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The Responsible Professional: Vocation and Economic Life

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What do professionals "profess?" Does attending a faith-based institution add anything distinctive to their "profession"? We argue that the "value-added" for students at Lutheran institutions of higher education is vocation, a sense of calling that reaches beyond professional commitments and ethics codes. Whether they are in graduate or undergraduate programs, whether their degree is in the liberal arts or in professional/pre-professional studies, whether they pursue grad school or career, whether they are Lutheran or not—whether they are religious or not!—we hope that these students profess a distinctive responsibility ethic that is derived from understanding themselves to be "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish" (NECU).

In this article we propose to show the ways in which profession and vocation intersect, before then outlining the distinctive marks of a responsibility ethic. Finally, we will unpack the marks of the responsibility ethic that informs the ELCA Social Statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*.

Throughout, we draw on work done by NECU-sponsored consultation from July, 2019 involving professors from business, leadership, and management departments at Augsburg University, Concordia College, and Augustana College (Rock Island).[1] The purpose of the consultation was to discuss the ELCA social statement on economic life as a possible resource for teaching business ethics.

Profession and Vocation: Intersections and Differences

How does a sense of calling or vocation make one's professional commitments more than "just a career"?

First, profession grounds vocation, whereas vocation invites professionals to think beyond themselves and their professional guild.

Professions root vocation, giving it a distinctive soil: a history and tradition of service, a set of practices constitutive of that profession, a community of practitioners who

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embody the goals and values of the profession, and a set of standards that enable the professional to know what it means to do her job well.

Vocation offers professionals a kind of *telos* beyond the profession, an end which orients the profession's history, place, and practice. The called professional has a sense that work well done contributes to a greater good that exists beyond the professional guild. Vocation infuses professional commitments with a meaning and purpose that exceeds simply "being a good doctor" or "being a compassionate teacher." A finance professor at Concordia College observed that, before introducing business ethics, "you have to talk first about the purpose of a human being, the purpose of your whole life." Talking about calling or vocation helps leverage the prerequisite conversation.

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Moreover, through their vocations, called professionals have a connection to other people of good will who work toward that greater good. They participate in a larger community, one that includes other professionals, other workers, others who value the same goal and serve the greater good.

Second, profession locates work within a particular history and community, whereas vocation locates profession within a larger history and a broader community.

Every professional works in a particular time and place. What it means to be a judge in twenty-first century North America is very different from what it means to be a judge in Guatemala or Pakistan. What it means to be a good judge in all locations demands a close reading of context, the particular contingencies that impact one's service.

Vocation reminds the professional of a broader context that encompasses and even judges the present context. That context can be variously defined—"the kingdom of God," "*shalom*," "*tikkun olam*" (the Jewish mandate to "heal the world")—but each articulation places the present in perspective. The director of the MBA program at Augsburg observed that he wanted to honor his students' desire to "make a bunch of money," but he added pointedly, "*and* we want you to give back." To that end, he has students craft a personal mission statement, as well as identify their core values and set a series of short-term and long-term goals that include service.

Third, profession is composed of consciously institutionalized patterns of trust between client and professional, practices specific to the profession, institutions that support these patterns and practices, and communities responsible for their nurture and governance. Vocation interrogates these patterns of trust, practices, institutions, and communities, posing critical questions about justice, fairness, equity, and access.

Vocation breaks the profession's potential parochialism, offering cross-professional perspective, even a cross-professional language. At the same time, vocations supply a court of appeal for questions of justice. For example, one could be an exemplary priest according to the professional standards of the Roman Church—and never question why there are no women in the guild. Vocation presses the question: are some "children of God" more equal than others?

A business administration professor at Augustana College observed that so much of business ethics had been tainted by scandals like Enron (2001), the banking crisis of 2007, or the subprime mortgage crisis (2008). She wanted to move away from "scandal-based ethics," which told students what *not* to do into a more positive ethics that helped them discern *what to do*. A sense of calling could help anchor them in the midst of stormy markets.

