At the turn of the 20th century, most people, even in the “civilized” world, were born, worked, raised children, lived, and died without ever traveling outside of a 50-mile radius of the places of their birth. The turn of the 21st century, however, was a different world. Many of us travel well over 50 miles every day just to go to work – or maybe even just to go to lunch. The changes in technology, transportation options, and the advent of social media have even made it possible for people to live in one part of the world and work with or on behalf of clients and coworkers who are many time zones away. These changes have compelled social workers and social work professional organizations to rethink and recast the way that we navigate the myriad ethical conundrums in which we find our clients, client systems, our work settings, and ourselves.

Further complicating our professional decision-making processes are the advances of modern medicine. Social workers who work primarily with elderly clients, for example, are even having to think about who qualifies as a “senior citizen” and exactly what that means as regards providing services to them. Genetic research findings have made treatment options more targeted, but they have also added layers of complexity around the issues of pregnancy planning, ability/disability work, and disease management. Stem cell research advances have increased options for patients with previously untreatable medical conditions, but the costs and technologies that are related to these treatments have put them out of reach of large numbers of people.

In the field of social work education, we frequently speak to our students about ethical dilemmas. To be true to the original meaning of the word, a dilemma is a situation in which there are exactly two options (notice the “di” at the beginning of the word), both of which come with unavoidable negative consequences (hence the phrase, “caught on the horns of a dilemma”). Today’s technological and social landscapes, however, frequently leave social workers with such a dizzying array of options, many of which are untenable for various reasons, that the old days of ethical dilemmas may seem more desirable.

Despite all of the benefits of new technologies, modes of transportation, communication options, our 21st-century world is still rife with people who are underserved, marginalized, victimized, tortured, and forgotten. The drive that compelled so many of us, hopefully all of us, to choose Social Work (capitalization intentional) as the way that we would spend our
lives is still there. Clients, patients, and communities are still in need. What, then, are we as social work clinicians, educators, researchers, community organizers, and case managers to do as we obtain toward that greater good and find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma? A trilemma? A quadrilemma? How about an octolemma? How can we remain true to the notion of ethically striving toward our clients’ goals when we are operating across multiple legal jurisdictions, in different time zones, and among conflicting cultural expectations? Progress, it seems, is fraught with challenge.

The authors in the work at hand have covered a wide range of topics, from a wide range of perspectives, and across a wide range of geography. They represent multiple nationalities, races, sexual orientations, genders, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and political ideologies; despite this, the core principles of professional social work are still discernable threads that weave through the tapestry of their collected works.

Worth and dignity of human beings

One of the core skills of successful social workers is the ability to make and sustain relationships. Our stock in trade is our ability to work with those people, groups, and communities who, for whatever reasons, may have had challenges with interpersonal interactions. Our efforts to make these connections meaningful and productive are bound in our professional attitude that people have an inherent worth that is not defined merely by their political ideologies, abilities, or religious beliefs. In this edition, our authors have illustrated this core principle well, although perhaps most poignantly in the chapters on working with right-wing youth in Germany, criminal justice, disability, and the section on the myriad perspectives of abortion and abortion rights.

Doing no harm

“First do no harm,” that phrase commonly, although incorrectly, attributed to Hippocrates, is one with which most of us are familiar. Physicians and other health care providers worldwide have taken an oath similar to this for hundreds of years. As a part of our ethical mandate, the idea of doing no harm has even added responsibility. Not only must we be mindful of not harming our clients in the moments when we’re working with them, but we must also carry that with us at all times, ensuring that our broader actions don’t indirectly harm them, either. We fight against political injustices because they can bring harm to underserved and underrepresented populations. We remain diligent when we accidentally meet our clients and former clients in public spaces, careful to avoid violating their trust and privacy. The idea of doing no harm is also represented by all of our authors as an underlying basic assumption. Particular chapters that highlight this idea include the chapter on social worker self-care, the chapters on group social work, and the chapters on micro practice settings.

Respect for diversity

Imagine a six-sided die. One side reads, “I am an individual with my own needs and history and deserve to be treated as such,” while the opposite side reads, “I want to be treated just the same as anyone else and given the same rights and responsibilities.” Another side reads, “I recognize that each person is unique and has the right to expect to be understood in his or her own individual way,” while the side opposite reads, “I understand that I am expected to treat everyone the same, showing no favor or partiality to any person or group.” The final
pair of sides read, “We as peers understand that we as a group deserve recognition of our group culture, values, and ideals, all of which are fundamental to our group identity,” which is opposed with, “We as a group understand that there may be members of our group whose culture, values, and ideals are different from ours as a group, yet those persons may still be identified as part of our group.” It is often as if we as social workers are asked to cast this die so that it lands with all six sides up.

Respect for diversity is, at the very least, complicated. Despite this, Social Work as a profession sees itself as the torchbearer for diversity of all types – diversity of thought, opinion, lifestyle, gender, age, status, sexual orientation, religion, and on and on. The idea of diversity is represented in this book first in the authorship itself. A cursory look at the last names and employment settings of the contributors to this tome reflects a dizzying array of backgrounds, languages, and cultural landscapes. The sections on diverse values, spirituality, globalism, and economic issues are all rife with discussion of the challenges of diversity.

**Human rights and social justice**

Almost any activity undertaken by a social worker in the context of working with marginalized and underserved people can be couched as a push for human rights and social justice. We give voice to the voiceless in individual practice settings; we advocate for policy change in our macro settings. Human rights and social justice are at the crux of everything that we do. This is complicated, though, because the concepts of human rights and social justice, though well defined in the literature, are still open for interpretation – the section on the ethics of abortion illustrates this in grand detail. The contributors to this text have demonstrated the importance of the application of ethical concepts and practices regarding human rights in the contexts of criminal justice, end-of-life care, food distribution/hunger, ability/disability work, and any myriad other potential practice settings.

**The future?**

What does the future look like for the study, research, and practice of Social Work Ethics? In a nutshell, no one knows. The challenges of our changing political, cultural, and natural climates are unpredictable. Technological advances will continue to change the ways that humans work, relax, communicate, learn, and heal. All of this will require social workers, and the profession at large, to remain responsive and agile, all while remaining true to the needs of our clients, the tenets of our profession, and the values of our own inner selves, which are what compels us to enter the field. We are, and may remain, blindsided by information from new and unknown sources. Much of this information may be useful and of merit, but the politicization of many of our media outlets should give each of us pause as we begin to digest what we hear.

As the global physical environment changes, many of the daily struggles with hunger, malnutrition, and disease that have for decades been largely issues that residents of the “civilized” world have only heard about fleetingly may become more pervasive; alternatively, changes in technology may result in new methods for growing, harvesting, and distributing food, thus actually reducing these problems. In either case, social workers will need to be able to respond. Ongoing political and ideological shifts may result in changes to borders, shifts in languages and customs, and reallocation of resources – again, social workers will have to be prepared to respond ethically. Technological advances in medicine and medicine delivery may change life expectancies, disease detection and management (at both the individual
and the population levels), and birth rates. At the forefront of these changes will be social workers, whose jobs will include ensuring that all of these activities are managed ethically and equitably.

We hope that this volume has provided some practical and concrete information about the relatively abstract concepts of Social Work Ethics. As our world changes, it is inevitable that methods for the application of social work ethical principles will change, too. Social Work researchers and practitioners continue to talk, research, and write about ethics. As the editors of this book, we look forward to being a part of and platform for that further discussion.