SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:
THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL PLURALISM

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January, 2010

The concept of "social justice" is central to social work. It reflects a powerful sentiment that moves most social workers—a sentiment of sadness and distress, if not outright anger and outrage about the disparities that characterize much of human life.

Poverty, lack of equal opportunity, discrimination, lack of political power, and subjugation are fundamental facts of human life; but to most social workers they are unacceptable.

- That there are large pockets of poverty in the United States, like that revealed in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, is unacceptable.
- That homelessness is still a fact of life in America is unacceptable.
- That 20% of America's children (50% of minority children) live in poverty is unacceptable.
- That the life expectancy of black people in America is 5 years less than whites is unacceptable.
- That 18,000 people per year of the 47 million who do not have health insurance die because of lack of health care is unacceptable.
- That opportunities for quality education are closed to most poor Americans is unacceptable.
- That 1 billion people live in profound poverty on less than $1 per day (after adjusting for purchasing power) is unacceptable.
- That more than 6 million poor children under the age of 5 die in poor nations each year due to malnutrition and preventable diseases is unacceptable.
- That more than 50% of people in extreme poverty in developing nations get no education.

Human life is a hierarchy of haves and have-nots. Most social workers feel a strong obligation to help the have-nots to lead better lives. And this sentiment translates into a widespread belief—built into the NASW Code of Ethics—that social workers have a duty to reject social injustice and to pursue social justice.

My goal in this lecture is to explore this duty in some depth. What, according to the NASW Code of Ethics does this duty entail? What arguments, beyond sentiment, can be mounted to defend the claim that all social workers have a duty to pursue social justice? What does "social justice" mean? The challenge is this. We live in a politically pluralistic, even fractious, society, and the profession of social work includes people of various political persuasions. Is there a definition of social justice that cuts across all these political perspectives or are there irreconcilably conflicting theories of social justice?

Selections From The NASW Code of Ethics (emphasis has been added to highlight key points)

- The Preamble: "The primary mission of the social work profession is to **enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people**, with **particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society**. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

  Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.

  The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of **core values** … [which] are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective: service, **social justice**, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence."

- Ethical Principle: "**Social workers challenge social injustice**. Social workers **pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals** and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are **focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice**. These activities seek to **promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity**. Social workers strive to **ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people**."

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients: "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients. … However, **social workers' responsibility to the**

larger society or specific legal obligations may on limited occasions supersede the loyalty owed clients…."

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society: 6.01 Social Welfare: "Social workers should **promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments**. Social workers should **advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs** and should **promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice**."

- 6.04 Social and Political Action: "(a) Social workers should **engage in social and political actions** that seek t**o ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully**. Social workers should **be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice** and should **advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice**.

  (b) Social workers should act to **expand choice and opportunity for all people**, with **special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people** and groups.

  (c) Social workers should promote conditions that **encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally**. Social workers should **promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people**.

  (d) Social workers should act to **prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination** against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability."

Arguments for A Duty to Pursue Social Justice

As you can see, according to The Code of Ethics social advocacy is at the moral core of social work. Social workers have a moral obligation not just to help their clients as individuals and families but also to pursue social change.

This duty to pursue social justice arises from—and weaves together—two lines of thought. One is a particular reading of the moral history of social work. The other is drawn from an ecological understanding of the needs of our clients, from the "person-in-environment" perspective, from the view, that is, that social environment has powerful effects on the lives of our clients.

A Moral Perspective on the History of Social Work

A common telling of the history of social work in America emphasizes the view that social work arose out of a profound sense of moral obligation to help people who were living in dreadful poverty. Here's how Walter Trattner, a social welfare historian, describes the social environment of the time:

> "American cities were disorderly, filthy, foul-smelling, disease-ridden places. Narrow, unpaved streets became transformed into quagmires when it rained. Rickety tenements, swarming with unwashed humanity, leaned upon one another for support. Inadequate drainage systems failed to carry away sewage. Pigs roamed streets that were cluttered with manure, years of accumulated garbage, and other litter. Outside privies bordered almost every thoroughfare. Slaughterhouses and fertilizing plants contaminated the air with an indescribable stench. Ancient plagues like smallpox, cholera, and typhus threw the population into a state of terror from time to time while less sensational but equally deadly killers like tuberculosis, diphtheria, and scarlet fever were ceaselessly at work."