Finally, professions regard the "other" as client, whereas vocation regards the "other" as neighbor or fellow-traveler.

Professions focus on a specific, often temporary task: e.g., getting a will written, finding a diagnosis, implementing a plan of treatment, getting a high school diploma. The other is "client," and the professional doesn't have to like her client, agree with her politically, or share her taste. Similarly, the client doesn't have to like her lawyer, agree with her politically, or share her taste. One serves; the other is served. Professional boundaries ensure appropriate distance and acknowledge a beginning and end to that service.

Professions frame service in terms of a question: "What do you want me to do for you?" The question acknowledges expertise on one part, need on another. There's difference between professional and client in terms of power and agency. The relationship is often dyadic; justice may be its operative norm.

Vocation regards the other as "neighbor." Moreover, vocation presents the professional as a "neighbor" as well. Neighbors share a common space—the neighborhood; they walk a common path. This relationship is less dyadic. There are lots of others in the neighborhood, lots of others along the way. In the relationship between two neighbors or two fellow-travelers, there's more symmetry in terms of agency and power. Vocation tempers justice with love.

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Vocation thus frames service differently: "What will we do together?" "Where does the path lead?" Or more simply, "What needs to happen?" Service is *with* another, not *for* another.

Kinds of Codes of Ethics

How does a sense of calling or vocation move a professional's behavior beyond a professional code of ethics or code of conduct?

Every profession has a code of ethics or code of conduct that is intended to guide the practice of that profession and regulate professional behavior. These codes align with three major approaches to human behavior dominant in Western philosophical ethics: deontological ethics, which attends to rules; teleological ethics, which attends to goals or values; and aretaic ethics, which attends to excellence in character and the virtues that describe it. These three approaches reflect basic dimensions of human behavior. Humans create rules to govern social life; guided by values, they seek after goals; finally, they practice virtues that compose a life of integrity.

Accordingly, professional codes of conduct or codes of ethics often list the rules governing conduct in the profession, the goals or values professionals hold, and the virtues that make for "a good lawyer" or "a good manager." In what follows, we unpack these three dimensions of professional codes of conduct using the Code of Conduct of the American Management Association (hereafter, AMA). Then, we demonstrate how an understanding of vocation pushes beyond these codes of conduct to offer called professionals a way of responding to what's going on around them.

Deontological ethics

Deontological or duty ethics honors that part of human nature that needs to know the rules—whether to follow or to disobey them. Rules set basic parameters for human interactions, enabling traffic to run smoothly, social trust to build, and governments to function according to a rule of law. Currently, politics in the United States is consumed with whether some individuals are "above the law," like the President and his associates, or whether they are temporarily exempt from constitutional constraints which apply to other citizens.

Deontological ethics presents humans as *citizens*, obedient to rules, particularly rules that forbid actions that destroy and dismantle social bonds. It focuses on "what should we do?"

Rules may be broad or quite specific; they stipulate what one must do (prescriptions or "thou shalt" imperatives), what one should not do (proscriptions or "thou shalt not" imperatives), as well as what one may do with impunity (permissions). It's worth noting that rules outlining what one should do (prescriptions) have greater range or impact than rules outlining what not to do (proscriptions). For example, the Ten Commandments told the Hebrew peoples to "Honor your father and your mother"—but did not say specifically how that was to happen. There's room for filial discretion, meaning a daughter or son can decide whether a parent would be happier with a Thanksgiving visit or an off-season adventure. The commandment is a broad, prescriptive rule. Another commandment clearly forbids killing: "Thou shalt not kill," but would have greater range if it read "Thou shalt love and speak charitably of your neighbor." Charity is a lot harder to manage than simply refraining from murder.

The AMA Code of Conduct leads with the rules that govern professional conduct, and those are three-fold: (1) do no harm, (2) foster trust in the marketing system, and (3) embrace ethical values.

