Social Work Values: The Moral Core of the Profession

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Summary

This paper argues that an emphasis on the profession’s knowledge base has come at the expense of attention to social work’s values and mission. The discussion examines the relative importance of knowledge, values and skills in an effort to understand the shifting emphases of the profession within a social and historical context. The consequences of these shifts for the profession and for its relationship to society are also considered. Concepts from the intellectual struggles of social work and from an interdisciplinary perspective suggest ways to ground the profession’s skills and knowledge in its values of human dignity, service to humanity and social justice. At its core, social work must respond to the moral imperative of caring for the neediest among us. This entails re-claiming and building on the commitment of early social workers ‘to work with forces that make for progress . . . to forward the advance of the . . . common people’ (Richmond, 1899, p. 151). The paper concludes that for social work to have a future, the profession must take pride in its moral core, define its contemporary meaning and work for the social welfare in ways that are relevant to both social workers and non-social workers.

Introduction

At a time of increasing social problems there is urgent need for social work to clarify its role and function in society. Government funding for social programmes is under attack and dwindling. The USA leads in these trends,
but there are similar patterns in the UK and other nations such as Canada and Germany. There is diminishing belief that society has a moral obligation to assure food and housing for those without, education for all its young, and quality health care unrelated to ability to pay. In the USA, over 14 per cent of the population lacks health care insurance (Bergman, 2002); infant mortality rates are the highest among industrialized nations (Health and Human Services, 2002); by the end of 2002 the incarceration rate was among the highest in the world with one out of 143 residents in jail (New York Times, 2003a). This wealthiest of countries is on the same level, or worse, than some of the poorest, while also contributing to world poverty through its cotton farm subsidies (New York Times, 2003b). Income disparity is so skewed that the combined $69 billion income of the 400 richest Americans is more than the combined incomes of the 166 million people residing in Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda and Botswana (Sachs, 2003).

These social problems and erosion of civic life demand the attention of the profession yet the social work voice is barely heard. As Jones complains, the profession ‘has been particularly silent over the past twenty years about the shifting patterns in social wellbeing and disadvantage’ (Jones, 1997, p. 179). This silence may be seen as a direct violation of the social work codes of ethics. The British code states, ‘Social workers have a duty to . . . bring to the attention of those in power and the general public, and where appropriate challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government, organizations or society create or contribute to structural disadvantage, hardship and suffering or militate against their relief’ (British Association of Social Workers, 2002, Section 3.2.2.a.). The International Code of Ethics also identifies that the service responsibility of social workers is to ‘the welfare and self-fulfilment of human beings; . . . [and] to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; and to the achievement of social justice (International Federation of Social Workers, 1994). The US Code further includes that ‘social workers pursue social change with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. . . . Change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty . . . and other forms of injustice’ (National Association of Social Workers, 1996, p. 5).

This lack of adherence to the values in the codes is an indicator of the low level of commitment to their importance (Payne, 2002; McBeath and Webb, 2002), even though there is a widely held assumption that values are central to the profession (Bartlett, 1970; Reamer, 1999; Parsons, 2001). If values are pivotal in the conceptualization and justification of the profession, those who practise social work must challenge and inform the public about ‘structural disadvantage’ and advocate for social justice (British Association of Social Workers, 2002, Section 3.2.2.a.). Social workers in the USA have greater autonomy and status yet at the same time there are cuts in the public funding of social services along with a turn to faith-based services (see Wagner, 2000). In the midst of this sea of crises, there is no ‘appropriate challenge’ from the profession. Such contrast between the increased professionalization of social
work and the decreased attention to social problems requires the clarification and reaffirmation of the importance of values to practice.

The moral base

During the profession’s formative years, moral concerns drove social work’s development. What we would now consider a case or care management function was carried out by the Charity Organization Societies in tandem with charitable efforts to raise the moral stature of individuals and society. The Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity (later to be called the COS) first met in 1870 to provide co-ordination (hence the name organizing) of the many private charitable groups forming in London during that period (Woodroofe, 1964).