It is important to understand that Trattner's description is in no way metaphorical. For example, when he says "unwashed humanity," he means literally unwashed. Poor people did not have running water in their homes, let alone hot water. Public baths were a major social achievement at the beginning of the 20th century. In my time bathhouses were infamous as places for anonymous sex and as one of the causes of the spread of AIDS. But when they were created, bathhouses were the only places that poor tenement dwellers could go to bathe.

"Inadequate drainage systems failed to carry away sewage," Trattner says. Those of you who have been to slums in developing countries today know exactly what he means.

As for "privies," those are places where people dumped their own human waste, which they first collected in chamber pots at home. In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt describes what it was like to be the poorest of the poor, to live at the end of the street, next to the privy. He describes the stench and claims that there were days when they could tell what people had eaten the night before. (*Angela's Ashes*, by the way, gives an extraordinary view of poverty—a child's non-judgmental view. If you haven't read it, you really should.)

The epidemics Trattner mentions were, as he says, killers on a magnitude we now find hard to imagine. For example, my grandmother was one of 16 children. Nine of them died in one week during a diphtheria epidemic in Philadelphia. Only one of the children who got diphtheria did not die—my great uncle Danny—who lived because he hid under a bed and was the only sick sibling not to go to the hospital. That saved his life because hospitals at that time, especially for poor people, were almost a death sentence due to contagion and lack of sanitation.

The first social workers saw what Trattner describes about the lives and living conditions of the poor and were horrified.

In this regard they were strikingly more humane than most people who were not poor and who were inclined to blame the poor for their poverty and suffering. Some believed that poverty reflected divine will—a sign that God had not granted the grace of faith to these people, that these were people condemned to damnation. Quite a remarkable shift from Christ's declaration that the meek shall inherit the earth! Social Darwinists, (before and after Darwin), argued that the poor brought poverty on themselves, that they were lazy and weak and should be left to succeed or fail, live or die on their own. Help, beyond the barest minimum, deprived the poor of the motivation to rise above their circumstances and ultimately weakened the human species.

These smug and hard-hearted perspectives horrified the forerunners of social work. They did not see poverty as a tolerable consequence of the divine or natural order. They did not believe that the poor were always the cause of their own poverty because they were Godless drunks and sinners. They saw poverty as a reflection of intolerable social conditions, of conditions that justice demanded be corrected.

Actually there were—to oversimplify—two schools of thought among early social workers—that of the settlement houses and that of the charity organization societies.

The Settlement House movement was built on a fundamental sense that almost all poor people could be helped. It was the progenitor of an approach to social work now known as "empowerment," which combines efforts to help people build on the strengths they already have to create satisfying lives in their new society with efforts to change the environment to make it possible for people struggling to rise out of poverty to succeed.

I believe that the optimism and the positive regard settlement houses had for their clients reflect the fact that primarily they were immigrants. Yes, they needed relief and refuge and also to learn English; develop trades; get jobs; live in safe, healthy environments; have access to education for their children; etc. But immigrants are by their very nature among the strongest, most courageous people there are. To know them is to quickly come to know how remarkable they are.

And people who worked in the original settlement houses knew their clients well. Settlement houses were located in the slums of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (Many are still there today.) Comparatively wealthy people moved into them so that they could live among the poor, be part of their community. (Quite a contrast to most social work today when few of us live among the population we serve.) Settlement house workers generally developed great respect for the people they served not by constructing idealized images from afar but from knowing them personally.

Their view became the dominant view of the Progressive Era —that people in great trouble are basically fine people who have been battered by their environments, by being exploited, by dreadful living conditions, by epidemics, and even by the moral challenge poverty brings in its wake. It is hard to be good when you and your family are hungry.

