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The Nature and Meaning of Professionalism

The modern professional is defined by an apparent dichotomy: his expectation, and that of his client, are usually that which applies his specialized skills to the best, if uninformed, interests of his client; but there is also a societal expectation of a meaning of "professionalism" which can impinge on the professional's survival, even if he performs perfect service to every client. In addition, the modern professional's interaction is further complicated by the occasional presence of an employer who comes between the professional and his actual client, leading to the occasional appearance of a conflict of interest. This paper will explore some of the historical antecedents to each of these definitions and conflicts.

Professionalism as a defined, distinct classification can fairly be said to have started with the monastic orders of the Roman Catholic Church, whose members took a religious vow ("profes", Old French, according to the American Heritage Dictionary). Their "client", so-to-speak, was their god; and though all persons in Christendom were expected to serve that god, those who were vowed learned methods which were believed to more properly address the desires of that god. The most famous collection of those methods was the Rule of Saint Benedict, which outlines the guiding rules of the profession. One interesting rule was that of obedience, which placed the abbot in the position of their god as far as outlining the services requiring performance ("they carry out the superior's order as promptly as if the command came from God himself", *Rule of St. Benedict*, Chap. 5). This put the abbot in a role analogous to modern middlemen (such as a senior partner of a law firm), where the professional was circumscribed in his own estimation of the best way to perform duties by his overriding requirement to obey the abbot.

In modern times, the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary retains the religious meaning of professional, but also includes "Engaged in a profession, esp. one requiring advanced knowledge or training", "Engaged in a specified occupation or activity for money as a means of earning a living, rather than as a pastime" (both dating from the late 18th century), and "Having or showing the skill of a professional person, competent, worthy of a professional person" (New Shorter OED, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 2368). It also defines "profession" as including "A vocation, a calling, esp. one requiring advanced knowledge or training in some branch of learning or science, spec. law, theology or medicine;

gen. any occupation as a means of earning a living." (Ibid.) From this, one can garner that in the specific sense, as opposed to the general, a modern professional is understood to be engaging in an activity for hire requiring some special knowledge and/or training.

Eighteenth-century Asian fiction writing brings to us the tale of an actual seventh-century Chinese "Judge", whose duties and training are a reflection of the professional dichotomy. Judge Dee, sometime Duke of Liang, had duties corresponding to the American equivalent of investigating detective, prosecuting attorney, judge and jury. In addition, as there were no defense attorneys, the seventh-century Chinese judge also had to provide that counterbalance in and of himself as well. However, the need for the Judge to sometimes move in less rarified circles than a high-ranking judge is expected to move in - because of his need to gather evidence as the equivalent of a Chief Detective - also necessitated the adoption of aliases in his work. Although, of course, he needed to hide his position from the persons being investigated, it would also be important - should a course of inquiry come to naught - to have no public connection to be seen between silk merchants and the like, and the professional life of the Judge. Irregardless of the perfect performance of Judge Dee's duties, it is still important for him to not be seen publicly as engaged in trade or other activities that might be seen by the public as 'less than professional'.

In the early sixteenth century, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. This text is still widely cited as a basis for certain professional characteristics by modern professionals in many areas of life, not limited to the thrust of the work (which was directed to an autocratic ruler). Machiavelli's idea of a professional is one whose first service is to oneself; and, who, in the performance of that service, emphasizes public relations over actual service to others. This is especially brought out in Chapter 15:

"anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursues his downfall rather than his preservation; for a man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin...it is necessary that a prince who is interested in his survival learn to be other than good, making use of this capacity or refraining from it according to need.."

Another profession addressed briefly in *The Prince* is the professional soldier - the mercenary captain. Machiavelli asserts that mercenary captains who are properly skilled at warfare are a threat to the ruler's civil position, and will always seek to gain power via the use of their professional skills (Chapter 12). One wonders if this was not, in fact, an unwitting self-observation by Machiavelli of, let us say, the "mercenary philosopher"? Certainly any well-trained professional has an opportunity to abuse the trust of his client, whether the professional is hired for military skills or advice on how to run a city-

state. This possibility is, in fact, what makes the distinction of professional - a skilled person applying his skills in the best interests of his client - a necessary step up from the simple idea of a skilled person.

But is the honest professional - indeed, the honest individual - primarily in service to himself, ignoring the demands of a client or of the body politic? A nineteenth-century classic provides an interesting view. In his essay on Civil Disobedience, Thoreau advanced the idea:

"I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with, - the dollar is innocent, - but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases."

In the modern democracies, allegiance of the citizen is assumed. When a citizen tries to withdraw allegiance, should he not, in all honesty, also refuse the benefits which citizenship confers? Yet Thoreau will not renounce such benefits; indeed, he states his plan to take advantage of these benefits to the best of his ability. This attitude seems to me to be no different than what Machiavelli assumed that the attitude of a mercenary captain would be: that he had no allegiance to the state that he was employed by, but would seek to gain undue advantage from the state:

"Mercenary captains either are or are not skillful soldiers. If they are, you cannot trust them, for they will always seek to gain power for themselves either by oppressing you, their master, or by oppressing others against your wishes." (*The Prince*, Chapter 12)

An interesting twentieth-century writing which sheds some light on modern professionalism is Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Among other things, this book brings to light the multiplicity of clients a professional writer may be serving. The book's advertising copy refers to it as an authoritative report of a trial; yet Arendt continually interjects her moral take on various parts of the trial. Moreover, the moral conclusions she draws often have elements of what is now known as "spin" in them. Who are her clients? The book was originally a series written for "The New Yorker" magazine. Are her clients the readers of the magazine, and the editors the middlemen who also must be pleased; are her clients the editors; or are her clients some constituency other than the people responsible for her hire?

