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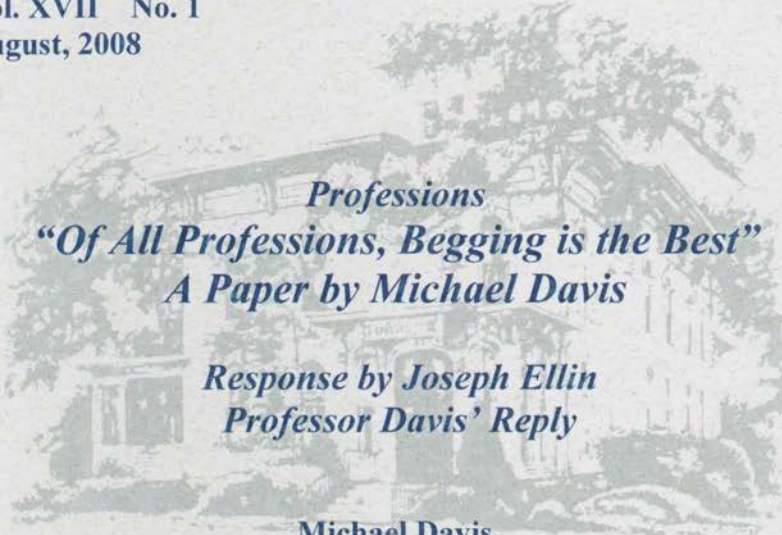
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"Of All Professions, Begging is the Best"
A Paper by Michael Davis

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Professor Davis' Reply

Michael Davis
Illinois Institute Center of Technology, Chicago
Center for the Study of Ethics in the Profession

Joseph Ellin
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
Philosophy

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

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**Western Michigan University
3024 Moore Hall
1903 West Michigan Avenue
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5328**

The purpose of WMU's Center for the Study of Ethics is to encourage and support research, teaching, and service to the university and community in areas of and professional ethics. These areas include, but are not restricted to: business, education, engineering, government, health and human services, law, media, medicine, science and technology.

Tel: 269-387-4397

ethicscenter@wmich.edu

Fax: 269-387-4390

<http://www.wmich.edu/ethics>

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Michael Davis
Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago
Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions

Joseph Ellin
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
Philosophy

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Michael Davis

Michael Davis is Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions and Professor of Philosophy, Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. Among his recent publications are: *Thinking Like an Engineer* (Oxford, 1998); *Ethics and the University* (Routledge, 1999); *Profession, Code, and Ethics* (Ashgate, 2002); *Actual Social Contract and Political Obligation* (Mellen, 2002); and *Engineering Ethics* (Ashgate, 2005). He has also co-edited (with Andrew Stark) *Conflict of Interest in the Professions* (Oxford, 2001) and (with Elliot Cohen) *Ethics and the Legal Profession* (Prometheus, forthcoming).

Joseph Ellin

Joseph Ellin is Professor of Philosophy at Western Michigan University. He teaches Ethics, Philosophy of Law, Medical Ethics, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, and 18th Century British Moral Philosophy.

“Of All Professions Begging is the Best” Some Problems in the Study of Professions

Michael Davis

My title comes from a rare version of an Irish folk song, “The Little Beggar Man”. The rest of the stanza is worth quoting here, since it explains why begging is “the best profession”:

For when a man is tired he can sit down and rest.
He can beg for his dinner, he has nothing else to do
But slip around the corner with his old rigadoo¹

We can, I hope, agree that, whatever this beggar is, he is not a member of a profession—in the sense of “profession” relevant to professional ethics. Begging may be his occupation, trade, or calling. Indeed, in the most common version of the song, the line quoted in my title is actually, “Of all the trades a-going, sure begging is the best”. One question I want to answer in this talk is why begging cannot be his profession (in the relevant sense), though it certainly is his trade or occupation and may even be his calling. Another question I want to answer is why engineering is a profession, when it is, and why its being a profession is

¹ A “rigadoo” is probably a knapsack (what the beggar is rigged out in).

important for understanding both engineering and the technology it produces.

This talk has four parts. The first explains what is wrong with the classic ways of defining profession, an inadequate method. The second part offers two alternative methods, both “philosophical”, explaining why one is better than the other. The third part works out in detail the implications of the definition that the second philosophical method generates. The last part considers an objection—correct as to the facts—that the preferred definition is not “universal” but “culturally limited”.

1. Sociological Approaches to Profession

“Profession” has several senses in English—and, indeed, in most European languages that have derived the word from Latin. “Profession” can be a mere synonym for “occupation”. It is in this sense that begging can be “the best profession”. It is also in this sense that we may, without irony or metaphor, speak of a “professional athlete” or “professional thief”—provided the person in question makes a living by the activity in question. This broad sense of “profession” is, I think, plainly not the one relevant professional ethics. Nor is the somewhat narrower sense (also common in English) of honest occupation, the sense that allows us to say: “Plumbing is a profession; prostitution is not.” Our concern is the sense of “profession” allowing us to say, for

example, “Plumbing is *not* a profession; engineering is.” Our concern is a special kind of honest occupation, one that we can compare to other similar occupations—law, medicine, architecture, journalism, and so on.

There are at least three approaches to conceptualizing profession in this special-kind-of-honest-occupation sense. One, what we may call “the sociological”, has its origin in the social sciences. Its language tends to be statistical. The statement of the conception, a definition of sorts, does not purport to give necessary or sufficient conditions for some occupation to be a profession but merely what is true of “most professions”, “the most important professions”, “the most developed professions”, or the like. Every sociologist concerned with professions seems to have a list of professions that the definition must capture. Law and medicine are always on the list; the clergy, often; and other occupations commonly acknowledged as professions, such as engineering, sometimes. Begging is never on the list.¹

¹ For more on the enormous variety of sociological definitions, see John Kultgen, *Ethics and Professionalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1988), especially, pp. 60-62. See also the recent exchange between: David Sciulli, “Continental Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Contributions”, *Current Sociology* 53 (November 2005): 915-942; and Rolf Torstendahl, “The Need for a Definition of ‘Profession’”, *Current Sociology* 53 (November 2005): 947 - 951.

We may distinguish three traditions in the sociology of professions (what we may call): the economic, the political, and the anthropological. Though individual sociologists often mix their elements, distinguishing them as “ideal types” should help us to think about them more clearly, even in their less ideal (that is, mixed) forms. What is wrong with all three ideal types, a failure to understand how central ethics is to profession, remains even when the types mix.

