

Religion, Morality and the Professions in America

Introduction

by David H. Smith and Richard B. Miller
Indiana University

Ethics and Values in Advertising:
Professional Identities and Organizational Cultures
by David Krueger
Baldwin-Wallace College

Quilting Professional Identities in Business
by David P. Schmidt
Fairfield University

The Poynter Center
for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions
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March 1998

Research for this project was funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment (Grant Number 920816).

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Table of Contents

Introduction by David H. Smith and Richard B. Miller	1
Ethics and Values in Advertising: Professional Identities and Organizational Cultures by David Krueger	9
Quilting Professional Identities in Business by David P. Schmidt	27

Introduction

David H. Smith
Richard B. Miller

A Bit of Background

With the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, the Poynter Center at Indiana University convened a three-year seminar to explore the connections between religion and professional ethics. We assumed that field study would enrich studies of professional ethics and clarify the religious dimensions of professional ethics. Each member of the seminar conducted independent research into a specific profession and wrote an essay exploring issues of identity and professional values. This volume includes two of those essays. In the remainder of this Introduction, we offer a fuller statement of the assumptions that inform the project.

Ethics and Professional Experience

Are the words “professional ethics” a contradiction in terms? The stories reported in the media sometimes make us think so. Owing to perceived abuses of power and uncertainties about professional purpose, the past twenty years have seen a renaissance in the study of professional ethics, beginning with medical ethics and spreading to many other lines of work — from law and engineering to business, journalism and the ministry. The trend has produced a burgeoning intellectual growth industry, generating new ethics centers on university campuses, academic journals and professional associations. Concern with the moral education of professionals — either during their training or throughout their professional life — has become widespread, and most professional associations think they must at least go through the motions of drafting a credible code of ethics, whatever they may decide about enforcing it.

Although much of the academic writing generated by this renaissance has been of high quality, work in professional ethics

often has been vexed by failures of communication between academic students of morality and thoughtful, self-critical professionals. This failure is attributable to both superficial and deep causes. Superficially, ethicists and professionals may use jargon or technical terms that are unintelligible to persons remote from academic ethics or the profession under study. The effect is to create distance and distrust and to make conversation difficult. Obviously this problem is serious, but it is easily remedied, at least in principle. Technical terms can be used sparingly; those that are used can be clearly defined; an imperious style of bringing moral truth to the unenlightened can be avoided.

Much academic writing about professional ethics has failed in a deeper sense, however: The academics often have failed to engage the moral world of professionals. Highly credible as their work may appear to their academic colleagues, it misses the target that provided part of the rationale for the enterprise: analysis and reform of the moral life of professionals in practice.

The reasons for this failure of engagement with professional life are many and complex. Partly they rest in the widespread assumption that morality is universal and that the general implications of universal morality need only be applied to the personal or institutional problems that confront professionals. From this point of view, the interesting parts of moral analysis precede (and often preclude) a hands-on understanding of a professional world. Moreover, the renaissance in professional ethics coincided with, and was significantly driven by, a widespread social movement that was skeptical about expertise and distrustful of power, especially professional

power. In that context, beginning with the professional's perspective was like siding with the enemy. To avoid complicity or co-optation, it might seem better to craft moral principles independent of professional experience. Detachment guarantees impartiality and objectivity for social critics who wish to evaluate professional institutions.

Social criticism, however, may be achieved at the price of relevance. Barry Hoffmaster puts the point well:

By investigating how moral problems are perceived and constructed by those whom they affect and how those individuals handle those problems, and by assessing their attempted resolutions, ethnographic studies can discover the disparate forms of moral rationality and stake out, at least in a provisional way, the limits of those forms.¹

On this account, moral critique is neither impossible nor undesirable. But in order to be heard, such criticism must relate to a practical understanding of professional life, the moral culture in which professionals work, and the expectations that they impose upon themselves. Accordingly, our project seeks to capture the voices and anxieties of professionals as an integral part of social and cultural criticism, to uncover the complex motivational forces that drive professional practice and to examine the extent to which those forces draw meaning and correction from normative criteria.

We do not argue that universal morality does not exist. Nor do we contend that the *only* important way to study professional ethics is the path we take here. We do insist, however, that the moral worlds of professionals are peculiarly interesting and important for professional ethics and, furthermore, that those moral worlds include



perspectives, concepts of virtue, and understandings of obligation that are not just a problem but a resource for professional ethics.²

If we are to draw upon the fund of professional experience, we must explore new avenues for combining descriptive research with normative inquiry. The goal is to enrich the current discussion of professional ethics in two ways: Assuming, with Alasdair MacIntyre, that there are “goods internal to a practice,” we want to identify the virtues and duties that shape professional life and to assess their meaning for real professionals.³ Rather than beginning with normative principles that have been crafted prior to and independent of professional experience, we seek to capture and comment upon some of the real-life contexts in which professionals find themselves.

Furthermore, this research does not prescind from historical particularity, especially religious particularity. When one begins with actual professionals, one must be open to the possibility that they are religious or that their professional practices have in some ways been influenced by religion. Religious analyses continue to be cogent and relevant to many professionals, and images and thought-forms of religious traditions may be quite instructive to professionals and social critics alike.

Thus, the following essays maintain an angle of vision that is self-consciously aware of the role of religious loyalties, thought-forms and institutions. We assume that religion is relevant, whether as resource or as problem, to understanding and reforming professional morality. Logically elegant as it may be to dismiss these influences and commitments, it leads to an oversimplification of analysis.

Comparing the values and symbols of a profession with those of a civic or religious tradition is impossible if one cannot understand both sets of values and symbols. Therefore, interpreting the moral world of professional life requires us to develop a *dual literacy*, that is, an ability to understand more than one moral language. In effect, dual literacy is meant to produce a “comparative symbolics,” in which the vocabularies and symbols of professional life are compared and contrasted with the symbol system of an individual’s religious convictions, or with symbols and codes within wider civil society. To the extent that we can interpret more than one language, we are able to draw analogies between the different languages of religion, culture and professional practice.

Developing the ability to understand a moral world is important because that understanding may help to expose dissonance between that world and a more familiar one. One advantage of these studies is that they highlight the competing loyalties or obligations of professional life. Diverse values, duties and symbols vie for professionals’ allegiance. We seek to ascertain how individuals negotiate the conflicting demands and commitments of a professional’s complex life.

Community and Character

Our attention to the real-life contexts of professionals leads to two distinct but related foci: community and character. One line of inquiry is an attempt to unearth the ethos or lived culture of a profession, its “moral ecology.”⁴ Here our aim is to uncover a moral dimension that is embedded in various professional practices and to see how that dimension is inscribed in the various rituals,

symbol systems, modes of reasoning, professional codes, values and socialization processes of professional life. In effect, our hope is to provide a window into the moral culture(s) in which professional skills are nurtured, sustained and legitimated.

The second line of analysis focuses on professional identity. Here we are concerned less with professional culture than with individuals' self-interpretations. Although each aspect of professional practice — ethos and identity — informs the other, this second line of inquiry is meant to specify how individuals might find meaning and motivation as professionals. In this regard, we focus on the purposes toward which professionals order their lives. How might professional commitment provide the sense that being a lawyer, minister, health care provider or scientific researcher is more than "just a job?" How do professional commitments become loyalties around which lives are built; in short, how do they become and function as vocations? How do religious commitments inform the idea of professions as callings?

Taken together, the twin concerns of ethos and identity call attention to the ways in which individuals shape and are shaped by the values that inhere in professional life. We seek to ascertain ways in which professional duties impose on individuals, and the extent to which professionals embrace, modify or reject what they see as the demands of their professional culture. These essays attempt to convey the reasons for individuals' responses to professional demands and the extent to which those reasons draw from ethical insight or religious conviction.

Researcher and Subject

During our three-year project, many authors were involved in extensive fieldwork, while others relied primarily on interviews. All involved themselves in discussion of research methodology. Thus, our studies reflect a series of self-reflexive commitments about carrying out research in ethics in the places where people actually work.⁵ Theoretical issues that bear upon the researchers' identity and their relation to the field of investigation are particularly important, especially for those who involved themselves in participant observation.

Issues concerning researchers' relation to research subjects derive from the fact that field workers have a double role as both insiders and outsiders in the professional's world. Investigators are insiders to the extent that they gain acceptance from professional practitioners. Privy to the backstage aspects of professional decision making, the investigators have access to professional life that clients rarely if ever have. Professionals who provide access may ask for advice or help from persons who are there to study them.

Yet in the final analysis, the field workers remain outsiders. Employed elsewhere and accountable to different clients, the investigators can make claims to professional authority only if they have gained certification through traditional routes.

As a result, acting as participant-observers requires field workers to combine engaged participation and detached observation. This synthesis is neither easy nor natural; indeed, it is inevitably awkward. Being a participant observer requires sacrificing elements of each role in order to make the combination work. On the one hand, as we have noted, investigators are

participants to the extent that they become a part of the professional context, developing a relationship of trust between themselves and informants. On the other hand, the researchers were not “one of those” whom they studied. Given the fact that field workers use sophisticated tools of analysis, there are limits about the extent to which they can truly participate in the practices that are being recorded. Unlike the professionals themselves, our investigators all entered different professional contexts knowing that they would eventually leave. Other duties beckoned: to write, to read, to teach.

Complicating matters further is the fact that the researchers’ presence inevitably affects the events they observe. Professionals who know they are being observed may be less than spontaneous or candid about their practices, conversations with clients, or decision-making procedures. Our authors were well aware of the “observer effect,” conscious of how the field changes once a field worker has been introduced into the environment.

Field workers’ double role, along with the fact that fieldwork inevitably affects the terrain of study, invite consideration about the “research ethics” of fieldwork. At one level, ethical questions surround the proper boundaries between the researcher and the subjects of study. Participant observation requires ethical sensitivity to informants’ rights of privacy and professional-client confidentiality. Inquiring beyond the limits imposed by privacy is not only presumptuous, it may jeopardize the professional-client relationships that are the subject of study. Moreover, researchers must protect themselves, and here too the need to draw boundaries is important. Involving oneself in the events of professional culture poses the danger of

being co-opted into the study subjects’ perspectives, potentially skewing one’s own angle of vision. Each side of the researcher’s insider-outsider role entails important ethical constraints.

At another level, ethical questions bear upon the purposes of investigative research. In general, researchers who see their task as simply reporting what they have witnessed will adopt a different ethical stance toward their field of inquiry than those who see their work as potentially reformist. To a pure descriptionist, normative inquiry is taboo; others see value neutrality as socially irresponsible. To varying degrees and in different ways, the essays we publish adopt the latter set of purposes. Our critiques involve ethical judgments about which reforms are appropriate and which judgments credibly can be put forward in research of this sort.

A final, related set of ethical problems surrounds the appropriate measure of empathy and commitment in investigative research. To what extent, and how, should a researcher exhibit care for or solidarity with the persons being studied? Excessive care would seem to emphasize one’s “insider” status, jeopardizing one’s identity as an “outside researcher.” Further, care presupposes a prior set of evaluative judgments that may compromise the investigation’s objectivity. Yet, to remain uninvolved in the lives of persons one encounters in the field is to adopt a kind of distance that seems dishonest. Accordingly, we need to tack back and forth between engagement and detachment, realizing that the researchers have complicated obligations both to those being observed and to the wider research community.⁶

Religions and the Religious

One angle of vision in this project, as we have mentioned, focuses on how religious and moral values inform professional practice. Our work engages the religious and ethical dimensions of professional practice in three distinct but overlapping ways.

First, *professional practices and generic features of religion share important analogies*. Here the idea is that professions have a religious dimension, that they exhibit features resembling various characteristics of religious belief and practice. One goal of this first approach is to lay bare how a profession constitutes a “sacred canopy,” legitimating various forms of human behavior and imparting a sense of meaning and worth to professional activity.

