

## Social Workers as ‘Strong Evaluators’: Rethinking Moral Sources and Professional Identity

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### Abstract

This paper argues that adherence to an ethical stance in is one of the defining strengths of social work and something that makes it both distinctive and progressive. Social work refuses to drop the notion that society can be a vehicle for the translation of private troubles into public concerns and the democratically generated search for community, solidarity and the good life. Against the tide of neoliberal political rule with its pursuit of self-interested individualism it is argued that social work retains a strong conception of an ethical good as part of its professional identity. It is against this drift of hardening neo liberal politics that this paper situates the significance of social work in terms of the “practice of value”. To pose questions of ethical practice for social work is the first step towards reawakening them. This can contribute to the enrichment of ethical social work by activating moral sources. The starting point for this analysis derives from the writings of the Canadian communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor, and especially his idea that human beings lead their lives and assess themselves in light of broad ethical standards. The paper asks why social workers are committed to ethical practice through an examination of Taylor’s conception of “strong” versus “weak” evaluators. It looks at the way we can bring theory and practice together in accounting for aspects of professional identity and how this provides a basis for resisting the malaise of neoliberal capitalism. Starting from an actor oriented perspective, which holds to the view that human beings are essentially embodied agents who actively encounter things that concern them, the paper broadens this framework to examine the moral sources of social work.

**Keywords:** social work, ethical judgement; professional identity; strong evaluators.

### 1. Introduction

In a society in which the narrow pursuit of material self-interest is the norm, adherence to an ethical stance is more radical than people realise. This for me is one of the defining strengths of social work and something that makes it most distinctive. Social work remains committed to values of compassion, social justice and care in the face of a culture of self-interest. Most significantly it retains a commitment to an ethical core that permits the affirmation of a positive professional identity for social workers. Values and beliefs are considered important aspects in the formation of professional identity. This paper demonstrates how the latter is mediated by practices of value and moral sources.

Social work is not ethically indifferent even though the tide of mass culture and self-interest becomes ever more pervasive. It refuses to drop the notion that society can be a vehicle for the translation of private troubles into public concerns and the democratically generated search for community, solidarity and the good life. Webb (2006) argued that under the shadow of global neoliberalism the values of social work are increasingly under threat and likely to be diminished. This paper contends that we need to reaffirm social work values at a universal level, whilst recognizing differences in local context. In light of global political changes affected by neo liberal economics it is important that there is vigorous debate on social work values. Similarly, the role of social work values in the context of the professional identity formation and training of social workers should be considered as central (McDonald, 2005).

### 2. Values in a Neoliberal Global World

Globally, the main ideological strands of neo liberalism are: the rule of the market; cutting public expenditure of social services and reducing the safety net for the poor; deregulation of systems that diminish profit; eliminating the concepts of the public good and community and replacing them with individual responsibility and choice. During times of neo

liberal political rule there is little room for cooperation or felt solidarity in what Bourdieu (1998) calls a neoliberal "programme of the methodical destruction of collectives." (p.12) Such a life increasingly erodes our capacity to think in terms of cooperative and common interests. One of the architects of neoliberal politics Gary Becker regarded the individual actors as self maximizing markets. Relations between people are conceived in terms of market relations the extent to which Becker uses the logic of economics to examine marriage markets in the same way he does financial markets. He controversially argues that parents often act altruistically towards selfish children by highly investing in a child in an effort to indirectly save for old age (Becker, 1976). For Becker parents makes market related economic judgments rather than ethical judgments in relation to their children. He believes that the rate of return from investing in children is often greater than normal retirement savings. Becker claims that social work support can cause families to be less interdependent by removing the motivation of parents to use altruistic behaviors in motivating their children to care for them. For Becker social work is harmful to the natural marketization of family relations that may optimally exist between parents and their children. He imagines each family as a kind of little factory - "a militiaperson unit producing meals, health, skills, children, and self-esteem from market goods and the time, skills, and knowledge of its members" (Becker, 1991). He supported George W. Bush's continuing use of the death penalty using a market economic rationality. He said "I support the use of capital punishment for persons convicted of murder because, and only because, I believe it deters murders" (2006, web page cited). It is against this drift of hardening neoliberal market logic that the significance of social work in terms of what has been called "the practice of value" is developed (Webb, 2006). The starting point in this article derives from the writings of the Canadian political anthropologist Charles Taylor, and especially his idea that, contrary to Becker, human beings lead their lives and assess themselves in light of ethical standards. The usefulness of Taylor's (1989) conception of strong evaluations as guiding ethical judgement has been explored in counselling, psychotherapy and medicine but has yet to be considered as providing the basis for thinking about social work values.

