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*What is Good Professional Practice?*

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*It seems evident that many of the most important features of our society are to a considerable extent dependent on the smooth functioning of the professions. Both the pursuit and the application of science and liberal learning are predominantly carried out in a professional context. Their results have become so closely interwoven in the fabric of modern society that it is difficult to imagine how it could get along without basic structural changes if they were seriously impaired. (Talcott Parsons, 1939, p. 457, and 1949, p. 34).*

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**Part 1: Introduction** I understand by professionalism the idea, institutionalization and working methods of a systematic creation and application of special expertise. That is, professionals as the term is used here are specialist *knowledge workers*, an occupational group that relies on skills that are unavailable to others, not because they are in any way esoteric or are always highly remunerated but simply because they require sustained training and practice. Accordingly, and this is a second important characteristic, professionals enjoy a degree of *self-control* in their work, and of the standards of "good" work that they apply to it, which other occupations do not usually enjoy. There are many fields of professional practice (so-called "professions"): medicine, law, engineering, management consultancy, operations research, public policy analysis, planning, economic analysis and consultancy, financial and fiduciary services (accounting, trusteeship, auditing), academic teaching and research, applied science (e.g., empirical social sciences applied to survey research, evaluation research, etc.), primary and secondary education, professional education, architecture, journalism, psychotherapy, social work, and nursing, to name just a few classical professions.

Most professions have developed well-defined notions of what it means to do a *competent* job of applying their special knowledge and skills in specific contexts of professional intervention, and consequently also of what a proper professional education and career should look like. Many also have their own professional *organizations* and journals, formal training programs, examination and review procedures, codes of practice, and so on. Last but

not least, a distinctive *ethos of service* characterizes the self-understanding of most professions, a dedication on the part of professionals to serving the interests of others rather than their own. It is thus usually rather clear to most professionals, as well as to their clients and the larger public, what criteria determine whether one is a member of a professional community, adheres to its rules and requirements, and is considered a competent professional.

Even so, professional attributes such as competence, formal organization, and dedication to service, tell us remarkably little about the role and responsibility of professionals in the occupational structure and institutional framework of modern societies, and about what it means to do justice to that role and responsibility. This is the issue to which the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1939) refers in the classical essay cited at the outset. It still provides worthwhile reading. It draws attention to the question of the specific *rationality* and hence, justification of the professional's job *within the fabric of modern society*, to use Parsons' words. I may not agree with all of Parson's views on the subject, but there can be little doubt that the question is relevant. It suggests to me that counter to a view held widely among professionals, a proper understanding of what "good" professional practice means cannot rely mainly or even solely on the internal perspective of the professions themselves. Clearly, it needs to include a sociological perspective of the role assigned to professionals. We need to understand, for example, how and why certain occupational groups have achieved a position of power that apparently allows them to define what is expert knowledge in a certain domain of practice, and to control to a considerable degree the access to and application of such knowledge. Perhaps even more importantly, we also need to move beyond a descriptive sociological account, towards a philosophical and methodological perspective of *how else* we might try to understand good professional intervention; "good" in terms of both its underlying rationality (How do we justify its societal role and importance?) and its societal vision (Towards what kind of society should it guide us?). I would like to outline a personal approach to this topic in three steps:

1. the quest for practical reason;
2. the quest for rational action; and
3. the quest for professional competence.

The three steps will be in the center of the next three parts of this essay. The present part offers some introductory considerations of a sociological (institutional) and philosophical (ethical and methodological) nature.

**From an internal to a societal perspective of professional practice** It is proverbial that war is too important to be left to the generals. Yet we find it quite normal that only doctors should be competent to judge medical practice, only lawyers to control legal practice, and so on – in short, that it is mainly an internal affair of the professions to define their notions and standards of good practice. Sociologically speaking, though, this *appearance* of normality is obviously the result of particular historical developments in the occupational system and in the institutional and political framework that legitimizes it, developments that might have occurred differently but which today allow certain occupational groups such as doctors, jurists, professors, scientists and others to have a far-reaching influence on the definition of what counts as relevant knowledge and rational action in their domains of special expertise (see, e.g., the major studies by Larson, 1977, and Abbott, 1988). The internal ethos of service held by the professionals themselves thus finds its sociological counterpart in an incapacitation of other occupational groups and of the citizens to be served.

