

Ethical Foundations of Social Work Practice



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FHSU Social Work Fall Symposium
September 27, 2024

Announcements



- Welcome everyone!
 - In-person, online, and asynchronous
- Save the date for the Spring Field Day
 - March 28, 2025
- Face-to-face attendees:
 - Please pick up an evaluation to fill out
 - Your CEUs will be available immediately following the presentation
- Zoom participants:
 - You should have received a Google Forms link for the evaluation following the presentation
 - Your CEU will be emailed to you once we receive confirmation that you completed the evaluation
- Other announcements?

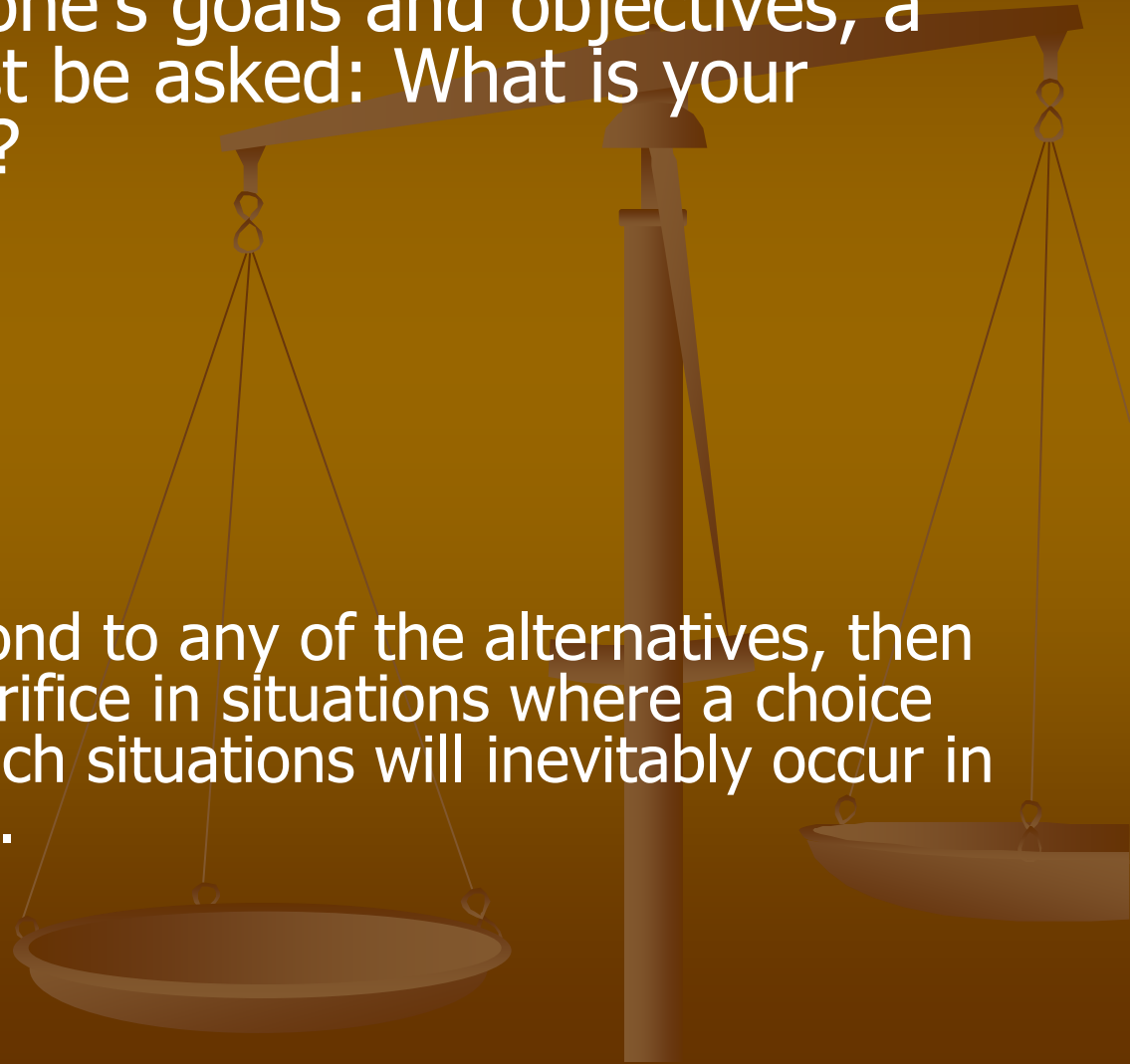
Introducing the context



- **“One of the paradoxes of modern times is the fact that the interest in professional ethics is high, even though the level of morality is rather low.”**
 - (Lowenberg, Dolgoff & Harrington, 2000)
- **In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Psychology professor Steven Davis says that cheating by high school students has increased from about 20 percent in the 1940’s to 75 percent today.**
- **“Students say cheating in high school is for grades, cheating in college is for a career.”**

You must choose

- When evaluating one's goals and objectives, a vital question must be asked: What is your highest aspiration?
 - A. Wealth
 - B. Fame
 - C. Knowledge
 - D. Popularity
 - E. Integrity
- If integrity is second to any of the alternatives, then it is subject to sacrifice in situations where a choice must be made. Such situations will inevitably occur in every person's life.

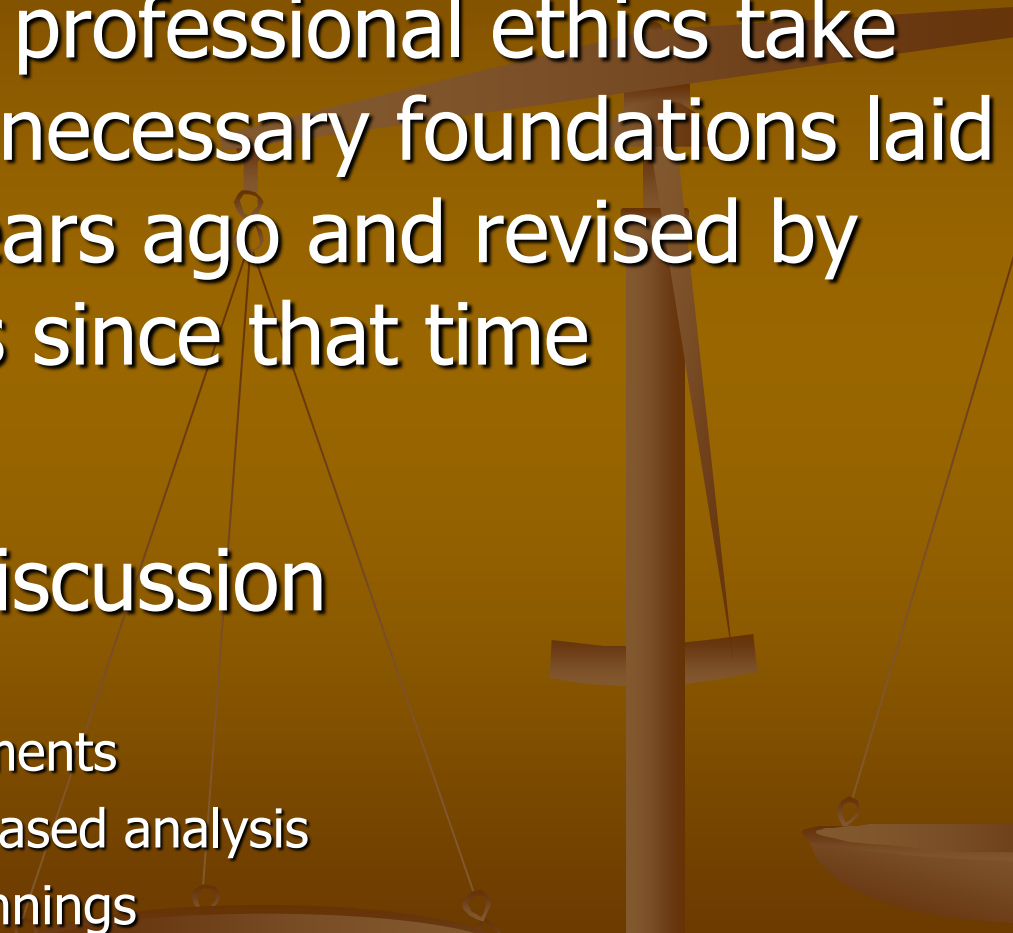


A few pertinent thoughts

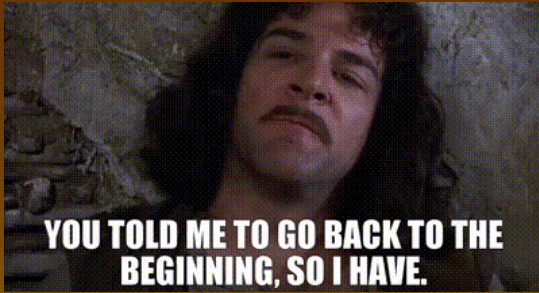


- To educate a person in mind but not in morals is to educate a menace to society
 - Theodore Roosevelt
- Try not to become a man of success, rather a man of value.
 - Albert Einstein
- Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself
 - Leo Tolstoy

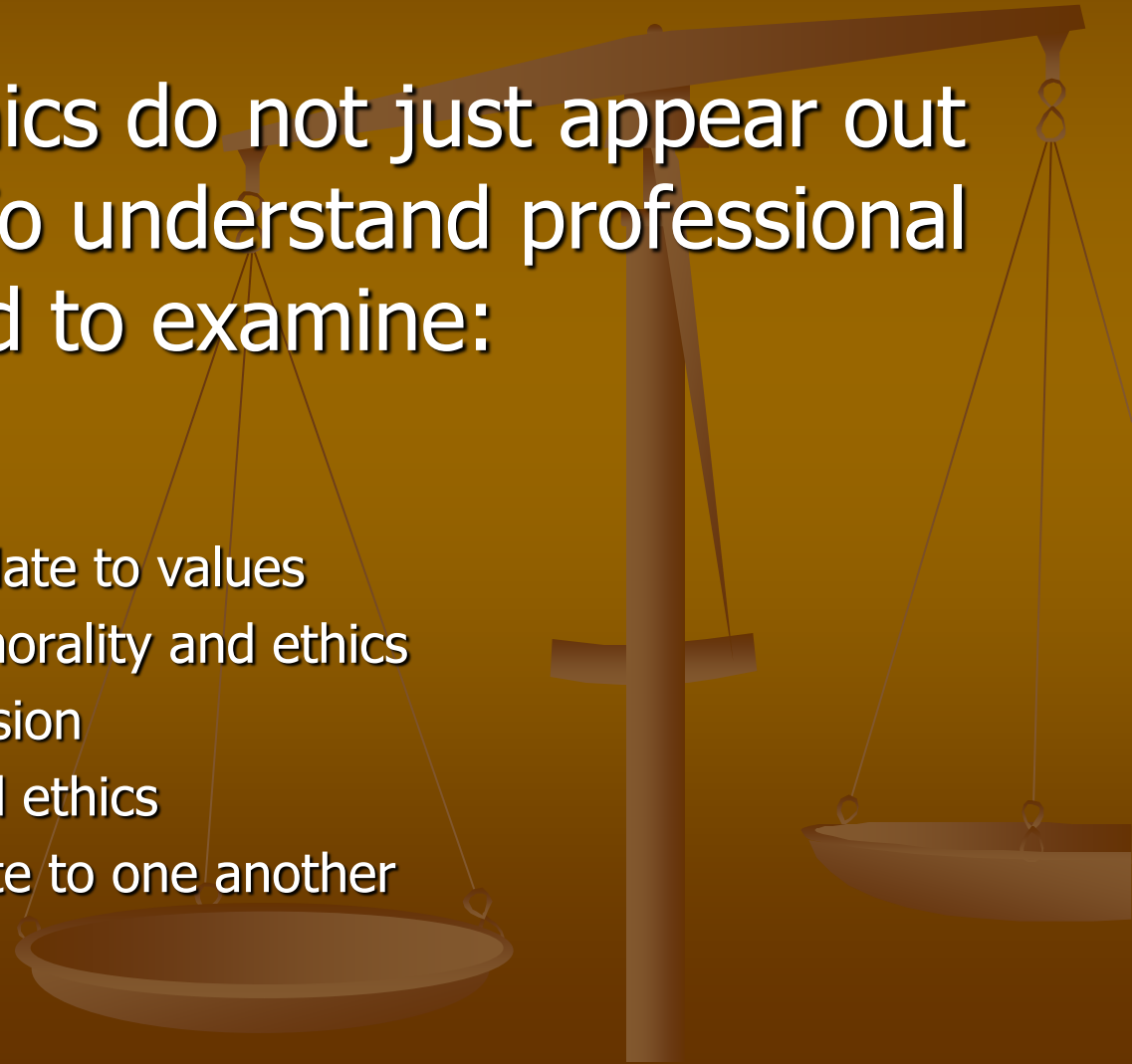
Where to begin...

