

## Chapter 4

# Philosophy Applied to Social Welfare: The Philosophy of, for, with, and against Social Welfare

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### Introduction

This chapter examines the "of" when discussing the "philosophy of" social welfare and its demands. It analyzes the link (the "of") between traditional philosophy and welfare practices, such as policy making, implementation, administration, and delivery. How do philosophers address broad-based questions, such as what are the state's responsibilities to its citizens? Which needs and rights should affect public decision-making? And how to distribute welfare equitably? Those tasked with delivering welfare – not just the policy architects but the social workers, social care support staff, health professionals, and so on – may turn the tables on these important philosophical questions. Instead, they may ask how philosophy is best distributed within the provision of welfare? Where should philosophy be located, with policymakers, academia, social workers, clients, etc.? And what effects should philosophy have on and in social welfare systems? The traditional "philosophy of" arrangement sits apart from the practical application of welfare professionals. Often, the "of"-relationship suggests a certain critical distance that sometimes forms an unhelpful hierarchy. By examining these conventional philosophical frameworks, the practitioner can uncover the layers of unhelpful hierarchy that influence their jobs.

Fundamental links exist between welfare and philosophy, primarily through *policy creation and implementation within its social context*. Welfare roots itself at the micro (individual), meso (middle), and macro (distal) levels in interpretative tasks, including community needs, welfare distribution, delivery, and discourse. The macro-level policy frequently develops from the more traditional "philosophy of" approach. However, the intersection of philosophy and welfare benefits from a "philosophy with" approach to social welfare, where both philosophy and social welfare have an equal voice. This chapter examines an approach not based on abstract welfare principles, but a practical method focused on meaningful social action.

The philosophical dimensions of welfare interpretation are vital to understanding the horizon through which delivery occurs. Understanding involves examining the principles and concepts of welfare at the macro-level and the role of welfare delivery and philosophy, with its historical foundation that lingers in social welfare today. This history is crucial to understanding the "uses" of specific philosophical ideas. Traditional philosophies primarily speak to the policy level rather

than the lived experience seen by people working and living with the welfare system. Ultimately, this chapter will examine the "philosophy of" approach's strengths and weaknesses to highlight the benefits of "philosophy with" interpretative approach to welfare. This chapter opens up a space for the practitioner to reflect on the system they find themselves in. Thus, allowing insight into the layers that affect our current system. Hopefully, this reflection will establish knowledge and possibly encourage change.

### **The complexities of defining 'welfare.'**

Social welfare can be defined in two senses. First, it can provide certain services or resources to those in need via private or public means. Second, it can refer to the sense of society's well-being, in a moral and political sense: "faring well." Sumner suggests a vertical relationship between the two philosophy's bearing on social policy is fundamentally that

welfare programs are justifiable only if they ultimately contribute to welfare in its deeper and more traditional sense, the sense in which welfare is the general condition of faring or doing well, and my welfare is the same as my well-being or my interest or (in one of its many meanings) my good. That does not tell us much about how such programs should be designed, or even whether we should prefer them to other means of promoting well-being (Sumner 1996, vii).

Sumner's ideas ground a "philosophy of" understanding. Sumner suggests a relatively traditional division between the foundational principles of welfare and the delivery of policies that aim to meet them. The former is intentionally reductive or simplified (to identify the core value or justification of social welfare), the latter intentionally pluralistic and open to various ideas (to ensure that the best delivery modes can be found).

However, the distinction hides a complicated picture of how welfare manifests within the application. Hamlin notes that in most Western societies, social welfare discussions take place in the "shadow" of the image of the welfare state or a government-funded welfare system. However, this is not always appropriate (Hamlin 2008). Today, when we look for a welfare "system," we encounter a network of organizations and policies, each carrying their own histories and horizons, rarely forming a neat, bounded model of care. The history of state welfare itself, at least in the UK and US, is one of the layering programs at different times, with variable success. Reminiscent of Ian Buchanan's description of policy infrastructure as a "curious state of affairs that is neither the product of deliberate, conscious design, nor the product of a sequence of random, ad hoc experiments, but somehow a combination of the two" (2017, 463).

