

# Pursuing Social Work's Mission: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Justice

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## Abstract

The pursuit of social justice is at the heart of social work's mission. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* cites social justice as a centerpiece of the profession's principal aims. In the context of current political tensions in the U.S. and abroad, it is important for social workers to understand the essential relationship between the profession's social justice mission and political philosophy as they chart their individual social action agendas. This article explores the philosophical foundations of social justice and social action concerning three overarching issues that pertain directly to social work: the role of government with regard to the citizenry's well-being and welfare; the fair and just allocation of social resources (distributive justice); and the complex relationship between welfare and rights. The author traces the evolution of philosophical thinking about social justice from Plato's time and connects these core ideas to social work's current challenges and efforts to pursue social justice in a politically charged environment.

*Keywords:* distributive justice, ethics, rights, social justice, welfare

## Introduction

Immediately following the final tally of the contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election results, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

released a formal statement: “The NASW *Code of Ethics* makes clear the importance of social justice. We cannot support any efforts to marginalize or oppress any group of people, and will always work to assure that human rights extend to everyone. Social workers continue to strongly advocate for our country’s most vulnerable populations” (NASW, 2016, para. 3). Consistent with its time-honored commitment to social justice, NASW shined a bright light on looming concerns related to poverty, human rights (including the rights of women and immigrants), discrimination, and the needs of vulnerable people (including children, older adults, veterans, and people with disabilities). The forceful statement sounded a clarion call to the nation's leaders and social workers.

Such entreaties are not new to social work; indeed, the profession is deeply rooted in earnest social justice efforts, dating back to its inauguration in the late 19th century. In fact, social work is the only human services profession that embeds social justice and social action prominently in its principal codes of ethics throughout the world (International Federation of Social Workers, (2012). In particular, the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2008) is unique among the helping professions in its clarity about the intimate and enduring link with social justice:

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. (p. 1)

Further, the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2008) states in no uncertain terms that social workers should be mindful of political issues and their social justice implications: "Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to 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" (p. 27; standard 6.04[a]).

For many social workers, the profession's explicit commitment to social justice and social action is the magnet that attracted them at the start of their careers. During their formative years as students in the U.S., social workers learn of the storied history of the profession's enduring social justice commitment, especially during the settlement house movement and Progressive Era in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the New Deal in the 1930s, and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Typically, social workers cut their professional teeth learning about the profound impact of social justice lodestars such as Jane Addams, Edith and Grace Abbott, Mary Richmond, Julia Lathrop, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Lillian Wald, among others.

What is less well known among social workers are the deep philosophical roots that underpin the profession's firm embrace of social justice and social action. Especially in the context of the current political maelstrom in the U.S.

and abroad, it is important for social workers to understand the essential relationship between the profession's social justice mission and political philosophy as they chart their own individual social action agendas. Although social workers' responsibilities typically focus on practical aspects of government's role in their clients' lives – related, for example, to the availability of affordable housing, provision of health-care services, and taxation policy – social welfare policies and initiatives are ultimately shaped by deep-seated beliefs about the goals of government, the rights of citizens in relation to the state, the obligations of government toward its most vulnerable citizens, civil liberties, and the nature of social justice (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; DiNitto & Johnson, 2016; Reamer, 1993). For social workers to adequately understand the determinants of their contemporary thinking about such issues, they must have some appreciation of the philosophical origins:

Political philosophy is not merely unpractical speculation, though it may give rise to highly impractical myths: it is a vitally important aspect of life, and one that, for good or evil, has had decisive results on political action; for the assumptions on which political life is conducted clearly must influence what actually happens. ... Questions concerning the aims of government, the grounds of political obligation, the rights of individuals against the state, the basis of sovereignty, the relation of executive to legislative power, and the nature of political liberty and social justice have been asked and answered in many ways over many centuries (Political Philosophy, 1988, p. 972).

The philosophical foundations of social justice and social action concern three overarching issues that pertain directly to social work: (1) the role of government with regard to the commonwealth's well-being and welfare; (2) the fair and just allocation of social resources (distributive justice); and (3) the complex relationship between welfare and rights.

