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# Philosophical Disputes in Social Work: Social Justice Denied

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*The debate in the social work academy about the pertinence of empiricist/positivist modes of knowing and doing is epistemological in character. It is the argument of this essay that prior ontological questions must be answered before the profession of social work can profitably enter this debate. These questions center on the nature of social work, the symbolic and moral essence of the social work enterprise and what the profession is becoming.*

The profession of social work as actually practiced could hardly be accused of a mania for a positivist tools for practice (Welch, 1983). The social work academy, however, is buzzing with a debate about the relevance of such tools and their accompanying presuppositions for practice (Fischer, 1981, 1984; Gordon, 1983; Heineman (Pieper), 1981; Hudson, 1982; Karger, 1983; Ruckdeschel and Farris, 1981; Brekke, 1986; Weick, 1987). The debate, now soft and insinuated, now loud and bitter, centers on selecting *either* a rigorous *or* a relevant epistemology to guide social work education, practice, and research.

It is the intent of this essay to briefly assay and critique core elements of the debate; to account for the ostensible and premature resolution of the debate; to argue that prior questions must be answered before the epistemological conflicts can be reasonably resolved; and to suggest that these prior questions are ontological and to suppose how they might be answered.

## The Debate

If the debate is about the fundamental epistemology of social work knowledge and practice it is about questions of how professionals know, how professional knowing is different from mundane knowing, and how professionals come to know, evaluate, and characterize their practice. The roots of the debate

extend back for centuries, fertilized extensively by Enlightenment fomenting over the best avenues to apprehend and control elements of the universe in the interest of "progress" and "freedom" (Gay, 1969). The empiricist contends that all knowledge must be based on the perceptions of the senses. Such knowledge can be systematically gathered and accumulated, and its validity put to the test by standard method and instrumentation. Rationalists on the other hand, argue that the mind inevitably enlarges, shapes, and or imbues impressions gained from sensory, empirical experience. Another related facet of the debate, again embedded in our past, is the tension between realists and idealists, the former asserting that the objects of our knowing are, in fact, real and have an existence apart from us and they can be known *as* they exist, while the latter posit that these objects are to some degree, a product of mind's intention, experience, and desire (Popper, 1982; Eccles, 1980).

In the social work academy, this hoary debate can be exemplified by the exchange between Martha Heineman-Pieper (1981; 1985) and Walter Hudson (1982). Others have contributed to this occasionally acrimonious dialogue, not the least of whom are Joel Fischer (1981, 1984) and William Gordon (1983, 1984) (although the irony of their particular foofaraw is that they both, as Haworth (1986) has pointed out, are empiricists). Heineman-Pieper believes that the positivist approach to understanding human experience is naive, inadequate to such a task and may even falsify, in its reliance on measurement, the essence of human experience. She asserts, in summarizing critiques of positivism from a variety of fields, that what is unique about human experience is that it is formed and can only be known in interaction, participation, and dialogue (Heineman-Pieper, 1985). Hudson (1982), on the other hand, puts it quite directly: "Constructs that cannot be defined, operationalized, and then measured are mentalisms that are useless to an understanding of the world in which we live" (p. 256).

This pale summary on the central issues at hand indicate that its substance is, in fact, epistemological, although there are those who have tried to extend the argument beyond questions of knowing (Weick, 1987). Confusions and conflicts over the nature of practice knowledge and the state of mind of the practitioner

have obscured prior questions that must be analyzed, appreciated, and answered before the epistemological issues can be reasonably grappled with: questions about the very nature of social work and what social work is becoming; that is to say, what exactly is the essence of the profession of social work's being?

These are ontological questions; and require inquiry directed to the existential basis of the profession. If social work as a profession, merely deals with questions about knowing, however constructively, we stand in danger of the tail wagging the dog, the method dictating the meaning, a prospect that forebodes the devolution of social work into technique or technology. To embarrass an old biological saw, in this case ontology must precede epistemology.

#### The Debate: Resolution by Default

Other forces and developments move to harden the debate and to assure a resolution in the direction of what Donald Schön (1983) calls the Technical/Rationalist or empiricist model of thinking and acting.

The most stentorian note sounded in the blare of the debate has been the rise of professionalism to unprecedented hegemony in authoring social decisions. In our culture, professions have become the standard-bearers of science and its progeny, technology. The prevailing definition of the concept of profession would denote something like "... professional activity consists in instrumental problem-solving made vigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (Schön, 1983, p. 21). Ernest Greenwood (1957) in a most celebrated discourse on the nature of professions generally, and the social work profession in particular, argues that "To generate valid theory that will provide a solid base for professional techniques requires the application of the scientific method to the service-related problems of the profession" (p. 76). In essence, professionals are to become applied scientists.

