THE PHILOSOPHY OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

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Summary

Professional ethics is a field of applied ethics whose purpose is to define, clarify, and criticize professional work and its typical values. Professions are characterized sociologically by means of their members' scientifically grounded expertise and their service ideal. Such a definition applies to what can be called classical professions. Their service ideal can be understood in reference to values that define the goals of their work; for example, a physician's primary goal is to promote health. Every classical profession has its own service ideal associated with the typical value of its members' work. From the point of view of philosophical ethics, professional work can be said to embody rights and obligations that are peculiar to each profession. Professional work entails also the virtuous character of the professional. Engineering ethics can be studied in reference to the technological system that is characterized by its autonomy of values, technological imperative, and technological determinism. By means of these concepts the context of the education, work, and goals of engineers can be analyzed and criticized. The standard view is that the values of engineering are the safety, health, and welfare of the public. However, in a critical perspective such a thesis can be criticized. The engineering profession is different from the classical professions in some crucial ways. The notion of double loyalties plays a crucial role here. In this article, business

ethics is not understood as a type of professional ethics. In other words, the notion of a profession is understood in its narrow sense.

1. Three Types of Professional Ethics

"Professional ethics" is a term that can be understood in different ways. First, professional ethics is a code of values and norms that actually guide practical decisions when they are made by professionals. As such, professional ethics may be a more or less explicit and conscious determinant of action. The study of this aspect of professional ethics belongs to social psychology.

Second, professional ethics is a fully idealized set of values whose purpose is to explicate the best possible world in which the given profession could be working. All professions have nowadays formulated their own codes of conduct that explicate their own best values, conduct, and consequences. Such professional ethics can be characterized as expressive and demonstrative, and it can therefore be studied best by the methods of the discipline called rhetoric. But such an assertion must be clarified before it becomes acceptable. For instance, the notion of rhetoric must not be understood in any adverse manner. It can then be said that professional ethics is a declaration and manifestation of good intentions that are supposed to characterize a given profession. Third, professional ethics may be a critical philosophical discipline, and as such a part of the wider field of applied ethics. In this case, normal methods of philosophical ethics are applied to professional decisions, planning, and action in order to evaluate, criticize, and develop them. This article adopts the philosophical approach to professional ethics.

In philosophical professional ethics, several trends can be distinguished. The first can be called quandary ethics, to adopt a term used first, it seems, by E. Pincoffs. When this idea is applied to professional ethics, professional life is studied from the point of view of its dramatic problems or ethical dilemmas. For instance, a defense attorney knows that she is representing a dangerous offender whose acquittal will lead to serious harm to the public. Should she still defend this person? Every person has the right to defend themself, but this right cannot be executed without the help of a law professional. This is a typical ethical dilemma in the field of law.

Second, the key concepts of professional work and professionalism in general can be scrutinized by philosophical conceptual analysis. Many philosophers would like to think that this is the main philosophical approach in this field, the one whose legitimacy is clear and whose benefits are obvious. For instance, the concepts of autonomy and authority are typical objects of analysis.

Third, a philosophical approach may focus on the historical world of professional life, understood as the context and environment in which all professional activities take place. Such an approach was pioneered by Foucault. In many ways this approach is the most fruitful because it allows an overall picture of professional life to be formed and the other aspects of professional ethics, those listed above, to be placed within this framework.

2. Sociological Foundations

However, the key idea above is not automatically clear. What is the meaning of the idea of the world of professional life? Here one can start from a set of propositions derived from the sociology of professions. The main sociological question is: What kind of social entities are professions? Then one can ask: How are professions organized and how can their activity, change, development, and work be understood?

The sociology of the professions defines a profession in general terms by means of professionalism. This implies that a profession has a certain degree of autonomy in society, its members' expertise is based on science, and the professional work exemplifies a service ideal. Sociologists have focused mainly on the first two features but they have perhaps tended to evade the treatment of the last feature, the service ideal. This decision can be explained, it seems, by remarking that the service ideal is a genuine value term whose normative characteristics are not always easy to study by means of the empirical methods of sociology. No corresponding difficulty may arise when sociologists focus on the autonomy or the scientific background of professional expertise. Values are peculiarly intangible entities, but professional ethics cannot be understood philosophically without them. Yet, in spite of its shortcomings, the sociological theory of the professions forms a good starting point for the philosophical study of professions and professional ethics, mainly because sociology has provided some key definitions in this field. It is necessary to identify a profession, if professional ethics is to be studied in a systematic and meaningful way.

Professional work is different from occupational work, which forms the content of a vocation, so that an engineer and a car mechanic, or a physician and a faith healer cannot both be professionals in the same sense of the word. According to sociological theory, the engineer's and the physician's expertise is based on scientific training that allows them to understand what is to be done from the point of view of the rational, epistemological foundations of action. Another possibility is to emphasize the autonomy of the professions. A profession can influence the social decisions that regulate its members' work and their related rights and obligations.

These are difficult sociological questions that cannot be solved by philosophers. It is illuminating to notice, however, that what are called the classical professions are each backed by their own applied scientific discipline that is taught at university level. Medicine, nursing science, legal studies, psychology, social policy studies and social work, engineering, and education are all represented among university faculties and departments.

This is the basis of professional expertise but also of autonomy. The high level of expertise, based on the specialized study of science, provides professionals with a knowledge base whose existence cannot be challenged by the lay public. But professional expertise is also applied knowledge, which is to say that it is useful to the public. In other words, the public needs this expertise and therefore cannot unproblematically reject, challenge, or ignore the professional advice and the influence of their work. All these facts make professional ethics a key issue when the public evaluates the potential bias of professional work in relation to the quality of their life.