The economic tradition interprets professions as primarily a means of controlling market forces for the benefit of the professionals themselves, that is, as a form of monopoly, guild, or labor union. The economic tradition has two branches: Marxist and free market. Among recent sociologists in the Marxist tradition, the best is still Magali Sarfatti Larson (*The Rise of Professionalism*, 1977); among sociologists in the free-market tradition, Andrew Abbott (*The System of Professions*, 1988) is a good example. For sociologist in the economic tradition (whether Marxist or free market), it is the would-be members of a profession who, by acting together under favorable conditions, create their monopoly. Successful professions have high income, workplace autonomy, control of who can join, and so on; less successful professions lack some or most of these powers (more or less). Morality, if relevant at all, is relevant merely as a means to monopoly, a way of making a “trademark”

(the profession's name) more attractive to potential employers. The success in question may be independent of what participants in events sought. The economic tradition loves discovering "the invisible hand" at work, especially, attempts to serve one's own interest that in fact serve the public interest instead. Like the monopoly itself, signs of the profession's success may be embedded in law but need not be. What matters for the economic tradition are market arrangements ("economic realities"), not (mere) law.

For the political tradition, however, law is crucial. Often associated with Max Weber, the political tradition interprets profession as primarily a legal condition, a matter of (reasonably effective) laws that set standards of (advanced) education, require a license to practice, and impose discipline upon practitioners through formal (governmental) structures. "Professional ethics"—and, indeed, even ordinary moral standards—are, if distinguished at all, treated as just another form of regulation. To be a profession is to be an occupation bureaucratized in a certain way. For the political tradition, it is society (government) that creates professions out of occupations, and society (the public) that benefits (whoever else may benefit as well). The political tradition substitutes society's very visible hands for the invisible hand of economics. The members of the profession have little or no part in making their profession. A

“Moral ideal” is not, I should add, a mere synonym for “public service”. Though the ideals I just listed are easily understood as forms of public service, some are not. For example, the natural sciences typically seek a shared understanding of “nature” (different sciences focusing on different parts of nature). They seek to make known the truth about nature without necessarily claiming to serve anyone. Discovering and sharing the truth about nature is nonetheless a moral ideal if, but only if, we *all* (at our rational best) *are* interested in knowing about nature, interested enough to praise, support, or otherwise aid those engaged in the natural sciences, even those studying parts of nature, such as distant galaxies, knowing about which does us absolutely no good (or, at least, no good beyond satisfying curiosity). That scientists do not seek to serve us all (“the public”) is consistent with their in fact serving us all. Not the intentions of scientists but “human nature” (what interests us at our rational best) determines whether the ideal that scientists serve is a moral ideal and therefore whether science can be a profession.

Perhaps I can be a morally decent person without actively serving any moral ideal, but an occupation cannot be a profession unless it serves one. A profession serves its chosen moral ideal by setting (and following) appropriate standards for carrying on its occupation, standards that go beyond what law, market,

of profession and, more importantly, is unlikely to. Sociology's way of developing definitions, that is, abstracting from a (short) list of clear cases a few characteristics common to most or all, is unlikely to yield a single definition—or, at least, is unlikely to yield one until sociologists agree on a list of clear cases sufficiently long to exclude most candidate definitions. Today, only two professions appear on all sociological lists (law and medicine). That is much too few to derive a widely accepted definition. Whatever the utility of a particular sociological definition for a particular line of social research, no such definition is likely to seem definitive to more than a minority of sociologists. Why sociologists continue to generate definitions in this way need not concern us here.³

Philosophers who recognize this diversity often try to patch together a “consensus definition” or a “useful definition”. So, for example, the best selling textbook in engineering ethics suggests that “the following five characteristics will be useful in distinguishing professions from nonprofessional occupations.”⁴ The five characteristics are: 1) extensive training of an

³ For an attempt to explain the attractions of the various sociological approaches, see Michael Burrage and Rolf Torstendahl, *Professions in Theory and History: Rethinking the Study of Professions* (Sage Publications: London, 1990), especially the Introduction.

⁴ Charles E. Harris, Jr., Michael S. Pritchard, and Michael J. Rabins, *Engineering Ethics: Concepts and Cases*, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth: Belmont, California, 2000), p. 12.

intellectual character; 2) knowledge and skills vital to the well-being of society; 3) a monopoly or near monopoly on the provision of their distinctive services; 4) an unusual degree of autonomy in the workplace; and 5) a claim to be regulated by ethical standards.⁵ The sign that the five characteristics derive from sociology is that they are hedged about with “typically”, “usually”, and “often”. As often happens when philosophers derive a definition from sociology, there is no attempt to compare what everyone knows with what the sociologists say. For example, while lawyers do have a near monopoly on legal work in the US, no other profession has a similar position in the market. Even physicians must share health care with dentists, osteopaths, podiatrists, nurses, pharmacists, midwives, chiropractors, faith healers, and so on.

This is reason enough for philosophers to stay clear of sociological definitions of profession—and, perhaps, to help sociologists do better. But, for our purposes, there is a much stronger reason to do so. Few, if any, of these sociological definitions would rule out an immoral profession—a profession of thieves, assassins, torturers, or the like. Assume, for example, that there is enough employment for torturers to form an

⁵ Harris, Pritchard, and Rabins, pp. 12-13.

occupation. Nothing in the *economic* conception of profession as such rules out the grant to certain persons of a monopoly on torture—with resulting high income, workplace autonomy, control of who can join them, and so on.⁶ Similarly, nothing in the *political* conception as such rules out laws requiring torturers to be educated in certain ways, to pass certain tests, to be licensed, and to be subject to having their license revoked should they prove incompetent, careless, or otherwise unsatisfactory. Last, there is nothing in the *anthropological* conception as such to rule out special knowledge of how to torture defining an occupational community, a profession of torturers. Because there is nothing in the sociological approach as such to require professions to be moral undertakings, there is nothing in it to rule out a profession of torturers. Individual sociologists are, of course, free to define profession to exclude torturers (since none of the usual lists of clear cases includes any profession that routinely torturers). But sociologists are equally free to define professions as predominantly male—because law, medicine, and other professions on a typical list of clear cases are predominantly male.

⁶ For a well-imagined example of such an arrangement of thieves, see Terry Pratchett, *Guards! Guards!* (HarperTorch: New York, 2001). Pratchett describes this arrangement as a “thieves’ guild”, though, not a profession.

Sociological conceptions of profession seem to be mere collections of characteristics rather than coherent wholes; they also seem to be somewhat arbitrary in what they collect. So, for example, sociologists have long equated professions with consulting occupations (sometimes also called “free professions” or “liberal professions”), excluding from professional status (or, at least “full professional status”) most engineers, journalists, nurses, teachers, police, and others who work as employees in large organizations. When doctors and lawyers themselves recently began to be absorbed into large organizations, much was written about their “de-professionalization”, though these professions otherwise continued much as before. Sociologists have no way to distinguish the accidental from the central features of profession. That, I think, is reason enough to reject the sociological approach, even though it continues to dominate discussion of what professions are.

2. Two Philosophical Approaches to Profession

The other two approaches to conceptualizing profession are, as I said, philosophical. They offer necessary and sufficient conditions for an occupation to count as a profession. While a philosophical conception may leave the status of a small number of would-be professions unsettled, it should at least be able to explain (in a satisfying way) why those would-be professions are

neither clearly professions nor clearly not professions.

Philosophical conceptions are sensitive to counter-example in a way sociological conceptions are not. Philosophers cannot use the standard defense of sociologists confronted with a counter-example: "I said 'most', not 'all'."

