

In beginning to think about this topic, one might well start with some clear and perhaps undisputed examples of professional groups and of professionalism in action. If we agree that these are good examples, then the next step will be to try to analyze them to see if we can obtain a few hypotheses about the nature of professionalism. If we continue this process far enough, we might expect eventually to come to an understanding of professionalism in general. Let us then consider for a few minutes these examples of professional groups:

Physicians

Nurses

Lawyers

Scientists, chemists for a more narrow case

Airline pilots

Diplomats

Sometimes the word "professional" is used simply as a synonym for "that is this person's job or livelihood", as when we might say "he is a professional marshmallow taster". Here we only want to identify someone's occupation, and surely that is not the sense of "professionalism" that interests us as a concept. The idea we now want to focus upon is one that includes aspects such as long-term training or education as a prerequisite for entrance into the profession. One can get a job if one can persuade someone to hire one. One would have gotten a profession in the sense we don't mean. But there are some jobs one can get only if one is a professional, and when one gets those special jobs, one is said to have entered a profession.

Looking back at the examples mentioned earlier, we can easily see that these occupations are not "just jobs", but are professions. Why are they not "just jobs"? Well, for one thing, we seem to respect such professions more than we do mere occupations. Naturally, I am only making a distinction and not disparaging the tasks of a marshmallow taster, or any other non-professional occupation. Why do we seem to respect true professions more than we do occupations? Perhaps it is because these professions perform some vital function for humanity or society at large, a function without which our life or our present way of living would be in danger, or would be diminished. Let us try this idea out with the example professions

mentioned earlier. Physicians and nurses are respected because they perform the vital function of maintaining health, curing disease, prolonging life, and many other similar things. Lawyers serve to maintain a kind of social peace by designing rules and procedures related to conflict resolution. Scientists are committed to a long-term search (which transcends single generations) for the truth about nature, something that we as a species find to be valuable in a very broad way. Airline pilots and their associates provide safe, convenient, and speedy travel, contributing to making possible the kind of world society we now have. This is an interesting example because airline pilots have only recently become professionals -- it used to be just a job. This suggests that society as a whole changed and that a new set of conditions made it vitally important for air pilots to become professional. Diplomats, of course, are somewhat like lawyers written large -- they try to do for the international scene what lawyers try to do for national or regional society. The vital importance of this profession is undoubted in the nuclear age.

If we are trying to think of Park Administration in professional terms, we might ask, does it as an occupational field exhibit these additional qualities that also make it a profession? I suspect that if it has not yet seen itself in professional terms, it is inevitable that it will shortly do so. It is obvious that as an occupation it requires considerable education and expertise. It is conscious of its history, and of its thrust into a future. It is now widely respected through activities of the National Park Service and related fields of endeavor. But, one might ask, what is the vital function this field performs for humanity, a feature which we saw to be important in the other examples we considered? If there is no such vital function, then perhaps we admire Park Administrators because they are nice people, not because they are professionals. I suggest that originally, say 100 years ago, there was no vital function for Park Administrators to perform, because almost anyone could easily place themselves into the beauties of nature by simply walking a short distance. Moreover, 100 years ago knowledge of our ability to pollute ourselves to death was hardly existent. Our natural habitat was seen as an eternal indestructable given. But now mankind has transformed the face of the earth, not for the better I would say, and unless persons of average means shall lose all contact with nature in its basic form, we need a profession

whose ideals are to protect the remaining natural resources we still possess, a profession that will not simply be a custodian, but which will vigorously seek to educate our entire society concerning the dangers to our species associated with the steady loss of our species' actual natural habitat, without which we would not exist. This is certainly an issue large and important enough around which to form a profession, although it would have entered very few minds 100 years ago that such a thing would be vital in the middle of the twentieth century.