For example, social work's welfare delivery role shifts with its statutory obligations (that is, what the state expects of it) and the dominant philosophies of the time. Current welfare systems emerged from the Charity Organization Society (COS) and the Settlement House Movement in the UK and US, drawing on Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy via British philosopher TH Green (see Pierson 2011). Kantian ethics decrees that the moral person "utters moral commands only to himself" (MacIntyre 1998, 147), and as such, Harris notes that in these early forms of social work, "poor people were not seen as at the mercy of [...] social and economic processes and were not regarded as requiring sympathetic intervention" (Harris 2008, 664). Instead, society took

Kant's view of "self-incurred immaturity" quite literally: "caseworkers stressed the importance of isolating the causes of individual difficulties and locating people's problems within themselves to intervene more directly in their lives" (Harris 2008, 666). However, in the first half of the twentieth century, emerging psychotherapeutic poverty (scarcity as a psychological state that everyone experiences from time to time) may not be as straightforward as "deserving" or "undeserving") and developmental aspects of the psyche required more rigorous interventions. Subsequently, there was a more defined role for the social worker as an "expert" in welfare. Yet another turn occurred with the rise of person-centered, strengths-based approaches and the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers, coinciding with reforms to government (such as the 1962 amendments to the Social Security Act in the US to focus on rehabilitation and prevention). This produced the re-emergence of casework backed by statutory legislation. Beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, a shift in social care towards budgets for the personalized service user, using the logic of liberal economics to counter the perceived "dependency culture" of social security, which "produces" the poor (Cree, 2013, 147). Meanwhile, many states downsized social care – such as mental health hospitals – coinciding with calls for better forms of evidence and conceptual bases for welfare delivery.

In turn, these practices of delivery reflect different ethical standpoints. The nineteenth-century system utilized pastoralism or monoculture (combined with localized punitive governance of the poor), emphasizing social rights within the welfare state. Leading to the managerial encouragement of consumerist self-governance (the preoccupation with consumer goods) in the recent shift to what Hartley Dean has termed "workfare," the move from welfare as meeting fundamental rights to welfare providing routes "back" to work (Dean 2007).

The point to note here is that different "philosophies of" have worked in the history of welfare provision. Furthermore, older ideas were rarely swept away throughout all of these changes. In the 2000s, particularly since the 2008 economic crash, the language of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor has resurfaced in political discussions of welfare provision. Unsurprisingly, many social workers and social care professionals will look back fondly on a time of person-centered casework, which may precede their own time in the workforce. The move to managerialism as a welfare philosophy is a merger of old paternalism and the ineffectiveness of centralized state services. Likewise, the success of new bureaucratic technologies, coupled with the increasing professionalization of services, enabled a shift from localized welfare delivery to state-driven practice. Still, even in this essentially administrative context, there remain constant debates over the ethical positive or negative underpinnings of welfare.

This summary demonstrates that the "welfare state" consists of a mixture of centralized, state-driven regimes that existed in the past and a personalized, care-driven regime of user choice which the current system aspires to become. As such, it makes sense to be wary of assuming that this image will map to the vertical relationship between welfare and "faring well," in the sense Sumner suggests. Indeed, it is clear that welfare policy and provision rarely simply "unplugs" from one philosophical grounding and "plugs into" another without leaving any remnants of its past. This raises challenges for thinking of a philosophy "of" social welfare and some routes through those challenges. Identifying and understanding the different layers that form the welfare system

one finds themselves in allows the practitioner to strategically assess the best ways to move forward in aiding a client or developing programming.

Questions to consider:

1. According to the examples above, what philosophical approaches do the practices in your work stem from? Are there remains of "lesser and more deserving poor," paternalism, client-centered casework, etc.?
2. Do these philosophies fit your company's and your personal mission and values?
3. Where do the philosophies of your program stem from? A philosophy "of", "for", "with", or "against" social welfare?
4. How does identifying the philosophy behind your work determine the goal and outcomes of your work?

### **Philosophical images of social welfare**

One benefit of the more traditional philosophical approaches to welfare – by which I mean the "philosophy of" – is that it does *not* engage with the myriad complexity of the day-to-day welfare delivery. Historically, philosophy sees society's well-being in its totality. Philosophy does not react to each change on the operational level. Instead, philosophy looks for the *core principles* that underlie *the very idea* of social welfare. Often, these principles are far more significant in their influence than individual policies or practices. This may appear as the motivation of welfare professionals, including the value-base that informs their everyday judgments. For example, how best to engage with clients (e.g., from strengths-based approaches, person-centered approaches, and so on) or what is the measure of a "good" outcome while balancing political and economic requirements and the benefits to the community.