## **The Role of Government**

Most social work programs and clients depend upon some amount of government funding. Public assistance, housing, healthcare, mental healthcare, protective services, food assistance, child welfare, geriatric services, substance abuse services, military and veterans' support, juvenile justice, adult corrections, hospice, transportation, education, and other programs and their constituents rely heavily on federal, state, and local funding. The availability of public funding often waxes and wanes depending on the ideological views held by politicians and administrators who have authority at any given political moment. Social workers' advocacy efforts are often shaped by their support of, or opposition to, those who are in positions of authority.

Questions concerning the role of government regarding public and social welfare have been addressed at least since Greco-Roman times (Smith, 2012; Wolff, 2016). Although there is evidence of speculation about some aspects of government in earlier cultures, the most focused and sustained inquiry concerning the role of government and political power began in ancient Greece (Political Philosophy, 1988).

Plato's magnum opus, *Republic* (c. 378 BCE), was and remains a major influence on political thought. Plato grew up in the midst of the devastating 27-year war between Athens and Sparta and sought to articulate a utopian view of political life. Social workers can find in the *Republic* a compelling forerunner of contemporary debate about the use of political authority to meet people's most basic needs, the relationship between elite rulers and the citizenry, and the conflict between public corruption and social welfare. The *Republic* also represents one of the earliest documented efforts to grapple with questions with which today's social workers continue to struggle: How can a society best be governed and best meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens? How should an ideal society be organized?

Remarkably, one of Plato's principal concerns foreshadowed a key concern among

today's social workers: social class conflict. Because of his own experiences in conflict-torn Athens, Plato was preoccupied with the deleterious effects of strife and tension among competing factions. Like today's conflicts among ethnic, religious, cultural, and economic groups, the conflicts during Plato's time threatened to tear asunder the very fabric of civilization. Sadly, this is not a new issue.

The growth of government responsibility for social welfare began largely out of concern for the poor. At the end of the Middle Ages, the developing nation-states of Western Europe had to contend with the problem of poverty. Nations enacted laws and ordinances concerning the treatment of the poor, vagrancy, and begging (Rimlinger, 1971). Substantial changes in the treatment of the poor came about during the second half of the 18th century as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the American and French revolutions. National governments had to become increasingly concerned about social welfare.

It is in these early attempts to devise government-sponsored programs that contemporary social welfare programs—often the focus of intense political and ideological debate today—that contemporary programs have their roots. For example, what is now referred to as the welfare state—a condition in which a national government assumes responsibility for some forms of economic security and the health of its citizens—has its origins in 18th-century Prussia and the *Landrecht*, or civil code, of 1794: "It is the duty of the State to provide for the sustenance and support of those of its citizens who cannot . . . procure subsistence themselves" (Rimlinger, 1971, p. 94).

Significant debate concerning the role of government in social welfare was afoot in the early 19th century, when mercantilist and laissez-faire doctrines clashed. There are echoes of this tension in today's political debates, especially with regard to free trade and tariff issues that have implications for immigration, employment, and economic policies (for example, current debate about the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] and the Trans-Pacific Partnership [TPP],

which have been viewed differently by the Obama and Trump administrations). Mercantilism was then the dominant economic doctrine in Great Britain and other European nations. A central assumption was that primary sources of a nation's power were a large population and precious metals. As a result, governments tightly regulated activities of the economic market, prohibited emigration, and imposed protective tariffs.

In contrast to mercantilism, the *laissez-faire* doctrine—typically embraced by political and economic conservatives—was based on an assumption that human welfare could be promoted and sustained most effectively if labor were allowed to find its own price in the market and if goods and services were allowed to be freely exchanged between nations (Pinker, 1979). The English Poor Law Reform Bill of 1834—a staple in social work history instruction—represents what is perhaps the best example of the importance of philosophical debate about social and economic justice. The Royal Poor Law Commission for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws was dominated by a *laissez-faire* philosophy that, in the spirit of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, was critical of the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 that had been created to assist vulnerable people. The classical economists of the era believed that poverty was the natural state of people in the wage-earning classes. The original poor law was an artificial creation of the state that taxed the middle and upper classes in order to provide care for the wayward needy (Trattner, 1979). Such sentiments have obvious implications for current ideological debate about policies related to minimum wage, public assistance, housing subsidies, and unemployment assistance.