A second approach *explores the ways in which the beliefs of a particular religious tradition inform a professional’s relationship to clients or to a profession as a whole*. The goal is to determine how individuals reconcile conflicting loyalties or integrate private and professional commitments. A main theme becomes inquiry into the relationship between personal values and professional practice, as illustrated by the essays that follow here.

David Krueger identifies the values that pervade the work of advertising, focusing on the personal identity of several agents and the organizational ethos of two agencies. He finds that ethical concerns can affect how ads are produced and how agencies conduct business. He also discovers one case in which religious values have shaped an agency’s mission, and concludes that such values can have a bearing on the types of products that an agency agrees to promote.

Drawing from extensive interviews with symbolic analysts in the business world,

David Schmidt probes the extent to which religious belief, family background and professional obligations shape the imaginations of those involved in investments and insurance. Schmidt finds that numerous “nonprofessional” sources help sustain these analysts through their career paths, e.g., art, meditation and family memories. He also examines the extent to which these professionals negotiate the competing duties of work, family and their own personal needs.

The third and final focus begins with the assumption of a *connection between professional life and the common good construed in religiously informed terms*. On this account, professional practice should be ordered by a larger vision, one that is shaped by civic virtue and the desire to contribute to public life.

Conclusion

This classification of religion and professional life is scarcely exhaustive, and the distinctions between our three approaches are by no means exclusive. One of David Krueger’s informants describes how a religious commitment to social justice informs his judgments about the proper relationship between advertising and wider public concerns. Religion, morality and professional values intersect in complex ways, producing no simple procedures or algorithmic formulas for tracking their modes of interaction. Nor is it the case that all of our informants expressed an affinity for religion and morality in any of these senses. But to conclude that professional life is bereft of religious sensibility would be to bleach the moral landscape of its many hues. Better to insert humanistic inquiry into the real-life contexts of professionals themselves.

Only in this way, we believe, can we grasp how religious beliefs are sequestered within the many strata of public life.

The essays printed here are preliminary studies, done within significant time constraints; in no case do they entail the degree of immersion in professional life that the authors might have wished. We hope that here, and in the essays in this series, we have said enough to suggest the importance of this kind of work and taken some first steps of interest and importance.

Notes

¹ Barry Hoffmaster, “Can Ethnography Save the Life of Medical Ethics?” *Social Scientific Studies of Medicine* 35 (December 1992): 1421-1431.

² For contrasting presentations see, *inter alia*, Michael D. Bayles, *Professional Ethics* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989) and Alan H. Goldman, *The Moral Foundations of Professional Ethics* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980). The main theme of Goldman’s argument is a rejection of “strong role differentiation” for professionals; conceding that many professionals have special duties, he argues that those duties can be derived from general moral principles. The only exception is some judicial actions. We have not designed this book as an attempted refutation of Goldman’s thesis; the two viewpoints are to a large degree reconcilable. At a minimum, however, we place the emphasis in a different place: on the importance of studying and learning from the moral experience of professionals.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 175. However, given what MacIntyre says about the conceits of professional expertise, it is unlikely that he would favor our effort to ascertain moral dimensions to professional practice.

⁴ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For an explicit definition, see p. 335.

⁵ We hold no brief for a thesis that only professions are occupations worthy of study; indeed, we include many occupations that are not professions according to a rigorous sociological definition , e.g., journalism and management.

⁶ The need for engagement and distance pervades the duties of professional life no less than the tasks of field workers. Professionals frequently confront the problem of the status of moral values, the idea that ends or values are “merely subjective” and that “objective” work uses verifiable and/or quantifiable data or well-established professional protocols. Such “objectivity” produces knowledge that is meant to enable people to match ends with means but is agnostic about the merits of any ends that are pursued. Our contributors found that problems surrounding value neutrality and the quest for objectivity pervade professional life. For example, the need for objectivity is pronounced in journalism. Factual reporting of who, what, when and where is the essence of journalists’ work, and opinions or value judgments that appear in news stories must be identified as such. But value judgments inevitably make their way into newspaper copy — not only editorials and signed columns — to say nothing of judicial decisions, genetic counseling, pediatric medicine and the practice of law. Our studies reinforce widely held views about the inevitability of value judgments in the day-to-day lives of professionals. All professionals must incorporate personal commitments with professional duties; in many ways, value neutrality is an ideal honored in the breach.

**Ethics and Values in Advertising:
Professional Identities
and Organizational Cultures**

David Krueger
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Introduction

This essay explores the role of ethics in advertising, with a focus on the organizational cultures of advertising agencies as well as the professional and personal identities of the individuals who work within them. My descriptions, analyses and conclusions are the result of in-depth interviews with approximately 35 professionals from two ad agencies located in a large American city.

I seek to uncover the role of ethics and values in these two agencies by 1) reporting the general purposes of the agencies as perceived and articulated by their members, 2) identifying the operative values that members perceive as shaping the cultures of their organizations, and 3) discussing ethical issues that members see pervading their work. As will become evident, members of both agencies think that ethical considerations can show their faces both in the “products” (the ads) they produce and in their conduct of their business, e.g., their relationships with clients and the internal functioning of their agencies. These two agencies also reveal significant debates that seem to be internal to the profession of advertising and to the cultures of ad agencies regarding the grounds of moral authority for the profession. These debates turn upon the question of whether and to what extent advertising professionals and agencies should make moral judgments about, or shape the moral intent of, the ads they produce, or whether they should leave these judgments to external sources of authority (e.g., clients, customers in the marketplace, or government or industry regulators). Significant debate also focuses on the meanings, roles and applications of honesty and truth telling. Within this discussion, I seek to uncover

ways in which religion seems to shape the moral understandings and vocational identities of professionals in the field.

Brief Profiles of the Agencies

Agency A is a large regional office of a publicly held global ad agency with offices in dozens of countries. This regional office employs more than 200 professionals who work on several consecutive floors of a very large new upscale office building. The surroundings are sleek, stylish and contemporary, with tasteful appointments and color combinations. Most professional staff have individual offices that ring the outer edge of each floor, with dramatic views of the city through windows that span most of the outer walls. People are clustered into functional groups (e.g., creative, media, account executives). Important vice presidents and directors have larger corner offices, with even more dramatic two-directional views. The inner areas of each floor comprise open areas for support staff, information technology and research support services, as well as state-of-the-art conference rooms for client presentations and focus group discussions. Most of Agency A's clients are large, well-known consumer goods companies. Examples of current and past print ads are prominently displayed along the inner hallways throughout the agency, along with plaques and other mementos of award-winning ads. Members are typically young and friendly, greeting each other by first names. While the agency clearly has no dress code, most are dressed expensively and with stylish flair; it is not unusual, however, to see an occasional

writer or artist dressed in blue jeans, t-shirt and high-top athletic shoes. Business is going very well, and the place exudes confidence.

Agency B is a smaller privately held ad agency with a single office. This local agency employs approximately 35 people and takes up a large portion of a single floor of a mid-sized office building, away from the more "glitzy" part of town where other ad agencies tend to cluster. The surroundings, while stylish and contemporary, are more functional and modest in appointments and subdued in color and material. Most professional staff also have small individual offices along the outer edge of the agency, with views overlooking the city. The president occupies the only large corner office, which is stylish and well-appointed, but also clearly serves as a hub for agency activity. Its large bulletin board is covered with advertising, most of it work in progress and concepts and ideas to be developed. People are clustered into functional areas, with account executives inhabiting the outer offices on one side and creatives on another side. Administrative support staff and other support functions occupy the inner areas of the office in open, half-walled cubicles. Most of Agency B's clients are large and mid-sized local companies in a wide array of business sectors. While the agency displays some of its print ads in its lobby, they are not as numerous or prominent as those in Agency A. Members are young and friendly; clearly everyone knows everyone else in this agency. Attire is varied but tends to be more conservative. Business is not strong currently, and morale and confidence levels are not high.

Agency A: A Large, High Profile Publicly Owned Firm

Bill Smith is a 69-year-old senior vice president of broadcast production, who has been with the agency for more than 30 years. He currently supervises 15 people who produce TV commercials for consumer goods clients. Bill has always wanted to be in the advertising industry and loves his work passionately, as evidenced by the fact that he has not yet retired in an industry known for its youth. He started as a copy writer and broke into TV advertising at its primitive beginnings, initially doing every aspect of TV ads single-handedly with no training. He came to Agency A as a creative director, and he has seen the agency grow dramatically and evolve through various changes in sometimes tumultuous and stormy leadership as well as a shift from private to public ownership. He sees a central part of his job as motivating his creative people to stay focused on core concepts and to foster a level of teamwork and mutual support that will create the best possible product for clients. Indeed, his goal is to produce advertising that will “put our clients where they never thought they would be and exceed their expectations.” He pushes his colleagues and his clients to take risks and reach for breakthrough ads that are exceptional, rather than safe and bland. He also acknowledges a strong duty to manage his budgetary costs prudently, a demand that is more essential with public owners concerned with dividends and stock values. Bill is here because he loves his work and his craft, its energy and pace.

Melanie Summers is a senior vice president and group creative director in her mid-40s who has been with the agency for ten years. She manages three creative

directors and thirteen creatives. Her clients include consumer product companies known to all. Her groups produce electronic and print ads that are industry award winners prominent on television and in magazines. She began in the industry as a copy writer and worked at other large ad agencies before coming to Agency A. A highly creative individual, she speaks eloquently about advertising’s important contribution to American society and to the people who work in the industry. “We encourage creative expression and promote the value of the individual. This industry gives a chance for creative expression. Art’s contribution to science is valued; function and aesthetics are linked together. Our craft forces me to use everything I am as a person, all my senses.” She celebrates the “sense of discovery” that pervades the craft and the industry. Melanie appreciates and nurtures a strong sense of teamwork that pervades her own groups and the agency as a whole, with its capacity to generate collaboration rather than competition, as well as the execution of outstanding ideas. “This place operates purely.” Married to another high-powered professional and with three small children, Melanie somehow seems to balance valiantly and efficiently the many competing demands placed upon her time. She acknowledges that she has become more paternalistic in her views about advertising since she has become a parent, feeling more strongly about the harmfulness of products such as tobacco.

Purpose of Advertising:

Effective Advertising that Sells Products

Members of Agency A articulate high levels of coherence and agreement about their agency’s purpose and about their own professional roles in support of that purpose, which is to serve their clients by helping

them sell their products. This purpose is illustrated by the following statements by agency members. “Our bottom line is to sell products.” “We sell solutions for clients.” “Our goal is to position products in the minds of consumers that have benefits that meet needs.” This commitment to serve the client is embodied well in Bill Smith’s aspiration to put their clients “where they never thought they’d be” and even by a production manager’s claim that “we pull them [clients] out of the gutter with style.”

This basic purpose is perceived to impose an obligation on the advertising professionals to put the client’s interests above their own self-interest or even in some cases the interests of the agency. For instance, tensions can exist between “creatives” (the writers and artists who create the original content and format of the ad), who sometimes want to create “great” ads that win awards and enhance personal portfolios, and account executives (who manage accounts and relate directly to clients), who wish to produce ads that satisfy the client and sell the product. This tension is generic within advertising agencies, and Agency A has resolved the tension in favor of the account executives. Indeed, they pride themselves on the number of industry “effectiveness” awards they win, as opposed to creativity awards. “Our ads are effective and creative, not outrageous.” Strong service to the client can also conflict with agency interests, for instance the need to generate high profit levels for owners. Some think that revenue and profit demands sometimes compromise client interests, however; they suggest that this tension was less apparent earlier, when the agency was privately owned and had not yet become a publicly traded corporation.

