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Ethics for the Professions

PROFESSIONS IN SIMPLER SOCIETIES

The rudimentary roots of our contemporary professions exist in basic human needs and values. Physical, social, and spiritual health have always been human values, and specialists in promoting them have long existed. Primitive society has had its healers, who treat illness through religious skills and herbalism. Traditional chiefs may function not only as public administrators but also as judges and perhaps as the highest official priests. Healers and chiefs are *prototypical professionals*.

Several features set the prototypical professions apart from our modern versions. For one thing, the traditionalists were unspecialized: the African healers, for instance, employed religious, magical, and technological means without distinction. For another, the traditional professions often perpetuated themselves by a system of inheritance, rather than solely by achievement through formal education and examination. But, like their modern counterparts, the traditionalists met basic human needs through the use of their special skills.

Scriptures have provided descriptions of professions in a somewhat more developed state and assist us in our quest for appropriate moral themes. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, in particular, are influenced by traditions about professions going back to at least the first millennium B.C. A class of religious professionals developed in early Israel; these priests and prophets became supreme authorities in law and religion and also performed medical functions. The commercial and bureaucratic "professionals" were the rich men and women dwelling in lavish homes on the view lots above the ancient city; Amos, the prophet, castigated them for crushing the poor in the dust by exacting exorbitant prices and rents. The prophets aid us in seeing professions at their moral best through their sensitivity to the abuse of the privileges of skill and position.

By the time of Jesus, various professions had become somewhat more specialized. He knew priests, teachers, lawyers, and physicians, as well as professional soldiers. Jesus generally denounced the legal and clerical professions with colorful and pointed imagery. He regarded them as hypocritical and legalistic. On the other hand, Jesus himself belonged to the teaching profession. He was a recognized rabbi in Galilee, a master

(almost in the contemporary British sense) with his student disciples. And Paul had his "beloved physician," Luke, the writer of one of the Gospels and the book of Acts. Undoubtedly, modern attitudes toward various professions have been shaped by the fact that generation upon generation has read the Bible, which praises those perceived as servants of the people and denounces those seen as exploiters.

Throughout the medieval period, particularly in Northern Europe, the development of the professions remained relatively rudimentary. The clergy, the primary professional group, through its control of education, was able to set rules governing the practice of other professions, including medicine, law, teaching, and business. There were disbenefits, but also some benefits, to church control. Professional practice was set, at least in principle, within a coherent framework of shared values and beliefs. Where exploitation of clients occurred, it was because the ideal was not met, not because an ideal did not exist.

The complexity of the history of the professions is suggested by the fact that during and even after the medieval period, occupations that we now recognize as professions were organized as guilds. Guilds also existed for many technical and commercial groups of workers. Standards were maintained, recruits trained, and deviants disciplined. After the Industrial Revolution many guilds evolved into professions.

A very important foundation for the modern professions was laid in the sixteenth century, at the turning point between the medieval and early modern eras, by two religious reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. Though they were primarily interested in the church and its beliefs, their changes were destined to influence all of society.

✓ Luther's contribution to the development of professions was to extend the concept of a "divine calling" to every worthwhile kind of work. During the medieval period the "calling" (*vocatio*) had been reserved for those who were chosen to enter the spiritually superior life of the monastery. In that way of thinking, only the religious professions were regarded as specially dignified by a divine calling. Even today the old use of the term still lingers when people say of one who enters the priesthood that he has a *vocation*. In contrast, Luther boldly generalized this concept to

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all forms of work. To him, the butcher, the baker, and not merely the priest, had a divine calling of service in the world. Luther laid the foundation for regarding every profession, as well as every other legitimate form of work, as service to God and humankind.

Calvin's contribution was to free people from following in their fathers' occupations, thus changing the main criterion for admittance to a profession from inheritance to achievement. While Luther dignified every line of work, he also limited persons to work in the same occupation as one's forebears; one was called to stay faithfully in one's place. This amounted to a vote of confidence in the static medieval social order. Calvin taught that one's calling was to serve God and people to the best of one's ability in whichever line of work one was best suited for. Freed from a certain occupation by accident of birth, an individual could now move from one niche to another in pursuit of a life of service. Every occupation could be understood as an arena for following one's calling.

In terms of the themes we are following, the Judaeo-Christian culture from Biblical times through the Reformation imbued the concept of *profession* with the moral principle of service grounded in a religious vision of God working together with people for the improvement of all creation. The doctrine of the *vocation* or *calling* became the religious and moral theme that most illuminated the meaning of the professions and of professional work.

R. J. Lifton. Life of the Self

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— When the men spoke harshly in our group about military psychiatrists we professionals of course asked ourselves whether they were talking about us. In some degree they undoubtedly were. They were raising the question whether any encounter with a psychiatrist, even in a context which they themselves created, and into which we were called, could be more authentic than the counterfeit moral universe that psychiatrists had lent themselves to in Vietnam.

