

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



The Professionalization of Work

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Abstract

Since the rise of universities in the late Middle Ages, certain occupations have been characterized as professions. Twentieth-century discussions about the professions focused less on what members did than on what organized professions had become. To consider the nature of work in the twenty first century it may be more fruitful to examine what it means to be a *professional* rather than to explore the nature of *professions*. This paper defends this distinction, offers a set of characteristics that define the professional, and considers why professionalism produces benefits for the common good as well as more human work.

During the last fifty years, society in every developed country has become a society of institutions. Every major social task, whether economic performance or health care, education or the protection of the environment, the pursuit of new knowledge or defense, is today being entrusted to big organizations, designed for perpetuity and managed by their own managements. On the performance of these institutions, the performance of modern society—if not the survival of each individual—increasingly depends.

Peter Drucker
Management (1974)

Time was, Americans probably gambled because life—getting to America; getting across America, through Comanche territory; getting out of the mills and mines in one piece—was a gamble. Perhaps nowadays gambling appeals because the rest of life is enervatingly predictable.

George Will
Washington Post (June 1999)

Human life cannot be made entirely simple, routine and predictable. No matter how hard we try, there is always an irreducible element of complexity, disruption, and chaos. More sophisticated societies generally succeed in making much of life “manageable” by reducing the chaotic dimension through planning and routines that are themselves the result of experience and shared knowledge. This sometimes results in the happy problem of a society so well organized and routinized that citizens need to look outside their daily lives to find excitement. It may be no accident that in today’s highly developed societies young people are increasingly turning to inherently dangerous recreational activities (such as extreme sports). So much of the unpredictability and peril of life just a few generations ago has been systematically eliminated. Whatever problems this creates, it is surely better than the alternative.

Even in the most highly organized and systematic communities, however, there still occur problems and crises that are unexpected and often new. Every society enjoys and values the services of some members whose function it is both to design and implement solutions that increase the number of manageable problems and to confront the new and unexpected successfully. In primitive societies these people attempt to cope through the use of magic or by eliciting the cooperation of powerful spiritual beings. In more sophisticated societies magic and idolatry are supplanted by the efforts of professionals, who bring specialized knowledge and skill to bear on the problems of everyday life in all its dimensions.

Professionals, in a sense, live on the “cutting edge” between the tried and true and the new and uncertain. Society depends upon professionals to provide reliable fixed standards (of health, of justice, of truth, etc) in situations where the facts are murky or the temptations too strong. Their principal contribution is an ability to bring sound judgment to bear on these situations. They represent the best a particular community is able to muster in response to new challenges. By employing a knowledge of causes and principles, they are able to draw an increasing number of problems within the category of the predictable and manageable. Modern society, in many important ways, is the product of professional activity.

Indeed, one significant sign of progress in social organization is an increase in the number of people who are legitimate professionals, and consequently the number of life’s dimensions that become effectively controllable. When the first universities were founded some 800 years ago, they offered professional training in three areas: medicine, law, and theology. Since then a number of other occupations have become professionalized. These might include, for example, architecture, engineering, pharmacy, and the military. Still others, in our time, are in danger of becoming deprofessionalized, or losing one or more of the key characteristics that make someone in an occupation a professional.

The Essential Characteristics of Professionals

Throughout much of the twentieth century writers have continued a debate about the characteristics of a profession. Some experts find seven characteristics, others only three or four. Nor can the participants come to any agreement about an exhaustive list of genuine professions. There is broad agreement that medicine, law, ministry, architecture, and a few other occupations are certainly professions, but what of nursing, or social work, or education? The defining characteristics, and the corresponding lists of professions, often beg the question. Assuming an accepted list of professions, a set of characteristics is generated that confirms this list, but may not admit other occupations.

There are several roots to this problem and it does very much concern the role of ethics and the management of businesses and other organizations. One source of the problem is that attempts to define professions focus a great deal of attention on their sociological aspects: how they are organized, how they relate to the larger society, how members are admitted and disciplined, how professional power is exercised. Professions are often conceived to be exclusive communities, formally set apart from the rest of society, and exercising considerable power. More attention is given to what a member of a profession appears to be than to what he does.

Another part of the problem is that the debate generally fails to make an important distinction between a *profession* (which is a sort of organized community of practitioners) and individuals who conduct themselves as *professionals*. Before any profession comes into existence, however, there must be individuals who conduct themselves professionally. It is these persons who define and exemplify the standards that will later be honored, encouraged, and protected by a profession. The organization of such individuals into a recognized profession is only the final step in a process.