One philosophical approach to conceptualizing profession is (what I shall call) the Cartesian. It answers the question, "What do *I* think a profession is?" It attempts to piece together in a coherent way the contents of one person's mind. There may be as many Cartesian conceptions of profession as there are people who ask themselves what they mean by "profession". The Cartesian approach has no procedure for mediating between one individual's definition and another's. That, indeed, is one reason I call this approach Cartesian, its tendency to be solipsistic, and a good reason to reject it. Another reason to reject the Cartesian approach is that it yields definitions as indifferent to morality as the sociological approach yields. My favorite admits the *mafia* to be a profession.⁷

⁷ John T. Sanders, "Honor among Thieves: Some Reflections on Codes of Professional Ethics", *Professional Ethics* 2 (Fall/Winter 1993): 83-103. For another (more plausible) example of the Cartesian approach, see Daryl Koehn, *The Ground of Professional Ethics* (Routledge: London, 1994). Like Kultgen, Michael Bayles, *Professional Ethics* (Wadsworth: Belmont, California, 1981), seems to offer a sociological definition.

The other philosophical approach to conceptualizing profession is (more or less) Socratic. It answers the question, “What do *we*—professionals and philosophers—(‘really’) think a profession is?” Such a conception must be worked out through a conversation, a typical Socratic dialogue in which Cartesian *I*’s unite into a public *we*. A member of a profession (so called) says what she means by “profession”. Philosophers, or other members of a profession, test the definition with counter-examples, consider the consequences of adopting the definition, and otherwise examine it in the way philosophers typically do. Any problem so discovered should be fixed by revising the definition in a way that seems to resolve the problem. The definition is again examined. And so the process continues until the definition satisfies everyone participating in the conversation. This critical conversation underwrites the claim that the resulting definition is “what we *really* think a profession is” (that is, what we think it is after enough reflection).

The conversation need not end with a definition that includes all groups originally called “profession”. The conversation may lead some participants to withdraw their claim to belong to a profession. There is nothing canonical about the original list of professions. The Socratic approach nonetheless provides a procedure for resolving disputes, something neither the sociological nor the Cartesian does. Individual insights must

be incorporated into a single definition on which everyone agrees. The Socratic procedure concludes only when there is no live alternative to its preferred definition, a procedure that necessarily excludes individual mistakes and even widespread but indefensible prejudices. In this respect, the resulting definition is a product of reason rather than individual or social psychology.

After many years of applying this method, I have reached the following definition:

A profession is a number of individuals in the same occupation voluntarily organized to earn a living by openly serving a moral ideal in a morally-permissible way beyond what law, market, morality, and public opinion would otherwise require.

3. Understanding the Socratic Definition

According to this Socratic definition, a profession is a group undertaking. There can be no profession with just one member. This is one respect in which members of a profession differ from mere experts, artists, or other knowledgeable, skillful, or inventive people. Such people can be one of a kind, working alone. A professional never works alone.

The group forming a profession must share an occupation (though its members may be only a subset of the occupation rather than the whole). Whether the occupants of a certain

collection of job descriptions constitutes one occupation, two, or several is, of course, as much a matter of decision as of fact—much as is the amount of hair one must have on his head to defend against a charge of baldness. To decide whether a certain collection of jobs is one or more than one occupation, we must know how similar the skills in question, how much movement between jobs of different descriptions, how similar the work of occupants of different jobs, how different from neighboring occupations the (candidate) “occupation” in question, and so on. There is usually room for argument—and, often, room even for more than one good answer. For example, for the purpose, say, of membership in the Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), computer scientists may count as belonging to the same occupation as electrical engineers. But, for some other purpose, say, the study of engineering ethics, computer scientists may be too different (since they have their own code of ethics). Though occupations do have fuzzy boundaries, they definitely have boundaries. Law and medicine cannot be one profession; nor can engineering and journalism. The underlying disciplines are just too different.

According to the Socratic definition, the group in question (the would-be profession) must organize to work in a morally permissible way. If there is no morally permissible way to carry on the occupation, it cannot be a profession. There can,

for example, be no profession of thieves, assassins, or torturers (since theft, murder, and torture are—almost always—morally wrong). Morality thus limits what can be a profession. Some professions (“professional thief”, “professional assassin”, “professional torturer”) are conceptually impossible.

The moral permissibility of a profession’s occupation is one way that, according to the Socratic definition, profession is conceptually connected with morality. There are two others. One concerns “moral ideals”. A moral ideal is a state of affairs “everyone” (every rational person at her rational best) recognizes as a significant good. (That the state of affairs in question is a good is shown by her wanting it—at her rational best—to exist; the significance of that good is shown by her being willing to help, in at least minor ways, to realize it.) For most professions, stating the distinctive moral ideal (roughly) is easy: physicians have organized to cure the sick, comfort the dying, and protect the healthy from disease; lawyers, to help people obtain justice within the law; and so on. Health, a comfortable death, justice within the law, and the like are goods we all recognize as significant. One reason the little beggar man can’t belong to a profession is that his conception of begging lacks a moral ideal to serve; his reasons for thinking begging “best” all concern his comfort or convenience.

“Moral ideal” is not, I should add, a mere synonym for “public service”. Though the ideals I just listed are easily understood as forms of public service, some are not. For example, the natural sciences typically seek a shared understanding of “nature” (different sciences focusing on different parts of nature). They seek to make known the truth about nature without necessarily claiming to serve anyone. Discovering and sharing the truth about nature is nonetheless a moral ideal if, but only if, we *all* (at our rational best) *are* interested in knowing about nature, interested enough to praise, support, or otherwise aid those engaged in the natural sciences, even those studying parts of nature, such as distant galaxies, knowing about which does us absolutely no good (or, at least, no good beyond satisfying curiosity). That scientists do not seek to serve us all (“the public”) is consistent with their in fact serving us all. Not the intentions of scientists but “human nature” (what interests us at our rational best) determines whether the ideal that scientists serve is a moral ideal and therefore whether science can be a profession.

Perhaps I can be a morally decent person without actively serving any moral ideal, but an occupation cannot be a profession unless it serves one. A profession serves its chosen moral ideal by setting (and following) appropriate standards for carrying on its occupation, standards that go beyond what law, market,

morality, and public opinion would otherwise require.⁸ At least one of those standards must be *special*, that is, something not imposed by law, market, (ordinary) morality, or public opinion. Otherwise the occupation (the candidate profession) would remain nothing more than an honest way to earn a living. So, for example, what distinguish the professional soldier from the mere mercenary (however expert and honest) are the special standards of a professional soldier. To be a (good) mercenary, one need only competently carry out the terms of one's (morally permissible) contract of employment, but to be a (good) professional soldier, one must do more, for example, serve one's country honorably even when the contract of employment, statute, ordinary morality, and public opinion do not require it.