To be sure, society imposes limitations on the amount of control that any profession is allowed to exert and thus, indirectly, on the amount of incapacitation which those not belonging to the profession have to accept. These limitations may be formal or informal. There are, for instance, informal and partly unconscious patterns of thought and behavior that determine our views of, and respect for, "the experts," due to attitudes we acquire in the course of our socialization and general education as well as through professional training. Formal limitations consist, for example, in the contractual or occupational conditions under which professionals work. To an important part they also consist in legal requirements that professionals need to observe like everyone else, such as general standards of liability and contract law, of public health and safety, environmental concerns, social security, technical norms, and many other legal requirements; but since everyone has to observe them, they cannot stipulate specific ends and criteria of good professional practice. Conversely, inasmuch as specific standards are

increasingly becoming a part of special legislation aimed at particular professions, they tend to focus on questions of due process and proper procedure rather than questions of good and rational (i.e., justified) outcomes – good and rational, that is, for those served as well as for those *not* served by the professional activities in question.

In sum, there is a tendency to describe "good" professional practice without asking for the *societal rationality and values* that provide the basis of assessment. Where do these normative assumptions come from, where *should* they come from? What is the professional's role with respect to them? What constitutes competence in dealing with the value content of "good" and "rational" practice? And if knowing the answers to such normative questions is not considered an essential part of the professional's role and responsibility (and implicitly, of the rationality of professional intervention) – if professional expertise can be properly practiced without asking for the value of the "good" in good practice, or for the rationality (justification) of the claims to "rationality" that go with it – is it, then, apparently a mainly *technical* matter?

**The classical sociological concept of the professional's role and special competence** Indeed: the claim to good practice, or what in the managerialist jargon of our epoch is now more often (somewhat euphemistically) claimed to be *best practice*, appears to be a response to "How?" questions rather than to "What?" and "Why?" questions. The focus is on the "input" side of professional intervention, as it were, the *means* of professional intervention, not on the "output side," the *ends*. At first glance though, the earlier reference to the professional's *ethos* of service might suggest that this is not so; that competent service indeed entails a professional focus on ends, albeit not the professional's personal ends. However (and here I return to Parson's analysis), this focus on ends is of a rather limited nature. Unlike politicians or entrepreneurs, professional people are not necessarily expected to identify themselves with the ends they serve, nor to question them. Rather, they are expected to take a *disinterested* stance of professional objectivity and neutrality, making sure they serve their clients or client institutions according to professional standards of competence, regardless of the extent to which they personally share the clients' ends. The responsibility and rationality of

professional intervention is in this respect seen as a basically *instrumental* one. Or, as Talcott Parsons puts it in his early discussion, the social role and status of the professions is primarily defined by their *superior technical competence* in a particular field of knowledge and skills (Parsons, 1939, p. 38), that is, by their qualification to identify the "best" means and ways for achieving given ends on the basis of rational analysis rather than just convention, tradition or personal opinion.

On this peculiar combination of technical competence (regarding means) and personal detachment or neutrality (regarding ends) rests the specific *authority* that professionals enjoy in modern society. It entails not only a high degree of social recognition and influence but also a certain independence from other authorities, in particular from political authority (an issue discussed in more detail in Parsons, 1952, pp. 371 and 374). We trust professionals and are willing to accept their advice precisely because of this role-specific independence of judgment, along with a demonstrated competence in proposing the best means for achieving the ends of others:

There is a very important sense in which the professional practitioner in our society exercises authority. ... This professional authority has a peculiar sociological structure. It is not as such based on a generally superior status [but rather] on the superior "technical competence" of the professional man. He often exercises his authority over people who are, or are reputed to be, his superiors in social status, in intellectual attainments or in moral character. This is possible because the area of professional authority is limited to a particular technically defined sphere. It is only in matters touching health that the doctor is by definition more competent than his lay patient, only in matters touching his academic specialty that the professor is superior, by virtue of his status, to his students. Professional authority, like other elements of the professional pattern, is characterized by "specificity of function." ... A professional man is held to be an "authority" only in his own field. (Parsons, 1939, p. 38)

Our contemporary notion of professional competence may thus be said to rely on *two strong assumptions*: first, that the specific role and rationality of professionals is linked to a "disinterested" motivational basis, which makes sure professionals do not pursue ends of their own; and second, that decisions on ends and decisions on means can be strictly separated, so that a specific technical competence can be deployed free of value judgments. I would like to comment on both assumptions, as a basis for outlining a different concept of professional competence. I will do so under the two headings of "disinterested professionalism" and "means and ends in good practice."