An ethically corrupt profession would be dangerous for the reasons recorded above. It can be said, however, that at least the classical professions, such as teachers, lawyers, physicians, and social workers, have a satisfactory ethical record. Yet the public should not automatically presume that this is somehow a natural state of affairs that will prevail independently of public and legal scrutiny.

3. Goals of Professional Work and Their Problems

Professional work is different from occupational work in a way that implies that professional ethics is distinct from an occupational work ethic. Professional ethics can be understood from the point of view of its service ideal and its related values. Therefore it is useful first to list the key service ideals of a profession and then to contrast them to a factual description of their work content. Here the ideal and the factual level of analysis can be distinguished. However, a third level can also be mentioned because it is possible to inquire into the worst scenario of professional work—what the public should be afraid of when they are dealing with the professionals. This can be called the cynical question, and for obvious reasons it is seldom asked.

In this manner a full picture of professional values and the ethics based on them can be given. The main benefit of this approach is that it draws a clear line between the individual good intentions of a professional and the systematic context of both professionalism and professional work. Reports of good intentions can be misleading if the social context of the work is not conducive to their systematic realization. Police work offers a dramatic example. Police brutality may be a fact though the officers themselves see their intentions as beneficial to the public and the ensuing problems both negligible and excusable.

In order to illuminate the three-tiered distinction between ideal values, the factual descriptions of the aims of professional work, and the worst scenarios, the following can be tentatively suggested. However, no simple account of these matters can do justice to the complexity and importance of the inquiry into professional work and its values. In general terms, it can be said that the ideal values of the classical professions are widely recognized as desirable.

Teaching aims at the growth of the personality of students; in fact professional teaching merely socializes and in the worst case it oppresses. Some radical educational theorists have remarked, cynically, that one of the tasks of education is to accommodate students to the socially prevailing norms of injustice.

The various sub-professions of law aim ideally at justice, as becomes clear to readers of their professional ethics codes. Law and justice belong together; they form a unity whose realization in social life is the task of law professionals. In fact, law professionals serve the law or, in other words, apply the law. An example of this is the nature of the law in the former Soviet Union or Nazi Germany where the laws were in many cases grossly unjust, but also regularly applied and enforced by law professionals and law enforcement professionals. What is the worst-case, cynical scenario in this case? One might suggest it is the active corruption of both the law and justice.

Health-care professionals, such as nurses and physicians, take health as a human value. This is a clear case of an objective value on which their work is based and which explains their high status in modern society.

At the factual level, these professionals medicalize modern life in relative independence of any pre-scientific or profession-independent notions of health and illness. Cynically speaking, patients become objects whose personal dignity and autonomy will be bypassed by experts in search of ever-widening scientific knowledge that in the end will serve only members of the profession.

A relevant example might be the cancer research industry and its often misleading reports of imminent success. This tendency would be covered by a veil of rhetoric and professional propaganda. Whether such a threat is a real one or just a figment of the imagination is worth some consideration.

An example that illustrates these points is the relative reluctance of physicians, the members of the most powerful of the medical professions, to take better preemptive measures against illness. Another relevant fact is the difficulty to agree on the definition of a concept of health itself. It seems that different health professions tend to adopt different definitions of health.

For instance, physicians may focus on health as freedom from illness whereas nurses may emphasize a more holistic notion, health as personal well-being. The enquiry into the various meanings of the concept of health is an example of conceptual analysis in one of the fields of philosophical professional ethics.
Psychologists aim at the autonomy of their clients, but in fact they may only help them to adjust to existing circumstances. Cynically speaking, for instance, clinical psychology may confirm and justify the ascriptions of abnormality to individuals, which tends to diminish their autonomy.

Social work is supposed ideally to alleviate the consequences of poverty and other dysfunctional social situations. In this way it should offer its clients an opportunity to help themselves. In reality social work may normalize such dysfunctional situations, and at worst stigmatize clients. It has often been accused of creating a vicious circle in which clients are made passive, alienated, and stigmatized to the extent that they lose both the motivation and the ability to help themselves.These methodological examples show in what way professional values, expertise, and work can be evaluated and criticized. A more specialized philosophical study on a particular professional ethic must analyze in detail both the professional values and the realities of the expertise-based work in question.

4. Normative and Evaluative Elements in Professional Work

Any philosophical study of professional ethics must focus on the following key concepts and their application to professional expertise and practical work: duties, obligations, rights, and virtues. Because professional work has its own service ideal and values, it can be expected that the analysis of the application of these ethical concepts reveals certain important aspects of professional activity and its ideology.

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Biographical Sketch

Timo Airaksinen holds a Ph.D. from the University of Turku, Finland, 1975. He is a full professor of philosophy in the Department of Ethics and Social Philosophy, University of Helsinki. Professor Airaksinen is also the head of department and former assistant dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. He has been a visiting professor in the Texas A&M University (1994–1996) and is a life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. Professor Airaksinen has published and lectured extensively on professional ethics, medical ethics, and problems of social justice. He has also written on Thomas Hobbes, George Berkeley, and Hegel. His books include *The Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft* (1999), *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (1995), and *The Ethics of Coercion* (1988). Professor Airaksinen has written a number of university and high school textbooks in philosophy and non-religious moral education.