The first and presumably most important rule to "do no harm" is broad and negatively stated. It does not specify the many and various ways in which marketers may inflict harm, which broadens its application beyond a rehearsal of specific situations. The message is clear: *in every situation*, the professional is to do no harm.

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But the rule does not have the range of the positive counterpart, a rule to "do good." The second rule—"foster trust in the marketing system"—presumes the marketing system is always right. The third rule points to the teleological thrust of the code, professional values or goals.

Teleological ethics

Teleological ethics honors that part of human nature that seeks outcomes or goals. The saying, "the ends justifies the means," hints that all kinds of rules might fall before a desirable outcome. More benignly, this kind of ethic satisfies the desire of people who like to aim for something, whether through an architect's design, a recipe, or a long-term goal. *Teleological* ethics presents humans as *makers*, crafters of their own professions and careers. It focuses on "what do I want?" or "what do I seek?"

Clayton Christensen, Harvard Business School professor and consultant, writes about the blueprint he drew up in college for a "well-planned life." Not surprisingly, it took a lot of planning to craft it. Christensen describes how everything was oriented toward goals: the sports he played, the relationships he cultivated, the time he devoted to projects, the sleep he got, even his family. He knew what he wanted and put all of his energies into achieving it. Observing Christensen and others like him, New York Times op-ed columnist David Brooks sums up the lure of a distant goal: "Life comes to appear as a well-designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way and brought toward a well-rounded fruition" (Brooks).

The AMA Code of Conduct lists an impressive roster of values that follow from its governing norms: honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship. Each value is defined, then elaborated in a series of pledges, which are stated in thoroughly teleological language: "To this end, we will…." For example, honesty is defined as being "forthright in dealings with customers and stakeholders," and supported by promises to "strive to be truthful in all situations and at all times" and to "offer products of value that do what we claim in our communications."

Clearly, each of these values could also be a virtue or character trait, but to have them listed as "values" rather than "virtues" signals they are aspirational rather than descriptive. The difference is important: it's probably better to have an honest marketer than a marketer who aspires to be honest. Still, a professional becomes honest by striving for honesty in all of his/her interactions. Though not identical, values and virtues are related. Perhaps the tired story of the famous pianist is still apt. When asked, "how did you get to be a Carnegie Hall musician," he simply said, "Practice. Practice. Practice." We become truthful people by telling the truth over and over and over again.

Character ethics

Aretaic or character ethics offers yet a third alternative, describing the qualities or characteristics that make a person good in general or simply good at whatever it is that she does. These qualities dispose a person to act in a particular way no matter what the situation. He doesn't have to consult a social or legal code; he doesn't have to calculate whether or not this action would forward his goals or projects or plans. He simply acts instinctively, leaning into patterns that have been etched into his behavior over time and in various circumstances. A truthful person never has to think about telling the truth; it's simply part of who she is. A truthful person will simply always tell the truth, without having to consult the rulebook and without having to calculate cost.

Character ethics presents humans as *creatures of habit*, specifically the habits that make for excellence in a particular professional role. It focuses on the question of identity, "who is the good professional?"

Much of professional ethics describes the specific qualities that make for a good lawyer or doctor, and these are delineated in the professional code for that profession. Daniel W. Porcupile, contract officer at U.S. Security Associates, Inc., compiled a list of desirable qualities for any profession: expertise or specialized knowledge, competency, honesty and integrity, accountability, self-regulation, and image (Porcupile). Again, these virtues or qualities of the good professional start as values, characteristics toward which one aspires. Over time, these values become habitual, etched on character. The truthful professional never has to wonder about telling the truth; she simply is a truthful person.

> "Virtues or qualities of the good professional start as values, characteristics toward which one aspires. Over time, these values become habitual, etched on character."