This moral claim is exemplified by C. S. Loch (first secretary of the COS) who hoped that ‘such an organization might bring to bear on the removal and prevention of evils a combined force that would far exceed in weight and influence any yet existing . . . it could renew and discipline the life of the people by a nobler, more devoted, more scientific religious charity . . . it could help us to realize in society the religion of charity without the sectarianism of religion’ (Loch, 1904, pp. 67–8).

In his seminal piece on the Charity Organization Societies, social work historian Leiby emphasizes their moral vision for the social welfare, ‘the most important insight charity organizers left us was their view of society as a moral community . . . a body of people held together primarily by intimate sentiments of responsibility, love and duty, and caring and sharing’ (Leiby, 1984, p. 535).

As Woodroofe chronicles the COS, she states ‘there was a genuine desire to improve the conditions of the poor.’ Although arguing that their emphasis was more on philanthropy and changing the individual than on changing society, she points to Loch’s hope for social change, ‘the lives of others, judged by his own, were sunless and sad. . . . There was a desire for action, in which he could play a part, to set the world right’ (Woodroofe, 1964, pp. 21–2).

This social change emphasis is more evident in the philosophy of the Settlement movement. Arnold Toynbee, for whom the first Settlement was named in 1884, talked of the need ‘to unite the advocacy of social reform with an appeal to the various classes who compose society to perform those duties without which all social reform must be merely delusive’ (Woodroofe, 1964, p. 68). Jane Addams, who in 1889 founded Hull House in Chicago, broadened from reliance on philanthropy to political action to improve such things as housing, education and sanitation. She believed that ‘“ethics” is but another word for “righteousness,” . . . without which life becomes meaningless’ (Addams, 1902, p. 1).
For Addams, sensitive to the major social changes and increasing secularization of society, social morality provided a foundation for democracy. ‘To follow the path of social morality results . . . in the temper of the democratic spirit . . . the guarantee of Democracy’ (Addams, 1902, p. 7). She also recognized that ideas and beliefs alone are inadequate and that ‘action is indeed the sole medium of expression for ethics’ (1902, p. 273).

Along with the moral commitment to ‘set things right’, other concerns motivated the COS and the Settlements: religious evangelism, the potential violence from social unrest, and the health and financial costs of poverty. Nevertheless, the friendly visitors and early social workers (both in the UK and the USA) recognized the importance of social morality. ‘So long as human beings are human and their environment is the world, it is difficult to imagine a state of affairs in which both they and the world they live in will be in no need of these adjustments and readjustments of a detailed sort’ (Richmond, 1922, p. 98). These moral concerns laid the foundation for some of the primary values of the profession, emphasizing the importance of individual worth and dignity and service to humanity.

The press for skills and knowledge

Notwithstanding the historical importance of values, a shift of focus to skills and knowledge occurred very quickly in the profession’s development. The friendly visitors firmly established the helping relationship as a core skill of the profession. Richmond points out that charity work consisted of more than direct aid. ‘Friendly visiting means intimate and continuous knowledge of and sympathy with a poor family’s joys, sorrows, opinions, feelings and entire outlook upon life’ (Richmond, 1899, p. 80). Relationship for Richmond is ‘the distinctive approach of the caseworker . . . wherever adjustment must be effected in this manner, individual by individual’ (Richmond, 1922, p. 98).

