Towards a hermeneutics of life practice for welfare professionals in the age of the ecological imperative

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Volz argues that the task of ethics can no longer be limited to the familiar questions of moral theory in the age of modernity: the questions of *morality* or right conduct for the autonomous individual (Volz, 1993; Kiesel and Volz, 2004). This is the framework that has formed the conventional ethics of social work as an individual therapy. Social work, Volz proposes, should now address itself to the task of enabling the individual to choose and live a life as a member of a specific cultural community, who at least potentially possesses a full and specific conception of the good life particular to his biography and socio-cultural circumstances (Volz, 2003). Such a move would recover the classical quest of philosophical *ethics*: for the good life and human flourishing. Volz proposes that the 'heart of social work' should be a 'Lebensführungshermeneutik' or 'hermeneutics of life practice' in which the professional aims above all to help the client discover the meaning of the life he wishes to lead.

In this paper I will consider the role not only of social work but of welfare policy and practice more generally in promoting the realisation of the good life. The traditional discourse of professional ethics in the social professions has turned on respect and human rights. More recently it has begun to address itself more explicitly to wider questions of the good life and human flourishing, not merely in the abstract, but in particular real communities and cultural circumstances. The endeavours of professional ethics in the welfare professions lie within mainstream western political theory, social policy and state sponsored welfare practice. As such they are primarily oriented towards *human* flourishing; they are informed by what analysts of environmental thought often refer to as an anthropocentric perspective.

Against this orientation of mainstream theory towards human flourishing can be counterposed the perspective of environmentalism, ecologism or green political thought. (I shall treat these contentious and inexact concepts as broadly cognate.) This conceives of human welfare as just one aspect of the wider good of the world. It presents a renewed critique of humankind's relation to nature. It rates some common human aspirations well below the preservation of the ecological integrity of the planet and its non-human constituents. As a consequence of these different perspectives and traditions, welfare practice and environmentalism have, so far, largely ignored one another. This paper contends that such indifference is incompatible with the internal logic of both traditions. Adopting the contemporary discourse of sustainable development, I argue that social policy and welfare practice should extend their vision so as to respond to the imperatives of environmentalism. Since what divides social welfare from environmentalism is, above all, a difference of perspectives and values, the appropriate response of social welfare must include practical interventions to promote value change.

In observing the shifting emphasis of the professional ethics of welfare from a discourse of rights and justice to a discourse of human flourishing, I argue therefore that a further move is needed to bring the professional ethics of the social professions face to face with the moral and political imperative that threatens to overtake all other concerns in the coming decades: the need to find a human and political response to the threat of global ecological catastrophe in any of the many forms that now threaten. In devising a new moral framework for the age of the ecological imperative, conceptions of rights and justice derived from liberal moral theory, and conceptions of human flourishing and the good life rooted in the classical tradition but finding new expression in the modern quest for sustainability, have essential elements to contribute. The challenge for the social professions in future will be to satisfy not only modern conceptions of rights and justice, and facilitate the creation and expression of ways of human flourishing in tune with contemporary knowledge and experience, but to find ways of doing so that will help avert rather than intensify the threat of global eco-disaster.

Social welfare and humanist values

In the twentieth century the idea that governments must promote social welfare became the norm throughout the developed world. This meant, for example, that as far as possible people should be freed from disease, provided with sufficient means of living and compulsorily educated at public expense. Welfare has become the policies and programmes, industries and professions that now consume very substantial portions of national income.

In the business of social welfare it is taken for granted that it is *human* welfare we are concerned with; its pursuit is deemed worth almost any price because, on this standard ideology, there can be no higher end (Barry, 1990). While in practice 'welfare' as a policy area has to compete with other pressing, and complementary, public concerns such as defence, public order and macroeconomic management, it is hardly questioned that, other things being equal, we should all welcome more and better health care, education and so forth.

Welfare policies embody the humanist values of the western religious and philosophical traditions. These are well known and need only brief recapitulation. Theory building for welfare proceeds by identifying the essential interests of people. Doyal and Gough (1991), for example, argue that basic human needs comprise physical health and autonomy. Health is a prerequisite for fully human functioning, while autonomy is essential to the realisation of ways of life that allow the full development of human potential and creativity. Within this tradition controversies turn on whether welfare is maximised by positing only a minimalist theory of human good - as with Rawls and other liberals - or whether a more prescriptive doctrine on human nature is needed in particular to allow the flourishing of characteristically disempowered groups - as with varieties of socialism and feminism. From these concepts flow competing projects on the role of the state, the market and voluntary associations in the promotion of welfare. This is the terrain of the dominant discourse on welfare and while many of its central concepts are contestable and its theories perennially controversial, there is agreement about one fundamental premise: the object of theory and the ultimate goal of intervention and practice is the

welfare of human persons. Issues such as poverty and justice acquire their significance within the discourse of *human* welfare.