- Most training in professional ethics take for granted the necessary foundations laid thousands of years ago and revised by brilliant thinkers since that time
 - Four layers of discussion
 - Surface arguments
 - Evidence based arguments
 - Value and Principle-based analysis
 - Metaphysical underpinnings
- 

Foundations of Ethics



- Professional ethics do not just appear out of the aether. To understand professional ethics, you need to examine:
 - What is morality
 - How does morality relate to values
 - Difference between morality and ethics
 - What makes a profession
 - Why professions need ethics
 - How do all these relate to one another



Morality and ethics

- **Common morality**
- **Personal morality**
- **Professional ethics**



Common morality

- The dominant set of moral ideas in our culture
 - Based historically on Judeo-Christian morality, but influenced strongly since the nineteenth century by utilitarianism
 - Philosophical theories Kantianism and Utilitarianism
 - Roman Catholic moral theology
 - The law



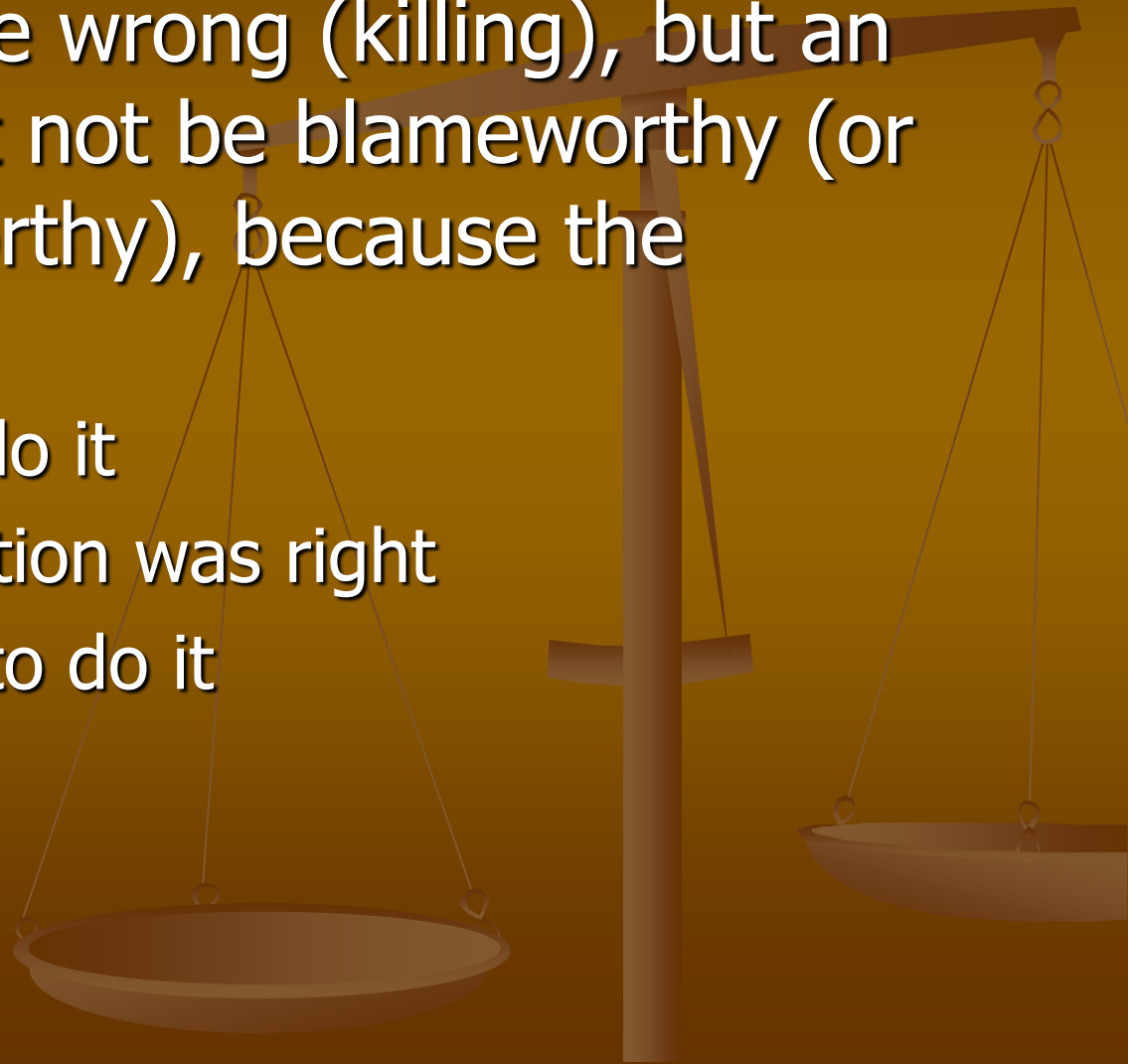
Levels of morality



- First-order precepts – principles and judgments about what is right and wrong. (Acts themselves)
- Second-order precepts – principles about how we judge individuals. (People who perform the actions)
 - Voluntariness/ involuntariness
 - Intention
 - Culpable/ inculpable ignorance

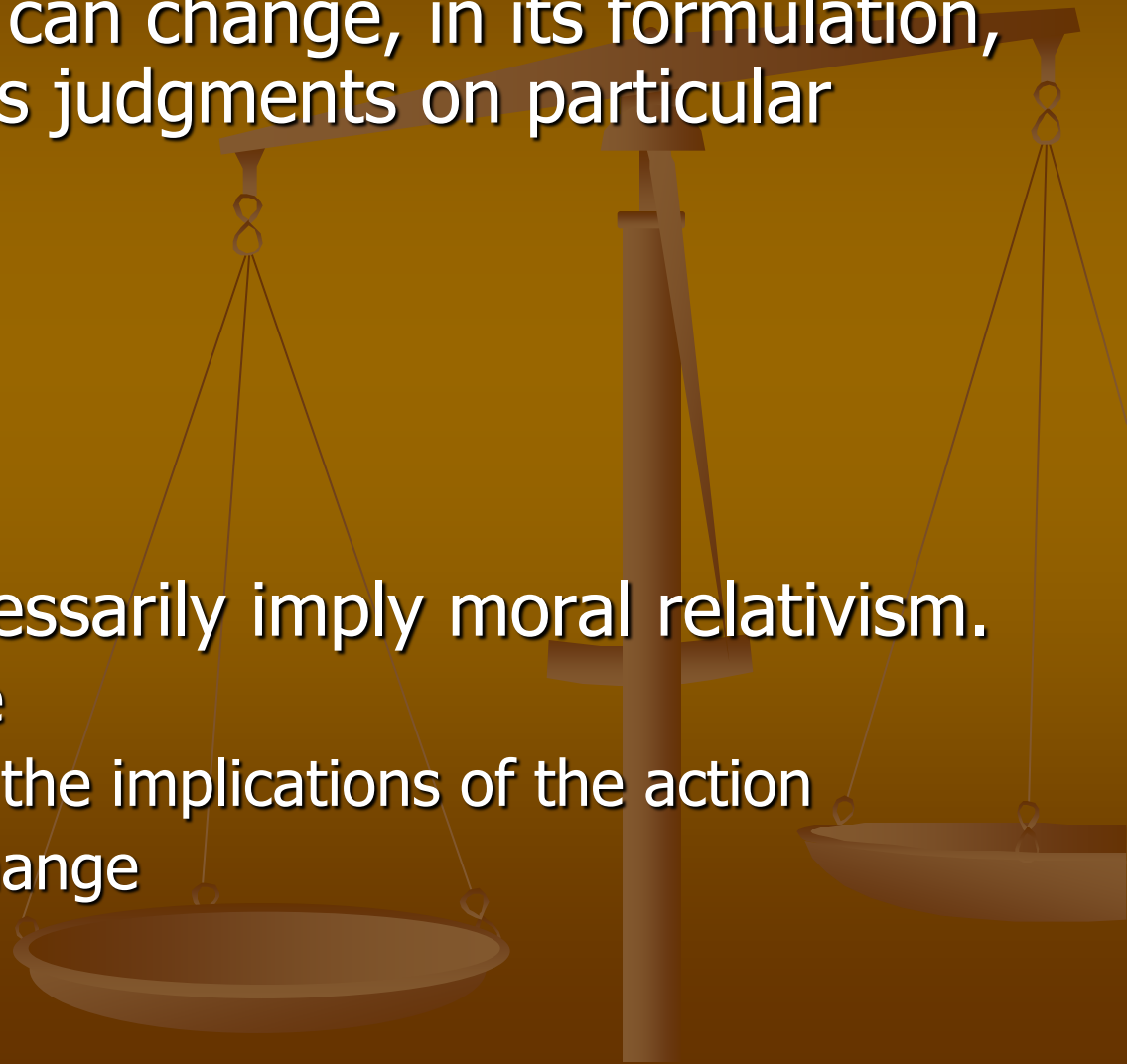
Examples

- An action can be wrong (killing), but an individual might not be blameworthy (or not as blameworthy), because the individual ...
 - Was forced to do it
 - Believed the action was right
 - Did not intend to do it



Variability in morality

- Common morality can change, in its formulation, but especially in its judgments on particular issues
 - Slavery
 - Divorce
 - status of women
 - contraception
- This does not necessarily imply moral relativism.
 - Conditions change
 - Interpretations of the implications of the action
 - Basic principles change

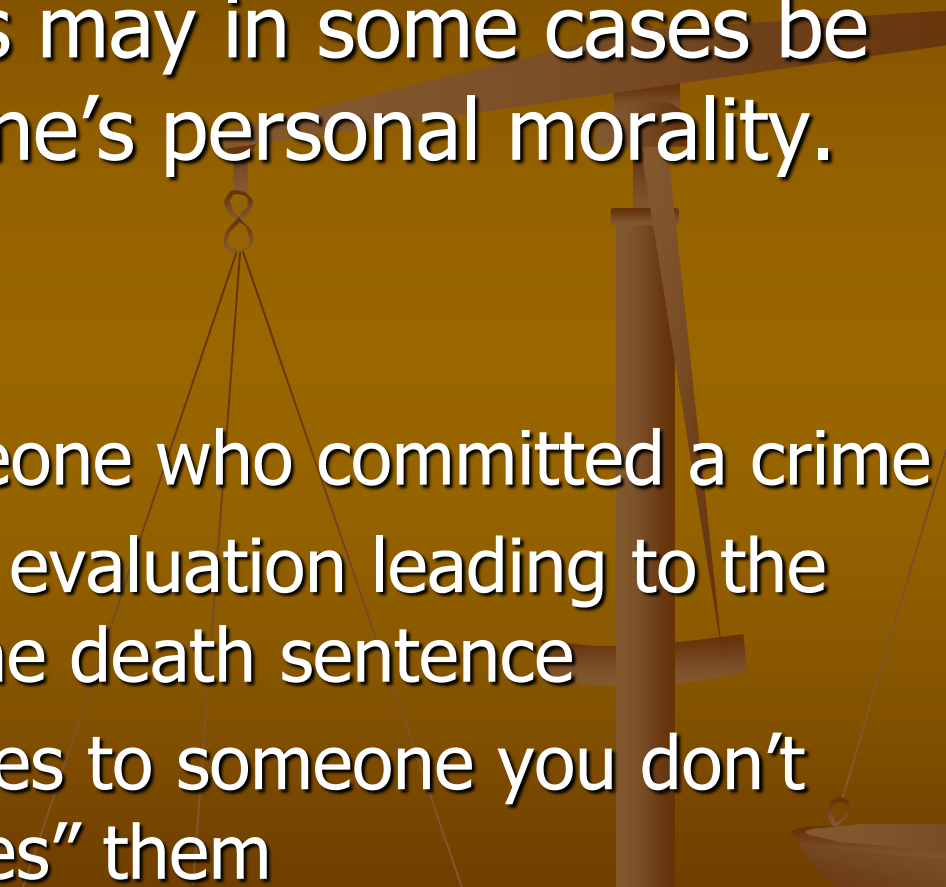


Personal Morality



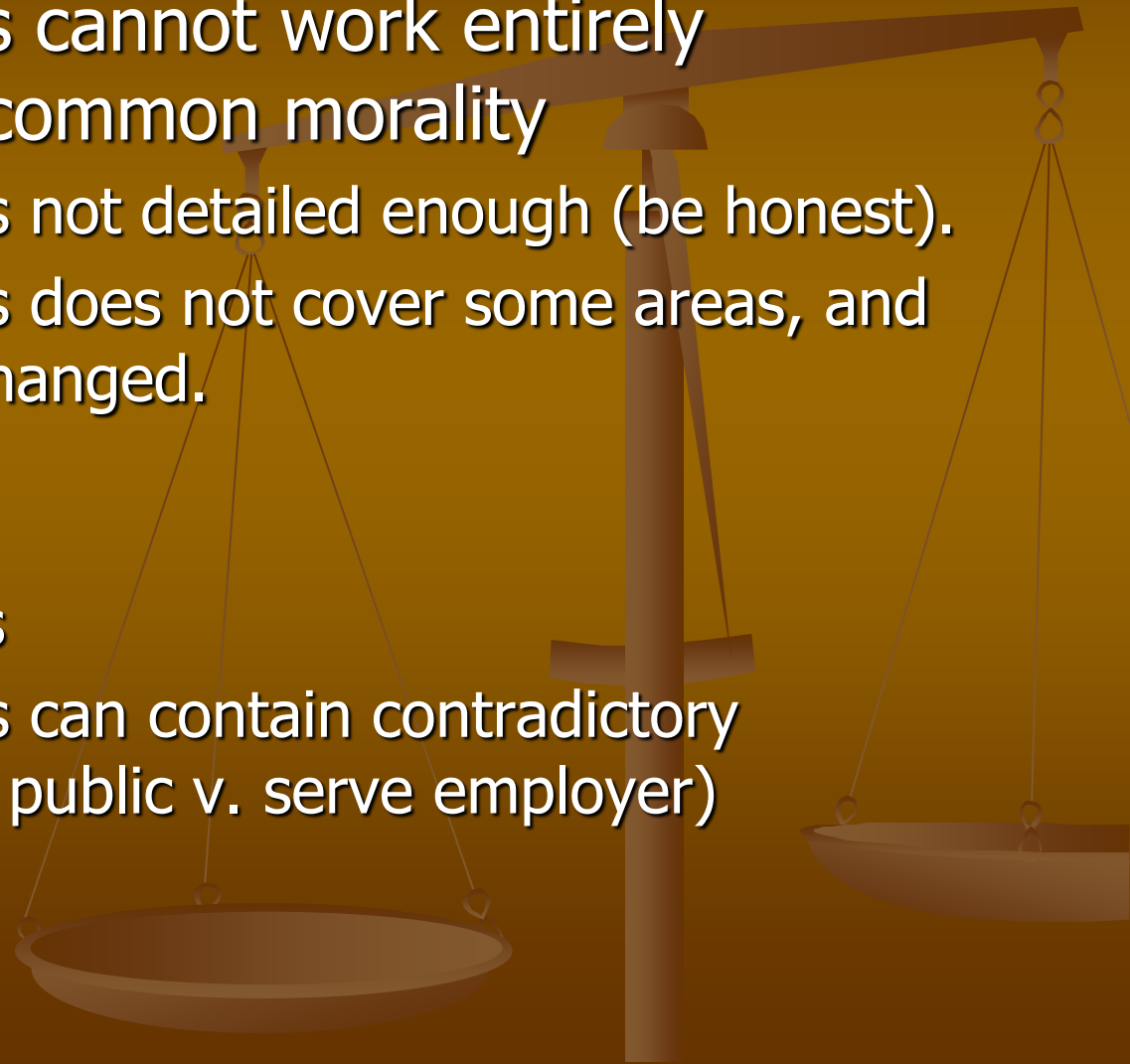
- Usually closely related to common morality, but may differ, especially in controversial areas.
 - You might think euthanasia is ok, even though common morality says (or has said) it is wrong.
- Personal morality also includes personal ideals.
 - One may have an ideal of service or improving the human condition (good works).