One example of the writing that brings such confusion to her true clientele is the following passage from the end of Chapter 8:

"And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody 'Thou shalt not kill';, even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: 'Thou shalt kill', although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people." (p. 150)

In examining this passage for the service of her assumed client, first one needs to look at the quote, "Thou shalt not kill". This is drawn from Torah, the foundational document for Judaism and Christianity, specifically from the book of Exodus, chapter 20, verse 13. A more accurate translation, however, is "You shall not murder" (The Tanakh, as translated by the Jewish Publication Society, Special Quality Paperback Book Club edition, 1985, New York, p. 116) In Playing God: 50 Religion's Views on Your Right To Die, by Gerald LaRue, Th.D., the author comments:

"The commandment reads literally, 'You shall not commit homicide', and refers, therefore, to only one form of killing. Anyone who reads the Bible will be aware that a variety of killings are justified..." (Playing God: 50 Religion's Views on Your Right To Die, Gerald LaRue, Th.D., Moyer Bell, Wakefield, RI, 1996).

In fact, the Torah even orders genocide against non-Jews as a state policy. In Deuteronomy, chapter 7, verses 1-3, it reads:

"When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you - the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you - and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons." (The Tanakh, op.cit., p. 285)

Certainly, then, quoting "Thou shalt not kill", as a means of condemning the Hitlerian government, is specious at best considering the killings advocated by the source of the quote. "Murder" or "homicide", on the other hand, is a state decision as to what types of killing constitute those terms;

and the indictment against Eichmann - and his conviction - took no note of the simple fact that under German law at the time, the crimes of which he was accused were no crimes (as they would not have been crimes if he had been a Hebrew state officer at the time they killed off the Hittites, et al.)

The statement that the "voice of conscience" is against all killing is equally disingenuous. One of the great German historical leaders of religion was Martin Luther, who wrote in 1543 that Jews should have their synagogues and homes destroyed, their Rabbis forbidden to teach, and that finally "... let whosoever can, throw brimstone and pitch upon them, so much the better..." ("On the Jews and Their Lies", Martin Luther, quoted in LaRue, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28) Clearly more than enough precedent was established - by the Jewish people themselves - to kill when the State ordered it; and equally clearly, to any competent researcher and writer, there were sufficient German historical antecedents to make the quoted statement from Arendt completely false.

Thus, here, we have a twentieth-century professional writer, -apparently- in the service of the readers of a magazine, but in fact in the disservice of them. Were Arendt's actual clients the Israeli Government, and was her task actually to justify a kidnapping and judicial murder? This is a problem with professionalism that clients must be wary of: whenever they do not have sufficient direct contacts with the professionals supposedly acting in their service, it is sometimes difficult to tell if the presumed clients are, in fact, the actual clients.

Is professionalism limited to what is considered generally morally acceptable, or is it defined by the skill set and professional-client relationship? Looking at the history of what has been called professional, as well as common parlance, I would assert that it is the latter. No less than the Oxford English Dictionary cites the common quote in which prostitution, long outlawed in most jurisdictions, is called "the oldest profession" (New Shorter OED, *op.cit.*) To take things a step further, murders-for-hire are carried out by what the public and police alike refer to as "professional killers". Skills in such a profession are likely taught via an apprenticeship method; however, there are books, such as [Professional Killers: An Inside Look](#), which purport to review the necessary skill set and planning involved. In the introduction to that book, the author plainly distinguishes professional killing as an act directed against a specific person, for a specific client, and done for hire; he excludes such killers as the Manson "family", as those killings were not done for hire (and thus do not correspond to the OED requirement that professionals do their work for hire). The definition used in the book for a "Professional Killer" is as follows:

"Today's professional killer operates strictly outside the law. He may work for a private party or a government. As a government agent, he kills the enemies of his country on foreign soil, subject to

foreign law. If he's caught he's liable to prosecution, beyond the protection of his government."
(Professional Killers: An Inside Look, Burt Rapp, Loompanics Unlimited, Port Townsend, WA, 1990, p. 2.)

He further distinguishes between contract killers who are -not- professional and professional contract killers:

"Today's contract killers vary from unskilled street thugs to highly skilled and trained professionals, using high-tech tools of assassination. Some contract killings are so neat and professional that the police don't even spot them as murders. Others are bungled jobs, bringing grief to everyone, including those who paid for the assassination." (Ibid.)

In conclusion, the modern professional is a person who is expected to use specialized skills in the furtherance of his client's interests. These interests need not be subject to any generalized moral or legal requirement; however, to win the respect of the public (thus leading to further employment) as a professional, the professional must fulfill the expectations of service which the client imposes, by the efficient performance of tasks with his skill set. The employ of middlemen between the actual client and the professional may lead to both a divergence of views as to what the task is, as well as the opportunity for an outside influence to be the real client of the professional, as in the case of Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem.