

Justice as a Core Virtue for Social Work Practice

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This article argues that justice should be considered as one of the core virtues to be cultivated in social work. After tracing the evolution of the term justice from ancient to contemporary times, the authors review social work conceptions of justice at both theory and practice levels, then offer ideas on how to cultivate justice as a virtue in social work students. The authors conclude with the challenges to cultivating justice and implications for research and practice.

*‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’
Micah 6:8*

THE RESURGENCE OF INTEREST IN VIRTUE ETHICS HOLDS PROMISE FOR BOTH the social work profession and Christianity, given the focus of both traditions on doing right actions. Social workers are often considered moral agents of society due to the nature of the services they provide and the vulnerable conditions of the populations they serve (Joseph, 1983; Chris, 2005). Webb (2010) indicates that “doing the right thing in social work is not a matter of applying a moral rule..., but rather the worker—as-agent expressed in the range and subtlety of use of the virtues” (p. 116). Similarly, people actively engaged in a Christian faith hold themselves to high ethical and moral standards. Christians are called to emulate Christ, to cultivate gifts of the spirit, including the virtues of wisdom, knowledge, faith, hope, and love, and to give witness to their faith through service to others and action for justice.

With increased interest in virtues, it is critical to consider what virtues are most relevant for social work practice. We argue that justice should be one of the core virtues cultivated in emerging social work professionals, and that Christian social workers are dually bound by the profession and their Christian identity to do justice. To make this case, we first define justice and subsequently present the classical and contemporary understandings of justice and their influence on the social work perspectives of justice. Then

we discuss methods for cultivating justice in social workers. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on some of the challenges of developing justice as a virtue in social work and we identify the need for more research on the pedagogical and ethical aspects associated with cultivating the virtue of justice in social work.

Defining Justice as a Virtue

Understanding the meaning of justice as a virtue is a complicated process. Banks and Gallagher (2009) posit that of all the virtues, justice is one of the more complex ones to understand. They attribute this difficulty to the fact that justice has several different meanings and interpretations resulting from different ideological and theoretical frameworks. Hursthouse (1999) goes so far as to say that the term, justice, has been “corrupted” (p. 5) by its vagueness. McCormick (2003) argues that confusion regarding the meaning of justice may reflect fundamental disagreements about its meaning.

Understanding justice as a virtue is further complicated by the fact that rarely is justice discussed as a personal virtue, i.e., a character trait that describes one’s internal state. Justice is typically conceptualized in one of three ways: 1) as an attribute of society, i.e., the arrangement of social institutions and their qualitative impact on human interactions; 2) as an attribute of a particular action, i.e., the extent to which the action conforms with societal norms as to what is *good* or *right* within a particular context; or 3) as an attribute of a social or legal contract, whether a contract represents a fair arrangement between parties.

In considering justice as a virtue, one must consider it as both personal virtue and a social virtue. It is personal in that it requires a disposition to the good; it is social in that it is manifest in one’s interactions with self and others, and in how one pursues the arrangements of social institutions and communities. Solomon (2001) speaks to the dualistic nature of the virtue of justice when he argues that it is exhibited by both interior thoughts and feelings and exterior behaviors and practices. Plato (2006) addresses justice as a personal virtue when he states that if an individual is just, it means that his or her soul is guided by a vision of the good. For Christians, God is the ultimate “good,” the infinite source of truth, light, and freedom. Therefore, for Christians, justice as a personal virtue might be defined as one having an interior state that is guided by the vision of God. But for the just Christian, an interior state of connectedness with God is insufficient without actions. “For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26, New American Bible). So Christianity affirms justice as both a personal virtue and a social virtue. Interactions that reflect *justice* are relevant for social work practice at all levels, and these will be discussed at greater length, after presenting the classical and contemporary concepts of justice.

Classical Perspectives of Justice as a Virtue

To help sort out the complex nature of justice as a virtue, it is useful to first examine the meaning of justice from three classical perspectives: Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. Plato's ideas on justice derived from his vision of reality. As a theoretical philosopher and rationalist, he believed that knowledge of reality came from knowledge of forms and reason: "any particular aspect of reality was [a manifestation] of an abstract and perfect or ideal form of reality" (Zucker & Borg, 2005, p. 144). To Plato, "all good things possess a common element or exemplify a common property or pattern" (Slote, 2010, p. 23). Plato saw virtue as excellence in the knowledge of the good. To Plato, "the highest good is some self-subsisting, eternal absolute that causes the goodness in all those lesser things" (Fitterer, 2008, p. 11). Through virtue, the person was disposed to the good life and to happiness (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Martin, 2007). Virtue is evident when there is balance between passion and reason (Solomon, 2001). To evaluate an individual's actions, it was necessary to look to the individual's soul (Slote, 2003). In Plato's vision, "virtue is enough ... good men need no laws" (O'Neill, 1996, p. 9). If the individual's soul or the state is just, then no actions are prescribed for either entity because they cannot do something wrong (White, 2008).

Plato's ideas regarding virtue led to the development of the four Cardinal Virtues: bravery/courage, temperance/discipline, justice, and wisdom. Justice, in *The Republic*, was an overarching virtue of individuals. Plato expanded the meaning of justice by equating it with human well-being (Reisch, 2002). Plato's concept of justice was "all-embracing, in that he defines justice as harmony in the soul" (Banks & Gallagher, 2009, p. 162). Justice existed when the other three virtues (bravery/courage, temperance/discipline, and wisdom) were in harmony (Banks & Gallagher, 2009). For a society to be just, there needed to be harmony between reason, spirit, and appetite (Reisch, 2002). Plato's ideals did not, however, speak to a belief in equality; rather, he accepted that unequals should be treated unequally as class distinctions were necessary (Reisch, 2002).