Viewed as the vehicle of social work practice (Bisman, 1994), relationship development received attention at the Milford Conference which attempted to unify social work as a single calling. ‘The flesh and blood is in the dynamic relationship between the social caseworker and the client (Social Casework-Generic and Specific, 1929, p. 29). Others contributed to the emphasis on relationship. Clow comments, ‘the success of any except a fool-proof plan (and of such, how many are there?) may be made or marred by the relationship between client and visitor’ (Clow, 1925, p. 272). While Dexter states ‘the interplay of her [the caseworker’s] personality and her clients forms the medium of her work and sets in operation the casework process’ (Dexter, 1926, pp. 436–42).
Although the skill of the social work relationship is essential, it became clear as the profession developed that it was not sufficient for effective practice. Responding to complaints of inefficiency and religious prejudice, and challenges to improve skills, more organized efforts began to formalize the teaching of social work. In 1896, the COS collaborated with the Women’s University Settlement in Southwark and the National Union of Women Workers to offer a mixture of apprenticeship, supervision and lectures. Emphasis was on practical work in agencies (Smith, 1965, p. 22). The COS founded the first School of Sociology in 1903 and by 1912 the School joined the London School of Economics as its Department of Social Science and Administration. Reverend Henry Solly proclaimed that ‘this is the science of doing good and preventing evil in our social system’ (cited in Woodroffe, 1964, p. 48).

Respect for science, indeed worship of the scientific method, was also evident among the early COS leaders. C. S. Loch declared: ‘If we wish to improve the conditions of the poor we must adopt scientific measures’ (cited in Woodroffe, 1964, p. 48). This sentiment echoed the Reverend D. O. Kellogg’s concern for a ‘science of social therapeutics. . . . [U]ntil this is done, benevolence is not much else but quackery’ (cited in Pumphrey and Pumphrey, 1964, pp. 174–5). In the USA, Mary Richmond called for a training school in applied philanthropy to strengthen both the theoretical and the practical. ‘We owe it to those who come after us that they be spared the groping and blundering by which we have acquired our own stock of experience’ (Richmond, 1898). Her aims for such schooling were for a ‘more highly organized body of knowledge’ (Richmond, 1930, p. 100) and ‘the development of higher ideals of charitable service’ (Richmond, 1930, p. 104). In 1898, the COS of New York initiated the first formal social work schooling in the USA in a six-week summer programme (Ayres, 1899). By 1904 there were three university-affiliated schools in New York, Boston and Chicago. These ultimately became the social work schools at Columbia University, Simmons College and the University of Chicago.

The affiliation of social work education with universities spurred two major conflicts that continue to this day. The first is the tension between knowledge and the application of knowledge. The second is the debate over the kind of knowledge needed by the profession and its mode of research. Both of these conflicts relate to the profession’s quest to be accepted by the academy and respected as a science.

Questions about the nature of science, its relationship to the social work domain, and whether it has aided or hindered the development of the profession have been particularly tumultuous in the USA. The extent of this strain is exemplified by the continuing influence of a medical education reformer who was not very knowledgeable about social work (Kirk and Reid, 2002; Marsh, 2002). In 1915, Abraham Flexner claimed that social work lacked a distinctive method and a scientific body of knowledge and was therefore not worthy of professional status. On one of his criteria for professional status, ‘the
advancement of the common social interest’ (Flexner, 1915, p. 581), Flexner commends social work ‘in the long run, the first, main and indispensable criterion of a profession will be the possession of professional spirit, and that test social work may, if it will, fully satisfy’ (1915, p. 590).

The lack of attention to Flexner’s commendation of social work’s concern with the common good is an early example of the profession’s turn towards knowledge development at the expense of a moral base. This emphasis on knowledge—on a particular type of knowledge—to the exclusion of values threatens the viability of the profession. Social work must move beyond the simplifications and long-standing divisions. In this vein, it is important to acknowledge some of the early gains achieved in the profession’s knowledge base. Responding to the criticisms in Flexner’s report, Richmond once again had a major influence on the course of the profession. She offered the social diagnosis as the profession’s method, ‘the primary purpose of the writer, in attempting an examination of the initial process of social casework, is to make some advance toward a professional standard’ (Richmond, 1917, p. 26). This first formal effort to make the diagnostic process systematic recognized the need for thorough history taking and the central connection of diagnosis to intervention. ‘Social evidence, like that sought by the scientist or historian, includes all items which . . . throw light upon the question at issue; namely as regards social work, the question what course of procedure will place this client in his right relation to society?’ (Richmond, 1917, p. 39).