The second school of thought developed out of the charity organization societies. These organizations were outgrowths of the charitable efforts made by many good people who felt, for

religious or other reasons, that they had an obligation to help the poor with donations of food, clothing, and even money. Towards the end of the 19th century, leaders of charities came to believe that the way they provided charity led to chaos and that there must be ways to organize charitable efforts so that they would be more effective. This led to the development of Charity Organization Societies, which established principles of giving and coordinated charitable activities.

One of the fundamental principles of giving was that it should always begin with an assessment—to sort out the frauds, to identify the hopeless, and to provide the basis of a plan of survival and redemption. Charity Organization Societies didn't want to waste money on crooks, Godless sinners, unredeemable drunks, and the like. They wanted to focus their efforts on individuals and families who were working to help themselves to rise out of poverty or who were too young, too old, or too disabled to help themselves. As a result COSs distinguished, some social work historians say, between the "deserving and undeserving poor;" and many social workers today criticize them for drawing this distinction. The critics' view is that all the poor are deserving and that they are not the cause of, or responsible for, their suffering. To them the COS view seems like blaming the victim.

To others it only makes sense to try to figure out the individualized needs and potential of people in trouble and to recognize that some people cannot be redeemed or rehabilitated. In fact, this view of the need to individualize intervention on the basis of an assessment became, and still is, fundamental to social casework.

Despite their differences, during the 1890's, when there was a major economic depression, most of the progenitors of social work came to regard poverty and suffering as usually not the fault of those who were suffering. They came to believe that the poor were

victims of bad economic and social conditions and that poverty and suffering reflected the injustice of the American social order far more than individual defect.

Leaders of both the settlement houses and the charity organization societies joined forces to seek social change and to create the profession of social work. Over the next fifty years they made some remarkable contributions—contributions that reshaped the American workplace, the American public health system, and the American welfare system.

It is this distinguished history that is one of the roots of the belief that seeking social justice is of the essence of social work and that social workers are obligated not to passively tolerate suffering, deprivation, discrimination, and social injustice but to advocate actively for social change.

The Needs of Our Clients

A second line of argument for the obligation of social workers to work to overcome social injustice is that our clients are strongly affected by economic and social circumstances and by the economic and social structure of the society in which they live.

Changes in their environment could make their lives better. Some even argue that tinkering with the lives of individuals and families has relatively little impact. They need more money, decent jobs, better housing, safer neighborhoods, genuine equality of opportunity, etc. Since the job of social work is to help people lead better lives, it is, according to this line of argument, clearly the job of social work to seek changes in the environments of our clients that will improve their lives.

In part this translates into the need for social workers serving individuals and families to function as case advocates. My client is homeless. She/he needs a home. She/he may be mentally ill and need treatment too; but it is our job, so this line of thought goes, to take the need for a home as seriously—perhaps even more seriously—than the need for psychotherapy.

Needless to say, the economic and social problems of our clients individually generalize. There isn't just one homeless person; there are many. And they all need homes, they all need food, they all need a place to shower, they all need clothes, and many of them need mental health services.

To respond to the needs of a group of people in trouble such as homeless people, we have to work for systems change. We have to work to be sure there is enough affordable housing; we have to work to prevent eviction; we have to develop places where people can get shelter and rehabilitation; we have to develop employment programs, we have to advocate for more and better health and mental health services, etc.

One way to think about this is that case advocacy involves helping our client negotiate the "helping" systems of our society—to get public assistance, to get housing, to get Medicaid, to get health and mental health care, etc. Social advocacy, however, seeks to transform these helping systems so that they work for people, so that they don't need to have advocates helping them to slog their way through the obstacle littered paths to help that are so common in our society.

Some believe that social advocacy needs to do more—that it needs to transform the fundamental structure of our society. Maybe. But the essential point here is that we cannot fully help our clients to improve their lives with counseling or psychotherapy alone. We need to advocate for them—case by case, social policy by social policy, and system by system. And this, it can be argued, is the basis of the duty of social workers to pursue social justice.

Are These Arguments Valid?

I am moved by the noble history of social work and by the insight that many, if not most people, need help to change an environment that stifles their potential. I personally love the

social dimension of social work, and I have dedicated much of my life in social work to seeking social change.

