

The Significance of the Professional Ideal

Professional Ethics and the Public Interest

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OF the many socially significant effects of the War there are some which are of particular interest to the professions. One of these is the new impulse to appraise the motives that have inspired various professional ideals and more particularly to test out those ideals with the touchstone of the public interest. That test naturally results from any consideration of the almost universal desire for service, the sacrifice of one's private interests to the common good that was prevalent throughout the War; perhaps, indeed, more prevalent among those who could not make their sacrifice by carrying a gun. For once, the money-making motive was laid aside; thousands, nay, millions of people gladly accepted the service motive as quite adequate to energize every human activity. At one blow, the professional classes were recruited a million-fold and a thousand occupations that had never been considered as capable of becoming professional unconsciously became professional. The gain motive was subservient to the motive of perfecting the quality of service.

With the cessation of hostilities most of these great impulses faded away almost over night. Their significance had been recognized by the few; yet here and there among the recognized professions there were stirrings of a new life, and at least two marked instances of effort to retain the worthwhile elements resulting from war-time coöperation. One of these was the admirable move of the engineering societies to continue through engineer-

ing councils certain forms of service to the public that had been most highly developed as a result of the war-time demand for their particular technique. The second was the effort of the architects to continue to lead the moves for the betterment of housing, for city planning, etc., in which they had taken a leading part during the War. In both of these professions there were also striking efforts to analyze the relations of the profession to the public. The Post-War Committee of the American Institute of Architects proposed, among other things, a very thorough investigation of the extent to which the architectural profession of the United States was rendering the quality and quantity of service which all of the public had the right to demand. This particular survey was very much along the line of the investigation of the professions in England made for the Fabian Society by Sidney and Beatrice Webb some years before.

INTER-PROFESSIONAL COÖPERATION

Perhaps the most notable ethical outcome of the service rendered by the professions during the War was their realization of the need for coöperation between different professions, between the branches of the same profession and between the professions and the technical branches of industry allied to those professions. Indications of this may be found by the formation at Detroit in 1919 of "The Inter-Professional Conference" (still fumbling for a definite form); by the very marked

tendency towards a more democratic inclusion of the larger number of professional men in the various professional societies, and by the formation of such bodies as the "Congress of the Building and Construction Industry," in which it is sought to bring together in all of the larger communities, not only architects and engineers, but all of those that are functionally connected with building, including contractors, sub-contractors, material manufacturers and dealers, skilled and unskilled labor, building loan and real estate men. There has been, then, a tendency on the part of the professional men to realize that they must become coöperators with the other elements of the total function of which they are a part, rather than one directing element. One item in the final report of the Post-War Committee on Architectural Practice said in effect, "The architect by himself cannot cure the deficiencies in his service, or the problems with which his profession is faced; he can only improve his service and make it more adequate to the public need as he realizes his functional relationship to the other parts of the building industry, and through co-operation makes these other elements realize each its distinctive functional responsibility."

In other fields, apparently, there have been similar drawings together of technician with worker and of technician with management, as in the experiments of the English Building Guilds. Whatever may be their measure of success or failure, these, like the Congress of the Building Industry in this country, are efforts towards democracy. The opportunity for the professions to lead in such moves is of immense value.

All of the post-war stirrings within the professions (of which there are legion) are interesting because it ap-

pears most important that the professional ideal be now clarified and democratized. Everywhere we see signs that the motive that has inspired industry and commerce is being questioned; a realization is growing that the old motives are inadequate. People say, "If it was possible to conduct the major operations of the great World War without the prime impulse of money getting, is it not possible gradually to increase the number of normal activities inspired by other than money getting?" The commonplace reply is that the necessary patriotic enthusiasm would be lacking. But the professions in the finest sense do actually get their inspiration from a motive other than the money-getting motive. Why, then, is the professional impulse limited in its scope? The earning of a livelihood is naturally the result of competent practice of a profession. But that is not its prime purpose in the best sense. The prime purpose is the perfection of a service, and the most important reward of that perfection is, not the extent to which it is paid, but the extent to which the service is appreciated by those best competent to judge it, by those who practise the same profession.

The whole argument with regard to the validity of (and the extensibility of) the professional motive is remarkably demonstrated by R. H. Tawney of Oxford in his admirable *Acquisitive Society*.¹ He says in part:

A profession may be defined most simply as a trade which is organized, incompletely, no doubt, but genuinely for the performance of function. It is not simply a collection of individuals who get a living for themselves by the same kind of work. Nor is it merely a group which is organized exclusively for the economic protection of its

¹ *The Acquisitive Society*, by R. H. Tawney, Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford. Harcourt Brace & Howe, 1920.

members, though that is normally among its purposes. It is a body of men who carry on their work in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards both for the better protection of its members and for the better service of the public. The standards which it maintains may be high or low; all professions have some rules which protect the interests of the community and others which are an imposition on it. Its essence is that it assumes certain responsibilities for the competence of its members or the quality of its wares, and that it deliberately prohibits certain kinds of conduct on the ground that, though they may be profitable to the individual, they are calculated to bring into disrepute the organization to which he belongs. While some of its rules are trade union regulations designed primarily to prevent the economic standards of the profession being lowered by unscrupulous competition, others have as their main object to secure that no member of the profession shall have any but a purely professional interest in his work, by excluding the incentive of speculative profit.

The conception implied in the words "unprofessional conduct" is, therefore, the exact opposite of the theory and practice which assume that the service of the public is best secured by the unrestricted pursuit on the part of rival traders of their pecuniary self-interest, within such limits as the law allows. . . . The rules themselves may sometimes appear to the layman arbitrary and ill-conceived. But their object is clear. It is to impose on the profession itself the obligation of maintaining the quality of the service, and to prevent its common purpose being frustrated through the undue influence of the motive of pecuniary gain upon the necessities or cupidity of the individual.

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The difference between industry as it exists to-day and a profession is, then, simple and unmistakable. The essence of the former is that its only criterion is the financial return which it offers to its shareholders. The essence of the latter is that, though men enter it for the sake of livelihood, the measure of their success is the service which they perform, not the gains which

they amass. They may, as in the case of a successful doctor, grow rich; but the meaning of their profession, both for themselves and for the public, is not that they make money but that they make health, or safety, or knowledge, or good law. They depend on it for their income, but they do not consider that any conduct which increases their income is on that account good. And while a boot-manufacturer who retires with half a million is counted to have achieved success, whether the boots which he made were of leather or brown paper, a civil servant who did the same would be impeached.

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The idea that there is some mysterious difference between building schools and teaching in them when built, between providing food and providing health, which makes it at once inevitable and laudable that the former should be carried on with a single eye to pecuniary gain, while the latter are conducted by professional men who expect to be paid for service but who neither watch for windfalls nor raise their fees merely because there are more sick to be cured, more children to be taught, is an illusion only less astonishing than that the leaders of industry should welcome the insult as an honor and wear their humiliation as a kind of halo. The work of making boots or building a house is in itself no more degrading than that of curing the sick or teaching the ignorant. It is as necessary and therefore as honorable. It should be at least equally bound by rules which have as their object to maintain the standards of professional service. It should be at least equally free from the vulgar subordination of moral standards to financial interests.

If any of these ideas are to be brought into effect in the interrelations of society; if the professional ideal is to be to any extent carried over into other fields, it behooves the professional man to perfect his ideals. It would be absurd to ignore the fact that these ideals are far from perfection; that professional standards are uncertain and purposes vague. The principles of professional practice have only too

frequently tended to protect certain monopolies or to advance a particular profession on the gainful side. Professional societies in that respect have gone through and are still going through various stages of liberation from selfishness. The first stage of organization was to protect the members against unfair competition and to improve the profession in public consideration. Then followed the stage in which the relationships between members of the same profession were considered as most important; certain courtesies were to be extended from one member of the profession to another. Then they were bound together to prevent outsiders from interfering or to protect the profession against unjust laws. Next followed the movement to improve admission to practice; educational qualifications were established, and the schools were looked after. Finally there was attained the stage in which permanent importance is given to the relationship of the profession to the service which it may be expected to render—that is to say the stage where public needs are placed paramount to professional rights or even desires. The various professions are today in different degrees within one or more of these several stages of development.