In Aristotle's view, many important virtues were "excellences of the human soul" (Fitterer, 2008, p. 17). These virtues needed to be cultivated for individual happiness (Martin, 2007). He classified virtues into two categories: moral/character and intellectual (Russell, 2009; van Hooft, 2006; Webb, 2010). Of all these virtues, it has been argued that justice was first to Aristotle because it was the only virtue directed toward others and it is thought to include all the other virtues (Gardner, 1984; MacIntyre, 1988; McCormick, 2003; White, 2008). Aristotle's views on practical reasoning influence his thoughts on justice (MacIntyre, 1988). As such, an individual who had complete virtue related to justice would choose to act in a just manner knowing that the choice is made for its intrinsic good (Fitterer, 2008). The virtuous individual would see what was just and act accordingly

(Fitterer, 2008; Slote, 2010). Therefore, justice referred to the “moral state of the agent” (Gardner, 1984, p. 405).

Aristotle also conceptualized justice to go beyond the individual's internal state to encompass just social arrangements (Banks & Gallagher, 2009). The just individual would maintain focus on both social and individual justice: “the virtue with which the good man discharges his social roles carries him forward finally to the perfecting of his own soul in contemplative activity” (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 108). Social arrangements were critical in Aristotle's view, as he put more emphasis on the good of the city-state than the good of the individual. Yet, at the same time, he saw that the city-state and the individual needed to be in a reciprocal relationship (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Webb, 2010). As such, to Aristotle, “justice was the first virtue of political life” (Gardner, 1984, p. 394). Justice as a virtue was then supported by laws, and divided into two different concepts: particular justice and universal justice (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Gardner, 1984). Particular justice existed along with other virtues and universal justice was an overarching virtue (Banks & Gallagher, 2009).

Aquinas built on Aristotle's ideas and added in a concentration on Christian doctrine. His ideas included a focus on the principle of love of self and neighbor. His conceptualization of virtue expanded from the four Cardinal virtues to include the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (van Hooft, 2006). He attempted to organize the virtues as acquired (Cardinal virtues) and as infused (theological virtues) (Irwin, 2005). Justice, an acquired virtue, was achieved through habituation and practice, while infused virtues were derived from God. All other virtues were subordinate to these virtues. Aquinas believed that to act virtuously, it was necessary to act on the Cardinal virtues, including justice. Similar to Aristotle, Aquinas defined “justice as that virtue which is directed toward others” (Gardner, 1984, p. 402). Aquinas then proceeded to reinterpret Aristotle with the incorporation of the theological virtues into his configuration of justice as a moral relationship (Gardner, 1984). In Aquinas' definitions, justice included looking at others as individuals and as part of a community (Gardner, 1984). To Aquinas, justice “[ordered] human life toward the common good” (Gardner, 1984, p. 403). In his view, justice would have trumped the other virtues because concern for the common good was more important than concern for the individual good of one person.

Aquinas then broadened his ideas of justice further. Kaczor and Sherman (2009) describe his views of justice as incorporating three perspectives: justice as a general virtue, justice as a Cardinal virtue, and justice as a part of Christian life. Religion plays a central role in his conceptualization of the virtue of justice beyond the incorporation of the theological virtues. To Aquinas, “religion is a moral virtue, being that part of the cardinal virtue of justice concerned with what we owe to God in the way of honor, reverence, and worship” (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 188). Justice is then seen

as incorporating what is owed to God along with a corresponding duty to others, including the virtues of piety, observance, and giving of honor (MacIntyre, 1988).

Enlightenment Views of Justice

The Enlightenment period focused on rational thought, rejected tradition and authority, and promoted emancipation on political and intellectual levels (Dupré, 2004; MacIntyre, 1988). This period began at the end of the Middle Ages and reflected a time of cultural synthesis and moral crisis; and yet, scholars have difficulty defining it due to conflicting opinions and divergent views of its legacy (Dupré, 2004; Edelstein, 2010; Frazer, 2010; MacIntyre, 1988). Some argue that the Enlightenment marks the founding of modernity (Edelstein, 2010). Dupre (2004) describes the period as a time of “self-consciousness” wherein people were more reflective and critical and, therefore, more likely to be suspect of tradition. Sen (2009) finds it to be a time of reasoning and public discussion. During this period, justice was seen as an issue of rights, and the idea that human rights were universal was prevalent (Bergman, 2011; Reisch, 2011). In this period, the virtue of justice focused on entitlements in society due “to the establishment of an arrangement where each has what is due” (Barden, 1999, p. 19). Honneth (1987) argues that this time period is different from others because of “its imminent relation to a criterion of rational validity which acts as a standard against which opinions and convictions can be upheld by rational examination” (p. 693).