Perspectives differ significantly as to whether the overarching commitment to sell a client’s products permits any discriminating moral judgments about the moral nature or social value of the product itself. One member, for instance, stated that service to the client means that “we will take any product. Would we take Philip Morris? Of course. This is a business.” The duty to serve the client would not allow much moral space for the agency to make critical judgments about the social value or harm of a product. However, individuals in the agency are permitted the freedom of conscience to decline work on an account if they have moral objections to the product or reservations about it. “We respect the desire of individuals who don’t want to participate on certain products,” Melanie Summers asserts.

I would not work on cigarettes, which are not in the customer’s or society’s best interests. I used to think that advertising impacts only current smokers, but not anymore. When used as directed, they produce illness and death. I don’t feel good about appealing to people’s worst fears. I am much more paternalistic and moralistic since I’ve become a parent.

The agency’s work for a large defense contractor was justified by one member: “I trust our country’s political judgments and uses of weapons.”

Some argued the contrary position, asserting that they could not imagine the agency selling cigarettes. Yet another member argued that “the market” or consumers themselves generally serve as adequate moral safeguards against harmful or bad products. “Our goal is to sell products that ought to be sold. Products that have no merit won’t be sold for long

anyway.” Most in the agency seem to perceive that customers’ choices (the market) or government policy (political judgments and laws) function as the primary moral arbiters of the goodness or badness of the products they advertise. These larger external social forces generally were perceived to make internal, agency-wide moral judgments unnecessary, although individuals within the agency were provided the moral free space to dissent without reprobation and to excuse themselves from participation in an account to which they had personal moral objections. In other words, the predominant, but implicit, moral philosophy in Agency A perceives primary (but not exclusive) moral agency to lie outside the agency. This reliance upon external moral sources is perceived to free the agency from the necessity of making on-going moral judgments about social well-being within the practice of advertising. In this sense, morality acts not as a “thicker” vision of the social good that would guide organizational culture and decision making about advertising products, but as a set of negative constraints, created by society and imposed externally, which define a “thinner” notion of moral permissibility. The agency is called upon to advance client interests as effectively as their creative and technological capabilities permit within broad constraints of moral permissibility.

Others acknowledged various ways that moral considerations might conflict with the duty to create effective ads. Without providing answers to her queries, one member reflected, “We have a responsibility to understand the impact of our products and ads and whether we leave a positive or negative impact on society. Are we creating culture or merely reacting to it? Are there products that aren’t needed or that are bad

for you?” She went on to acknowledge that her professional role and its benefit to society are harder to measure than a physician’s, for example. “What I do does not have a direct benefit on consumers like a doctor does a patient.” Rather, its social benefit and moral justification is its general contribution to the well-functioning of our economic system: “I am a part of the cog that creates jobs, opportunity and the country’s wealth. We create needs and desires that people sometimes can’t afford; nevertheless, it is a positive part of the capitalist system.” Another member defended this economic contribution less ambiguously and in a more morally forceful way: “We allow entrepreneurs to introduce new products. This takes power away from the retailer and gives it to the consumer.” In other words, advertising can be a form of empowerment for the creative contributions of entrepreneurs and thus a means to redistribute power in society, away from traditional centers (mature products and producers) to new sources (new products and producers) that may generate new benefits for users and society. Another, though, could not escape from this ambivalence of purpose: “How important is advertising really to society? We rationalize it by saying we serve an economic function, our sales provide jobs, etc. But our value to society is constantly questioned.” Another noted, “We sometimes try to add value where there’s really no value to be added.” These women were joined by another agnostic, who commented, “My first opinion was that advertising was one of the most unethical industries -- selling what I don’t believe in. I’m not sure we’re any worse than any other industries, though. I thought it attracted people lacking in ethics. I still see questionable people, though — divorces,

affairs, sexual harassment, arbitrary terminations.”

Corporate Culture: Teamwork and Creativity in Service to the Client

All organizations acquire traits, values and patterns of behavior that collectively shape the individual behaviors of their members and the work in which they are engaged. Members at Agency A identified the following key values and organizational traits: client satisfaction, teamwork, creativity, honesty and truth telling, good judgment and avoiding conflicts of interest.

Client Satisfaction Client satisfaction is a strongly articulated value among agency members. More than any other, this value functions as the unifying purpose that members identify within their agency. (The reader should refer to the discussion of agency purpose.)

Teamwork Teamwork involves the capacity of individuals to function effectively in groups to produce ads that satisfy the client. Due to the subjective nature of advertising, teamwork is perceived as an indispensable value, for its absence could result in strong individual egos dominating and corrupting group effectiveness and productivity, ultimately compromising the agency’s service to its clients. The strong emphasis on teamwork supports the agency’s commitment to produce “effective” ads that satisfy the client rather than more “creative” ads that win more industry creative awards but might not sell the product so effectively. This agency commitment affects the internal balance of power between creatives and other personnel, primarily account executives. “We’re less likely to have creative stars here with big egos that run the place.” Individuals speak proudly and appreciatively about the strong bonds of

collegiality, excitement and mutual support that exist among cross-functional work groups serving their clients. This value serves as a strong incentive for personal excellence and employee satisfaction. One professional with years of experience in several agencies stated, “This is the most apolitical agency I’ve ever worked for. We don’t foster individual kingdoms and power struggles. People give away ideas to each other and put the agency’s good above their own personal good.”

Creativity While creativity is not the dominant value that “trumps” other organizational values, as is the case at other agencies, it is nevertheless vital to the success of the agency. “We produce break-through advertising that makes our clients’ businesses successful. We channel creativity in the service of effectiveness.” Recall Melanie Summers’ eloquent portrayal of the expression of creativity as one of advertising’s important contributions to society and to its own creative professionals. Said a senior media director whose decades-long career has been spent in the industry, “Advertising is the poetry; marketing is the information.”

Honesty and Truth Telling Honesty is generally affirmed as a value embodied in the ways that products are advertised to the public and in relationships with clients. For instance, many articulated a strong duty to communicate research findings to clients with unswerving honesty. On the other hand, members expressed various perceptions of and moral reactions to the agency’s practices in billing and expensing client accounts. One member indicated that clients are not overbilled at Agency A but acknowledged that overbilling occurs at other agencies. Another suggested that overbilling occurs in the form of “absorbing

costs,” e.g., when a charge is falsely expensed to another account of the same client in order to keep an account under budget. The same person shared a frequently expressed view of those interviewed, “Economizing is not a strong value here.” She went on to claim, “I’ve never been pressured here to do something unethical,” in contrast to a former agency. There, she had been required to create false invoices for a client’s account, which she considered an unconscionable request; she complied, but she left the agency shortly thereafter. This response suggests a moral distinction between blatant falsification of totally fictitious expenses, which is considered an egregious moral fault, and “cost absorption” that merely shifts actual expenses from client to client or among accounts of the same client, which some seem to consider morally permissible within certain limits. Some claimed that expense reports are padded occasionally, for instance by rationalizing that the expenses are generally only “nickel and dime” items or that one comes to feel he/she is “owed” such minor perks for long and hard work for a particular client that is sometimes not appropriately accounted for in the billings to the client or in the member’s compensation package.

The roles of honesty and truth telling also surfaces in the tension between taking creative license and providing harmful or misleading advertising. Some acknowledged the potential for “puffery,” subtleties and ambiguities of information and truth claims, and “shades of gray” that are often present in the ways a product is advertised. “We [the industry] sometimes create perceptions [in the minds of consumers] that should mean something but really don’t.” One person cited a recent, highly effective Kodak ad by a

competitor that portrays photography as the “selling of memories” but retorted that “all film sells memories; it’s just that one company took advantage of that concept.” Yet the overwhelming consensus is that honesty and truthfulness are important moral values that should not be compromised with customer or client. “We must support the claims we make [about our products]. We cannot lie or mislead.” “We must exhibit realism in our ads, especially with children. We cannot overpromise.” One person proposed that creative license with a product is permissible as long as it is not harmful or misleading. “We must be utterly honest when we communicate consumer preferences [from our research] to our clients.” Another individual claimed that the industry engages in “mega-puffery” but believes that “the consumer will recognize it as puffery.” Advertising itself is “a world of fabrication.” In other words, there seem to be different types of “puffery” and creative license that could be harmful and should be avoided, and some that are perceived to be less harmful or even harmless and a part of the nature of their industry, function and craft. Indeed, some expressed comfort in acknowledging the role of external regulations, such as the networks and federal government, which aim to safeguard the public by preventing certain types of intended or unintended deception, e.g., the National Label Education Act, which requires full disclosure of nutritional content for food products. Another individual even appealed to Christian values that prohibit her from lying or taking advantage of people: “I won’t do that [fabricate] based on my personal morality and ethics. Furthermore, telling the truth is the best way to position the product in the marketplace.”

While there seemed to be consensus that dishonesty and even blatant puffery are inappropriate in advertising, the moral reasons for this prohibition generally were limited to appeals to personal values, religion or economic self-interest. Only one person made any references to industry or professional standards or norms (e.g., network regulations, professional association codes of ethics) or to any legal constraints, noting the National Label Educational Act.

“Good” Judgment Good judgment is colored by the general perception that advertising is an inherently “fuzzy,” subjective enterprise. While agency members express strong pride and commitment to doing “good work” for their clients, they acknowledge the inevitable diversity of judgments about what constitutes good work and a good ad. They acknowledge the reality that advertising is more art than science, even though the field has become more scientific. For instance, the science of market research has become more sophisticated in its empirical ability to understand and identify consumer preferences. New technologies such as retail information scanning at the point of sale give the producer more precise and sometimes instant feedback about consumer preferences, permitting ever more efficient response to consumer needs. Agency A, like most other large agencies, devotes considerable expense and personnel to utilizing various techniques (e.g., focus group discussions with samples of prospective customers) that try to take the guesswork out of predicting whether their ads will be effective in the marketplace. Nevertheless, all acknowledge the large scope of subjectivity that lies at the heart of their enterprise. This subjectivity can be the source of lively and creative — indeed,

sometimes heated and adversarial — debate among account teams as they create ads for their clients.

Some expressed the view that this subjectivity implies the importance of “making good judgments.” “We work in an essentially subjective business, which raises issues about the objective measures we use for judgment, which are themselves subjective. This was more difficult in the past when we were highly politicized and our culture was dominated by cults of personality. Decisions seemed arbitrary.” Another stated, “Since there is no ‘right or wrong,’ you must trust your judgment.” In other words, judgment becomes a valuable professional skill based upon experience and expertise, but one that is acknowledged to be highly subjective and intuitive, not based on readily demonstrable, objective criteria and standards, as is the case in some other professions and fields.

Avoiding Conflicts of Interest A final ethical value is the need to avoid conflicts of interests. This issue was discussed especially among buyers in the media department. One media supervisor stated,

We get a lot of vendors “doing favors” for us, taking us to sporting events, dinner, etc. These become gray judgment calls because you could compromise your judgment and begin to justify it to a client. This potential to cloud one’s judgment is especially pronounced in our business because the factors upon which we base decisions are already so subjective.” Such gifts and favors are constantly available as temptations that can compromise the buyer’s sense of objectivity and duty to agency.

The Role of Religion in Advertising Ethics

Among the twelve persons interviewed at Agency A, three cited religion as influencing

their professional self- understanding and ethical judgments at work. One, Bill Smith, appealed to his Jesuit education decades earlier as a source for professional courage and risk taking. “My Jesuit training has impacted me. I say, ‘Stand up and be heard,’ which can be risky and dangerous. This means we shouldn’t settle for bland advertising. But our culture has shifted, and we’re more conservative. Now we’re looking more for safety and security in our ads rather than passionate art and advertising.” Bill Smith perceives religion not as a set of rules or prohibitions that serve as independent constraints on professional action and decision making, but rather as a personal source of courage and strength that provides a stronger sense of vocational identity than others might have. As noted above, another respondent cited her personal Christian values as a source of moral principles that constrained her from engaging in lying or taking advantage of clients or vulnerable and impressionable customers. A third individual noted at the end of the interview, as a prompted afterthought, “My Catholicism affects how I relate to others here, for example with such values as compassion, empathy and forgiveness.”