This last and manifestly most socially valuable stage of the development of professional organization can best be advanced if the professions come together and test out the validity of their several standards in the light of the criticism of those who practise some other profession. The weakness of professional influence in public life comes about through the fact that each profession in the past when trying to affect public affairs has spoken for itself alone, and hence its opinions were always suspected of being influenced by self-interest. Nothing is more im-

portant in our democracy than that the best qualified to speak on any particular topic shall be able to bring their opinions to bear on public affairs. Nothing is more evident than that today the inexpert is listened to more frequently, perhaps more trustfully than the expert, on questions of public policy. Even when the expert speaks officially as representative of his particular professional body, he is weak because of the suspicion as to his motives. The right technique, that is to say the technique best qualified, can be brought to bear upon our government affairs only when the professions as professions join together, testing out every recommendation in a group conference so as to be able to present their views to the public with all the force of a consolidated inter-professional opinion. And this method is right, too, because no question of public health or engineering or law is merely a question of one technique. The housing problem, for instance, includes problems of engineering, architecture, finance, economics, city planning, public health, social work, law, and many other professions.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PUBLIC INTEREST

The public interest, then, in the growth and development of the professional ideal is manifold. In the first place, the professional ideal seems to hold out a new hope for a worthwhile motive in many fields which today seem to feel the failure of the money-getting motive. The professional attitude has increasingly proved its validity, and particularly during the War, as an adequate motive force, despite its many failures. It can, however, only be carried over into other fields of human activity from the present-time recognized professions if it is purified and perfected as a result of the efforts of professional

bodies, coöperating in a study of their ethical standards, methods of training and adequacy of the service to the entire public need, irrespective of class. In the second place, the public interest is great by reason of the fact that the professional ideal alone seems to offer a way out to an inexpertly governed democracy. Through coöperation between professions the expert can be brought into government through the more powerful public opinion thereby created. In the third place, the professions alone can lay the groundwork of a new society based on the idea of the distinctive functional contribution of each to the common good. They must develop that basic idea into a clearly defined scheme by enlarging their field of coöperation and democratic understanding between professional groups and then through points of contact with every branch of the particular

industries to which each is related. They alone can begin the process of relating people to each other in terms of their vocations and thus lay the foundation of that new society based on the functional contribution of each to the whole, of which more than thirty years ago Charles Benoist saw the possibilities in *La Crise de l'Etat Moderne*.

Far off as it may be to the realization of any such dream, it is in its beginnings at least in the new impulses noticeable in our professional societies as a result of the War, and will be advanced by such coöperation between the professions as will perfect their standards, justify their ideals with the public interests, and lay the foundations of a broader more democratic inclusiveness, based on the prime importance of the functional relationship between individuals, groups, states and nations.

The Social Significance of Professional Ethics

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THE spirit and method of the craft banished from industry finds a more permanent home in the professions. Here still prevail the long apprenticeship, the distinctive training, the small-scale unit of employment and the intrinsic—as distinct from the economic—interest alike in the process and the product of the work. The sweep of economic evolution seems at first sight to have passed the professions by. The doctor, the lawyer, the architect, the minister of religion, remain individual practitioners, or at most enter into partnerships of two or three members. Specialization takes place, but in a different way, for the specialist in the professions does not yield his autonomy. He offers his

specialism directly to the public, and only indirectly to his profession. But this very autonomy is the condition under which the social process brings about another and no less significant integration. The limited “corporations” of the business world being thus ruled out, the whole profession assumes something of the aspect of a corporation. It supplements the advantage or the necessity of the small-scale, often the one-man, unit by concerted action to remove its “natural” disadvantage, that free play of uncontrolled individualism which undermines all essential standards. It achieves an integration not of form but of spirit. Of this spirit nothing is more significant than the ethical code which it creates.