Unfortunately, the term “professional” has become very fluid in its meaning, so fluid that it has become quite difficult for us to see what is truly distinctive about professionals. Not everyone who makes her living at a particular occupation is truly a “professional.” Even though we may speak about athletes, writers, secretaries, custodians, truck drivers and any number of other people in a variety of occupations as “professionals,” they are only professional in a very loose sense of the term. Usually we mean nothing more than that they are not amateurs. In another sense, though, a professional is sometimes thought to be someone who lives up to a high standard of conduct on the job. The movie actress, for instance, who always comes to the set on time, knowing her lines, and ready to work, is often called a professional. So is the athlete who practices every day to sharpen his skills.

These people, however, are not professionals in the most proper sense, even though they may embody one or more of the essential characteristics of a professional. This does not mean that what they do is not skillful, or valuable, or admirable. It does mean that they may not have the duties incumbent on a professional.

Professionals, as I have said before, do not so much occupy a special place in a society as play a special role in it, a role they may play well or poorly. I believe the indispensable characteristic of a professional is the ability to exercise sound and reasonable judgment about important matters in conditions of uncertainty. This ability, in turn, depends upon three other factors that must be present for someone to exercise this sort of judgment. The professional must possess specialized knowledge, must make critical commitments, and must be permitted autonomy in decision making. When these three foundational elements are present, and a person has developed the necessary judgment, we are justified in speaking of this person as a *professional*, regardless of whether she has joined with her colleagues to form a *profession*. Let us consider what these elements involve.

Specialized Knowledge

The *sine qua non* of professionalism is specialized knowledge, and not just any sort of specialized knowledge. It is an accumulated and ordered knowledge, built up over time by the experience, analysis and insight of predecessors in the field. It is knowledge that penetrates to the root of the matter and gives its possessor an understanding not only of *how* things are, but *why* they are. It is also hard-won knowledge that requires time and effort to possess, knowledge that many people cannot achieve. Lastly, it is powerful knowledge, and historically those in a position to pass it on have ordinarily demanded some evidence from students that they are worthy to receive it.

The professional, as a result, is the opposite of the “self-made man.” The professional is a man or woman who is deeply indebted to others from the start. Principal among these others are predecessors in the field who have discovered and systematized the knowledge and who have passed it on. Furthermore, the professional is indebted to the community. Virtually all professional education these days takes place in the context of a university, and universities are heavily supported in many ways by the community (e.g., tax exemptions, land grants, donations and tax deductions for donations, etc). The community offers this support because it values the contributions of the professional so highly, and because it expects a reciprocal dedication.

The professional is therefore obligated to use his or her knowledge well. In addition, he must add to the accumulated knowledge where possible, correcting it, refining it, and generally increasing its depth and breadth.

Such knowledge is powerful, and like many powerful things it can produce great benefits if used well, and great evils if used badly. For this reason, professionals have generally been careful throughout history to share their knowledge only with those personally committed to using it well.

Commitment to Service

To be a professional, to “profess,” is to stand for something in a public context, to make a public promise to the community. The first thing that a professional professes is commitment to address problems according to the principles and accepted practices of the discipline. The priest or minister accepts the doctrines and liturgical practices of a particular church community, just as the physician (at least in Europe and North America) adopts an approach to medicine that depends upon the physical sciences and the scientific method. As a result, someone relying upon a professional knows in advance something about how that person will deal with matters related to that professional area.

Second, and more important, the true professional also professes service to others. That is, professionals publicly commit themselves to use their special knowledge principally to serve others and not primarily to serve themselves. This does not mean that professionals must be selfless in their practices. Quite the contrary, they may be well compensated in a variety of ways for what they do. However, their first concern in making decisions will always be the benefit to the person served, and only secondarily the consequences to themselves. Furthermore, they place themselves at the service not only of their friends and neighbors, but of strangers as well. They are public persons and so have an obligation to serve those in need, regardless of personal relationship.

Once again, this does not mean that professionals must be utterly self-sacrificing in their practices, but it does mean that, as a community, we expect from them a higher level of dedication than we would from non-professionals. At times that means we expect them to work long hours or unusual hours, or to place themselves at some risk, or to serve when they may not be paid, or to tell the truth no matter how unpleasant, or to do any of a number of other things that we would not always expect of ourselves. The trade-off, of course, is that professionals by and large have a higher income (and greater related benefits) than non-professionals as well as a special status in the community.