But I still find the duty to pursue social justice enunciated in the Code of Ethics to be open to significant question because we live in society that is politically pluralistic—Republicans as well as Democrats, conservatives as well as liberals and radicals. And the profession of social work also includes people with a broad range of political opinion—different beliefs about what social justice is and how to achieve it. There are, that is to say, competing theories of social justice and the Code of Ethics does not help us choose from among these theories or from among the competing perspectives on social welfare linked to these different perspectives on justice.

If we have an obligation as social workers to pursue social justice, which version of it are we to pursue? Or does it not matter so long as we pursue our own vision of social justice?

Theories of Social Justice

Before trying to answer these questions, let's take a look at several important theories of justice.

"Social justice" as used in the field of social work refers primarily to what political philosophers call "distributive justice", i.e. the fair distribution of goods in a society, in a nation, and perhaps in the world, (including rights, opportunities, political power, and social benefits as well as wealth and material goods).

There is no definition of "social justice" in The Code of Ethics; but in *Ethical Standards of Social Work,* an elaboration of the Code of Ethics, Frederick Reamer quotes the definition in Robert Barker's *Social Work Dictionary* that "Social justice is an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits."

This definition is both utopian—"an ideal condition"—and egalitarian—"members of society have the same [social goods]". This definition is subject to criticism on both grounds.

Utopianism: Although it seems self-evident that we should seek to perfect human society, to make it ultimately ideal, some believe that utopianism is actually dangerous. For example, Isaiah Berlin has raised significant concerns about what he calls the "pursuit of the ideal." He points out that historically the most noble of ideals have contributed to the slaughter of millions and millions of human beings. Religions seeking to convert people to the true faith have tortured and slaughtered to achieve their goals. Nazis seeking to purify the human species slaughtered 12 million people and 10's of millions more died in the war of conquest that Hitler initiated. Stalinists and Maoists also slaughtered millions in a futile effort to create fully egalitarian societies by eliminating the bourgeoisie.

Berlin believes in pluralistic democracies rather than utopias. These, he maintains, always involve a messy balancing of conflicting values. Nothing ideal about them. As Churchill put it, "Democracy is the worst form of government there is—except for all the others."

Of course, some people disagree with Berlin. They argue that not every pursuit of every ideal results in despotism and slaughter. And they are surely right. For example, the Tibetan Buddhists have created an admirable community based on spiritual ideas, and they have not attempted to force their views on others.

But Berlin is surely right that quite a number of the worst episodes in history were driven not just by greed or lust for power but very prominently by desires to transform the world. As Berlin points out, when you think you know how to achieve perfection for the mass of humanity through spiritual redemption, through a classless society, through purity of the species, or even through liberal capitalism, the loss of a few million lives seems like a small thing compared to the salvation of billions.

Equality: Without doubt the concept of equality is one of the most powerful political concepts in history. It is one of the bed rocks of democracy in the Western world. It is fundamental to Locke's views on equal rights—which were among the driving forces of the American Revolution. It is fundamental to Rousseau's views on the inherent equality of all human beings—which were among the driving forces of the French revolution. It is fundamental to Marx's views—which were among the driving forces of the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

But let's think for a moment about what "equality" means.

Reamer and Barker's definition of justice is interesting in that it doesn't refer to equality of wealth. They call for "all members of society [to] have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits."

What they catch in this definition of justice is that equality has a variety of political meanings such as equality of wealth, equality of opportunity, equality before the law, equality of rights, and equality of fundamental value as a human being. As a result there are many disagreements about what sort of equality social justice requires.

For example, Aristotle said that equality means equal treatment for equals. This is a definition that countenances vast differences in the treatment of human beings, even including the enslavement of "uncivilized" (read non-Greek) individuals.

Another example: in modern philosophy a common definition of equality is "discrimination for relevant reasons." (See Bernard Williams, for example.) Given this definition, it is an act of inequality not to hire a person because of the color of his or her skin (an irrelevant reason), but it is perfectly fair not to hire a person who is unqualified for the job. Equality of this sort is perfectly compatible with a society with vast economic disparities—so long as the disparities exist for "relevant" reasons—whatever those are.

