# THE

# PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK FREDERIC G. REAMER

# The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work

FREDERIC G. REAMER



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# THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK

Philosophy, the lumber of the schools.

—JONATHAN SWIFT

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# **PREFACE**

I recently read a book—The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations (1989)—by the acclaimed philosopher Robert Nozick. Toward the end of the book Nozick includes a chapter with a curious title: "What Is Wisdom and Why Do Philosophers Love It So?" For Nozick, philosophy's ultimate aim is an understanding of what is fundamentally important and a grasp of life's central issues. Nozick argues that this sort of understanding takes the form of wisdom: "Philosophy means the love of wisdom. What is wisdom? How shall it be loved? Wisdom is an understanding of what is important, where this understanding informs a (wise) person's thought and action. Things of lesser importance are kept in proper perspective" (267).

One of social work's principal virtues is that its practitioners tend to have a certain wisdom about life's important issues. Seasoned social workers have come up against life's most compelling circumstances and clients' struggles with them. Social workers have much to be philosophical—and wise—about. My purpose here is to identify and explore the core philosophical issues in social work and speculate about their relevance to practice. As I will argue in some

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detail, this sort of exploration is particularly important at this point in social work's history, as the profession closes in on the end of its first formal century.

Throughout social work's evolution, practitioners have made a concerted effort to deepen and broaden the profession's knowledge base. Even a cursory survey of the profession's expanding literature demonstrates that social work's own scholars and practitioners have added increasingly to what we know about such phenomena as mental illness, poverty, aging, crime and delinquency, child welfare, health care, substance abuse, community development, social policy, administration, and evaluation research.

Although social work is still in the relatively early stages of the cultivation of its own knowledge base—reflecting the unique value base, conceptual principles, and practice methods of the profession—it is clear that knowledge is expanding rapidly with respect to social work's various fields of practice (for example, children and family services, mental health, aging, and health care) and methods of intervention (for example, casework, group work, community organization, advocacy, and research).

What is curiously lagging in this evolution, however, is sustained, scholarly examination of the philosophical foundations on which the profession rests. Admittedly some progress has recently been made in this regard, especially with respect to philosophical questions bearing on social work research and ethics. Yet, a careful review of the profession's literature demonstrates clearly that this foundation-level inquiry is nascent at best and is developing at a rather modest pace.

The principal aims of any profession rest on core assumptions about mission, methods, and conceptual orientation. In short, the heart of any profession consists of a philosophically oriented statement of purpose and perspective. The central goal of *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work* is to help lay the groundwork for such a statement.

Such an endeavor is an essential component of a profession's maturation, and it is especially important to social work's continued development. Careful consideration of philosophical issues related to the profession is essential if social workers' practice-based decisions are to be anchored in core values and tenets that uniquely frame and characterize the profession, emanate from its central mission, and are not derived in hybridlike fashion from allied disciplines and professions. Examination of relevant philosophical is-

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sues is necessary if social workers are to critically examine the aims, methods, and motives that surround their day-to-day duties.

In some respects the pursuit of philosophical questions and issues may seem like an exercise in intellectual gymnastics, removed from the more immediate, pressing, and daunting demands faced by contemporary social workers, (The British playwright, John Osborne, said, in Epitaph for George Dillon: "It's easy to answer the ultimate questions—it saves you bothering with the immediate ones.") At least since the time of Socrates and the Greek thinkers of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.. Western philosophers have been known for their tendency to wrestle with remarkably abstruse concepts that may seem quite distant from the compelling problems today's social workers face. After all, what social worker can afford to dwell for hours on Plato's conception of justice when one of her clients does not have enough food for her own children? As Hunt (1078) aptly notes. "In a real sense the sometimes urgent business of social work cannot be suspended while a careful analysis of its assumptions is carried out by philosophical analysts concerned about the veracity of any claims for justification" (24).

In the end, however, we cannot ignore the primary questions. questions that move social workers in the first place to be concerned about starving children, or any other vulnerable group. If social work is to enhance its own knowledge base as it continues to mature as a profession, it is essential for the profession to examine. shape, and clarify its key philosophical assumptions. Moreover, social workers must learn how to think philosophically, to know what it means to critically examine an argument and claims about practice. As Kaelin (1989) says, "Experience, reflection, criticism; renewed experience, reflection, and criticism describe the neverending round of the philosophical enterprise, which begins in a relatively confused experience and, if it attains to any degree of felicity, ends in a richer, clearer, more enjoyable experience of the values to be found in living" (3). If such inquiry is to be meaningful to the social work professional, clear links must be made between underlying philosophical issues and the mission, skills, and practical decisions of today's social workers.

For our purposes, philosophy can be defined as "the rational, methodical, and systematic consideration of those topics that are of greatest concern" to humankind (The History of Western Philosophy 1989:742). Among the many areas of inquiry within philosophy, several are particularly relevant to social work. In *The Philo-*

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sophical Foundations of Social Work I focus on five major philosophical themes that are especially germane to contemporary practice. First I explore a series of issues related to political philosophy, in particular those related to the role of the state in social welfare, distributive justice and equality, welfare rights, and the concepts of the public interest and common good (chapter 1).