### 3. Putting Values First

The article provides a validation of social work in terms of an *ideal-typical* ethical position which supports an affirmative stance for the making of professional identity . From this standpoint it is argued that we must affirm core values, not lose sight of the importance of necessity of an ethical social work and as a profession should be more musical in matters of moral discourse. Here I concur with Bisman (2004) about the primacy of values and her contention that it's time for social work to embrace a core ethical framework. To forcibly pose questions of ethical practice for social work is the first step towards reawakening them. This can contribute to the enrichment of ethical practice in social work by activating moral sources - drawing on sociological and philosophical perspectives - underneath the rampant economic individualism of neo liberalism. Such ethical practice rests on the principles of elevating a particular type of ethical self-other than me as the ultimate moral goal and the preference for acts freely chosen over one's performed under constraint. (Simpson, 2001) Developing such a perspective is important because an increasing tide of neoliberal critiques of social work continue to castigate the profession precisely for adhering to core ethical values (see Payne, 1996 and 1998, and Olasky, 1992 for earlier examples of this kind of neoliberal critique of social work.). Rather than concentrating on preconceptions about what social workers ought to do the starting point for developing an account of ethics when it rests on the active deliberation of moral good is to concentrate on what social workers do or cannot do and in particular what sort of ethical engagement is translated into the making of professional identity (see Jordan, 2004).

Two caveats are introduced before proceeding to define the nuances of ethical judgement for social work. Firstly, I want to suggest that ethical commitment emerges in sustained and proximal social relations which impact on the professional identity of a practitioner. Societal changes such as the impact of globalisation, risk technologies and the growth of corporate capitalism produce conditions of profound uncertainty which impacts on the ethical substance of identity. Social ties are increasingly loosened between people in the push towards what Richard Sennett (1998) calls "short-termism". Bauman holds that the terrain of late modernity 'is a territory subjected to rival and contradictory meaning-bestowing claims and hence perpetually ambivalent'. (1992, p.193) In emphasising ambivalence Bauman (1998) locates ethics at the centre of social relations, but an organic and practical ethics based on facing ambiguity and making hard moral choices, rather than one based on an external moral laws. There is no question for him that late modernity brought out conflicting values and demands, but these conflicts are nevertheless still embedded within an 'inevitable moral framework'. Bauman wants to replace the notion of society with an affirmative form of sociality. As a defender of social work, Bauman is concerned not just with the social glue that holds society together but with the ethical commitment that emerges in sustained and proximal social relations. He uses the concept of sociality as "having a concern for people in their fullness" to contrast with economic short-termism that reduces encounters between people to instrumental self-interest, requiring them to constantly make everything anew through fragmented and intermittent membership of social networks. Sociality is a minimal condition for producing trust and reciprocity, allowing us to perceive the local social world we share as more stable and cohering out of contingency. Trust is a key condition of

value judgements in advanced liberal societies (Misztal, 1996). Mirroring Bauman's plea for sociality we can locate proximal and sustained interaction at the centre of mainstream social work interventions.