The more recent growth of government's role in social and public welfare can be attributed in part to a declining confidence, especially following the Great Depressions of the 1870s and 1930s, in the ability of the free market to promote and sustain individual and family well-being. Over the years, various models have emerged with respect to the philosophical foundations supporting and opposing

these trends. Perhaps the most familiar are the conservative, liberal, and radical views (Atherton, 1989; Blau, 1989). Political conservatives argue that the welfare state encourages personal and social irresponsibility more than it provides some measure of defense against poverty, unemployment, sickness, and so on. From this perspective, generous welfare benefits encourage sloth and dependence (classic discussions include Friedman, 1962; Gilder, 1981; Hayek, 1944).

By contrast, the liberal perspective argues that government spending on social welfare is often insufficient, and that this is one of the principal reasons why social problems persist. Liberal critics claim that anemic funding of social services has led to inadequate efforts to address chronic problems such as poverty, crime, unemployment, homelessness, addiction, and mental illness (Reich, 2015). They also argue that unrestrained capitalism exacerbates poverty and leaves many vulnerable people in its wake.

A number of these contemporary concerns have their roots in 19th-century political philosophy. For example, in his *Philosophy of Right*, published in 1821, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel commented on the tendency of a market economy to produce great poverty alongside great wealth, and that this can ultimately threaten the stability of a society:

The poor still have the needs common to civil society, and yet since society has withdrawn from them the natural means of acquisition. ... their poverty leaves them more or less deprived of all the advantages of society, of the opportunity of acquiring skill or education of any kind, as well as of the administration of justice, the public health services, and often even of the consolations of religion (cited in Moon, 1988, p. 28).

The radical perspective, however, is uniquely complex. Radicals tend to agree with conservatives that liberals demand too much of the welfare state, while also agreeing with liberals that the welfare state has not gone far enough (classic discussions

include Abramovitz, 1986; Gutmann, 1988; Piven & Cloward, 1971). Further, radicals tend to argue that the fiscal policies of a capitalist economy are immoral, harmful, and shortsighted. Marxists (or socialists) tend to prefer a welfare society in which all economic matters occur in a social market for the common good. Social Darwinists (or capitalists) view the welfare state as unwarranted and counterproductive interference with natural evolution. From this perspective, the free market ultimately encourages progress by weeding out the weak and allowing the "fittest" to survive.

Stronger support for government-sponsored intervention for social welfare comes from Fabian socialism and interest-group liberalism. Fabian socialism—which originated in the late 19th century and is based on the strategy of gradual change embraced by the Roman general Fabius Maximus—assumes that collectivist ideas and reforms will lead eventually to widespread acceptance of socialist ideals and principles. Fabians, who have had considerable influence on the design and operation of the British welfare state (along with those involved in the charity organization society movement), typically support expansion of the boundaries of the welfare state to meet people's basic needs without calling for radical dismantling of capitalism (for a classic discussion see Titmuss, 1958).

Interest-group liberalism, in contrast, while also supporting an expanded role for government social services and public assistance, is not inspired by socialist ideals. Rather, it is the product of humanistic values and practical recognition of the need to improve social conditions produced by capitalism (Lowi, 2009).

The true middle-ground view is held by supporters of a mixed economy, which combines a respect for capitalism, in principle, with significant collectivist instincts. This is a perspective that appeals to many mainstream social workers.

### **Distributive Justice**

Social workers frequently find themselves without sufficient resources to adequately administer the policies and programs for which

they are responsible. Meager funding, budget cuts, and increased demand for social services often require social workers to make difficult decisions about how to allocate limited or scarce resources. The concept of distributive justice is central to the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2008): "Social workers should advocate for resource allocation procedures that are open and fair. When not all clients' needs can be met, an allocation procedure should be developed that is nondiscriminatory and based on appropriate and consistently applied principles" (pp. 20-21; standard 3.07[b]).