**Disinterested professionalism** In the disciplines concerned with the motivation of human action, particularly in psychology, sociology, and ethics, it is traditionally assumed that one of the most fundamental distinctions for understanding human behavior is that between self-interested (or "egoistic") and disinterested (or "altruistic") motives of action. While classical virtue ethics, for example in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle (1976), assumed that the quest for personal excellence and good practice precludes merely self-serving behavior, at latest with the economic liberalism and utilitarianism of Adam Smith (1776) it became a basic ethical tenet of the institutional framework of a modern and open society that the rationality and success of the *market economy* is compatible with, and actually depends on, the pursuit of self-interest. It is by pursuing their own interests that individuals promote the over-all interest of society most effectively, as if "led by an invisible hand" (Smith, 1776, p. 447).

However, this is obviously not true in all cases. Modern societies also depend on a division of labor in the occupational system that requires *some* specific functions, such as those of the professional or the civil servant, to renounce the pursuit of self-interest. As mentioned above, we trust professionals and accept their advice precisely because and inasmuch we believe they (i) do not pursue ends of their own and (ii) are competent to serve the ends of others. Similarly we expect civil servants to be "disinterested" and competent, although their limited independence from political authority does not allow them to enjoy quite the same professional status and self-control as we tend to attribute it to doctors, lawyers, researchers, and so on. By contrast, the competence and authority we ascribe to politicians and business people does not depend on this peculiar combination of technical (or administrative) skills with disinterested service. Rather than on personal attributes, it depends on attributes of their office, for example, democratic election, hierarchical level, or executive power. In this respect, the situation of professionals is indeed different from that of most other functions in the occupational system:

The business man has been thought of as egoistically pursuing his own self-interest regardless of the interests of others, while the professional man was altruistically serving the interests of others regardless of his own. Seen in this context the professions appear not only as empirically somewhat different from business, but the two fields would seem to exemplify the most radical cleavage conceivable in the field of human behavior. (Parsons, 1939, p. 36,

similarly p. 43)

We have accordingly become used to associate good *professional* practice, but not entrepreneurial or political practice, with this requirement of a disinterested deployment of technical competence. Similarly, Freidson (2001, e.g., p. 179) explains the special role and working methods of professionals and professional institutions by means of a distinct institutional rationality or, as he calls it, a different ideal-typical "logic," as compared to the "consumerist" logic of the market and the "managerialist" logic of bureaucracy. This "third logic" partly conflicts with the logic of all other institutions and makes professionals act differently. In particular, only the "professional" logic allows workers to control their own work, whereas in the market logic it is the consumers, and in the bureaucratic logic, the managers or politicians, who are in control and determine what constitutes "good" work.

The freedom to judge and to choose the ends of work is what animates the institutions of the third logic. It expresses the very soul of professionalism. (Freidson, 2001, p. 217)

Indeed! I certainly recognize in these accounts of Parsons and Freidson important elements of my experience as a long-term evaluation researcher and policy analyst in government. By explaining the particular motivation of professionals working with or for commercial or bureaucratic institutions, they highlight an aspect that is as crucial for understanding the professional's role as it is often poorly understood and appreciated by client organizations. At the same time, these accounts also help us appreciate the particular difficulties of professional work that are due to the *different institutional rationalities at work*.