In the second place, it is claimed that ethical practice should not be rule-bound, based on a strong notion of "duty" or derived from codes of conduct. This kind of ethical formalism has its roots in de-ontological ethics and associated with the liberal moral philosophy of Kant. What is called deontological thinking has tended to dominate British social work values for some time. It fed directly into British codes of ethics, as evinced by the British Association of Social Workers and the UK General Social Care Council code of practice. A critique of this kind of Kantian ethics was initially developed by McBeath and Webb (1989) who argued that deontological theories which dominate social work codes of ethics fail to address differences of power and explicitly neglect the evaluative layer and qualitative distinctions concerning worth, while implicitly presupposing them. Kantian deontological ethics offer a disengaged view. It may be that the Kantian categorical imperative is of help in testing maxims, but in building one's professional identity and formulating one's maxims, it remains silent. From this thin conception of rules and duties validation is required as part of the moral law of practice rather than stemming from the singular intent of a virtuous practitioner. For example, the former Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) claimed that "a value determines what a person thinks he *ought* to do" (1976, p.14). A key problem here is who tells you that there are moral laws to which our conduct ought to be liable? And as with many child abuse scandals who tells you that what never happened ought to have happened? Moreover, the social worker who does the task because he or she is obliged – is duty bound – to do it, lacks commitment as a self-defining person in pursuit of an ethical end. Foucault, too, recognizes that codified ethics is in decline:

*The idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, to the search for an aesthetics of existence. (1990, p. 49)*

Foucault is implying that hard distinctions between "good" and "evil" increasingly fall away in late modern societies and the search for a deeper and situated "lived ethics" comes to the fore. I take this aesthetics of existence to be value based and this sense of lived ethics as providing a foundation for a social work value perspective. To value something is to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes towards it and for acting in certain ways in regard to it. The active dimension to this, as Scanlon notes, means that valuing something often involves finding reasons to preserve and protect it (as, for example, the value associated with a historic building); in other cases which relate directly to social work it involves reasons to be guided by the goals and standards that the value involves (e.g. marriage equality for same-sex people) (1998, p.95). In the case of social work we can thus talk meaningfully about value loyalty.

#### 4. The Self and the Good

A positive link between self and the good needs to be established to endow any basis for a "lived ethic" in social work and in particular a circular relation between professional identity and strong evaluation. Before undertaking this exercise it is necessary to establish what is meant by "self" and how self and morality are intertwined? Let's start with foundation question of selfhood. Being a person is an active business. Having a self in a full-fledged sense means having a conception of oneself, and having conceptions is a lively and active business. People don't have value commitments like things have properties. So, for example, the hypothetical person Fred has a conception of "Fred-ness". This forms a background horizon or pre-figures the way self evaluation takes place and effects things in the world. Fred has a sense of what kind of person he is. Whilst some senses of Fred-ness may be pretty stable and continuous other bits may not be. Therefore the self-identity of Fred-ness is always a tentative result of an ongoing processes of interpretation even if he is merely confirming what he already believes. This process is particularly helpful when thinking about the sorts of moral dilemmas social workers face. The peculiarities of Fred-ness are configured along three-lines: first there is his *practical* Fred-ness; here identity is a question of one's orientation towards certain concerns in life. This practical orientation hinges on what Fred aims to do with his life, it is not about how he differs from other people but his own life projects; second, there is his *biographical* Fred-ness, for which identity is the question of the way his life or the way it hangs together. It provides for a sort of moral glue. He cares about the things that shape his life as a coherent whole. Perhaps if the whole was ever achieved, he would cease to self validate or maybe he would adopt a new perspective of Fred-ness?; and finally there is his *qualitative* Fred-ness, or the "defining features" or things that make him distinctive. These are the peculiarities and nuanced aspects of Fred. Take together, all these are questions, which involve Fred's self-validation through interpretation. Clearly, the views of other people are central for the genesis of Fred's conceptions, but they are not an aspect of his identity. They can directly be an aspect of his reputation or public image, but cannot shape his professional identity. Thus professional identity is not a natural given, it is a result of continuous interpretation and a sort of "matching with" the rich context of everyday life. A persons identity is not merely dependent on one's moral orientation, or one's conception of the good but is crucially dependent on one's self-evaluation as to the worth of one's motivations and actions (see Laitinen, 2003). These evaluations are deliberative (as opposed to non-deliberative, see Dreyfus, 1992, for a distinction between 'deliberative' and 'non deliberative' modes of consciousness) mental acts.

