



Professionalism: What Happened to Dialogue?

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Good Questions

- **That students ask about
“professionalism”**

Good Questions (II)

- “How can we deal with faculty who are *not* professional in the way that they act towards us?”

Good Questions (III)

- “Do the faculty know what *professionalism* is?”

Good Questions (IV)

- “How are *faculty* held accountable for professionalism?”

Good Questions (v)

- **“Why be professional? What is the motivation?”**

Questions--Significance

- These questions all point to potential misunderstandings about professionalism
 - --that might be *shared* by students and faculty
- Misunderstandings will get in the way of any useful, ongoing *dialogue* about professionalism
 - --which, one may argue, *ought* to be the goal of a professionalism program at UTMB

One Possible Clarification

- **Closely connected ideas:**
 - **Professionalism**
 - **(Professional) Virtue**
- **Virtue has a long tradition in ethics, and this could enlighten a dialogue around professionalism**
- **But recently, “virtue” has been widely misunderstood and the notion cheapened**

Who Is The Person on the Right?



Almira Gulch (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939)

- “That dog’s a menace to the community. I’m taking him to the Sheriff and make sure he’s destroyed.”
- “If you don’t hand over that dog, I’ll bring a damage suit that’ll take your whole farm!”
- (*Aunt Em*): "Almira Gulch ... just because you own half the county doesn't mean you have the power to run the rest of us! For twenty-three years I've been dying to tell you what I thought of you ... and now ... well--being a Christian woman-- I can't say it!"

Is This Virtue?

- If asked, Almira Gulch would probably insist that she was a *virtuous* person
- She would probably defend this statement by appealing to a list of *rules of behavior* that she follows steadfastly
 - ...and would proceed to criticize all her fellow citizens who don't follow the rules to her satisfaction

Is It Virtuous To...

- **Enjoy using your power to dominate others?**
- **Feel self-righteous and superior to others who may behave differently?**
- **Appeal only to the rules, but never to the *reasons* behind them?**
- **Always to follow the rules and never inquire whether circumstances justify exceptions?**

Real Virtue?

- The Almira Gulch stereotype represents *false virtue*, not real virtue
- **What, then, is *real* virtue?**

Virtue

- **Virtue = a kind of human moral excellence**
- **Virtues are multiple (courage, honesty, kindness, etc.)**
 - **Cannot be reduced to a single quality**
- **Virtues relate less to what one does on any single occasion and more to *how one lives one's life as a whole***
 - **Biographical vs. snapshot ethics**

Virtue (II)

- **Answers the motivational question: “why be virtuous” (= *professional*)**
 - **To be a virtuous person is to commit oneself to lead one’s life in accord with certain selected moral excellences**
 - **Being virtuous is therefore a commitment to *being the best person that you can be***
 - **Possible rule of thumb = “obituary test”**
 - **What would you like people who know you well to say about your character after you’re dead? (Cf. Almira Gulch)**

Virtue (III)

- Real virtue goes *all the way down*
- Doing:
 - The right thing
 - For the right reasons
 - With the right attitude and values
- Real virtue therefore requires prolonged practice and apprenticeship
 - Properly understood, is a *lifelong* endeavor

Professional Life Journey

**Choice of
career**

Retirement



Professional Life Journey

Student



**Choice of
career**

Faculty



Retirement



Ideal Dialogue?

- **Students and faculty in any health profession are *on the same journey***
 - **Professionalism is a *collective*, not solely an individual responsibility**
- **The faculty were once where the students are now and can remember what that was like**
- **Therefore, faculty bring a perspective to discussion that students lack**

Ideal Dialogue? (II)

- **Nevertheless, faculty face many of the *same* pressures and conflicts at their stage of the journey**
 - **Being a health professional in today's complex world is morally challenging**
 - **Constantly being pressured or tempted to cut corners, allow self-interest to dominate over commitment to patient, etc.**

A Professionalism Challenge

- **Should faculty who have financial ties to a pharmaceutical or device firm, disclose these ties when they teach their students, especially when that drug or device is mentioned?**
 - **Common today to require such disclosure e.g. when publishing paper in journal**
 - **...but very *uncommon* to require it in the classroom or teaching ward**

The Ideal of Dialogue

- **Allows faculty to share their wider perspective with students and prepare students for future challenges**
- **Recognizes that faculty are fallible and that they may also have genuine questions as to what professionalism requires of them**
- **Shows that the institution takes *everyone's* professional development seriously**

The Ideal of Dialogue (II)

- “If faculty members tell us that something is *unprofessional*, they should also tell us why it is important and what are its consequences.”
- Students treated as *adult* learners
- Students treated as *fellow* travelers on the same professional journey