The AMA Code of Conduct speaks less of character, but what it does say is powerful: "As marketers, we recognize that we not only serve our organizations but also act as stewards of society in creating, facilitating, and executing transactions that are part of the greater economy." The statement confers on marketers a two-fold identity, and the state-of-being language is crucial. Marketers are servants of the organizations that employ them; they are also stewards of the larger economy. These are powerful markers of identity, but here's the rub. These two identities could be mutually exclusive, e.g., when serving the company conflicts with stewarding society. And they could often compete with one another. Moreover, what happens when the "greater economy" systematically dis-privileges or dis-enfranchises a group of people, as the economies of the American South (revolutionary, pre-Civil War, reconstruction, Jim Crow eras) have historically discriminated against black people?

Responsibility Ethics and Lutheran Higher Education

Responsibility ethics presents humans not so much as citizens or makers or creatures of habits, but rather as people who are summoned or called to be the *first responders* to what's going on around them.[2] In their responses, they attend to various dimensions of their context: themselves, their own professions, the world around them, and God. The language of vocation inhabits the world of responsibility ethics.

Responsibility ethics focuses on questions of accountability, "What's going on? How am I being called/summoned to respond? Where is God in all of this?" As first responders, responsible professionals are "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." Readers familiar with *Rooted and Open*, the founding document of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, will recognize this language. What follows is something of a rewriting of that document's main moves, but in the register of responsibility ethics. We believe that these commitments outline three elements of a responsibility ethics that both deepens and interrogates traditional codes of professional ethics.

Called and empowered

Being a "first responder" does not mean acting on impulse. Response is different from reaction. Reactions are instinctual, unconsidered, and often hasty. If I touch a hot burner, my instinct is to jerk my hand away from a source of immediate pain. That instinctive reaction is appropriate to the situation. But most professional situations call for a response, and responses are more considered, deliberative, and discerning. Responders are reflective professionals and reflective practitioners.

Responsible professionals are freed from the constraints of custom and status quo, even any unjust parameters of their professional code, to ask broadly: "what is going on?" They are freed for a kind of critical inquiry into a situation or issue to ask tough questions and to turn down easy answers. Aware of their own limitations as well as the limitations of human understanding in general, responsible professionals have a healthy sense of humility. Rather than paralyzing them from any action at all, this intellectual humility prods them to be probative and open to the counsel of others.

To serve the neighbor

As first responders, responsible professionals act out of a sense of calling or vocation, which includes but exceeds their professional work. They possess a critical appreciation for their own strengths and skills, which they regard as God-given gifts, not innate possessions. Because these capacities are "gifts," they are not the property of the one who has them. Rather they come with an obligation to be shared with others. Here, "can" implies "ought," not the other way around as philosophical ethics would have it.[3] The professional has a responsibility to share with others the strengths and skill with which she has been gifted.

Moreover, responders share their gifts with clients whom they also regard as *neighbors*. Regarding the client as a neighbor breaks the hierarchical nature of a relationship between a superordinate (the professional) and subordinate (the client) and adds a dimension of equity to the relationship. Both client and professional are neighbors, one to another. Responsible professionals are released from the prison of their own individuality or career goals to work for the good of another. Advocacy (*ad-* + *-vocare*) becomes part of their vocation or calling (*vocare*), as they work for justice in the world.

So that all may flourish

Finally, regarding the client as neighbor points toward a *neighborhood* or *commons* in which "all may flourish." As first responders, responsible professionals look toward a common good that lies outside the boundaries of the professional guild, their immediate place of employment, even the concerns of global market. From the perspective of the common good, responders have a critical perspective on the penultimate goods of career, professional guild, nation, and the global economy. All of these goods come together in the divine economy, quite literally, the "house of God" or *oikos theou*.

> "From the perspective of the common good, responders have a critical perspective on the penultimate goods of career, professional guild, nation, and the global economy."

Because they do not have a God's eye view and so can only catch glimpses of the divine economy, responsible professionals regard themselves as stewards, tending a house that they do not own. They exercise a radical hospitality toward both neighbors and neighborhoods in which they work, extending God's welcome to the whole of creation. Finally, they exhibit a commitment to the well-being of the world, particularly those places and people that suffer from inhospitality.

Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All

Graduates from Lutheran institutions of higher education know that they are "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." How does that calling play out concretely for graduates working in various sectors of business and the economy?

The 1999 ELCA Social Statement, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, reframes these questions in the horizon of a broader economy, the household of God. Further, it offers four criteria for making economic judgments. Finally, it invites business professionals to respond rather than react to global market forces.

Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All, (hereafter, SSLA) provides an alternative framework for economic deliberation that both complements and critiques codes of conduct like the one referred to above. For example, the AMA Code rightly challenges managers to see that their duties do not end with the organization that employs them. Managers function as "stewards of society" and serve "the larger economy." SSLA insists on an even broader horizon, nothing less than a divine economy, the household of God: "In Jesus Christ, God's reign intersects earthly life, transforming us and allowing us to see the ways in which the world falls short of God's intentions and enabling us to speak out." Seen from this point of view, accepting any economy system without question gives it "god-like power" (ELCA, "Brief Summary," see also Reierson).

The document spells out "God's intentions" in language that translates to people who do not believe in the Christian God and to people who do not profess faith at all. Four criteria inform economic judgments, which ought to aim for "a sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all."

Sufficient

Sufficiency means the ability to meet basic needs, which is both a divine intention and a human right. In order to meet basic needs, the world's resources must be shared and distributed justly so that everyone has enough. Huge disparities between rich and poor disrupt the just distribution of resources. Some people have more than they need; some have nothing.

The document names two threats to the just distribution of natural resources: consumerism and greed. Consumerism confuses wants and needs, confusing desire with necessity. Greed, which has both personal and corporate dimensions, is that obsessive desire for more. People become possessed by their possessions; corporations acquire smaller, more vulnerable enterprises creating monopolies that cut jobs and raise prices. The search for cost-cutting and saving leads to higher prices and fewer jobs. SSLA calls on all government to promote the common good; it calls on all citizens to hold governments accountable.

Attention to sufficiency demands that responsible professionals ask the question: how much is enough?

Sustainable

Sustainability refers to the capacity to survive and thrive together over the long term. Respecting the integrity of creation is both a divine intention and a human responsibility. Humans are bound to respect the integrity of creation, not just for their own survival and enjoyment, but in order to pass this on to future generations.

The past year has seen teen-agers and young people such as Sweden's Greta Thunberg on the front lines protesting climate change. They boldly display disgust with the irresponsibility of their elders: "We're skipping our lessons to teach you one." "If you don't act like adults, we will." Sustainability highlights the responsibility of one generation to those that succeed it.

Attention to sustainability demands that responsible professionals ask the question: what is the long- and short-term impact of our actions?

Livelihood

A livelihood refers to an economic support system, nothing more and nothing less. Although there are multiple dimensions of one's livelihood, including the various communities to which one belongs (family, neighborhood, faith community, and nation, etc.), the workplace is probably the primary economic support system for many people. Workplace practices of hiring, retiring, and termination, in compensation and benefits, in policies for illness and childcare should reflect a basic respect for the dignity and worth of each employee.

"Workplace practices of hiring, retiring, and termination, in compensation and benefits, in policies for illness and childcare should reflect a basic respect for the dignity and worth of each employee."

At the same time, people are more than what they do. As children of a living God, they have an inherent worth, whether they are working are not. In the divine economy, all people have dignity, even when their "livelihood" depends on others, i.e., when they are not working, no longer working, or unable to work at all. A Down's syndrome adult in a group home may not receive a paycheck but has a life of meaning and purpose nonetheless. A retiring engineer has a calling, even though she no longer goes to work every day. Responsible professionals contribute to the livelihoods of others, not just themselves.

Attention to livelihood demands that they ask the question: how do we support ourselves and those who depend upon us?