Hobbes’ thoughts on justice were considered to focus on the identification of perfect justice rather than engaging in comparisons between just and unjust societies, and his views were thought to have given rise to the “‘contractarian’ mode of thinking” (Sen, 2009, p.6). Hobbes, in his discussion of the natural condition, argued that entitlements exist, but that they were created by a human decision, i.e., an agreement or contract. Through the first agreement, a context for entitlements arises in society (Barden, 1999). Hobbes differed from Aristotle: “in the Hobbesian image civil society is the state and is understood as a universal agreement to submit to authority whence derives laws and justice; in the Aristotelian image humans emerge within society and human society already is a web of entitlements” (Barden, 1999, p. 32). Here, one begins to see a shift away from rights and responsibilities of individuals within their communities to a focus on the rights of individuals as more important than the rights or well-being of the community.

Hume, an Enlightenment philosopher, continued with the period’s focus on practical rationality (MacIntyre, 1988). Frazer (2010) describes him as a sentimentalist who believed that moral actions are motivated by both reason and passion in a state of equilibrium. Hume divided virtues

into two categories based on their origins: natural and artificial (Dupré, 2004; Frazer, 2010; MacIntyre, 1988). While natural virtues are acquired through instinct, artificial virtues are socially constructed out of need. He characterizes justice as artificial in the *Treatise*, indicating that it is not acquired directly but rather through education and is dependent on society's structure (Dupré, 2004). Justice, as an artificial virtue, implies that the members of a community have a shared reasoning about justice; when a member of the community makes a judgment about justice, that person is not just reflecting his/her individual position, but that of the majority of the community members (MacIntyre, 1988). His further writings tie justice to an individual's feelings of sympathy and attitudes of benevolence (Dupré, 2004; Frazer, 2010). And yet, he moved the idea of justice from a focus on what is good for the community to what is good for the individual, moving from justice as "human allegiance...to individual self-interest" (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 307). Frazer (2010) states, "Hume's understanding of justice...[ties] the character trait he identifies as the justice of individuals to features of the social systems under which an individual lives" (p. 67). Justice then became a question of property and the enforcement of rules related to property (Frazer, 2010; MacIntyre, 1988).

In Germany, Kant contributed to Enlightenment ideas of justice with a move away from feelings to an emphasis on norms that were universal (Dupré, 2004). Frazer (2010) identifies Kant's phrase, "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to make use of your *own* understanding," (p.4) to be illustrative of the Enlightenment period as a whole. Solomon (2001) describes Kant as "radically individualistic in his ethics" (p. 174). His ideas were in conflict with Rousseau's thoughts about morality; while Rousseau thought people are born good and that goodness should be nurtured through education, Kant believed that people are born with an inclination toward evil (Dupré, 2004). He saw "morality as obedience to the command of reason" (Dupré, 2004, p135). Barden (1999) asserts that "to discover what is just is to discover what belongs to whom" (p. 2).

Contemporary Understandings of Justice

Over time, justice has moved from the classical ideals to more teleological or utilitarian foci. Part of this shift has been attributed to a shift from the community focus of the classical theories to "individualistic conceptions of human nature and emotivist conceptions of morality" (Gardner, 1984, p. 393). The shift to the focus on the individual in justice theories mirrors the focus of society; as Lawler (2008) argues, "modern society—or at least its more sophisticated parts—is distinguished by its concern for individual dignity. Individuals demand to exist for themselves" (p. 229). As such, contemporary visions of justice have moved from good as right to good as what benefits people regardless of whether it is right (Solas, 2008b). Some

argue that the teleological emphasis leads to a conceptualization “of the idea that the end (always) justifies the means” (Slote, 2010, p. 35).

Building on these ideas, some contemporary philosophers are exploring the contrast between justice as a personal virtue and justice as a characteristic of society. White (2008) points out the reciprocal nature of the two visions of justice, but also notes that a just society does not necessarily mean that all individuals in that society are just nor does it necessarily follow that just individuals live in a just society. Solomon (2001) argues that taking the viewpoint of justice as a personal virtue helps to move justice from the theoretical, abstract realm to the personal realm of practices and personalities. He characterizes “a just life” as including deliberation and reflection as well as feeling and habit. Solomon (2001) then broadens the discussion of justice as a virtue with an acknowledgement that a just life is evidenced by “our responses to and interaction with other people” (p. 174).

The notion of justice as a personal trait has been further developed in contemporary times by Seligman’s positive psychology, which refers to “the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” (Sheldon & King, 2001). This discipline developed from a desire to understand the full human experience and to move away from a deficit, disease model to include a focus on strengths (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001). Positive psychology involves examination “of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630). Specifically, positive psychology looks at virtues as individual character traits that lead to behavioral outcomes, personal fulfillment, and achievement of the good life (Dahlsgaard et al, 2005; Miller, 2003). In fact, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006) state that “good character is essential for individuals and societies to thrive” (p.118). But, unlike the philosophers, the positive psychologists see virtues as somewhat subjective (morally-neutral) instead of objective (morally-laden); in other words, virtues are defined as “what-society-considers-virtues” instead of “morally desirable traits” (Martin, 2007, p. 96).

The positive psychology focus centers on the “ubiquitous virtues” or “core virtues” (Martin, 2007). The core virtues developed from the examination of which virtues demonstrated convergence across historical periods and cultures (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). There are six core virtues (wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity/love, justice, temperance, and transcendence) and 24 strengths; unlike the classic perspective of Aristotle where virtues are seen as integrated, all virtues in positive psychology are treated as independent entities (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). People are encouraged to develop “signature” strengths (Seligman, 2002). Justice was explicitly named in all the traditions examined (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Christianity, Judaism,

and Islam) and is defined as “civic strengths that underlie healthy community life” (Dahlsgaard et al, 2005, p. 205). Justice encompasses three strengths: citizenship/teamwork, fairness, and leadership (Martin, 2007; Park et al, 2006).