In the USA, responses to Flexner and the university affiliation for social work became equated with social work’s attempt to be a science within a positivist framework. A fully-fledged debate among academics initiated by Fischer (1981) dominated the attention of American social workers and rejuvenated Flexner’s press for scientific respectability. Drawing from Kuhn’s (1970) seminal work on paradigms, Fischer claimed that social work was ‘in the midst of a revolution . . . or a paradigm shift . . . towards scientifically based practice’ (Fischer, 1981, pp. 199–200).

Gordon (himself a scientist who had long worked to make sense of the profession’s knowledge base), responded with great passion to Fischer’s ‘misuse of Kuhn . . . and his rank empiricism’ (Gordon, 1983, pp. 181–2). Gordon worried about the profession continuing to distract itself from the work he deemed important, which was the separation of ‘what the profession prefers or wants for people from what social work knows about people’ (Gordon, 1965, p. 34). Gordon’s concerns were well founded but his interests in the relationship between the profession’s knowledge base and core values have continued to receive scant attention. Empiricism, measurement and a search for ‘truth’ became the dominant research approach (Bloom and Orme, 1993; Briar, 1990; Rubin and Babbie, 1993). Meanwhile, the postmodernist challenge, with its concern for values, context and construction, gained some adherents among social work academics (Heineman Pieper, 1989; Rodwell, 1987; Tyson, 1994) but their efforts were mainly expended refuting the dominant discourse.
The primacy of values

These divisions have taken much of the profession’s attention while short shrift has been given to the desired ends of the knowledge and skills. Without values and morality, what good is the knowledge attained and skills used by social workers? All professional occupations are grounded by values, and guided by ethical codes. Professional practice derives from normative or moral theory and ‘deals with moral values and social norms, with conduct that is socially good, obligatory, and normal, or that is bad, offensive, and deviant’ (Siporin, 1975, p. 64). Gustafson points to the centrality of morality to professional practice. ‘A profession without a calling . . . has no taps of moral and humane rootage to keep human sensitivities and sensibilities alert . . . [and cannot] envision the larger ends and purposes of human good that our individual efforts can serve’ (Gustafson, 1982, p. 514). Moreover, the primary focus of a profession like social work is not defining and explaining, which are objectives of the social sciences (Durkheim, 1938), but caring and changing.

Brint (1994, p. 7) explains that professions represent a coherent ideology encompassing both technical performance of knowledge-informed skills and a moral grounding component. Professions are guided by the social ends they serve. This attention to societal interests, and thus the profession itself, is threatened by the continuing press for expertise and applied formal knowledge. According to Tawney, the meaning of the profession’s actions, for social workers and the public, is ‘that they make health, or safety . . . or good law’ (Tawney, 1948, pp. 94–5). The actions of social workers must promote ‘social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being’ (British Association of Social Workers, 2002).

Without this emphasis on social justice, there is little if any need for social work or social workers. The skills and knowledge base of the profession are not unique nor do they particularly contribute to social interests. Social work skills of relationship building, therapy and case management are performed by other professionals, such as counsellors and public health workers. Similarly, despite the extended and intensive efforts to build a knowledge base unique to social work, in practice, social workers draw from the same knowledge base in human behaviour and social systems as do psychiatrists and city planners. It is the application of knowledge and skills towards moral ends that imbues the profession with meaning and defines the role of the social worker in society.

Upholding and shaping belief systems and value orientations, with a mission to change the behaviour of society, the profession cannot exist without continual attention to moral questions. Perhaps, as Reamer asserts, social work is the most normative of professions in that its ‘mission has been anchored primarily, although not exclusively, by conceptions of what is just and unjust and by a collective belief about what individuals in a society have a right to and owe to one another’ (Reamer, 1995, p. 5).
In spite of these efforts to think about the role of morality and values in the profession, social work’s conceptions still lack an anchor for its skills and knowledge. As discussed earlier, in the push to empiricism in the 1980s, Gordon became distracted from his work to shape a discourse around the knowledge/value realm. His potentially important contributions, on how values not only affect what we do about what we know but also shape what we know, were never adequately developed (Gordon, 1965). He collaborated with Bartlett and, in her thrust for a common base to the social work profession, she stated that values ‘refer to what is good and desirable. These are qualitative judgments; they are not empirically demonstrable. They are invested with emotion and represent a purpose or goal toward which the social worker’s action will be directed’ (Bartlett, 1970, p. 63). Lewis also generalized values as ‘those enduring beliefs we hold about what is to be preferred as good and right in our conduct and in our existence as human beings’ (Lewis, 1982, p. 12). Social work practice, however, occurs in the real world with real-life problems where empirical support and demonstrability is essential.

