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# Where's the value in professional life?

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# The problem stated

- Initial empirical note: A high % of programmes of study in higher education could be said to comprise professional education
- (Over the past 50 years, many occupations have sought to become 'professional' and have looked to higher education to provide the education & training for their entrants.)
- A strong link between professions and higher education – which goes back to the middle ages – suggests that there are values associated with professional life, which higher education should heed and help to develop.
- But what are those values? What/ where is the value in professional life?

# Ways in: two presenting options

## - option one

- Essay values ('internal goods') said to inhere in the practices professional life – (reflecting MacIntyre)
- A list
- They would be epistemic virtues but go beyond to embrace values said to inhere in the professional-client relationship
- Perhaps, therefore, a dual list of virtues
- *Epistemic* virtues of truthfulness, careful inquiry, disinterestedness, continuous learning ...
- + *Professional* virtues of care, compassion, integrity, honesty ...

# Problems

- Too normative, even if influenced by empirical work on professionals
- Too stipulative – always suspect, that the list is somewhat arbitrary; question-begging
- Too abstract
- Self-serving

# Option two – turn to realism

- Peering into the deep structures – ‘generative structures’ – of professional life
- Understanding the context
- eg, the re-positioning of professions (context of neoliberalism, new public management, inversion of professional life, undermining of ‘producer capture’)
- ‘Professional’ becomes a term of near-abuse, of elite trades-unionism.
- Value lies in value-to-client, now understood as a customer
- Value-for-money; efficiency – and so to ‘performativity’.
- Values – an attachment to a form of life in which power resides with the professional.

# Problems

- Values hollowed out; undermined.
- Value-talk suspect. An 'empty signifier'.
- Professionalism hollowed out.

So, how go forward?

# An ecological approach – a 3<sup>rd</sup> way

- Professional life is part of multiple ecosystems:
- Knowledge, learning, economy, persons, social systems, culture, the natural environment
- Intertwined
- And complex – are open-ended.
- These ecosystems are vulnerable, may be impaired, exhibit little diversity, are insufficiently developed

# Value in professional life

- So value in professional life becomes a way of advancing the wellbeing of these ecosystems
- And the professional comes to have a care towards the wellbeing of those ecosystems
- This is why being a professional today is extremely difficult for the wellbeing of those ecosystems pull in different directions.
- Personal judgements are called for, as decisions are made in favour of competing ecosystems – of persons, social institutions (profession, families), the environment, the economy. Learning (societal and professional) ...

# This is 'rhizomatic' thinking? Not quite

- Image of the rhizome – shapeless, multiplicity, forever being reconfigured in unexpected ways
- Not entirely
- More like an octopus – moving to some extent under its own agency
- Reaching out
- A fluid organism in a fluid medium
- Hard and soft surfaces, and easy & awkward movements
- In which we can speak of 'responsibility' – care and concern for the wellbeing of multiple ecosystems (which include the profession and the professional her/himself)

## Conclusions: the ecological approach - responsibility and agency are integral

- There are problems both with the virtue approach  
- and with the straight realist approach
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> way I have suggested – the ecological approach  
- not just does some justice to both (virtues & the real)  
- but brings in a world perspective  
- and opens questions of agency  
- and judgement, and thereby responsibility & agency  
- amid rival concerns of multiple ecosystems.
- It does justice to what it actually is to be a professional  
today in all its complexity.



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