"Of All Professions Begging is the Best" - Some Problems in the Study of Professions

Michael Davis

Illinois Institute Center of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ethics_papers

Part of the Bioethics and Medical Ethics Commons, Business Law, Public Responsibility, and Ethics Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, and the Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation
Davis, Michael, "Of All Professions Begging is the Best" - Some Problems in the Study of Professions" (2008). Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers. 81.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ethics_papers/81
"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 rigadoo

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

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.

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. 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. 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.

---

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.  

---

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. 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

Work on this paper was carried on in part under National Science Foundation grant SES-0117471. Early versions of this paper (under various titles) were presented to: a workshop, "Toward a Common Goal: Ethics Across the Professions", Sierra Health Foundation, Sacramento, California, August 26, 2006; the Research Group of Ethics, Faculty of Letters, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan. February 14, 2007; and to Second ASPCP International Conference on Philosophical Practice, Purdue University Calumet, Hammond, IN, May 19, 2007.