From there I move to an overview of issues raised by moral philosophy. My major purpose in chapter 2 is to acquaint readers with the rudiments of ethical theory and to show how they are relevant to practice. I focus mainly on the nature of ethical inquiry, ethical conflict, and the emergence of applied and professional ethics.

I then move from discussion of overarching issues concerning social work's mission (those raised by political and moral philosophy) to an examination of how social workers think, in the philosophical sense, about their practice. In chapter 3 I concentrate on the branch of philosophy known as logic, acquainting readers with traditional ways of thinking about valid forms of argument and logical fallacies. My aim here is to alert readers to the importance of precise, logical argumentation in social work—especially as it relates to claims about the effectiveness of practitioners' interventions—and to a number of logical fallacies encountered in the profession.

Chapter 4 addresses a series of issues that have received considerable attention in the social work literature in recent years. They concern the role of science in social work and ways of knowing. In philosophy, such questions typically fall under the heading of epistemology. In this section I provide an overview of the substantial and ever-increasing debate about the status of empiricism and positivism in social work, as compared to other ways of knowing.

The book concludes with a discussion of aesthetics, that is, issues pertaining to the ways social workers perceive, judge, and critique their work. Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy has a great deal to offer social workers, mainly with respect to the ways in which practitioners evaluate their work and perform artistically. Hence, in chapter 5 I provide a survey of various schools of thought in aesthetics and explore a variety of concepts that, in my view, can be usefully incorporated into social work practice.

I make no claim that this book constitutes a comprehensive, exhaustive review of all philosophical issues relevant to social work. One could make a case, for example, that a volume such as this might have also explored the philosophy of religion and existential

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philosophy. I have no particular quarrel with this. Instead, I have chosen to limit my discussion to those areas of philosophy that are applicable to social work in the broadest sense, including the "micro" and "macro" domains of the profession. As we shall see, the subjects of political philosophy, moral philosophy, logic, epistemology, and aesthetics are relevant to casework, group practice, family intervention, community organization, social policy, administration, and social work research. In contrast, philosophy of religion and existential philosophy, while certainly important, have narrower relevance, pertaining mainly to direct practice and individual casework.

My hope is that my speculation about the philosophical foundations of social work will generate considerable discussion and debate about the profession's central aims and will help, at least in some modest way, to deepen the grasp of the profession's conceptual anchor. This is hard intellectual work, but I suspect the effort will pay off. As Carlyle said, "Knowledge conquered by labor becomes a possession—a property entirely our own."

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### CHAPTER ONE

FC

# POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The culminating point of administration is to know well how much power, great or small, we ought to use in all circumstances

-MONTESQUIEU

Since its inception as a profession, social work has had complex ties with the state. Although many social work functions have been offered under private-sector auspices, no one questions that the profession's mission is inextricably linked to government, in the form of public laws, policies, regulations, and funding.

Certainly the ties between social work and the state have been loosened and tightened at various points in the profession's history. Particularly during the Progressive Era, the New Deal era, and the War on Poverty years, social work was an integral participant in federal, state, and local government's efforts to design and implement novel and ambitious social welfare programs. During other periods, however, including the years immediately following World War II and the 1980s, social work has been more peripheral to the formulation of government's social welfare mission.

Even during quiescent periods, when social work has not been central to social welfare policy design, the profession still, by necessity, has been linked to government programs that offer social services and benefits to clients. No social worker can avoid drawing connections between clients' needs and publicly sponsored programs, regulations, or benefits pertaining, for example, to public assistance, elder or child welfare services, community-based programs for the mentally ill, or shelter care for the homeless

Thus social workers have had a long-standing interest in the role of the state in social welfare. For nearly a century, social workers have been involved in intense debate about the division of responsibility between the public and private sectors for the welfare of vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens. Considerable discussion has taken place in the social work literature about the nature and limits of government obligation to meet social welfare needs, the ability of the private market to provide social services, the functions of public assistance, welfare rights, and various models of a welfare state (see, for example, Atherton 1989; Blau 1989; Gilbert 1983; Gilbert and Gilbert 1989; Jansson 1988; and Martin 1990).

Clearly, much of our current thinking about the role of the state and distributive justice has its origins in classic theories of political philosophy. By and large, however, little recognition has been given to the philosophical roots and assumptions embedded in contemporary statements about the role of government in social welfare. Examining the philosophical origins of modern-day policies and conceptual frameworks can enhance our understanding of prevailing approaches to social welfare and enable us to examine their merits critically.

### PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Although social workers' ordinary responsibilities tend to focus on practical aspects of government's role in their clients' lives—related, for example, to changing eligibility requirements or benefits for welfare clients, provisions contained in new affordable housing legislation, a state agency's regulations concerning reimbursement rates, or the impact of a recent court decision on deinstitutionalization—publicly sponsored social welfare activities are ultimately shaped by deep-seated beliefs about the goals of government, the rights of citizens in relation to the state, the obligations of the state toward its citizens, the nature of political or civil liberty, and the nature of social justice. For social workers to adequately understand the determinants of their contemporary thinking about such issues, they must have some appreciation of the historical and 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 the centuries. (Political Philosophy 1988:972)

Questions concerning the role of the state, for instance, have been addressed at least since Greco-Roman times. Although there is evidence of speculation about some aspects of government in earlier cultures (for example, the laws of Hammurabi of Babylon, c. 1750 B.C., concerning trade and irrigation and the sixth-century B.C. writings of Confucius), the most focused and sustained inquiry concerning the role of government and political power began in ancient Greece (Political Philosophy 1988).

