

## Contrasting Models to Community Welfare: Plato and Maimonides\*

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APPROACHES to the solution of social problems may in most cases be categorized according to,

a) the political model which is dominated by the concept of community planning, or

b) the humanitarian model which is concerned with providing basic privileges to the individual.

In the humanitarian model the basic privileges of the individual are not subject to any conditions but are given to him simply by virtue of the fact that he is a human being. In the political model these privileges are secured by man through his faithful discharge of duties to the community.

Underlying the political model is the recognition that there exist interdependent and interrelated meanings between men, and between man and society's institutions, as well as between one institution and another. These reciprocal relations do not allow for good and efficient work except through a given concept of a "perfect state" embodying clearly defined tasks for each individual within it. Only a full realization of the planning approach to society ensures the peace of the community and the happiness of the individual within it. By contrast, the humanitarian model is without such unyielding perfectibility as perceived through planning. The primary concern within the humanitarian approach is the protection of the individual's basic privileges which it will not exchange in favour of any other social goals.

\*Translated by the author from the Hebrew: Chap. 3, Jacob Kellner, *Social Problems and Social Welfare*, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1969, pp. 11-18.

The act of opting between these two contrasting approaches is a value choice which is not subject to scientific proof or disproof. However, it is possible and indeed desirable to examine what the social consequence is of each option, that is, what are the rewards and prices of each, whom and what do they serve, or conversely whom and what do they hurt?

Now let us look at examples of these two approaches in their classical formulations as contained in the political solution of the "Platonic State" and in the humanitarian solution as developed in Maimonides' principle of "Good Works" and "Gifts for the Poor", based on Jewish tradition. In the following, particulars are given, setting forth the main characteristics by which each model may be discerned.

### The Political Model of a Planned Society

Underlying the political model are the following implicit assumptions which give it its uniqueness;

1) The selfish and often irrational demands of the individual require a rational plan for the good of all. Indulgence of the individual's wants interfere with the well-being of society.

2) It is not within the individual's inherent capability to plan and to organize the efficient functioning of a society nor even his own role within it.

3) Society grants the individual rights in exchange for the fulfillment of his duties within it. The non-fulfillment of his social task brings with it the annulment of these rights and the privileges that flow from them.

4) The annulment of the individual's rights is expressed in the rejection of those who deviate from this mutual understanding between individual and society even unto renouncing those individuals who have become unwilling or unable to carry out their prescribed tasks.

5) In order to ensure its stability the social structure must forbid all criticism of the plan or of the executives carrying it out (political censorship) and must enforce as well, clear limitations on irrational expression (art censorship).

6) The family constitutes a distinct unit with irrational goals which may be in conflict with those of the society's values.

7) The existence and continuity of the society are the concern of the general public, and hence, the qualitative planning of birth (the improvement of the human race), and quantitative planning (the maintenance of the required number of people and the restraint on capricious multiplication) are political decisions made by the state and not by the private individual.

8) The separation of the generations and the equality between the sexes are characteristics of the planned society. The separation of the generations is indicative of the absolute preference for the general good as against the individual's rights. The non-differentiation between the sexes (or the emotional states in the bio-physiological realm) lays stress on the rational above the irrational.

9) The authorities in the realm of education planned society function in accordance with its requirements, independent of the family's wishes. The authorities are in a position to select the new-born child on the basis of his individual virtues and deploy him in accordance with the needs of society, to raise him in an environment which calls for training in his specific social task, and to

condition his emotions so that feelings will not dominate clear and purposeful thinking as needed for his role in the society.

10) Only through specialization are functional skill and optional development of personal abilities assured. Hence the individual must be limited in his interests only to his functional purpose. His free activity, his studies, his contacts with people from other callings and his social mobility must be circumscribed as well.

These principles and features of a comprehensive political system as embodied in the Platonic model bespeak its virtues and guarantee its efficient functioning. Underlying this system are Plato's three assumptions for what he considered to be the society planned to perfection.

