

# REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF A PROFESSION

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper we are revisiting the concept of a profession. Definitions of the concept are readily encountered in the literature on professions and we have collected a sample of such definitions. From these samples we distil frequently occurring elements and ask whether a synthesis of these elements adequately explains the concept. We find that bringing the most frequently occurring elements together does not adequately address the reason (or purpose) that society differentiates professions from other occupations or activities – why there is a concept of ‘profession’ at all. We suggest an alternative approach that attempts to make sense of the concept at a more general level. This, more philosophical, approach employs analytical tools from Julius Kovesi, Patricia Hanna and Bernard Harrison to address the question of what is the point of the concept.*

**Keywords:** Professions; professional ethics; ethical principles

## INTRODUCTION

Our reason for revisiting the concept of a profession arises from our concerns about the basis of professional ethics, discussed below. In the past half century, professional ethics has been viewed in two very different ways: as a special kind of ethics, with its own distinctive features, and as a branch of general philosophical ethics. Under the first approach, each profession crafted its own ethical code and creed, guided by the assumed social role of the profession and the ideals that inspired its members. The second approach, which has predominated since the 1970s, sees professional ethics as based on general ethical principles. For example, in biomedical ethics it has mostly taken the form of ‘principlism’, as constructed especially by [Beauchamp and Childress \(2009\)](#) though various other kinds of principles-based biomedical ethics are available (e.g. [Veatch, 2012](#)).

The contest between these two approaches to professional ethics might seem to be long since over. Much of the extensive literature on the principles-based approach is focused on refinements and clarification, rather than presenting any fundamental challenge to it. But, despite it being likely that many people, including a large number of ethicists, would have little idea where professional ethics might come from if it were not from more general universal norms, the basic debate is not quite over. For example, Rosamond Rhodes ([Rhodes, 2001, 2007](#)) argues that ethics based on general ethical principles fails to explain the special features of the biomedical professions. Her proposal is that in biomedical ethics the central idea is that of trust. Biomedical ethics is not, she thinks, simply ‘an extrapolation from general morality’ ([Rhodes, 2001](#), p. 493). In previous work, we go even further. In our view, the attempt to derive professional ethics from principles drawn from general ethics is logically flawed ([Tapper & Millett, 2014](#)). General ethics is too general to be the sole basis of professional ethics, as it applies to anyone anywhere, whereas professional ethics has to be specific to the professional situation. Professional ethics has to specify what the professional must do, *qua* professional, that is it must differentiate the obligations of professionals from the obligations of non-professionals. For example, professionals must recognise that, in the context of the professional relationship, clients possess rights to exercise autonomy that are other than the general rights of personal autonomy accepted in ordinary social life. Similarly, professionals are expected to display beneficence towards their clients that is more than the beneficence expected of anyone in ordinary social life. In short, there is an obligation on professionals (with regard at least to autonomy and beneficence) that is greater than the

obligation on patients or clients. We have argued that these distinctive features of professional ethics cannot be explained by appeal to general ethical principles (Tapper & Millett, 2014). Thus, we are driven to look elsewhere for the basis of professional ethics.

We start this examination by reviewing some of the ways in which the concept is commonly defined, in part to ascertain whether the common definitions are themselves coherent and whether there is some agreement as to what is at the core of all professions.

In attempting to get to the heart of what makes something a profession, we looked at a range of working definitions – set out in the next section. Each of these definitions presents features thought to be characteristic of professions and in these an *ethical* element is so prevalent as to suggest that it is a *necessary* element of what it is to be a profession. But in preference to applying the language of necessary and sufficient conditions – which would imply that there is a concise argument available that would prescribe exactly what a profession is – we take up Kovesi's work on moral notions and his characterisation of the formal element that is at the heart of any concept. To this we add Hanna and Harrison's view that every concept – in this case the concept of a profession – is embedded in established social practices and is part of our practical involvement in the world. In doing this we make the beginnings of an argument that the formal element of the concept of a profession has ethics at its core.