In addition to positive psychology, contemporary views of justice have developed out of adaptations of Aquinas’s ideas regarding justice and out of the Enlightenment’s perspectives on justice and the rights of the individual (Hughson, 2010; Sen, 2009). Three dominant contemporary justice perspectives are libertarian, utilitarian, and egalitarian (Van Soest, 1994). As Powers and Faden (2006) indicate, “inequalities come in many forms” (p. 3), which has led to discussions of justice focused on issues of inequality. According to Lucas (1972):

the principles which trouble modern thinkers most in their attempts to elucidate justice are those of equality and need. Justice is not equality, but often to treat people unequally is thought to be unjust. The criterion of need is different from that of desert, but not to meet the needs of those in need is held to be unfair as well as unkind” (p. 241).

Each of these perspectives is influential today as they attempt to answer the question of how to distribute scarce resources. However, while each focuses on the distribution of resources in society, each of these perspectives looks at justice from an individual rights framework.

Libertarian views of justice, historically associated first with Spencer and Locke, are predicated on the idea that a person could have as much freedom as possible so long as the rights of others were not violated (McCormick, 2003). Three basic rights ground this perspective: the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property (Van Soest, 1994). Nozick supported the idea of minimal state responsibility for the protection of individuals, but this state responsibility did not extend to the need to redistribute wealth or opportunities for those in need (McCormick, 2003). Some argue that libertarian views reject the idea of social justice; instead, in this view, the allocation of resources is just if the individual is free, the state is neutral, and individual rights take precedence above the common good (Caputo, 2002).

Associated with Bentham and Mill, the utilitarian perspective of justice is thought to have been the most popular in the 20th century (Reisch, 2002). The goal of the utilitarian perspective is “to maximize the welfare of persons and society” (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1024). In this perspective, “an action is right if it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Chappell, 2009, p. 98). Through the process of measurement and aggregation, it can provide systematic justification for what one ought to do (Upton, 2003). Justice, in the utilitarian perspective, involves “weighing the relative benefits and harms and ascertaining what maximizes the

greatest good for the greatest number of people” (Van Soest, 1994, p. 714). As such, this perspective does have a focus on the common good (Caputo, 2002). Moreover, by definition, efforts to maximize the good for the greatest number often leave out the populations on the margins of society, i.e., the very people about which the social work profession cares most. There is also the problem of valuing goods. MacIntyre (1997) critiques the idea of “summing goods” (p. 136); how can you place a value on happiness, fulfillment, sense of belonging, and other goods that are difficult to measure?

Egalitarian views of justice seek to address the critiques of utilitarianism by focusing on the idea of providing a minimal level of equality for all with minimal protection for the poor and marginalized (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Caputo, 2002; McCormick, 2003). This perspective “directly challenges the assumption that society can be rightly ordered if it is based on social and economic inequalities” (Van Soest, 1994, p. 714). These views draw on the work of Rawls, who had an “intuitive idea of justice as fairness” (O’Neill, 1996, p. 47). In Rawls’ view, “in a social union participants share ends and value their common institutions and activities as good for their own sake, and such a union exists in a society when its members have a common aim of realizing their own and one another’s good according to a shared sense of justice” (Russell, 2009, p. 42). From this shared sense of justice, Rawls felt people could come together under a “veil of ignorance” to make decisions about the fair distribution of social goods. Under this veil of ignorance, people would be blind to their own social position, and therefore, in their own interest, agree to a fair distribution of social goods to ensure that all people had the social minimum. Furthermore, Rawls added, “although the distribution of income and wealth [i.e., social goods] need not be equal, it must be to everyone’s advantage” (Van Soest, 1994, p. 714).

Social Work Conceptions of Justice

Because of its emphasis on equal distribution of goods and consideration of the least advantaged in society, Rawls’ notion of distributive justice has been an overwhelming influence in social work conceptions of social justice (Banerjee, 2005). Wakefield (1988) was among the first to draw on Rawls to argue for social justice as an organizing principle for the profession at all levels of practice:

Social work can be conceived as a profession engaged in alleviating deprivation in all its varieties, from economic to psychological; social workers identify with people who fall below the social minimum in any justice-related good and intervene in order to help them rise above that minimally acceptable level. (p. 205)

More recently, social workers have been incorporating notions of restorative justice (Gumz & Grant, 2009; van Wormer, 2006), human rights (Hodge, 2007; Reichert, 2006; Wronka, 2008), and explicit attention to the role of white privilege in the creation of our current unjust social arrangements (McIntosh, 2007; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003).

Scholars have begun to raise questions about whether Rawls' theory of justice is the appropriate framework for the social work profession after all. While his concept of a veil of ignorance may be a useful exercise for considering fair arrangements in society, it provides little guidance in dealing with the issues of power, politics, ideology, and irrationality that characterize many of the environments associated with structural change. In addition, critics find that the basic needs approach that characterizes distributive justice will not go far enough to promoting human flourishing to its fullest potential (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1985). Banerjee (2005) argues that Rawls' revised notion of justice leaves out non-working poor adults and does not allow for the provision of remedial supports to enhance their capacities. In her application of Rawls' theory of justice to the 1996 welfare reform law, Banerjee argues that Rawls would consider "non-working poor citizens who rely on welfare [as] unworthy poor" (p. 48).