For All

The final phrase of SSLA—"for all"—reiterates the scope of the divine economy, but focuses particular attention on those people who suffer from poverty and economic injustice. Because Christians follow a God who embraced suffering on the cross, they show particular compassion to those who suffer. Similar to the "preferential option for the poor" in Roman Catholic social teaching, SSLA calls for "particular scrutiny of policies that affect the poorest people with the aim of investing to improve their lives."

After working for the State Department, Augsburg graduate in communications and political science Jacquie Berglund worked in the Baltic countries for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development before turning toward making beer. She turned out to be as successful at the alchemy of the palate as she'd been with the alchemy of international relations, and Finnegans

Brew Co. was born. But Berglund wanted to encourage "barstool philanthropy," as she called it, and she conceived of the idea of a reverse food truck: "Some food trucks serve food. This one serves the greater good." Instead of making food, people donate money to stock local food pantries and shelters. A menu listed prices for how much it would cost to feed a family of four for a day, for a week, for a month. The food truck became a regular presence at weddings, graduation parties, birthday celebrations. Aiming to "put hunger in the rear view," Finnegans truly serves the common good (Finnegans).

Attention to flourishing "for all" demands that responsible professionals ask the question: how does our behavior affect others, particularly those living in poverty? How does our behavior impact the whole of creation.

Conclusion

The goal of posing all of these questions is not to prescribe answers but to help responsible professionals in various fields of business think through the impact of their behavior, actions, and decision. These tools for deliberation outline a way to respond rather than merely react to the forces and situations surrounding them.

We believe a distinctive professional formation, one that goes way beyond acquiring skills, happens at Lutheran institutions of higher education. Although we focused here on business, this framework could be applied throughout the professions, using other ELCA social statements and social messages in the process. (See complete list on page 15.)

"A distinctive professional formation, one that goes way beyond acquiring skills, happens at Lutheran institutions of higher education."

What marks professional education at an ELCA college or university? Graduates are poised to become responsible professionals who are "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." These young professionals know how to make a living—but even more importantly, they know how to make a life.

Endnotes

1. Participants included Augsburg University's George Dierberger, Director of the MBA Program and Associate Professor of Management; Marc McIntosh, Associate Professor of Finance; and Fran Lyon Dugin, Adjunct Professor in Business; Concordia College's Ahmed Kamel, Professor of Computer Science and Management Information Systems; Angel Carrete Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Finance; and Faith Ngunjiri, Associate Professor of Ethics and Director of the Lorentzen Center for Faith and Work; and Augustana College's Amanda Baugous, Associate Professor of Business Administration; and Lina Zhou, Associate Professor of Business Administration. The consultation was facilitated by Kathi Tunheim, Vice President for Mission, Strategy, and Innovation at Gustavus Adolphus College. Presenters included Dr. Roger Willer, Director for Theological Ethics at the ELCA; Dr. Mark Wilhelm, Executive Director of NECU; and Rev. Dr. Ernest Simmons, Emeritus Professor of Religion at Concordia College. Observers included Augsburg University's Marty Stortz and Tom Morgan, Concordia College's Larry Papenfuss, and Augustana College's Jason Mahn.

2. This section draws on distinctions found in H.R. Niebuhr's classic book on Christian ethics, *The Responsible Self* (HarperSan Francisco, 1963). Niebuhr presents three different approaches to the question of ethics: man [sic] the maker (teleological), man [sic] the citizen (deontological), and man [sic] the answerer, responsibility ethics. While following elements of Niebuhr's typology, we distinguish character/aretaic ethics (creature of habit) from responsibility ethics (first responders), arguing the distinctiveness of these two approaches. In his op-ed article, "The Summoned Self," David Brooks contrasts the "well-planned" life (a teleological approach) from the "summoned" life (a responsibility approach), and we are indebted to his insights and distinctions as well.

3. The principle that "ought implies can," attributed to Immanuel Kant, stipulates that an agent, if morally obliged to perform a certain action, must then be able to do it. Markus Kohl (see works cited) debates whether this is what Kant intended, despite the subsequent history of attribution.

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