The third way that professions are connected with morality (only implicit in the definition) is that their special standards are *morally binding* on every member of the profession simply because of that membership. These binding standards (the profession's "ethics") are what constitute the profession's essential organization, not its learned societies or regulatory agencies. But how is it possible for standards that are morally

⁸ There is no need for the moral ideal to be unique. Several professions may share the same moral ideal. So, for example, osteopaths (O.D.'s) seem to have the same moral ideal as physicians (M.D.'s). What distinguish osteopaths from physicians are their special standards, especially their educational standards and standards of practice.

permissible but not otherwise part of ordinary morality to be morally binding on members of a profession? That, I think, is the central question in the philosophy of professions. Here is my answer.

Professions must be “professed” (that is, declared or claimed). Physicians must declare themselves to be physicians; lawyers must claim to be lawyers; engineers must say they are engineers; and so on. They need not advertise or otherwise *publicly* announce their profession. There is nothing conceptually impossible about a secret profession, for example, a profession of spies (assuming what they do is morally permissible). But even members of a profession of spies would have to declare their profession to potential clients or employers. Professionals must declare their profession in order to earn a living by it. They cannot be hired as such-and-such—say, a chemical engineer—unless potential employers know that they are “chemical engineers” (in the special-standards sense). They cannot, that is, be hired as a chemical engineer if they only claim to know a lot about chemical plants, to have earned a living by designing, managing, or overseeing the maintenance of certain chemical plants for several years, and to be good at it. If chemical engineers have a good reputation for what they do, the (truthful)

declaration of membership in that profession (“I am a chemical engineer”) will aid them in earning a living as a chemical engineer. They will find appropriate employment. If, however, their profession has a bad reputation (or none), a declaration of membership will be a disadvantage (or, at least, no help). Compare, for example, your response to the declaration, “I am a chemical engineer”, with your response to “I am an alchemist”).

Where members of a profession freely declare their membership, the profession’s way of pursuing its moral ideal will be a voluntary, morally-permissible cooperative practice. The members of the profession will be members because they were entitled to be, wished to be, and spoke up accordingly (that is, were open about their profession). They may cease to be members simply by ceasing to claim membership.

In general, members of an occupation free to declare membership in the corresponding profession will declare it only if the declaration seems likely to benefit them (that is, serve at least one purpose of their own at what seems a reasonable cost). The purpose need not be self-interested, though it often is; there is nothing to prevent some, or even all, members of a profession entering it, for example, simply to be in a good position to help others in a certain way. If hired (in part) because they declared their membership, members of a profession will be in position to have the benefits of the profession, employment as a member,

because the employer sought such-and-such and they (truthfully) declared themselves to be one. They will also be in position to take advantage of the practice by doing less than the standards of the practice require, even though the expectation (justified by their declaration of profession) was that they would do what the profession's standards require.⁹ If cheating consists in violating the rules of a voluntary, morally permissible cooperative practice, then every member of a profession is—because of that membership—in a position to cheat. Since, all else equal, cheating is morally wrong, every member of a profession has a moral obligation, all else equal, to do as the special standards of the profession require. The professional standards are morally binding much as a promise is.

An occupation “professionalizes” by organizing as a profession, that is, by adopting special standards; it “de-professionalizes” (ceases to be a profession) by abandoning such standards. “Professionalism” is (strictly speaking) simply acting as the standards of the (relevant) profession require. To be a “professional” (or “a real pro”) is to be a member (in good standing) of the profession in question—or (by analogy) to act as

⁹ They are, of course, in position to take advantage of the professional practice in large part at least, precisely because law, morality, market, and public opinion do not enforce those standards (or at least enforce them effectively enough to make following the standards prudent without the additional moral obligation arising from profession).

if one were (that is, to act in the way the relevant standards require or, perhaps, should require). Professional standards are, of course, open to interpretation. Part of being a professional is interpreting the relevant standards in ways the profession recognizes as legitimate, for example, interpreting a certain technical standard taking into account the moral ideal it was designed to serve. Conduct is “unprofessional” if it is inconsistent with the profession’s standards (properly interpreted). Since only members of a profession are subject to the profession’s standards, only they can violate them. Someone not a member of the profession can be a charlatan, mountebank, or impostor, but cannot engage in unprofessional conduct.

Professional standards may, and generally do, vary from profession to profession. There is no reason why the professional standards of engineers should be the same as those of lawyers—or even architects. A profession’s standards depend, at least in part, on opinion within the profession and therefore change from time to time as opinion changes. A profession’s standards generally appear in a range of documents, including admission requirements, rules of practice, and disciplinary procedures. A profession is organized (successfully) insofar as its special

standards are realized in the practice of its members, in what they do and how they evaluate themselves and one another.

This elucidation of the Socratic definition is also a “proof” of it (insofar as a definition can be proved). Insofar you found the description of profession it generates unsurprising even when, as it often does, it deviates from this or that sociological definition (for example, by not requiring professions to be licensed or have a monopoly), you are recognizing it as a good definition of profession (a practice with which we are all familiar). And, insofar as the definition seems to help explain how ethics (special moral standards) is a necessary part of profession, it identifies itself as a definition peculiarly relevant to the study of professional ethics. And, insofar as other definitions fail one or both these tests (as all seem to), this definition must be “the” definition of profession.

4. An Objection Considered: Code of Ethics?

We turn now to one important objection to the analysis provided so far. One of the documents stating professional standards may be (what is often called) “a code of ethics”, a formal statement of the most general rules of practice. Yet, while many definitions of profession require such a code as a condition of being a profession, the Socratic definition does not. That omission is both important in itself and as further proof of the

definition. While a formal code of ethics is a central feature of professions in the United States, Canada, Britain, and most other English-speaking countries and has been since early in the twentieth century, few such codes seem to have existed outside English-speaking countries until after the Second World War. I say “almost” because there certainly seem to have been some, for example, the code that the Japanese Society of Civil Engineers adopted in 1938 (“Beliefs and Principles of Practice for Civil Engineers”). Perhaps, if we looked, we would find many more such examples.

The use of the word “profession” in anything like the special-kind-of-honest-occupation sense discussed here also seems to have begun in English-speaking countries only in the last hundred years or so and to have spread elsewhere only in the last fifty. There is, I think, little reason to doubt that “profession” (in the sense discussed here) is an English invention much as the railroad engine and parliamentary democracy are—and, like the railroad engine and parliamentary democracy, has spread to much of the rest of the world. Every new thing must begin somewhere.

Yet some non-English-speaking countries without a (formal) code of professional ethics (or their own word for profession in our preferred sense) seem to have entities otherwise much like professions in English-speaking countries. So,

requiring a *formal* code or requiring it to apply to something called a “profession” seems unnecessarily Anglo-centric—as well as settling by definition what would otherwise be an interesting empirical question (whether a certain occupation in this or that country is a profession even though it lacks a formal code of ethics). It is therefore evidence for the Socratic definition offered here that it does not require a profession to have a formal code of ethics (or to be called “a profession”) but instead instructs us how to determine by empirical research whether a particular occupation is organized in a certain way. What it tells us to look for is the triple connection between occupation and morality just described. It is this complex connection that distinguishes profession from otherwise similar forms of social organization, such as labor unions, learned societies, and licensed trades.