Since Plato, how society supports its population and the role of a "state" in providing welfare has been a philosophical topic. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues against Thrasymachus' claim that government should operate in the government interest. Socrates points out that ruling is a craft, a craft should have an external goal, and thus rulers' goals should be like a shepherd's goal, dedicated to the general population's welfare (342e). The theory of education that Plato puts forward is dedicated to promoting social welfare. At the same time, other texts from classical philosophy, such as Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue* and Aristotle's *Politics*, debate a ruler's obligations to their people. Just as welfare professionals reflect on their core values, philosophers are often interested in the *root* of societal needs and obligations. Such roots can fall into different categories for understanding the basis of need. These include those based on some kind of the unchanging core of human existence or fundamental need for living or functioning (known as "naturalistic" theories); based on an individual's aims or positional need (and therefore fundamentally subjective); based on an individual's ability to choose and the satisfaction of their choices (a utilitarian approach), and so on. This chapter will not cover all of these but note how many traditional philosophical arguments use the philosophy "of" approach.

Just as a political philosophy has always invoked metaphor and analogy to summarize the complexities of statecraft, the idea of welfare has also carried particularly compelling images. One

main image is the "state of nature," which has remained firmly pressed into the Western imagination since the seventeenth century. The "state of nature" is the notion that core human traits exist when free from organized society and are modified by forming a social order. This naturalistic starting point has provided the foundation for a range of welfare philosophies and models of practice. One example of models used in welfare practices is Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1983). This hierarchy forms the basis of "graded care" for the assessment of service user needs (see, for example, Hopkins and Hill 2010), child neglect (see Ayre 2007), or even for healthy management strategies of social workers themselves (see Lewis et al. 2001). The foundational question, "what does a person need, *above all else*?" forms part of this thinking, including how one imagines need. In the case of Maslow, an individual's need is first and foremost, leading with the fundamental needs of food and shelter, followed by caring relationships and complex cultural factors. This informs how welfare professionals engage with clients: how welfare professionals consider their individuality, relate this to their culture or immediate community, and what freedoms and actions are available to them for their benefit, impacting service delivery.

The image of the state of nature is often dated back to the work of Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century. From Hobbes, political philosophy assumes the model of purposefully ignoring the existing personal day-to-day relationships in favor of the foundational moral principles of "society." Unlike the focus of classical philosophy on the existing state, modern thinking tends more towards the question of an individual's participation in society. We should, in Hobbes' words, "consider men as if [...] sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement with each other" (Hobbes 1972, 205). Hobbes reasons that the world would be a state of nature without the structures of law and authority around us. This is a wild, uncivilized, and violently individualistic situation where people wander the world, surviving against all others in an endless competition for scarce resources: a place where life is "nasty, brutish and short." Thus Hobbes argues that society emerges when individuals band together under a social contract, sacrificing some of their freedom for the security that more significant numbers provide. One gives up freedoms for protection. Other models exist for imagining the welfare interactions between the state and its people. Plato, Maslow, and Hobbes are three historical philosophies "of" examples. These welfare philosophies are shaped by the policy creation and implementation within their social context, and these policies forge links between delivery and principles in a reflexive circle. In this sense, Sumner's initial suggestion that philosophy provides the principles on which delivery should vertically take place can be questioned, as should the notion that a "philosophy *of*" welfare commands some logical separation between the philosophy and social services.

Questions to consider:

1. What are the benefits of these traditional philosophical arguments and their use of the wide-based "philosophy of" approach? How can their drawbacks lead us towards a better merging of philosophy and welfare?
2. What do you think of when you envision the needs of your clients? What do they need above all else?
3. Where do you see the philosophy "of" showing up in your work and the policies that shape your work? Are they still relevant? Do they fit the needs of clients and society?

#### 4. Is a philosophy "of" necessary today?

### **The just distribution of welfare**

This chapter suggests that particular traditions of thinking have shaped the image of welfare (and the needs it attempts to address) through its choices of metaphors and analogies and its assumptions around the basis of rational thought itself. But such a welfare philosophy can lead to problematic issues at both policy and delivery levels. For example, using Maslow's hierarchy of needs can create barriers to forming social programs that address the whole person's needs, and the programs created are too limited in scope. In that case, further philosophical analysis can be crucial in unpacking, critiquing, and offering alternatives.