Agency B: A Mid-Sized, Family-Owned Firm

Byron Newcombe is the 51-year-old president of Agency B. Approximately fifteen years ago, he purchased the agency from his father, who then retired after running the agency for more than 40 years. An active Roman Catholic layman, Newcombe seeks to create advertising that is consistent with his own humane, moral vision of the world. This goal involves an intentional, but sometimes subtle, effort to

inform the moral content and tone of the advertising the agency creates. For instance, the agency tends to eschew ads that promote violence or aggression, sexist portrayals of women or men, harmful products such as tobacco or alcohol, or marginally or questionably beneficial products. Instead, the president seeks to advertise in ways that tie the product to positive social values such as personal growth, respect for persons, good health, solidarity among people and family units, nonviolence and community well-being. Byron is a youthful, charismatic individual who is also widely read intellectually in philosophy, religion and American history and culture. He has an MBA in marketing from a prestigious business school. Under his leadership the agency has grown from \$3 million in annual billings to approximately \$30 million.

Jane Jacobsen is a highly successful 38-year-old account executive who has been with the agency for two years, after working at other, larger agencies for several years. According to Jane, the purpose of advertising is to help clients sell their products by communicating effectively with their publics. She feels uncomfortable with the president’s conviction that the agency should seek ways to substantively shape the moral character or tone of the messages they communicate or to influence the values of their clients. Rather, she subscribes to the belief that an agency’s duty is to create advertising that sells a client’s products. In this sense, the agency’s role should be reactive, responding to both client’s wishes and market preferences. Jane is a hard-working, bright, articulate, well-organized, highly competent professional who knows the business well and who takes pride in doing her work of coordinating the

development of advertising that meets the needs of her clients.

Purpose of Advertising: Servicing the Client and Creating the Good Society

Agency B's culture is shaped by an internal debate about the purpose and mission of its advertising. This privately held agency is run by a descendant of its founder, who self-consciously seeks to shape a culture with a distinctive mission and values. The president is a socially progressive and religiously serious individual who seeks to imbue his agency with values consistent with his own religious commitments. Indeed, this agency's values are widely perceived among its members to emanate from its president. By contrast, members at Agency A never attributed their organization's strongly articulated values to any individual in the agency, either present or past. Agency B has a succinct statement of corporate mission and values; its president and some of its members claim that that statement drives the organization and shapes its advertising and business activities. This statement appeals to such values as exceeding client expectations, employee growth and development, benefiting the end user, and contributing to the well-being of society.

Hence, where Agency A's mission of service to the client tended not to include much space for discriminating moral judgment about the moral nature or social value of the product itself, Agency B's morally laden mission statement as well as the strong persona and influence of its president not only permit but seem to require such moral judgment.

This "morally thick," values-driven vision of advertising's purpose and agency mission has a variety of effects on the corporate culture of the agency. It variously creates

debate, inspires, stimulates and motivates, causes skepticism and even occasional reactions of hypocrisy among members.

First, some are inspired by and feel they have reasonable levels of understanding of and commitment to the agency's and president's commitment to a strongly values-based vision of advertising. (Indeed, this factor attracted them to work there.) For instance, the agency has declined opportunities to advertise food products with little or no nutritional value because they do not promote physical health. They persuaded one client to alter the way it advertised a military toy, portraying its humanitarian capacities to rescue lives of comrades rather than its destructive qualities. The president did not want to portray a product in a way that contributed to what he believed were already excessively high levels of violence in the media and popular culture.

All in the agency believe that the agency would never consent to advertise harmful products such as tobacco or alcoholic beverages. Some believe the mission can provide a unique market niche that links the agency to like-minded clients who share a commitment to creating a society that embodies humane values. For instance, members cite a recent business pitch they made to a large sporting goods manufacturer in which they portrayed the primary value or benefit for the consumer of a product as the joy of physical activity and fitness and as a means for family and friends to celebrate their bonds of relationship. This approach contrasts with conventional emphases on hard and painful conditioning, competitiveness and individual achievement, and winning at the expense of others, or the use of sexist portrayals of men and women. Unfortunately, the pitch was unsuccessful because the prospective client hesitated to

work with such a small agency. One media director defined the difference in their approach to their products:

[Our president's] point of view gives a different spin on how we look at marketing and companies. We try to get outside classic formulas and boxes and bring in the human elements. We ask, "How does a product impact people?" We're starting to get at the core of what's really important with our products and get at the heart and emotion of the product, seeking a "higher element."

A second cluster of members is unconvinced that such moral agency is even possible in today's marketplace, given typical agency-client dynamics. One account executive stated, "I'm not sure we have any ability to influence our advertising. Rather, we are strongly reactive to our clients. They drive the product, not us. In fact, in our effort to satisfy our client, we give in too much. We cave in and don't stand up enough to them." When asked if there was anything distinctive about their product, he responded, "I don't think so. The process is the same; the variables that shape the product are the same." Another account executive states, "I haven't seen our values have any practical applications to my clients. None of the work we've done has anything to do with that."

A third cluster of members exhibits moral discomfort with, if even principled objection to, the claim that the agency should actively attempt to shape the moral character or message of a client's products. Jane Jacobsen declares, "It's not my job to force my clients [to subscribe to a set of values]; it's my job to help clients sell their products. Our role is reactive. I have not seen opportunities to lead clients to socially responsible opportunities." She goes on to

suggest the moral appropriateness of avoiding harm ("I would not do things inherently harmful, like advertise things like tobacco or hand guns.") but the moral inappropriateness of attempting to define the human good with her clients. She regards that as a paternalistic infringement of freedom. "Advertising should create positive moral values? Whose values are they? I don't share some of our president's moral values." Rather, she believes the market should be the moral arbiter of values: "I should offer the benefit that the customer wants even if it's not what I want. My beliefs should not override what the market wants. I am not willing to make judgments for people."

In effect, persons representing the latter two positions generally believe that the purpose of advertising cannot be or should not be morally-laden in its basic character. It is not an exercise of practical reason which aims at the moral good. Rather, advertising is basically amoral. It is a matter of technique, albeit good technique. Its value is judged by how well the client and/or the customer/market is satisfied, and thus according to criteria that are independent of the moral agency of the ad agency itself.

This internal debate about how far Agency B should go in shaping the moral content of its advertising was adversely colored by two recent developments. First is the fact that the agency has been in a period of economic stagnation for the past few years, during which they have not secured any new clients. This problem has resulted in downsizing, notably two painful workforce reductions two years ago, the first in the agency's history. Morale is low; members fear for their jobs and criticize the agency's unsuccessful efforts to secure new business. Many conclude that their

values-driven philosophy is ineffective and that their president's optimistic belief that they can carve out a special niche in the marketplace is misplaced. "These values haven't brought us any new business. It shouldn't be this hard." Many see no tangible positive results for the agency, like growth in clients and revenues, and thus are quick to discard the values as insignificant if not problematic for the agency. "We need new business right now, not values." Many see the agency's values as inconsequential, as luxuries that are not affordable for the time being, if not harmful to their efforts to acquire new clients. Perhaps they are trying to be something that nobody wants.

A second development was a recent experience with a very difficult major client, with whom the agency had an unpleasant and trying relationship from the start. Trust levels were chronically low. The client was extraordinarily hard to please. Account executives came to dread their contacts with client representatives. Creatives came to expect their work would always be rejected; they were always going back to the drawing board to generate entirely new concepts. There was constant bickering about billings and payments. The relationship was fraught with power struggles in which the agency tried to be accommodating. Late in the relationship, the client asked the agency virtually to copy the successful ad of a competitor, which it did, with the knowledge and at least tacit approval of the agency's senior management. This ethical lapse surprised most in the agency, particularly those who already doubted the efficacy of the agency's "high-minded moral stance." When the competitor discovered the similarity, the client was forced to withdraw the ad. Indeed, this client and this event are the most talked-about internal story that

defines the culture of the organization. In the minds of some, the event seriously compromised the integrity of the agency's philosophy and substantially deflated the seriousness with which many members, especially the avowed "atheists" and border-line "agnostics," were willing to entertain the practical viability of the agency's espoused philosophy and the president's role as charismatic moral leader. Later, when the agency decided to resign this account (an action very unusual in the industry), nearly everyone supported the decision as long overdue, in spite of the substantial loss of revenues for an agency that was already struggling to retain its personnel. The overall consensus was, "Our values and self-respect told us to do this. Why didn't we do it long ago?"

Corporate Culture: A Caring Community Fighting For Survival

Members at Agency B characterize the corporate culture of the agency in terms of the following operative values: respect for the individual, openness and low levels of organizational structure, service to the client, and honesty.

Respect for the Individual While there are open debate and difference of opinion as to whether the agency's product differs at all from what competitors produce, there is nearly unanimous agreement that Agency B is qualitatively different from any other agency any have worked for. "This place has a heart." "I am respected and cared for as an individual." This atmosphere emanates from the top. The president and other senior managers are known for their "personal touch" with members. Many describe the place as "family" and speak appreciatively of long conversations they occasionally have with the president, who cares about their

lives and ideas. Individuals generally leave his office stimulated and impressed with the president's personal concern, charisma and probing and intellectually provocative mind. He challenges them to consider issues from radically different perspectives. Indeed, until recently the agency had never experienced a layoff other than the occasional termination of an unproductive member. Longevity in the agency was considerably longer than the norm in the industry. "People are not disposable here like they are in other agencies."

While this commitment to respect and value the individual is generally appreciated, it is also the cause for internal debate and strife. Privately, some in the agency wonder if some longer-term members are productive and talented enough to justify their employment and/or level of compensation. Some believe that loyalty is more highly valued than talent and wonder whether the agency can afford this choice during a period of extreme financial difficulty. Some note that this value made the process of effecting the workforce reduction extremely slow and painful, and perhaps inordinately delayed, to the detriment of agency morale and productivity.

Openness and Low Levels of Organizational Structure Agency B is a highly fluid organization, marked by low levels of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Members work in cross-functional teams servicing client accounts, but these teams are not highly rigid in structure. Many members may be involved in an account. Individual initiative is generally welcomed. The president's door is always open, and people know him to be highly approachable. He seeks input, suggestions and criticism from all in the agency without recrimination, to the point that some wonder whether there is

enough respect and deference for his position.

At the same time, this low level of structure results in very little attention given to formal procedures like goal-setting, strategic planning, the creation of job descriptions and performance reviews. As a consequence, some complain that the agency is not serious enough in its efforts to measure and monitor performance, which is especially worrisome at a time of financial vulnerability and fear of job loss. Some suspect that a stronger system of regular performance appraisal might have eliminated the shocking necessity of the layoffs two years earlier.

Service to the Client Members generally believe that the agency distinguishes itself in its capacity to serve the client by developing strong relationships with client representatives. A media director says,

Our clients are usually here and not at a large agency for a reason. I think we develop our relationships with our clients differently. We have strong involvement and closeness. This ability to develop relationships gives our agency personality. Some clients want "hand-holding" and desire high levels of service. Our relationship [with clients] becomes more real more quickly.

Like Agency A, Agency B does not have a culture that is driven by its creative department. Indeed, creatives often lament the fact that their best ideas and work are rarely accepted by their clients, who tend to be conservative. They complain that agency account executives and clients drive the direction of the creative work, stifling their creative energies, and that the account executives too quickly "cave in" to clients' desires.

In Agency B, commitment to serve the client also entails the tendency to “under bill” clients. “We’ll eat costs we don’t think a client should pay for, almost to a fault.” “I don’t know why we have some of our clients. We haven’t made a penny from them.” This frugality is contrasted with the expensing and billing practices at Agency A.