A central theme throughout the philosophical literature on social welfare is that of the allocation of resources such as wealth, healthcare, housing, transportation, and other social services; philosophers refer to these as issues of distributive justice (Feldman, 2016; Fleischacker, 2004). These challenges can increase exponentially during political administrations that aim to reduce public spending on services on which social workers' clients rely.

Distributive justice has been of enduring concern among political philosophers; familiarity with their conceptual frameworks can help social workers frame their own social action efforts. Aristotle, for example, was among the first to introduce the concept of distributive justice in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. He favored allocating resources based on individuals' merit, or what people deserve – a view that is out of step with traditional social work values. Herbert Spencer, the 19th-century British philosopher, also defined distributive justice in terms of desert, arguing that what people have a right to is a function of what they contribute to the broader society (Francis, 2007).

In contrast, the 18th-century philosopher David Hume viewed justice as an extension of property rights. That is, justice is determined in part by defensible principles related to the acquisition of private property, transfer of property, occupation of property, and so on. For Hume, extreme concentrations of wealth and property may not be a problem as long as established property rights are respected. This view has implications for the

defensibility of current politically-based taxation policies related to inheritance and estate taxes (Graetz & Shapiro, 2005). Political conservatives often oppose significant taxation of inheritances, arguing that redistribution of hard-earned assets is a form of theft; political liberals often support taxation as a way to redistribute wealth.

For many social workers, income and asset inequality is a pressing issue. Some political philosophers emphasize the concept of absolute equality in which resources (wealth, property, access to resources, and so on) are divided equally among all people. This is sometimes referred to as the equality of result (Spicker, 1988). There is also equality of opportunity, which is concerned less with the ultimate outcome of distributive efforts and mechanisms than with the opportunity individuals have to gain access to desired resources – a value that is central to social work.

Rae (1981) offers several perspectives on ways to enhance equality that have special relevance to social workers. The first is the maximin policy (maximizing the minimum), where minimum standards for income, housing, education, healthcare, and so on, are raised. This is especially relevant to current intense debate about raising workers' minimum wages. A second approach is to address the ratio of inequality, or increasing the resources of those who are worst off in relation to those who are the best off. A third policy aims for the least difference, where the goal is to reduce the range of inequality. And the fourth is the minimax principle, whose goal is to reduce the advantage of those who are most privileged, that is, minimize the maximum. Politicians' views on these issues in recent elections have generated intense partisan debate.

Many social workers have been introduced to, and profoundly influenced by, the pioneering writings on distributive justice by philosopher John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls bases much of his argument on the concept of a "social contract" that is to be used to establish a just society and manage its limited resources. He derives two core principles to enhance justice. First, liberty is the most important rule of social justice, and a

just society must preserve liberty. Second, whatever inequalities exist must be acceptable to everyone. Rawls' oft-cited difference principle, which states that goods must be distributed in a manner designed to benefit the least advantaged, includes a requirement to aid those in need and provides an important safeguard against applications of classic utilitarianism that might sacrifice the needs of the disadvantaged for a greater aggregation of good. In a just society, according to Rawls, some differences in wealth and assets would be acceptable only if those less well off benefit as a result.

For Rawls, the economic and social advantages some people enjoy because of the natural fortune into which they are born—with accompanying initial endowments of natural talent, property, skill, and luck—are morally arbitrary (Krouse & McPherson, 1988). Ensuring greater equality in the initial distribution of property and skill level would lessen the need for significant redistribution of wealth by taxation policy and transfer programs administered by government. This is Rawls' principal argument for an adequate social minimum, progressive inheritance across generations, some degree of income redistribution, and public policies that promote equal opportunity, especially in education. This philosophical position resonates for many social workers.

## **Welfare and Rights**

Much of the philosophical literature addressing social justice issues is anchored in the concept of rights. Prominent social welfare scholars have drawn on this core concept to argue that welfare should be viewed as a fundamental right that provides essential protection against the destructive byproducts of a capitalist system (for example, poverty, unemployment, and high-cost housing and healthcare) (a classic discussion is by Piven & Cloward, 1971).