One example of this is the work of John Rawls, which has stood for a long time as a rigorous justification of liberal welfare. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, philosophical accounts of welfare in the UK and the US were dominated by utilitarian ethics. When Rawls first published his landmark book *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, it responded to this dominant utilitarian approach, which suggested that the just distribution of welfare should result in the greatest good for the greatest number. What counts as "good" is determined by how much "utility" is borne from its consequences. Additionally, utilitarianism typically endorses a model of negative freedom, whereby individuals should be allowed the freedom to act out their development as long as they do not infringe on others' freedom. The flourishing of the individual is vital, but only insofar as *all* individuals can flourish.

The practice of utilitarianism led to problematic judgments regarding how welfare applicants, or clients already within the system, meet the conditions for receiving support. Emphasizing the importance of negative freedom and freedom of interference from others may help high-level budget decisions, such as limiting the amount of support a person receives. However, it does not aid in understanding the state's role regarding complex, individual needs. For example, a young mother trying to leave an abusive, financially-secure partner would not receive the support needed to leave and establish a different life. The challenge for Rawls was not to create a more complicated system but rather a justification of state welfare that did not depend on idealized utilitarianism.

Rawls agreed that for a society to be just, it must have an optimal distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunity within a community or society. Rawls argued that differences between people (such as morals, religious beliefs, social practices, etc.) must be held together by *procedural* principles (such as equal benefits for Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) recipients). The individual's fundamental freedoms were protected by theorizing a distinctly procedural distribution account (Besthorn, Koenig, Spano, & Warren, 2016: 148-9). It concentrated on establishing the minimal conditions by which an individual's rights could be maintained. Consider a program designed to provide a community center in a diverse city. The practical (utilitarian) approach would be to host programs that benefit the most people while avoiding impinging on the freedoms of minorities. But Rawls questions what "good" utilization is for every person and finds it risky and open for disagreement. In Rawls' words, "the concept of right [is] before that of the good" (1971, 31). His argument, then, like Plant et al., 1980, begins by

affirming that any bonds of community, and the governing of social relationships, must be procedural rather than standardizing. In such a context, the question is not what is good but what is right. What conditions can be agreed on which are both minimal enough to allow for individuals to go about their business but not so insignificant that they lack usefulness for the distribution of welfare – as one could argue by Plant et al., 1980 arrives at in his thinking.

So how is this done? Rawls proceeds via a thought experiment, "original position." He asks us to imagine how to decide wealth and power distribution in a community. The caveat is that this must be behind a "veil of ignorance" – a hypothetical position whereby nobody knows what role they will have in the society they are planning. Similarly, they do not know what physical and mental abilities they will have. This veil of ignorance simulates real life – nobody knows what circumstances they will be born into or what qualities or capacities they may have. Under such conditions, Rawls argues, participants should choose to divide wealth and power so that opportunity is distributed equally. It is like baking a cake between five people and deciding the best way to cut it without knowing who will get what slice. The rational position would be to divide the cake equally so that you were ensured getting the best possible slice, rather than cutting one big slice and several small ones, hoping that you end up with the bigger slice.

Rawls suggests that we would agree on particular outcomes rationally, amounting to two specific principles. First, a principle of equality should be equality in distributing fundamental rights and duties. Everyone should have "an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls 1971, 60-1). Second, the principle of difference, inequality, whether social, economic, or moral, is only considered "just" if they result in compensating benefits for everyone (1971, 302). The first principle effectively limits the reach of the second. Once everyone acquires equal rights, the second principle must be that inequality must be justified regarding those rights. Thus, Rawls argues that the purpose of society is to value liberal freedom while maintaining a duty to well-being. Rather than pursue the negative liberty of utilitarianism, where society fits around the maximum amount of individual flourishing, for Rawls, society is "a cooperative venture for mutual advantage." (Rawls 1971, 4) On this foundation, Rawls suggests we follow a "reflective equilibrium" whereby we bring a theoretical sense of justice into balance with our day-to-day practices.

The move from frontline decision-making to policy construction is relatively straightforward. Rawls argues it makes no sense to allow inequality to fester uncontrollably until the massive wealth of a few forces the many into scarcity. Thus, in more practical terms, his philosophy provides an enhanced liberal justification for the welfare "safety net" that exists beneath a free-market capitalist society. On the street-level of welfare delivery, Rawls offers a method for understanding how distribution takes place based on rights rather than norms: so, going back to our community space from earlier, simply choosing what works for the majority will risk encouraging inequalities to grow. For example, installing a basketball court may satisfy some people but exclude others who lack places for exercise and socializing.