## SOME DEFINITIONS OF A PROFESSION

Our review of the common definitions of a profession begins with dictionaries originating on either side of the Atlantic. The [Oxford English Dictionary \(2014\)](#) notes that a profession involves occupation (whether career or vocation), knowledge, application, training and formal qualification, with the last two regarded as normal but non-essential. The [Merriam-Webster Dictionary \(2014\)](#) says a profession is 'a calling or a vocation requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation'.

Despite dictionary definitions being a common first point of inquiry for concepts generally, they do not necessarily get to the heart of a given concept. In an attempt to understand the core of what it is to be a profession, we consider from the literature examples that seek clarity as to the nature of a profession. In examining the sources we found that all – except, notably, the dictionary definitions above – had an ethical element. We take an

element to be ‘ethical’ if it references non-legal rights or duties or similar such concepts or if it invokes other-regarding virtues such as benevolence, altruism, honesty and fairness.

Below, we group together explanations of what a profession is according to ethical themes expressed by the authors. Some of the explanations might readily sit within more than one theme and where that is the case we have tried to identify the theme that is most strongly expressed. We do, however, recognise that others may hold different views on this categorisation. The themes we have identified are that a profession involves: an ideal of service and responsibility to the public good; virtue on the part of professionals; and a special sort of fiduciary obligation. The first theme was the most prevalent, and that is where we will start.

### *An Ideal of Service within a Generalised Responsibility to the Public Good*

Before addressing the prevalence of an ideal of service it is pertinent to note that the ideal of service in the definitions below cannot be characterised merely in terms of a commercial exchange. It requires professionals in some key respects to subordinate their own interests to those of their clients while recognising that the profession of which they are part exists to a significant degree to support the public good. It includes what [Smith \(1994, p. 118\)](#) calls ‘the delivery of a significantly intellectual, consultative service rather than mere production of a practical good’. This service itself, he says, ‘must be of a critical importance to the successful functioning of society ...’. However, the ideal of service, while having an element of altruism, is not reducible to altruism. It incorporates an obligation to meet the essential needs of clients and patients, the meeting of which, when generalised, is a social good. In effect, the ethical element of the service orientation acts – as [Carr \(2000\)](#) suggests – as a sort of glue holding together the other elements of what it is to be a profession.

In a definition from early last century, [Flexner \(1915\)](#) says that professions involve ‘essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility; they derive their raw material from science and learning; this material they work up to a practical and definite end; they possess an educationally communicable technique; they tend to self-organization; [and] they are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation’. The last element represents an ethical ideal of service.

A definition of a profession contemporaneous with Flexner’s was from the founders of the London School of Economics, Sidney and Beatrice

Webb, who considered that a profession is ‘a vocation founded upon specialized educational training, the purpose of which is to supply objective counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain’ (Webb & Webb, 1917).

In the years since Flexner and the Webbs many different approaches to understanding the concept of a profession have been suggested. For example, in later editions of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, Beauchamp and Childress’s definition (e.g. 2009, p. 7) posits four elements: knowledge, training and certification, self-regulation and service. The service component is construed in ethical terms.

Professionals ... are usually distinguished by their specialized knowledge and training as well as by their commitment to provide important services to patients, clients, or consumers. Professions maintain self-regulating organizations that control entry into occupational roles by formally certifying that candidates have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills. In learned professions, such as medicine, nursing, and public health, the professional’s background knowledge is partly acquired through closely supervised training, and the professional is committed to providing a service to others.

US legal scholar Pound (1953, p. 5) in contending that a profession is ‘a group ... pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of public service – no less a public service because it may incidentally be a means of livelihood’ puts particular emphasis on service as an ethical obligation. Cruess, Johnston, and Cruess (2004, p. 75) suggest the following definition: a profession is an occupation whose core element is work based upon the mastery of a complex body of knowledge and skills. And like Pound they invoke a sense of calling in which specialised knowledge is used in the service of others and whose members are governed by codes of ethics and profess a commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism, and the promotion of the public good within their domain. These commitments form the basis of a social contract between a profession and society, which in return grants the profession a monopoly over the use of its knowledge base, the right to considerable autonomy in practice and the privilege of self-regulation. Professions and their members are accountable to those served and to society.

Eliot Freidson (quoted in American Bar Association Commission on Professionalism, 1986, p. 10) defines a profession as: An occupation whose members have special privileges, such as exclusive licensing, that are justified by the following assumptions: its practice requires substantial intellectual training and the use of complex judgments; since clients cannot adequately evaluate the quality of the service, they must trust those they consult; the client’s trust presupposes that the practitioner’s self-interest is

overbalanced by devotion to serving both the client's interest and the public good, and the occupation is self-regulating – that is, organised in such a way as to assure the public and the courts that its members are competent, do not violate their client's trust, and transcend their own self-interest.

Sullivan (2005, p. 36) takes a profession to be a kind of occupation with three characteristic features: 'specialized training in a field of codified knowledge usually acquired by formal education and apprenticeship, public recognition of a certain autonomy on the part of the community of practitioners to regulate their own standards of practice, and a commitment to provide service to the public that goes beyond the economic welfare of the practitioner'. The first of these features is an ethical feature in the procedural sense, and applies to the profession as a body. The commitment to service applies to the professional as an individual. Jackson (2000, pp. 239–240) also notes that a profession is a type of occupation with three elements: 'the occupation answers to some important sphere of human need'; 'the contract of employment only loosely defines one's duties – duties which are often open-ended and related to certain ideals of service'; and 'one becomes a member of a community of practitioners dedicated to a common cause, with obligations to uphold and continue a tradition of service'. Two of the three points are ethical ideals of service: one is at the level of the individual, the other is a corporate ideal.

In a conception they say is common among lawyers, Cohen and Davis (2009, p. 27) state that a certain number of persons constitutes a profession if, and only if, they are all engaged in the same learned art, more or less full time. The art in which they are engaged needs to be helpful to others 'in some important way' and those so engaged form an organisation that governs how they practise the art. Finally, they introduce a service ideal whereby the governance imposed by the organisation is primarily for the public good rather than for those who are so governed.

For Barber (1963, p. 672) '[P]rofessional behavior may be defined in terms of four essential attributes: a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge; primary orientation to the community interest rather than to individual self-interest; a high degree of self-control of behavior through codes of ethics internalized in the process of work socialization ...; and a system of rewards' that are 'ends in themselves'. Two of these are ethical attributes, one being a procedural attribute for the profession as a whole, the other requiring that the interests of the community be of primary concern.

For Behrman (1988, p. 97) a profession has: a clearly defined field of expertise; a period of prescribed education or training preceding membership; membership restricted to those who qualify; a procedure for testing

and licensing; meeting an obligation to social service; a service orientation that has greater weight than gaining income or wealth; pro bono work; differential fees that take account of capacity to pay; a set of self-governing rules, inculcating a code of ethics and requiring a high level of competence; and a means of self-surveillance and penalties for misbehaviour or negligence.

Carr (2000, pp. 17–19) notes that analyses of the idea of a profession standardly focus upon five principal criteria, according to which professions: ‘provide an important public service’; ‘involve theoretically as well as practically-grounded expertise’; ‘have a distinct ethical dimension which calls for expression in a code of practice’ (which ‘clearly identifies professional *obligations* and responsibilities in relation to the *rights* of the client or patient’); ‘require organization and regulation to manage recruitment and maintain discipline’ and require practitioners to demonstrate autonomy and independence of judgement. While only the third criterion of the five is clearly ethical, he does note that ‘once we begin to explore logical relations between these criteria, it should become clear that all are implicated in the ethical in ways which may well serve to distinguish professional from other occupations’. He observes that professional practice is ‘a matter of intelligent *practice*’ distinct from trade and other practices in that ‘professional training cannot be *solely* a matter of hands-on apprenticeship’ and that there is a link between ‘the theory implicatedness of professional practice and the need for professional autonomy’.

