

Professions, professionals, and professionalism

In this section, the concepts of professions, professionals and professionalism will be examined in more detail.

Someone can be a professional in one or both of two different senses, one broad and the other narrow. Likewise, 'profession' can have a broad or a narrow sense. In the broad sense, a profession is anything that is done for a living: a professional golfer or carpenter is one who makes a living out of playing golf or doing carpentry, as distinct from the amateur, who seeks no such reward but pursues the activity just for the love of it. In the narrow sense, a profession — such as law or medicine — is said to be a particular kind of occupation that satisfies a number of criteria (for typical sets of these criteria, see the following papers by Clive Boughton and by John Weckert and Douglas Adeney). The notion of a professional can have two different senses even when used in the narrow sense. A professional might be a member of a profession or a professional might be someone who has a particular attitude to his or her work. In the extract below by George Bernard Shaw, the two doctors talking are professionals in that they are both members of the medical profession, but neither possesses the attitude expected of professionals, so are not professionals in that sense.

Schutzmacher has dropped in on Ridgeon and is telling him how he, Schutzmacher, managed to make so much money as a doctor:

SCHUTZMACHER. Oh, in my case the secret was simple enough, though I suppose I should have got into trouble if it had attracted any notice. And I'm afraid that you will think it rather *infra dig*.

RIDGEON. Oh, I have an open mind. What was the secret?

SCHUTZMACHER. Well, the secret was just two words.

RIDGEON. Not Consultation Free, was it?

SCHUTZMACHER. [*shocked*] No, no. Really!

...

SCHUTZMACHER. My two words were simply Cure guaranteed!

RIDGEON. [*admiring*] Cure Guaranteed!

SCHUTZMACHER. Guaranteed. After all, that's what everybody wants from a doctor, isn't it?

...

RIDGEON. And the guaranteed proved sound nine times out of ten, eh?

SCHUTZMACHER. [*rather hurt at so moderate an estimate*] Oh, much oftener than that. You see, most people get well all right if they are careful and you give them a little sensible advice ...

(George Bernard Shaw, *The doctor's dilemma*, 1906)

Both of these members of the medical profession are behaving in an unseemly manner. They rate financial gain more highly than caring about, or being truthful with, their patients.

The first two chapters in this section focus on the distinction between the notions of a *professional* and that of a *profession*, although the perspectives are rather different. For Boughton, an information and communications technology (ICT) academic with vast industry experience, a professional satisfies criteria very similar to commonly accepted criteria for a profession. A profession, in his view, is 'usually exemplified in the form of an association/society/body' and has responsibilities to the professionals who are its members. Core components of a profession are its code of ethics and body of knowledge (BOK); both of which are essential in maintaining professional behaviour. Boughton explores BOKs in ICT and concludes that more work needs to be done in this area before ICT can be a real profession. ICT also still lacks a professional body that can enforce professional behaviour. He suggests that perhaps it is currently a 'semi-profession'. Weckert and Adeney, both philosophers, also distinguish *professional* from *profession* but, unlike Boughton, do not see the traditional concept of a profession as useful: what is important is that an ICT professional has a *professional attitude*, such an attitude being defined as 'taking pride in one's work, trying to do it as well as possible and actively considering ways in which it might be done better, looking at it in the broader context of society as a whole, and taking responsibility for what does.' On this account, professionalism is broader than on Boughton's account. For him, a professional is more closely related to a traditional profession than for Weckert and Adeney. For them, anyone can be a professional if they have the right attitude, whether they be a doctor, plumber or fruit picker. Like Boughton, they also doubt that ICT is a profession but not because it is as yet not mature enough but, rather, because there are no professions at all in any interesting or useful sense.

In the third paper, Richard Volkman, also a philosopher, presents a different perspective on ICT professionalism, one that is related to professional attitudes and the account of professionalism outlined by Boughton. Volkman argues that virtue ethics provides a much better foundation for ethics in computing than do either of the more common approaches of utilitarianism or deontology.

Utilitarianism, put simply, is the theory that the morality of actions is determined purely by their consequences, particularly to the extent that they create more happiness than the alternatives. Deontological accounts specify morality in terms of rules. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the person and is interested in developing a 'good person'. Given the problems in regulating ICT, as the Hon Michael Kirby points out in his article, ICT professionals who behave well without external regulations are essential, if the industry is to maximise its benefit to society. Virtue ethics as presented by Volkman is an attractive option.

Finally in this section, Catherine Flick, a lecturer in computing and social responsibility, examines end user licence agreements (EULAs) in what is, in effect, a case study of responsibility in the ICT industry. It was noted earlier that responsibility is an important part of professionalism and Flick shows convincingly that serious problems exist in this area in ICT. Neither the content nor the presentation of standard EULAs, are, in most cases, conducive to users giving informed consent to the software that they are installing. This does not reflect well on the industry's sense of responsibility to its customers. The situation, however, is not all bleak. She also examines a variety of suggested solutions to remedy the situation: this shows that many in the industry are concerned with the current situation. Lastly, Flick outlines her own solution, which is based on a different account of informed consent from the one presupposed by most EULAs.

Reference

Shaw, George Bernard, *The doctor's dilemma*, 1906.

Biographies

Dr Douglas Adeney (MA Monash, PhD St Andrews) is a senior fellow in philosophy at the University of Melbourne. He taught for a number of years at Melbourne State College, and then at the University of Melbourne, retiring in 2007. He currently teaches short courses at the Centre for Adult Education in Melbourne, and is involved in various ways in the development and delivery of the VCE Philosophy course. Among his publications is *Computer and information ethics* (co-written with John Weckert, Greenwood, 1997).

Dr Clive Boughton has enjoyed a diverse career ranging from soil physics research and engineering, water pollution engineering, superconducting, plasma and molecular physics research and, ultimately, software engineering as developer, expert advisor, manager, educator and researcher.

His background has enabled him to observe and experience the affects of both professional and non-professional behaviour in many forms. Today, he believes that there is greater focus on defining and promoting professionalism, but that consistency and dedication to improvement is lacking. As chair of Australian Safety Critical Systems Association, Clive sees competence and professionalism as essential for people developing safety-related systems.

Dr Catherine Flick is a lecturer in computing and social responsibility at the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University, United Kingdom. Her research interests lie in the area of ethics in ICTs, particularly in social media, user experiences, and emerging technologies. Apart from her research into informed consent, some of her previous work has been in the areas of online child protection, ethical governance of emerging technologies, anonymous computing, and trusted computing. She has a computer science and computer ethics background, and gets excited about developing ethical, value-centred technologies from the ground up. She is an active member of the British Computing Society and the International Federation of Information Processing Working Group 9.2 and SIG 9.2.2.

Dr Richard Volkman is professor of philosophy at Southern Connecticut State University and associate director of the Research Center on Computing and Society. Dr Volkman's research evaluates the impact of information technologies on our abilities to lead the good life. Since the relevant information is decentralised, tacit, and local, this project involves articulating individualist moral and political philosophy for the information age and addressing associated issues, such as intellectual property, identity, privacy, and digital culture.

Prof John Weckert is professorial fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE) and professor of computer ethics in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Charles Sturt University. He is editor-in-chief of the Springer journal *Nanoethics: Ethics for Technologies that Converge at the Nanoscale*. He is manager of the CAPPE program in technology and has published widely in the ethics of ICT and more recently on ethical issues in nanotechnology. His previous appointment was professor of information technology at Charles Sturt University and recently he was a visiting professor in philosophy at Dartmouth College and an Erasmus Mundus scholar in Norway and Sweden.