Reamer is probably one of the more prolific writers on values and explains that they ‘are generalized, emotionnally charged conceptions of what is desirable; historically created and derived from experience; shared by a population or group within it; and they provide the means for organizing and structuring patterns of behavior’ (Reamer, 1995, p. 11). Others have accorded values great importance: Vigilante (1974) calls them ‘the fulcrum of practice’; Bernstein (1970) states that values offer methods the necessary ‘vision and discernment’; Younghusband (1967) states they are ‘everywhere in practice’. None the less, Timms’s (1983) plea for ‘value-talk’ is still, after two decades, most relevant. Critical that use of the term ‘values’ has not moved beyond vague generalizing, he bemoans the continuing gap between social work concepts and practice. Clarity of ‘values’ for Timms requires both content, ‘the consideration of what a person ought to do from a moral point of view,’ and function, ‘the doing . . . of that action which he ought to do’ (Timms, 1983, p. 42). This is the challenge for the profession. Social work must understand its goals and then act to achieve them.

Values: A discourse of caring

In order to make these links and capture a meaning of the social welfare that is relevant to social workers and society, the profession needs to draw from an interdisciplinary perspective and engage in a wider discourse. In addition to social work, many other fields, such as sociology, law and philosophy may help to provide a broader, non-sectarian context through which social workers can understand and apply the moral base of the profession.

This enrichment will provide greater clarity about social work’s moral charge and help to distinguish between social and individual morality. Social
morality refers to matters of the collective—not private morality or even the behaviour of specific people in public roles, but the broad range of behaviours that create the public life and impact on the public sphere. Although social work scholar Goldstein explains that ‘social work practice . . . inherently . . . is an ethical and moral endeavor’ (1998, p. 241), it has been difficult for the profession to accept its responsibility to improve the conduct of social life in its moral aspect. In her writings about social work and ethics, Emmet (1979) contrasts political morality and its concern for consequences rather than principles with social morality and its focus on relationships guided by concerns about the common life of a community. To practise social work is to act on the morality of social life. Such practice requires the profession to embrace its mission to enhance human well-being and accept that this domain necessarily includes the dual areas of individual and social well-being.

Bauman’s sociological and philosophical perspectives provide support for social work’s moral responsibility and a solid conceptualization of its service ethic. He points out that the private versus public split results in the deterioration of essential collective services and public goods such as public health, transportation, housing and education. Those who are financially able may buy their way out of collective responsibility, paying less into the pool of public funds yet benefiting more from public services. ‘The ideal for the citizen is a satisfied customer. Society is there for individuals to seek and find satisfaction for their individual wants’ (Bauman, 1994, p. 244). It is for social work to live up to the moral inspiration of its inherent paradoxes and engage in the business of ‘redemption of moral capacity and . . . remoralization of human space’ (Bauman, 1994, p. 240).

This public support, which is necessary for the social welfare, requires a set of shared beliefs about the common good along with a broad and inclusive definition of community membership. In his work on legal theory, Dworkin writes that ‘a genuine political community must therefore be a community of independent moral agents’ (Dworkin, 1996, p. 26). Dworkin also provides support for Bauman’s conception of individual moral responsibility accompanying a shared concern with the collective. Communities provide the circumstances that encourage individuals to ‘arrive at beliefs on these matters through their own reflective and finally individual conviction’ (1996, p. 26). Dworkin pushes for a ‘moral reading’ of the US constitution, requiring judges and citizens to understand that abstract clauses ‘invoke moral principles about political decency and justice’ (1996, p. 2). Although judges claim that morality does not influence their decisions, Dworkin asserts that ‘true self-government is possible only within a community that meets the condition of moral membership’ (1996, p. 24) because it is only then that we can refer to government ‘of, by and for’ the people.

