The institutional structure of professions does not develop these qualities to maximal degree in all professionals, nor does it permit the qualities to be fully expressed without cost to those who do acquire them. Measured by the ideal, professions stand in need of improvement. Nevertheless, something like ideal professionals emerge in sufficient numbers to make professionalism a major social resource. The professions must be credited with bringing the ideal of professionalism to the forefront of modern consciousness and making it an option for some members of society.

But is it an exclusive possession of the professions? Should they monopolize it? Perhaps they must in the sense that it can be realized only in the kind of work they do or only under the institutions they provide?

Or, to the contrary, should professionalism not be a model for everyone in every occupation? Would we not want everyone to do his or her work as professionally as possible?

The professional virtues as forms of human excellence can be developed and hence they can be deliberately pursued and cultivated. Our survey reveals that all are relevant to features of work as such, not just features of particular kinds of work. While some virtues—for example, the ability to think abstractly and apply concepts to cases or the capacity to feel compassion and yet maintain objectivity—are more important in some forms of work than others, none is entirely restricted to any particular form and the complex of professional virtues is not so relevant to a particular set of forms as to set them apart as “professional” in any strong sense. In a word, the professional virtues are relevant to all forms of work. We have good grounds for saying that professionalism should be universalized.

To be more specific, in an organic system of specialized social labor, each member of society would contribute to every other by diligent and expert work. Contributing one’s fair share to society in this way would give meaning to work and raise it above the level of mere necessity and self-interest. And since work is a central part of life, the meaningfulness of work would go a long way toward giving meaning to life.

There is no reason in fact or justice to restrict meaningful work to one group of occupations. It should be available to everyone. But it will be objected that the demands of competition and productivity make it necessary for the majority of the labor force to work under conditions where the professional virtues are simply superfluous. The answer to this objection has two parts.

The first is that some degree of professionalism is possible on almost every job and any degree is better than none at all. Even workers on the assembly line can be concerned with quality and conscientious about carrying out their assignments, and they will respect themselves more if they are. This is certainly true of other relatively unskilled jobs that allow more initiative, such as farm labor.

The second part of the answer is that the very fact that many jobs do not provide much scope for the professional virtues is a reason to criticize the way those jobs are organized. It is a problem that needs to be addressed by the societies in which professions flourish. The challenge is to alter the conditions of other kinds of work so as to foster greater self-development and self-expression and to provide conditions in which workers will know and approve the products of their labor. Introducing variety into routine work, involving workers in its management, and other techniques should be tried not just to increase productivity, but because society is obligated to enable its members to find meaning in their work and lives. It is one more professional challenge to find the way.

Ideals and Moral Suasion

Universalization of professionalism requires action on two fronts. Professions need to be reformed so that they will populate themselves with more members who consistently put the ideal ahead of other considerations. And the prejudice must be broken that professionalism is only for professionals.

In addressing the first problem, a fundamental change in attitude must somehow be brought about. To do so, we must come to terms with an unfortunate psychological fact. Making some norms mandatory by formal sanctions or even peer pressure diverts attention from other norms put forward as ideals that are to be pursued primarily for the intrinsic value of living by them. Enforcement of even broad limits on conduct tends to transmute the moral into the prudential point of view.

This may be illogical but it does take place. It is reflected in the way professional associations sell morality to their members. Having codified rules and established enforcement mechanisms,
they think it necessary to persuade practitioners that ethics pays in terms of professional success. Unfortunately, they leave the impression that ideals are not worth adherence when adherence does not pay.

We have observed that the limited sanctions available to professional institutions result in punishment of only the most egregious malefactors and individuals can cut ethical corners with impunity if they are discreet. Since the struggle for professional employment, business, and clients is a competitive affair, those who do not cut corners may come in second in the competition. For example, it is sometimes a handicap to observe agreements scrupulously, be honest about one’s limitations, admit mistakes, avoid conflicts of interest, or blow the whistle on colleagues or superiors. This unhappy fact of life appears to frighten leaders of professions. They earnestly desire ethical behavior, at least in others. They are not convinced that practitioners will be sufficiently attracted by morality for its own sake to behave as they should. They are not able to make morality pay consistently. They, therefore, are forced to pretend that it does pay in order to persuade others to behave as they wish them to. Speakers for professional associations promulgate the myth.

To illustrate: John Carey maintains that ethics pays for accountants in a two-step argument. First, he maintains that an association’s ethical code [in his case, that of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants] reflects an effort to protect the profession’s reputation in the interest of all of its members.