Bennion (1969, pp. 14–15) uses a six-point account, but an account that allows for some of the points not to be present. For him, a profession requires: an intellectual discipline, capable of formulation on theoretical, if not academic, lines; a foundation in private practice; an advisory function, often coupled with an executive function in carrying out what has been advised; a tradition of service where income is subordinated to serving the client in a manner not inconsistent with the public good; societies or institutes that represent members of the profession; and a code of professional ethics.

Pepper’s (1986, p. 615) definition is predicated on the idea, similar to Bennion’s, that a profession connotes a function of service under which professionals are to subordinate their interests to the interests of clients. Under this definition, a profession is a means of making a living based on specialized knowledge, training and ability, often requiring intellectual labour and many years of higher education. The services rendered are necessary to individuals at various points in their lives and frequently stand to affect them significantly. Because of the specialized knowledge involved, the client is unable to test the quality of the services rendered and is thereby

vulnerable and the profession wields significant economic power through the exercise of a monopoly. The profession is also largely self-regulating and part of the regulation usually includes ethical prescriptions that articulate a service orientation.

Under [Benson's \(1992\)](#) criteria, heard by the House of Lords, a key element is the presence of a governing body in support of which members should subordinate their selfish private interests. The governing body must: set adequate standards of education and ensure education continues throughout the member's professional life; set ethical rules and high professional standards that should be for the benefit of the public; take disciplinary action should the rules and standards not be observed and ensure that the public are not exploited by unfair competition. The work of a profession is often reserved by statute as not to do so may endanger the public. Members of the profession must be independent in thought and outlook, and the profession's field of expertise should give leadership to the public it serves.

### *Professional Virtues*

Two prominent authors, William May and Raymond Tallis, weight their definitions of professions in favour of the virtues. For [May \(2001, pp. 7–10\)](#) a professional enters a covenant that opens out in three directions – intellectual, moral and organisational – ‘that help distinguish professionals from careerists: the professional professes something (a body of knowledge and experience); on behalf of someone (or some institution); and in the setting of colleagues’. ‘These distinguishing marks call for three correlative virtues – practical wisdom, fidelity, and public spiritedness’. He glosses both the virtue of fidelity and the virtue of public spiritedness as a service ideal, noting that ‘professionals wield knowledge not simply to exploit others or to indulge in self-display, but to serve others in their needs’. A profession is: ‘the art of acting in concert with others for the common good: (1) in the production of services; (2) in the distribution of services; and (3) in the quality control of services, through professional education, self-regulation, and discipline’.

For [Tallis \(2005, pp. 239–240\)](#) ‘[P]rofessions are associated with an expertise based upon a body of knowledge and a set of skills refined through experience and a deeper form of common sense and nous’. In his view members of a profession can be expected to exhibit characteristics of ‘honesty, reliability, beneficence, a sense of personal responsibility,



integrity and independence'. Professions are also 'associated with a "calling" ... [and have] an accountability to conscience that goes beyond strict legal liability and the duty of care defined by one's job description'. In following a calling, members of a profession should exhibit genuine compassion, imagination in finding ways to care for people based in a genuine desire to help and be willing to carry the burden of taking personal responsibility.

### *Fiduciary Obligation*

The notion of a fiduciary obligation, an obligation to act on behalf of someone for that person's benefit, is well known in legal contexts in which it is a legally enforceable duty of trust and, as the Oxford Dictionary shows, need not have an ethical connotation (Dictionary). However, some authors suggest that a version of this obligation expanded to include an ethical element is a necessary characteristic of a professional.

Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993, pp. 155–156) put forward a six-point account of the sort of professional relationship found between physician and patient, lawyer and client, and clergy and their congregation. Firstly, in these relationships, the person seeking help is dependent, vulnerable and exploitable. Secondly, the client–professional relationship is unequal, with the professional having power arising from specialised knowledge. This inherent inequality may be thought to prohibit the professional relationship being considered a contract, as one party is heavily dependent on the other's services. Thirdly, professional relationships have a special fiduciary character because we must trust our physicians, lawyers or pastors in situations where we are exposed to harms (*caveat emptor* should not apply). This fiduciary character is accentuated because 'the professional invites our trust', beginning 'their relationship to us with the question "How can I help you?"' Fourthly, professional knowledge does not exist for its own sake and cannot be wholly proprietary: it exists to meet certain fundamental human needs. Fifthly, the professional is the final common pathway through which help and harm must pass and is the guardian of the patient's interest. Finally, the professional is a member of a moral community:

a collective human association whose members share the privileges of special knowledge and together pledge their dedication to use it to advance health, justice, or salvation. Together the members of the moral community make the same promises and elicit the same trust that they do as individuals. They are bound by the same fidelity to the promise they have collectively made and the trust they have collectively elicited. The

professional is therefore not on a moral island. He belongs to a group that has been given a monopoly on special knowledge and holds it in trust for all who need it.

Sokolowski's (1991, pp. 25–31) account of the professions has knowledge, the use of knowledge and fiduciary obligation at its heart. He contends that the possession of formal and specialised knowledge requiring 'extensive education and training' is at the core. Clients subordinate themselves to the judgement, the prudence, of the professional. Of particular note is his claim that 'the exercise of professional judgment and skill must, first of all, be for the client's good'. This obligation to act in the client's interests stems from the 'very nature of the relationship between professional and client', a relationship that is 'fiduciary' in which the 'client trusts the professional and entrusts him or herself ... to the professional'. For him 'the difference between a profession and an art ... lies in the fiduciary relationship that is built into the profession but not into the art'.

## WHAT HAS THIS SURVEY SHOWN?

Our analysis shows that there are many possible elements that together may be constitutive of a profession. However, with the exception of the two dictionary definitions, all the authors surveyed include an ethical element, reflecting Davis' assertion that the 'claim of professionalism is primarily a moral claim' (1988, p. 343).<sup>1</sup>

The six most prevalent themes identified in the survey are summarised in Table 1.

Are any of the definitions better than others? Some are clearer, some are more comprehensive, some appear to have more force than others, and the number of elements varies. These differences point to one of the problems we are intent on addressing: that clarifying a concept is not readily achieved by compiling a shopping list of content and attempting to achieve a complete definition. To clarify a concept, another approach is needed.

## HOW MEANINGS FUNCTION

After analysing the works included in the survey, we are still left with some questions. How might we know that any one component is necessary? And how might we know that some further component is not needed to achieve

**Table 1.** Main Elements of the Concept of a Profession.

Elements	Number of Sources where the Elements Are Found (Out of 21)	Sources
Possessing an ideal of service and responsibility to the public good	19	(3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (16), (17), (18), (19), (20), (21)
Based on a body of specialised knowledge	18	(1), (2), (3), (5), (6), (7), (8), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (17), (18), (19), (20), (21)
Operates as a community and is self-regulating	15	(2), (3), (5), (7), (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (16), (19), (21)
Requires intensive training and formal qualification	12	(1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (8), (12), (14), (15), (16), (20), (21)
The knowledge is applied knowledge	10	(1), (3), (4), (7), (10), (13), (14), (15), (17), (19)
Requires a code of ethics or a shared ethics	8	(3), (7), (11), (12), (13), (14), (16), (19)

*Index to sources:* (1) Oxford English Dictionary (2014); (2) The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014); (3) Flexner (1915); (4) Webb and Webb (1917); (5) Beauchamp and Childress (2009); (6) Pound (1953); (7) Cruess et al. (2004); (8) Sullivan (2005); (9) Jackson (2000); (10) Cohen and Davis (2009); (11) Barber (1963); (12) Behrman (1988); (13) Carr (2000); (14) Bennion (1969); (15) Pepper (1986); (16) Benson (1992); (17) May (2001); (18) Tallis (2005); (19) Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993); (20) Sokolowski (1991); (21) Freidson in American Bar Association Commission on Professionalism (1986).

sufficiency? Where the definitions differ, how do we choose between them? The questions are philosophical in nature, and here we need to do some philosophical work. We need to give a grounded account of how meanings function.

