

THE ETHICAL BASIS OF PROFESSIONAL ROLES

Abstract

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The main contention of this paper is that professional roles are best understood as an embodiment in practice of a, more or less, coherent set of normative demands. The source of the normative force of these demands lies in both public expectations and professional tradition. Philosophical counseling of professionals should therefore focus upon articulating this normative core of professional roles

The first step in the paper's argument is a short defense of this – Weberian and "idealistic" – conception of professional roles. After these preliminary remarks, some general conclusions regarding the ethical language befitting this conception will be drawn. Thus some outmoded words – such as "loyalty", "calling", "vocation" and "betrayal" – will be taken out of the closet and refreshed in the open air

The second stage is focusing on a single profession – journalism – which seems to be in some dire straits regarding the self-understanding of its own normative backbone. This focus opens the way to a critical examination of the adequacy of the paper's conception. Does the strong normative view of professional roles apply to our (volatile, constantly changing, cynical, power and money driven) contemporary society? Choosing journalism – arguably the most "post-modern" of all contemporary professions – presents the severest challenge to the Weberian conception here presented

Finally, a case study in actual counseling is presented, in which this strong normative conception of professionalism was used. The case was of a lawyer by training who found herself in a position of an auditor in the civil service. It became clear through the counseling that she was attentive to two distinct (and contradictory) normative calls: the one reflecting the normative demands which govern the legal profession, the other reflecting the auditor's normative demands. As in all cases of true dilemmas regarding action in the public sphere, there was no easy way out. But it seems that the articulation of the conflict in terms of two normative structures, demanding the professional's loyalty, did aid the individual seeking counsel better to understand her position and even suggested some new ways of action which were not entertained prior to the counseling process