A code of ethics... is a set of rules or precepts designed to induce a type of behavior on the part of practitioners of the profession concerned that will maintain public confidence. This is a very practical purpose. The practicality of the rules of ethics in the accounting profession is shown partly by the manner in which the rules were developed. Nobody ever sat down and wrote what he thought would be an ideal code of behavior for certified public accountants. On the contrary, most of the rules were developed as a result of the incidents which came before the governing bodies of the accounting societies, and which they feared might impair the confidence in the profession if repetition were not prevented in the future.

This frankly states that the code is primarily a public relations document.

Carey recommends the code to individuals on the basis of self-interest. The accountant must follow it if he is to maintain his reputation and retain his clients.

Relationships may shift very rapidly in the business world. A client for whom an accountant tried too assiduously to reduce a tax bill might, as a stockholder, wonder if the same accountant would display similar zeal in the interests of the management. Even the beneficiaries of practices bordering on the unethical would be likely to lose their respect for an accountant who forgets his professional responsibilities in the hope for financial rewards.

Unfortunately the moral is not that one should be ethical, but that one should be discreet so that one’s reputation for ethics is maintained.

The disastrous consequences of this approach have been noted by moralists since ancient times. Plato has Adeimantus observe that when parents and teachers praise justice for its rewards, children—no dummies they—see that the same rewards can be won by seeming just without the burden of being so. They resolve to practice injustice while cultivating the appearance of justice: “I will describe around me a picture and shadow of virtue to be the vestibule and exterior of my house; behind I will trail the subtle and craft fox...” And Kant, while conceding to Aristotle that pleasure and pain must be used to habituate a person to right action and allow him to experience its satisfactions, argues, as soon as this mechanical work, these leading-strings, have produced some effect, then we must bring before the mind the pure moral motive, which, not only because it is the only one that can be the foundation of a character [a practically consistent habit of mind with unchangeable maxims], but also because it teaches a man to feel his own dignity, gives the mind a power unexpected even by himself, to tear himself from all sensible attachments so far as they would fain have the rule, and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he offers, in the independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to which he sees he is destined.

The attempt to derive morality from self-interest is not only mistaken, it is pernicious. It seduces us from respect for the moral law and its command to do what is right despite contrary inclinations, desires, and appetites.

True morality is taught, Kant instructs us, by the example of
heroes who sacrifice all to duty, not people who happen to prosper by doing what it requires. In this way Kant hopes to teach people to “feel their own dignity” and find a “rich compensation” for doing their duty at whatever cost in “the independence of their rational nature and the greatness of soul to which they see they are destined.”

Are there any reforms in professions and other institutions that shape people before or independently of whether they become professionals that might help instill the ideal of professionalism for its own sake?

My last remarks will be devoted to a review of what might be done to make the professions more effective in producing and supporting true professionals and to universalize the professional ideal for all work. Though the professions have created the ideal, they do not have exclusive proprietary rights to it. I will suggest how their hold on it might be loosened while at the same time trying to see that they adhere more closely to it.

What Can Be Done

Let me briefly review my proposals for reconstructing professions to promote the ideal of professionalism among their own members. In view of the danger of giving further power to groups that have not proved worthy of the power they have seized, I am not ready to advocate the Durkheimian constitution of professions as political estates without a fundamental reconstitution of society. Nor do I advocate any program that would impose the same form on all occupations. Trial and error no doubt would reveal that some elements of the functionalist model would work for some occupations but not others, both for those currently recognized as professions and those denied the title. Hence, I do not urge that all occupations professionalize and certainly not that current professions further distance themselves from other occupations. Nevertheless, a few across-the-board reforms are attractive.

1. Professional associations should continue to try to perfect their codes. We have discussed modifications in the content of codes in view of the professional ideal and measures to increase their clarity and logical form. We have argued that rules need to be derived from a defensible moral philosophy based on a sound understanding of the dynamics of the particular occupation. There is no reason to start from scratch. Codes exist. They have valid content and at least lip service is paid them. Moreover, the professions contain people of good will and ordinary conscientiousness. If properly challenged, they would be willing to sacrifice some privileges for meaningful reforms. They would accept codes and ideals that authentically spoke to their conscience and represented more than an ideological facade.

2. The public, acting through political representatives and assisted by intelligentsia from outside particular occupations, should be involved more intimately in shaping and implementing occupational codes. No group’s moral standards are its sole responsibility. Standards concern all of society because they affect everyone in it. Perhaps the idea of professional covenants designed for the common good, drawn up by the professions and the rest of society, and voluntarily accepted by both parties is utopian. The country is too large and complex for the public to inform itself and act very effectively. But steps in this direction could not help but improve the situation.