Conflict of values and ethics

- These standards may in some cases be different from one's personal morality.
 - Abortion
 - Euthanasia
 - Defending someone who committed a crime
 - Carrying out an evaluation leading to the application of the death sentence
 - Providing services to someone you don't believe "deserves" them
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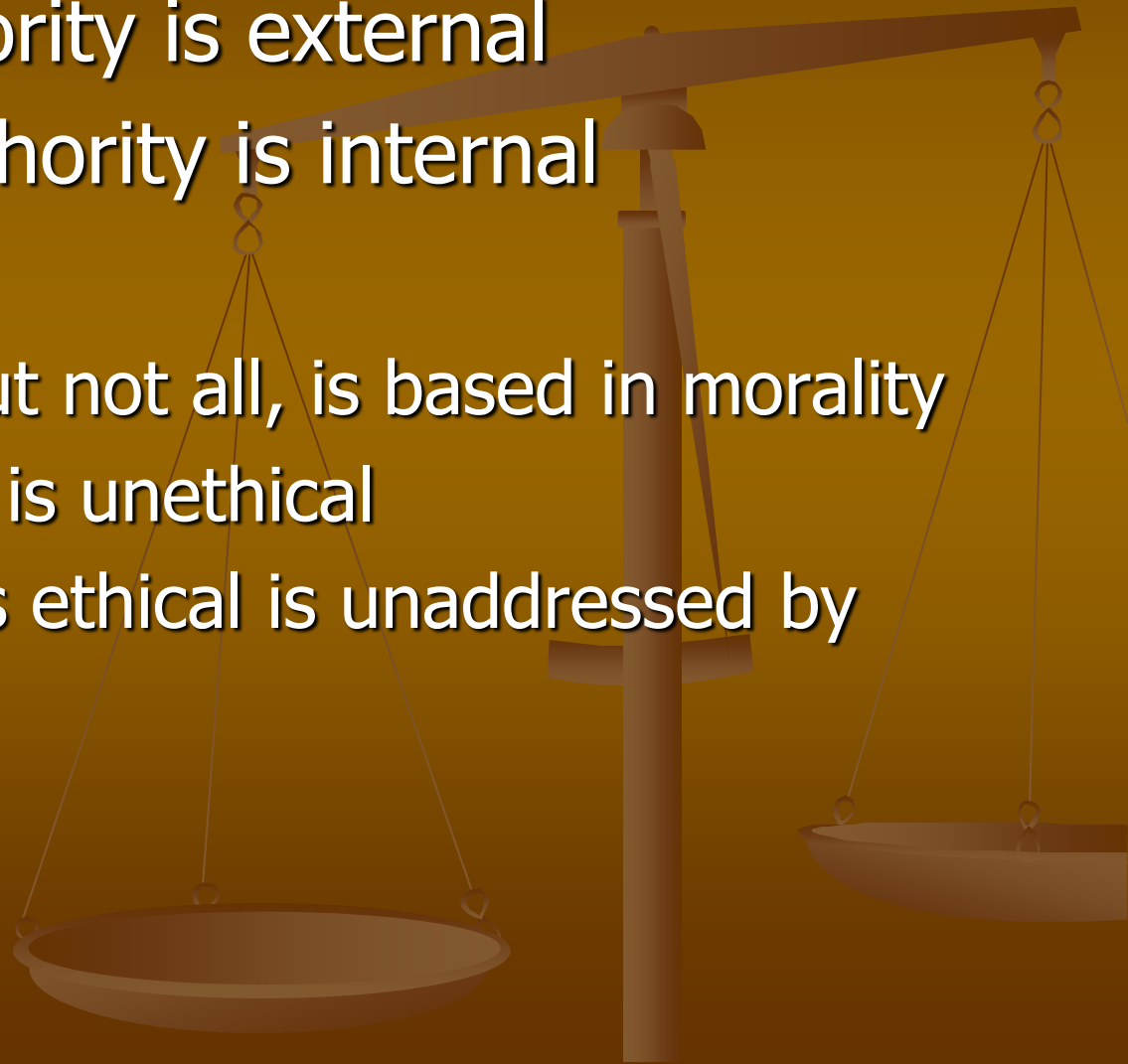
Ethics and morality

- Professional ethics cannot work entirely independently of common morality
 - Professional ethics not detailed enough (be honest).
 - Professional ethics does not cover some areas, and may need to be changed.
 - Euthanasia
 - The environment
 - Professional rights
 - Professional ethics can contain contradictory injunctions (serve public v. serve employer)



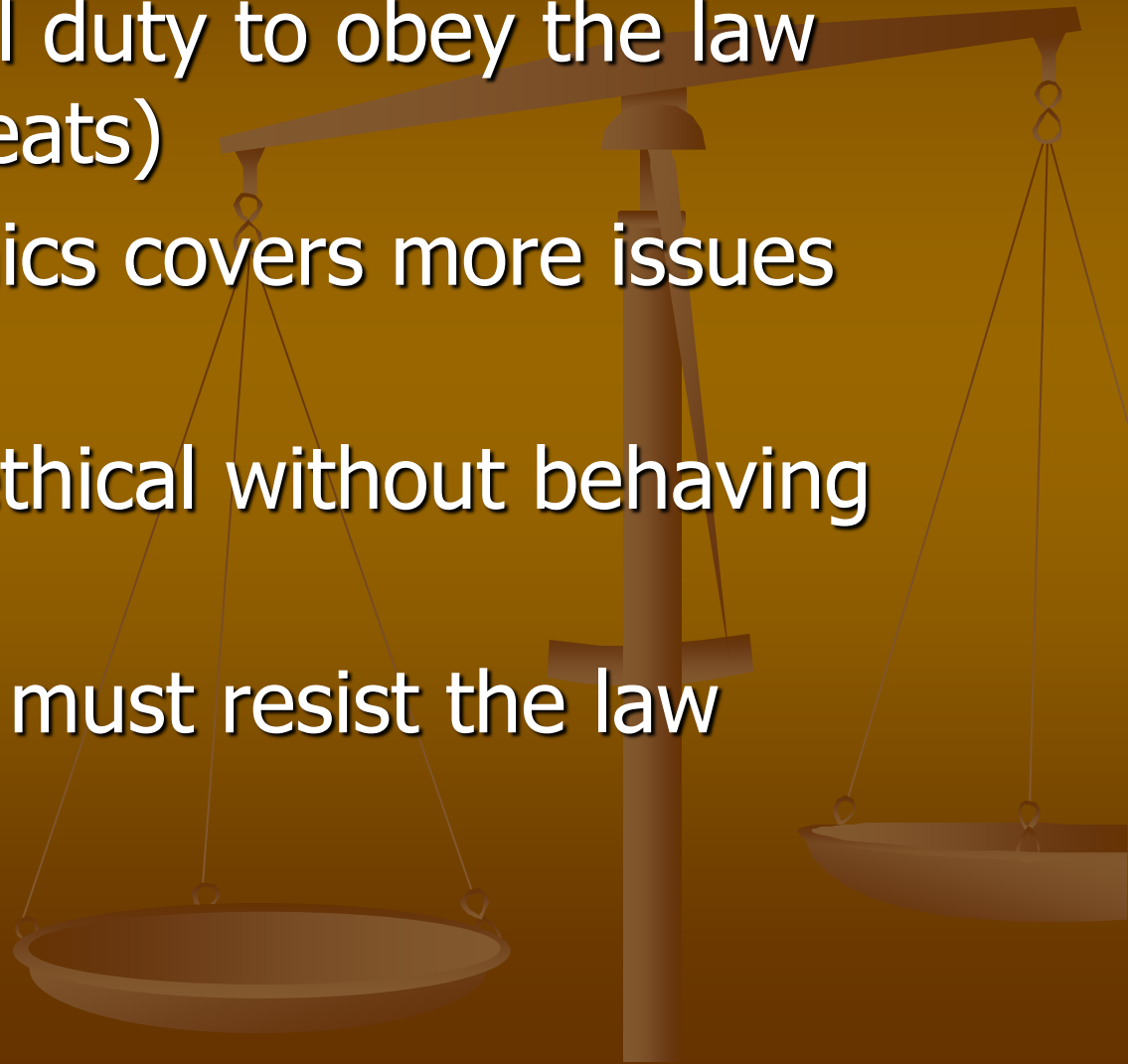
Ethics vs. Law

- Law – the authority is external
- Ethics – the authority is internal
 - Much of law, but not all, is based in morality
 - Sometimes law is unethical
 - Much of what is ethical is unaddressed by legal rules



Professional ethics and the law

- There is a moral duty to obey the law (with some caveats)
- Professional ethics covers more issues than the law
- One can be unethical without behaving illegally
- Rare – ethically must resist the law



Professional identity



- You are not a professional until you are a member of a group of colleagues who have articulated a set of standards and values and can enforce them, at the very least, by exclusion from the group.
 - Group identity
 - Shared education, training -- requirements for admission
 - Special uncommon knowledge
 - Knowledge used in the service of others... positive social need
 - Involves individual judgment, (some) autonomy in decisions
 - Adherence to certain values
 - Penalties for substandard performance

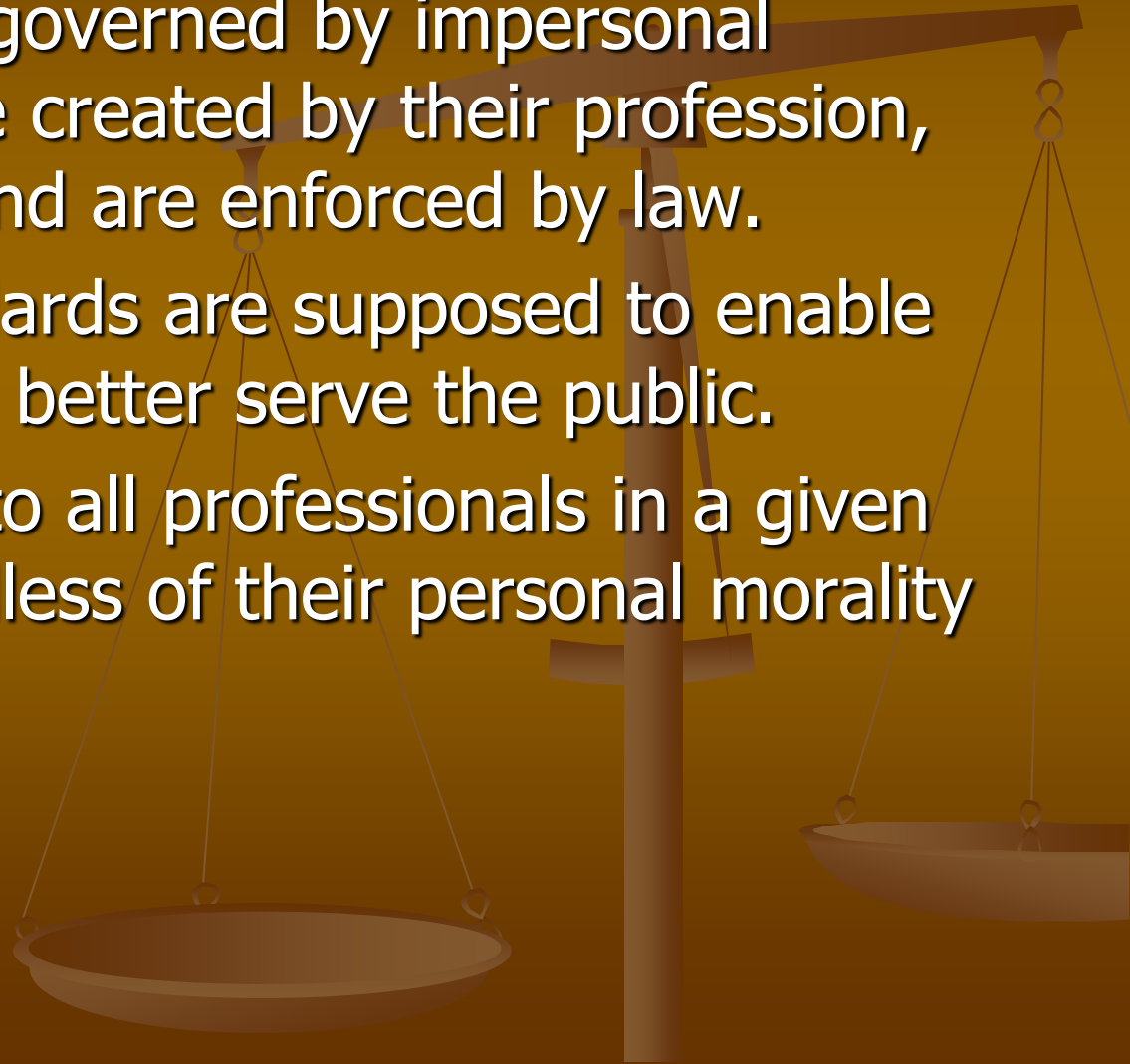
Professionalism



- Work itself doesn't have moral status
- However, because humans have moral status, the execution of work has moral status
- This then implies that professionalism must include:
 - Relational element – work will be beneficial to others
 - Skill and competency in work

Professional Ethics

- Professionals are governed by impersonal standards that are created by their profession, stated in codes, and are enforced by law.
- Professional standards are supposed to enable the professions to better serve the public.
- They are applied to all professionals in a given profession, regardless of their personal morality