Both in the public and corporate sectors, professional intervention finds itself in a constant tension between two conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, there is the imperative of adhering to the distinct "third" logic of the professional's own discipline, as an indispensable condition of valid and publicly defensible work. On the other hand, there is the imperative of serving the needs of the client institution. I would like to illustrate this tension with my personal experience as a researcher in government. There was on the one hand the constant need for defending the logic of independent and unbiased research, according to the standards of the empirical social

sciences and of policy analysis, against institutional pressures; on these very standards depended not only the value of my work for the government but also my personal credibility and reputation as a researcher among fellow researchers and in the public media, and the recognition my evaluation reports or policy proposals received by the public health or social welfare programs and institutions concerned. At the same time, if my work was to be used as a basis for the government's decision making, it needed to observe the very different logic of the political-administrative system, which tended to value the results of my research according to the political pressures and opportunities of the day rather than its intrinsic merits. Thus, while the political and bureaucratic logic constantly resisted my professional claim to, and need for, independence with respect to working methods and judgment, my own professional logic obliged me to insist that I was entitled, and indeed obliged, to formulate critical findings and conclusions no less than positive ones, unwelcome as they might be. The result was a somewhat unstable balance that often but not always allowed for my research findings and conclusions to be published, more or less completely and with more or less appreciation, while institutional selectivity made sure only those results were flowing into the political-administrative process of decision making which were not seen as too "disturbing." In some cases, the institutional logic at work meant that unwelcome results were misunderstood as a case of disloyalty rather than disinterested service, and consequently that the messenger tended to be accused of *causing* the bad news that he reported.

Generally speaking, the situation is somewhat paradoxical. The institutional logic of clients, whether it is of a political-administrative, bureaucratic-managerialist or marketing-consumerist type, makes them forget that professional intervention serves them precisely *because* and to the extent its rationality is different – and independent. Because it is independent, its method of working and its results do not follow the institutional logic of the client. Because its rationality differs, it can make a difference – and "disturb." Thus it is ultimately the very "third logic" that makes professional intervention valuable in the first place, which also causes it to be seen as a disruptive factor. In the client's institutional logic that often means the professional's efforts and results need to be controlled and weakened, rather than supported and strengthened.

My impression is that the sociologists' traditional emphasis on the distinct motivation, role and function of professionals within an apparently clear-cut division of labor in the occupational system and institutional framework of modern society, tends to underestimate the difficulties and pressures that professionals face in the real world of working for and with corporate and governmental organizations. In any case, it appears to have the lasting effect that the proper use of professional expertise, its value and limitations, is not always well understood by the larger public, no more than by decision makers and professionals themselves. In particular, there are reasons to doubt whether characterizing the professional's role in terms of disinterested or altruistic service, as distinguished from the self-interested or strategic orientation of other roles such as (ideal-typically) those of the politician, the entrepreneur or the manager, is conducive to understanding the essence of good professional practice. Real-world practice rarely allows us to separate professional, political and administrative functions neatly along these lines, for at least two basic reasons. The first reason builds on Parson's and Freidson's sociological perspective, the second considers the ethical implications of professional intervention.

***The sociological argument:*** Sociologically speaking, professionalism essentially owes its rise and importance to the same institutional framework that has brought forth the capitalist market economy and the bureaucratic modern state. To secure its success, professionalism needs to be "successful" not only according to its own standards but equally according to the requirements and pressures of the institutional environment within which it works, in particular the specific corporate cultures and values of client organizations but also the larger institutional framework of society, including legal and bureaucratic requirements, political mechanisms, and commercial imperatives. The pursuit of professional activity thus needs to be seen as subject to largely the same institutional conditions as those which in a particular society and domain of application govern politics and business, for example, institutional requirements and incentives defined by "the market," by the need for "capital realization" and economic growth, by vested interests, party politics, the media, the internal dynamic and micro-politics of bureaucracy, hierarchical and clique structures in organizations, and so on.

This circumstance suggests that "disinterestedness" is perhaps not quite as fundamental a criterion as is traditionally assumed for understanding what distinguishes good professional practice from good political, entrepreneurial and managerial practice. A more fundamental criterion may be seen in the professional's awareness (or alertness, reflective stance, critical distance, etc.) regarding the institutional patterns at work, along with the worldviews, values, and interests that shape them and which put pressure on professionals to adapt to them, whether consciously or not. In view of such institutional pressures, perhaps a better word to describe the special personal quality that we expect of professionals is *integrity*. Professionals will not always be in a situation that would allow them to remain entirely disinterested and neutral (i.e., objective and impartial); but they may still be expected to maintain their personal and professional integrity in handling such pressures, that is, to preserve a basic independence of judgment and, where necessary, to disclose the conditioned nature of their findings and conclusions to all the parties concerned.