1) It is in the power of society (through its philosophers) to analyze and uncover latent threats to the system and predict coming political change. Society's possession of these resources for analyzing its problems gives it the means to prevent breakdowns and to create and maintain the perfect society.

2) The advance plan must be all embracing; any partial or gradual reforms are intrusions which run counter to the purpose of the plan. Because of the interdependence of the institutions and their interrelated functions there is the need for a comprehensive blue print.

3) Because the social scientists possess the requisite capacities it is their social obligation to put these talents at the disposal of society in the matter of formulating the laws and of working for their enforcement.

Although the virtues and efficiency of the planned society are self-evident, there is nevertheless the obligation to identify the people, the situations, and functions that are harmed by the societal decision which is decreed as ethical from

the standpoint of the collectivity. Some of these problems are examined below.

a) The highly preplanned society based on specialization is calculated to take into account every conceivable exigency. However the virtually inexhaustible number of variations and their attendant nuances presented by the individual are beyond external control. Hence the effect of the totally planned society is to impinge on freedom of the individual and restrict his autonomy in order to ensure such control. Furthermore, since such a society is in the hands of a clique of experts with the authority to decide and articulate upon the nature of the all-pervasive plan, the individual subjected to it is in effect freed of voluntary accountability incumbent upon the thinking member of his society.

b) The Platonic scheme couples privileges provided to the individual member with his ability to discharge tasks expected of him by the state. There are, furthermore, certain conditions by which the individual must live in accordance with an established code of regulations. For example, in the case of a child born without regard to the specified time for mating (which is related to the individual's age), "one must leave this newborn as if no food was created for it." Or in the case of those born poorly endowed to fulfill their planned tasks, "one must hide them in a distant and secret place - that is the proper way to treat them."<sup>1</sup> Or else in relation to the sick and the aged, "one must allow them to die, to be free of all the troubles of their bodies." And finally, "those corrupted in their souls" are to be killed.<sup>2</sup>

c) Efficiency within the planned society rests on stringent censorship within which it is forbidden to the individual to react critically to developments unforeseen by the authorities. This posits the

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book V, p. 460-61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409-10.

false notion that the plan as conceived by the experts is in a state of perfection and that criticism of it is in effect wrong and therefore not to be tolerated.

The Platonic view is realistic in that it perceives society as fully rational in all of its aspects. Plato's denial of the irrational and the emotional as realities of human existence courts the danger of forcing these phenomena underground. This leads to dangers unanticipated by Plato in which the state is subjected to unexpected mass outbursts the origin and the causes of which are denied in Plato's vision of a planned society.

#### The Humanitarian Model and the Community's Commitment to the Individual in Need

Underlying the humanitarian model are the following assumptions:

1) Man's very existence constitutes his right to live and it is society's first obligation to uphold this right.

2) The right to life is not dependent on any prior conditions fixed by society. Indeed this right calls, in situations where the individual cannot on his own fulfill requirements basic to his existence, for society to provide food, clothing, shelter and other essentials necessary for establishing and maintaining one's family.

3) The individual's rights (e.g. to live and to reproduce) may not be interfered with in the ordinary course of events even though such incursions might be deemed in the interests of the larger society.

4) Society's active concern for the human being extends throughout the individual's life; whether the changing fortunes are within the individual's life cycle or due to economic modifications within the larger society, support to the individual in need continues without differentiation as to cause.

5) Man's universal need for his fellow man is a basic characteristic of society as in the case of children's need for the protection of grown-ups or the dependence of the sick upon the healthy. (In the Rambam's words, "It is part of the worship of God that man remember also his times of trouble when God blesses him with plenty.")<sup>3</sup> From those principles two central commandments are derived.

a) *G'milut Hassadim* (Good Works) - pertain to those deeds which span the life cycle from birth to death and include: visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, burial arrangements, following the casket, wedding and dowry arrangements for the poor bride, the aim of such nuptial aid being that the poor are not deprived the joys of marriage.

b) *Matnat Anym* (Charity or Donations for the Poor) - include giving food, shelter and means for maintaining the poor family.

