

Chapter 5

Agencies

Introduction

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Questions

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- (1) How can not-for-profit human service agencies profit from adopting features of corporations like General Motors?
- (2) Expand on the following statement: 'What's good for social welfare agencies is good for the country.'
- (3) How do social welfare agencies differ from such groups as the Red Cross? What would it help or hurt for social welfare agencies to be more like the Red Cross? Remember that we are examining the 'corporate' structure, as it were, of social welfare agencies and such groups as the Red Cross. Even GM employs social workers, but it does not make it like a social welfare agency.
- (4) In an age of increasing privatization, ought governmental social welfare agencies be privatized? What would be the gains? What would be the losses?
- (5) Law firms and accounting firms are like human service agencies in that their members are professionals. What similarities and differences are there between human service agencies and other such groups of professionals? It will help in pursuing this

question to ask what changes would need to be made in law firms and in lawyers' conceptions of their role in society for them to operate like not-for-profit human service agencies.

- (6) Would social work be better or worse off moving towards a model of organization more like that of law firms? In responding to this question, discuss the goals of social work practice as they differ from those of legal practice.
- (7) Define autonomy. What makes autonomy professional? What is the difference, if any, that is, between the autonomy of clients and the autonomy of social workers?
- (8) Assess the truth of the claim that a social work practitioner has autonomy about everything except what makes a difference to his or her supervisor.
- (9) A social work practitioner working in an agency is an employee, and the goals of an agency may differ from those of a social work professional. We saw that difference in *1.2 Dancing the legal dance* where the agency suggested that Mary was putting too much effort into the case while she thought she needed to spend more time on the case. Is there some procedure agencies could introduce, besides appealing to a supervisor, to handle these sorts of problems where one thing should happen in the professional judgment of the caseworker while the agency's decision is that something else could happen? Explore the advantages and disadvantages of alternative ways of handling such conflicts.
- (10) The problems that can arise from wearing different hats can happen to any of us in almost any situation. A vote on school taxes requires that we consider ourselves both as parents and as citizens concerned about the educational well-being of children. There need be no incompatibility between what we do under one hat and what we do under another, but when there is, we have ethical problems. Give three examples from your experience or from the cases of ethical problems that arise from wearing two hats.
- (11) One analysis of what went wrong during the discussion about the launch of the Challenger space shuttle is that the chief engineer at Morton Thiokol was asked at a crucial junction to wear his 'management hat.' As an engineer, he was risk averse, arguing that it was too risky to launch the Challenger when the temperature was to be so low at launch. But as a manager, he was to do a risk/benefit analysis in which the chance of a disaster was a risk, but one that had to be balanced against the risks to the shuttle program of another delay and other such matters. That is, wearing two hats sometimes means that we change the very way in which we make decisions. In managed-care, one complaint of professionals is that decisions are being determined by economic factors that ought not to make a difference in assessing what, professionally, ought to be done. Discuss how we as a society ought to resolve such problems as the conflicts that occur when professional judgments are beholden to other considerations such as cost.
- (12) What is an internal ethical problem? What makes such a problem internal?
- (13) Different professions can be distinguished from one another by examining the differing

internal ethical problems that mark out their boundaries. For instance, we expect a nurse, as a nurse, to care for the well-being of his or her patients. A sales clerk who cared for his customers' well-being rather than, say, the profits to the store would not last long. Distinguish the internal ethical problems of social work practitioners from those of sales clerks. From lawyers. From physicians.