Honesty Apart from the earlier example of the pirated ad, members assert that honesty pervades the work of the agency. For instance, they claim that the agency will never overbill a client. One member even cited an incident where the president returned an overpayment of several thousand dollars to a previous client when it was discovered two years after the fact. He goes on to marvel at this event, claiming it would never occur in a typical agency.

Furthermore, some believe the agency does not charge enough for some of its services, noting that some client accounts perennially fail to generate a profit for the agency. They suspect that this pattern stems from the president’s desire to maintain long-term relationships and high levels of client satisfaction, in the hopes that these accounts might grow and become profitable in the future. Unlike Agency A, members of Agency B never mention incidents of expense account padding.

In light of this consistent record of fiscal honesty and the president’s personal vision of strong moral purpose, the incident of the pirated ad seems even more curious and out of place in this agency. Both creatives and account executives expressed surprise and shock that the event could have occurred within this organizational culture. Even those who do not share the president’s morally “thick” vision of the role of

advertising in creating the good society regarded the event as a faux pas and a clear error in judgment. For creatives, this constitutes a violation of the values internal to the practice of the profession insofar as stealing someone else’s creativity and attributing it to oneself denies the expression of creativity — it is artistic plagiarism. Even account executives acknowledged that pirating ads is something that “just isn’t done in our industry,” even though it was demanded by the client. In the end, this moral lapse seemed to be a function of a very difficult and trying client relationship, which was also harming the agency financially. Many perceived it as an act of desperation for a client who could not be satisfied by any other course of action.

The Role of Religion in Advertising Ethics

Religion as a personal source of values for professional identity was mentioned by only one person in this agency -- its president. In his case, its impact is very strong. In general, the president understands his progressive and activist Roman Catholicism to include a pervasive, comprehensive world view that provides substantive clues and normative guidelines for shaping and transforming the good society, empowering his organization to contribute to the well-being of society and its own members, and inspiring the creative participation of persons within business. This understanding of religious faith as socially transformative is unique among respondents. It serves not only as a source of moral vision and direction but also as a source of dissension among those with conflicting visions of the good and notions of professional identity.

Conclusions

Corporate culture shapes the ethical understandings and practices of these agencies. A key ethical question is the fundamental purpose of advertising itself. How this purpose is defined, in turn, shapes the grounds of moral authority of the advertising professional. Agency A's corporate culture espouses a more "conventional" philosophy, which views the agency's relationship with its clients as fiduciary. As such, its role is to advance the clients' interests by creating advertising that sells their products as effectively as possible, thus maintaining long-term client relationships. The relationship is "morally neutral" in that it makes minimal judgments about the "moral goodness" of the products, assuming that such judgments about social benefit and harm are made primarily through external mechanisms (consumers, government). In effect, the moral authority of the advertising professional is attributed to, and to some extent surrendered to, external sources.

Agency B's corporate culture is strongly shaped by its CEO, who attempts to translate his personal moral convictions into the agency's philosophy of advertising. That vision is more morally laden. Agency B attempts not only to serve the client well but also to do so in ways that advance a particular vision of the good society. This latter philosophy is more prone to make moral judgments about the goodness or badness of products and also about the values that are communicated in the advertising of the product.

Predictably, the moral ambiguity that surrounds advertising's social purpose also results in some expressions of ambiguity about individual professional identity. Some

members of both agencies expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about their own contribution to society, questioning advertising's varied impacts, value and benefit to society. Others, however, spoke with great professional pride of its contribution to the economy by facilitating the buying and selling of goods as well as its capacity to promote artistic creativity in the service of client. Almost all attested to their own personal growth and development within their agencies.

Members of both agencies are able to identify clear operative values at work within their organizations. What are the sources of these values? The most visible source seems to be the organizations' unique corporate cultures. Notably absent in either agency was any appeal to independent moral standards or professional codes that one would find in a professional ethic (e.g., law, medicine or accounting) and that stand beyond the norms of one's particular work organization or any mention of memberships in professional advertising organizations. Nevertheless, these advertisers exhibited strong pride in their work. They generally viewed their work as a highly skilled craft, merging science and art in the service of their clients. Notable in both agencies was a strong commitment to *pro bono* work done for various nonprofit organizations, typically ones that were identified and publicly featured by the agencies for special sponsorship and assistance. Some also cited "personal values" as sources of morality, with religion included as a "personal value," i.e., a value external to the agency that an individual member "brings to work." Typically, personal values, including religion, acted as moral "trump cards." As such, they provide a type of immunity for the individual, which permits him or her to be excused from

a practice that may be standard within the agency. For instance, individuals could be formally excused from working on an account whose product they found morally questionable or problematic. Some might decide not to pad expense accounts, although others might do so occasionally. Byron Newcombe is the one dramatic exception to this more individualized notion of morality with his understanding of morality as the shaper of corporate and social vision.

The interviews from these two agencies suggest that questions of honesty and truth telling create fundamental moral challenges for the practice of advertising. Indeed, these moral challenges seem embedded in the very nature of the practice of advertising and its role in a consumer society. This challenge stems in large part from the extent to which advertising engages in puffery, which embellishes, fabricates and fantasizes in its effort to persuade the customer to purchase a product on the one hand, and the moral boundaries that society wishes to place around that enterprise on the other hand. These boundaries try to define permissible limits to the intent and honesty of advertising's claims and attempt to prevent some social harms. This issue itself begs the larger question of advertising's moral purpose in society. To what extent is advertising merely creative license to portray the product in ways that will most effectively persuade the buyer? To what extent does society have other expectations of advertising's role, such as provider of factual information or as vehicle to create a more substantive vision of the good society? In other words, the fact that puffery seems inherent to the practice of advertising itself relativizes or limits advertisers' and society's expectations of truthfulness or honesty of the

product claims. At the same time, this relativizing is limited, for it does not permit advertisers to make claims that cannot be substantiated, contradict empirically substantiated evidence or mislead in ways that may cause harm to the user. Creative license is not unconditional, but is itself constrained by moral considerations that aim to protect the public welfare. How and to what extent this creative license should be limited, however, is subject to considerable reflection and disagreement, both within the industry and in society. Indeed, this ongoing question will frame much of the moral debate about the character, contribution and value of the profession to the larger society.

While most professionals in these two agencies acknowledge that advertising engages in puffery, they also strongly affirm honesty and truth telling as important values internal to the practice of advertising. For instance, one is duty-bound never to misrepresent information (e.g., marketing research) to the client, nor should one fabricate fictitious expenses. Showing favoritism with vendors is also rejected as an inappropriate course of action. Plagiarism of competitors' ads is also considered inappropriate but occurred surprisingly under conditions of business duress. Padding and even shifting of expenses among accounts seem more common practices. Hence, honesty and truth telling are not unconditional values; exceptions are made. In sum, how professionals and agencies define the expectations and limits around the embodiment of these values within their own practices often seems unclear and open to internal probing and debate. Clarifying moral expectations around honesty and truth telling will be an important task for the profession and the industry. Ad agencies would do well to make such moral concerns

explicit topics for reflection and debate as they shape the fabric of their cultures and clarify what they see as their fundamental purpose to society.

Quilting Professional Identities in Business

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Introduction

Some say that business managers can't be professionals. However, after ten years of consulting with various corporations on ethics issues, I would have to say that some managers are more professional than some doctors, lawyers and even clergy of my acquaintance. For this project, I spent two years talking with some of the most interesting and thoughtful contacts from my consulting and business relationships. My agenda was not to throw more evidence into an interminable, often highly abstract debate about what constitutes a profession. Instead, by observing persons closely in their chosen business fields, I hoped to learn something that would deepen our appreciation of what is required for professional business practice.

I started by identifying four business contacts who would generally be regarded as professional: They have advanced training or education and possess esoteric knowledge; they hold themselves to be morally accountable for their expertise; and, if their work does not always directly serve the public good in the broadest sense, neither is it guided only by narrow self-interest. I specifically looked for people who primarily work with abstract ideas and information, as opposed to manufacturing things or providing direct, physical services. "Knowledge workers" as management professor Peter Drucker calls them, are widely viewed as a crucially important segment of today's rapidly changing business world, yet comparatively little is known about them, especially in connection with issues of morality and religion.¹

On average, I met five times with each contact over two years in various settings, including their workplaces; each conversation lasted about 90 minutes. Instead of a tape recorder (which I think stilted the conversation), I relied on written

notes, so I should emphasize that the following is more an interpretive painting than a documentary photograph. However, I believe I have been faithful to my contacts and that they would concur with my main interpretations.

In what follows, I present the four contacts in turn, describing what they do, the main issues they face, and how they deal with their issues. My conclusion will consider just how much we can expect these individuals to transform the world of work. I would not extrapolate from this group to general conclusions about all of business practice. Rather, I have intentionally narrowed my focus to the most engaging contacts I could find, trusting others would learn as much from them as I did.

Helen, the Human Resources Executive

For as long as she can remember, Helen had wanted to paint. Her burning interest led her to earn a Master of Fine Arts and to begin a career of painting and teaching art. To tide her over while she tried to establish her own art studio, Helen took a job in insurance. But what she thought would be a one-year detour into business somehow turned into a fifteen-year human resources career. Today, by any reasonable business standard, Helen is a success. But what has become of the artist in her?

When she turned to business, the field of human resources resembled teaching, so she gravitated in that direction. However, instead of settling into the “warm and fuzzy” areas of personnel management, Helen forged a career in technical areas of benefits and retirement plans. Working closely with accountants and finance executives, she had to become proficient in quantitative business skills. Today, she is studying for an MBA,

on top of her demanding work schedule, because technical management skills are so necessary for career security, let alone advancement.

Helen now works in a large, highly decentralized retail corporation, dividing her time between her headquarters office and visits to various divisions. For the first time in the history of this corporation, the business required an extensive reengineering process. Consultants were brought in to examine the profitability of the various divisions, to recommend how to reshape the corporation’s functions from top to bottom. It is not uncommon for jobs, even whole departments, to disappear as a result of corporate restructurings. Employees fret about the possible outcomes, rumors run rampant, and office morale is extremely fragile.

As a participant in this reengineering process, Helen confronts many of the political issues that accompany profound change. She has come to see that, despite their official rhetorics or postures, people at work tend to act on the basis of unofficial, hidden agendas and personal interests, such as protecting their turf. She has learned that her success, even her survival, depends on her capacity to read others’ implicit agendas and to anticipate how they will perceive her actions. Helen has had to augment her quantitative skills with more intuitive perceptions about the hidden political agendas in the workplace. She states, rather matter-of-factly, “If you don’t read the situation correctly, you’ll get killed.”

At work, Helen’s artistic or aesthetic side might not appear as visible or as dominant as her “MBA” side, but to me it seems to be more central to her personal identity. She would like her aesthetic sense to complement her business skills, although she is not clear

about what it would mean to bring together her artistic and managerial orientations. Two modest ways in which Helen tries to bridge both worlds are serving on the board of an arts organization and using arts news as conversation starters with business colleagues. But these efforts fall short of the deeper synthesis of aesthetic and business judgment that Helen desires.

Helen's experience with religion, and its limited explicit function in her business world, sheds some light on her dilemma. Although Helen's religious upbringing was very active (she attended a Protestant church, studied the Bible seriously, participated in church groups), she stopped participating in organized religion after high school because she found it to be somewhat hollow. Today, however, Helen believes in "something higher" that is deeply important. Her sense of spirituality or holiness is not clearly defined, but it seems to resemble what she means when talking about her aesthetic sensibility. Spirituality and an aesthetic appreciation of beauty are both central to Helen's self-identity; both deeply shape her general outlook toward life; and yet neither seems to enter explicitly into her business judgments.

Although Helen regrets the gulf between her aesthetic sensibility and her work skills, she does not approve of people bringing formal religion into the workplace. She speaks critically of a former co-worker, a "born-again type," who proselytized at work and who used her faith to ground particular business decisions. And yet, she sees the value of a spiritual faith. Helen knows a co-worker for whom religion is a source of personal comfort during this period of stressful organizational change (although the topic of religion came up only after they had gotten to know each other well).