Dworkin frames the moral base as a strength. ‘[W]hen we understand democracy better, we see that the moral reading of a political constitution is . . . practically indispensable to democracy’ (1996, p. 7) in its ‘demands that judges make contemporary judgments of political morality, and it therefore
encourages an open display of the true grounds of judgment, in the hope that judges will construct franker arguments of principle that allow the public to join in the argument’ (1996, p. 37). This is my hope for social work—that acknowledgement of the moral nature of the business of social work will foster a broad public discourse about those things essential to societal well-being. As Dworkin emphasizes, the moral reading of any society’s social compact encourages the development of a sense of justice, enlivens the commitment to liberty, and ‘engages us as moral deliberators and advocates rather than just members in a political count’ (1996, pp. 346–7).

Downie, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, the same position held by Adam Smith, agrees that professionals are moral agents and argues against impartiality. In his work with Telfer, he frames the business of social work as covering ‘what sort of a life a person ought to be enabled to live in his society’ (Downie and Telfer, 1980, p. ix). Critical of social work’s reliance on ethical rules for guidelines and on the social sciences for expertise, he believes that practitioners need a better grasp of the complexities of moral concepts. Since the ‘value base of medicine and social work is in a sense ultimately independent of the knowledge base’ (1980, p. 10), Downie and Telfer urge social workers to spend more time analysing the moral ambiguities of their authority, rights and function.

Understanding that the profession’s authority for its value stance stems from concern for societal improvement as opposed to individual morality, Downie and Telfer explain that, for the social worker, ‘it is society’s welfare, . . . not the client’s moral welfare, which is his ultimate concern’ (Downie and Telfer, 1980, p. 33). Downie further emphasizes the relationship of social justice to a standard of living that includes basic needs such as housing, food, medical care and education. ‘The fulfillment of these minimum social rights can be regarded as a necessary condition for the exercise of any rights whatsoever; there can be no rights to life or liberty without bread’ (Downie, 1971, p. 81). Access is critical. ‘[W]e judge a society not only in terms of the amount of benefit but also in terms of the way the benefit is distributed’ (Downie and Telfer, 1980, p. 40).

For Downie and Telfer, as for Emmet, social morality involves a sense of commitment, of ‘the ties generated by kinship . . . the sense of being part of a broad cultural tradition’ (Downie and Telfer, 1980, p. 41). Social workers need to not only generate fraternity among themselves (‘gemeinschaft’ or ‘community spirit’) but also to enhance feelings of belonging by the diverse range of persons within the larger society.

Contributions of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers on the relationship of society to citizens continue to be relevant to the building of a just community. Sharing Ferguson’s (1772) admiration for society, sociologist Wolfe states ‘moral obligation can become a social practice only when—as the proposed and the classical tradition in society carried forward—society is understood as a gift that we give to ourselves’ (Wolfe, 1989, p. 258). Yet, ‘when we make self-interest the guide to all our moral decisions, we are in a sense proclaiming that
we no longer wish to enjoy the gift of society but wish instead to be ruled by something called human ‘nature’, as if society were not put in place to prevent us from acting like selfish genes’ (1989, p. 259). Wolfe believes that the practices and institutions we put in place save us from ourselves and that modernity requires an extension of those moral rules that worked locally such as family and friendship, to extend the notions of civil society to include more distant obligations (1989, p. 20).