Debate about the concept of welfare as a right is rooted in several distinct philosophical traditions (Blau, 1989; Nadasen, 2012). According to a position most closely associated with the 17th-century British philosopher John Locke,

individual citizens acquire rights by virtue of their financial stake—in the form of property held to counterbalance government's power—in the society. From a politically conservative vantage point, social welfare benefits represent a form of charity organized by government; of special significance to social workers and their clients, such benefits are not based on any assumption about rights.

In contrast, a more radical democratic tradition holds that people need protection from both the power of government and the power of private property. As Blau (1989) notes, "Invoking the communitarian vision of personal rights and popular democracy, this tradition declares that commodities such as medical care and affordable housing are a natural right" (p. 36).

It is important for social workers to consider the implications of a rights-based view of welfare with respect to a concept that is fundamental to clients' basic well-being: work and employment. Work has been a lightning rod in historic and current debate about social welfare benefits and rights. In short, the chronic challenge social workers and policy analysts have faced has been to devise a strategy that provides support to those in need without undermining their incentive to work (assuming that we are focusing on people who are able to work).

Attempts to strike a balance between the level of benefits that is sufficient to ensure a reasonable standard of living and one that discourages work date back at least to philosophical debates surrounding inauguration of the 17th-century English Poor Laws. During that period, and in subsequent 19th-century controversies about revising the Poor Laws, much of the debate about the relationship between welfare and work was couched in moralistic language concerning religious views about the inherent value and virtue of work as a way to build character. In addition to being influenced by fear of violence and social disruption that might result from unemployment, European nations and the U.S., in particular, have struggled to design welfare programs that balanced these trade-offs as much as possible, as evidenced by the well known

distinctions among "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, "impotent" and "able-bodied" poor, "indoor" and "outdoor" relief, and so on.

In contrast to a rights-based view of welfare, supported by many social workers, is a privilege-based view. The privilege-based view suggests that people receive benefits because of the community's largesse and generosity, not because poor and otherwise vulnerable people have a fundamental right to them. From this perspective, "welfare payments are never a matter of legal entitlements of the recipients, but only an expression of collective benevolence by the transferrers" (Epstein, cited in Elster, 1988, p. 58). The distinction between welfare as a right and as a privilege may seem solely intellectual; in fact, the distinction has significantly shaped the extent to which aid has been provided to poor and other vulnerable people throughout history.

Clearly, the philosophical concept of rights is central to any thoughtful consideration of contemporary welfare policy. Not surprisingly, many competing perspectives are at play concerning the extent to which welfare is a right, as opposed to a privilege. As Blau (1989) concludes, "there is no easy way of reconciling the differences among these views. But the concept of rights is a rich one that can help to illuminate the premises on which theories of the welfare state are based" (p. 36).

## **Conclusion**

Political philosophy dates back to Plato, who laid the foundation in his *Republic*. Since then, scores of philosophers have wrestled earnestly with the complex issues of social justice, a concept that is at the heart of social work.

Social workers who truly embrace the profession's mission recognize that our views of and efforts to promote social justice rest on fundamental beliefs about what we mean by the term justice and about effective, morally defensible ways to pursue it. In that justice is an ancient concept that has been the focus of scores of scholarly analyses, it behooves social workers to appreciate the intellectual and philosophical lineage that underpins contemporary perspectives.

Today's social workers, no matter what their political leanings and ideology, make and act upon critically important judgments about the role of the government and private sector with regard to citizens' well-being and welfare; the fair and just allocation of social resources (distributive justice); and the complex relationship between welfare and rights. Familiarity with longstanding philosophical perspectives is not only illuminating, informative, and inspirational; such knowledge also enhances social workers' ability to think through and offer strong support for their social justice views, and, most importantly, design concrete action steps to promote social justice. This is vitally important in this era of politically charged debates about what it means to meet people's needs and care for the most vulnerable. And nothing should be more important than this for social workers.

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