In the rap-group experience I found the issue of investigative advocacy more pressing and powerful than in other research I have done. This was partly because veterans and

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professionals alike were more or less in the middle of the problem: the war continued, and we all had painful emotions about what it was doing, and what we were doing or not doing to combat it.* But I came to realize that, apart from the war, the work had important bearing upon a sense of long-standing crisis affecting all of us in the psychological professions and the professions in general—a crisis that the war in Vietnam both accentuated and illuminated but by no means created. We professionals came to the rap groups with our own need for transformations in ways parallel to, if more muted than, those which we sought to enhance in veterans. We too, sometimes with less awareness than they, were in the midst of struggles around living and working that had to do with intactness, wholeness, and integrity.

One source of perspective on that struggle was a return to the root ideas of profession, the idea of what it means to profess. Indeed, an examination of the evolution of these two words could provide something close to cultural history of the West. The prefix "pro" means forward, toward the front, forth, out, or into a public position. "Fess" derives from the Latin *fateri* or *fass*, meaning to confess, own, acknowledge. To profess (or be professed), then, originally meant a personal form of out-front public acknowledgment. And that which was acknowledged or "confessed" always (until the sixteenth century) had to do with religion: with taking the vows of a religious order or declaring one's religious faith. But as society became secularized, the word came to mean

* In contrast, my Hiroshima work, in which I also experienced strong ethical involvement, was retrospective and in a sense prospective (there were immediate nuclear problems, of course, but we were not in the midst of a nuclear holocaust); my study of Chinese thought reform dealt with matters of immediate importance but going on (in a cultural sense) far away; and my work with Japanese youth had much less to do with overwhelming threat and ethical crisis.¹²

"to make claim to have knowledge of an art or science" or "to declare oneself expert or proficient in" an enterprise of any kind. The noun form, "profession," came to suggest not only the act of professing but also the ordering, collectivization, and transmission of the whole process. The sequence was from "profession" or religious conviction (in the twelfth century) to a particular order of "professed persons," such as monks or nuns (fourteenth century), to "the occupation which one professes to be skilled in and follow," especially "the three learned professions of divinity, law, and medicine" along with the "military profession." So quickly did the connotations of specialization and application take hold that as early as 1605 Francis Bacon could complain: "Amongst so many great foundations of colleges in Europe, I find strange that they are all dedicated to professions, and none left free to Art and Sciences at large."¹³

Thus the poles of meaning around the image of profession shifted from the proclamation of personal dedication to transcendent principles to membership in and mastery of a specialized form of socially applicable knowledge and skill. In either case, the profession is immortalizing—the one through the religious mode, the other through works and social-intellectual tradition. And the principles of public proclamation and personal discipline carry over from the one meaning to the other—the former taking the shape of examination and licensing, the latter of study, training, and dedication. Overall, the change was from advocacy based on faith to technique devoid of advocacy.*

* One can observe this process in the modern separation of "profession" from "vocation." "Vocation" also has a religious origin in the sense of being "called by God" to a "particular function or station." The secular equivalent became the idea of a personal "calling" in the sense of overwhelming inclination, commitment, and even destiny. But the Latin root of "vocation," *vocare*, to call, includes among its meanings and derivatives: *vocable*, *voca-*

To be sure, contemporary professions do contain general forms of advocacy: in law, of a body of suprapersonal rules applicable to everyone; in medicine, of healing; and in psychiatry, of humane principles of psychological well-being and growth. But immediate issues of value-centered advocacy and choice (involving groups and causes served and consequences thereof) are mostly ignored. In breaking out of the premodern trap of immortalization by personal surrender to faith, the "professional" has fallen into the modern trap of pseudo-neutrality and covert immortalization of technique. As a result, our professions are all too ready to offer their techniques to anyone and anything. I am in no way suggesting a return to pure faith as a replacement for contemporary distortions around the idea of the professions. But I am convinced that we require a model of the "ethical professional" that includes issues of advocacy and commitment.

The psychiatrist in Vietnam, whatever his intentions, found himself in collusion with the military in conveying to individual GI's an overall organizational message: "Do your indiscriminate killing with confidence that you will receive expert medical-psychological help if needed." Keeping in mind Camus' warning that men should become neither victims nor executioners, this can be called—at least in Vietnam—the psychiatry of the executioner.¹⁴ I do not exempt myself from this critique. I served as a military psychiatrist in the Korean War under conditions that had at least some parallels to those in

tion, vouch; advocate, advocation, convoke, evoke, invoke, provoke, and revoke. Advocacy is thus built into the original root and continuing feel of the word "vocation"; and "vocation," in turn, is increasingly less employed in connection with the work a man or woman does. If we do not say "profession," we say "occupation," which implies seizing, holding, or simply filling in space in an area of time; or else "job," a word of unclear origin that implies task, activity, or assignment that is, by implication, self-limited or possibly part of a larger structure, including many related jobs, but not, in essence, related to an immortalizing tradition or principle.