In many countries lacking formal codes of professional ethics, perhaps in all, technical standards incorporate the same requirements a code of ethics would in England, Australia, or the United States, though implicit in details rather than explicit in the more general terms characteristic of a code of ethics. In those countries, the code of ethics *may*, in this sense, be both in writing (in technical standards) and still “unwritten” (that is, not formalized as a “code of ethics”). Whether the technical standards of physicians, lawyers, or engineers in any country in

fact serve as an implicit code of ethics depends on the attitude that the members of the relevant occupation in the country in question (or at least most of them) generally take toward those standards (assuming the standards to be morally permissible and designed to serve a certain moral ideal). If, for example, engineers in Turkey regard their technical standards as (primarily) external impositions, the standards count as law, not as an (implicit) code of ethics (whatever their content). If, however, each Turkish engineer (or, at least, most of them) regard their technical standards as rules they want every other Turkish engineer to follow even if that would mean having to do the same, that is, as part of a cooperative practice, then (all else equal) the standards do constitute a code of ethics (even if an unusually detailed one and even if enacted into law)—and Turkey has a profession of engineering.

I have informally carried on such empirical research for more than a decade, mostly by asking questions of engineers or professors of engineering I meet either when they are traveling in the US or I am traveling abroad. I now have the impression that some countries have an engineering profession indistinguishable from the American even though they do not have a code of ethics or a term for profession not borrowed from English. Dutch engineers are my best example—or at least were until the Royal Institution of Engineers adopted a code of ethics. I also have the

impression that a few countries may lack an engineering profession altogether. Interestingly, the clearest example of that is not some underdeveloped country in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, but one of the most advanced countries of Western Europe, the birthplace of engineering. French engineers I questioned seemed to understand themselves as government agents (even if working for a private employer). They served “the state”, not some independent moral ideal. They understood themselves as bound by law and morality but not by a code of professional ethics (as I have interpreted that term). Indeed, they initially understood “profession” to be a synonym for “occupation” and had great trouble understanding what I meant by “professional ethics”. They initially thought I meant the application to engineering of moral theories—what philosophers teach in a course called “Ethics”. If my impression of French engineers is accurate, then professional ethics is still “culturally relative”, not—like engineering or physics—more or less universal.

Understanding an occupation as a profession has many consequences both for teaching and for research. So, for example, if engineering in a particular society is a profession, all engineers (and only engineers) in that society belong to one community, engineering. Whether they belong as well to other communities—a province, company, industry, or occupational

category (“technologists”), they will have distinctive ways of working simply because they are engineers. To understand engineers as engineers, we must study their profession (as well as their function, discipline, and occupation). If we are to teach engineering ethics in such a society, we must take into account not only the substance of their code of ethics (whether explicit or implicit) but also the special reason a professional has to obey it (“Don’t cheat”). The same is true for any other profession.

Notes

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Of All Professions, Prostitution Is The Oldest (Except Possibly for Teaching)

Joseph Ellin

Michael Davis would have us believe that there is a Socratically correct definition of 'profession.' Dialogue will get us there; he tells us where dialogue (much of it internal, perhaps) has gotten him. I am not convinced.

There are amateur athletes and amateur musicians, but no such thing as an amateur prostitute. If you take money for sex you are a prostitute; if not, you aren't. Hence 'professional prostitute' is redundant, as 'professional musician' is not. But there are semi-pro athletes and (no doubt) semi-pro musicians; a person who gives an occasional concert for pay is not a professional musician. Professionals earn their living at doing what they profess, as Davis says, but this condition is not sufficient to make one a professional: someone drafted into the army earns his living (during the term of his service) by being a soldier but is not a professional soldier. There is (humorously) such a thing as a professional student, but this term does not describe a student who attends university on a full-ride scholarship. In this sense, 'professional' describes someone who makes a career of some occupation, and who thus identifies

himself with that occupation (independently, perhaps, of whether he's actually earning a living doing it: a professional student is someone who never leaves school, not someone who earns money by studying).

There appears to be a somewhat suppressed difference between being a professional and having a profession. Professional athletes are professionals; in fact, this sense of profession, earning money by doing something at a high level of skill, may well be the only sense of professional in common usage. But is being an athlete a profession? My sense of English is that we don't quite want to allow that. Yet why should we say that being a prostitute is having a profession, while hesitating to say the same about being an athlete? But perhaps I am mistaken about what others would say: perhaps they would say that playing sports for a living is indeed having a profession. Other than counting noses, there seems no way to adjudicate this disagreement, if it exists; and indeed as Davis points out, there is very little agreement about what occupations are and what are not properly called 'professions.' This suggests that any attempt to formulate a common definition is unlikely to succeed other than by stipulation.

Davis says there are many 'senses' of the word professional, and indeed there are. This fact alone would not

make the prospect of finding one central definition, very encouraging. Socratic definition is possible only where usage is standardized sufficiently to allow the possibility of a common sense (deviant cases and usages aside). Socrates thought this held for such terms as 'justice' and 'virtue,' and 'wisdom,' but only in an extreme form of Platonic realism can we suppose that it must hold for all or most interesting terms in the language. Davis dismisses what he calls the 'sociological' approach, in which one collects actual uses and more or less makes lists of how the term is used, but appears to give no argument why this approach is less satisfactory than the Socratic search for a common definition. Even Socrates (on one view anyway) did not simply assume there were necessary and sufficient conditions for every term he examined; rather, his method is purely hypothetical: on the hypothesis that there are (or may be) necessary and sufficient conditions, we look to see if we can discover them. Of course where Socrates and sociologists differ is that Socrates subjects proposed definitions to rigorous examination; his goal is not a consensus definition but a consensus that has withstood severe logical tests. Comparison of linguistic intuitions about word meanings-sociology-is useful, perhaps necessary, but is hardly exhaustive of the Socratic method. Nonetheless such comparison is revealing, and what it reveals here is that, as Davis somewhat too cheerfully admits, we seem to have no common list of

professions, at least judging by what he has found among the sociologists: "Law and medicine are always on the list; the clergy, often; and other occupations commonly acknowledged as professions, such as engineering, sometimes" (2). This bodes ill for the prospects of finding a common definition: suppose Socrates and his interlocutors disagreed among themselves as to whether courage or cowardice, temperance or dissipation, were virtues or vices (they all agree that justice is a virtue, but disagree as to what justice is). Socrates would have to appeal (as he does) to extra-definitional consensus principles ('Surely we all agree that being virtuous makes the virtuous person happy') and empirical fact ('Is the dissipated person happy? Who can think so?'). Unless comparable principles are available, the hypothesis that by Socratic means a common meaning will be reached is likely to fail, it seems to me.

And it does. Let us turn to Davis' definition. Professions, he says, echoing the self-promotion of apologists, serve "a moral ideal in a morally permissible way..." where each of these conditions is necessary for some occupation to qualify as a profession. Now the first thing one thinks of here is that the term 'profession' is an honorific; we don't want to call anything a 'profession' unless we approve of it. So the first thesis in the definition is close to tautological. Close, but not quite, as Davis wants professions not only to be morally acceptable, but to serve

‘a moral ideal.’ And there is reason to think that he wants them to serve an actual moral ideal, not just a supposed or imagined moral ideal (he takes pains to explain this, pg 8). ‘Moral ideal’ carries weight for him, but it’s not clear what weight or how much, as it seems to take very little for an occupation to qualify: “a state of affairs everyone...at her rational best recognizes as a significant good” (8). Science, he says, serves the moral ideal of providing us knowledge (assuming that we all at our rational best want to obtain knowledge); but if that’s all that’s needed, then so does farming, so does clothesmaking, so does the construction trade, and many other occupations: for at our rational best, we all want to eat, to wear clothes, to obtain shelter. Or so one would imagine. There is a second disconnect between something being a profession, and something serving a moral ideal. I think just about anyone would regard the clergy as a profession, though perhaps for reasons Davis doesn’t give. Where does that leave those people who think that religion is a pernicious influence, and the clergy a force for evil, on the whole? There are many such people; their writings (once) used to be easy to find. On Davis’ account, they cannot hold that the ministry is a profession, which may surprise them. Why should their linguistic practice be bound by this particular stipulation? And the same observation could be made with regard to other dissidents. Libertarians for example might acknowledge that city planning, or public administration

generally, is a profession, but hold (as they do) that all such efforts do more harm than good and ought to be abolished.

Then there are those who do not take professional propaganda at face value. The moral ideal served by the legal profession, Davis and the ABA tell us, is “to help people obtain justice within the law (8).” We can accept that this objective is indeed a moral ideal while yet holding that the objective of the legal profession is much other than this and is closer to what O W Holmes once said it is, namely, to counsel clients how to achieve their ends without running afoul of the law. Davis might counter that the ideal as he states it ought to be the objective of lawyers, even if it isn’t; but this concession to reality would possibly require him to revise his definition of profession into something more hypothetical. I will offer this: a profession is an occupation where a moral ideal is available, whether or not the practitioners actually acknowledge or practice it.

Yet this condition is likely to run aground due to the very uncertainty about lists Davis cites. Surely, we want to say, teaching meets that criterion and is thus far a profession? Artists, in all their variety, serve, or could well serve, the ideal of enhancing human experience, and so qualify? And don’t athletes, actors, magician, jugglers and hosts of other entertainers in fact serve the (very important?) moral ideal of providing amusement, relaxation, and distraction from the worries of the day? Any

rational person would approve of this, would they not? But if we are unwilling to call these pursuits professions, or even if, as Davis presumably would agree, we are not clear whether these occupations are professions or not, then we are going either to have to say more about what a 'moral' ideal is, or reject the moral ideal condition.

Davis' second criterion is that a profession must serve its moral ideal "in a morally permissible way beyond what law (etc) require" (7), which he later elucidates as requiring a "special" moral standard (beyond the law etc). The professional soldier, he says, (apparently overlooking the distinction between being professional and having a profession) is distinguished from the "mere mercenary" by serving his country honorably. He does not explain this further but no doubt it is true that, theoretically at any rate, the mercenary is motivated by money and is thus available to the highest bidder, whereas the professional soldier's motivation is different, involving love of country perhaps, or a desire to protect his fellow-citizens. Putting aside the objections of pacifists, anarchists, anti-imperialists, anti-militarists, and perhaps others who think that no motivation is enough to excuse the professional soldier's willingness to earn his livelihood by killing (and therefore soldiering cannot serve a 'moral ideal'), we can ask why, other than by stipulation, this difference qualifies soldiering as a profession but disqualifies the mercenary. I have

no idea what soldiers (in Davis' sense) think about mercenaries, but though they may disdain them for the reason given, I doubt they regard them as not being members of the very same profession, the profession of soldering. So what is the Socratic line of inquiry which can show them that in this they are mistaken?

Conclusion. As noted, the term 'profession' is an honorific; occupations apply it to themselves in order to enhance their status and thus, income and authority. As an evaluative, it is unlikely that the term carries necessary and sufficient conditions; application of evaluatives is in general in part a matter of choice. Arguments that a certain occupation should indeed be granted the status of profession are carried on in part by analogy with acknowledged professions, in part as matters of social fairness ('we nurses are just as important as doctors'), in part by appeals to social good ('teachers are in the business of preparing the future'), and, indeed, by whatever means may come to hand. If these arguments resonate, language will reflect ensuing changes of attitude. Since criteria of application are at best rough, the 'sociological' approach to definition seems correct. As the sociologists say, there are several characteristics that are generally associated with professions. Occupations possessing enough of these characteristics come to be regarded as professions. There is no definitive list of what these

characteristics are, and hence no final word as to whether a given occupation is or is not a profession. The 'useful definition' approach of "the best selling textbook in engineering ethics" (4) seems thereby validated.

Reply to Joseph Ellin's Of All Professions, Prostitution is the Oldest (Except Possibly for Teaching)

Michael Davis

Joe Ellin's commentary on "Of All Professions, Begging is the Best" illustrates both the strengths and the weakness of what I called the "Cartesian method". Among the strengths is that, without leaving his desk or consulting any other person, Ellin has been able to tell us a good deal about how "profession" might be used, about what libertarians might think, say, or do, and even about what *might* be true of professions. Among the weaknesses of the Cartesian method Ellin's commentary illustrates is, however, an inability to undermine, or even understand the power, of what I called the Socratic method. Indeed, his argument rests on an obvious fallacy. He seeks to move from what might be true to what is true. That form of argument is a respectable way to refute logical claims. ("Imagine a space in which parallel lines cross" is a way to disprove the Euclidian axiom concerning parallel lines.) But imagining what could or might be is no way to disprove an empirical claim. ("All swans are white" might be true—or false—no matter how many red, green, or mauve swans we imagine.) And my main claim about what professions are (their complex connection with morality) is an empirical claim (though, as I shall explain, a special sort of empirical claim). Not all philosophy is *a priori*; much philosophy, such as the philosophy of law or the philosophy of biology, is

contingent on the empirical claims (what those involved with law or biology claim about the practice of law or biology).

My talk was not, therefore, an exercise in lexicography or language analysis. I was not trying to describe how the word “profession” is in fact used (its “one central definition”, as Ellin called it). I was not seeking “the concept” (the most general guide to usage). Rather, I was engaged in trying to understand a certain use of “profession” (a conception rather than the concept), the use people calling themselves “members of a profession” make of the term when they are speaking carefully about their common project. That is why I distinguished and dismissed several common senses of “profession” before reaching the admittedly specialized sense on which I focused. Much of Ellin’s ruminations on how “profession” is used are therefore strictly irrelevant (however accurate).

Consider an analogy with money. There may well be one central definition of money, say, “any means of exchange”. Money in this sense includes coins of various kinds, bills of various denominations, checks, negotiable bonds, and so on. Nonetheless, for some purposes, we distinguish between “real money” and other sorts. For example, none of us would knowingly accept *payment* for our services in play money (what we happily treat as money when playing the board game Monopoly), counterfeit money, or even lapsed currencies (such as the Confederate dollar or Soviet ruble). Though at least arguably money in the central sense, they are not *real* money, that is, money for the end in view, receiving payment. The reason is not that real money is valuable and the other sort is not. We sometimes refuse

payment in something that we admit is valuable. For many of us, negotiable instruments (like bearer bonds) are not “real money” because no store will take them, though we would be treat them as money when calculating our inheritance and an economist calculating the “money supply” would include them. A conception of something always sacrifices the complete description of usage—the “central definition” or concept—in order to obtain a term useful for a particular purpose, the purpose of picking out what is of interest to us then. Conceptions are therefore always as open to controversy as a) the purpose to which they are to be put and b) the criteria for evaluating their usefulness. Like other tools, they are inventions or works of art, not the linguistic equivalent of a photograph.

What special sense of profession was I interested in? I was, as I said, trying to understand what members of professions, both actual members of actual professions (whoever they turn out to be) and mere supposed members of merely so-called professions (the remainder), think about the project they take themselves to be involved in—not, I hasten to add, what they *happen* to think at a given moment (a fact about their psychology) but what they think after careful reflection in concert with others who make similar claims (a fact about their common conception of profession). So, what people *might* say is entirely beside the point. Even what they do say is only a beginning. I do not, as Ellin put it, simply “count noses” (not even after selecting the right noses). The crucial thing, what is entirely missing from Ellin’s critique, is what members of professions (and those who only think

they are) say after such careful reflection in concert (what they say “at their rational best”).

How can I know this crucial thing? My claim to that knowledge rests on actually engaging in (something like) the appropriate dialogue with them in classes or workshops, at conferences, at parties, and even in open-ended interviews.¹ My dialogue with members of professions has not been—as Ellin snidely suggests—“[mostly] internal”. I am serious about following (what I called) the Socratic method. One sign of Ellin’s Cartesianism is that he supposes me to committed to Socrates’ metaphysics (along with his method); a metaphysics that guarantees agreement among all rational persons whether they have the appropriate experience or not. I have no such commitment. Another sign of Ellin’s Cartesianism is that he cannot believe a philosopher would actually go about the world as Socrates once went about Athens. I sympathize. Like him, I was taught philosophy at a time when “we” (philosophers) could not see why internal dialogue was not sufficient. If one can define “chicken” without asking a “chicken” for its opinion (something we certainly can do), why not define “profession” without asking its members what they think they are doing?

The question is not merely rhetorical. The conception of profession I am interested in is not like the concept of chicken, or even any of the likely conception of chicken. “Profession” (in our preferred sense)—like “democracy”, “engineering”, and “rational”—is a conception having an inside as well as an outside. It describes a self-

conscious undertaking (as well as a collection of behaviors). The test of a Socratic definition is, it is true, *in part* Cartesian even when the definition concerns "profession". The definition must satisfy philosophical standards of clarity, coherence, and so on. But the test of a Socratic definition is in part radically un-Cartesian, that is, that those who seem to use "profession" to describe what they are doing recognize the corresponding definition as describing their use. While the internal dialogue of a philosopher at his desk can (in principle at least) determine that the first test is satisfied, it cannot determine whether the second is. Anyone using the Cartesian method will almost certainly miss what is central to the conception of profession that interests us, the way the members of profession understand what they are doing. Ellin's method of understanding profession rests on (what used to be called) "a category mistake".² He has treated a term belonging to one logical category (conception with an internal point of view as well as an external one) as if it were a term belonging to another (conception with only an external point of view).

There is, nonetheless, much agreement between Ellin and me—and pointing it out should help to clarify the strength of the argument I made in my talk. So, I now turn to what we agree on, though even here there are important disagreements.

¹ See, for example, my *Thinking like an Engineer: Studies in the Ethics of a Profession* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998), Ch. 9.

² For an extensive discussion of this mistake in another context, see my "Liberalism and/or Democracy?" *Social Theory and Practice* 9 (Spring 1983): 51-72.

First, we agree that “professional” has a somewhat different use than “member of a profession”. I concluded my discussion of the Socratic definition of profession with a characterization of professional (relying on that conception): “To be a ‘professional’ (or ‘a real pro’) is to be a member (in good standing) of the profession in question—or *(by analogy) to act as if one were* (that is, to act in the way the relevant standards require or, perhaps, should require).” Notice that I offer ways to extend the use by analogy (in what I have now italicized). So, of course, I can agree with Ellin that there can be athletes who are “real pros” in this (extended) sense even if professional athletics are not members of a profession (in that sense).

To say that professional athletes do not now form one or more professions is, of course, not to say they could not. All they need do is organize as the Socratic definition requires. Here Ellin raises the question whether what professional athletes do or at least could do would serve (what I call) a moral ideal. I see no reason why not, though I do think finding such an ideal is not as straightforward as it is, say, for medicine or engineering. Consider, for example, Ellin’s suggestion, the ideal of competing in physical games at a high level of skill. This is an ideal, but not a moral ideal. Nothing about playing perfectly makes it rational for a moral agent as such to favor anyone’s competing well, badly, or not at all. Only if one has an interest in athletics to begin with would it be rational to favor his or others’ pursuing the ideal in question. And nothing in moral agency requires such an interest.

Behind my conception of a moral ideal is (as Ellin explicitly notes) a conception of rational goods (what goods it is always rational

to desire). All ideals are rational guides to action in the sense that pursuing what one considers good is rational (all else equal). These may, of course, only be "apparent [rational] goods". Some ideals are rational in the stronger sense. The supposed good actually is good for the one pursuing it (though perhaps not for others). We might call these "prudential goods." Certain prudential goods are rational in an even stronger sense, that is, they are (all else equal) what any rational person has an interest in. Among these, presumably, are health, a good education, safe and useful structures, accurate financial information, and justice. These (or at least the more important of these)—what I think Ellin means by "rational goods"—is, however, still not necessarily pursuing a moral ideal. Moral ideals have a connection with morality that mere rational goods of this sort, what we might call "primary good", need not have. Anyone's pursuing one of them is, all else equal, good for others. So, for example, physical strength is a mere primary good, but public health is a moral ideal (in part, of course, because I benefit not only from not have a contagious disease myself but from your also not having it). We might usefully picture this connection between certain primary goods and morality by thinking of morality as the work of a "moral legislature" consisting of all rational persons laying down rules binding on all.³ Achieving the desired distribution of certain primary goods may be possible without adopting any particular rule. Self-interest may, for example, assure the desired

³For a fuller explanation of this technical device, see my "The Moral Legislature: Morality without an Archimedean Point", *Ethics* 102 (January 1992): 303-318.

distribution (as it may for physical strength). The distribution, though it can be an ideal, cannot be a moral ideal. Other primary goods may be such that achieving the desired distribution, while possible only by adopting a rule, is best approached by adopting a rule expressly requiring the desired distribution. This distribution of primary goods would be a moral requirement, not an ideal. An environment free of serious physical violence is such an ideal. Still other primary goods may be such that the desired distribution cannot be directly legislated. For example, the necessary rule might impose too great a burden (as universal altruism would), or something about the good itself might make *requiring* the distribution self-defeating (as requiring everyone to share confidences with everyone else seems to be—since universal sharing would destroy the point of confidences). The desired distribution of such goods may still be approximated by adopting auxiliary rules, that is, rules making it easier than it would otherwise be to engage in activity tending to produce the desired distribution. For such goods, the desired distribution is a moral ideal. The connection between the rule and the ideal provides a reason for making supporting rules part of morality.