In addition to the problem of definition, it is hard to believe that literal equality is possible—or even desirable. When we think about equality many of us are thinking about the vast disparity of wealth that exists in wealthy societies, in developing countries, and between wealthy and poor nations. And there is an undeniable impulse that many of us feel to equalize wealth.

What would happen if we did? I find this exercise useful to figure out the answer to this question.

Suppose a person of considerable power convened a group of people of vastly unequal wealth and arranged it so that each would have $1 million? (Note that s/he would probably have to give each a different amount of money to get their net worth to $1 million. Those in debt would get more than a million. Those with some wealth would get less than a million. And those with more than a million would have to give some of it up.)

If they met again in a year, their net worths would no longer be equal. Some would have saved their money, squirreled it away for a rainy day. Some would have gone on spending sprees or gambled and come back totally broke. Some would have had to spend all their money on health care for themselves, a family member, or a friend. Some would have given their money to charity. Some would have made investments resulting in gains or losses. Some would have created businesses, hired people to work for them, and either built a going concern or gone bust.

Now what should we do? Redistribute to equalize again? Or is your impulse that each person made his/her own bed and should be left to lie on it no matter how soft or hard it is?

I'm pretty sure that most of you will not be inclined to re-redistribution except to those people who lost their money through no fault of their own—if they were robbed or if they were

forced to spend it to take care of a disabled family member. This observation is built into a number of theories of distributive justice.

Rawls' Theory of Justice

John Rawls, for example, appreciates this reality of human behavior and believes that it makes economic disparity inevitable. He also draws from capitalistic economic theory, according to which wealth is best generated through the working of the marketplace, which inevitably leaves some people wealthier than others.

Although he believes in capitalism and the inevitability of disparity, he does not believe that the distribution of wealth that results from unfettered capitalism is just. He believes—as do all liberals—that there should be regulated capitalism, which is in effect "regulated inequality."

In contrast to the sort of utilitarian capitalism supported by laissez-faire conservatives, Rawls proposes a social contract theory of justice. He asks us to imagine that a group of individuals get together to consider forming a society. What rules would they agree to? What contract would they draw?

Essentially Rawls believes that a social contract drawn by rational people would establish a constitutional, democratic, capitalistic society governed by a number of fundamental principles including:

1. A fundamental right to liberty limited only by the need for each person's liberties to be compatible with like liberties for all. People will be free to pursue their own beliefs and dreams so long as they don't trample on the rights and liberties of others.
2. Protection of the rights of minorities from the power of the majority. The society's laws and the distribution of power will be determined through a democratic process, but that process cannot legitimately result in laws or the use of power in violation of the rights of any individual member of the society.

3. There will be a hierarchy of power, but there must be equal opportunity for positions of power.
4. Basic needs must be met for everyone.
5. It is reasonable that there be economic disparities but only if those disparities benefit everyone and the poor most of all.

This last principle is particularly important. For Rawls' distributive justice is not a particular pattern of distribution at a moment in time; it is a pattern of economic growth. Specifically, economic growth is just if, when the haves of a society get more—say a 10% increase in wealth—then the have-nots of society have an even bigger increase in wealth—say 15%. It is, Rawls would say, clearly unjust when the upper crust gets richer and the poor get poorer. But it is also unjust when wealth increases for rich and poor at the same pace. The goal is to reduce disparity over time. The goal is for the have-nots of society to become haves.

Critiques of Rawls

Rawls' views provide a pretty good summary of the liberal thought of much of the 20th century, but they have been subjected to scathing critiques from both the right and the left.

The Libertarian Conservative Critique

Robert Nozick, a student of Rawls, mounted the most famous and one of the strongest philosophical critiques of Rawls' theory of distributive justice. In essence he argues that Rawls' tries to combine a rights theory in which the rights to liberty and to property are fundamental with a utilitarian theory pressing for the greatest good for all with a tilt to the advantage of the poor. This, Nozick argues, is logically incoherent.

Nozick argues that the right to property is absolutely fundamental to the implicit social contract that has governed Western democratic thought since Locke. This right, he argues, is

limited only by the need for a government to protect the rights of all people, but this is a minimal government, a "night watchman government" he calls it.