Helen thinks that her aesthetic side has contributed indirectly to her judgments as a human resources executive. One of her company's divisions filled with rampant rumors about possible layoffs (and in fact, that division *was* targeted for a workforce reduction). The standard procedure at Helen's corporation is not to tell employees about impending layoffs until the last possible second. But Helen felt that withholding the news in this case was hurting employees more than it helped the company, so she persuaded her boss to announce the reductions earlier than usual. In a modest but not insignificant way, Helen tried to make an aspect of the reengineering process more humane.

Left untouched, and quite beyond Helen's power (indeed, very likely beyond any single individual's power), are larger issues of the wisdom and the ethics of highly disruptive reengineering efforts in America's corporations. To take on this larger effort would entail challenging the very idea of "creative destruction" that some say lies at the heart of capitalism. Even though Helen is not able (or may not even desire) critically to engage this larger issue, she is able to find limited opportunities for making a positive difference in the processes at work. It is her conviction that she would be a better human relations executive, and that she might play a more transformative role at work, if she could more fully draw upon her aesthetic side in her business perceptions and judgments. Helen continues to seek ways to relate her aesthetic side to her more conventional MBA persona.

Greg, the Investment Banker

With his confident air and immaculate attire, Greg seems perfectly suited to the

ambiance of power and success that pervades his investment bank. But at our last breakfast meeting in one of the firm's stately private dining rooms, Greg leaned across the mahogany table and confided, "For the first time, I'm seriously thinking about leaving this firm." This comment was not entirely a surprise, but the timing was unexpected. Greg had worked for most of his career (about twenty years) at the same firm, one of the country's leading investment banks, where he now has senior responsibilities for a major product area of the firm. While the investment banking industry tends to breed narrow specialists, Greg has developed into something of a generalist, participating in a variety of managerial committees. He looked to me like someone aiming for the top job. But Greg had told me early on that he didn't want to stay in the industry all his life, saying, "Someday, I'll leave and do something else that I've always wanted to do." Now, unexpectedly, "someday" had arrived. What had happened?

As Greg sees it, his industry's problems are rooted in its preoccupation with money. That is ironic, he points out, because expertise with money is a prerequisite for success in investment banking. His firm doesn't make *things*; it profits by bringing together people who need money with who wish to provide it. There is nothing wrong with investment banking, says Greg, unless it is warped by excessive greed. And today, more than before, no one is safe from the growing temptations of the business.

Greg takes pride in the high caliber of people at his firm, but he acknowledges that he is able to recruit superior talent only because of the extremely lucrative rewards that investment banking promises. As in sports and entertainment, all too often young people on Wall Street attain financial success

and notoriety very quickly; many succumb to greed and lose their bearings. Greg conceded that he speaks from personal experience. His impressive success has allowed him to enjoy luxuries — an expensive home, fabulous vacations — that had been well beyond his parents' reach when he was growing up. Greg admits that his personal lifestyle may have become excessive, and he worries about the ambiguous impact of his success on himself and his family.

An inordinate preoccupation with short-term, personal gain seems to permeate the firm. Greg remembers, rightly or wrongly, a time when his colleagues and superiors based their business decisions on what was best for the firm overall. Increasingly, he feels, they are motivated by "what's in it for *me*," and his firm (like many of the investment banks) has responded by basing employee compensation on how much profit each *individual* brings in.

Traders, who calculate their profits and losses daily, can easily determine their bottom-line value. But for Greg, who has risen from the role of "seller" to more that of "manager," it has become harder to demonstrate numerically the value of his contribution to the firm. His performance appraisals become less "objective" and more "political," pressuring him to focus on directly producing short-term profit. To be sure, Greg does not oppose making money. But he is aggravated by this structural barrier to thinking and managing in terms broader than short-term, individual greed.

On what basis does Greg judge issues in the workplace? Like many at work, Greg uses sports metaphors to describe the moral terrain of business. He speaks of certain "lines" that should not be crossed. In most work situations, he maintains, there is clearly

a point where one can go “out of bounds,” where one no longer plays according to the same set of rules that most people accept.

Greg acknowledges there are “crooks” in his industry who know full well where the lines are but who cross them anyway. More troubling to Greg, however, are people who are apparently oblivious to the *existence* of moral lines. They seem to be morally blind to any norms other than the mandate to make as much money as possible, as quickly as possible. It would seem that negative character traits, such as excessive egoism and greed, contribute to this moral blindness. The question of character is difficult, as Greg is the first to admit that his firm (indeed, the whole investment banking industry) has sought people who are highly self-interested and competitive, who play as close to the line as possible.

This kind of ethical discernment prompts the question of the sources or bases for one’s ethical intuition. How does one learn to see where the lines are, or that there are lines at all? As Greg tells it, his perception of right and wrong was shaped by various people and experiences, including family, team sports and a few role models in his firm. Religion is mentioned as a formative source, but a somewhat distant one. Greg allows that he is not overly religious and attends church now largely in deference to his wife (although, he says, “I usually like the service once I get there!”). He believes in God and in God’s judgment of human conduct, yet he sees no direct bearing of religion upon particular decisions at work. In fact, while he knows that some co-workers are deeply religious, he has never once heard colleagues appeal to religious convictions in business decision making.

Greg feels that his opportunities for transforming customers or clients are

comparatively limited, especially compared to retail brokers, who, in their dealings with “ordinary people,” have more opportunity for paternalism. Greg’s institutional customers are supposed to be highly sophisticated and knowledgeable, and so should have an idea about their “deeper needs.” And in any event, the “rules of the game” provide a powerful disincentive to question very deeply what the customers want (unless they want something that clearly goes against their interests).

But Greg does not think he lacks opportunity to do any good *within* his firm. Part of his job is to recruit and to help train new hires. Greg feels obliged to set a good example and to give ethical guidance to these new members of the firm. He wants them to see that their interests should encompass those of the firm and its customers. In this effort, he seems to be largely self-motivated and self-directed. It is not at all clear that his firm provides meaningful institutional support, through policies such as compensation and promotion, for the values Greg endorses.

Julie, the Actuary

Julie was a rising star in her insurance company. An actuary, she showed abundant intelligence, an extraordinary dedication to doing things right, and a cool demeanor around competitive male egos. These qualities landed Julie on track to become a corporate officer. Then she and her husband started a family, and Julie took the step (unusual at that time) of negotiating a flexible work arrangement that gave her more time at home. Julie’s prospects for significant corporate advancement vanished. As she once said, “We used to be yuppies; now we’re not.”

I have visited both of Julie's worlds. Her office is a utilitarian, no-nonsense space with a desk buried under documents and a computer terminal for crunching numbers. Her kitchen, where many of our conversations for this project took place, is crammed with evidence of her other priorities: kiddie art on the refrigerator, things to take to school, a stack of dishes waiting in the sink. How does her determination to give significant time to her family affect her professional authority at work?

Julie has worked for over a decade as an actuary at her present company. Her actuarial skills help the company price products in important areas, such as pension funds. Much of her time at work is spent before a computer terminal, but Julie also has some managerial responsibilities, and she participates in various business meetings.

Insurance, once a genteel, even somewhat sleepy industry, has been buffeted by deregulation, sharpened competition and shrinking profit margins. Julie does not directly face the brunt of market forces; her primary role is to provide analyses for others. But the pressures of the market permeate the bureaucratic layers of even the largest insurance companies, and Julie experiences these pressures as political conflicts of judgment and power with her colleagues and superiors.

When pricing insurance products, such as flexible retirement annuities, Julie renders an "objective" judgment in the sense that she arrives at her figures through established actuarial methods and principles. Even so, her recommendations are sometimes overruled by more senior executives who, for marketing reasons, favor a price lower than what Julie deems prudent. Responding to growing competition among insurers,

some executives are willing to tolerate razor-thin profit margins in order to capture more business.

Although Julie is really frustrated by having her actuarial judgment overturned, she can't do much about it. Her options are to let the matter drop (which, in her judgment, would expose her company to unwarranted risk), or to contest the views of her superiors, seeking reinforcement from other actuaries in the company. How she responds to any particular situation does not depend solely on the objective accuracy of her pricing decision; also important is Julie's reading of the relevant political dynamics. As she puts it, "You have to learn to pick your battles."

Julie makes her actuarial judgments against the backdrop of broader organizational realities. Like Helen's corporation, Julie's company is reengineering its business functions. Julie does not think her own job is at risk, but she can't be sure of that. Short of losing her job, she could be reassigned to a different office location and/or report to a different boss. Either development might jeopardize the delicate part-time arrangement that gives her more time with her children. Given this ongoing uncertainty, Julie is even more cautious about rocking the boat by fighting for unpopular actuarial judgments.

Julie's process of reasoning about these conflict situations varies with the circumstances. When she disagrees with the judgments of her superiors, sometimes the prudent course of action is simply to back down — a tactic that irritates Julie when she knows that, from her perspective as an actuary, she is in the right. Given her shy demeanor, it is surprising to hear Julie admit to a terrible temper, which she must control in these conflicts with her superiors. Her

strongly religious orientation comes into play, as Julie says it helps her to remember the words of the Apostle Paul to “be slow to anger.”

When Julie manages others, however, the balance of power is reversed. As the boss, she sometimes has to resolve intractable disagreements that erupt among her subordinates. As she sees it, this situation calls for “professional” judgment and action that are guided by norms other than actuarial principles. Her objective is to establish a common basis for agreement. First, Julie tries to reason with the conflicting employees, using what might be considered very broad, humanistic principles (e.g., “Respect the dignity of others”). If that argument fails, Julie then appeals to corporate policies and procedures. But, as Julie observes, the problem with written policies is that they can always be interpreted in different ways. Finally, all her efforts fail to end the dispute, Julie simply must impose some order, based on *her* understanding of how people ought to treat each other. Sounding not unlike a mother dealing with her own children, Julie would say, “Here is how *I* see this situation, and here is how it’s going to be. . . .”

At this final step, as a last resort, Julie says she is likely to reach explicitly for religious values that are central to her human identity (if not, formally, her professional actuarial role). Although the subject of religion is not prominent in her office, Julie experiences occasional moments when religious values break through explicitly in her workplace judgment, but only with her subordinates, not with her superiors.

Aside from the opportunities to heal (or, at least, control) outbreaks in the office, Julie sees few occasions to play a transformative role at work. She has little client contact, as

a physician might. But she sometimes plays an educative role with others in the company. Sometimes people use unrealistic figures, more out of ignorance than anything else. In these situations, Julie can educate others about what makes sense financially, and what doesn’t. However, Julie can effect only limited changes in her company, let alone in her industry.

It bothers her that insurance companies have been attracting media attention for ethical infractions. Her father kids her about “working with those crooks.” In principle, Julie thinks the insurance industry provides society with a valuable and honorable service. If it includes some bad apples, she shrugs, there is not much she can do about that. The main issue for Julie is whether she personally adheres to high moral standards. And when she says, “If I had to do unethical things to keep my job, I’d quit,” she seems to be speaking from her deepest religious and personal moral convictions, not from the professional ethics code of her independent actuarial society. (In fact, Julie could not readily summarize the contents of her actuarial profession’s code of ethics.)

Kurt, the Portfolio Manager

At 4 a.m., Kurt’s working day as a trader begins. The markets won’t open for several hours, but Kurt has research to do, positions to check, strategies to map. Once trading starts, Kurt rarely strays far from his small office, where two walls of television and computer screens continuously pump out news and financial information. Periods of quiet are punctuated by flurries of rapid exchanges over several telephones, when Kurt monitors the executions of trades in response to breaking news. When time allows, Kurt visits various locations around

the city for meetings, presentations and visits with brokers and customers. The workday ends at about 11 p.m. The next day, it starts all over.