6) The closer the poor the more direct the responsibility becomes. In other words, one is obliged to help one's needy kinfolk before one proffers help to the stranger, and to the poor of one's own locality before giving aid to the out-of-towner, and to the visible poor before the anonymously indigent.

7) Poverty is seen not only as physical deprivation (in the form of undernourishment, poor housing, etc.) but as a state of mind as well, resulting in apathy and hopelessness. Hence the aim of charity is spiritual no less than material restoration.

8) Within this perception of charity someone even well-to-do, who may by the force of circumstances, be subjected to misfortune of a short term duration is eligible for help no less than the person in state of permanent want. In this connection the following constitutes a vivid example of charity within the Jewish tradition. "An affluent man who is on his

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, *Marc Nebuhim*, Part 3, Chap. 39.

way to a certain city exhausts his funds and is left with no money to buy food. Such a person should be permitted to receive the charity of the community. Furthermore when he arrives home he is not obligated to repay the money advanced to him during his temporary loss because he was in his hour of need deemed to be a poor man."<sup>4</sup>

Another example of this approach to social welfare which deals with the evaluation of people's need, is the following; if a man who had been accustomed "to ride a horse, with a servant who ran before him," should become impoverished, we are commanded to help this man in accordance with the customary wants he is lacking,<sup>5</sup> which means restoring the animal to his possession. In other words assistance within these terms is not given in accordance with minimal standards but on the basis of a man's needs and the desire he was accustomed to gratify in the past.

9) Hence the goal of charity is to help the needy retain their independence and sense of status and dignity. Furthermore society must have faith in the needy man's capacity to function as an independent individual and we are commanded to extend loans rather than proffer charity, or to make a partner out of the needy man in one's business enterprise rather than make him a recipient of one's largesse.<sup>6</sup>

10) Charity may be given on an individual person-to-person basis or through a community institution but in either case consideration of and sensitivity to the plight of the needy must at all times be the prime concern. This precept is exemplified in the "Commandment of *Peya*." Three times during the day *peya* is divided among the poor in the field (i.e. the crop left in a corner of the field to be

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Hilhot Matnat Anym*, Chap. 9, p.15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 7, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 10, p. 7.

gathered by the poor) ... and why was it not decreed that *peya* should be extended only once during the day? Because the nursing mother is hungry and should be permitted to come in the early morning, because there are poor small children that do not rise in the morning and therefore do not get to the fields until mid-day, and furthermore there are the aged who do not arrive till the afternoon."<sup>7</sup>

11) The concern for the individual's right takes precedence at all times not even excluding such dire occasions as when the society is defending itself in a war from an external enemy. For example, "one never makes war on a man until one has first asked for his surrender," or "he who wants to flee - let him flee; he who wants to surrender - let him surrender; he who wants to fight a war - let him". "When one besieges a city in order to capture it, a place must be left for those who wish to flee to escape with their lives."<sup>8</sup>

As the proclamation for peace precedes the declaration of war, so the admonition precedes the punishment. "He who saw his friend sin or take the wrong path, is commanded to bring him back to better ways and to help him realize that his misdeeds lead to self-impairment. He who reproves his friend...must do so in privacy of the two of them. His reproof must be pleasant and softspoken and he must declare that he does this in the good interests of this friend."<sup>9</sup>

12) Situations presenting special types of want not provided for in the ordinary course of events constitute a charge upon the community which is obligated to care for individuals finding themselves in these unusual circumstances. This would include any special privileges which may be entailed in dealing with the

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 2, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, *Hilhot Melahim*, Chap. 6, pp. 1-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, *Hilhot Deoth*, Chap. 6, p. 7.

needs of such individuals. For example, "One is obliged to be considerate to orphans and widows since their souls are humble and their spirits are low even though they are rich...And how is one commanded to behave toward them? One may not speak except softly to them, and one must not behave toward them except with dignity that becomes them. Furthermore one must not give them hard labor nor hurt their feelings with harsh words ... You shall not treat them as you treat the others but deal with them differently, that is with kindness, mercy and honor."<sup>10</sup>

There is an assumption behind this humanitarian approach. It is basically one of optimism in a meaningful world order and an unbounded trust in Man. This combination of optimism and trust serves to ensure that attention to those in situations of want will be rendered in keeping with their unique needs. Such optimism built on mutuality characteristic of a small traditional community in which the emphasis is on face-to-face experience in all spheres of its existence cannot be maintained in a modern, complex society wherein relationships are essentially formal and task-oriented. Hence the welfare safeguards which gird the individual in the folk society virtually disappear under conditions of anonymity within the industrialized secular state. Anonymity within the complex industrial society coupled with a rapid pace of change constitutes both an opportunity and a danger to its members. Differing rates of change may be an advantage within one sector of the society and a problem within another; take for example, recent developments in the fields of medicine and technology. While new remarkable possibilities have been opened to humanity in the struggle against epidemics and infant mortality, the increased populations benefitting

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

from these advances put new heavy strains on lagging educational systems or food-growing possibilities. Similarly, technological advances with their multiplicity of professions, specialization and automated processes create problems of unemployment and of retraining individuals whose skills have been developed for jobs which have become obsolete due to technological progress. The problem is complicated further by people being thrown out of work who must learn to cope with involuntary leisure.

Within such conditions of complexity, quick tempo of change and the numerous social problems which come in their wake, trust in mutual aid based on the spontaneous interplay of relationships becomes unrealistic. Inevitably the modern society is driven toward organized and methodological efforts for ensuring human life and optimal development of Man and his culture.

### **Professional Goals of Social Workers**

We have examined two contradictory approaches, namely, Plato's planned society and the Maimonidian concept of a community founded on inter-personal relationships wherein help is a spontaneous response of man to man-in-need rather than a formalized act derived from an adopted policy. Significantly, social work as a profession has sought to develop a synthesis of values characterized by these conflicting systems.

Thus the ethical code of the social work profession includes such basic values as the personalized concern for Man, the non-judgmental acceptance of the individual and his inalienable right to help. Within the terms of Maimonides' humanitarianism, Man is exhorted to fulfill his responsibilities to his fellow man as acts of charity and compassion. However in the framework of the social work profession these are held to be rational principles which illuminate the

practitioner's skill and knowledge. The assumptions which underpin the humanitarian approach take much for granted. For example one can by no means be certain that the act of spontaneous rendering of help will necessarily find a corresponding readiness to receive such aid or that the helper's notion of help is in effect appropriate to the need he has encountered. Furthermore, at times questionable motives of which the helper may be unaware may run counter to the sound interests of the individual in need of assistance. Finally there are types of need induced by the larger environment which go beyond the good-will and the ameliorative capacities of the would-be helper.

It is to overcome such limitations of spontaneous humanitarianism that the values of the social work profession derived from these same humanitarian motives are applied in the context of a rationally ordered system of knowledge, of practice skills, self-awareness and of controlled behavior. What is paradoxical about this development is that out of such ordered and systematic knowledge arises the power to produce the cure before the illness takes effect. The dependence upon and interrelationships of varied functions in the existence of Man and community and the all-embracing view of society which this entails simultaneously tend to move the social work profession in the direction of the planned society advanced by Plato.

The sustained effort within social work to create a blend of values from two approaches which are basically in conflict, as exemplified by Plato's planned society and the humanitarian community of Maimonides, represents a struggle on the part of the social worker which has important implications. Obviously the development of the social work profession lies not only in the refinement of its technology but also in the clarification of pertinent philosophical questions.