Government has the authority to tax only for the purposes of providing protection and not for the purpose of redistributing wealth to benefit the poor. He goes so far as to say that taxation for the purpose of redistribution is robbery. Nozick does not oppose helping the poor, but he argues this should be a matter of charity. It should be done voluntarily not through the coercion of government.

Nozick also mounts a very interesting argument about the nature of just distribution—one that is consistent with the example I gave earlier about redistribution a year after establishing equality. Just distribution, he says, needs to be understood not in terms of a pattern of distribution at a moment in time, but in terms of how that pattern emerged historically. It may appear entirely unfair that there are rich people and poor people. But—he argues—if the rich people got rich legally through their work, investments, or even gifts they received from relatives or friends, then they are entitled to what they have. And if poor people are poor because they cannot sell their labor at a high price, that is not injustice; it is just one of the vagaries of the market at work.

The poor, Nozick argues, have just as much opportunity as the rich. If they had the skills and the contacts that the rich have, they could be rich too. The market does not discriminate. It rewards those who have something to sell that people want or who can manipulate money skillfully; and it punishes those who do not have something to sell that buyers value.

The Laissez-Faire Capitalist Critique

Nozick's critique of Rawls' view that disparities should be limited and that economic development should be tilted towards the poor is based primarily on the libertarian view that

government should not intervene in our lives except for purposes of protection. He argues that government should not interfere in commerce between "consenting adults."

Laissez-faire capitalists also argue for extremely limited government intervention, but their reasons are somewhat different. They believe that unfettered capitalism results in the best of all possible economic outcomes for everyone. "A rising tide lifts all ships."

Capitalists, including Adam Smith, the first capitalist, argue that the marketplace results not only in some people becoming very rich but also produces greater wealth and a higher quality of life for the people who do not become rich. Keep in mind that the point of reference for Smith and his followers is the feudal era, during which almost everyone lived in the kind of extreme poverty that the poorest of the poor in the developing world live today. Yes, industrialization created a few super-rich, they would argue, but it also humanized life for almost everyone else in democratic, capitalistic societies.

Laissez-faire capitalism raises a very important question for the theory of distributive justice. Is the fundamental issue of justice disparity or poverty? If rising disparity results in vastly reduced poverty, should we encourage disparity for the sake of the poor?

Radical Critique

Radicals, of course, would find the notion that disparity benefits the poor to be ludicrous. And they would cite it as one of the pieces of deception on which capitalism relies in order to reward the rich and to exploit the poor. Radicals tend to believe that freedom in a capitalistic society is an illusion. The only true freedom is freedom from the oppression and exploitation of capitalists and their lackey politicians.

Radicals generally believe that conservative and even liberal beliefs in the equality of opportunity are nonsense. Yes, a few people rise from poverty to the heights of power and wealth, but the vast majority live out their lives in a state of exploitation.

Radicals also generally believe there must be a strong government with the power to redistribute wealth on the basis of need. "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

This is a very interesting theory of fair distribution. Like liberals and conservatives, radicals implicitly agree that there cannot be a literal equality of wealth. But unlike liberals and conservatives who support the view that wealth should go to those who make the greatest economic contribution, radicals argue that we should distribute wealth on the basis of need. There's a social choice to be made, akin to the choice a parent must make about how much to leave to a healthy child and to a disabled child who cannot make a living. Some parents in this situation leave more for the disabled child so as to equalize the lives of the two children.

Radicals take a similar view and believe that a social safety net is not enough. A safety net is a pittance to enable people to survive who through no fault of their own cannot provide for themselves. They deserve more. They deserve to live as well as anyone else. Executive, worker, or person with disability—each shares the same humanity, and each deserves a life of equal well-being.

Theories of Social Welfare

Just to remind you, this discussion of theories of social justice needs to be understood in the context of the question of whether and to what extent social workers have a duty to pursue social justice. I have raised the question of what this duty might be given the fact that there are fundamentally different theories of social justice. Is our duty to pursue any of them; it doesn't matter which? Or is our duty to pursue one of them rather than another?