Schön (1983) is highly critical of the Technical/Rationalist model because it distorts, if not denies altogether, the actuality of what most professionals know and do. It also comes tantalizingly close to confusing method with essence and tends to

belittle other ways of knowing and doing as either soft-headed or subversive of rigor.

The professional as Technical/Rationalist becomes part of an elite, bureaucratic and entrepreneurial, that institutionalizes the positivist perspective (even though much of what passes for science and technology would fail any positivistic test of rigor and validity). No less a contributor to this hegemony, perhaps even a result of it—it is difficult to say—is the rampant individualizing or psychologizing of social misery. In our world, the idiom and world view of capitalism, and the language and judgment of the professions have become one. In a world where the marketplace rules, a blithe ignorance of the historical evolution and political/economic configurations that abet what we define as individual difficulties makes some sense. This “social amnesia” (Jacoby, 1975) has cast the professions adrift from social relevance so that some have evolved into a “jejune conglomeration of technical devices and methods” (Saleebey, 1987). So, for example, it is not politic to raise serious social, and economic, questions about why more women than men suffer depression. It is far more lucrative, and amenable to the extension of available technology, whether pill, placebo, or panacea, to treat each woman one by one as they troop through the office, consulting room, or clinic. We do postulate some notions about collective forces that may be involved but they usually are little more than multipliers of the single case. In social work, there has been notable effort to develop characterizations of the environment but even they may be somewhat debilitated by social amnesia. Germain (1987), in her review of developmental theory and the passing away of stage theories, gives a nod to the mutually interactive effect of individual-environment relationships, but speaks nary a word about the historical embeddedness of, or institutional pressures that drive, the course of individual development. Jacoby (1975) says it well in his critique of the individual psychologies that rule today’s consciousness:

The convergence from contrasting directions on the importance of the subject as an emotional and psychic entity points to a real development of society; not as apologists would have it, that society has fulfilled basic material needs and is moving to the higher reaches of liberation, but the reverse:

domination is reaching the inner depths of men and women. The last preserves of the autonomous individual are under siege. (p. 17)

The Technical/Rationalist model, funded by the individualist bias, has swept (or is sweeping) other points of view, looney and legitimate alike, under the rug. To its credit, social work resists, but these forces are impressively powerful and culture is shot through with them. We should not, as a profession, engage in the debate over rigor versus relevance until we are clear about our identity, until we firmly understand what we are about, and thus, can assess the epistemological questions from a sound ontological vantage point.

### The Ontological Issues Denied

As I said above, broad cultural forces conspire to embolden the advocates of a "scientific" world view. These forces work as well to sap the identity of the profession of social work.

Christopher Lasch, in two books (1979; 1984) has drawn a portrait of contemporary culture shot through with "narcissism", not the self-love of the overweening, strutting egoist, but the self-doubt of an individual uncertain of the boundaries and contours of the self, an individual who has trouble distinguishing between me and not-me, one who cannot comfortably discern what is illusory and what is real about the self. Add to this a miasma of disaster and threat permeating the culture—"the threat of AIDS, the terrors of air flight, the looming of the Big Earthquake", etc.—and you have individuals who must travel light, avoid lengthy or profound personal commitments, disavow emotional encumbrances, and ignore communal burdens and responsibilities. Such penetrating themes in our culture make the very notion of social welfare, of *caritas*, of responsibility to others quaint, if not frankly annoying. Social workers live in this culture, too, and it is not far-fetched to imagine that such themes and strains can make us deaf to our basic commitments and *raison d'être*.

The gradual decline of New Deal sensibilities and the weakening of the liberal agenda of the past few decades, and more pointedly, over the last eight years, have also eroded the firmness of our ontologic sense. Listen to Republicans and Demo-

crats today talk about social welfare policy—if they do at all—about the social good, and you might be listening to a cadre of parvenus bat around stories about welfare “abusers.” The error here is to think, as some do, that the liberal quest has been accomplished or to think, as others do, that it has abysmally failed. But thinking either to be true, in a climate of political/economic rationalism and restraint, dampens, in the profession and outside it, the central ontological business of social work, the pursuit of social justice. Recoiling, perhaps, from the excesses and failures of the 60s we find ourselves faced with a public morality that reflects, more often than not, the credos and prescriptions of the marketplace.