Kurt is not the stereotypical obnoxious, hyper-aggressive trader. Unfailingly polite, Kurt is almost low-key. He often introduces himself as a portfolio manager to avoid the stigma popularly ascribed to traders. Whenever I have seen him, even when he's alone at his trading desk, he has always worn a conservative, dark business suit and freshly pressed white shirt. He is attentive to his family, and he keeps an office location close to home so that he can see his children at odd times in the day. Kurt comes across as a thoughtful, highly disciplined person who is oriented by a clear sense of purpose. What he does fascinates me. Still, many might wonder, why would anyone want to work like this?

It wasn't always this way. Kurt started working in banks following college graduation, where he developed a keen expertise in a particular industry area. After a stint in mergers and acquisitions with an investment bank during the heady '80s, Kurt took his money, "cashed out" and started trading for himself, "for his own account." Following an initial brush with success, Kurt lost nearly all his money in what he terms "my burnout period." With substantially reduced capital, he began a long, slow road to successful trading.

Kurt is a technical trader, meaning that he uses quantitative charts or computer programs to identify and project price trends in a market or a security. Most of his analysis is done for short-term trades, and he hedges, attempting to profit even when the market drops. Unlike my three other contacts, Kurt works for himself and so does not contend with the political issues that

come with employment in large companies. His major worry is market risk; no bureaucratic layers or organizational safety nets protect him from the brute force of the market. There is always the risk that the frenzy of market trading will cloud Kurt's judgments and his responsibilities to customers.

Kurt's "burnout period" prompted him to develop and adhere to a business discipline that would sustain him over time. Some hints of this discipline are evident at his trading desk: Taped above one of his computer screens is a small sign that reads, "The goal of a successful trader is to accumulate capital." Kurt keeps this principle where he can see it, to remind him that his true objective is not simply to trade for the sake of trading — something that is easy to do in the heat of the moment. He maintains that sometimes the smart thing to do is to stop trading and "sit on the sidelines."

The stress of trading *can* promote certain vices, especially for traders in small shops like Kurt's. With many pressing duties, and without sufficient staff or institutional resources to maintain robust customer relationships, some traders simply let customer relations slip. This lack of communication is compounded by the fact that traders' strategies usually include sophisticated hedging techniques that are difficult for the average investor to understand. There is a tendency simply to take the customer's money and say, "Don't talk to me." Kurt disapproves of this tactic, citing his banking background for his commitment to candid customer relations. Kurt's stance is, "If some of my trades go badly, I won't avoid the customers. I'll call them and tell them about it. If I keep trading badly, they'll take their money somewhere

else. They'll have less than when they started with me, but more than if I had kept quiet."

In one period during my meetings with Kurt, the markets were plunging. Over an early breakfast conversation, Kurt remarked that some traders had lost "lots of money — in one case, over \$1 billion." The shadows under Kurt's eyes and his slightly slower gait betrayed his stress and fatigue. He didn't complain about the strain, however, noting only that his own positions were relatively strong, thanks to his conservative trading philosophy. While he wasn't *making* a lot of money during this period, he was relieved that his hedging strategies had protected him from huge losses, and that he had hidden nothing from his customers.

Kurt augments his rigorous approach to trading with other disciplined methods. He has developed a meditation skill, which he views as essential for guiding his reasoning and maintaining his equilibrium. Following the Silva Mind Control Method,² Kurt places himself in a meditative state in which he imagines himself attending a meeting of a hypothetical board of directors. The board is constituted of persons whom Kurt knows and admires: They are cool under pressure; they possess important philosophies of life; they have defied convention to pursue their dreams. In a highly ritualized process, Kurt convenes this board to solicit advice. The questions he poses are not about technical trading tactics; rather, the board discusses more strategic business considerations. As Kurt puts it, "Once you get clear about the overall direction, everything else falls into place." It is a practice he does at least weekly, if not more. Kurt claims that this technique has changed his life.

Kurt's mind control technique seems like a formalized way to develop and use a kind

of nonquantitative intuition. An important question is the sources of the values or principles that guide Kurt's broader, more strategic decisions. The persons on Kurt's mental board of directors personify particular virtues and values that he admires. But how was it that he chose *these* individuals and not others?

It is tempting to say that Kurt is drawing on life-long influences in his judgments about how to populate his board of directors, and such influences must play a role in the board's actual operation. Interestingly, Kurt did not dwell on biographical features in his account of professional decision making. He readily acknowledged the formative influence of his father, for example. But as Kurt talked about his business philosophy and decision making, he referred mainly to his mental board of directors, not to actual biographical experience.

Organized religion, also a factor in Kurt's life, is important to him personally without bearing directly on his business. An active churchgoer as a youth, he drifted from institutional religion after some bad church experiences. Today, however, he attends a nearby church — mainly, it seems, for the value it has for his family. He says that his children can decide for themselves eventually how they feel about the church. Just as important to Kurt, it would seem, is his emphasis on his mind control technique, which he also is passing along to his children.

In the course of trading, Kurt does not seek to challenge or transform his business. Granted, he actively participates in several professional associations that monitor their members' ethical conduct; he devotes a lot of time to this work in order to "give something back" to the industry that has benefitted him. But he seeks only to ensure that traders play by the rules; he doesn't see

his role as one of evaluating or challenging the rules themselves.

Kurt experiences brief opportunities for transformation at the outset of establishing a business relationship with a customer, when he determines the appropriate investment strategy for that customer. As a chartered financial analyst, he is obligated to exercise a certain measure of paternalism and to guide the customer to an appropriate trading strategy. However, he is under no professional obligation to “transform” the customer’s deeper values. For the most part, his customers authorize Kurt to trade their money at his discretion, trusting him to do whatever, in his judgment, is most likely to make them the most money.

Conclusion

My account of these four business professionals provides a glimpse into the challenging world of “knowledge workers.” I was acquainted with my subjects prior to this study, and I began these interviews thinking that I was fairly well informed about my subjects’ jobs and their views on subjects like ethics.

From the very beginning, I was thoroughly impressed by their professional comportment. There is no denying that part of my subjects’ impact stemmed from certain physical, tangible features. They are comfortable in the “power clothes” of corporate America’s elite, which is a cosmetic but not trivial way to signal to others that one is not a rank amateur.³ They exude self-confidence and determination. It must also be noted that they do not earn small sums of money. It would be fair to estimate, on average, that they pull in five or six times what a successful academic ethicist might make. With Kurt, in principle the

upside for profit is virtually unlimited (although the thrill of this prospect is offset by the possible downside). Looking beyond these obvious features, one notices in these subjects a more abstract professional “style,” which William F. May describes as “the elegance of technical competence, a fitness of bearing, and a personal attentiveness to all dimensions of a case.”⁴ I found much to respect, even admire, about their efforts to take seriously the moral issues they discern in their work. They endeavored to meet their responsibilities to their clients, their companies and their colleagues, as well as their private commitments to career and family. I think that anyone who got to know these subjects as I did would be similarly impressed.

Our conversations gradually disclosed subtle details of issues they encounter at work. I was struck by the intricacy of these issues, which created opportunities for making meaningful connections between professionalism, religion and morality, as well as barriers to those connections. In this conclusion I will show how a particular, important understanding of professionalism fails to describe the moral landscape of my four subjects. I wish to consider whether or in what manner the idea of transformation can account for the ways in which business people strive to be professional. I will close with an additional question about what it would take for my subjects to be more fully transformational, and hence more professional, in their work.

To guide my questions, I will use William F. May’s influential account of transformation as a criterion for judging whether someone is a professional.⁵ May separates careerists from professionals. (His example of a careerist is the car salesperson, an occupational classification that typically

scores low in opinion polls about ethical conduct in different kinds of jobs. May's use of a car salesperson to represent business seems to suggest an anti-business attitude that might have made it more difficult for him to see the diverse ways business people can be professional.) According to May, careerists focus on their own needs and wants to the exclusion of the public good. They are self-interested individuals chasing after personal advancement and monetary success. In contrast, the professional seeks to serve the public good. The professional's judgments about what is best for an individual client or patient should be guided by a broader context of concern for what is also desirable for the common good.

May's careerist-professional separation parallels his distinction between two types of interaction or social exchange: the marketplace exchange (what May refers to as the "deal") and the professional exchange. The market exchange is "merely" *transactional*, says May, in the sense that it serves only to meet the self-perceived, stated wants of the customer. The professional exchange is *transformational* in the sense that it serves the "deeper needs" of the client. So, for example, May says, "The patient suffering from insomnia often wants simply the quick fix of a pill. But the physician who goes after the root of the problem may have to challenge the patient to transform the habits that led to the symptom of sleeplessness."⁶ May's use of transformation as a critical or heuristic principle is not idiosyncratic. Many contemporary social critics use it, and it is not unusual for a significant work like *Habits of the Heart* to conclude with a chapter on "Transforming American Culture."⁷ This emphasis on transformation warrants a closer look at the meaning of the term.

In his article on this subject, May does not give a detailed account of transformation beyond his stipulation that it entails serving "deeper needs." For him, an understanding of the common good is necessary for determining whether *deeper* needs are served and not some other, less significant needs. In his view, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to serve someone's deeper needs in a transformative way without also making a positive contribution to the common good. But can a highly general principle of the common good serve as a meaningful criterion for saying who is professional and who isn't? Can it help people "in the field" describe their actual experiences?

It may be that "transformation," simply stated, is so loaded a term that it blinds us to the complexities of actual moral experience. I suspect that contemporary theological ethicists who use this term owe at least an implicit intellectual debt to H.R. Niebuhr's classic text, *Christ and Culture*, which helped to establish transformation as a central category for religious and moral action. In Niebuhr's account, people who view Christ as a transformer of culture

... understand that his work is concerned not with the specious, external aspects of human behavior in the first place, but that he tries the hearts and judges the subconscious life; that he deals with what is deepest and most fundamental in man. He heals the most stubborn and virulent human disease, the phthisis of the spirit, the sickness unto death; he forgives the most hidden and proliferous sin, the distrust, lovelessness, and hopelessness of man in his relation to God.⁸

To describe or assess the work of professionals in terms of transformation does not entail comparing them in a literal way to Niebuhr's ideal type. Nevertheless, using the

language of transformation to explicate professionalism raises the stakes considerably, as it emphasizes that something truly extraordinary must occur within the professional exchange in order for it to count as transformational. If the only alternative to this kind of profound transformation is the transactional exchange, we are left to consign most business executives to the merely transactional. My exposure to the occupational and moral experiences of my interview subjects suggests the need for a richer account of their experience that can recognize an area of moral deliberation and action lying between the extremes of the merely transactional and what might be called the profoundly transformational. In what follows, some brief scenarios, inspired by conversations with two of my subjects, will attest to the reality of this middle area. Their experiences indicate the need for a more sensitive acknowledgment of the space on their moral landscape that permits some measure of a limited, but not insignificant, transformational exchange.

For Helen, a transactional exchange might take the form of simply complying with corporate assignments. If her company wants to reduce its human resources costs, Helen would respond by devising more efficient ways to provide services in her highly decentralized organization. Her recommendations might include consolidating previously dispersed human resources functions into a single office, with the possible consequence of eliminating certain “redundant” positions. Within a purely transactional exchange, Helen would use her advanced expertise to render sophisticated judgments about *how* to do what her company wants; left untouched are questions about the appropriateness of those wants.

What would constitute a profoundly transformative exchange in this era of dramatic corporate restructuring? We might suppose that Helen would seek to situate her company’s desire to reduce costs within a broader social context, in order to grasp more adequately the significance of her company’s strategic directions. Her technical cost/benefit calculations of the comparative merits of different plans to restructure would be augmented by an analysis of the appropriateness of the objectives themselves. While Helen might not be in a position to change her corporation’s objectives, to be fully professional it would be incumbent upon her to make sure that the appropriate persons were adequately apprised of the broader implications of their proposed actions. She would attempt to articulate a way to align the corporation’s interests with concern for the common good.