They require conscious effort and reflection. While dialogue and recognition by others plays a crucial role in the formation of a person's identity, the views of others are not directly constitutive of that person's identity. Thus the version of ethical identity suggested here explicitly refutes the social constructivist version of reality that claims ethics are external imposed by the rules and formations of discourses and such like. The crucial idea here is that relations between self and others are value-laden only to the extent that they are actively formed by deliberative self evaluations. It's important to recognize that this conception of professional identity does not amount to an affirmation of the autonomous and self defining Cartesian subject, but rather is a dynamic formation of identity that is constituted in and through relationships with others. The view expressed here is that deliberative evaluations based on an internal dialogue mediates 'structure' and 'agency' in a way that is akin to that described by Margaret Archer in her *Culture and Agency*.

### 5. Ethical evaluation and professional identity

Let us now examine how this value laden-ness as ethical evaluation provides the basis for an alternative ethics for social work. To begin boldly, the social worker has an ethical commitment to do the best for clients and insofar as they have the resources to do so, they try to use these to maximize ethical ends. This is not about adherence to principles of duty or a set of prescribed rules codes of conduct. That is conformity. Practicing values and believing in them is an active process that depends on ethical commitment. Commitment to an ethical practice is a virtue because it indicates the seriousness, necessity and deliberative nature to some direction of action. So, why are social workers committed to an ethical life? The short answer to this is that they are in the words of Charles Taylor "strong evaluators".

Taylor introduces the notion of "strong evaluation" in his "Responsibility for Self" (1976), a revised version of which appeared as "What is Human Agency" (1977, reprinted in 1985a). The main targets of Taylor's concept of 'strong evaluation' are the sociobiological, utilitarian and emotivist attempts to reduce morality to mere desires.

This concept needs some careful exposition if we are to properly convey the relation between social work and the ethical good. These ideas have not previously been explored in the social work literature so let's look closely at the way Taylor vividly brings theory and practice together in accounting for an ethical life and how this provides the basis for a reconstitution of value in social work. He is not just interested in *what it is right to do, but what it is good to be*. The starting point for Taylor's account is derived from existential phenomenology, which holds to the view that human beings are essentially embodied agents. By this he means that human experience is not merely a representation of objects or a disinterested contemplation of things, but entails a *proximal encounter with things that concern us*. (Smith, 2002, p.87) For Taylor persons are not merely particular entities, located in a causally closed universe and obeying its laws, but they have an *engaged internal relation* to their world.

Taylor is deeply concerned about the malaise of late modernity and wants to sort out the good from the harmful in the cultivation of the self. His starting point is to insist that the human condition is distinctive in that we lead our lives and evaluate ourselves with regard to broad ethical standards. He thinks that a rich moral background can be retrieved without giving in to the undesirable consequences of technical, disengaged and political calculative rationality. For Taylor the character of the self is constituted by ethical concerns, that is, the self is constituted in and through the taking of moral stances (1989, p.41). His concern is *how we orient ourselves in relation to the good*, and the way in which we negotiate and traverse the ethical space we inevitably find ourselves in as human agents. It strikes me that this orientation to the good is what enables social workers to establish durable and trusting relations with clients, that is, as embodied agents who encounter people with ethical concern.

Taylor articulates this position by distinguishing between what he calls "weak evaluation" and "strong evaluation". The former is about the manner in which we weigh up the way we want to satisfy our desires and decide which desires we want to satisfy best. This might involve thinking about whether you want to buy a new car and instead take a holiday. As Smith points out "The decisive issue in my evaluation is just what I happen to feel like." (2002, p.89) Taylor refers to this as "weak evaluation". In weak evaluation the statement that that "A is better than B" remains inarticulate, because there is nothing more to articulate. I just like A better, it just feels that way, it is just a matter of *de facto* desires or preferences. In weak evaluation, the basis or intrinsic worth of the desires is not put in doubt. The agent weighs desired actions "simply to determine convenience, or how to make different desires compossible or how to get the overall satisfaction." (Taylor 1976, p.282). Such simple weighing of alternatives is possible without any qualitative distinction in the intrinsic desirability of the desires in question. Weak evaluation is generally a matter of expedience or degrees of desirability.