The traditional theory of welfare is underpinned by a broadly Kantian ethic of right action towards human persons. Humans as moral agents have the capacity, and the obligation, to respect other bearers of the capacities and rights of autonomous personhood and responsible citizenship. In practice, welfare policies also frequently adopt a utilitarian attitude in which the (perceived) general good of society constitutes the principal frame of reference for decision making. The contrasting imperatives of these two approaches occupy much controversy in welfare policy. They all share, nonetheless, what political environmentalism terms the 'anthropocentric' perspective: they conceive of welfare exclusively as human welfare (Stenmark, 2002).

Contrast: the values of environmentalism

Environmentalism (in which I subsume 'greenism', 'ecologism', and so forth) represents a broad range of theoretical orientations and practical politics separated by sometimes deep scientific and philosophical divisions and having, perhaps, little in common apart from a shared apprehension about the immediate and eventual consequences of human impact on the natural world. These ideological divisions have been thoroughly taxonomised and criticised in many other places (see for example: Yearley, 1991; Goodin, 1992; Eckersley, 1992; Hayward, 1998; Baxter, 1999; Barry, 1999; Garner, 2000; Cahill and Fitzpatrick, 2002). Despite these differences, the general themes of environmentalism are well known: concern about environmental pollution and degradation; about the loss of biodiversity and the depletion of resources essential to decent conditions of life both now and in the future; dismay at the perceived fracturing of humankind's necessary relationship with itself and with nature. It is within what are frequently termed 'ecocentric' perspectives that a radical disjunction with traditional welfare thinking appears. Ecocentrism rebuts the assumption of welfare theory that it is exclusively human welfare we should be concerned about. For ecocentrism it is axiomatic that the welfare of other entities - such as animals, natural environments, species or ecosystems - is of equal or greater concern than human welfare as such.

Whatever the merits of the different positions, for the purpose of this paper I shall merely make the minimalist assumption that the case for a moderate environmentalism is beyond doubt. This is well enough expressed in the rationale for sustainable development: that civilised life for all of Earth's citizens, both present and future, will very soon become unsupportable unless drastic measures are taken to control pollution, conserve resources, slow down climate change, safeguard ecosystems and thus ensure the long term sustainability of the means of life (Brundtland, 1987; Dobson, 2000, Chapter 3). This moderate position neither precludes or entails the more radical claims of 'deep ecology' (Barry, 1999) and other theories that intend to reconceptualise the whole of humankind's relationship with the natural and social world; for my purposes such theories are optional to the argument here. I take it as self-evident that, unless the means of life are sufficiently safeguarded for present and future generations, the more specific values and aspirations typically associated with the promotion of social welfare – for example, rights to health, livelihood and social participation - will quite simply be

unattainable. There is no potential for advanced concepts of social welfare or social citizenship in a world that cannot first resolve the problem of mere survival.

Environmentalism is not, of course, without prescriptions and implications for social relations in general and social welfare in particular. On the contrary, almost all varieties of environmental philosophy and politics apart from the palest green consumerism entail visions of society in which human needs will not only allegedly be better met than is the case in modern industrial society, but in which the nature of those welfare needs is radically reconceptualised. However, the response of social welfare to the challenge of environmentalism has been limited, as we shall see next.

Sustainable development and social policy

In the British social policy literature there have been only limited attempts to address the theoretical, political and policy challenges posed by the green critique of the industrial ways of life in which subsists standard welfare theory. Meg Huby's text on *Social Policy and the Environment* (Huby, 1998) focuses on a number of need and policy areas having significant environmental implications: food, water, housing, domestic energy, travel and leisure. Huby shows that environmental considerations must impact on the achievement of typical social policy ends and remarks on inequality, sustainability and responsibility as common themes between social policy and studies of the environment. However, Huby does not further pursue the enquiry into how the assumptions and methods of social policy itself - as academic discipline and as political praxis - may need to be revised in the light of critiques emanating from environmentalism, especially the more radical sorts.