3. Time and again, we have observed how good intentions and high pretensions are subverted by the competitive economic environment. Anyone interested in effective reform must continue to seek arrangements that would ensure competent practitioners a decent but not excessive income. Temptations as well as pressures are the enemy of ideals. They must be limited to allow the intrinsic interest of competent work and its moral imperatives to come to the fore. In some cases, this might require public ownership of organizations that employ professionals as in education and social work. In others, the objective might be achieved incident to pursuit of distributive justice by requiring public services from privately employed professionals or heavily taxing their income.

4. Some social controls are legitimate though they limit freedoms because they clear a space for more important or legitimate ones. Some powers of professionals and those who make use of professionals must be limited to protect the opportunity of moral professionals to act conscientiously. Disciplinary mechanisms of quasipublic professional associations or agencies of the state are necessary to deter gross malfeasance. By chartering professions and perfecting their codes, a de jure basis would be provided for the task. Then more resources might safely be devoted to making enforcement work. But in view of the monopolistic tendencies of the professions, safeguards are necessary to prevent abuse and these limit the degree of control that is
possible. The most we can hope is to establish institutions strong enough to enable persons of limited good will and ordinary conscientiousness to follow their conscience without undue sacrifice or heroic virtue in a world in which unscrupulous competitors remain.

5. This leads to the crucial role of moral training. Morality must be taught for its own sake despite the existence of rewards and punishments to encourage proper behavior. The inculcation of work ethic must begin at the beginning of the cultivation of character, in the home, school, church, and workplace, well before people are exposed to the socializing institutions connected with a lifelong career. For this it would be essential to universalize the professional ideal. People need to be taught to value professionalism long before they learn what their work will be.

I will not attempt to specify how this might be done, but I will make a few comments about the final stage, the kind of moral education that should occur in the professions on the basis of the already well formed character of the people entering it. While moral training in professional schools is a means to a further end, moral practice in professional life, it also may be viewed as an end for which prior training is designed. A consideration of the end will suggest things about the prior stages that lead up to it, though I shall leave the suggestions undeveloped.

Cultivation of Character

In the absence absolute control over another's physical and social environment, one cannot make the other into a particular sort of person. One can only provide conditions that will encourage his or her natural tendencies to realize themselves.

The control over individuals that institutions of the professions have and should have is limited. They are agencies of socialization, but those whom they socialize are already adults with ingrained habits, beliefs, and attitudes. The professions, therefore, can only invite and equip individuals to become true professionals, that is, not just certified as a professional engineer or whatever, but deeply committed to the professional ideal and incorporating its virtues in their character. This invitation is important. Entry into the profession is a voluntary act and most people who perform it are disposed to learn its ways and take its ideology seriously. They need only be told how.

Clearly, the professional school plays the critical role. Professional associations and peer groups continue the process of socialization, but these are not likely to be effective if the individual is not aimed in the proper direction at the outset. Unfortunately, professional elites, who exercise considerable control over the curricula of schools, think of moral training as indoctrination in group standards and appeal to prudence rather than genuinely moral intentions to persuade people to follow those standards.

It is easy to understand why those who profit from the social system cherish indoctrination and detest criticism. Indoctrination does not raise questions about the system behind it. Moreover, indoctrination is easier than critical education. It can be handled expeditiously without diverting time from technical training. As a ceremonial exercise, ritual recitation of professional codes and creeds provides an outlet for moral impulses without forcing difficult choices. Dogmatic ethics thus helps the system work without calling attention to its flaws, whereas searching criticism causes difficulties everywhere.

If the established elites of professions cannot be expected to take the lead in inculcating ideals that generate critical attitudes toward the status quo, the burden must fall on educators. They must break rank with the leadership if necessary.

The potential is there. Faculties of professional schools are not directly accountable to employers with a material interest in their philosophy. Their students have not yet identified with the profession, committed themselves to its special interests, or fully absorbed its ideology. The academic profession has won strong guarantees of freedom to think, speak, and criticize for both faculty and students.

Thus professional schools have the opportunity to pump practitioners into society with new ideas about the old ways of doing things, critical conceptions of the corporate responsibilities of occupations, and a healthy skepticism about the way institutions actually work.

Some progress has been made in the education of critical professionals. One thinks of new specialties such as public interest law, public health medicine, and environmental engineering, and activist groups such as Physicians, Lawyers, and Educators for Social Responsibility. But I have in mind particularly the socially conscious, critical, and innovative professionals in all specialties and all modes of employment, penetrating all insti-
tutions and working their way up to positions of influence in every hierarchy. Professional schools have an unrivaled opportunity to be a leaven for society by turning out this sort of graduate.

Traditional ways of teaching ethics and social responsibility are not adequate. Training in codes, etiquette, and business practices stultifies the critical spirit if not salted with the dialectical methods of philosophical thought turned upon fundamental questions of human existence. The philosophy of work has received this kind of attention only in recent times.