Tronto (1994) shares Wolfe’s interest in the Enlightenment thinkers and his concerns about the problem of distance. Her thesis is that Hutcheson (1994), Hume (1874, 1924) and Smith (1981, 1982) were grappling with changes in social distance, recognizing that while close and familiar ties were becoming less common, distant connections were becoming more prominent. Crediting our moral legacy to the arguments of these thinkers, Tronto believes our fundamental moral question is still the one Hutcheson tried to answer: how to ‘conceive of a way to think of morality that extends some form of sympathy further than our own group’ (Hutcheson, 1994, p. 59). In order to present a continuity of moral ideas and behaviour, Hutcheson, a professor of moral philosophy, proposed a moral sense distinct from reason, self-interest and cultural norms. Tronto argues from a feminist perspective for a different paradigm, an ethic of care that is both moral and political. Critical of our current tendency to think of politics as a means to achieve moral ends or morality as a means to achieve political ends, but not as similar means and ends, she believes that human care and interdependence are categories of social life that structure our realities across gender, race and class.

Consideration of these and other ideas, including those from social work’s own history and intellectual struggles, may not only aid contemporary social workers in reconciling the profession’s roots of charity organization with settlement but also help to solidify understanding of its moral function. Human well-being encompasses both individual and social well-being—the nexus of the profession’s domain. Continuing discourse within the profession and the broader community will provide social workers with the language necessary to clarify and sustain a vision for human well-being and caring (See Parton, 2003; McBeath and Webb, 2002; Jones, 1997). This shared vision will nourish the profession and guide the practice and education of social workers.

**Conclusion**

The twenty-first century began with the accelerating erosion of state concern for social welfare. In England, this commitment dates back to the 1600s. Social work’s inadequate response to this unravelling of the social compact may in part be understood as a consequence of the dominant emphasis on the development of scientific knowledge and technical expertise. It is time for the profession to once again embrace its core values. Working for social justice and human well-being requires that these values drive the search for knowledge.
needed to shape the world in this particular way. The aim is not to diminish the importance of knowledge but to place knowledge development within the context of the profession's larger aims.

Social work has not lived up to the moral inspiration of its traditions. Only by re-emphasizing the ‘social’ aspect of social work, and articulating the ethical basis of social welfare, can the profession survive. Ideas from other disciplines provide intellectual support for attention to these matters of the collective, not private morality but the morality of social structures and policies as they impact the social life and private lives of individuals.

Social work is not value-free. The profession reflects the values of practitioners and the larger community. Where social work’s values do not match those of the community, it is the responsibility of the profession to ‘seek to change social structures which perpetuate inequalities and injustices’ (British Association of Social Workers, 2002, Section 3.2.2.d.). Values and mission are central to the profession; without them there is no social work. The values reflected in the moral conundrums of practice—not the knowledge base used—distinguishes and must guide the profession.

Some may be concerned that morality can be used as a basis for subjective/manipulative decisions that are not in the best interest of society. After all, shared values do not necessarily result in identical, or even similar, actions. (The value of human life, for example, is relied on by those who support a woman’s right to choose as well as by those who oppose abortion in all circumstances.) Such confusions are part and parcel of the profession’s domain. The moral world is ambiguous, a world of ideals rather than truths. As Bauman explains ‘the moral person cannot beat ambivalence; s/he may only learn to live with it. The context of life . . . is messy. It is not easy to be a moral person’ (1994, p. 182). The profession’s values and moral core will not prescribe but rather should serve to inspire, guide and motivate its practice, teaching and research.

There are challenges to the relevance of the profession’s ethical code (Banks, 1998) and claims that context shapes the practice of social work (McDonald et al., 2003). Nevertheless, throughout multiple cultures, social workers share a ‘grounding in humanitarian values’ (Healy, 2002, p. 539). To sustain this core, the profession must advance ‘the common social interest’ (Flexner, 1915, p. 581) and fulfil its role of social trustee professionalism (Brint, 1994). These humanitarian values must drive the profession’s search for knowledge.

In the words of Adam Smith: ‘Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. . . . No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable’ (Smith, 1981, p. 96). It is social work’s responsibility to help society flourish by providing leadership in the moral domain of human well-being and social welfare.

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