This higher income is legitimate for three reasons (assuming competent practice). First, the work of the professional is ordinarily of great benefit to the community and usually valued accordingly (though some professions are much less skillful in helping the community to see the relationship). Second, the level of income is ongoing compensation for the effort and expense of obtaining the necessary education and for the personal sacrifices usually required by professional practice. Third, the higher income should, in principle, help the professional to resist temptations to make self-interested decisions by relieving basic economic pressures.

Incidentally, it would be a mistake to see professional practice primarily in economic terms. As some writers have observed, the relationship between professionals and those they serve is not a transaction (which would imply an exchange of equal values) but rather a transformative encounter. While the professional is rewarded, the client, patient, or student is benefited in more than material terms. Professionals of all sorts must keep in mind that, however much they may be paid for what they do, the real objective and the real value of

their work is non-material and thoroughly human.

Autonomy in Decision Making

Autonomy, or self-rule, is the liberty to choose concrete goals and specific courses of action without interference, or at least to make such choices within fairly expansive boundaries. The assumption that underlies the autonomy permitted to professionals is the belief that the real circumstances in which professionals are called upon to make decisions are potentially so varied that they cannot be adequately described in advance. In other words, the conditions in which problems present themselves in real life are inherently unpredictable, and so it is not possible to develop routines and detailed plans for coping with every contingency. Instead, we rely upon people who thoroughly understand the principles at the foundation of successful solutions to craft a workable plan in the context in which the problem occurs. The value of professionals to a community lies precisely in the ability of the professional to devise successful new plans for new situations, and in order to do this they must have the freedom to break out of existing patterns when necessary.

This freedom, however, is not a freedom completely without restraint. It depends upon two kinds of criteria, and these criteria establish some boundaries. The first criterion is the welfare of the person or group served by the professional. The professional's freedom is legitimate to the extent that it actually promotes this welfare and certainly does not permit courses of action that undermine it. The second criterion is the standard of practice generally accepted by other professionals (and perhaps even articulated in detail in a code of ethics or professional conduct). As long as professionals respect these boundaries they should be permitted to exercise their sound judgment in responding to the real problems they encounter in their practices.

More fundamentally, this freedom also depends upon trust. As a practical matter, we are willing to permit professionals a great deal of liberty as long as we believe that we can trust them to place the welfare of those they serve (clients, patients, students, and so on) ahead of their own interests, and to practice competently. This often comes down to a matter of personal contact and faith in a particular person. This is very obvious in medicine, where establishing a rapport with a patient can be critical. Less obvious, perhaps, but often equally important, is the trust that we personally place in individual architects, engineers, teachers, lawyers, and even managers.

This trust is sometimes betrayed by professionals, and the community is rightly skeptical of the power of those with special knowledge. This knowledge can be used to help or to harm, and often we do not discover which it will be until it is too late. The Hippocratic Oath, perhaps the earliest professional pledge we possess, can be read as a detailed promise to honor the physician's obligations to those from whom he or she learned the art, to practice according to a high standard, and to refrain from taking advantage of opportunities to use the knowledge of the profession to harm others. Nevertheless, some professionals do betray the trust placed in them. The specific response to incidents of betrayal is litigation,

and if it seems common enough (or too serious to tolerate even if rare), the public response is regulation (which has the effect of further restricting the professional's liberty).

Sound Judgment

One of the most obvious marks of a true professional is the ability to make sound judgments in conditions of uncertainty. Anyone trained in first aid will know how to deal with a minor cut or sprain. When faced with a more serious or less common injury, we turn to someone who has much more extensive knowledge and experience, and eventually that means turning to a physician. We have good reason to believe that the combination of knowledge and experience allows the professional to make good decisions even when presented with something new and different, perhaps even unprecedented. And what is true in medicine is also true in law, science and scholarship, engineering, architecture, war, and other professional areas. (Needless to say, while a particular professional might be a person of sound judgment generally, this does not mean that his or her judgment is *professional* judgment outside that person's area of expertise.)