Fitzpatrick (Fitzpatrick, 1998) discusses the lack of impact of 'ecologism' on social policy. 'Ecologists' (a term Fitzpatrick uses to refer to adherents of a political ideology, not to life scientists of the mutual relationships between species and their environment) criticise conventional welfare provision as a system of social control. They argue that social cohesion and solidarity require social equality, and share with feminism a critique of the role of women in market societies. A more specific criticism from the green movement is that welfare has become dependent on unsustainable continual growth. Fitzpatrick proposes that welfare theory may belong to one of two approaches. The conventional, environmentally blind 'productivist' model favours indiscriminate growth and the ethic of the pre-eminence of paid employment over other activity. Alternatively an ecological model of welfare would comprise ecologically measured, sustainable growth. It would adopt welfare associationalism as proposed by Hirst (1998) in which the state and the market must be supplanted by non-market decentralisation and social participation. The employment ethic must give way to a work ethic which values non wage earning, informal activity and non-wage mechanisms for the transfer of resources and definition of social roles. Fitzpatrick cautions however that green advocacy of higher taxation on consumption may carry the risk of 'ecologists ... aligning themselves with the regressive policies of modern Conservatism' (*ibid.,* p.21).

The neglect of environmental concerns by social policy is indeed paralleled in social democracy as a political ideology. Callaghan (2000) remarks on traditional Labour attitudes that the environment was an irrelevance to the classic goals of improving living and working conditions for the working class. However, across northern

Europe new left, social-democratic movements and red-green alliances have challenged the traditional alignments of social democracy with the labour unions. This has opened the way for parties of the moderate left to adopt, at least notionally, light green political perspectives; and these are now typically expressed in the language of sustainable development.

George and Wilding apply this concept of sustainability, borrowed from the environmental debate, to explore trends and prospects in several areas of social policy. Their chapter on the environment ascribes problems to 'four core interacting social values' (George and Wilding, 1999 p.107): industrialism, consumerism, individualism and anthropocentrism. They note that the environment has never been a central issue in British politics. Policies for environmental improvement are seen as frequently ineffectual or incoherent, showing little if any progress in most areas albeit with some exceptions. They conclude that: 'The Brundtland view that it is possible to combine economic growth with the preservation of the environment is now generally accepted' (*ibid.,* p.125), but remark that 'The arrival of a green and sustainable society depends to a large extent on the public acceptance of a new set of values' (*ibid.,* p.127).

Shaw takes a similar line, suggesting that 'in the future, thinking about social policies may increasingly be informed by thinking upon sustainability' (Shaw, 1999, p.366). Shaw's analysis shares the insight of other authors that there is a fundamental conflict of perspective between traditional welfare theory and policy, and the central concerns of environmentalism:

> [T]he green welfare agenda separates the twin conventional priorities of full employment and rising living standards by redefining both the nature and value of work and by adopting wider quality of life measures (including quality of environment) in the place of economic living standards (*ibid.,* p.367).

In conclusion it can only be said that academic social policy has so far offered but a partial and tentative response to the arguments, insights and values of the broad environmental movement. Michael Cahill's comment perhaps sums up the attitude of welfare specialists towards the environmental critique: 'In most areas of social policy the green perspective offers nothing new in the sense of policy ideas. Any novelty comes from the priority which it accords to an environmental perspective' (Cahill, 1999, p.481). Nevertheless explorations continue to advance, specifically, *social welfare* policy and practice towards new models supportive of environmental sustainability (Cahill and Fitzpatrick, 2002; Fitzpatrick and Cahill, 2002).

Sustainable development and welfare practice: two examples

Social welfare theory has, then, produced only a modest response to the environmentalist critique of consumer society. Let us consider more specifically the response of the social professions in two fields of practice: personal social services and community development. Both examples are drawn from the British context.

Personal social services
Personal social services such as social work and social care are directed towards individuals whose needs for support in daily living, for care or control are relatively large in comparison with the community in general. These services directly engage a

large proportion of the population at some time or other during life; they comprise a significant sector of public expenditure; and they occupy a very substantial paid workforce. Given this centrality, it might seem surprising that ruling conceptions of social needs and care, as realised in the applicable legislation, in the agencies of service delivery and in the ideology and practice of welfare professionals, have hardly been affected by the environmentalist critique. As Hugman remarks, 'the ethics of ecology ... has not been widely attended to in the caring professions' (Hugman, 2005, p.103).

