Statement on Character, Virtue and Practical Wisdom in Professional Practice

'A virtue-based approach to professional education would seek to strengthen the character of all who engage in professional practice.'

This statement is founded on research conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and others in the field. The statement was developed in partnership with members of various professions, educators, policy makers, professional organisations and academics. The overall aim of the statement is to open up space for renewed debate, discussion and dialogue about the place of character, virtue and practical wisdom in professional practice.

Specifically, the statement has five aims:

i. To clarify and re-affirm the aspiration to 'professional' status of a wide range of human occupations (such as medicine, law, nursing, teaching, social work, armed forces, business) in terms of their significant potential contribution to public good and service;

ii. To reinforce the view that such professionalism or professional status should be normatively construed as a matter of *moral* practice;

iii. To argue that the normative or moral dimensions of professional practice are not entirely or best captured by formal codes of practice but, rather, call for the cultivation of personal qualities of *character* or *virtue*;

iv. To give some account of such personal qualities and their place in professional conduct, with specific focus on the professional value of *phronesis* or practical moral wisdom as a model for sound professional judgement;

v. To suggest some ways in which education and training for professional practices might be improved to accommodate the development of *phronesis* and the cultivation of virtuous character.

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Introduction

Many publicly important human occupations – including, but not exclusively those traditionally designated 'professions' – aspire to *professional* status. Our understanding of such status is not exclusively confined to considerations of technical expertise or proficiency. Indeed, accusations of unprofessionalism more often turn on interpersonal and moral failure or dereliction. It is upon such aspects of professional practice that the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates – arguably the founding father of modern professional ethics – directly focused. Hippocrates was perhaps the first to recognise that while one might in some practices, trades or skills be recognised as a good or excellent practitioner – irrespective of one's moral treatment of others – the idea of a good or excellent, but exploitative or abusive, doctor is normatively incoherent.

Even more so than in Hippocrates's time, professional practices nowadays enjoy a unique and privileged place in the public eye. They are relied upon for moral probity, diligence, fairness and resolve, frequently in complicated circumstances and often in the face of conflicting demands. Professional people are expected to *do the right thing*; and they are expected to do the right thing both for individuals – be they clients, customers, patients, pupils, victims of crime or enemy combatants – and for society at large.

Professionalism as moral practice

In this light, the term 'professional' may be taken to define primarily those aspects of an occupation that mark it as a *moral practice* – and, correspondingly, the term 'unprofessional' largely serves to identify failures to meet the moral standards of an occupation. Professional practices are therefore characterised by general commitments to public service that recognise principled duties of responsibility, care and respect for others' rights and aspire to the highest standards of civilized personal conduct and interpersonal association between service providers and clients. Such commitments and standards may also be expected to engender trust between professional practitioners and their clients (e.g. patients, pupils) and such trust lies at the heart of professional life. Precisely, the public is entitled to expect professionals to be *trustworthy*, and trust – which is hard won, but easily lost – may easily be undermined by moral failures and public scandals (recent examples of which are well documented in Blond, *et al.*, 2015).

How, then, are the appropriate moral norms, standards and commitments of a professional practice – and the public trust consequent upon these – upheld or maintained? In fact, traditional professions and other occupations bent on professional status have typically aimed to capture the moral dimensions of their practice in the form of codes of professional ethics. Such codes have precisely sought to safeguard the rights of clients and to specify the responsibilities of service providers with respect to such rights. Indeed, in the spirit of Hippocrates, some occupations and vocations have embodied

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the basic standards and principles of such codes in *oaths* that new practitioners are required to 'swear'. In addition, many other professions, vocations and public and private services have established institutions, such as the General Medical Council and the Solicitors Regulation Authority, to formulate good professional policy and discipline those who deviate from the standards.

Nevertheless, the value and effectiveness for sound professional practice of institutional regulation and codes of conduct are limited. While practitioners are familiarised with codes of practice in the course of their professional training, such acquaintance has not prevented much professional malpractice. Indeed, such moral failure often seems to have followed from shortcomings of personal self-interest, dishonesty, greed, poor self-control, lack of integrity, cowardice and unfairness – more indicative of indifference or defiance than ignorance of professional codes. It would therefore seem that the education and training of professional practitioners requires something more than acquaintance with codes of conduct or even formal lessons of professional ethics. Exemplary practice requires practitioners who are not only knowledgeable concerning the values and principles of their occupations, but who are *agents of moral character*: we need lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers and soldiers who are honest, caring, compassionate, courageous and fair or just.