Not, then, simply the rise of the Technical/Rationalist conception of the professions has led us to this debate, but wider social and cultural trends compel us as well. Not only have they conspired to make us less certain than we might be about who we are, but they have suckered us into a debate which we cannot competently argue until we more firmly establish a professional identity.

### The Ontology of Social Work

The word ontology promises more than I can deliver: all that is intended here is a survey of what I regard as the symbolic and existential infrastructure of our professional edifice. As you may discover, if we accept these notions, two effects follow: social work will never be, nor should it, like the other, more established professions; in the academy, we must spit out the positivist bit, and continue the search for a more thorough-going and humane inquiry.

It was John Romanyshyn (1971) who, years ago, through the power of his example, the clarity of his thinking, and the depth of his commitment best exemplified what might be the existential heart of this profession. We begin, he suggested, we are instructed and fueled by an *ethic of indignation* (Romanyshyn, 1972), not bloated self-righteousness, or mindless indignation, but a palpable sense of hurt and outrage at indignities afflicted—unjustly, unnecessarily, and often illegally—on people(s). It is a kind of rectitude, even resentment, over acts and attitudes which deny human dignity and thwart human possibility. It is a

sense that, in all ways, we should strive for and support the triumphs of organism over machine, of home over institution, of learning over profit, of identity over celebrity, of the real over the illusory. This ethic requires that, in our small way, individually and collectively, we be stewards over the possibilities and requisites of humanness, and, as is needed, advocates for those who are oppressed, denied, misrepresented, and vulnerable.

*Humane inquiry and understanding* is part of the corpus of social work (Hampden-Turner, 1970; Romanyshyn, 1971; Reason and Rowan, 1981). We seek means of understanding that without violating its meaning, or distorting its nature, can bring us closer to the vagaries and mysteries of the human condition. Life is awash in ambiguity, change, paradox, contradiction, and the continuing tension between the possible and the thwarted, the tragic and the hopeful. We are reluctant to give up our own illusions and myths and to confront these sometimes discordant and frightening elements of the human condition. But we must. We do not want to lapse into the cheery bon mots of modern pop-psych, to pin on the "smile button" that obfuscates the genuine struggles and the real sadness that are the mortar of civilization's bricks (Saleebey, 1987). Neither do we want to wallow in a kind of European existential muck waiting for the Godot of unkind fate. And we may not want to distantiate ourselves from the objects of our interest and concern as the positivists urge. To be conversant with the tragic, to be aware of oppression is not to lose sight of the possibilities of liberation, the turning of the dross of mechanical detached labor, emotional numbness, and intellectual limit into the potential gold of eros—sensual, natural energy, and individual and collective empowerment. To accept the tragic is liberating because, no longer deluded, we can use our own powers of mind and body, our will, and our ethic to restrict the scope of ignorance, fear, prejudice, and oppression. Having confronted it, we can resolve to use the fruits of any inquiry in behalf of improving the human condition.

A second presumption of humane inquiry is that such inquiry is always participatory, a product of a mutual quest, dialogue, and joint learning. Just the opposite, of course, typifies the most elegant positivist mode of inquiry, the experiment. As



Argyris (1975) says of this exquisite jewel in the empiricist crown:

An experiment is a peculiar 'temporary' system. In order to obtain as unambiguous evidence about causation as possible and in order to control extraneous variables, the experimenter strives to gain as much control as possible over the design and execution of the experiment. (p. 474)

This is not a scenario in which one can easily discover the elements of human experience, although one might conceivably discover how people act when they are deceived, encouraged to obey, and not allowed to learn. More humane inquiry, however, rests on vastly different assumptions, and among these are that reality is, in significant degree as far as humans are concerned, constructed symbolically and through interpersonal negotiation; that discovery of lawlike constructs and the causal links are unlikely if not impossible goals, that research methodology is participatory and idiographic, and that all theories, methods, and questions for inquiry are enshrouded with values (Rodwell, 1987; Reason and Rowan, 1981).

A third ontological obligation of social work is *focused compassion and caring*, requiring of us a mimetic or empathic lens through which to see; a stance toward the world of human experience based on a profound appreciation of the root similarities of the human condition for all of us, a positive affective identification with others' humanness, a deep respect for others' uniqueness, and an active resolve to participate in the gathering of individual and group strengths, aspirations, and possibilities (Rifkin, 1983). The manifestation of such caring is dialogue, a peculiar sort of relationship between individuals based upon the mutual appreciation and respect of two (or more) people engaged in a joint project carried out in an affective matrix that is loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, and dedicated to a critical search for possibility, liberation, and empowerment within the surrounding environment (Freire, 1973).