The aim of social work, I have argued elsewhere, is to promote the realisation of an ordinary life (Clark, 2000). The conception of an ordinary life played out in contemporary welfare practice reflects the familiar dominant values of industrialism and consumerism characteristic of the society in which it is embedded. Welfare professionals tend to – and arguably ought to – aspire for their clients the achievement of traditional goals as communicated and perpetually refabricated by popular culture. Much recent policy discourse has been focused on social inclusion, a concept that specifically promotes the participation of hitherto excluded minorities in the opportunities and responsibilities accepted as normative in contemporary society (Percy-Smith, 2000). Notwithstanding the growth of a thin veneer of light green consumerism, popular culture is generally unreceptive to the somewhat uncomfortable thesis of sustainable development.

Although what predominates in welfare is the aspiration to a conventional western lifestyle, there are some exceptions which demonstrate at least that the connection between conventional 'welfare' and consumerism is not an entirely necessary one. Various kinds of therapeutic and residential communities have been built upon ideologies that reject to some extent the conventional values of consumerism. Interestingly, many such communities have been devised in response to the needs of individuals with severe long term disabilities and have sought to replace what is held to be the false lifestyle of consumerism – never a realistic aspiration for individuals with severe disabilities - with a more holistic and encompassing philosophy. The Steiner communities for individuals with learning disabilities are a well known example. Indeed, it is in the utopian aspiration to develop new *communities* that welfare practice begins to leave behind consumerism and move towards sustainability, as will be discussed next.

Sustainable development and community involvement
Sustainable development famously requires local action alongside global consciousness. In Agenda 21 the UN enjoined that 'by 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on a "local agenda 21" for the community' (United Nations, 1999). That is a large ambition and so far only patchily achieved, at best (Cahill, 2001, Chapter 3). For example, a study by the Scottish Executive found relatively low levels of awareness of the LA21 process amongst LA21 officers in eight Scottish local authorities (Scottish Executive, 2002). If this is representative of specialist local government officers one would hardly expect to find a good understanding of LA21 amongst the general public. However, local consultation is perhaps further advanced on those policies likely to excite powerful opposition, such as traffic congestion charging schemes for city centres.

From the field of social welfare it is the theory and practice of community development that may have the most pertinent contribution to make towards sustainable developmemt. Community development focuses on building the involvement of local citizens in addressing issues of local concern. It prioritises the political and practical principle that improvements in local housing, transport, economic opportunity, education, leisure or amenity are always best constructed through participation and partnership with local citizens; it rejects the untrammelled authority of established status and political power over the aspirations of ordinary citizens.

The approach of community development has been adopted from time to time in several areas of British social policy, including colonial development, urban renewal, social work and adult or community education. It has remained, however, largely peripheral to all these fields. Nevertheless community development has always understood that lasting improvements in environmental practice at the local level can only be achieved with the active support and involvement of the local community. Without this, the best efforts of politicians or experts to improve resource use or amenity are likely to meet an unreceptive or hostile public, and fail. This applies as much to urban improvements in industrialised countries as it does to the conservation of threatened species and environments or improved land use in the tropics.

Given this perspective of community development on one side, and the ever-growing if not always well focused general public and political support for sustainable development on the other, one might have expected a notably vigorous coming together of their respective practices. Shaw has it that:

> '... the Green welfare agenda separates the twin conventional priorities of full employment and rising living standards by redefining both the nature and value of work and by adopting wider quality of life measures (including quality of environment) in the place of economic living standards' (Shaw, 1999, p.367)

and goes on to comment that:

> 'Little of this thinking is different from mainstream social policy ideas on community development and it has been argued that Green perspectives offer little new to many areas of social policy' (*ibid.,* p.368).

In fact, despite some interesting exceptions to be discussed shortly, there is little evidence of any widespread cross-fertilisation between the institutions and exponents of social welfare and those of sustainable development. This may well be partly attributable to the chronic institutional weakness of community development in British social welfare. Crescy Cannan however goes further by arguing that there is probably a gulf of culture and discourse between social welfare and environmentalism. She argues that greenism tends to prioritise saving places and species: 'until recently, the green movement in Britain has stressed the threat to the countryside and wild places rather than environmental issues in the urban context' (Cannan, 2000, p.367); whereas by contrast, 'community development has prioritized people over "nature" and, in general, the urban over the rural' (*ibid.,* p.369). Cannan criticises some greens' naive, or objectionably prescriptive, understanding of community, democracy and power, and proposes that the expertise

of community development in understanding democracy and supporting participation would equally be relevant to the green agenda.