Professional character and virtue

All the aforementioned qualities may (among many others) be considered *virtues* or moral qualities of *character*. While such qualities were formerly rather neglected in modern moral philosophy, they have attracted more recent attention with the revival of 'virtue ethics' – an approach to moral philosophy and theory drawing mainly on the ethics of Aristotle. Essentially, Aristotelian ethics regards virtues (Greek *arête* or 'excellences')

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as the main focus of moral enquiry and defines such key virtues as justice, temperance, courage and wisdom as *traits of character* apt for effective moral agency. However, whilst such qualities are primarily *practical* dispositions to appropriate conduct, they qualify as moral virtues only insofar as they are governed or guided by the intellectual virtue or capacity that Aristotle calls *phronesis* or practical moral wisdom, and therefore as responsive to appropriate reasons (Kristjánsson, 2015).

What is significant about the practical moral wisdom of *phronesis* – not least in the light of lately aired reservations about moral codes – is that the deliberation it requires is highly *context-sensitive* and therefore not readily susceptible to codification in the form of the general rules characteristic of traditional professional codes. Indeed, this gives rise to several concerns about attempts to reduce the ethical aspects of professional practices to general unexceptionable rules or principles. First, given the practically grounded complexity of the judgements required of professional practitioners, it is seldom possible to find general rules for all or even most cases – especially, indeed, when general imperatives conflict. Secondly, the danger of defining professional conduct in terms of rules or protocols is that it can promote an unreflective, or conformist, 'jobs-worth' mind-set, discouraging the autonomy and initiative that we should otherwise expect from responsible practitioners. Thirdly, however, professional conduct that is merely rule following and not deeply rooted in the soil of virtuous character may be more liable to the sort of moral backsliding lately indicated. Fourthly, the carrot-and-stick method of ever stricter rules or financial incentives simply does not work in practice (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010). In short, professional practice requires agents whose conduct, whilst firmly grounded in good character, is nevertheless capable of rising responsibly to the inevitable contingency and risk of genuine professional engagement (Carr, 2000).

While virtue ethics is concerned with the contribution of such virtues as honesty, justice, temperance and courage to the moral flourishing of human agents in general, recent work has also paid attention to the particular role of such virtues in professional life (e.g. Bondi, *et al.*, 2011; Ivanhoe and Walker, 2009). In this regard, while there is clearly a general case for wanting all who we encounter in occupational roles to be persons of good and decent character, there are also particular arguments for virtuous character in professional roles. Indeed, one strong argument for virtuous teachers, priests, politicians and others is that it seems part of their professional role to be *models* or *exemplars* of good character to others. However, another is that while it is clearly desirable for doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, social workers and so on to be moral agents as such, more specific virtues – such as care and compassion in the case of doctors and nurses, intellectual enthusiasm, passion and curiosity in teachers and courage or chivalry in soldiers – would seem to be called for in particular occupational roles.

Towards professional education in virtuous character

Recent work carried out by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Arthur, *et al.*, 2015a; Arthur, *et al.*, 2015b; Arthur, *et al.*, 2015c) provides some cause for optimism regarding the future prospects of a range of professional practices. Studies focused on law, medicine and teaching found that experienced practitioners as well as new recruits to these occupations seem both well acquainted with and guided by the ethical ideals of their chosen vocation. This research confirms the strong motivation on the part of practitioners to 'make a difference' and highlights their commitment to such moral virtues as kindness, empathy and fairness as crucial to professional practice. That said, both experienced and novice practitioners highlighted certain shortcomings of present day professional education, especially with regard to the *moral* dimensions of practice. While, as already noted, attention is often given in such education to the more general principles, or 'do's' and 'don'ts', of good practice, there seems to be less exploration of the morally problematic dimensions of professional engagement – especially of those in which there may be real tension between best 'situated' professional judgement and received convention, and in which practitioners may precisely require personal initiative, integrity and courage to counter unhelpful institutional and social trends and pressures.