To some of you, it may seem an idle question when we are talking about philosophical theories of justice, all of which may seem too abstract to have clear, direct application to the real world. But in fact each of these theories of justice links to different views about social welfare,

and as social workers many of you will need to grapple with questions about what sort of social welfare system we should have in the United States or other parts of the world. In fact, some of you may end up in positions to make decisions about the American and the global social welfare systems.

The fundamental question is what should society do to reduce poverty? For sake of simplicity, let's approach this in terms of conservative, liberal, and radical views of social welfare.

Conservative and liberal theories of how to overcome poverty and of social welfare share two fundamental insights—that capitalism is the engine of wealth and that greater wealth for a society makes it possible for poor people to rise out of poverty. In a sense, conservatives and liberals agree that the primary way to address problems of poverty is through economic development rather than through pure redistribution. Make the pie bigger, rather than cutting it into many small, but equal, pieces.

But conservatives by and large believe that the way to create the most wealth and to create jobs to raise most people out of poverty is to let the marketplace run unimpeded by governmental constraints. Liberals by and large believe that government must restrain businesses and regulate the marketplace so as to protect people from bad products, provide workers with decent working conditions and wages, and protect the environment. For liberals strong government is a "countervailing power" to big business and to the rich, who have not only a disproportionate share of the wealth of our society but also a disproportionate share of power.

Conservatives—then and now—are not (or at least claim not to be) indifferent to the plight of the poor. They believe:

- Capitalism is the source of wealth and is most effective when the market is unimpeded by government regulation. "A rising tide lifts all ships."

- Work is the route out of poverty. (Many liberals share this view.)
- Strong businesses create jobs. (Many liberals also share this view.)

- The first responsibility for people in trouble lies with their families.

- Charity and voluntarism should be **the** major source of aid to the poor.

- Taxation should be kept to an absolute minimum and not tax the wealthy at higher rates than others.

- Government should provide subsistence income for people with disabilities and others, but poor people who are not disabled should be expected to work.
- Dependency breeds dependency; therefore, welfare benefits create a perverse incentive to remain poor.

- Immoral sexual behavior results in single-parent families that are less capable, in general, of raising children successfully than are two-parent families. + Usually anti-abortion.

- Government should play a limited role in assuring access to health care and human services.

- Insurance for the most part should be private rather than public including retirement, health benefits, and disability insurance as well as life and home insurance.

- Public education for all that is adequate to create an infrastructure of people prepared to do necessary jobs.

- Not all difference is the result of discrimination.

    - Support equality of opportunity not of outcome.

- Limit use of affirmative action to prevent reverse discrimination.

- Campaign finance controls violate right to free speech.

- For the most part public policy should be made at the state or local level rather than at the federal level.[*]

In contrast, liberals—then and now—believe that government must play a major role in assuring decent lives for the have-nots of society, including:

[*] This list draws heavily from Leon Ginsberg's and Bruce Thyer's writings.

- Workplace protections such health and safety regulations, rights to organize unions, and minimum salaries and benefits
- Assistance for unemployed people including unemployment insurance and job training
- Consumer protections including assurance of safe food and drugs
- Environmental protections
- A free, high quality education
- Access to quality health care for all preferably with a government-based single payer system
- A safety net that provides more than mere subsistence for individuals who need help
- Support for families who provide care for disabled and troubled family members
- The use of progressive taxation to pay for the benefits that poor people need because charity is far from enough
- Protection of civil rights and affirmative action on behalf of populations that have historically suffered discrimination[**]
- Protection of personal privacy from intrusions by sexual moralists
- A strong federal governmental role in social policy so as to equalize benefits throughout the country.

Radicals, of course, regard conservative and liberal positions as slight variations of the ideology spun like the Shadow's hypnotic state over the vision of all who are exploited by capitalism. Radicals argue not for safety nets but for massive redistribution of wealth on the basis of need. Some radicals continue to believe that a market economy should be totally eliminated and replaced by a planned economy in which the government owns and operates the

[**] Some conservatives share this view but believe that giving advantages to minorities in order to promote diversity amounts to discrimination against whites and/or men.

means of production. In general, radicals argue not for government as a countervailing power to big business but for the elimination of industries controlled solely by the rich. At one end of their spectrum, they call for shared leadership of corporations—workers and managers together. At the other end of their spectrum they argue for government ownership of the means of production. As for social welfare policy, radicals tend to call for:

- Guaranteed adequate income and/or decent living conditions for all
- Free and equal public education for all
- Free equal publically provided health care for all
- Heavy taxation of those who somehow remain wealthy
- Elimination of racism and discrimination
- Elimination of exploitation, oppression, and disparities of power.