Vietnam. And although I had very little to do with men in combat, it is quite possible that my work since has been affected by that personal "survival."

The military's approach to psychiatry emphasizes "the therapeutic endeavor . . . to facilitate the men's integration into their own groups (units) through integration into the group of ward patients."¹⁵ The approach seems convincing until one evaluates some of the conditions under which atrocities occurred or were avoided. I spent ten hours interviewing a man who had been at My Lai and had not fired or even pretended he was firing. (Among the handful who did not fire, most held their guns in position as if firing in order to avoid the resentment of the majority actively participating in the atrocity.) Part of what sustained this man and gave him the strength to risk ostracism was his very distance from the group. Always a "loner," he had, as a child raised beside the ocean, engaged mainly in such solitary activities as boating and fishing. Hence, though an excellent soldier, he was less susceptible than others to group influence, and in fact remained sufficiently apart from other men in his company to be considered "maladapted" to that immediate group situation.¹⁶

One must distinguish between group integration and integrity—the latter including moral and psychological elements that connect one to social and historical contexts beyond the immediate. Group integration can readily undermine integrity—in Vietnam for both soldiers and psychiatrists who had to grapple with their own struggles to adapt to a military institution with its goals of maximum combat strength, and to a combat situation of absurdity and evil. The psychiatrist, no less than the combat soldier, is confronted with important questions about the group he is to serve and, above all, the nature and consequences of its immediate and long-range

mission. To deal with that question he must overcome the technician assumption one falls into all too easily: "Because I am a healer, anything I do, anywhere, is good."

A formative perspective, a focus on images and forms and on their continuous development and re-creation, gives the psychiatrist a way of addressing historical forces without neglecting intrapsychic concerns. The antiwar passions of a particular Vietnam veteran, for instance, had to be understood as a combined expression of many different psychic images and forms: the Vietnam environment and the forces shaping it; past individual history; the post-Vietnam American experience, including Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the rap groups and the historical forces shaping these; and the various emanations of guilt, rage, and altered self-process that could and did take shape. Moreover, professionals like myself, who entered into the lives of these veterans, with our own personal and professional histories and personal struggles involving the war, became a part of the overall image-form constellation.

Psychiatrists have a great temptation to swim with an American tide that grants them considerable professional status but resists, at times quite fiercely, serious attempts to alter existing social and institutional arrangements. As depth psychologists and psychoanalysts, we make a kind of devil's bargain that we can plunge as deeply as we like into intrapsychic conflicts while not touching too critically upon historical dimensions that question those institutional arrangements. We often accept this dichotomy quite readily with the rationale that we are not, after all, historians or sociologists. But the veterans' experience shows that one needs extrospection as well as introspection to deal with psychological conflicts, particularly at a time of rapid social change. I believe that a general psychological paradigm of "death and the con-

tinuity of life." helps one to attain this dual perspective, and to recognize the interplay of psychological and moral elements in relationship to ultimate commitments.

All this points toward the need for a transformation of the healing professions themselves. At the end of Chapter 4 I mentioned a model of change, based on a sequence of confrontation, reordering, and renewal, which was important in my work with veterans. I think this model can be helpful to us in the healing professions to begin to examine ourselves.

For the veterans, confrontation meant confronting the idea of dying in Vietnam, often through the death of a buddy. For psychiatrists it would mean confronting our own concerns about death, mortality and immortality, and our personal and professional struggles with them. Reordering for the veterans meant the working through of difficult emotions around guilt and rage; for psychiatry this would mean seeking animating relationships to the same emotions in ourselves and recognizing and making use of our experience of despair.¹⁷ Renewal for veterans meant a new sense of self and world, including an enhanced playfulness. The professional parallels are there as well, and much can be said for the evolution of more playful modes of investigation and therapy.

The urgency of our situation in the professions is suggested by the experiments which Stanley Milgram has conducted on the whole issue of obedience to authority.¹⁸ The experiments focused specifically on the willingness of people to cause pain and even to endanger the lives of others, when authoritatively requested to do so. Whatever one's view of the scientific and moral aspects of these "Eichmann experiments," one of Milgram's own conclusions is worth thinking about: "Men are doomed if they act only within the alternatives handed down to them."

But if there is a compelling moral urgency that must be

confronted, there is also a pervasive confusion that is no less difficult to resolve. That is why I believe we must call forth the ethos of the survivor as we sense the "passing" of a psychological "way of life." For that is exactly what a change in paradigm means. There will be those who see no "momentous shift" or no shift at all. And there will be others who will find little of value in any of the three paradigms I have described. My work has taught me that in every form of survivor experience there is considerable possibility for avoidance, numbing, and stasis. But there is also possibility for confrontation, enhanced sensitivity, and renewal. Only the latter course does honor to our mentors and to ourselves. For: "A god outgrown becomes immediately a life-destroying demon. The form has to be broken and the energies released."¹⁹