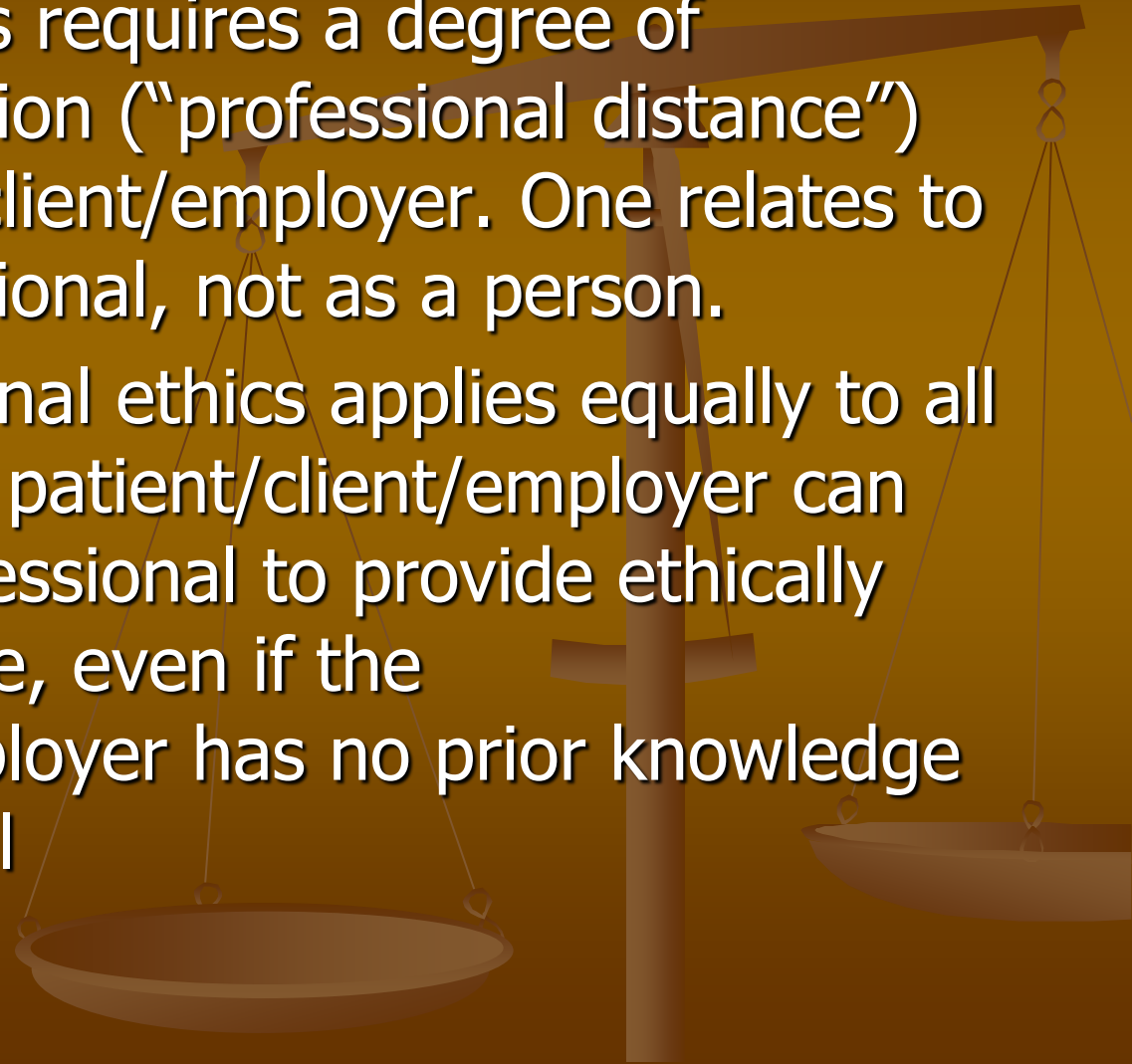
Professional Ethics



- Professional ethics focuses on behavior (first order), not an intent or motivation (second order).
- Professional ethics allows professionals to accommodate their own personal values to some extent, by permitting the professional to refuse to render services when doing so would severely violate those values.
- The professional may, however, have some obligation to see that other professionals are available to perform the services she refuses to perform.
 - Abortion
 - Defending a client, unless the 'last lawyer in town'
 - Sex offenders

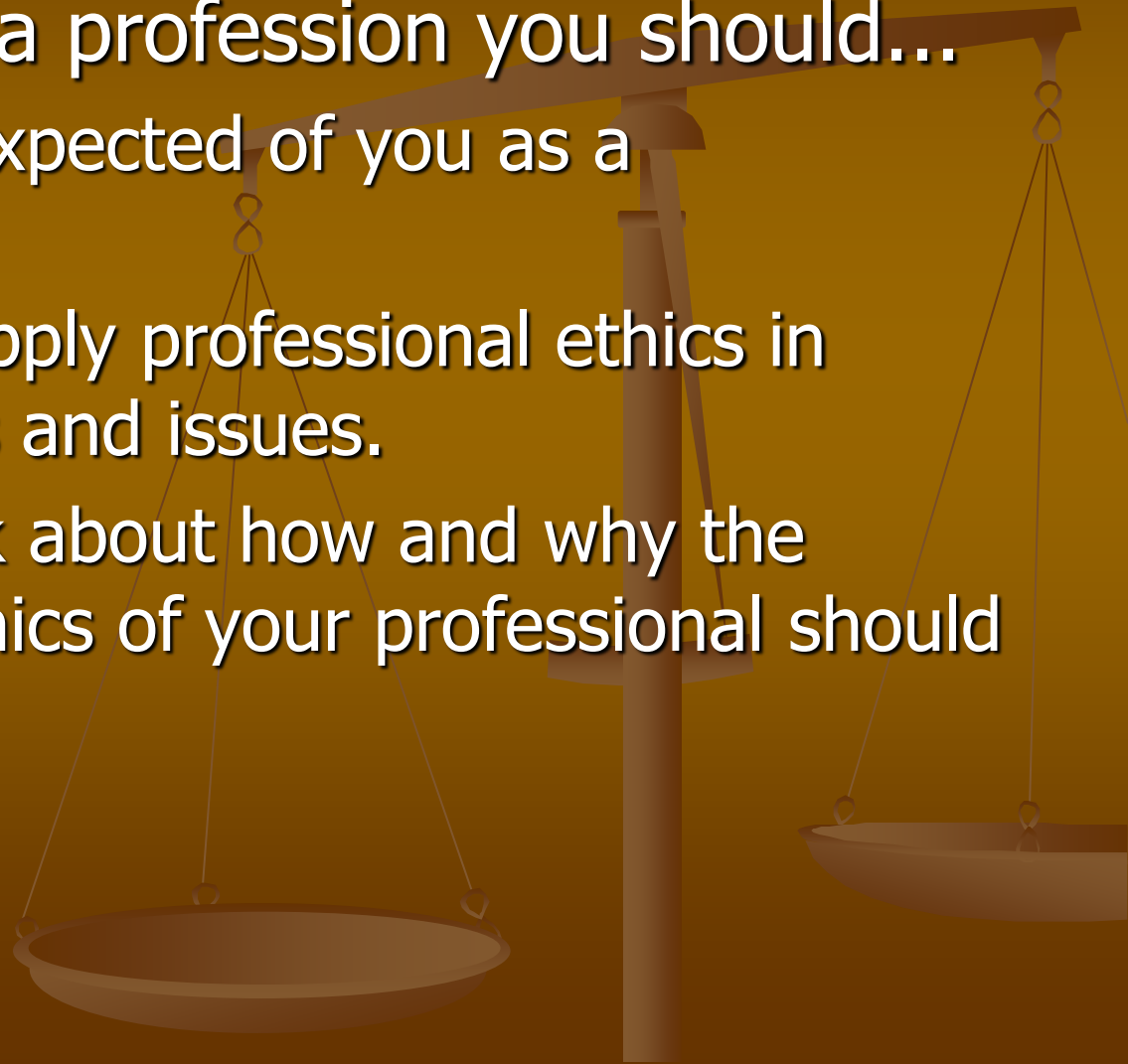
Professional vs. Personal

- Professional ethics requires a degree of emotional separation (“professional distance”) from the patient/client/employer. One relates to them as a professional, not as a person.
- Because professional ethics applies equally to all professionals, the patient/client/employer can count on the professional to provide ethically responsible service, even if the patient/client/employer has no prior knowledge of the professional



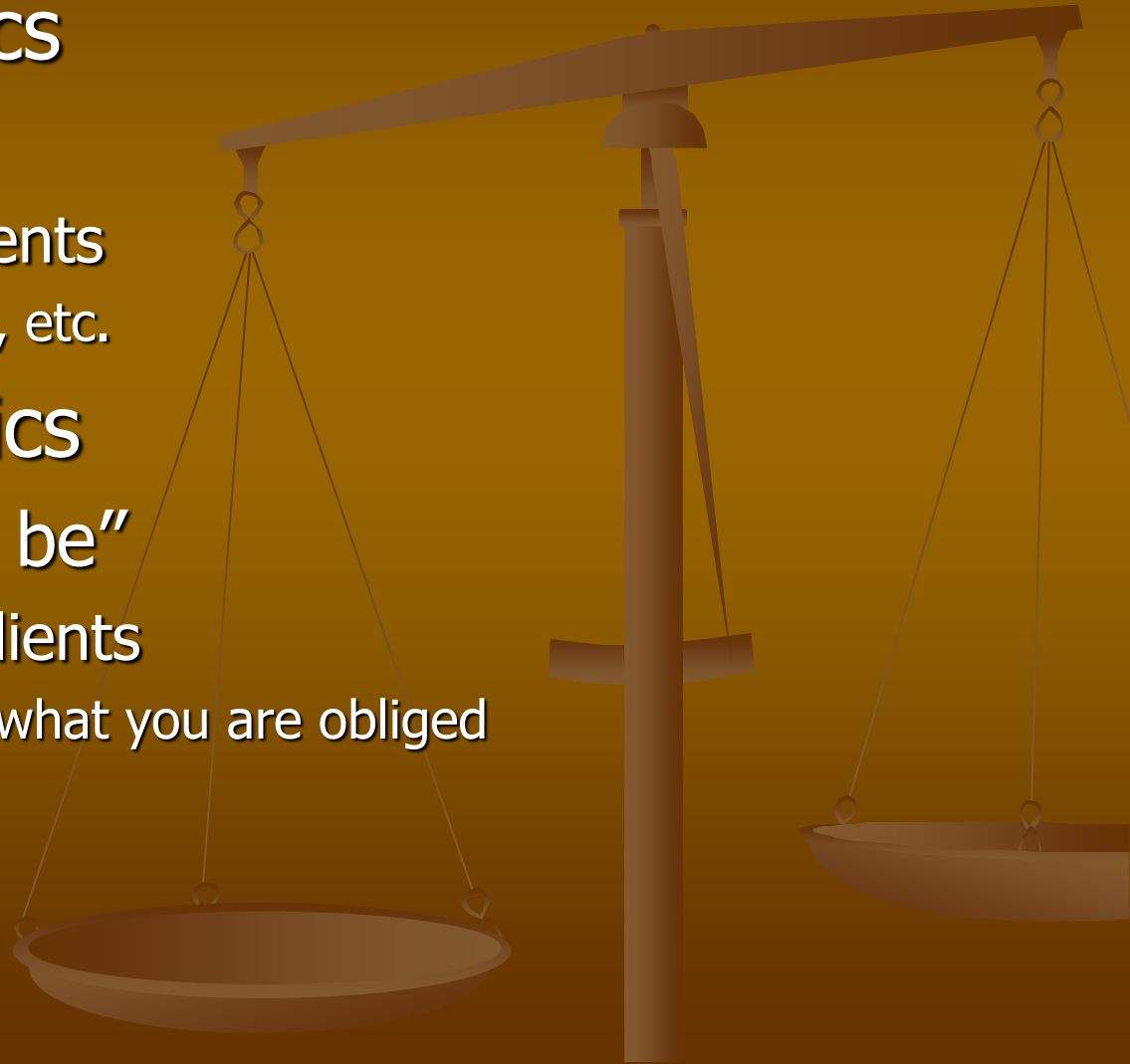
Why Ethics are important

- As members of a profession you should...
 - Know what is expected of you as a professional.
 - Know how to apply professional ethics in particular cases and issues.
 - Be able to think about how and why the professional ethics of your professional should be changed.



Ethical behavior

- Descriptive ethics
 - What "is"
 - Don't abuse clients
 - Sex, extortion, etc.
- Prescriptive ethics
 - What "ought to be"
 - Don't neglect clients
 - Provide them what you are obliged