Which View of Social Justice Is Right for Social Work?

Clearly there are dramatically different views about what constitutes social justice not just as philosophical matters but also as matters of fundamental social welfare policy. Which of these views are we to pursue to fulfill our duty as social workers?

The language of the *Code of Ethics* is suggestive of liberal and radical views. It enjoins us not only to help people who are poor but those who are "vulnerable", "disadvantaged", "exploited", "oppressed", and victims of "discrimination." This clearly is not the language of conservatism.

But before discounting the possibility conservative social workers can comply with the Code of Ethics, I think we should pause and recognize that the language of the Code is open to substantially different interpretations, particularly about the situations to which they apply. Is a person who is unemployed vulnerable? Of course. We all need money to live. But does

government have a responsibility to pay full wages to an unemployed person for an indefinite period of time? There is room for great disagreement about that. And, what is the obligation of our society to a person who rejects work? There's room for significantly different views about this too. Is a woman married to a wealthy man who spends her days at tennis and teas oppressed? Some people think so, think that she has been brainwashed into a life of insignificance by her culture. Others of us wonder if such a woman is "oppressed," what is a woman in Afghanistan under Taliban rule? A conservative might well despise and work against oppression of women in Afghanistan and think that the rich woman should not be a social priority.

Stripped of its rhetorical meaning, the language of the *Code of Ethics* leaves open significant questions about what it means to have an obligation to pursue social justice. Nevertheless, it is my personal view it is the language of the far left and ought to be changed to be more neutral so as to make it clear that it is inconsistent with the Code of Ethics is not consistent with drumming social workers who are political conservatives out of the profession.

I strongly believe that social work benefits from being a diverse profession made up of people with all sorts of political views. Not only does this force us all to refine our thinking in the face of alternative perspectives, it also could enable the profession to have more political clout than it does. I can tell you as a person who lobbies for social causes that it is not a good thing to be perceived as a profession that supports only Democrats and liberal or radical positions. We need elected officials to believe that their actions can influence our votes. Advocates with died-in-the-wool political positions find it very hard to win the kind of bi-partisan support we generally need to move our causes.[***]

[***] The first two years of the Obama administration may be an exception to this rule, but I will be wildly surprised if one-party dominance of the U.S. Senate continues after the next election.

So where does this leave us with regard to the meaning of social justice in social work and with regard to the social welfare policies that social work ought to support? It leaves us with a politically diverse profession and without clear requirements about our duty to pursue social justice. [****]

Recently, there has been increasing recognition of that the concept of social justice is nebulous and not a clear guide to action, and the social work literature has begun to include efforts to define social justice in terms of "human rights."

Some of you will be participating in a class that John Robertson and I will be teaching together. He will explain and defend the human rights perspective.

I will then note that this perspective has not been universally embraced within the profession of social work. For those who believe in the *International Declaration of Human Rights* without reservation, moral injunctions based on human rights are persuasive. For those who have philosophical and moral reservations about the applicability of the concept of human rights to the real world and about the relevance of this concept in some non-Western cultures, none of the issues about the diversity of moral ideas is resolved by appealing to human rights rather than to equality or any of the other more traditional defining characteristics of social justice. Is there a solution? After Professor Robertson's presentation, I will suggest that Amartya Sen's latest book, *The Idea of Justice* may provide a framework for a shared conception of social justice. However, I am not at all sure that the framework I will suggest will satisfy conservatives, liberals, and radicals.

Let's talk about it.

[****] My personal view is that every social worker does have enough time and enough money to make a meaningful, if small, contribution to efforts to achieve a better world. And I urge you all, no matter how busy you are with direct practice and your personal life, to do at least this: join an advocacy group, contribute money to it, write letters to public officials when the group asks you to; and go to a lobbying event once a year.