The capabilities perspective (Morris, 2002) is emerging as an alternative framework that views the fair distribution of social goods as insufficient to achieving a just society. According to the capabilities perspective, a just society would ensure that all of its members had the means and conditions necessary to fully flourish and reach their greatest potential. In this viewpoint, the social minimum of goods is a means to an end, but not the end itself. The end has only been achieved when people have access to the goods, the opportunities, and the conditions where they can fully flourish. Nussbaum (2003) identifies ten essential capabilities for human flourishing: life; health; play; control over one's body; control over one's environment; using one's senses, imagination, and thought; emotional attachment; use of practical reasoning; ability to live with concern for nature; and freedom to form relationships. Nussbaum describes these capabilities as being irreducible, and therefore, impossible to prioritize one over the other. The irreducible nature of the capabilities leads it closer to a conception of justice that implicitly recognizes the importance of community and mutual responsibility in human development that better aligns itself with a Christian conception of the reciprocal nature of a just society, where rights come with social responsibilities.

Although a great deal of complementarity exists between social work and Christian conceptions of justice, profound differences remain, a few of which will be described below. First of all, both share the belief that actions for justice are derived from the view that all people have inherent dignity and worth. For the profession, this view is rooted in a secular humanist perspective, as the profession is comprised of members from

secular and non-secular traditions. For Christians, this view is rooted in the belief that people were created by God, in God's likeness and image, and therefore, are sacred.

The profession and Christian traditions also share the value of the importance of relationships. For social work, this value is grounded in human behavior theory that speaks to the social nature of humanity and the importance of relationships to enhance human well-being. Attachment theory is a good example of a theoretical explanation for the importance of human relationships.

Christians deepen their understanding of the importance of human relationships in the theology of the Trinity, which speaks to an inter-relational God, i.e., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Catholic theologian Todd Whitmore (2005) traces the evolution of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) over 60 years, and its growing emphasis on the social nature of human beings and their interdependence with the application of Trinitarian theology. He sums up their relationship by stating "there is no human dignity apart from the dignity we all have in relation to each other" (p.60). Catholic social teaching extends this relational notion of humanity to societal structures, and defines justice as "right relationship" whether it be in interpersonal relationships, families, communities, political spheres, economic spheres, or any dimension in which human beings should participate with others to give meaning to their lives. Whitmore argues that understanding human dignity in the context of right relationship helps to distinguish Christian thought from classical liberal social thought that tends toward a more individualistic notion of human dignity. The social work perspectives of justice that emphasize human rights and human capabilities could benefit from a relational understanding of human dignity as it deepens arguments for public policies and community change initiatives that foster interdependence and build solidarity among people.

Another example of the complementarity between social work and Christianity is the special commitment both have to people who are poor and vulnerable. The NASW Code of Ethics speaks to this in its Preamble, and the Judeo-Christian tradition has spoken about the importance of helping the poor and the oppressed for millennia. Christians look to the teachings of Jesus and his life example to understand the special responsibility we have to bring justice to people who are poor and vulnerable. Many Christians point to the story of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46) as evidence for this special responsibility. Wolterstorff (2006) argues that the story of the last judgment has been misinterpreted by Christians as a call to charity, but that a proper reading would show that it is a call to justice. After a close analysis of the Old Testament texts on justice and New Testament texts of Jesus' teachings, Wolterstorff states "And there can be no doubt that the Old Testament writers and Jesus regarded the lifting up of the downtrodden and the incorporation of the excluded as the first

priority in the undoing of injustice and the bringing of justice” (p. 129). He says that for social workers, this includes not only alleviating suffering among people, but also loosening “the bonds that” oppress them and cause their suffering (p. 137).

The aforementioned conceptions of justice in social work focus primarily on justice as a social virtue, i.e., the characteristics of society that maximize human well-being. In fact, much of the social work literature on *justice* refers to the external manifestation of justice seen in the social, political, and economic spheres of life, with particular attention to the experiences of vulnerable and oppressed populations. There is virtually nothing in the social work literature that discusses *justice* as a personal virtue. In the Social Work Dictionary, Barker (2003) defines justice as “the principal of fairness and equity, especially in accordance with moral and ethical rightness, social standards, and law” (p. 234). Following this definition is a note to see also *social justice* and *economic justice*.

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) directs social workers to “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.” The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Code of Ethics (2004) states that “social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice” (p. 1) by challenging negative discrimination, recognizing diversity, distributing resources equitably, challenging unjust policies and practices, and working in solidarity. Bisman (2004) contends that “without this emphasis on social justice, there is little if any need for social work or social workers” (p. 115). Solas (2008a) argues that justice should be “the first of the profession’s cardinal values because injustice invariably devalues all the others” (p. 133). Lundy and van Wormer (2007) assert that “the social work profession can be proud of its heritage as the only helping profession imbued with social justice as its fundamental value and concern” (p. 728).

Despite its centrality to the profession, the meaning of social justice is elusive and broadly conceived. However, social workers generally understand social justice to include addressing the inequities in the distribution of goods, services, and access to opportunities in society. The profession generally holds the view that these inequities are caused by a legacy of racism and other forms of discrimination that are embedded in the structures, institutions, and policies of society. The foundation for the profession’s understanding of social justice is grounded in the value that all people have inherent dignity and worth, and therefore social workers work for a society where this dignity and worth is recognized.