A second conclusion is that any claims to "good practice" need to be understood and examined against the background of the institutional rationalities and pressures at work, and of the selectivity of the professional's judgments and concerns they may entail. In one phrase, it is never a bad idea to check professional findings and conclusions for possible effects of what I have described, inspired by Offe's (1972, pp. 65-78) analysis of structural selectivity in the capitalist system, as *institutional selectivity* (see Ulrich, 1983, pp. 149f and 395-400). Professional disinterestedness cannot preclude or overcome institutional selectivity. Hence, professionals cannot credibly claim, by referring to their professional detachment and ethos of service, objectivity in the sense that no institutional selectivity would have influenced their findings, and thus that their intervention does not effectively (though perhaps not deliberately) serve particular interests while harming or neglecting others. The only basis for such claims is an empirical examination of the actual consequences of an intervention. What professionals should strive for and are entitled to claim, however, is professional *integrity in handling institutional selectivity*, by undertaking a systematic effort to examine and uncover the way it may influence their assumptions and results.

***The ethical argument:*** Ethically speaking, serving the interests of others in a "disinterested" rather than "self-interested" way is still a form of "interested" action; for its rationality is still oriented to the particular interests of *some* people – usually those involved – rather than to the general interest of all those potentially concerned. An ethos of service always raises the question, service to whom and to whom not? This ethical argument is somewhat parallel to the previous sociological argument but is independent of it. The concern it addresses is the unavailability of comprehensive rationality rather than the unavoidability of institutional selectivity; it is of a *methodological* rather than sociological nature. Accordingly it needs to be considered regardless of whether in a specific context of professional intervention there actually are some institutional pressures at work. Even where not only self-serving motives on the part of the professional but also institutional pressures are wholly absent, such ideal circumstances would still not imply that the interests of all those concerned are given due and fair consideration. The motivational difference between the professional's disinterested, altruistic or in any case value-neutral, ethos of service and the manager's or politician's self-interested selectivity does not overcome the dilemma at issue, namely, that no action can serve all interests equally at the same time. Even in the best conceivable professional practice, conflicts of interest or of commitment can rarely be fully avoided (cf., e.g., Werhane and Doering, 1995).

The crucial conjecture from an ethical perspective is that there are always *options* for defining relevant standards of improvement, as well as for selecting conforming means, assessing possible consequences and side-effects imposed on third parties, and identifying legitimate stakeholders to be involved. It follows that ethical issues arise in all professional intervention, regardless of personal motivation, institutional conditions, and the technical and administrative competence deployed in choosing and implementing means. References to a stance of professional objectivity and neutrality, or to an absence of self-serving motives and institutional pressures, do not supersede the need for systematic examination and discussion of these ethical issues. Accordingly insufficient it is methodologically to conceive of the rationality of professional intervention solely in terms of disinterested and value-neutral, or even altruistic, instrumental action.

**The normative core of all practice** What the above two arguments against the role given to professional disinterestedness for good practice have in common is that they both point to an *unavoidable normative core* of professional practice. There is thus a need for examining this core in each specific case of professional intervention, as well as for understanding its general methodological implications. Without such an effort, we cannot hope to fully understand what good professional practice means. It follows that the conventional account of professionalism in terms of the discussed, peculiar combination of "technical" competence regarding means with a simultaneous "disinterested" stance or value neutrality regarding ends, is insufficient. It cannot grasp the normative core of good practice, much less help professionals in dealing with it systematically and critically.