In moral philosophy, the general ability to make sound practical judgments is called *prudence*, or *practical wisdom*. The prudent person should not be confused with the person who is simply or excessively cautious. The prudent person is one who best knows both what goals are worth pursuing (i.e., what goals genuinely bring into being real human goods) and what means will be most likely to achieve those goals (i.e., what means most efficiently and effectively achieve the goals without harming other goods along the way).

Furthermore, each professional area has its own specific prudence (medical prudence, military prudence). The architect, for instance, should have a good idea of what makes a building both functional and beautiful, and a clear conception of what materials and techniques will be required to build the building efficiently and effectively. Or the general directing a battle should have a clear sense of what can be accomplished and of how best to use his resources of personnel and material to produce the most favorable result. If his judgment is really sound, he must also be able to adapt his plan during the battle in response to unexpected developments.

In a similar fashion, professionals in any area must be able to judge well when confronted with the new, the unexpected or the unknown.

Professionalism, Virtue and Good Work

In *Laborem exercens*, Pope John Paul II speaks of the objective and subjective dimensions of human work. The objective dimension is measured by the quality of the work product. The subjective dimension is measured by the humanizing effect the work has upon the worker. To put it in other words, human work is excellent objectively when the artifact

or the service produced is of high quality, however that might be determined. It is excellent subjectively when the work helps the person doing it to become a better person, which is to become more virtuous.

In the classic tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues are perfections of those faculties that are most distinctive of persons, the intellect and the will. Much has been written in recent years about the moral virtues, and especially about the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Objectively good work, if it is to be done consistently, requires workers who possess these cardinal virtues. No workplace that breeds injustice, punishes courage or undermines personal discipline can produce excellent products or services except by accident, and even then only occasionally. Such a workplace corrodes the human dignity of good workers and confirms bad workers in their vices.

A good workplace, by contrast, uplifts mediocre workers, restores their dignity and builds up their moral virtue. In such a situation excellence can become the norm, provided another set of conditions is satisfied. However important moral virtue may be, it is still only a necessary condition for excellent work not sufficient in itself. The attention given to the crucial role of moral virtues in making work good has tended to obscure the vital role that another set of virtues, intellectual virtues, must play.

Just as moral virtues are perfections of the will, intellectual virtues are perfections of the intellect, or reason. The poet who said "Virtue is its own reward," grasped a truth that has eluded many people. Virtues are desirable not for what they might *bring* to a person but simply because they constitute excellence in what it means to *be* a human person. The possession of the distinctively human perfections that are virtues make it possible for human persons consistently to act in excellent ways. This state of affairs, on Aristotle's definition, is natural happiness.

The moral virtues enable persons to *choose* well, while the intellectual virtues enable them to *reason* well. Both are required for persons genuinely to *act* well. Since work is a fundamental kind of human action, we cannot be indifferent to the role that the intellectual virtues play as we pursue excellence in work.

The three intellectual virtues that contribute to excellence in work, and upon which professionalism in any field depends, are prudence, art and science. Prudence has been discussed above. In the classical taxonomy, it is a perfection of the intellect (not the will), but of the intellect oriented toward *praxis*, toward *doing* the good.

By contrast, art (or *techne*, in the Greek) is a perfection of the intellect oriented toward *making* things. (This is not to be confused with or restricted to the fine arts, which are parts of the larger whole that is the virtue of art, or with physical skills at making things.) It is a development of the mind's ability to bring into being objectively what it can conceive in the imagination. Where prudence enables a person to act well (that is, to act to secure the good for himself and others), art enables that person to produce well (that is, to manipulate objects in the real world to create artifacts that are true, beautiful, effective and efficient).

Both are forms of knowledge (or more precisely, perfections of our capacity to know in certain ways) and they complement one another. Art without prudence is technique or skill without judgment; prudence without art may be ineffectual. Together they form an indispensable foundation for excellence in work, but they still require one additional virtue.

That additional virtue is science, though not science as we commonly conceive of it today. Modern science is a body of knowledge concerning the material world as well as a methodology for investigating that world. Science as an intellectual virtue includes something of this, but more properly it is a perfection of mind's ability to know the reasons behind contingent realities. That is to say, it is a perfection or development of our ability to know why our world (in both its natural and human dimensions) is as it is, to know how things are connected and interrelated, and to understand the concrete relationships of causes and effects.

A person who possesses the virtue of science understands not merely that things are this way or that way, or merely that doing this causes that, but understands why this is so. As mentioned above, this is the essence of professional knowledge. It is not mere experience; it is the deeper knowledge of causes, rooted in the analysis and experience of many more minds than the knower's own.