Social Justice at all Levels of Social Work Practice

The social work profession has generally viewed its actions for justice in the context of macro social change. In Barker’s definition of social justice

(2003), he prescribes advocacy as the method by which social workers pursue social justice: "A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities" (p. 405). In addressing the historical tension within the profession between micro and macro practice, scholars have written about the dual focus of social work, i.e., service and justice. In so doing, they have generally referred to macro practice (e.g., policy advocacy, community organizing, social action) as the profession's expression of justice (Donaldson, 2007; Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Jacobson, 2001; Schneider & Netting, 1999), whereas clinical or micro practice represented the service domain of social work. However, there is growing recognition that social justice is a relevant concept for all levels of practice, including micro-level practice.

Swenson (1998) builds on Wakefield's (1998) notion that social justice includes alleviating all forms of deprivation, including emotional deprivation. Included among the characteristics of justice-oriented clinical practice are:

1. "profound appreciation for a client's strengths, contexts, and resources" (p. 534).
2. recognition that race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of difference are central to how clients define and give meaning to their life experience; and
3. conscious effort to redress power imbalances between clients and social workers in the helping relationship and in organizational contexts.

She identifies a number of clinical methods that are exemplars of justice-oriented clinical practice including: strengths-based practice; narrative therapy, empowerment practice, feminist practice, and ethnic-sensitive practice.

Finn and Jacobson (2008) offer a Just Practice Framework to guide action for change at all levels of practice. This framework suggests critical analyses related to the meaning, context, power, history, and possibility are necessary requirements for just practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, or societies. Even macro practice methods designed to address the structural causes of injustice (e.g., policy advocacy, community organizing and development, international social development) may not reflect just processes if they do not take these concepts into consideration in their implementation.

So there is a growing awareness within the profession that *doing justice* in social work occurs on the continuum of practice methods from micro to macro. At the clinical level, social justice is primarily evidenced in the interaction of the helping relationship. For example, citing Staples in his article on anti-oppressive practice in mental health, Larson (2008) characterizes a just helping relationship as one that is "based on trust, power

sharing, informality, and collaboration, and committed to minimizing the power associated with the formal expert helping roles” (pp. 47-48). Justice-oriented macro-level practice includes the justice-oriented dimensions of the human relationship, and applies those in partnership with others to address the structural causes of poverty, racism, and other forms of injustice in our society. Some might consider macro social work as seeking a higher order of justice since it reduces the underlying causes of a vast majority of human needs.

Gardeners in the Vineyard: Cultivating Justice as a Virtue in Social Work

Developing justice as a virtue is complicated for students, and teaching justice as a personal and social virtue is a challenge for social work educators. Adams (2009) notes that questions related to whether or not we can teach virtues and how to do it “are questions at least as old as Plato” (p. 99). As faculty in institutes for higher education, we could be considered gardeners in the vineyard of our institutions. Just as we are pruned by God, our mentors, and our life experiences, we prune our students for professional social work practice. (It is important to note that our students also prune us, and together we are co-learners and co-producers of knowledge in the classroom.)

If we agree with Aquinas, that justice is an acquired, not infused virtue, we believe that our students need to be taught or trained to be just. Cultivating justice as a virtue through education is a process of “deliberate molding of human character” (Blomberg, 2006, p. 92). This process must address the individual’s intellect and affect; it must strive to educate the soul’s component parts, both rational and nonrational (Homiak, 1997). Aristotle claims that a virtuous life is characterized by an excellence of character evidenced by 1) a disposition toward virtue, and 2) the capacity for moral reasoning. Aristotle argues that virtue is cultivated through 1) practicing virtuous acts, i.e., developing habits of virtue, and 2) developing the intellectual and moral reasoning skills to discern the right action in a given circumstance. Radden and Sadler (2010) summarize Aristotle’s process of cultivation as being “incremental and un-heroic. It calls for attention, repetition, conscientiousness, and practice” (p. 63). For cultivating justice as a virtue there needs to be a synthesis of moral exemplars, personal experience or practice, self-reflection, and moral reasoning (Begley, 2005, p. 630).

Moral Exemplars

To learn virtues, in Aristotle’s viewpoint, involves interaction with moral exemplars. Moral exemplars are people with virtuous character traits that are consistent with human flourishing (Peterson, Spezio, Van Slyke,

Reimer, & Brown, 2010). They reason well and keep the good of the society in mind; “all moral exemplars do their job with such extraordinary integrity and moral clarity that their strength of character is readily recognized” (Rugeley & Van Wart, 2006, p.383). Individuals need the opportunity to view examples of people living virtuously to become virtuous; the need for examples is particularly relevant for those virtues that fall into the category of moral virtues (McBeath & Webb, 2002).

To learn justice as a virtue, our students need to have the opportunity to observe and imitate exemplars who embody justice as both a personal and social virtue. But the students are called on to do more than just watch. The students need to 1) be motivated, 2) pay attention to the exemplar, 3) retain what is observed, and 4) reproduce the behavior (Moberg, 2000). Walker and Hennig’s (2004) study found that the profile of the just exemplar was more complex than that of the one for the caring exemplar or brave exemplar; it blended dominance and nurturance, with an emphasis on conscientiousness and openness to experience. Key attributes of the just exemplar included: honesty, fairness, and principled.