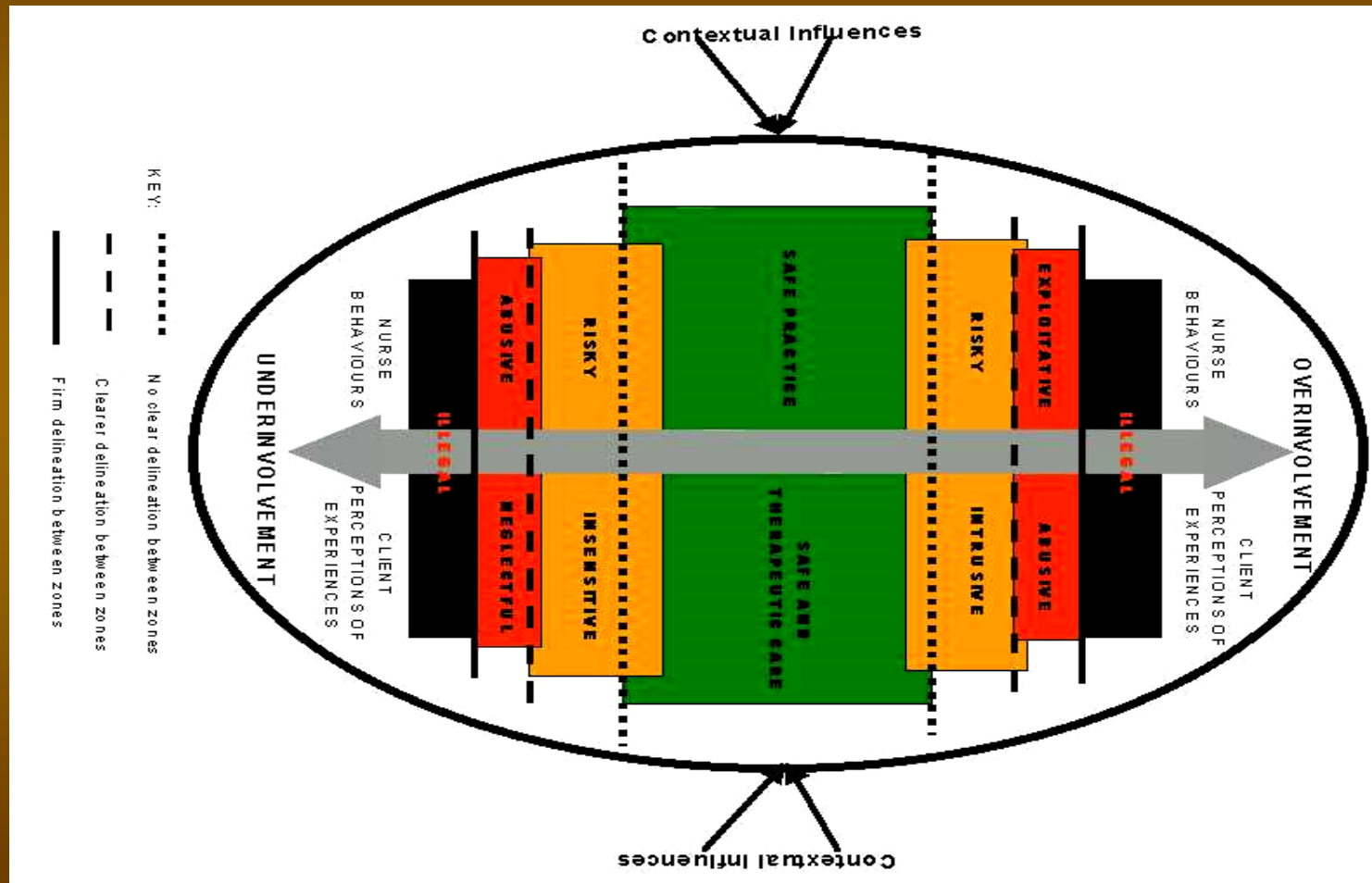


Ethical decision making



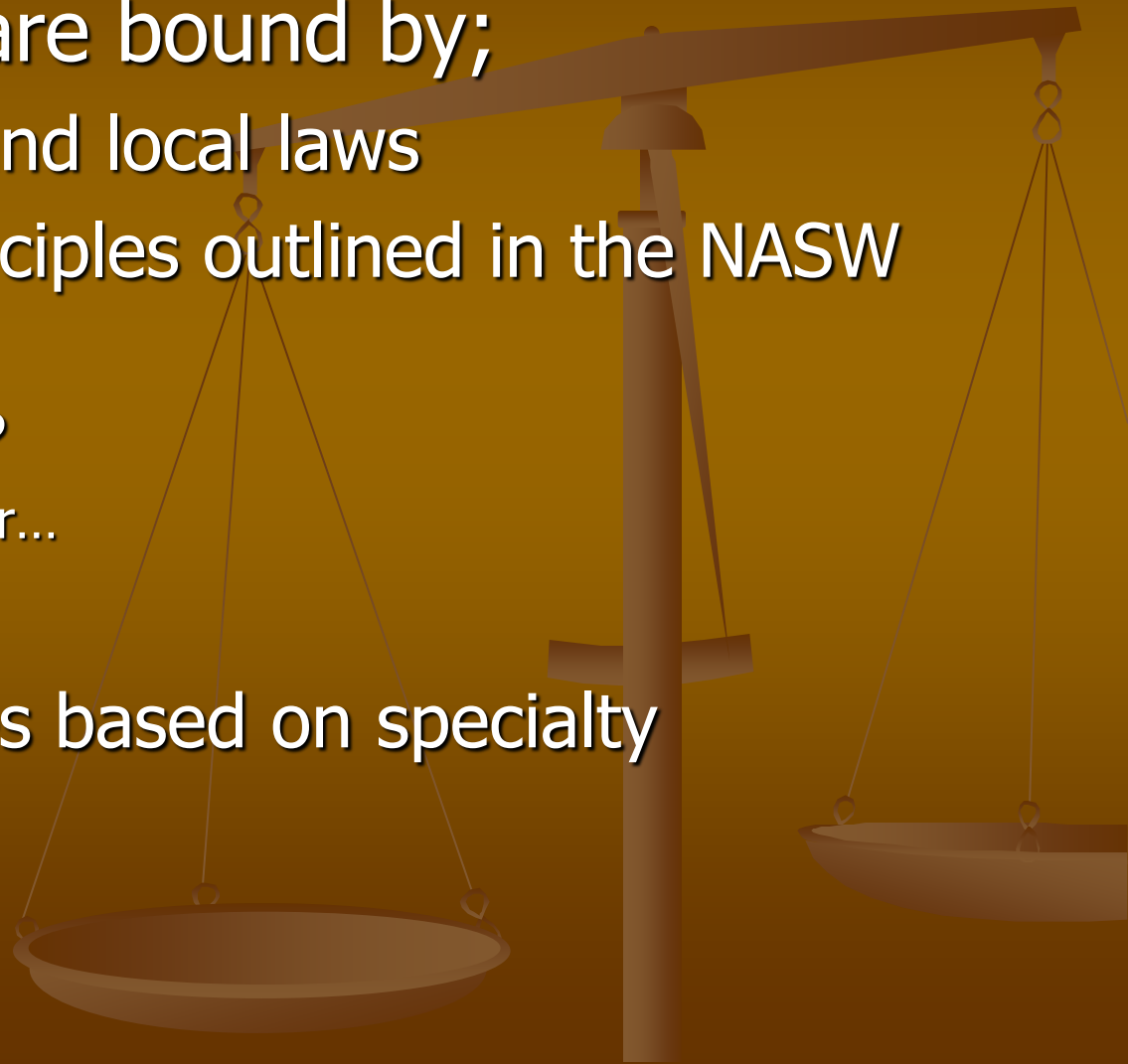
- Appeal to a Rule (rightness, wrongness)
- Using a Theory (perspective)
- Applying a Value
- ...Be very careful...
 - Not to embark in an exercise in ethical analysis when there is a clear legal rule in the situation that trumps the entire process of ethical analysis.
 - Not to assume that there is a legal rule for every situation. Often the gaps between legal rules require one to switch to an ethical analysis.

Continuum of helpfulness



Professional Social Workers

- Social workers are bound by;
 - Federal, state and local laws
 - The ethical principles outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics
 - Not a member?
 - Doesn't matter...
 - Agency policy
 - Applicable codes based on specialty



NASW Code of Ethics



- The *Code* identifies core values on which social work's mission is based.
- The *Code* summarizes broad ethical principles that reflect the profession's core values and establishes a set of specific ethical standards that should be used to guide social work practice.
- The *Code* is designed to help social workers identify relevant considerations when professional obligations conflict or ethical uncertainties arise.
- The *Code* provides ethical standards to which the general public can hold the social work profession accountable.
- The *Code* socializes practitioners new to the field to social work's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards.
- The *Code* articulates standards that the social work profession itself can use to assess whether social workers have engaged in unethical conduct. NASW has formal procedures to adjudicate ethics complaints filed against its members.
- * In subscribing to this *Code*, social workers are required to cooperate in its implementation, participate in NASW adjudication proceedings, and abide by any NASW disciplinary rulings or sanctions based on it.

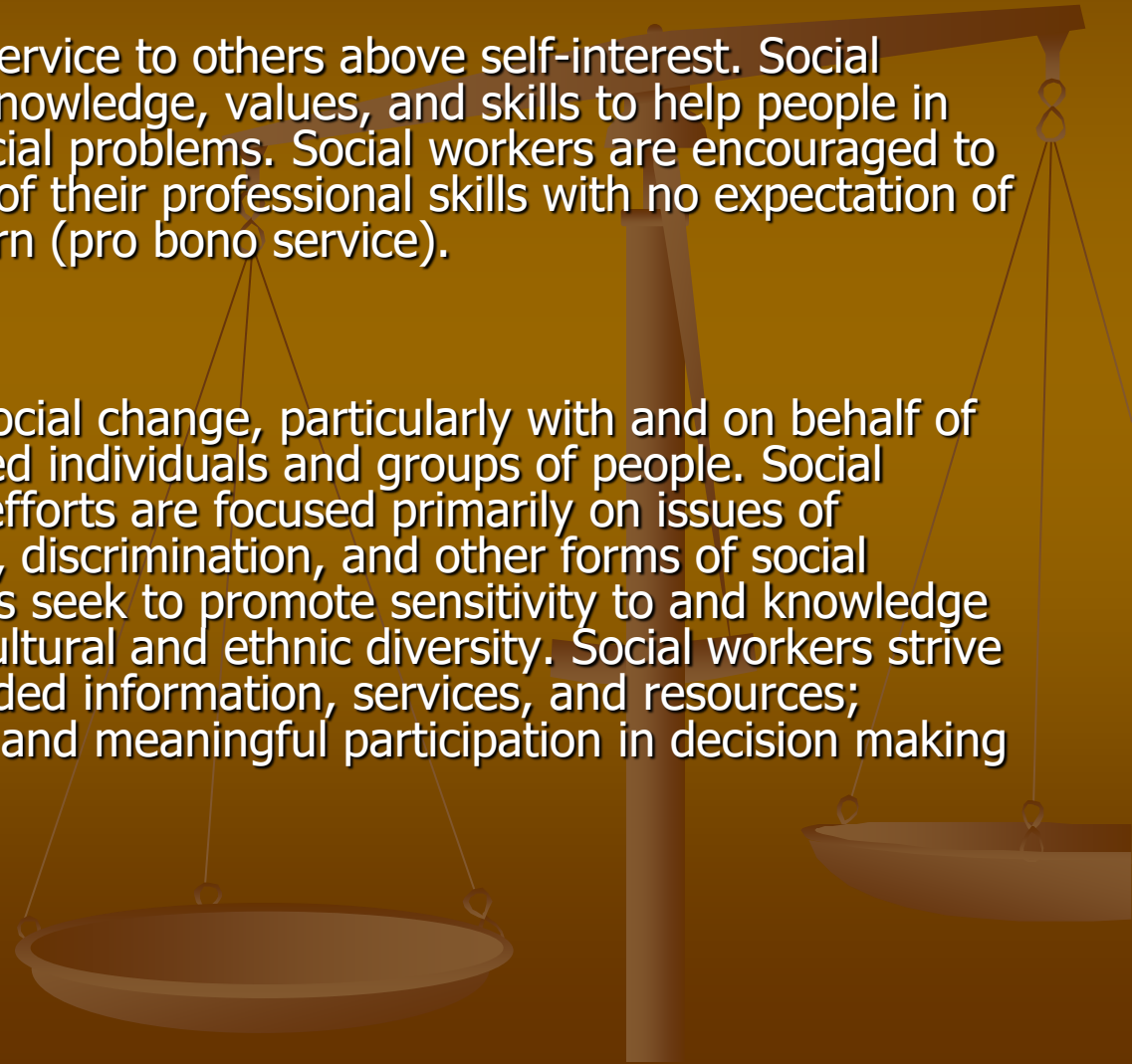
Social Work Core Values

■ Service

- Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

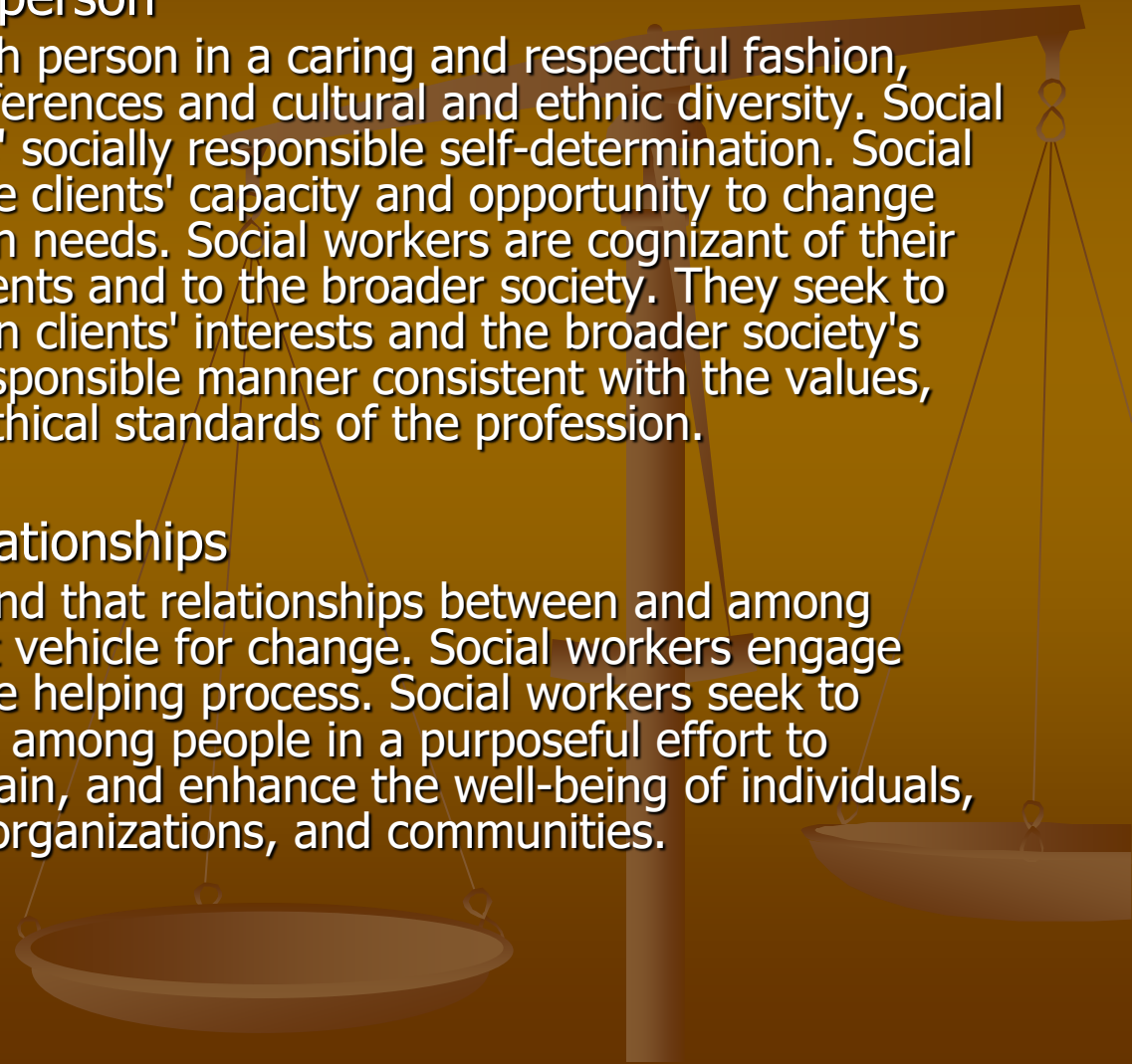
■ Social justice

- Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.



Social Work Core Values

- Dignity and worth of the person
 - Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.
- Importance of human relationships
 - Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.