The most significant work of this era was Plato's renowned Republic (c. 378 B.C.). Plato grew up in the midst of the devastating, twenty-seven-year-long war between Athens and Sparta and sought in the Republic to formulate a utopian view of political life. Social workers can find in this work a compelling forerunner of contemporary debate about the use of authority to meet the public's 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 efforts to grapple with questions with which today's social workers continue to struggle: How should an ideal society function? Is such a society possible? How can a society best be governed and best meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens? Although Plato has been properly criticized for being elitist, he nonetheless broached a variety of compelling issues that continue to resonate among social workers.

One of Plato's principal concerns, for example, was with class conflict. Based on his own experience in conflict-torn Athens, Plato was preoccupied with the deleterious effects of strife and tension between competing factions. Like today's conflicts among ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, and between the wealthy and the

poor, the conflicts during Plato's time threatened to tear asunder the very fabric of civilization.

Like some social workers, Plato was inclined to analyze his society's troubles reductionistically, by comparing it to the development of an individual who matures and deteriorates—the so-called biological analogy (Stroll and Popkin 1979:194). For Plato, the society was little more than "the individual writ large." Hence, Plato believed that by studying individual human beings, rules and patterns could be identified that would help us understand the broader culture.

Plato argued that the state needs to be governed in much the same way an individual is "governed," that is, by its cognitive abilities, its spirit, and its passions. For the state to be governed adequately, it would require a hierarchical class structure made up of (1) leaders, (2) soldiers to defend the state, and (3) workers who provide necessary labor. Thus, the ideal society would consist of three distinct classes, the members of which would accept their fate and mission and would not attempt to usurp the responsibilities or privileges of the other classes. This, for Plato, would offer the greatest stability. This arrangement, of course, is reminiscent of modern-day citizens who believe that members of each social class should understand and "know" their place.

To ensure this tripartite division, Plato advocated administering tests of citizens' ability. Ideally, children would be raised together until age twenty, at which time they would take tests of their inherent intellectual, physical, and "moral" abilities. The results of the tests would determine whether one would be placed in the class of rulers (to be subdivided later into soldiers and legislators) or workers.

Thus, Plato favored a highly centralized form of rule, with the general citizenry having relatively little autonomy concerning their ultimate role in society. This perspective clearly clashes with most social workers' vision of the role of government, the importance of individual self-determination, and the value of social services designed to enhance individual skill, opportunity, and capacity.

At the same time, one can see in Plato's work the seeds of contemporary criticism of generous and ambitious social service programs. Conservative criticism of social welfare spending often seems couched in an elitist view, according to which the state is not obligated to provide opportunity and assistance to the least capable and advantaged. Instead, as in Plato's ideal world, government's principal task is to distribute responsibility and resources to

ensure stability and to identify the "proper place" for its citizens. The state's resources should be channeled primarily to train the most capable, intelligent members of society. Those who pass the various tests and training should be rewarded, while those who fail should be cast aside. In many respects, Plato's perspective was decidedly undemocratic.

Aristotle's *Politics* provides another example of a reductionistic approach to analysis of society. Aristotle, who was a student in the Academy of Plato, analyzed society as if he were a physician and prescribed remedies accordingly. This was perhaps the first formal expression of what we now know as the "medical model."

Like Plato, Aristotle believed that only a minority within society could lead a high quality of life and, further, that some individuals are "slaves by nature" (Political Philosophy 1988:973). He also argued that a hierarchical, aristocratic, and undemocratic form of government is essential to preserve social order.

Among the most patronizing, contemptuous, and undemocratic sentiments toward the masses—which foreshadowed some contemporary characterizations of the poor—are found in Machiavelli's sixteenth-century writings:

Since this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowards, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life, and children . . . when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you. . . . [And] since the desires of men are insatiable, nature prompting them to desire all things and fortune permitting them to enjoy but few, there results a constant discontent in their minds, and a loathing of what they possess. (Political Philosophy 1988:976)

Thomas Hobbes's seventeenth-century views were also rather contemptuous of the masses. In his classic, the *Leviathan*, Hobbes presented a point of view quite at odds with social work's vision of the community's need to care for its most vulnerable members. He argued that the true law of nature, its central imperative, is self-preservation, which can be achieved only if all citizens agree to transfer, through a social contract, their individual power to the "leviathan" (ruler). Like Machiavelli, Hobbes assumed that human beings are basically depraved and self-interested. Society's principal function is to provide opportunity for gain and glory, and the only form of equality possible or desirable among people inheres in their ability to kill each other. In "the state of nature," Hobbes