



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

8-2008

Of All Professions, Prostitution is the Oldest (Except Possibly for Teaching)

Joseph Ellin
Western Michigan University

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

Ellin, Joseph, "Of All Professions, Prostitution is the Oldest (Except Possibly for Teaching)" (2008). *Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers*. 82.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ethics_papers/82

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



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.