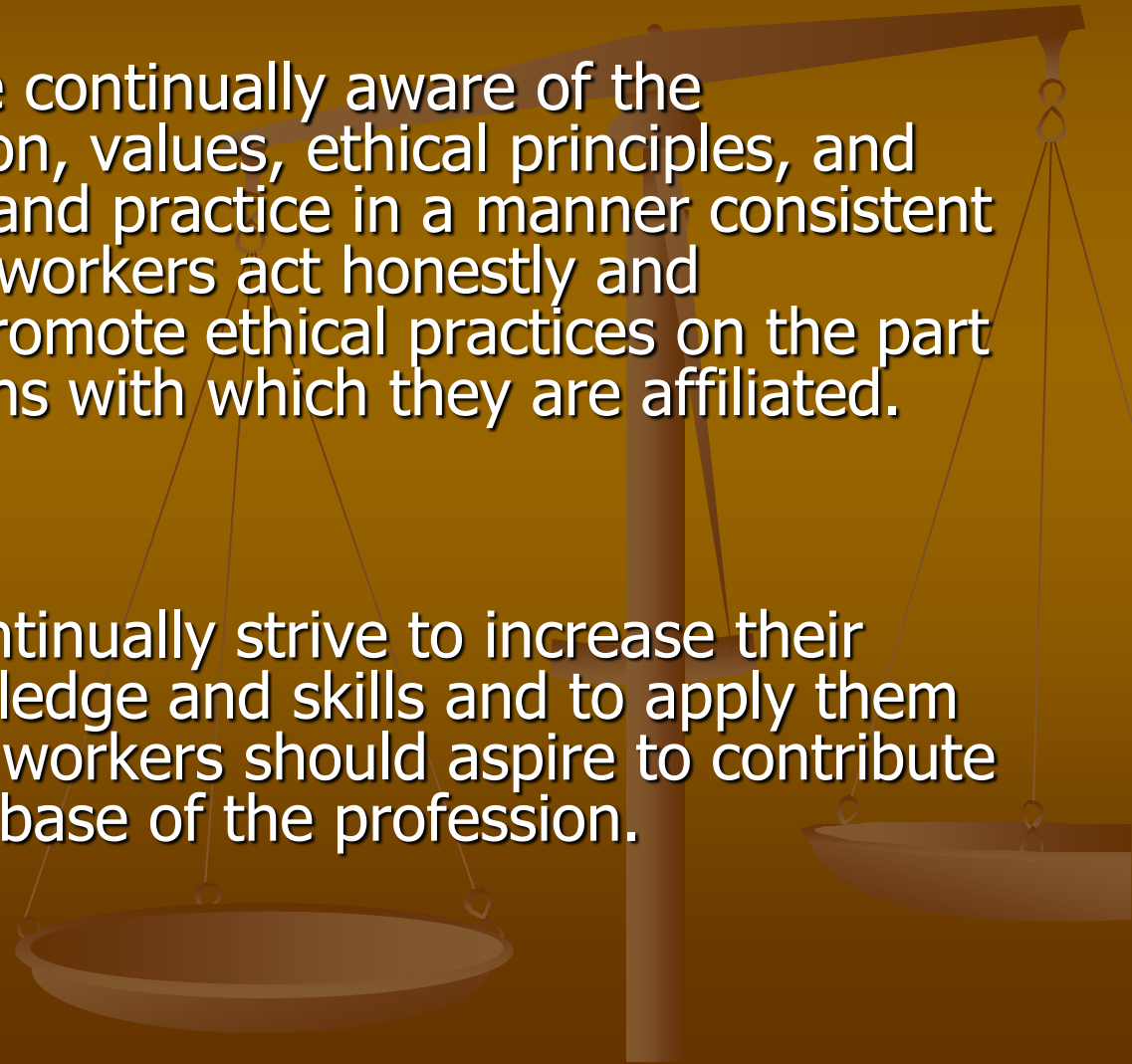
Social Work Core Values

■ Integrity

- Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

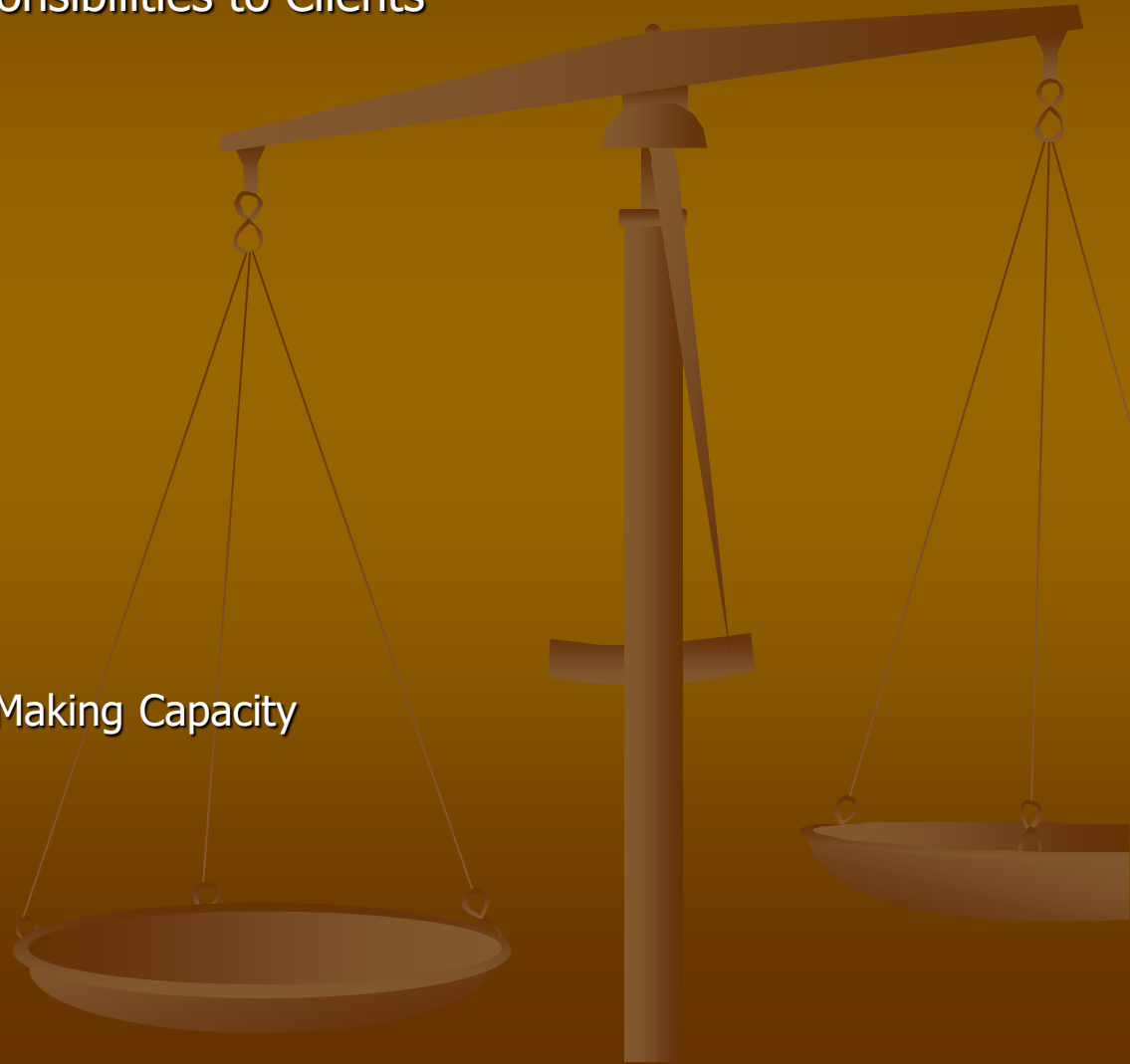
■ Competence.

- Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.



Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients
 - Commitment to Clients
 - Self-Determination
 - Informed Consent
 - Competence
 - Cultural Competence
 - Conflicts of Interest
 - Privacy and Confidentiality
 - Access to Records
 - Sexual Relationships
 - Physical Contact
 - Sexual Harassment
 - Derogatory Language
 - Payment for Services
 - Clients Who Lack Decision-Making Capacity
 - Interruption of Services
 - Referral for Services
 - Termination of Services



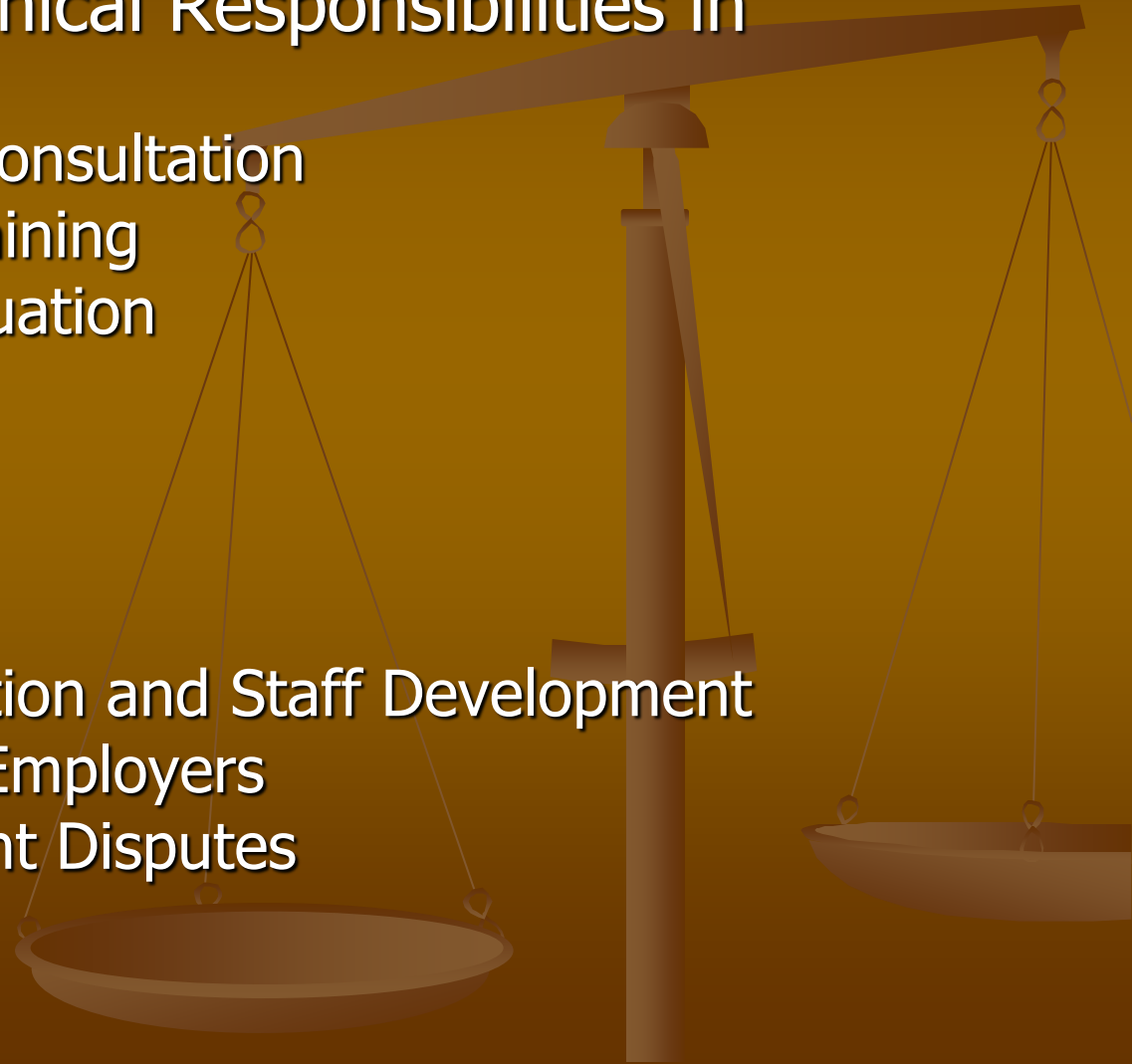
Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues
 - Respect
 - Confidentiality
 - Interdisciplinary Collaboration
 - Disputes Involving Colleagues
 - Consultation
 - Referral for Services
 - Sexual Relationships
 - Sexual Harassment
 - Impairment of Colleagues
 - Incompetence of Colleagues
 - Unethical Conduct of Colleagues



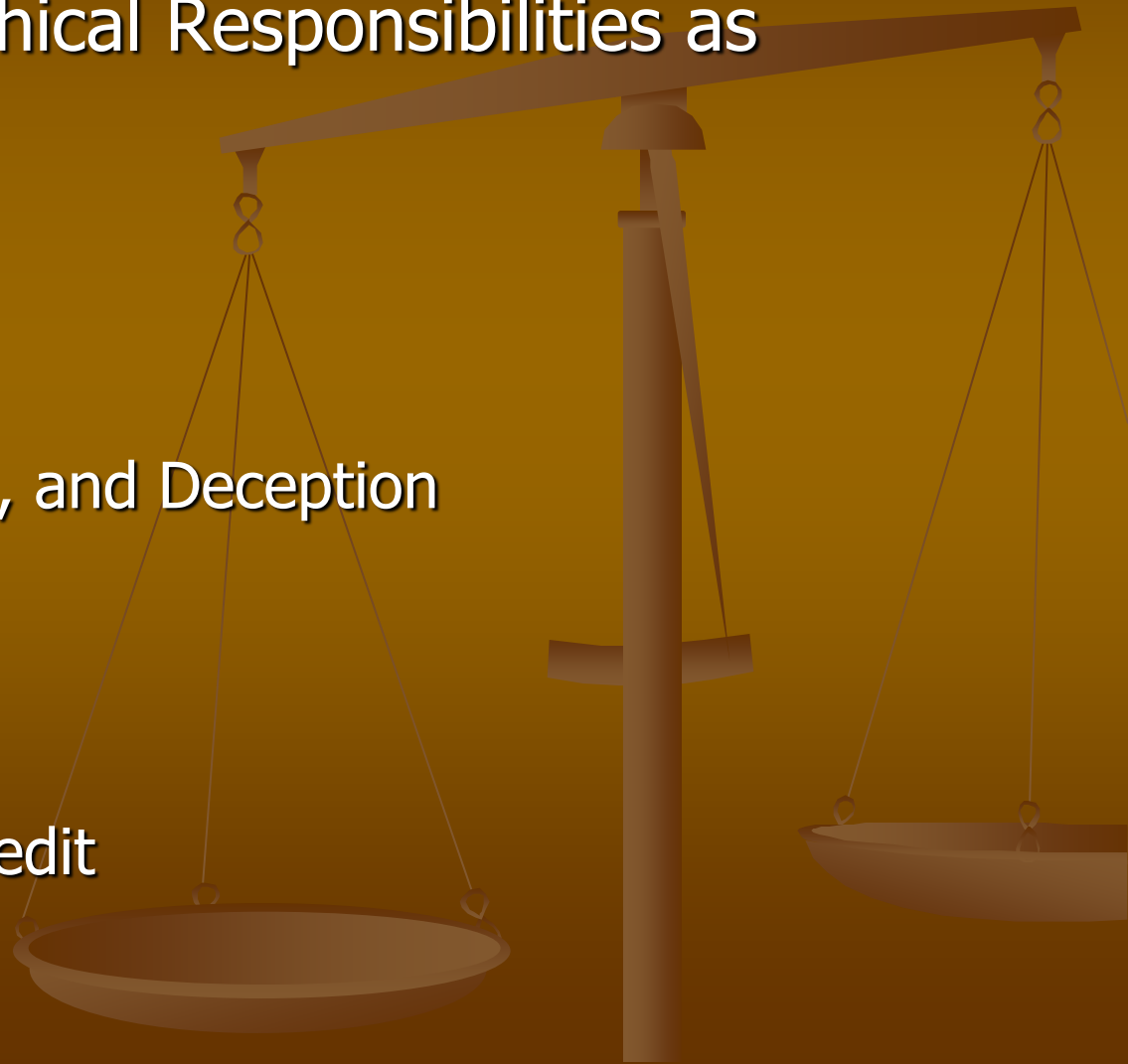
Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings
 - Supervision and Consultation
 - Education and Training
 - Performance Evaluation
 - Client Records
 - Billing
 - Client Transfer
 - Administration
 - Continuing Education and Staff Development
 - Commitments to Employers
 - Labor-Management Disputes



Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals
 - Competence
 - Discrimination
 - Private Conduct
 - Dishonesty, Fraud, and Deception
 - Impairment
 - Misrepresentation
 - Solicitations
 - Acknowledging Credit