Such an approach is justified in Rawls' view because almost all inequality is fundamentally unjust. Someone may have more money than another, but this could be due to inheritance. Somebody may work harder than another, but this could be due to their upbringing. A person does not choose

not to have learning disabilities. In all cases, an individual's success is ultimately down to chance. Given that our resources and opportunities in life are often due to accidents of birth (wealthy parents, a natural aptitude for high-quality work, physical ability, and so on) which we do not ourselves choose, this cannot and should not figure in the discussion of distributive justice.

Rawls thus provides us with a clear philosophy of welfare that justifies the procedural aspects of the welfare state's existence without becoming involved in the localized practices of the delivery of welfare itself. This is not to say he wrote nothing on this or had no interest in it. Still, the role of his philosophy – his use of the "philosophy of" – was to ground welfare as universally agreeable principles that maintained the pluralism of modern democracies.

Questions to consider:

1. How would you imagine our society if you were planning welfare behind the "veil of ignorance"?
2. Do you see any flaws in Rawls' thinking and ways to improve it?
3. How does understanding the history of welfare delivery help us imagine better systems?

### **Welfare for whom?**

Rawls' approach demonstrates how thought-based experiments can identify justifications for particular social security systems. By removing the assumptions of Hobbes' state of nature and justifying general distributive equality for all, Rawls' individual behind the veil becomes an abstract entity, divorced from its embodiment, social ties, family relations, and non-possessive desires. This thought experiment is beneficial because it allows us to consider welfare distribution not according to problematic quasi-historical accounts of states of nature but based on rational decision-making made by any potential member of society. Thus, Rawls' welfare model is not based on "needs" but "primary goods." In North American social work, Rawls' theory has traditionally been a touchpoint for concepts and definitions of social justice (Banerjee 2005, 36). Similarly, it has been used to justify antipoverty transfer programs (or "social assistance") in middle-income countries (Barrientos 2016).

The benefits of Rawls' approach allow imaging welfare policy from a perspective that circumnavigates the unequal starting places of its recipients. In this case, contextual factors outside individuals' control are deliberately removed from the consideration, for example, the effects of the 2008 financial crash on lower-income families. Institutions caused the crash, obscured in layers of complexity and bureaucracy, far removed from an ordinary individual's actions and intentions. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities argued that without government assistance, the number of US citizens in poverty would have doubled in 2010. It is



illogical to hold individuals responsible for their descent into poverty. This becomes particularly relevant when faced with philosophical arguments against social welfare, such as Robert Nozick's, which bases its argument on the importance of property as a fundamental aspect of human selfhood. Thus, for Nozick, one's personal history is as important as one's membership in a community for deciding on fair welfare distribution, primarily because the interests of individual freedom should always outweigh those of the state or community. Nozick argues that the aim of society should be to guarantee a minimum amount of safety and minimal interference in the activities of individuals. For Nozick, engagement with others is a sacrifice of our freedom, and "there is no justified sacrifice of some of us for others" (Nozick 1974, 33).

Nozick understands that people have a right to private property they own and inherit that cannot be taken away, even by Rawlsian thought experiments. Rawls argues that such property rights support inequalities and that working from an "original position" regarding property distribution would remove any (apparent) political agendas at work, except for promoting the freedom Nozick defends.

Rawls offers a procedural account for the most logical way of designing policy decisions. However, the danger here is that this procedural welfare account slips into morality. While Rawls' approach is focused on the institutions of welfare as agents of change rather than individuals *per se*, his philosophy does not provide any in-depth account of institutions themselves. His work tends to waver between institutional concerns – i.e., "just distribution" – and moral concerns – the "primary goods" of welfare. Because the two are not separated, this moral justification for welfare, building on the image of a contractarian society based on making and keeping agreements which Hobbes lays the groundwork for (I partake in society to reap some benefits; otherwise, I would go it alone), remains enthralled in an economy of exchange: liberal freedom exchanged for pay, food, shelter, and so on.

This leads to potential problems for Rawls and any "philosophy of" approach to welfare (including Nozick's). It risks framing welfare as an economy or a function of the broader economy. (An argument utilitarianism might make.) As did President Bush in 2002 when he declared the success of welfare reform was fundamental to reducing the budget (Banerjee 2005, 42). Also, the "philosophy of" does not account for what Boltanski and Chiapello term the "spirit" of society, the engagement required for both the accumulation of resources for welfare distribution (e.g., income and corporation tax, insurance, and, more recently the growing reliance on a "third sector," and so on) and its receipt. In other words, it misses out on the physical and emotional relationships around the idea of welfare and how these relationships are recognized and maintained.