Taylor recognizes, however, that another kind of evaluation is at play in the way we think about ourselves. Sometimes we find ourselves evaluating desires in terms of what they are worth. He calls this strong evaluation. Using the previous example, if one starts to give reasons for one's preference in terms of the good-making properties of A and B, one is actually engaged in strong evaluation. As Smith goes on to explain "What counts now is the way I locate or interpret the feelings, that is, how I characterize them as something base and petty, or as something higher and more admirable."

(ibid) Roughly speaking to characterize this type of evaluation refers to the times we beat ourselves up over things we do to ourselves or others. It involves a standard or judgement of worth or what some call conscience. One's value-beliefs form a framework of strong evaluations, which can also be called a 'moral map'. One need not engage with all of these values in one's life. The moral map tells one not only where to aim, but also which values to respect. One's own selections of goals can be referred to as one's orientation. Taylor says that when we strongly evaluate we "classify it in such categories as higher and lower, virtuous and vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base." (1985, p.16) He wants to show the importance of this distinction for our understanding of the ethical self in the modern world. Smith gives some examples of the difference between strong and weak evaluators in terms of practical reflection:

*The strong evaluator has a depth and articulacy lacking in the weak evaluator. This is obviously true for the quality of their practical reflection. Faced with a choice, the weak evaluator has a sense of which outcome he would prefer – a sense that he would rather have one of his desires satisfied than another – and he can reflect on the likelihood of satisfying his desires through the course of action he adopts. But he only has an inarticulate sense of what it is that makes one desire superior, or more worth going after than another. All he can say is that there is certain 'feel' to it which appeals to him. The strong evaluator, on the other hand, can articulate his sense that one desire is more worth satisfying than another by locating the desires in a qualitative contrast – such as the contrast between a mean or generous spirit – that enables him to have a more nuanced and refined understanding of the options available to him. (p.90)*

This has a familiar ring in our late capitalist societies. As part of the neoliberal scheme of things, we are increasingly faced with a culture of weak evaluators. Opportunism and short-termism are particularly symptomatic of the widespread hardening of weak evaluation as the basis for negotiating social relations. How often do we hear people saying "don't argue with me, it's my right" and "it just feels right to me - so don't you dare insist on me accounting for myself"? Or the even shallower "don't be bullying me by asking me to justify why I want to do - it's my choice!" Willful and selfish might properly define these kinds of weak evaluative statements.

Taylor is not only claiming that strong evaluators are more considered and careful about their options, or that they are capable of having deeper self-reflection; more than this, he is saying that their reflection upon value engages with the heartland of desires and purposes themselves. Strong evaluators exercise an ethical sensibility and judgement that's based on their ability to contrast the value or worth of things. This provides them with standards and characteristics by which they judge the quality of human life. Taylor's argument runs such that certain social actors owe their identity to the role played by strong values in their life. This perspective, by offering an ethical deliberation to practical reflection, goes significantly beyond the reflective practice model offered by Schon and others who have very little to say about ethics in the context of social work. One function of reflectivity is to broaden one's evaluative framework and increase its level of sophistication, but people begin their reflective life from different starting-points, and one such difference concerns the breadth of their moral vocabulary (see Laitinen, 2003). Taylor distinguishes between *engaged and disengaged reflection* (1989, pp.162-164). With engaged reflection the point is to look closer or attend more closely to a motivated challenge, whereas in the disengaged reflection the idea is to step back, gain distance to one's reactions. It appears that the social work literature tends to focus on the latter at the expense of the former. The argument developed here is that reflexivity, as internal moral tension, is a *structural feature of strong evaluation* and not just a *process of reflection* whereby the practitioner "confronts herself" as part of an internal dialogic process. Strong evaluation is much more gritty and substantial than reflective practice. Our internal speech is not confined to issuing statements, reflecting on things or describing the world, instead we often ask ourselves questions. Self appraisal and self monitoring requires self questioning that for strong evaluators is often of an ethical content. Like all conversations this internal dialogue can go on over time. As Margaret Archer playfully remarks "We cannot put the phone down on ourselves" (2003, p.97). So strong evaluation is deliberative and based on internal dialogue. It has a reflexive structure and while invoking internally tense states is related to a reasonably durable but contingent set of ethical sensibilities. As Archer summarises "internal dialogue is the practice through which we 'make up our minds' by questioning ourselves, clarifying our beliefs and inclinations, diagnosing our situations, deliberating about our concerns and defining our own projects" (p.103). Ethical judgement is produced through the reflexive deliberations of practitioners who evaluatively determine their moral projects in relation to their social circumstances.