On this analysis, a moral ideal is a distribution of goods every rational person wants enough to accept a significant moral burden in exchange but not enough to accept the burden that morally requiring the good to be provided would entail. So, for example, achieving good health for everyone is a moral ideal in this sense. Health is certainly a primary good and we generally benefit from the health of others. The healthy are not a drain on us in the way the sick are, nor do they

threaten contagion in the way the sick often do. Yet we are unwilling to require each of us to help the sick, to avoid all conduct that might cause disease, and to do whatever else might be necessary to provide that good for everyone. The moral rules therefore include no requirement that each do what he can to assure his own health or anyone else's, only such auxiliary rules as prohibit sneezing on others or require us to help a physician if our help is needed in an emergency and can be given with minimal cost.⁴

So, if professional athletics is to be a profession, it must serve some moral ideal in this sense. Ellin's suggestion is to consider athletes are a category of entertainer. Like actors, magicians, jugglers, and so on, they seek to provide amusement, relaxation, and distraction from the cares of the day (by competing in physical games at a high level). This strikes me as a useful way to define their moral ideal. But before I accept it, I would want to ask professional athletes whether they consider themselves to be providing this good (perhaps among others). If not, then, of course, the mere possibility of their doing so does not make them a profession. But for now, let's assume professional athletes would accept this description of their work. Amusement, relaxation, and distraction from the cares of the day seem to be rational goods (even if not as important as primary goods like health, justice, or

⁴ This analysis of the distinction between "rational goods" and "moral ideal" is not new but follows what I said in *Profession, Code, and Ethics* (Ashgate: Aldershot, England, 2002), pp. 25-26. As used here, "moral ideal" is a term of art (a conception). Those who wish to save the term for some other purpose are free to substitute another. What is important is not the term itself but the conception it names.

safety). Still, that does not show that their provision is also a *moral* ideal, that is, a good important *enough* to take on the burdens that turn a rational good into a moral ideal. Ellin, or more likely other thinkers, will have to provide further argument before we can conclude that good athletes can routinely serve a moral ideal (much less that they actually do).⁵

That brings me to the question why any occupation, not only professional athletics, should want to form a profession. Echoing much sociology, Ellin seems to think that “profession” is an “honorific”, that is, a term convention makes an honor or sign of respect (whether deserved or not). “Sir” or “Nobel Prize Winner” are typical honorifics. Most honorifics simply accord honor or respect (though some, like the Nobel Prize, come with money or other valuable things). The title “profession” differs from typical honorifics in (according to Ellin and many sociologists) somehow guaranteeing (or, at least, making much more likely) higher social status, higher income, or more authority (control over one’s work). While I agree that “profession” (in the relevant sense) does justify respect for the occupation so designated (until we have reason to doubt the designation), I do not think the

⁵ My position on the possibility of a profession of prostitution would be exactly the same. I see no reason a priori why prostitution cannot be a profession (one committed to providing “sexual comfort”). Just that possibility was a subject of common conversation in the Netherlands when I visited in 2007. Of course, those discussing the possibility did not regard providing sexual comfort for money as morally wrong. Had they considered it morally wrong, they would have had to reject the possibility of a profession of prostitution. The list of possible professions will always be contingent on our understanding of morality. Ellin is right to point out that that is indeed a consequence of my analysis.

connection is conventional or that it guarantees (or even makes likely) anything in the way of status, income, or authority. Certainly, there is no centralized body handing out the designation (in the US) or setting the benefits to accompany the designation.

The connection between the benefits of a profession (whatever they turn out to be) and the designation is more like that a trademark (Bayer Aspirin or Campbell's Soup) and the goods properly sold under that designation. The professions so called have had to earn whatever respect we now tend to give them. The term "profession" may yet go the way of other terms that once demanded respect but no longer do, such as "Made in the USA" or "British engineering". The conception of profession I offered is, all else equal, a reason to expect a profession (properly so called) to do more good in the world than the corresponding (non-professional) occupation would. After all, a profession is designed to do good beyond what law, market, morality and public opinion would otherwise require. But the design does little more than give us reason for hope; designs often go awry. Professions may become "corrupt" (to use Ellin's term), that is, come to ignore their own standards most of the time. They may simply become lax in enforcing their standards. But, even if they maintain their standards as strictly as humanely possible, the design for service may fail for one reason or another. Their required education may ill fit them for the work they do (which is why construction managers are replacing architects on large projects); the cost of their ways of doing things may be too high for the market to bear (which is why physicians are yielding many routine activities to nurses, technicians, and physician's

assistants); their techniques may become outmoded (which is why we no longer have phrenologists); and so on. What can happen to one profession could happen to all. If the market became much closer to perfect than it is, professions would probably disappear. The professions would go the way of guilds. There is nothing in the conception I offered to guarantee the existence of professions, much less higher status, higher income, or greater authority than the market would otherwise provide.

That is just as well. The professions seem to have special status, income, and authority only when we focus on the “principal professions”, that is, law and medicine. Once we widen our view to include the great majority—engineering, nursing, teaching, military officers, and so on—the “honorific” tends to dissolve into the respect that is due those who set a high standard of conduct for themselves, act accordingly, and benefit society in consequence. If the designation of profession were primarily a means of “self-promotion” (as Ellin claims), it seems to be a surprisingly poor means. MBAs and even plumbers do better without it. That is, it seems to me, a good reason to reject this “debunking” interpretation of professions—one Ellin seems to have derived from the sociology’s economic tradition (though he seems to think it a result of his Cartesian method).

Ellin is, I think, right that professional soldiers generally recognize the mercenaries as belonging to the same “profession of arms” as they do—in the occupational sense—, that is, as fellow warriors. A professional soldier will nonetheless distinguish himself from the mercenary. He will point to the special standards of conduct

professional soldiers do not share with mercenaries (who are, after all, explicitly creatures of the market). He will not—as the sociologists seem to tell us to expect—point to the higher pay of professional soldiers (since mercenaries are generally paid more), nor to higher social status (since the social status of both is pretty low and about the same), nor even to greater authority (since mercenaries today seem to have greater control over what they do than professional soldiers have). One of the odd things about the sociological analysis (which Ellin seems to endorse at the end of his comments) is how badly it fits the facts of most professions. Those who doubt this should check it out, starting with any professional soldier he can find.

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