As Banerjee argues, Rawls' traditional theory does not provide a critical platform against welfare reforms that may be considered ill-sighted or short-term. For example, while Rawls insists that distributive justice requires all to contribute to society, it justifies harsher measures involving removing welfare payments to the long-term unemployed or those who could not actively demonstrate they were looking for work (Banerjee 2005). Policies do not always look at the reasons for long-term unemployment or upstream actions to prevent it. We would need to consider the person-in-situation and the role of life history in policies. The US government intervention addressed the onset of poverty following the financial crash of 2008. Yet, the austerity

measures introduced in the US following this crash led to the swell of those needing welfare due to unexpected job losses. This introduced myriad complexities into welfare distribution, including addressing the perceptions of who receives welfare. Again, the successful delivery of social welfare – beyond the financial transaction – involved those on the ground understanding the contexts and narratives of those in need to promote the best course of action.

Questions to consider:

1. How do current morality trends impact welfare delivery today?
2. How has the perception of welfare recipients changed in the last 100 years?
3. What is the current perception of the welfare recipient?
4. What kind of challenges arise in your work based on the current perceptions of the welfare recipient?

### **Faring well and imagining better**

Rawls is far from the final word on social welfare. Efforts to articulate the philosophical distinction between the institutional functionality of welfare and the moral justification for welfare have been made, most notably by the "capabilities approach." The capabilities approach looks at rights and freedoms while weighing one's needs. Like Rawls and Nozick, the capabilities approach values freedom. It distinguishes between welfare provided for "functioning" and welfare required for developing "capability." Individual freedom is defined as the freedom to achieve; functioning is defined as capabilities realized. Removing barriers and blockers enables more people to reach their potential. Using the capabilities approach, the role of welfare provision allows people to realize their potential while being aware of each case's personal, socio-cultural, or broader contextual conditions at work. Amartya Sen's (1979) famous example compares two people, one non-disabled and the other disabled. While both may receive identical resources, the former is more likely to realize their capabilities. First, the disabled person is likely limited by the environment (a wheelchair user would only access wheelchair-accessible places). Second, quantitatively suppose they are provided with the same resources as the non-disabled person. In that case, they are left with qualitatively less, as their disability may require more resources than the non-disabled person (the installation of wheelchair ramps, and so on). In this way, the moral character of welfare is clearly defined by Sen as attending to individual capability over and above the exchange of resources, as a resource can and will be used differently according to the individual. See figure 4-1 for a visual representation of this idea.

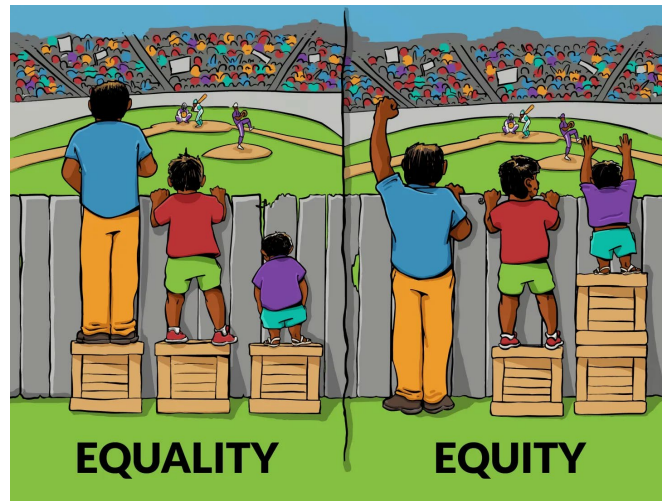


Fig. 4-1 Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire [interactioninstitute.org](http://interactioninstitute.org) and [madewithangus.com](http://madewithangus.com)

While the capabilities approach offers an alternative to the Rawlsian policy design and welfare distribution, it also points to the importance of the lived experience at the frontline of delivery. This approach would form a crucial part of implementing welfare and realizing potential. It also suggests a different role for philosophical considerations in social welfare, one which moves us away from the traditional "philosophy of" and more towards a "philosophy with."