I hope you will continue to build your status as a profession, and that a few of my preliminary ideas might be of some assistance. In thinking further about the examples I gave earlier, I saw that another aspect of professionalism seems to be that a profession is a corporate personality. This is a complicated topic, but part of what is involved is that because the profession as a whole has a set of vital ideals, individual persons will often yield their purely personal interests in favor of the corporate ideals. For a corporate personality to exist, there must also be unique means of communication among the members -- such things as meetings, journals, study groups, institutes, or schools. And among these there will usually be a hierarchical order. A sign that a corporate personality has come into being is that in conversation what was discussed before as an action or an operation is talked of now as if it were a noun instead of a verb. Or, instead of talking about individuals only, persons within a corporate personality begin to talk about the abstraction "the profession". Thus, prior to the advent of the profession of airline pilots a flyer taking some passengers for a ride from Dallas to Fort Worth might fly entirely as he personally saw fit, and most likely there would have been no problem because this aircraft probably would have been the only one in the sky at that time. But imagine an airline pilot nowadays announcing just before takeoff that the flight would proceed in some arbitrary manner. This pilot would probably lose his license, lose the respect of fellow pilots, and probably be cited for "unprofessional conduct".

Let us imagine that kind of situation in the context of something a Park Administrator might be doing. Suppose a park ranger decided one day in Yellowstone that she was tired of backpacking into a wilderness area, and that she would set about to construct a railroad into the site,

to make access easier. To thus act for individual comfort, against the greater and more important ideals of the profession of park rangering, would no doubt bring this ranger's superiors to begin to speak with abstract nouns such as "unprofessional", "not in the best interests of the service", etc.

It seems clear by now that another aspect of a genuine profession is that its members are bound together to some extent by moral ties. And if someone is thrown out of a profession, it is often on some kind of moral grounds. This is another important difference between a professional and a person with just an occupation -- one cannot be thrown out of an occupation, there one can only lose one's job. But for a lawyer to be disbarred, means inability to function in the future as a lawyer. We might say that the ethics of profession^x are those moral features minimally needed so that each member of the profession can maximally contribute to the profession's ideals, with the least hampering of any other member's ability to contribute to those ideals. Many professions have listed these morals in special "Codes of Ethics". A place in which ethics is often overlooked, but a place in which it plays a very large role, is in the terminology a profession routinely uses. It can become a professionally immoral act to misuse a key item of terminology. For example, if a physician during surgery uses an improper technical term, it could result in misunderstanding, which could cause injury or loss of life. Persons with active imaginations can no doubt envisage other such cases from the professions of flying or diplomacy. In the case of Park Administrating, if a technical term is misused, no immediate loss of life or property may occur, but perhaps twenty or thirty years hence, the adverse consequences of that misuse may become apparent, like cancer ten years after over-exposure to radiation. Scientists in general, and chemists in particular, have been leaders in showing the importance of this matter, and have devoted considerable time to drawing up codes (ethical codes, mind you) of terminology. Far from being gay little abstractions, words can actually kill.

In studying the moral issues important for your profession, I suggest you consider to some extent the works in ethics which moral philosophers have developed over the years. These works do not usually attempt to tell one how to be moral, but instead attempt to clarify issues, and

provide resources, which a person or group can then use to make their own decisions. In particular, in recent years there has arisen a field of environmental ethics within philosophy which should have a particularly strong relevance to your profession. I list a few books which could start your research.

Philosophy and Environmental Crisis, ed. William T. Blackstone,
University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1974.

World Hunger and Moral Obligation, ed. William Aiken and Hugh La
Follette, Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1977.

Animal Rights and Human Obligations, ed. Tom Regan and Peter Singer,
Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1976.

A Search for Environmental Ethics: An Initial Bibliography, Mary
Anglemyer, Eleanor R. Seagraves, Catherine C. LeMaistre,
Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, D. C., 1980.

Ethical Issues in Business: A Philosophical Approach, ed. Thomas
Donaldson and Patricia H. Werhane, Prentice-Hall: Englewood
Cliffs, 1979.

Ethical Theory and Business, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp and Norman E. Bowie,
Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1979.

It seems to me that your profession and ones allied with it are very important to our future as a species. Without your finest professional efforts in educating all persons of every social and economic class as to the incontrovertible necessity of maintaining our habitat, we may be the first species in the history of the earth to have provided the means for our own extinction.

SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON THE
CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISM

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