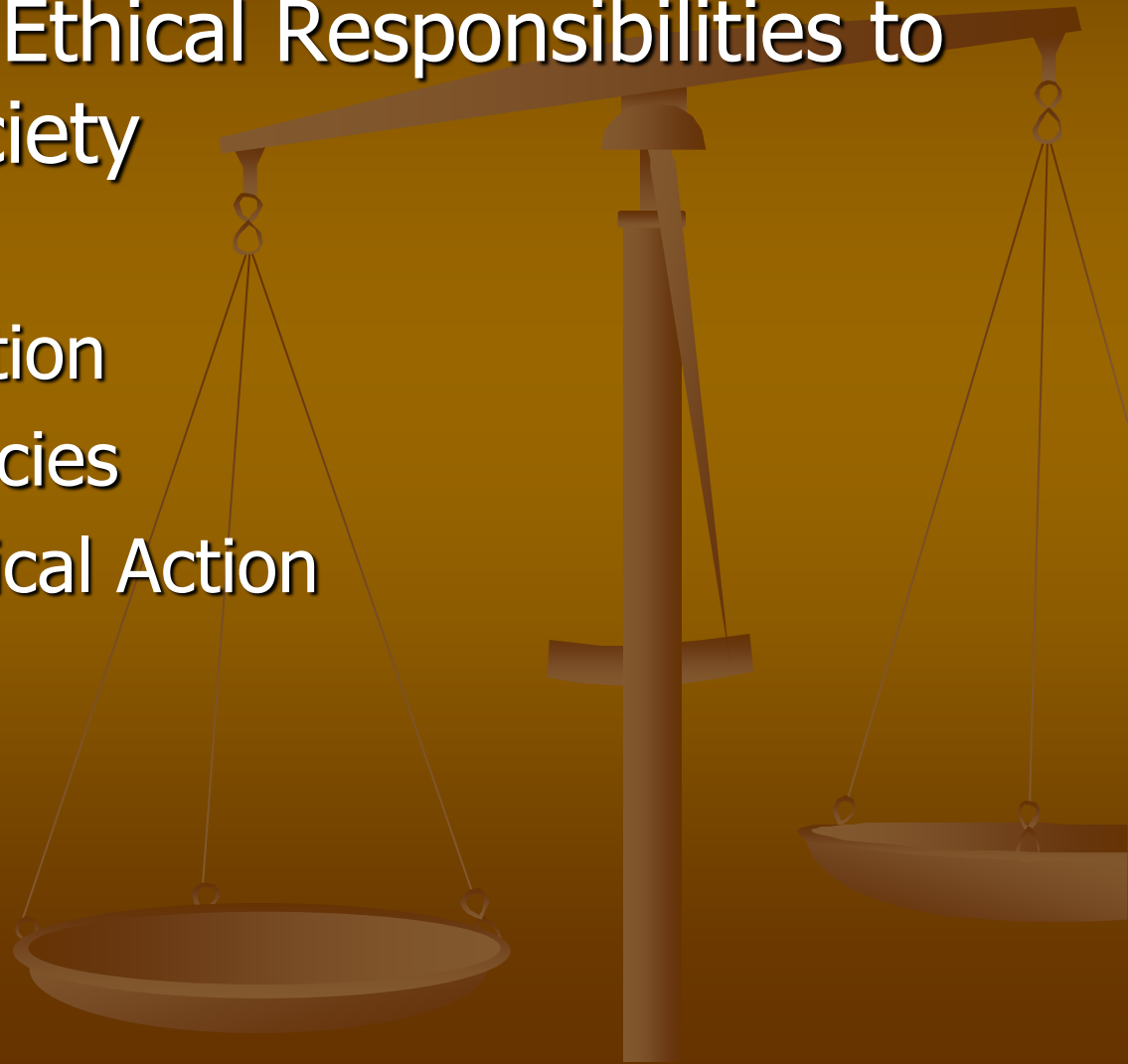
Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession
 - Integrity of the Profession
 - Evaluation and Research



Ethical Standards

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society
 - Social Welfare
 - Public Participation
 - Public Emergencies
 - Social and Political Action

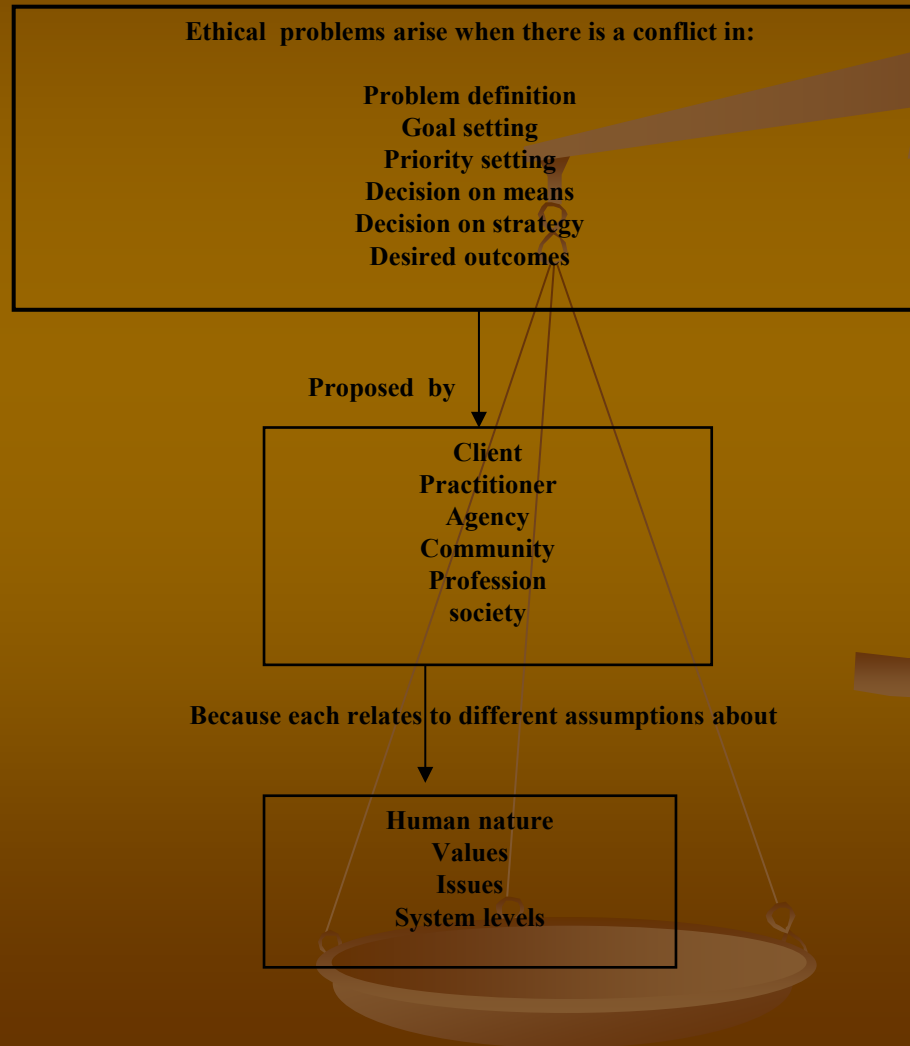


Ethical Dilemmas



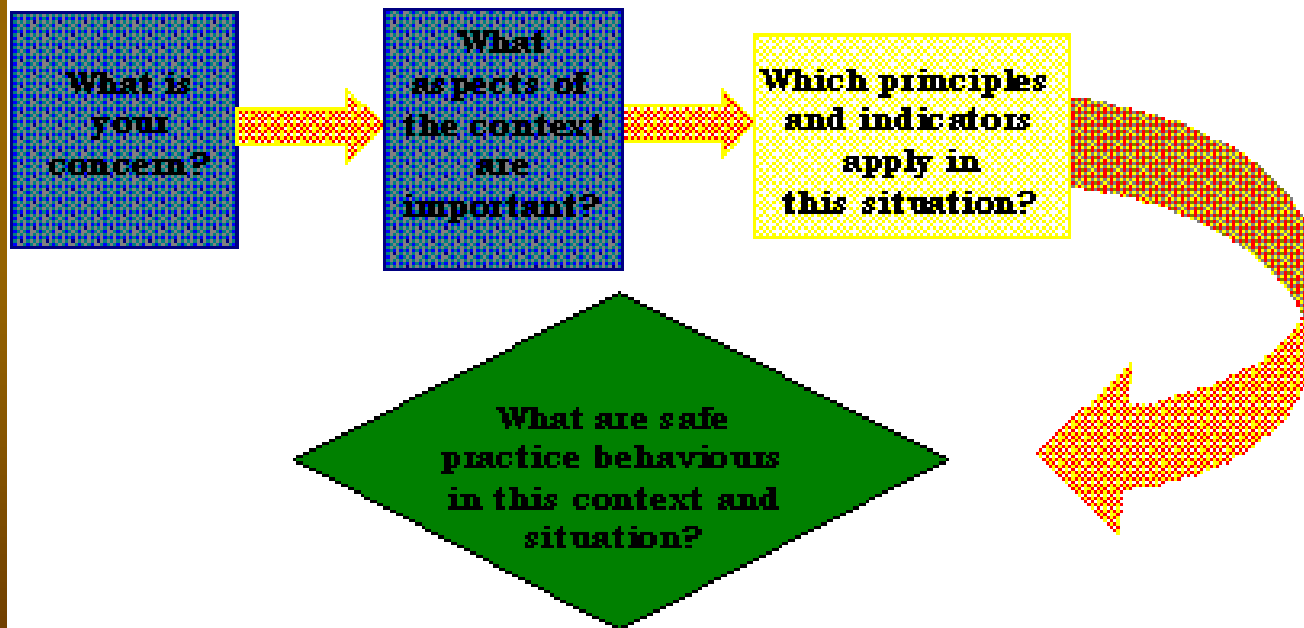
- Occurs when the social worker must
 - Choose between two or more relevant, but contradictory, ethical directives, values, or statutes
 - When every alternative results in an undesirable outcome for one or more persons
- Two root causes
 - Competing Values
 - Competing loyalties

Ethical problems in social work practice



Thinking it through

Step by Step Decision Making



It's easy until it's not

- Child welfare decisions
 - Drug abuse
 - Physical abuse or neglect
 - Supremacy of the family
- Transgender Children
 - Age of consent
 - Parental disagreement
 - Surgical transition
- Sex offenders
 - Orientation or choice
 - Age of consent
 - Risk of recidivism



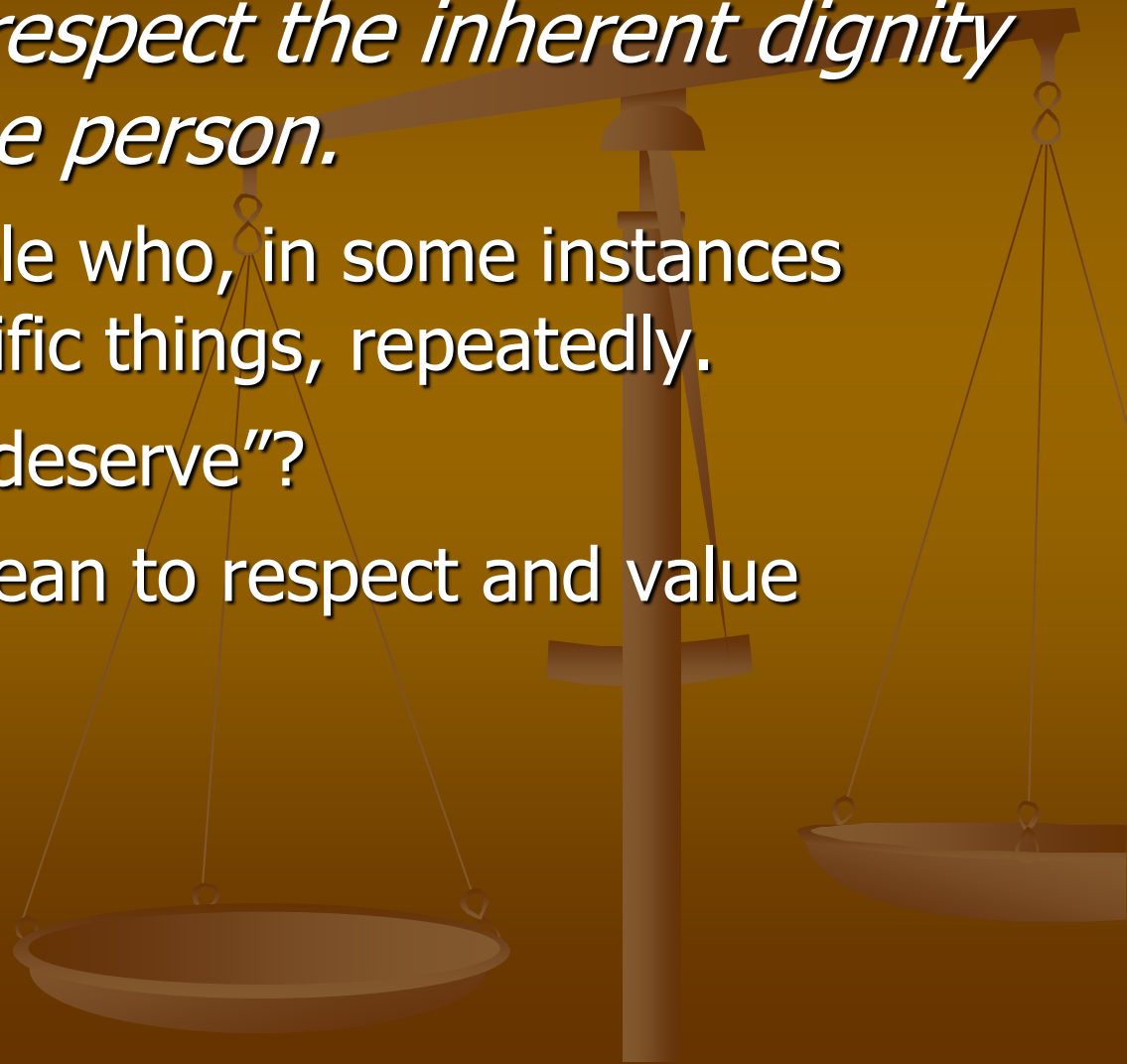
SW value dilemma (SO)

- Presumption of guilt
- Informed Consent
- Confidentiality
- Dual Relationships
- The Right to Refuse Treatment
- Community Registration
- Civil Commitment Laws