Helen did not tell me that she ever undertook any such profoundly transformative action, nor is it clear to me that she would consider this action appropriate even if it were a practical possibility. But I would be reluctant to portray Helen’s actions as a human resources executive as merely transactional. Consider her attempt to revise certain workforce reduction steps in a more humane direction. By exercising personal initiative in bringing this recommendation to her boss, she went beyond the explicit terms of her stated wants. Helen went further by alerting (one might even say educating) others to aspects of the process she thought were important. She certainly did not take this action solely for personal gain — to the contrary, she assumed some risk. Admittedly, this action falls short of a profoundly transformational exchange. A thick description of Helen’s

experience needs an alternative category to the merely transactional deal, something like a circumscribed or limited transformational exchange.

Like Helen, Greg and Julie work in large organizations in which they have some latitude for responding to stated corporate wants. They do have opportunities to be transformative, albeit in a manner bounded or circumscribed by their capacities and circumstances. Greg attempts to orient his firm's younger recruits toward broader ethical concerns. Julie tries to provide sound actuarial judgment and sensitive managerial direction. We need to acknowledge their efforts with the appropriate descriptive and normative terms.

Kurt provides an interesting contrast and should be considered separately. His goal as a trader simply is to accumulate capital. While that is easier said than done (if it weren't, everyone would be rich), the mechanics of the transactions are relatively direct. As a participant in the U.S. securities markets, Kurt's actions must comply with governing laws and regulations. As the principal of a small business, he exploits advanced technology to keep up in an industry increasingly dominated by large, sophisticated financial institutions. A technical trader, Kurt uses a quantitative methodology to trade, and his success depends upon the soundness of this method. But none of these attributes influences or modifies his goal of accumulating capital, and his trading resembles the deal making of May's self-interested careerist.

Unlike the other interview subjects, who routinely confront explicit political and ethical dilemmas in their organizations, Kurt must contend primarily with the impersonal dynamics of the market. What are Kurt's prospects, as a trader, for profound

transformation? Perhaps he could offer a fundamental critique of capitalism as a market system inimical to the common good. It is possible to envision him taking political action to regulate, even to dismantle, the nation's securities markets for the sake of some broader, public value. But it is difficult to think of him advancing a systemic critique while participating in the system as a trader. He would need to step out of the system and engage it in other terms, political or sociological. As a participant in the system, with the central goal of profiting by the system, Kurt's prospects for profound transformation seem profoundly limited, an outcome that I suspect would not overly dismay him.

The lack of meaningful opportunities for profound transformation does not mean that Kurt can make only purely transactional deals, however. Moments in his business provide comparatively rare but genuine opportunities to exercise significant moral judgment. Kurt certainly could qualify his goal of accumulating capital without seeking to dismantle the entire securities industry. For example, he could introduce social or normative criteria into his trading methodology, altering his goal to read, "The goal of a successful trader is to accumulate capital without investing in socially or morally undesirable companies or industries." Kurt never indicated an interest in this kind of circumscribed trading, but the growth of "socially responsible investing" suggests that there are traders who do invest in this way.

However, Kurt *did* identify a space within his client relationships for exercising a limited transformative role. As a Chartered Financial Analyst, Kurt is subject to the Code of Ethics and the Standards of Professional Conduct of the Association for

Investment Management and Research. One of these standards, which pertains to portfolio investment recommendations and actions, states,

The financial analyst shall, when making an investment recommendation or taking an investment action for a specific portfolio or client, consider its appropriateness and suitability for such portfolio or client. In considering such matters, the financial analyst shall take into account (a) the needs and circumstances of the client, (b) the basic characteristics of the investment involved, and (c) the basic characteristics of the total portfolio. The financial analyst shall use reasonable judgment to determine the applicable relevant factors.⁹

Kurt told me that if there *is* a transformational aspect to his work, it would occur at the outset of establishing a business relationship with a customer, when they agree upon the appropriate investment strategy. Should a customer desire a strategy inappropriate to his or her circumstances, Kurt is obliged to educate that customer about a more fitting strategy. This moment presents a *moral* risk of exposing the customer to potential harms, such as excessive risk. (If the customer rejects Kurt's advice, Kurt is supposed to decline the business.) Once the investment strategy is determined, Kurt still faces *market* risks of trading badly. Both risks are significant, in that both pose potential legal liabilities to Kurt. In meeting his duties, Kurt must rely on technical knowledge, but at this critical moment in the outset of the business relationship he is also required to exercise "reasonable judgment," which includes moral discernment. Kurt has much more tightly circumscribed opportunities for transformative exchanges, compared to Helen, Greg and Julie. But such

opportunities do exist; they constitute important moments in his professional life; and they should be acknowledged as a part of his business terrain that goes beyond merely transactional exchanges.

One final observation about what it would take for my subjects to be more fully transformational, and hence more professional, in their work: Given the exalted status popularly ascribed to "knowledge workers,"¹⁰ it was something of a surprise to learn just how tightly circumscribed were my subjects' opportunities at work to effect even limited forms of transformation. I should have remembered Peter Drucker's point that knowledge workers are in fact highly dependent upon others. For all their independence, they still need access to an organization, without which they cannot produce or perform. Drucker says, "Knowledge workers can work only because there is an organization for them to work in. In that respect, they are dependent."¹¹ Knowledge workers depend on organizations for more than just physical hardware and technical support. They also require a community that will listen to their moral concerns and, when necessary, support their efforts to take on hard or unpopular ethical issues at work.¹² As William May argues:

the manager must live, breathe, worry, and aspire, largely within the confines of the single corporation for which he works. It envelops him. It becomes his *de facto* world. This psychological envelopment does not confer upon managers the right to abandon either general moral constraints or the special constraints that they, as a professional class, may see fit to accept for themselves. But it does mean that moral constraints must largely be built into the very structure of the institution and its purpose. *It cannot depend entirely on the fitful efforts of individual persons.*¹³

My contacts did not tell me that they enjoyed a social or institutional base of support for their moral judgments or actions at work. As impressed as I was by their commitment to professionalism, I was even more impressed by how they had quilted their professional identities from various unrelated aspects of their experiences: family, mentors, personal faith, friends. Having accomplished this goal, however, they were still very much on their own as professionals.

During this project, my contacts told me that they were happy to give their time to our interviews because they provided the only opportunities they had to think and talk seriously about the moral dimension of their work. This disclosure amazed me. Maybe they were simply being polite, but I strongly suspect that they meant exactly what they said. It did not seem to me that any single social institution provided sustained support for my contacts' dedication to professionalism. Not the professional associations: Julie, who as an actuary has the most formal professional grounding, did not seem to find her professional association's code of ethics to be very helpful. Not institutional religion: Although they all have a personal sense of spirituality, and some are active in church, none cited organized religion as a meaningful resource for their professional concerns. Not even business: All but Kurt seemed disillusioned with the leadership or overall climate of their organizations. Helen noted that she had not started circulating her resume to flee the traumas of reengineering only because she believed that the same thing was happening everywhere else in business. When Helen, Greg and Julie contemplate an activity that would draw more from their deepest values and aspirations, they look beyond

corporations to worlds of artistic expression, of teaching, of caring for children.¹⁴

The exception seems to be Kurt, who once said, "I can see myself trading for the rest of my life!" He even hopes to pass along his business to his children. How is it that he has such a sunny outlook, especially given the extraordinarily stringent requirements of his work? For one thing, Kurt has done something the other three have not: He started his own business and so *is* pursuing *his* dream, albeit a demanding one. But where is Kurt's community of support? At the risk of oversimplifying, I would venture that, absent an actual community, Kurt is attempting to thrive with the help of the virtual community of his mental board of directors. To be sure, Kurt "has a life" beyond his thoughts and his trading desk, and his family and church constitute important sources of personal meaning. But when Kurt talked about seeking strategic guidance for his professional concerns, he emphasized the value of his mind control exercise.

It seems supremely fitting for a knowledge worker to fabricate a mental community for professional guidance. For Kurt, it seems to be working. But is something like his method the only alternative for supporting business professionals if we lack the necessary social institutions or communities for the task?

Imagine the following: What if companies continue to tear themselves apart through reengineering, in ways that fuel mistrust and alienation? What if the traditional "implicit contract of trust" between employer and employee completely dies? What if other institutions — churches, for example — continue to fail to support managers in their difficult deliberations? Taken together, these grim circumstances

constitute something of a worst-case scenario and, thankfully, the worst usually fails to happen. But if such circumstances prevail, moral business professionals may have little choice but to go it alone, courageously making the best use of whatever resources are provided by their own ingenuity.¹⁵

One might use the apparent absence of a robust moral community in the business world, one capable of resisting marketplace pressures, to argue that these business people really aren't professionals after all — for if the professions do anything, they provide communities of moral interpretation to support and guide the individual judgments of professionals.

I think this critical response is mistaken, for at least two reasons. First, it overlooks the diverse ways in which my subjects *do* maintain at least a circumscribed professionalism, despite the lack of supportive, vigorous moral communities in their places of work. Second, this critical response ignores the ways that the other “classic” professions — law and medicine among them — are gradually adopting the features of market-driven business

communities. Despite William May's distinction between the transactional car salesperson and the transformational physician, my subjects all feel that the gap between the two is narrowing: To maintain a viable enterprise, the car salesperson increasingly attends to the customers' long-term, deeper needs whereas the physician increasingly prescribes treatment with at least one eye on the balance sheet.

In my view, the professions are beset by new challenges to their authority and independence, challenges that reflect a growing encroachment of market forces on professional practice. It may be that my subjects are merely ahead of the curve and that their experiences, and the experiences of others in business, should be studied closely for clues about the challenges other professionals may encounter in the near future. Their experiences are not altogether encouraging, unless we conclude that everyone will be able to follow the path that Kurt has charted for himself. But their experiences are too important to overlook or to dismiss as irrelevant to the concerns of the professions. They might be working through their issues on their own, but that does not mean they should go unnoticed.

Notes

1. Although the phrase “knowledge worker” appears in some of Peter Drucker’s earlier writings, the most extensive account is found in Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), Chapter 1 and passim.
2. Jose Silva and Philip Miele, *The Silva Mind Control Method* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977).
3. See William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), pp. 1-5.
4. William F. May, “Professional Ethics: Setting, Terrain, and Teacher” in Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, eds., *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, p. 219.
5. William F. May, “The Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 2 (March 1992): 38.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
7. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
8. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), pp. 190-91.
9. *Standards of Practice Handbook*, 6th ed. (New York: Association for Investment Management and Research, 1992), p. 5.
10. See Robert Reich’s account of the “symbolic analyst” in *The Work of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), pp. 171-84, and Tom Peter’s praise of workers in the professional services firm in *Liberation Management* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), pp. 179-88.
11. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, p. 64.
12. Ethics offers an extensive literature on the importance of community for ethical reflection and moral character. Less has been written on community, ethics and the business manager. One notable exception that adopts an Aristotelian approach to business is Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a discussion of community and communication that is particularly suggestive for the so-called knowledge worker, see William Bergquist, *The Postmodern Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), Chapter 6.
13. May, “Professional Ethics,” p. 222. Emphasis mine.

14. There is an important message here for our business leaders: By any objective standard, these individuals are valuable resources for their companies. And yet each one would seriously contemplate dropping out of corporate America, if only a meaningful or realistic exit were available. Business cannot afford to lose people like these. For reasons of self-interest (if nothing else), business should assume more responsibility for listening and responding to workers' deeper concerns (including their moral concerns). This need is especially true for knowledge workers, whose intellectual autonomy does not obviate their need for moral community and support.

15. I wish to express my gratitude to my four business contacts, for their generous participation in this study; to the participants of the seminar on Religion, Morality and the Professions in America, for their thoughtful guidance; and to Norma Schmidt, for her valuable editorial suggestions.