



What is Professional Integrity? Why Does it Matter?

Jonathan Webber

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 11th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5th – Saturday 7th January 2023.

These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



What is Professional Integrity? Why Does it Matter?

Jonathan Webber, Cardiff University

Jubilee Centre Eleventh Annual Conference, Oriel College Oxford, 5-7 January 2023

The virtue of integrity is often invoked in professional contexts. What is it? And why does it matter?

I argue that professional integrity is driven by the aim of promoting flourishing through professional context. It requires refining goals and techniques in response to experience and reasoned discussion with colleagues.

I conclude that micromanagement narrows the scope for professional integrity, hampering innovative ideas and agile responses to changing circumstances.

1. Professional Integrity and Professional Context

The integrity of a professional context consists in its structures and systems operating coherently to achieve the organisation's goals – e.g. the integrity of a hospital.

According to one influential view, professional integrity is the individual's quality of adhering to the profession's constitutive norms – e.g. aims and values of medicine.

However, professions just don't have agreed charters of constitutive norms. This idea of professional integrity in medicine, for example, simply pushes debates about the rightness of a medical procedure into debate over the essence of medicine (Huxtable 2015).

An alternative would define professional integrity as adhering to the core values or mission statement of the organisation. However, these are highly abstract, so no less open to debate and disagreement.

These ideas of professional integrity don't add anything substantive to the requirement to uphold the integrity of the professional context.

Rather, they encourage the cynical attitude that one can behave however one pleases within the organisation's regulations. The obvious organisational response to this cynicism is to increase regulation.

Ironically, this reduces scope for initiative and judgment grounded in experience to improve the organisation's methods and procedures.

This makes the organisation less innovative generally and less agile in responding to changing circumstances.

2. Ethical Integrity

I think we should understand professional integrity as a restricted application of the virtue of ethical integrity.

Ethical integrity is often misunderstood. It does involve resistance to mere peer pressure, but without openness to other people's ideas this would be arrogance.

Likewise, it can involve deep commitments or a well-integrated outlook, but without openness to revision in response to new reasons this would be intransigence.

Thus, integrity is driven by a fundamental commitment to *ethical accuracy*, concern to act in ways that promote worthwhile and fulfilling lives (i.e. human flourishing).

This commitment grounds resistance to peer pressure and over time fosters a deeply held, sophisticated, and well-integrated ethical outlook.

But it also entails a willingness to revise these in light of new reasons – i.e. integrity entails:

– *Ethical humility*: concern to correctly assess strengths and limitations of one's own ethical reasoning.

This in turn grounds and delimits –

– *Ethical receptivity*: respect for other people's ethical reasoning, so responding rationally to reasoned critique of one's own ethical ideas and seeking out advice.

This makes it clear why ethical integrity is a virtue. The person of ethical integrity won't necessarily do what is best. Rather, integrity is essential to improving ethical commitments and practical reasoning.

Detailed argument for this: Webber 2022.

3. Ethical Integrity Within a Professional Context

My proposal: professional integrity is the manifestation of ethical integrity within a professional context.

It is driven by a concern to promote worthwhile and fulfilling lives through the professional context.

This does require abiding by organisation's structures and systems, but also suggesting changes to that context motivated by the concern for human flourishing.

It requires action within those limits to be driven by the concern with ethical accuracy.

All of this requires the humility to correctly assess the strengths and weaknesses of one's own reasoning.

Which in turn requires receptivity to reasons voiced by one's colleagues, and indeed seeking those out.

This reasoning is as much about what worthwhile and flourishing lives look like (in relation to this profession) as it is about how best to achieve it in this profession.

4. Why Professional Integrity Matters

Each professional develops their own ideas about good practice, in reasoned dialogue with one another.

Professional integrity is prior to an organisation's ethos and to the ethos of the profession; it determines both.

Organisations foster this through culture of peer ethical discussion and personal responsibility (*not* regulation).

This culture means the organisation is more agile and innovative than one that employs precise regulations and then checks that these are followed.

It also itself makes life more worthwhile and fulfilling for the professionals in the organisation.

References

Huxtable, Richard. 2015. Death on Demand: Proper Medical Treatment? In *The Legitimacy of Medical Treatment: What Role for the Medical Exception?*, ed. S. Fovargue and A. Mullock. Routledge.

Webber, Jonathan. [2022](#). Ethical Integrity as the Goal of Character Education. In *Values and Virtues for a Challenging World*, ed. A. Jefferson, O. Palermos, P. Paris, and J. Webber. Cambridge University Press.