Prudence, art and science come together in the professional. Prudence focuses the professional on the genuine human goods that his professional activity ought to serve. Art enables the professional to make whatever his profession requires in order to achieve the good. In some professions more than others, these will be physical objects. And finally science enables the professional to perceive the web of causes and relationships that lie behind the objective realities of experience. Science enables the professional to see patterns in the new and unpredictable, and to exploit those patterns to bring order and routine to the apparently chaotic.

All of this makes professional work superior work, work that more fully draws upon the potential of each person and that perfects the person as it does so. If this is so, then to the extent that it is possible, human work should be made more professional.

Consider why this is true. Professional work excels in both dimensions. Objectively, since it is work done with skill and informed by systematic knowledge, the quality of the product should be excellent. We rightly expect a professional to perform better than a non-professional. Subjectively, since it draws upon and enhances the abilities of the worker and at the same time permits him a degree of freedom that other modes of work do not, it tends also to perfect the person. Professionalism draws on what is most human (and, indeed, most God-like) and at the same time further develops these characteristics.

The Prospects for Professionalism

One frequent criticism of professions is that they tend to become exclusive, being more

concerned with limiting membership than with ensuring that every community has the full benefit of professional expertise. This is understandable, since the ability of professionals to provide effective solutions to important problems is valuable. Having too many competent practitioners dilutes the value of their performance, and therefore threatens the income of members of the profession. There is also a cachet that attaches to the professions, perhaps a residue of a time at which membership in the professions was denied to lower classes in the community. It was (and still is to some extent) a common dream of generations of immigrants to America that their children or grandchildren might one day enter a profession.

This attitude has carried over considerations of new professions. Twentieth-century writers who took up the question of new professions tended to be willing to admit only those occupations that had taken on a shape similar to the traditional professions. Or, to put it more precisely, occupations might be considered professional if they were susceptible to being organized into social groups that mirrored the traditional professions (e.g., ministry, medicine, law, and the military). Since traditional professional practice was something of a “gentleman’s” pursuit, writers tended to dismiss occupations that were too concerned with making money (business) or that dealt with the more unsavory elements of society (social work) or, for that matter, that were too closely associated with the work of women (nursing).

From the perspective of work offered in *Laborem exercens*, however, we may take a different view of the multiplication of professions. First of all, while we may legitimately be concerned with some of the sound things that professions do, such as ensuring a level of quality practice through accepted standards and self-policing, and accumulating and passing on a systematic body of knowledge, our focus should not be on the integrity or well-being of these social organizations. It should instead be on the contribution that *professionals* (again, as distinct from *professions*) may make to the common good of society. Considered in this way, it is very much to the benefit of society and to the individuals concerned that as many people as possible can function as professionals, regardless of whether they belong formally to professions.

Society has a growing need for professionals in a wide variety of occupational areas, including many areas of work that have only recently been defined. One of the indisputable characteristics of modern society is its growing complexity. On the one hand, this complexity represents the degree to which humanity has been able to fulfill the mandate of the Creator and exercise lawful dominion over creation. On the other hand, complexity brings with it new problems of its own. Professionals are urgently required both to maintain the dominion we have established and to cope effectively with the new challenges.

An example of this can be found in the transformation of the modern world into a society of organizations. One of the fundamental problems of less developed countries throughout the world is the absence of effective organizations of all sorts, from government to business to cultural and religious bodies, to say nothing of the environmental frameworks necessary to sustain them. This new society of organizations, unlike anything experienced before in human history, has brought relative prosperity to large numbers of ordinary people, but it also imposes costs. One of the costs is the necessity for professional management, which is to say management systematically trained, committed to the common

good, and possessing the judgment crucial to the proper operation of large organizations. Whether or not they belong to a collegial organization, they are certainly professionals in the sense relevant to this paper. As such, they must have the formation proper to professionals, which is preeminently formation in the virtues of prudence, art, and science.

Similarly, a variety of other occupations can and should emerge as professional, including many in administration, health care, engineering and computer science, and so on. The risk is that students will be trained only in the techniques, the art, of these professionals and will not receive an adequate formation in prudence and those aspects of the cardinal virtues elicited by professional practice. The rewarding possibility is that society may benefit from a richer range of professionals and that a far larger number of individuals will become more fully human through their work.