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What, then, are the implications of the observations so far for the future progress of professional education? The first and most general message is that to perform well in a professional role is not simply to be a competent technician who follows officially prescribed professional rules, but a person of moral virtue as defined by such character virtues as honesty, justice, self-control, courage, compassion and so on. However, for genuine virtue, one needs also to have acquired that capacity for good judgement about what is in the circumstances, honest, just courageous, and so on, which Aristotle called *phronesis*. In this light, while would-be professional practitioners may have been trained while young to be broadly honest, fair, self-controlled, and so forth, it should be appreciated that the truly virtuous deliberation and judgement of *phronesis* requires on-going education in the light of relevant experience. In the professional context, this obviously points – in addition to strong emphasis on the importance of character for sound professional conduct and promotion of virtue literacy – to serious opportunities during professional preparation to explore the vexed moral issues and dilemmas in which professional character and conduct are invariably implicated.

However, the cultivation of professional or other morally virtuous practice should not be conceived as an exclusively *individual* or personal matter, and requires wider support from communities and institutions generally committed to the promotion of good moral character and the wisdom of *phronesis*. As already indicated, the contemporary institutional ethos of professional regulation and training is often 'top-down', and not always hospitable to the promotion of professionally independent initiative and judgement. Hence, the simple introduction into professional education of ethics courses, while not without value, is clearly not in itself sufficient for the development of professional wisdom and requires wider institutional overhaul in more democratic and collegial directions. Better and more supportive mentoring of new recruits by senior colleagues in the actual practical contexts of professional engagement and opportunities for various sorts of service learning are also undoubtedly helpful to the development of situated moral wisdom. It is also arguable that professional preparation for a variety of occupations would benefit from broader *educational* or *cultural* acquaintance with

literatures apt for greater understanding of and/or empathy with the human condition in all its rich diversity.

A virtue-based approach to professional education would seek to strengthen the character of all who engage in professional practice. Institutions committed to fostering the virtues should, for instance, affirm the importance of character and virtue in their mission statements and promote public commitment to such qualities. This should also encourage professional practitioners and professional educators to appreciate that the development of an institutional ethos based on character and virtues is a fundamental, not an incidental, goal. Every member of a professional community should have a basic understanding of such ethos and seek to cultivate it yet further. For this to be possible, explicit acknowledgement of the importance of character and virtues is required. This may require considerable changes in the way professional education is conducted, including greater use of the language and typology of virtue, throughout training.

Given the powerful contemporary influences and pressures of individualism, consumerism and legalism that condition much of the modern world, there is urgent contemporary need for appreciation by a range of important public services, not only that aspiration to professional status is essentially a *moral* matter, but also that moral practice is at heart rooted in the probity, integrity, commitment and responsibility of personal character that it behoves individual practitioners to develop throughout their careers. In the interests of the professionalism of good character that British public life urgently needs, research by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has lately addressed many of these possibilities and prospects for enhanced professional learning in a variety of professional contexts and from an interdisciplinary perspective, and is currently focused on the development of various strategies and educational interventions precisely designed to foreground the importance of character and virtue in professional practice.

Going forward: addressing some big questions

In the light of issues raised in this statement, the main work lies ahead and, therefore, this statement closes with some key questions for further and future attention. It is these questions that we suggest those with an interest in the flourishing of professional practices might use as the basis for further dialogue and debate on this issue.

i. Given apparently limited contemporary knowledge and understanding of the language of character and virtue and of its relevance to professional practice, how might such understanding be more widely cultivated or promoted?

ii. Given the need, noted in this statement, for social and institutional reinforcement of individually professional virtue, how might current professional institutions and communities be developed in more morally virtuous directions?

iii. What steps might be taken to bring the vital importance of moral character and virtue for sound and appropriate professional practice to wider public, political and (institutional) professional attention in Britain and more widely?

iv. Insofar as the pressing issue here is that of professional education in virtuous character, how might strategies for this – in addition to those already indicated in this statement (virtue-and-*phronesis*-based ethics teaching, broader education beyond training, service learning, and so on) be further developed?

These big questions are an invitation to all with an interest in developing professional practice to look both inwardly and outwardly in the interest of both individual and societal flourishing.

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