From the above discussion we can sense how strong evaluations and identity may be intertwined in various ways. According to Laitinen (2003) there are four important aspects of this: 1) a person's evaluative convictions directly constitute the content of self identity or practical commitment; 2) a person's strong evaluations guides the way in which some features are identified with, 3) the actual features a person identifies with may play a role in the selection and specification of their ethical commitments, 4) a person judges motivations and success in life in the light of their strong evaluations. (p.124). For Taylor value is inescapable in that the process of judging, ascribing, monitoring or even

denying value. In short, the process of evaluation, can never be avoided, this is how we work out a *modus vivendi* for ourselves, the process is evaluative through and through. What is at stake is the kind of evaluation that takes place. Seen in this way, the practice of value is bound up intimately with motivation and purpose of every kind. From this perspective we can map acts of ethical practice as involving first of all judgements of an agent, whether oneself or another, in terms of whether a motive or an action is proper to the given situation of that agent; if it is, we evaluate that the motive or action has merit, otherwise demerit. We do this irrespective of whether the situation is past, present or future (see Connor, 1993).

Taylor helpfully distinguishes three ethical dimensions that count for strong valuations. Firstly, in every socio-cultural formation we find practices that express some aspect of concern, love or respect for other people. This group of ethical goods includes duties, obligations, and responsibilities towards others as caring concern. As Smith explains "People fall short of the standard set up by this class of life goods when they are cruel to others, betray them, humiliate them, wrong them and so forth" (p.91) The second category or class includes the aspiration for human flourishing, living a meaningful and fulfilled life that is acknowledged as having virtue, as opposed to a shallow, empty or purposeless life. As something emanating in the relation between self and Other it involves those special moments of tenderness, compassion and concern for others. The final dimension Taylor distinguishes refers to human dignity and recognition. Smith elucidates this as "dignity elicits the respect of others, a respect born not so much from the duty of care or responsibility for the other as from the recognition of something like nobility." (p.92) This is not a form of personal understanding of self-fulfillment but an individual dignity or form of life that is acknowledged as something we look up to, aspire to and recognize as having value.

## 6. Practicing strong evaluation in social work

We can now begin to sketch the distinctiveness of social work and map the differences that may exist between different types of social workers along ethical lines. Positioning social workers as strong evaluators may mean that they are different from say politicians, shopkeepers, bankers, business men, lawyers and the police. I accept that this kind of claim requires some empirical justification but it wouldn't be too difficult to devise instruments that test the differences across professions and between strong and weak evaluating social workers.

Strong evaluations are not always ethical. Valuing buying books over fashion items can be a strong evaluation. It is precisely because the strong evaluations that social workers are predominantly ethical, however, that allows us to situate them as a constitutive good in modern societies. Social workers' evaluative understanding is a matter of practical experience and habituation, practical-know, emotional sensitivity and personal experiences rather than a kind of cognitive knowledge acquired by detached reasoning or learning theories. Most crucially, perhaps social workers exhibit commitment to an ethical life, or better still what is called a "*substantive commitment*". According to Laitinen (2003) such commitment has three main features (1) it tends to be stable over time while remaining potentially revisable (under critical rational scrutiny); (2) it has action-guiding force; (3) it has a central role in social workers self-understanding and identity. Such commitment structures their professional and personal lives and strengthen their identity, therefore reinforcing their integrity. As strong evaluators social workers perform a two-fold ethical task in relation to clients. This consists of thematizations of various influential but distorting assumptions which are made in daily lives of clients. The two-fold task is based on a negative criticism of distorting views and a more positive construction of alternatives.