Two recent research reports offer useful insights into how the worlds of welfare and environmentalism could better address each other's concerns. Burningham and Thrush (2001) investigated the environmental concerns of people living in disadvantaged urban areas. Noting that it is disadvantaged groups that often experience the worst environments, they found that local priorities were identified with local and sometimes small-scale issues such as dirt and litter rather than wider concerns such as pollution, resource depletion or energy use. Poverty frequently limited people's ability to act in environmentally more responsible ways, for example by investing in more energy efficient appliances. The authors point to the risk of alienation between the exponents of environmentalism and the concerns of ordinary people:

> There is a danger, however, that the language of environmental justice, which links "poor people" with "poor environments", might not only reinforce a negative image in some localities but may ignore the distinctive problems faced by poor people living in "good/desirable/beautiful" rural environments'.

Church and Elster (2002) surveyed a range of local action projects, choosing projects that combined environmental and social activity. They found that such projects could make a limited though still locally important environmental impact. The social impacts were more significant, including job creation, training, community development and capacity building. Projects helped to build awareness, understanding and engagement with environmental action. This finding echoes the classic doctrine of community development that it is the gains in understanding and skills, social solidarity and political effectiveness that are of greater long term significance than the purely practical improvements gained through local action. The authors note the limited funding and institutional support for such initiatives and argue for better integration of environmental and social agendas.

Reconstructing values as a target of welfare policy

The environmental crisis threatens and subverts the achievement of welfare. In the face of all-pervasive environmentally unsustainable practices, the goals of welfare will not be realised merely by pursuing conventional policies for it. Predominant attitudes towards the environment will progressively impede the advance of welfare, even on the narrow conception that regards the environment as purely instrumental to the satisfaction of human material needs. This impasse is caused by social attitudes of neglect for environmental values. I will argue that it is therefore necessary for social policy itself - and the practitioners who work in its systems - to address the consciously or unthinkingly anti-environmental values widely found in the general population, in social institutions and economic systems.

It might be objected at this point that it is not the proper function of social policy to change values, if by social policy is meant the activity of government and its agencies exerted directly and indirectly on acknowledged social problems. Social values, on this view, are for individual conscience, politics, religion and the institutions of civil society to debate, but not, in a liberal democracy, for government

agencies to prescribe or promote. The idea of governments promoting specific social values carries disturbing associations of state paternalism or worse, totalitarianism. In contemporary British politics it is easy to identify, for example, a bristling reaction to the more communitarian or, as some would say, sanctimonious aspects of Blairite social policy.

This objection is based on an overly narrow, or perhaps purist, view of the separation of powers in liberal democracy. Some examples will show that the changing of social values is in fact widely accepted as a legitimate goal of social policy. When measures to prevent drunk driving were given more stringent force by the introduction of a specific blood alcohol limit and subsequently, by the introduction of quasi-random breath testing, it was necessary for government agencies to challenge and reverse the widely prevalent attitude that the amount a person chose to drink was entirely his private business and not a proper area for state regulation or interference.

A second example comes from the arrival of AIDS. This showed that when faced with the uncontrolled spread of an incurable and seemingly deadly disease, government agencies could lead the way to a public frankness about sexual behaviour and disease prevention that had previously been unthinkable in the ordinary media. A side effect of the government AIDS awareness campaign has been to transform the public discourse on all aspects of sexuality.

A third example comes from social work. During the 1980s a government agency, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, determined that principles of anti-discriminatory practice should permeate all of social work education. Anti-discriminatory practice required social workers to challenge racism, and other forms of oppression, wherever they might be encountered. As state employed professionals, social workers were expected to lead the way in changing racist values not only in government and its agencies but also among the ordinary population including clients in particular.

What these examples, amongst many other that might be cited, show is that the role of social policy is, on occasion, to set out deliberately to change social values. The targets of such changes are not even necessarily restricted to supposedly benighted or reactionary minorities who are seen to need remedial attention to bring them into line with the decent values of the rest of society. It is majority attitudes that may just as well be challenged. Social policies designed to bring about changes of values in the general population are not responses to mass movements of opinion but the creations of opinion leaders and experts aided by agencies of government. Citizens come to accept the legitimacy of social interventions designed to change values provided that such interventions are accepted as instrumental to legitimate broader policies.