- (14) What is an external ethical problem? What makes such a problem external?
- (15) The Catholic Council of Bishops has voted that those in political office are to support life in all ways. That means, they say, that a politician cannot be a good Catholic and support abortion rights. So a Catholic politician who supports abortion rights -- Senator Kennedy, for instance -- has an external ethical problem. What is that problem? Find a similar sort of problem for social work practitioners.
- (16) An employer cannot easily let employees pick and choose what they want to do and not do. But it seems wrong to require employees to do something they think ethically wrong. Suppose yourself the head of a human service agency faced with the kind of problem examined in 5.3 A pacifist. What principles should the agency adopt to handle such problems -- given that the agency cannot always let its employees decide for themselves what to do and not to do?
- (17) Deontological theory seems to require that each time we are faced with a decision about what we ought to do, we are to consider the maxim of our action and determine whether it is ethical. But if we have an ethical character -- are honest, for instance -- we do not take time to decide to answer honestly. Being honest is just part of who we are, and we just do it. Indeed, mulling the matter over seems itself unethical: if being honest is the right thing to do, why would you need to think about it for any period of time? So if we ought to develop an ethical character, then, it seems, deontological theory is a mistake. Discuss.
- (18) Aristotle has said that there is only one way to do what is right, but many ways to do what is wrong. We can say we are sorry in the wrong way, at the wrong time, for too long a time (saying it over and over, in many different ways), for too short a time ('Sorry. '), and so on. We display a character trait in a variety of different ways, that is, by the tilt of our head, by our concerned expression, by whether we lean forward or back when expressing sympathy, and so on. Lay out in detail the various ways in which we can express our character when, for instance, we want to express sympathy. How can an expression of sympathy go wrong? Consider how it can go wrong regarding each way in which we are to express sympathy.
- (19) Some of us have irritating little habits that indicate a lack of character in certain ways -- looking off in the distance while talking to people so that we are not looking at them and it looks as though we are not concerned about talking to them, looking at our watch constantly while talking with someone, and so on. List a set of five 'little habits' some professionals you know have and explain why they are character defects. What harms do they cause?
- (20) What is a professional character trait?

- (21) What are several of the character traits that social workers need if they are to be successful?
- (22) What are several of the character traits that social work students are trained into during their social work education?
- (23) In your lists in the previous two questions, which characteristics are good for social workers to have and which are not? Explain for each.
- (24) What are the goals of the agency for which you work or the kind of agency you would like to work for? Are they consistent with one another? Would achieving them produce a good agency? Are they consistent with the self-determination of its employees? Are they in any way harmful to clients? The public good? Be specific.
- (25) We often talk of 'gray areas.' What does that phrase mean? Give an example from among the cases we have had and explain why it is an example. How ought we to decide what to do in a gray area?
- (26) We will sometimes have ethical dilemmas in which the reasons for doing any of a number of things are equally weighty so that it is difficult to know how to determine what to do. How is that kind of situation different from our being in a gray area?
- (27) What is discretion? Do police have discretion about whether to issue tickets? What does that mean? Do medical practitioners have discretion about whether to report someone with an infectious disease to the authorities? Do social work practitioners ever have discretion? When? What are the pros and cons of a social work practitioner's having discretion? Should Mary have had discretion in *1.2 Dancing the legal dance* about whether to report that Martha's father had sexually abused Martha?
- (28) With the increasing privatization of various social and medical services, it has been claimed, the discretion of professionals is being eroded. A physician no longer has discretion to require certain medical procedures, for instance, but must obtain permission first. How would or could the privatization of social services affect the discretion of social work practitioners?
- (29) Assess the advantages and disadvantages of privatizing social work services in regard to professionalism.
- (30) When the court system took on the burden of regulating desegregation, and some courts ended up running the school systems, as in Boston, one objection was that the courts are institutionally ill-designed for such a task. They lack the administrative oversight necessary for running a large bureaucracy, for instance. Similarly, some may argue that human service agencies are well-designed for some tasks and ill-designed for others. Examine the general form of human service agencies and lay out, in regard to two or three activities, what they are well-designed and ill-designed to do. Show in regard to at least one of those activities how the design of the agency can have ethical implications because of its ability to perform one sort of task well and badly.

- (31) One way to resolve the problems introduced when agencies compete would be to have an overarching centralized agency of agencies, as it were, to ensure that agencies help rather than harm each other. Another solution would be to allow competition full rein so that those agencies that are inefficient do not survive. Discuss the merits and demerits of both proposals. Determine which is the best solution, if either is, and justify on ethical grounds the determination you make.