There are, however, likely to be strong and weak practicing evaluators within social work. The weak evaluative practitioner is a simple weigher of alternatives, an opportunist making discrete judgement-by-judgement decisions, who takes no stand at all concerning the qualitative worth of different options. They are unconcerned with the evaluative aspects of the objects of evaluation. Obviously some social workers will be better deliberators than others, and it is equally obvious that the causes of those differences will be contextual and structural. However, Taylor is not suggesting that moral responsibility is not built on the powers of deliberation, more radically, he is claiming that *it is built on the decision to deliberate*. That decision to think with sufficient care and depth is up to us and the buck stops there (Waller, 1999). Taylor wants us to take responsibility for the kinds of persons we are. We've seen that strong evaluators can articulate the reasons for their preferences on the basis of qualitative distinctions of worth. They are likely to be involved in supererogation that goes beyond the call of duty. For these actions it is intrinsically good in being aimed at higher ends than the mere fulfilment of the commandments. For social workers this means that judgements concerning the worth of options are not merely of theoretical interest, but are practically relevant in determining theory commitment, orientation and authenticity. It remains to be seen to what extent strong evaluation translates across or compares to something like a radical evaluation whereby an ethical good is sought after in terms of political stance. Hellman (2008) thinks this is a possibility in likening Taylor's conception of strong evaluation to Michel Foucault's technique of the self. He develops two consequences for Taylor's conception of positive freedom. First, when the freedom of a society's members is evaluated such that we should analyze the techniques of the self practiced by those

members. Second, strong evaluation is a technique of the self that agents can use to overcome obstacles to their freedom.

To return to the personal level strong evaluation makes a difference to one's motivation. This difference is not simply on a judgement-by-judgement basis, but rather, a person has strong attachments to certain strongly-valued ends. Taylor suggests that:

*... because I see certain of my other properties as admitting of only one kind of strong evaluation by myself, because these properties so centrally touch what I am as an agent, that is, as a strong evaluator, that I cannot really repudiate them in the full sense. For I would be thereby repudiating myself, inwardly riven and hence incapable of fully authentic evaluation."(1985, p.34)*

One can read this passage as Taylor advocating the following kind of reasoning: "because I am filthy rich, I would be repudiating myself if I were an egalitarian, so the value of equality cannot be applied to me". Or, "I am not a nice guy, so demands of considerateness do not apply to me" (Laitinen, p.24). Clearly, when identified with a person's factual characteristics these can play a central role in justifying one's evaluative judgements. The point here is that a person's dignity or self worth is in internal connection to her or his motivations. Thus value commitments are directly constitutive of self identity or as Laitinen puts it "a person's defining qualities" (ibid). Anyone who has partaken in interviewing prospective social workers for professional training programmes will be acutely aware of the prevalence of this sort of self constituting value talk. Indeed, one of the defining features of the admissions interview is the way it centres on value commitments. The propensity towards strong evaluation is tested early on in the potential career of a social worker and likely to be sustained in practice agency settings. The question about whether applicants for social work training programmes should be assessed on their abilities to strongly evaluate is an interesting and likely to be a controversial one.

## **7. Value, Commitment and Public Good**

To conclude social work is the commitment to a basic constitutive ethical good and thereby provides social workers with the capacity to locate themselves and determine the qualitative significance of various interventions in value-laden ways. It contributes to the making of professional identity as a source of moral value. It also permits the articulation of an ethical ideal for social workers in the justification of the professional role. Social work entails depth in its seriousness, affective involvement and capacity to respond in an ethical way to complex situations invoking strong values. By acting in accordance to deliberative ethical judgement social workers have a "sense" of qualitative distinctions about what it is best to do. Such judgement is geared up from a set of basic evaluative commitments which orient them in positive terms and give horizons to the constitutive ground of an ethical identity. As Archer (2003) notes "It is in relation to explaining these precise 'doings' that reference to our internal deliberations is indispensable" (p.143). It cannot be a mechanical process because individuals themselves must deliberate upon a precise course of action in view of their concerns in relation to others. In other words, it permits an enactment of the special relationship between self and Other along ethical lines. Taylor explains this affective ethical dimension:

*We sense in the very experience of being moved by some higher good that we are moved by what is good in it rather than that it is valuable because of our reaction. We are moved by seeing its points as something infinitely valuable. We experience our love for it as a well-formed love. Nothing that couldn't move me in this way would count as a hyper-good (1989, p.74).*

In displaying his full communitarian colours, for Taylor, we cannot live without either valuing a way of life or feeling guilty about living at odds with the valuation of a form of life. To summarise, for Taylor, as an avowed moral realist, values are constitutive of human life because human life is basically teleological, meaning that it is always orientated towards basic goods. These goods rest on an active practice of valuing including promises, obligations, duties and fidelities to people (Scanlon, 1998). Secondly, as we have seen human beings assess their life by qualitative value distinctions (good vs. bad; right vs. wrong; truthful vs deceptive); our entire internal dialogue is almost always penetrated and constituted by value judgements. Social work is the archetypal professional manifestation of this state of affairs. Social work values an ethical way of life and thinks deeply and seriously about it to the extent that it is a constitutive moral ground for professional identity and is so in ways that other professions and occupations (e.g. banking and real estate) are not.

## **8. Resisting neoliberal global agendas**

Given the moral bankruptcy of much of late capitalist life we may ask what is to be done in social work in the face of neoliberalism? (Gray & Webb, 2013) In his penetrating but challenging essay "The Essence of Neo Liberalism" (1998) the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu outlines the logic, consequences and rationality of this dominant political discourse for modern societies. He is hard pressed to identify any serious countervailing trends or socio-political

movement that is capable of stopping what he calls this “infernally machine”. For Bourdieu the transition to neo liberalism “takes place in an imperceptible manner, like continental drift, thus hiding its own effects from view. Its most terrible consequences are those of the long term”. Nevertheless he identifies what he calls an “old order” that paradoxically helps both to conceal the effects of neo liberalism and offers a potential space for resistance. The old order Bourdieu is referring to is the social state and its public sector institutions like social work and education that are currently being dismantled by neo liberalism. To quote at length Bourdieu (1998) tells us that:

*We are faced with an extraordinary paradox. The obstacles encountered on the way to realising the new order of the lone, but free individual are held today to be imputable to rigidities and vestiges. All direct and conscious intervention of whatever kind, at least when it comes from the state, is discredited in advance and thus condemned to efface itself for the benefit of a pure and anonymous mechanism, the market ... But in reality what keeps the social order from dissolving into chaos, despite the growing volume of the endangered population, is the continuity or survival of those very institutions and representatives of the old order that is in the process of being dismantled, and all the work of the categories of social workers, as well as the forms of social solidarity, familial or otherwise (p.10).*

For Bourdieu, social work plays a dual and contradictory role under neoliberal rule. Firstly it assists in maintaining the social order and holding it together, even though a rampant and destructive neo liberal politics calls into question any social solidarities and collective goods that serve as obstacles to the logic of the pure market. Interestingly, he is suggesting that a field of moral-political conflicts lie hidden and festering beneath the veneer of neoliberal capitalist integration. And yet, Bourdieu concedes that these “same forces of conservation ... are also from another point of view, forces of *resistance to the establishment of the new order and can become subversive forces*”. In echoing earlier comments identifying social work not merely as an affirmative social entity and evaluative constitutive good, but as “unruly practices” that can actively sabotage, resist and challenge neo liberalism, Bourdieu wants to appeal to public sector institutions like social work to take a deliberate stance against the dominant forms of political rule in advanced capitalist societies. He thus offers a glimmer of optimism when says that “If there is still cause for some hope, it is that forces still exist, both in state institutions and in the orientations of social actors (notably individuals and groups most attached to these institutions, those with a tradition of civil and public service) that ... will be able to invent a new social order. One that will not have as its only law the pursuit of egoistic interests and the individual greed for profit and that will make room for collective oriented ends.” (ibid) We must think of social work as occupying a specifiable ethical location in a communitarian space that belongs to a traditional order underpinned by strong evaluators who are courageous enough to say “I prefer not to” in relation to unjust social regimes. (McKendrick & Webb, 2014). It is expansive in having acquired ethical identities, such as courage and commitment, to counter the hegemony of neoliberalism.

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