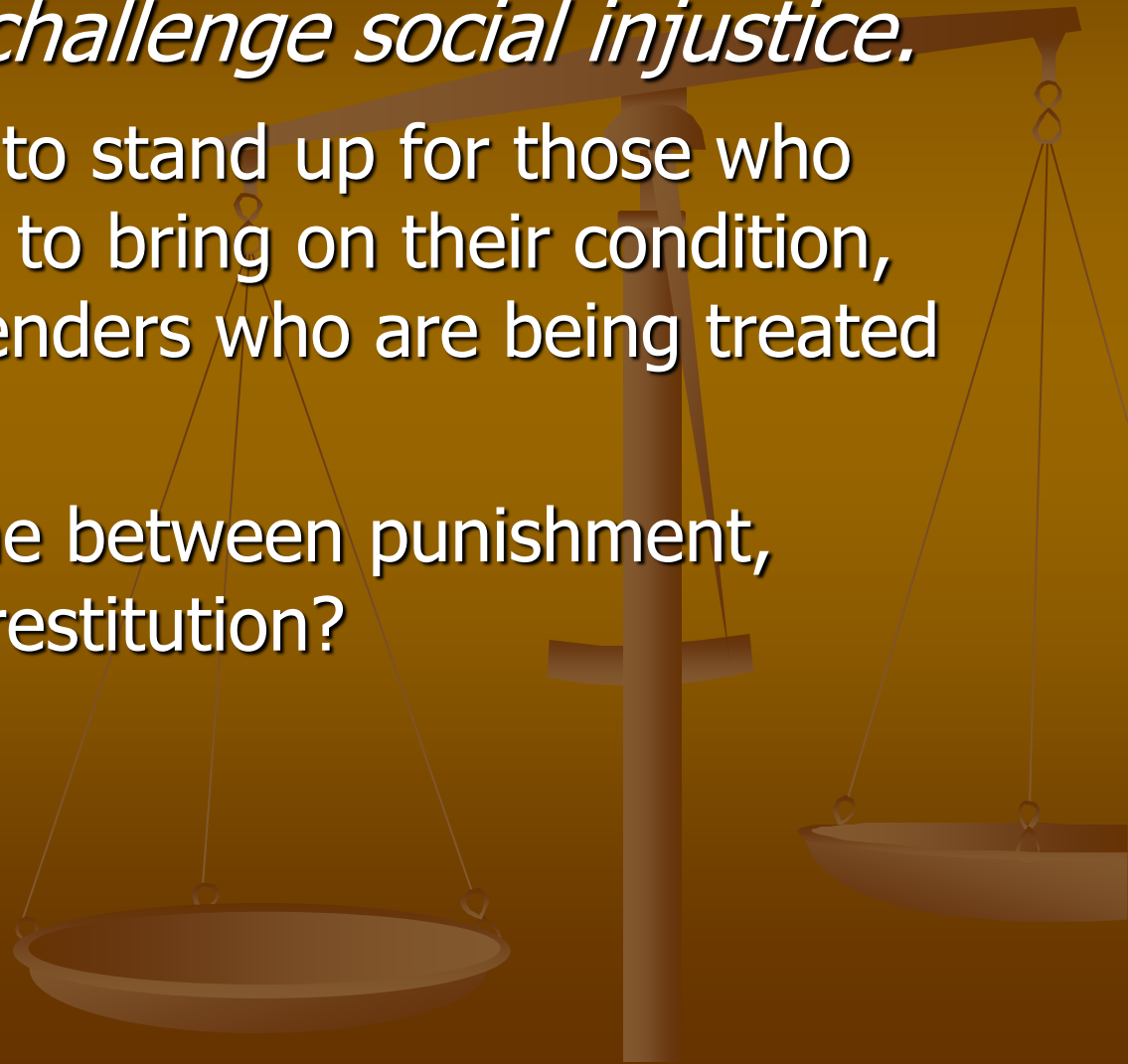
Social Work Values?

- *Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.*
 - These are people who, in some instances have done horrific things, repeatedly.
 - What do they “deserve”?
 - What does it mean to respect and value them?



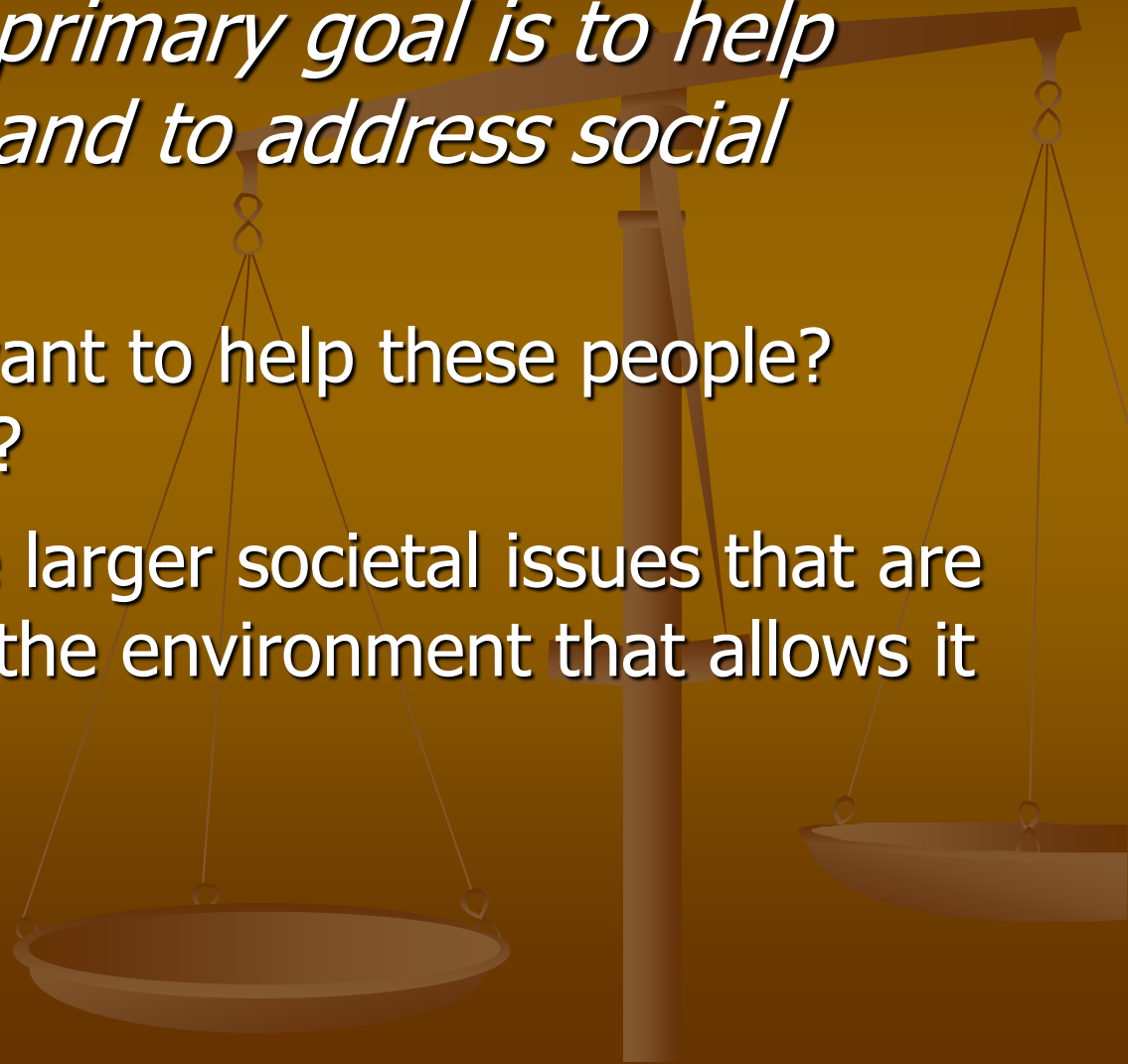
Social Work Values?

- *Social workers challenge social injustice.*
 - It may be easy to stand up for those who have done little to bring on their condition, what about offenders who are being treated unfairly?
 - Where is the line between punishment, treatment and restitution?



Social Work Values?

- *Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.*
 - Do you really want to help these people?
Help them how?
 - What about the larger societal issues that are contributing to the environment that allows it to survive?



Putting it into practice I



Lily is a licensed social worker in a small rural community, where she provides counseling services at a local clinic. Given the small size of the town, many people know one another personally, and it's common to encounter clients in social or community settings outside of the clinic.

One of Lily's long-term clients, Sarah, has been seeing her for over a year for issues related to anxiety and self-esteem. During their sessions, Lily has helped Sarah make significant progress in her personal and professional life. However, recently, Sarah began attending the same yoga class as Lily, and Lily has seen Sarah at several community events and local gatherings.

One day after yoga class, Robin, a mutual friend of Sarah's and Lily's, asks them to join her and several women from the yoga class for coffee. Sarah agrees to go, but Lily makes an excuse to skip. The after-class coffee group has become a tradition. They talk about various non-work-related topics, and the interactions are friendly and casual. Over the next few weeks, Robin and Sarah invite Lily to the gathering, and Robin tells Lily that other ladies from the group feel like Lily is avoiding them. Lily brings the invitation up in her sessions with Sarah, and Sarah encourages her to attend. Lily now finds it difficult to refuse the invitations, especially since they also often see each other in town.

Putting it into practice II



Maria is a 32-year-old woman who has been meeting with a social worker, Jane, for weekly therapy sessions. Maria is dealing with severe anxiety and depression, stemming largely from an abusive relationship with her ex-partner, Alex. Over the last few weeks, Maria has shown progress, but during today's session, she becomes increasingly agitated and shares something alarming.

Maria confides that Alex has recently started sending her threatening messages, saying that if he can't be with her, no one can. She reveals that Alex owns several firearms, and in an emotional outburst, she tells Jane that she fears he might act on his threats. She adds, "Sometimes I feel like I should just take him out before he gets to me."

Jane is now torn. Maria's statements could be interpreted as either a cry for help or as a real threat of violence against Alex. Reporting the threats to the authorities might violate Maria's confidentiality and could escalate the situation. On the other hand, failing to intervene could put Maria or Alex in serious danger.

Putting it into practice III



David is a social worker assigned to a family from a traditional immigrant community that places a high value on cultural customs and practices. The family has recently moved to the United States, and their 9-year-old daughter, Aisha, has been exhibiting behavioral issues at school, including withdrawing from her peers and struggling academically. Her teachers suspect that she may be suffering from depression or anxiety and have reported their concerns to child protective services.

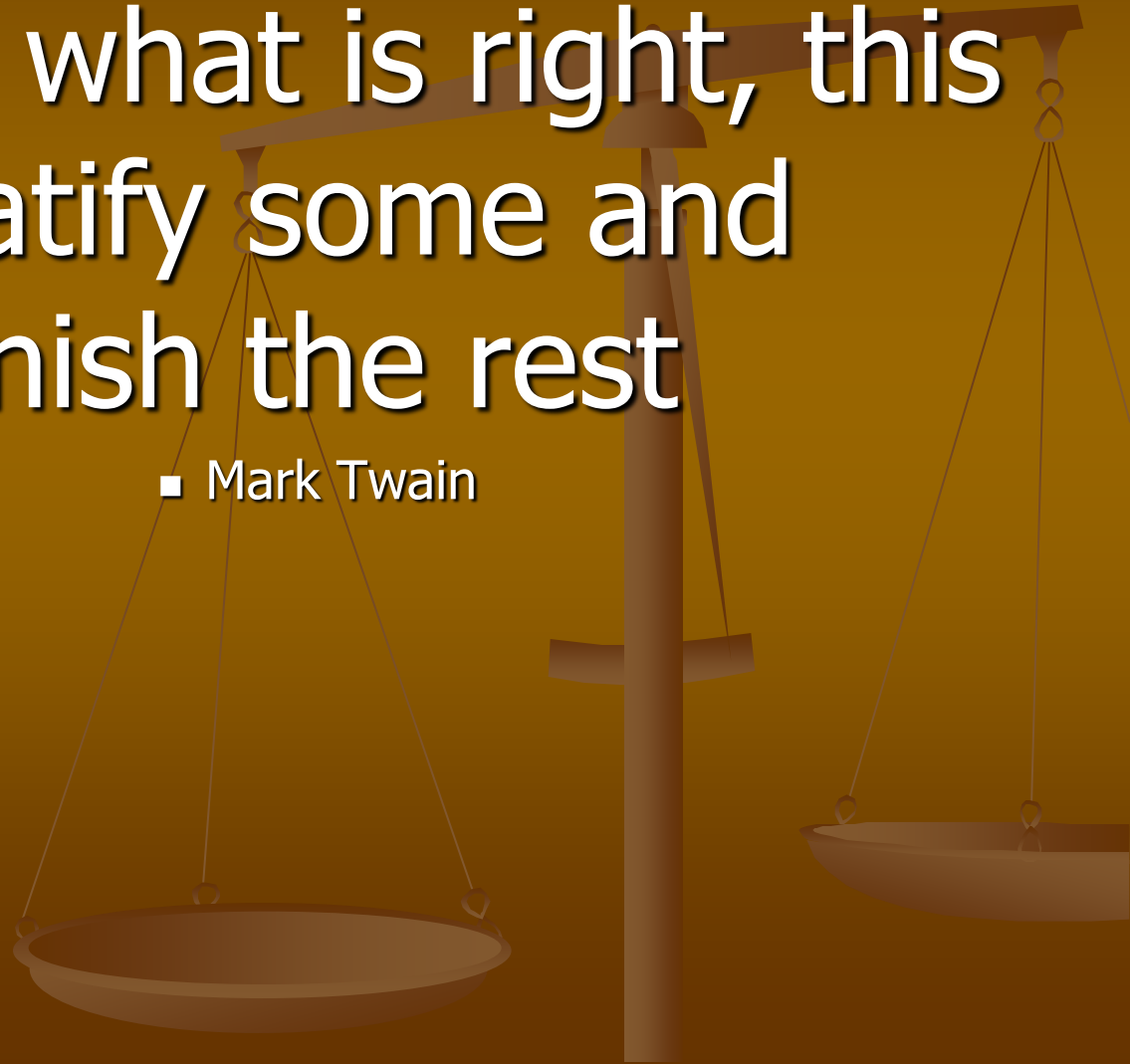
During a home visit, David notices that Aisha's parents, while caring, hold very strict beliefs about discipline and roles within the family. The parents share that Aisha is being disciplined with physical punishments for disobedience and not following household rules, which they believe is normal and necessary in their culture to raise a respectful child. They feel misunderstood by the school and argue that Aisha's behavioral issues stem from the cultural differences between home and school.

David observes that Aisha has some bruises, but the parents insist that they are from traditional methods of discipline and not abuse. Aisha also says she loves her parents and wants to obey them, but she seems fearful and withdrawn.

Parting thought

- Always do what is right, this will gratify some and astonish the rest

■ Mark Twain



Thank You

- Questions?
- Comments?
- Complaints?
- Contact info:

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