Changing environmental values

The political acceptability of sustainability policies would seem at the present time to be finely balanced. On one side, a light green consumerism is relatively uncontroversial. Many people are willing to sort and recycle their domestic rubbish if it is not too inconvenient or laborious, and they are not in principle hostile to

government exhortations on the subject. Observation suggests, however, that environmental sympathy is generally restricted to changes seen as having no more than marginal consequences for current lifestyles. Despite the overwhelming environmental case for reducing carbon emissions, in 2001 popular resistance easily stopped the rather modest British fuel tax escalator in its tracks. Road pricing and other intrusive controls on car use are so politically contentious that governments, both central and local, hesitate even to air the possibilities. Environmental policies that might have a serious impact on present ways of life, or consequences for industry, or costs in individual opportunity do not appear to have widespread political support.

For all its amibiguity, sustainable development is nevertheless applauded by virtually everybody. In these circumstances, where policy ends that are widely seen as essential are frustrated by reactionary social attitudes and values, it is arguably legitimate and necessary for social policy to address the changing of values. The wide consensus on the aims of welfare will be increasingly frustrated by political reluctance to contemplate the environmental cost. This reluctance is attributable to the continuation of what are fundamentally, if perhaps unconsciously, anti-environmentalist values. If government is to promote welfare from the longer term perspective of sustainability it must work to change the social values that impede pro-environmental laws and policies.

How is this to be done? Although detailed programmes will have to be pursued in other places, some broad principles can be suggested. The first could be thought of as a plea for political honesty. There is, for example, no long term benefit in pretending that we can enjoy ever increasing opportunities for cheap air travel on tax-free fuel without counting the effect on global warming and the ruin of countryside by runway building and use. And if a plea for honest politicians seems a little naive, the examples given above do illustrate that governments can, and must, stop avoiding the politically unpalatable when the situation gets serious enough. Perhaps we are almost ready to accept a political climate based on strong principles of environmental sustainablility, as we have become used to the idea of a new climate of restraints on sexual behaviour in order to avoid the uncontrollable spread of AIDS already seen in some countries.

At the macro level of policy, governments plainly must attempt to pursue policies for long-term sustainability. To do so means tackling not only the scientific, technological and economic issues, but also specifically addressing the changes in social attitudes and values necessary to legitimate moves towards sustainability. The street between improved technology and socially supported cultural change must run both ways, since the innovations of technical experts will fail unless they have social and political support. An example comes from changing thinking about the conservation of especially valuable natural environments in national parks and nature reserves. These used to be thought of as pristine islands in an otherwise over-exploited and degraded natural world, to be isolated as far as possible from human interference. Indeed in some places an idea of conservation was pursued at the cost of displacing the human residents. Now it is widely recognised that conservation policies will fail unless they have the enthusiasm of local people, who may well have a tradition of sustainable exploitation of the resources without bringing about their long term destruction (see O'Riordan and Stoll-Kleeman, 2002).

The route from macro level policies to their acceptance in the wider society and their realisation at community level is very often baffling for government, leading to unexpected and frustrating results. While we need top-down policies for sustainability, we also need bottom-up methods to ensure they will be accepted. Welfare practice, which has always been played out at the local level of the family and community, can contribute its own tradition of community development to the pursuit of sustainability. The examples given above suggest approaches that could usefully be adopted more widely – with government support through funding, programme development and training.

Moves towards sustainability by changing values could also be strengthened by government investment in voluntary action. We may be grateful that it is beyond the capacity of governments to find the answers to all social problems. It is the capacities and institutions of wider civil society that will produce the experiment and innovation needed for changing values towards sustainability. Government, by taking risks of some politically unwelcome or practically ineffective outcomes, can support the processes indirectly by means of benign policies for voluntarism.

Conclusion

For Volz, the heart of social work is assisting the client to discover, or perhaps we can say invent, the character and meaning of the life he wishes to lead. This hermeneutic perspective requires a considerably enlargement of the scope of welfare and professional ethics beyond the 'social problems' conventionally recognised within liberal social policy. It moves from the mere negative avoidance of the familiar catalogue of social ills towards the active promotion of a positive vision of human flourishing. However, in a world where the very survival of civilised life is deeply threatened by multiple forms of ecological disaster, it is impossible to imagine continued human flourishing without taking account of the challenges posed by environmentalism. Social policy and welfare practice have, so far, barely begun to engage with the challenge of sustainable development. Although social work, for the most part, has equally has failed this engagement, within the theory and practice of community development there are seeds of a hermeneutic approach to promoting human flourishing relevant to welfare professionals. Such a practice would equally be about changing values, which I have suggested needs to be better grasped as a goal of social policy. For welfare practice, reconsidering the end of what might be termed the self-discovery of human flourishing within the frame of the ecological imperative raises larger questions than can possibly be answered in a brief review. We can, at the very least, begin to discern the enormity of the challenge.

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