Noddings (2007) describes the importance of teachers serving as models, and describes the process of learning to include four components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. The moral exemplars that our students rely on do not need to come from highly valued positions in society; everyone can be an exemplar (Rugeley & Van Wart, 2006). As social work faculty, we are in a unique position to serve as moral exemplars and to act as models as a means of teaching the virtue of justice. We then need to be able to facilitate dialogue about what is justice and provide confirmation to our students when they get it right; for that to happen, we need to make sure that they also have the opportunity to practice.

Practicing in the Field: Learning by Doing

van Hooft (2006) differentiates between learning moral and intellectual virtues, arguing that in Aristotle’s framework, moral virtues would be developed by training and intellectual virtues by education. As such, to learn to do justice, it would be imperative to provide appropriate training in justice—learning in the classroom is important, but not sufficient. Nor was classroom learning sufficient to Aristotle; Fitterer (2008) notes that “this is the kind of knowing not teachable in a classroom, but the kind acquired by personally experiencing the choice-worthiness of virtuous actions, by actually doing them and finding them pleasurable to perform” (p. 18). While Aristotle differentiated virtues from skills, he did find a similarity in that “the virtues, like skills, are learned through practice” (Russell, 2009, p. 1). Habituation of virtue, for Aristotle, included the need for repetition of actions; or, in other words, experience and time (Stichter, 2007). Adams (2009) furthers the argument for learning through practice: “the social work

student learns these virtues and develops her character and ethical use of self through the practice of her profession, in which she cannot achieve excellence without them” (p. 100). Therefore, teaching justice must also involve the field education component of social work education for students to develop true competency in this area.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) notes that field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education. All students can be encouraged to engage in social justice projects related to their field experiences, including, but not limited to, education about a social justice topic, advocacy on a social justice issue, fundraising for populations, and service learning related to the topic (Birkenmaier, 2003). Specific to learning to do justice, field placements can allow students to learn in organizations committed to justice issues. Also, placement experiences can allow students to learn from field instructors who can serve as role models or moral exemplars. Banks and Gallagher (2009) argue that role models also serve as inspiration to students.

Self-Reflection as a Tool to Cultivate Justice as a Personal Virtue

Webb (2010) argues that for social workers to become “more fully virtuous” (p. 119), it is necessary for them to critically examine themselves, the moral concepts that relate to practice, and the moral concepts that relate to the agency’s context of practice. As such, to cultivate justice as a personal virtue, it is necessary to help social workers to engage in a process of self-reflection. One way to do this might be to facilitate engagement in contemplative practice, a method familiar to most Christian traditions. Aristotle identified the fourth part of the soul to be the contemplative part, and thought that it “is fulfilled by thinking about eternal and changeless things” (van Hooft, 2006, p. 55). In his vision, “human kind is therefore primarily active and practical, and secondarily contemplative” (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1021). Further support for the benefits of contemplative practice related to the cultivation of justice is offered by Lee and Barrett’s (2007) finding that there is a connection between spirituality and social justice in their study of how a social worker’s personal spirituality affects practice and commitment to social justice issues.

Contemplation is a method used to engage oneself with the ultimate source of truth and goodness. For Christians, the ultimate source of truth and goodness is God. Using the metaphor of the vine and the branches (John 15: 1-17), Jesus describes God as the vine grower, Himself as the vine, and the people as the branches. Throughout this biblical passage, Jesus implores us to “remain in [him],” “remain in [his] love,” so that we “may bear fruit that will remain.” Christian mystics have written about the transformative effects of contemplative practice in being in union with God or being fully conscious of His presence. Thomas Merton (1996) writes

that through contemplative prayer we are seeking a “purity of heart” (p. 68) where we long for “the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for capacity to hear and obey him” (p. 67).

Merton (1996) describes each human being as “a spoken word of God” (p. 68), and thus our lives have meaning in this world because God’s words have meaning. It is through contemplation where we tap into the ultimate truth of our lives and find the full understanding of God’s hopes for us, i.e., discover the purpose of our lives. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Carmelite nun and Christian mystic, uses a castle with many rooms as a metaphor for the human soul (Starr, 2003). God dwells in the center of the castle; one enters the castle and journeys to the center through contemplative prayer and meditation. It is through contemplation that one can find the Divine Presence and discern what actions are graced by God, i.e., are just. Araujo (2000) writes, “at the heart of seeking, teaching, and doing justice, is the realization that all is dependent on the transcendent truth that is God” (p. 592).

Developing Moral Reasoning to Cultivating Justice as a Social Virtue

In *Summa Theologica* (1941), Aquinas argues that in order to direct one’s will to the good, one needs to apply reason. To engage in reason, one must develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are one of the ten core competencies required in social work education (CSWE, 2008) and are deemed essential for the social work profession (Gibbons & Gray, 2004).

The Catholic intellectual tradition has several models of social analysis that are useful for developing critical thinking and moral reasoning skills to cultivate the virtue of justice in students. The “See–Judge–Act” model was made popular in the early 20th century by Belgian priest, Cardinal Joseph Cardign. Cardinal Cardign developed this method of social analysis to address the social and economic conditions of workers in the Young Christian Worker Movement (Zotti, 1990). This method of analysis is similar to that of Paulo Freire’s (1998) philosophy of education where people who are experiencing oppression reflect on their problem (see), analyze the underlying historical and structural causes of the problem (judge), and plan for action to remedy the situation (act). This model serves to cultivate moral citizenship within our students, by helping them to develop all of the key components of a moral citizen: awareness, thinking, feeling, and action for justice (Manning, 1997). The model can be applied as follows:

- **See:** Describe what is happening in the situation. Where is it taking place? Why is it taking place? Who is involved? Why are they involved? Who is affected? How are they affected? Why did people react the way they did? What are the causes and consequences of the situation?