As a last comment on this issue, there is of course a valuable self-critical moment in the idea of professional self-limitation to an instrumental kind of competence. Likewise, an ethos of disinterested rather than self-interested service is a true and indispensable professional virtue. I do appreciate both ideas. But to appreciate an idea correctly, we also need to see its limitations. As the sociological and the ethical arguments outlined above should make clear, conceiving of professional competence in terms of a "technical" responsibility for means only is not good enough to secure good practice. How should practice make sure it is "good" if it has no methodological conception of its own value content and hence, no systematic way to appreciate its own normative implications and what they may mean for those who have to live with the consequences? A better starting point for critical and responsible practice, it seems to me, is to acknowledge that all professional intervention tends to have consequences that concern different people in different ways, and that the choice of means shapes these consequences no less than the choice of ends. Good and competent practice, then, surely cannot turn a blind eye to its own normative content, read its consequences for all the parties concerned (including those not involved), regardless of whether they are rooted in the ends pursued or in the means deployed. Philosophically and methodologically speaking, we need to deal more carefully with the inextricable interdependence and ethical relevance of both means and ends.

Let us, then, turn to a core philosophical and methodological issue of good practice, concerning the relationship of means and ends in the quest for rationality. This relates to the second of the "two strong assumptions" mentioned at the outset, regarding the separability of decisions on ends and decisions on means.

**Means and ends in good practice** Many professionals shy away from a notion of professional competence that would include its normative core in addition to its technical core, as such a notion obviously entails questions of value judgment and ethical responsibility. They have learned in their training that a good professional, not unlike a good scientist, maintains a stance of professional objectivity and neutrality, a requirement that (they assume) is more easily met by restricting themselves to the choice of adequate means for reaching "given" ends while avoiding questions related to the choice of ends, as ends are not theirs to judge. The question is, is this true? Does such a narrower, science-oriented concept of professional competence really "avoid" value judgments in the positive sense of securing objectivity or of resolving the issue in some other ways, or might it merely avoid them in the negative sense of turning a blind eye on the unavoidably normative content of all practice?

The answer, I would argue, is neither simply black nor simply white but involves some shades of gray. Professional expertise undoubtedly has a role to play that primarily addresses questions related to the choice of means rather than ends. Professionals may be expected to rely first of all on empirical knowledge, theoretical understanding, and analytical skills rather than on value judgments. But why exactly? It is important in this context that readers gain a clear and precise understanding of the methodological connection between a "technical" concept of competence and the "scientific" aspect of a focus on the choice of means. Most people assume that there is some such a connection, without however being able to explain it accurately.

***Applied science and the means-end scheme:*** Why and in what way exactly does a scientific stance imply a focus on means? The crucial question is how far the selection of means, unlike that of ends, can and needs to rely on empirical knowledge, theoretical understanding, and analytical skills rather

than on value judgments. Methodologically speaking, this is so inasmuch as the identification and implementation of good means is logically equivalent to the transformation of knowledge into "what-if" kinds of statements. We thereby translate empirical statements that involve *theoretical hypotheses* – more exactly, causal or statistical statements of the kind "Given circumstances Y, event X regularly produces effect Z" – into instrumental propositions, that is, *technical prescriptions* as to what needs to be done if a certain effect is to be achieved: "To produce effect Z, bring about event X under circumstances Y!" The transformation as such (and this is the important point) involves no value judgments. Its validity only depends on analytical correctness and empirical corroboration, in that the stated relationship between X, Y and Z must lend itself to empirical reproduction so that both statements can be said to be "true" and furthermore, relying on them for practical action can be said to be "rational." The underlying concept of rationality remains the same, in that both kinds of statements are expressions of theoretical rationality. Both can be assessed scientifically, by means of theoretical explanation and empirical testing. Because instrumental reasoning can thus be based in theory and science, it lends itself to a *science-based* notion of expertise and professional competence. We may conclude that *inasmuch* as professional competence relies on instrumental reasoning, a science-based notion of competence is useful – no more, no less.

***Professional practice goes beyond applied science:*** The above "inasmuch" implies that such a science-based notion of expertise and professional competence, useful as it is, is insufficient. An obvious first objection is that not all fields of professional activity are as close to empirical science as are, for example, engineering, medicine, economic analysis, evaluation research, and others; the legal and teaching professions may serve as counter examples, but also architecture, social planning, social work, or psychotherapy. Professional competence reaches beyond applied science. The rationality of that "beyond" cannot be explained in the terms of science theory.