Philosophers have debated this problem since Plato, and we might well regard it as a central question of philosophy since Gottlob Frege's famous essay 'On sense and reference' (Frege, 1892/1960). One main strand of subsequent philosophy, seeking to avoid the suggestion that concepts exist in some non-naturalistic dimension, championed the apparently down-to-earth idea that 'meaning is use'. Words have meanings insofar as they have uses. What are these uses? In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1991), Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of a word derives from the way it is used in the context of a social practice. He illustrates the theory with examples from bricklaying. The use of the word 'slab' lies in its place in the practice of bricklaying. The word does more than name an object, thus

allowing us to identify it as a 'slab'; it also guides the way we use the object. However, whilst a story such as this may make sense in the case of functional objects such as slabs, does it make sense more generally? Can it be applied to the concept of a profession? To broaden the theory of meaning-as-use we need to expand the idea of *use*.

Here we can turn to the work of Julius Kovesi, who put forward a general account of how concepts work and how they are to be understood. In *Moral Notions* (1967) he draws a distinction between the *material* and the *formal* elements of a concept. The material elements of a concept can vary without affecting how the concept is applied: tables, for example, might have any number of legs and may vary in size, in what they are made of, and so forth, and still be examples of the concept of a table.

The formal element of a concept is the reason or reasons for its formation. In the cases of functional objects such as tables, the reason we form the concept is our need to use flat surfaces for working or eating at, etc. But in other sorts of case, our reasons are quite different. The reason we have the concept of murder (another example from Kovesi) is not to facilitate the performance of murders but to prevent and prohibit murders. The point of the concept of murder is found not in the action itself but in our needs as social beings. The material elements never determine the nature of the concept. Quite the contrary, it is the formal element of the concept that determines the material elements, which can be very variable. All the tables we have seen may have legs but having legs may not be necessary – a table might be suspended from the ceiling, for instance. Until recently, all books were made of paper or parchment, but the invention of digital books changed that: digital books are no less books because they lack paper. Murders normally involve intention to kill, but they may also arise from non-intentional killing in the course of committing a felony or killing brought about by a reckless indifference to life or from hiring a hit man to do the killing. A certain set of elements in a particular case will count as an instance of X only if the elements amount to X, and that is determined by the formal element – that is by the reason why we have the concept.

Kovesi's line of argument has been pursued further by Patricia Hanna and Bernard Harrison in *Word and World* (2004). In their view, 'what concepts a language honours is relative ... to the nature of the practices on which that language happens to be founded' (p. 12). Concepts are to be understood as embedded in human social practices such as, for example, counting or carpentry. We form concepts as part of our practical involvement with the world. They are not formed by abstraction from experience, but they are nevertheless related to experience. One who understands the

concept of X (length, for example) thereby knows what sorts of facts are relevant to determining X-ness (length). Thus, he or she can operate with the concept, in pursuit of the practice (of measuring, for example) in which the concept is embedded. Furthermore, concepts do not each stand alone but are interconnected. Individual concepts belong to families of concepts, just as particular practices belong to broader practices: bricklaying is part of building, which is part of construction, etc.