Dialogue is the only way, not only in vital questions of the political order, but in all expressions of our being. Only by virtue of faith, however, does dialogue have power and meaning; by faith in man (read: humanity) and [its] possi-

bilities by the faith that I can only become truly myself when other [individuals] also become themselves. (Jaspers, in Freire, 1973, p. 45)

The last and most important element of our being is *the quest for social justice*, and although the most resonant, it is possibly the most difficult to pin down. Incapable of a philosophical treatise, I can only offer some of the threads that, with others, form the wholecloth of the social justice.

- (a) Social resources are distributed on the principle of need with the clear understanding that such resources underlie the development of personal resources, with the proviso that entitlement to such resources is one of the gifts of citizenship.
- (b) Opportunities for personal and social development are open to all with the understanding that those who have been unfairly hampered through no fault of their own will be appropriately compensated.
- (c) The establishment, at all levels of society, of agenda, and policies that have human development and the enriching of human experience as their essential goal and are understood to take precedence over other agenda and policies is essential.
- (d) The arbitrary exercise of social and political power is forsaken.
- (e) Oppression as a means for establishing priorities, for developing social and natural resources and distributing them, and resolving social problems is forsworn.

These four cornerstones—indignation, inquiry, compassion, and justice—have at least two important corollaries. The first is that all human beings, even the most debilitated, defiled, and disenfranchised, have strengths and potential and some capacity to transform themselves. We do not give power to the people, we encourage them to discover and employ the powers of the self or of the people. Second, every human being exists in a web of relationships, institutions, and sociohistorical circumstances that are profoundly important in determining the possibilities of liberation, transformation, or development.

These first principles of our professional being, to the extent that you accept them, precede our participation in the great debate and suggest some of the terms of that debate.

- (a) The personal is political: Even the most private problems of relationship and consciousness have political and social dimensions. In Jacoby's (1975) words: "... the isolation that damns the individual to scrape along in a private world derives from a public and social one" (p. 44).
- (b) The politics of helping for social work centers on empowerment: We are committed to helping people discover and employ the resources (knowledge, experience, motivations, skills, relationships) that may have been suppressed by self-limiting ideologies and oppressive institutional arrangements. This requires that we focus on the strengths inherent within individuals, groups, neighborhoods and communities.
- (c) Insight is, first and foremost, inspired by social critique: Transforming actions, strategies, and ideas are funded, in part, by a peoples' capacity to see beyond the conventional wisdom, and institutional ideologies and arrangements. The anorexic young female, for example, must be helped in understanding how her (and others) self-image, her very identity is obscured and manipulated by the marketplace and media, otherwise she remains at risk for other consequences of a distorted and abused identity (Saleebey, 1987).
- (d) Closeness to the people is essential: If we desire to help give voice to the silent, advocate for the oppressed, we must approach them in communion, and cooperation through dialogue and not the implicitly required distance and detachment of esoteric technique.
- (e) Theories for practice focus on the dialectical nature of human striving and interaction: The world of human experience is constructed of polarities, appositions, and tensions. The usual inclination of individuals is to control such tension through the suppression of one side of a dialectic that must be elevated to consciousness if action and movement is to be freed. For many males, as an example, one side of their potential for liberated action has been buried under the delicts of capitalism, commerce, and technology—the

organic, sensual, caring part of their being has become alien. Males, to be empowered more fully, must confront both the instrumental and affective elements of their being.

### Radicalism Redux

The preceding sounds suspiciously like an outworn radical agenda, now virtually forgotten or, perhaps, thoroughly discredited. Later radicalism waned as a significant social force because it forgot its history, wallowed in excess or because it failed to formulate an agenda for positive transformation. As a profession, we cannot foist off these beliefs and principles on the rest of society but we can, individually and collectively, pursue them as we engage in the daily round of practice and citizenship. If we fail to assert and follow them then we stand as one of the legion of guardians of the status quo, as one of the minions of social control or, perhaps more likely, as one of the corps of petty bureaucrats of therapeutic tinkerers.

If we hope to enter the current epistemological debate unfolding within the profession with vigor and resolution, our ontological awareness and commitments must be heightened and made formidable. To the extent that we do that, social justice will not be denied, and we will stand as advocates for relevance before rigor, and meaning before method.

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