A second objection is that professional practice, even in those disciplines which are relatively close to empirical science, does not take place in the laboratory of the scientist, nor in the lecture room of the theorist. As soon as we turn to *applying* the conclusions gained by the (avowedly value-free)

technological transformation of empirical into instrumental propositions, the normative core of practice creeps back in, as it were. There is no way to keep practice "pure" in the sense of relying on what-if statements only, with the "whats" standing for value-free selections of means and the "ifs" for ends that fall outside the researcher's or professional's boundaries of concern (and for this reason, unlike the means, can safely be avowed to be value laden). The earlier-advanced "ethical argument" applies: the choice of means, no less than that of ends, has consequences that may affect different people differently. Hence, although the choice of efficient means can as such rely on a merely "technological" transformation of knowledge into what-if statements and to that precise extent can be justified in terms of "applied science," the implementation of these what-if statements in specific contexts of application cannot be so justified. The "pure" character of what-if hypotheses gets lost the moment we implement them and thereby produce specific consequences for the different parties concerned. The purely analytic nature of the transformation in question thus furnishes no compelling argument as to why good professional practice could and should exhaust itself in a merely "technical" notion of competence, a focus on means according to the means-end scheme.

***The means-end scheme is faulty!*** A third objection is methodologically even more fundamental: the focus on instrumental reasoning and rationality – the professional's self-limitation to the selection of means – does not buy as much immunity from value judgments as is generally assumed. This is so because the crucial underlying concept, the so-called *means-ends scheme*, is faulty. It assumes that means and ends are philosophically distinct categories and accordingly can be handled independently from one another. This assumption relies on the idea that the two tasks of justifying means and justifying ends require different forms of reasoning. To some extent, as we just have seen, this is true. Selecting means raises primarily questions of technique, strategy, and economics, whereas selecting ends raises primarily questions of ethics, morality, and legitimacy. But to some extent, it is false and lends itself to uncritical employment. The mistaken assumption is that all normative issues of practice can be associated with the selection of ends, whereas the selection of means can be kept free of value implications. Once the ends have been chosen, so goes the reasoning, adequate means can be

determined in a value-free or at least value-neutral ("disinterested") manner, as they simply "serve" the ends previously chosen on avowedly normative grounds. But what at first glance looks like a clear-cut distinction turns out to be far less clear in practice. While it is true that the selection of means requires theoretical and instrumental knowledge and to that precise extent can be grounded in science and expertise, it does not follow that professional practice can select, justify, and implement adequate means free of any value judgments.

***Rationality cannot be divided up along these lines.*** Yet another way to state the same conclusion is this: Not even the most rational selection of means, grounded in perfect theoretical and instrumental expertise (which ensures the chosen means are reliable, effective and efficient), can secure good results if thus-chosen means are used to promote questionable ends. Questionable ends achieved by rational means amount to a questionable kind of rationality. Efficiency is rational only to the extent it promotes well-chosen and justified ends; otherwise, it implies *not a gain but a loss of over-all rationality*. The efficacy (effectiveness and efficiency) of means is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for claiming their rationality. And finally, even where the ends are generally agreed and entirely beyond reasonable questioning, it remains a fact that practice virtually always confronts us with *options*. Ends can be achieved by different means; but different means for reaching one and the same end may have different consequences for different people and thus confront us with normative questions as to whose concerns should be given priority.

**Conclusion: towards a two-dimensional concept of rational practice**

There is no way, in practice, to keep the choice of means, however rationally arguable they may be with respect to their efficacy, entirely free of normative content. Limiting one's professional efforts to the choice and implementation of means simply does not do the trick. It is not possible to avoid values, worldviews, and all subjectivity whatsoever by associating the normative content of professional practice with the choice of ends only and then focusing safely on the choice of means. Means, just like ends, have consequences. *Means matter*, they have a normative content of their own.

We can see it in TV debates and hear it on the bus: in real-world problem

solving and decision making, the selection of means is often more in dispute than that of ends. How could this be so if the means-end scheme had got it right? The contrary is true: because means *are* value-laden, and because there are always options for choosing them even when the end to be reached is given and generally agreed, the disputes get stronger the more they focus on means. They become more emotional, and the ethical issues involved become more difficult (just think of nuclear power plants as a means to produce sufficient electricity for everyone).