- **Judge:** What is the context in which this event took place (history, social, geographic, political, economic, cultural)? What are the effects of age, race, gender, ethnicity, class, ability, religion, sexual orientation, or other dimensions of difference in this situation? Who wins from the situation? Who loses from the situation? What do our social work values tell us about the situation? What does Catholic Social Teaching or our own faith tradition tell us about the situation?
- **Act:** How would you approach a resolution to the situation to bring about justice?

This element of social analysis has the potential to advance students in their capacity for moral reasoning, or if done in the light of Divine truth (e.g., through contemplation), contribute to their personal transformation as agents of justice.

Discussion

This article begins with a definition of justice as both a personal and social virtue. The social work profession has gone a long way toward embracing justice as a social virtue. For example, social justice is already a core value of the social work profession. Scholars have noted its historical importance to the profession, and the NASW Code of Ethics claims that attention to the underlying causes of injustice are a “fundamental” component to our work. The Council on Social Work Education (2008) requires that accredited programs develop student competencies in “advancing human rights and justice.” The commitment to justice within the profession has resulted in countless social work graduates with knowledge and skills to pursue justice with and for vulnerable and marginalized communities.

In terms of justice as a personal virtue, the social work literature has little to nothing to say, except for the growing interest in virtue ethics in general. In this article, we identify contemplative practice and social analysis as two methods to address the cultivation justice as a personal virtue. The application of these methods in the classroom provides an opportunity for students to begin developing practices that are important to the development of one’s character, contemplative practice and moral reasoning. For Christians, the idea of contemplative practice may correspond to the Christian practice of *discernment*, the process of understanding God’s purpose for us and help us make choices that align with God’s purpose. However, neither contemplative practice nor social analysis nor their integrated use has been studied in terms of their effect on cultivating virtue or in creating a greater disposition toward justice.

Despite a general consensus about the importance of justice in social work, ambiguity and confusion about the meaning of justice remain, and

the practice dimensions of justice have largely been associated with macro practice. We argue that justice-oriented practice happens on a continuum, to include the process dimensions of clinical and macro practice as well as the particular practice methods to address the structural causes of poverty, discrimination, and other forms of injustice such as policy advocacy, community organizing, community development, and social action. Given the historic tension regarding the service/justice bifurcation in the profession, it is not clear how readily this broad conception would be accepted within the profession. Some social workers may not agree with the notion that justice begins in the interpersonal relationship and may only recognize its manifestation in macro-level change methods. Others may not be comfortable with a justice-oriented vision of clinical practice that embraces a primary focus on strengths-based practice, and intentional consideration of power and privilege in the helping relationship. Furthermore, the macro-oriented dimensions of justice continue to be marginalized, hidden, or at best misunderstood as legitimate methods of social work practice. So, some may feel that broadening an understanding of just practice to include clinical processes may further marginalize macro practice.

Regardless of one's practice area, the infusion of justice content remains an important area for continued integration across all levels of practice in the social work curricula in order to cultivate justice as a virtue in social work students. Birkenmaier (2003) argues that social work educators should advocate for the integration of this content area across the curriculum as well as incorporating social justice issues into teaching. van Wormer (2006) provides examples of how to incorporate justice into research, policy, practice, and elective courses. In addition, Pelton (2001) argues that we need to openly confront the contradictions inherent in what is taught in social work education and what contexts the students experience in practice. He points out, specifically, contradictions between what is taught and working in "social work contexts that are coercive, punitive, paternalistic, and discriminatory in their approaches to clients and social problems" (p. 438). These concerns relate to practice methods with micro, mezzo, and macro systems.

Finally, because cultivating justice as a virtue is not one of the competencies identified as one of the CSWE competencies for accreditation, social work educators can legitimately claim that cultivating justice as a virtue is beyond their capacity. With all of the competencies social work educators are called to address, many educators might be resistant to adding another one that is not mandated. In addition, since cultivating virtue is a lifelong endeavor, its development over time is difficult to measure during the course of an academic program. However, social work programs located in faith-based institutions might be the logical place to initiate a social work program that gives attention to cultivating virtue in its students. Many of those institutions already view "formation of students" as intrinsic to the

function of the university, and have access to the rich resources of their faith tradition to use in that process. Faith-based institutions might have more freedom to talk about the role of moral exemplars in the classroom and in field, self-reflection and contemplative practice, and social analysis as a tool to cultivate virtue, particularly the virtue of doing justice.

In addition, since the 1980s, interest in spirituality and social work has grown as evidenced by the hundreds of articles yielded in Social Work Abstracts by using the terms “religion,” “spirituality,” and/or “faith” (Sheridan, 2009). Most of the literature focuses on social work practice or conceptual issues. Very few discuss religious or faith-based practices as pedagogical tools. The articles that do address the integration of faith tradition and pedagogy are typically anecdotal, conceptual, and descriptive in nature. While they are useful for their insights and to spark ideas, they offer no empirical evidence for such methods. Therefore, the link between social work pedagogy and spirituality is ripe for research. Given the renewed interest in virtue ethics, the link between pedagogy and spirituality and cultivation of virtue would be of interest, particularly for faith-based institutions of higher education. Faith-based institutions offer a good environment to develop research agendas that examine such questions. ❖

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