So far, we have discussed assumptions of arguments for and building philosophies "of" welfare. Likewise, these assumptions inform policy and delivery itself. Using philosophy as a form of critical thinking or moral discourse at the root of welfare principles or design can perpetuate certain habits of thought. However thick the veil of ignorance may be, there is still the risk that those partaking in Rawls' thought experiment and imagining what just distribution looks like still do so with an implicit bias towards existing structures, aims, and ambitions. Social work scholar Brij Mohan suggests that in most cases, the "basic premise of state welfare is to maintain [the] status quo without unbearable pain and stress." (2018, 35). Likewise, Sumner suggests that a theory of welfare is best-suited if it is "faithful to our ordinary concepts and our experience" (1996, 10) and should be nothing other than an "interpretation of our preanalytic convictions, [...] the best interpretation is the one which makes the best sense of those convictions." (Sumner 1996, 11) This understanding seems to contradict another aspect of social welfare. That welfare is not to supplement the status quo but rather to enact change in people's lives. As the capabilities approach points toward assisting people in "faring well."

These broader moral obligations can be pre-figured by specific cultural and methodological assumptions that do not manifest themselves until they are embroiled in the complexities of welfare delivery. This suggests the focus needs to shift from providing an abstract, high-level contribution to the discussion and an interpretative approach rooted in what Aristotle termed *phronesis*, or "practical wisdom."

Phronesis involves both *epistemē* and *technē*. Aristotle defines *epistemē* as proven knowledge in its universal form and *technē* as the technical knowledge of how things work. For example, consider a social worker working with a group of young people to raise their employability. In such a situation, the social worker will know their desired outcome and the available resources and materials. In this situation, the *epistemē* is the knowledge of what makes someone more employable, the enhancement of prospects, etc. The *technē* is the software and the capacity to use a PowerPoint presentation. This knowledge alone will not make the activities the social worker does successfully. Social workers must know how to act in concrete situations and utilize their resources to achieve their aims. This "knowhow" is phronesis. "Knowhow" is a negotiation of technique and knowledge in an applied context. This "knowhow" is often missing from the traditional "philosophy of" accounts.

Those on the frontline of welfare delivery, such as health care and social workers, "have a unique, up-close and personal perspective on social problems, their causes, their effects, and the role of policy in ameliorating or exacerbating them" (Hrostowski 2013, 50). However, this does not necessarily constitute wisdom in and of itself. For example, the embittered cynic who has "seen it all" has the experience, but they are the worst person to mentor a new employee. The phronesis Aristotle refers to is a "reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" (1140b 20-21). This knowledge cannot just be a case of following an abstract principle like some traditional philosophies "of" welfare suggest because of the messiness of welfare history, its representation in social-cultural discourse, and delivery complexities. In this sense, phronesis is not simply "frontline knowledge" but a form of applied *interpretation*.

Questions to consider:

1. What blocks or barriers to realizing capabilities exist in your work?
2. How is your ideal world skewed by what currently exists when going behind the veil of ignorance?
3. What "knowhow" do you have about the systems you work in? How can you use your "knowhow" to inform and progress welfare practices and policies?

## **Interpretation as the core of welfare provision**

We have already seen that the history of making sense of welfare is a long process of layering different images and practices. At the same time, trends and patterns develop over time regarding the needs of society and the responses to those needs in the policy. These occur across a mixture of past understanding and future aspirations regarding what welfare "is." What Aristotle suggests must be a "reasoned and true" capacity. Therefore, it cannot refer to reasoning in a vacuum and truth in abstraction. Instead, it must be mindful of how these *images* of welfare – both in policy and in philosophy – contribute to their *justification*. In other words, if the "philosophy of" welfare involves positing the "big" questions – the greatest good, the fundamental principles of distribution, and so on – the "philosophy with" welfare would involve examining and offering a critical appraisal of, the nature of practical wisdom as a form of interpretation.

While interpretation is often used flippantly – usually to suggest something is a subjective point of view – the modern philosophical tradition builds on Aristotle, arguing that interpretation is the fundamental process in our human endeavors. Such traditions resonate with those who view welfare provision not as the economic weighing up of resources but rather as a process of interpreting circumstances, considering different, often-competing contexts, and deciding the best resource to utilize. Thinking back to our multicultural community center, we see how Rawls' account avoids the blunt utilitarian method. Still, the veil of ignorance works better for larger-scale justifications of welfare provisions instead of decision-making in the field. For example, understanding how best to utilize a community space requires focusing on the decision and our "understanding" of the different community voices throughout the process.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer notes that all our understanding is formed through interpretation. Gadamer developed the theory of "effective-historical consciousness," which illustrates that we are bound to our traditions of understanding, our interpretations, and our "truth" of a situation. Gadamer terms this situated-ness a "horizon" for understanding: our "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer 2004: 301). Our horizons are not simply operational knowledge of the world but also our expectations, projections, and hopes of the world, including the images of welfare and society which frame our approach to practice. In this way, our situated-ness is not an obstacle to understanding; it is, instead, a condition of understanding itself. While this enables our understanding, it also limits it to the history or traditions we carry with us. As such, this frame of reference is shaped and changed by the limits of our historical situation and knowledge and how such knowledge is significant to us