Compare these views with a tempting alternative. Concepts might be considered as ‘fuzzy sets’ (Zadeh, 1965) having no ‘precisely defined criteria of membership’ but in which there is ‘a continuum of grades of membership’ (p. 338). A fuzzy set is a convenient way of representing uncertainty with respect to membership of the set. A similar idea is Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘family resemblance’ (Wittgenstein, 1953/1991, pp. 31ff) that supposedly holds together the various uses and instances of a concept. On the other hand, we want to say that concepts must have a certain sort of coherence. If the set is quite fuzzy, what makes it a set? If the family resemblance is fleeting, what makes it this family rather than that? What is it about law, medicine, engineering, teaching, and so on, that makes them all professions, while taxi-driving, real estate sales, and book-keeping are not? To answer such questions, we suggest, we need to go to the reason why we form the concept.

Our aim, then, is to explore how the idea of a profession might have coherence. Kovesi’s account of concepts is relevant here. If he is right, at the heart of a fuzzy set or a collection of family resemblances or even a multi-point extended definition there needs to be a core element, and that core element will not be whatever the professions currently happen to have in common. It will be some higher-order function.

Two extended definitions — one by Walter Metzger and one by Rosamond Rhodes — seem to us to come close to what we are seeking. Metzger (1976, pp. 8–9) gives the following account of the concept of a profession.

I subscribe to these interlinked propositions: that, as the amount of knowledge increases, so too does the relative amount of ignorance, for each man can know only a decreasing fraction of what can be known; that knowledge, as it grows more specialized, also tends to grow more potent, more capable of being used for ill or good; that, as a consequence, there comes into being not a mass society but a lay society — a society, that is, in which each is potentially at the mercy of someone more thoroughly in the know; that these mutual dependencies grow more dangerous as knowledge, which had once been held by holy men, kin and neighbors, passes into the hands of strangers, and as the customary means of assuring its benign uses — parental love, communal sanctions, religious discipline — tend increasingly not to work. It is to avert a

Hobbesian outcome that society urges occupations to tie their expertise to honourableness, to accord even ignorance moral claims. In that urging the professional ideal is born.

This is a story, but it is a story with a point. Expressed in a non-narrative form, Metzger's point is to portray professions as a social response to the risks and benefits of specialised knowledge, that is he provides the concept with a formal element. In his story, the professional ideal arises from the generally shared need and desire to tie knowledge and expertise to honourableness and to accord moral rights to those who lack them. The honourableness and the rights are located in the operation of those occupations in which knowledge and expertise are both predominant and potentially dangerous. The ultimate point is to avert a 'Hobbesian outcome', that is a situation where the advantages of knowledge can be freely exploited to the disadvantage of lay people. The concept of a profession serves a definite social purpose. The domain in which it belongs is the domain of occupations. It picks out a subset of occupations and designates them as subject to two directly moral concepts: honourableness in practitioners and rights in lay people.

This story has the form we think is required: it is focused on a single point. It contains what Metzger calls a set of 'interlinked propositions', that is, the parts all go together in such a way that the concept 'makes sense'. The concept is not a bundle of separable items but forms a single package. We can use it as a starting point from which to derive the various 'material elements' that are ways in which the concept is elaborated and instantiated. We are not here proposing that Metzger's story is perfectly correct or indisputable. Other accounts could be constructed that have the form we are after. What we are suggesting is that it is working at the right level and that other accounts would need to be working at the same level – at the level of articulating the formal element.

A second example we take from Rhodes (2001, pp. 494–495). She is discussing medical professionalism, but, without endorsing it, we can take her point to be a general one potentially applicable to any profession:

As I see it, roughly speaking, professions are defined (that is, constructed) by the set of knowledge, skills, powers, and privileges that a society entrusts the profession to have and to use for the good of its members. In a sense, society acknowledges that medical knowledge, skills, powers, and privileges are potentially very dangerous and that the activities of physicians require patients to make themselves vulnerable in very significant ways. Therefore, societies recognize that the knowledge, skills, powers and privileges of medicine should only be wielded by a special few. Hence we have a rather clear conception of the core characteristics that a doctor should personify (e.g., intelligent,

able, responsible, honest, caring, respectful) and because we expect doctors, as a profession and as members of the profession, to be people of that sort, we allow them to exercise their special powers.