I have in mind an education in which students are exposed to no-holds-barred debates on the ethical dilemmas of professional practice and every position—radical, reformatory, conservative, reactionary—regarding the socioeconomic system and the place of professions in it. Students should not only witness debates, but be required to enter into them. An informed, practiced, and critical grasp of alternative moral and social perspectives should become as integral an element of professionalism as technical skill.

I shall not propose a comprehensive plan for professional education. I shall only suggest that it needs be quite different than it typically is. Its aim must be breadth of vision as well as depth of expertise. It must cultivate judgment as well as impart theoretic knowledge. It must develop interpersonal skills and nurture growth of the individual as a person not just as a technician. It must bring to life the vision of a better society and a passion to contribute to it. It must arouse a deep and abiding resolution to become fit for membership in the ideal moral community. Professional education is not geared to attempt these things in any serious way.

The Fate of Profession
To end the proprietary claim of professions to professionalism, I recommend the systematic subversion of the generic distinction between professions and other kinds of occupations that, as we have seen, sets them apart in status and power. This recommendation may seem incompatible with the ideas just advanced about professional education and the possible reforms in the structure considered in Part III. How can we propose both the end of profession and the reform—that is, preservation and strengthening—of professional institutions?

The point is that an experimental approach should be taken to the organization of occupations. Components of the functionalist model may indeed be appropriate for different occupations, but this is no reason for this or any model to be taken as a single pattern for a limited number of occupations and used to measure their worthiness for superior status. It certainly is no reason for believing that the professional ideal can be realized only in "professions," by the members of occupations that are so labeled by society or social scientists.

My modest proposal, therefore, is that the social sciences abandon ‘profession’ as a descriptive term. Little would be lost for analytical purposes. Semantically, the term is more obscurant than illuminating. It has become encrusted with a family of different meanings as ever more occupational groups have claimed it for themselves. The family continues to grow as new occupations are created by technological advances. Common elements of meaning become ever more attenuated. "The" meaning for any given speaker becomes more and more nebulous.

Sociologists have tried to staunch the semantic hemorrhage by essentialist definitions of ideal types. Their failure to come up with useful generalizations, not to mention explanatory theories with predictive power, has demonstrated the bankruptcy of the approach. We have suggested that the reason is that the product, the functionalist model, is an ideological rather than a scientific tool.

The abandonment of ‘profession’ as a technical term would not mean that it would pass out of the vocabulary of social scientists. They would continue to refer to the term as long as it continues to be used by people in society. By investigating its ideological role, they would explain its use without legitimating it.

Social scientists, even of the conflict persuasion, are not ready to conclude that the category leads to conceptual dead ends. None seem ready to jettison it. Habenstein comes closest. After reviewing its vagaries of use, he remarks, “In my judgment, ‘profession’ does not have the stature of a sociological category, that is, of a concept with analytic power, describing a limited number of characteristics whose relations and order are demonstrable.” However, he does not conclude that it be dumped. Rather it might be salvaged to deal with “the way human associations function to handle emotional crisis, stress, and vulnerabil-
The professional ideal. At the same time, the professional ideal could be promoted. After all, the honorific connotations of the professional terminology reflect a widespread popular response to true professionalism. The response reflects a preanalytic appreciation of a form of human excellence. There are good reasons to call that form of excellence by its established name.

To summarize, profession should be abandoned as an ideological category that sets some occupations apart from the rest in a social hierarchy, as an analytical concept for theoretical generalizations in social science, and as a normative pattern for select occupations to emulate. Professionalism should be rescued from the social structures in which it is embedded and recognized as a personal ideal available to all who work. What is needed is professionalism without professions.

Postscript

I shall end as I began, with a personal note. In attempting to put the professional ideal into words, I have been aware of coming to know myself. I have articulated what I sensed and admired when I faced the fundamental choice of an occupation to which I would devote my life. What I wanted but only vaguely understood was an opportunity to do my best at a job that would utilize my native talents, challenge me to a form of excellence, and indisputably contribute to the welfare of others.

From the outset, the ideal told me that whatever work I chose, I should do a professional job of it. I should become as skillful as I could and use my skills to the best of my ability. Upon reflection, the ideal now tells me that the most unprofessional thing is to forget what the skills are for. If I have done my job well for the right purpose, my life has substance and meaning. If I have done my job poorly or for the wrong purpose, I have squandered my life, however much I have prospered.

I recognize these values as a heritage. Both of my parents admired professionals without the opportunity of becoming such. Each displayed the virtues I describe, though the one lacked a higher education and devoted his life to business and the other, though enjoying an education, eschewed a profession to maintain a home. Both displayed the dignity of hard work done intelligently in the service of others. Both were more professional than most professionals.