For Gadamer, to "understand" is to understand oneself in the subject matter of what is being interpreted (Gadamer 2004, 294). We are always within the act of interpreting the world; we can never step outside to a point where no interpretation occurs. Our understanding is always incomplete: as before, this is perhaps why the "philosophy of" theories are helpful for large-scale frameworks of justifying certain welfare practices but often come unstuck when looking at individual cases. In such cases, the limitations of a particular horizon of knowledge are revealed. Installing a basketball court in the community may well reveal as much about the welfare providers' assumptions and the limitations in understanding the community's needs. The provider's perception may relate to history, community engagement, and cultural relativity. Given the complexities of a world in which welfare is needed and the history of previous welfare efforts, it makes sense that, for Gadamer, our entire thinking is always a process of interconnected interpretation explanation or objective "truth." Precisely *because* of this, we widen our horizon of understanding. In this way, the frontline worker can address the intersubjectiveness seen in welfare issues rather than a rigid policy approach.

Gadamer's philosophical account of interpretation has been used to inform frontline delivery of services and face-to-face work with clients (see Grimwood 2016). It also speaks to policymaking by explicitly rejecting the idea of a perfect formula or abstract rule for determining policy. Instead, policymakers must first acknowledge the preceding tradition and history to understand a situation and design policy to address it. Secondly, policymakers must acknowledge their lived perspective and work to encounter people with different viewpoints or horizons. Understanding is a dialogue,

or, in Gadamer's famous phrase, a "fusion of horizons": a joining of the interpreter's different horizons and interpretation. Meaningful responses emerge by opening our horizon to the possibility of a different perspective, which implies that our horizon is always incomplete. Aristotle's interpretation is not the recovery of something lost or a return to the original position or state of nature. It does not require a singular "answer" to the question. But neither is it a form of relativism, whereby any policy will do. Instead, a proper understanding of welfare policy would fuse the horizons of the relevant stakeholders, where each horizon is widened from its encounter with the others.

Policymakers frequently attempt to consult targeted populations or field experts when drawing up welfare plans. Often, this falls into the traps that Gadamer notes in his discussion of understanding. The first trap, sacralizing the "service user voice" and simply seeing their "horizon" without allowing it to affect one's own understanding, conveys token public talks that policymakers ignore because of broader political pressures. The second trap imposes our horizons so that everything we hear from service users confirms our current view, which might not be the case. This also reflects some of the problems with the "philosophy of" social welfare, mainly when it avoids addressing the practical delivery of welfare and vice versa in dialogue, but from a separate room. Interpretation and understanding are central to philosophy and social welfare. In this way, an in-depth account of how such terms are interrelated seems pivotal to having a "philosophy with" social welfare rooted in philosophical foundations.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does changing to a "philosophy with" change your views on your work and actions in the welfare system?
2. What do you need to keep in mind when looking at your horizon? What biases do you have?
3. How do we listen to the service user's (client's) voice without tokenizing them? What does welfare look like from the client's point of view? How do we use that viewpoint to change our system?

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the philosophy "of" and "with" welfare. First, this chapter provides a brief history of welfare and the philosophies behind different policies and actions that create our current welfare system. Then, it examines what welfare means from a societal and individual perspective. Using Rawls, it explores "the veil of ignorance," imagining what a just society would resemble if we did not know our life situation. It notes that Rawls' ideas may be short-sighted and only address ideal outcomes for today, disengaging with current problems in the welfare system. "Philosophy of" theories are helpful for large-scale frameworks but often come unstuck when looking at individual cases. Finally, it examines the "philosophy with" welfare approach. Gadamer discusses how to look at welfare with our own biases and use "philosophy with" to build our welfare system.

Questions to Consider:

1. Which of the different philosophies on welfare help you in your work?
2. How do other philosophies help broaden what needs to be done to create a more just society?

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