We can easily agree that our societies should offer all young people educational chances according to their talents; that worldwide economic disparities should be reduced and poverty and malnutrition should be eradicated; and that electricity should be produced in ways that do not cause further global warming. But we cannot so easily agree, despite all the professional expertise available, about what kinds of educational opportunities, economic policies, and poverty-fighting programs might be the best and should be deployed, or about the options (nuclear, fossil, renewable, energy saving) for securing a sufficient supply of electricity. The reason is, of course, that different means to reach these general ends amount to different notions of improvement, and ultimately to different notions of what kind of societies and global society we want to live in.

*Different means amount to different specific ends*, which is just another way of saying they have normative implications of their own. (Take again the debate about energy policy options: they weight different ends, such as minimizing the cost of energy production, preserving oil reserves for future generations, fighting the process of global warming, or avoiding incalculable health risks for present and future generations, differently.) The two categories of ends and means cannot be separated nearly as neatly as the means-end scheme stipulates. Counter to what it assumes, ends and means are not substantially distinct categories (Ulrich, 1983, p. 72). There is something wrong, then, with the idea that all normative questions raised by professional practice can be associated with the choice of ends, so that once the ends have been chosen in legitimate ways, expertise can inform us "objectively" about the best means to be used without involving further (and essential) value judgments. (For fuller discussion of the methodological inadequacy of the means end-scheme, see Ulrich, 1983, pp. 67-79; 2001, pp.

9-11; 2006b, pp. 7-18; and 2007, pp. 2-8).

The conclusion is inevitable: professionals cannot, by limiting themselves to a technical concept of competence, avoid value judgments. Yet this is precisely what the means-end scheme, and the prevailing concepts of expertise and professionalism built on it, imply. To the extent professionals do try to avoid value judgments on this basis, they risk "avoiding" them merely in the sense of turning a blind eye on them. The implication is not a gain but a *loss of competence*.

In the terms familiar to regular readers of the *Bimonthly*, we risk relying on a concept of rationality that reduces practical to merely instrumental reason. But such an impoverished concept of rationality cannot help us in dealing reasonably with the non-instrumental, genuinely normative side of practice. Yet it is precisely those non-instrumental issues which regularly confront us all – whether as decision-makers, professionals, or citizens – with the most difficult and most contested issues.

It should be clear, then, that a well-understood quest for good professional practice must not rely one-sidedly on the pursuit of instrumental reason and hence, on a merely "technical" understanding of professional competence. Rather, a *two-dimensional concept of rational practice* is required, in which practice is considered rational to the extent it is grounded in "good" reasons for its practical-normative as well as for its theoretical-instrumental presuppositions and implications. Thus-understood, competent practice will need to identify and unfold the value implications of alternative means as well as their underlying assumptions of fact. Conversely, it will need to examine the assumptions of fact and feasibility in the choice of ends as well as their underlying values and specific notions of improvement. In sum, it will need to deal systematically with both the normative and the empirical content of proposals. This is what a two-dimensional notion of rational practice is all about: practice either is rational in both the theoretical and the practical dimension of reason, or it is not rational at all. In good practice, theoretical and practical reason come together.

It is imperative, therefore, that competent practitioners understand the concept of *practical reason*. How can good practice strengthen practical *along with* instrumental reason, rather than relying on a systematic neglect of

either dimension of reason? This question will be in the center of the next, second part of this essay. So long!

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**Picture data** Digital photograph taken on 9 March 2008 around 1:00 p.m. ISO 400, exposure mode shutter priority with exposure time 1/640 seconds and exposure bias 0, aperture f/5.6, metering mode multi-segment, contrast normal, saturation high, sharpness normal. Focal length 42 mm, equivalent to 84 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera. Original resolution 3648 x 2736 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 120 KB.

### March 2011

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*March-April, 2011*



*Good practice: precise approach, safe landing, sweet results*

„A proper understanding of what 'good' professional practice means cannot rely mainly or even solely on the internal perspective of the professions themselves... We also need to move beyond a descriptive sociological account, towards a philosophical and methodological perspective of *how else* we might try to understand good professional intervention.”

(From this essay)

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