Like Metzger, for Rhodes the concept of a profession arises from what ‘societies recognize’. Like Metzger, Rhodes focuses on the relation between knowledge-based skills and potential danger. Out of these arises the vulnerability of the lay person, and from these we see the need for a special focus on the good character of the knowledge holder. She does not quite say that professions are a form of occupation – that is assumed, and it would be better if it were explicit.

We see Metzger and Rhodes as trying to give a Kovesian ‘formal element’ story about the concept of a profession. What emerges from their views is the centrality of good character and ethical behaviour in the concept of a profession. Our survey of the definitions strongly suggested that ethical ideals and requirements are built into the concept of a profession. In all cases surveyed, except that of the two dictionaries, the definitions included at least one ethical element. It seems generally agreed that professionals have an obligation to privilege their clients’ interests and ensure that the sum of their actions as a professional serve to support the public good. This obligation is often seen as a ‘service orientation’. Some accounts add two other obligations: an obligation to the body of knowledge on which the profession is based; and an obligation to protect the general public from the misuse of that body of knowledge.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Does the foregoing allow us to state what is and what is not a profession? If it were deemed necessary for all of the elements in [Table 1](#) to be present then something like school teaching may not counted as a profession as it is frequently not self-regulating (as, e.g., with state-run education systems). It does seem, however, that built into our understanding of teaching as a practice is that it has what we have described as a service orientation, the application of dangerous knowledge and a role in nurturing a necessary public good. Something like hairdressing on the other hand would not be a profession as there appears to be no required ethical ideal of service, no application of dangerous knowledge and no role in nurturing a necessary public good. In short, the formal element of a profession is absent.

Our analysis has followed two pathways. In one, we have surveyed the literature in which extended definitions of the concept of a profession have been put forward. That survey indicates that professions are characterised in three ways: in terms of a unique fiduciary obligation; in terms of the moral virtue required of professional practitioners; and in terms of a service ideal, which operates within a responsibility to the public good, in which the needs of patients or clients are *prima facie* superior to the needs of the professional. In the other, we have sought to clarify what is lacking in these extended definitions: namely, an understanding of the point of the *concept* of a profession and how that concept operates to structure the practice of the professions. We have proceeded in a tentative way, more with the aim to raise a question than to make a statement, and in a spirit of seeking further understanding of what it means to be a profession. Our tentative suggestion is that the formal element of a profession might be construed in terms of employing dangerous (or potent) knowledge in pursuit of a public good by people of good character who behave ethically in the use of that knowledge. What emerges from both approaches to the problem is the prominence of ethical considerations. Both approaches suggest to us that Davis (1988, p. 343) was right when he asserted that ‘the claim of professionalism is primarily a moral claim. To be a professional is to have obligations one would not otherwise have. These ... are obligations one is in honor, in conscience, in decency, bound to respect’ while also recognising that ‘the claim of professionalism is not simply a moral claim’.

We have not been trying to settle how professions operate as practices – that is another project.<sup>2</sup> Rather we have been trying to clarify how the concept of a profession needs to be discussed, which we take to be a preliminary question. In the absence of something like the notion of a formal element, any suite of definitions – such as those summarised in the first part of this paper – cannot fully capture what is at the heart of the concept of a profession. We have found two authors who are each telling a story that appears to be enunciating the formal element (the reason or reasons for the formation of the concept) of what it is to be a profession. Their stories may not be telling all that needs to be told, but we believe they are going about it the right way and encourage others to follow them.

## NOTES

1. Curiously, in none of these definitions is there mention of the traditional ‘do no harm’ doctrine (or ‘nonmaleficence’, in recent terminology) or of the idea of



respect for client autonomy – two of the four ethical principles that Beauchamp and Childress regard as the core of biomedical ethics.

2. For two insightful analyses of professions as practices see Davis (1988) and Miller (2009). For a more general discussion of practices, see Schatzki (2001).

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