

Proceedings of the Witnessing Professionals and Climate Change workshop  
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I'm not an expert on climate change, though I almost feel I am now after today's discussion. I'm here because I'm supposed to know about professional ethics. I started a university-wide ethics center at Harvard more than 30 years ago. The aim was to strengthen the teaching and research on ethics generally and broaden ethics teaching in the professions beyond the narrow kind of ethics that you heard described critically by Jacob [Lipton], our academic lawyer from Harvard.

Professional ethics was not very prominent in the professions at that time. At least not the kind of ethics that required serious intellectual reflection or attention to broader social responsibility. That began to change gradually. Not entirely because of my efforts at Harvard, I admit, but mostly, as with many things in ethics, the change was driven by scandals. That usually gets people's attention and they care about ethics again. That's why ethical scandals are good for professional ethicists. Our own center, by the way, was located in a building named for Alfred A. Taubman. You may remember that he went to jail for price fixing in the auction market. So there we were sitting in this beautiful building—and it was quite luxurious—honoring a price fixer.

Partly as a result of scandals, ethics courses began to be required in many law schools and medical schools. Some of the courses were broader than the narrow offerings that had been taught in the past. Professional associations took notice, applied ethics journals popped up, degree programs proliferated. The ethics movement spread. It gained momentum not only in the traditional professions, but also in surprising places—such as the profession of law enforcement. A graduate of our ethics program was put in charge of training for the New York Police Department. I'm not sure how well that turned out. Veterinarians, accountants, even economists, the last academic discipline to adopt a serious code of ethics.

Here is my favorite example showing how far the movement spread. Those of us who teach get free textbooks in the mail all the time. Publishers are trying to get us to adopt them. And ethics teachers are no different. So when this book appeared in my mail [Speaker shows book, "Undertaking Ethics"], I first thought that the title alluded to the verb "to undertake, to engage in" But NO. It really was about undertakers. The book presents mini case studies with multiple choice answers. Here is an example: In a small cemetery the deceased is buried in the wrong grave because the stone was engraved on the wrong side of the marker. You are the only one who knows. What do you do? Choose

one: (a) you blame the monument company and the cemetery for the error; (b) you contact the client, and take responsibility; (c) you sit on it, it's not your problem; (d) you secretly dig up the body and rebury it. Actually, undertakers are beginning to think more broadly about ethics than these cases suggest. (Or so I am told. I'm not an expert on undertaking ethics.) The profession is actually talking about the damage to the environment that the proliferation of cemeteries is causing: "What is our responsibility as undertakers? What should we do about the damage because for sure there's going to be more dead people than we have room for?" So maybe there is progress in undertaking ethics.

All this growing interest in professional ethics— in many ways welcome — is still mostly limited to only one aspect of the ideal professionalism, the ideal of service, which emphasizes that the service is to the patient, the client, the shareholder, the research community, or perhaps even the cadavers. The revival has only recently begun to attend to the obligations that professionals may have to bring to their expertise into the public sphere—to pursue a public purpose in the sense Nancy [Rosenblum] suggested in her opening remarks, and more generally in the sense that Robert [Jay Lifton] expressed in his idea of "witnessing professionals" that inspired this conference. We professionals enjoy great privileges and in return we owe something to society not only to the individuals we directly serve, but to the larger society—to the public purposes for which the professions profess to believe in.

This conference actually exemplifies a revival of that aspect to the professional ideal. The presentations today could be seen as a contribution to bringing back a commitment to the public purposes of the professions. In fact, I would say 97 percent of you agree that that's what we should be doing. Would the three percent please raise your hands? Attempting to fulfill that obligation is not easy. There are practical limitations of time, resources, funding, and also psychological limitations that we heard about and political pressures. The public health panel today, in particular, was good at bringing out those constraints and some possible ways to overcome them. But the service to the public is difficult in a deeper way. It may conflict with other internal moral obligations of professionals, which may be even harder to overcome. Harder because in some ways they should not be changed. Because there is a real moral basis for some of these constraints on taking a public role.

In the first panel today, particularly Rob [Socolow], but also Naomi [Oreskes], there was much more appreciation of dangers of compromising some of these traditional role responsibilities. Both were in different ways saying that we need to redefine or expand the professional role—Rob more reluctantly, Naomi more enthusiastically. I agree with the need, but I also want to emphasize that the traditional role has some values that we shouldn't want to lose. To make this point, I will mention three risks to these values that we ought to care about. As we advocate changing the professional role, we don't want to lose what makes us respectable, ethical professionals in the first place.

The first risk: undue bias. If you're going to be effective in public debate, you have to act more like an advocate than a judge. Initially, I thought that lawyers won't have any trouble with that because they do a lot of advocacy anyhow. And Katie [Kuh], in the first part of her remarks confirmed this thought. But then she went on to say something like: "The problem is, if you're an advocate you're likely to do some things that we might really question ethically." There are ethical limits on advocacy too. Mr. Justice Benjamin complicated my picture of judges, which assumes that judges should decide particular cases between particular people. Justice Benjamin argued that judges should think universally—about the public interest. In at least in American jurisprudence that would be a radical change in the judicial role and law itself, as well-described by Sam [Issacharoff], and I would argue that it would entail some loss of the important value of impartiality.

Harold [Shapiro] remarked that being an advocate in public hearings is engaging in something like a competitive sport, and you've got to be careful that in that competition you don't end up treating it as only a sport. There is value in the role of the honest broker or the traditional judge. While we want to transcend that value in some cases, we don't want to completely ignore it.

The second risk is excessive simplification. If you're going to be effective in the public sphere, a certain amount of simplification is necessary. There are some people who are very good at translating technical knowledge into accessible information for the general public. I would bet that Jessica [Green] excels at this. But most of us are not, even if we think we are. It's really hard to simplify complex subjects. Jacob [Lipton] said that explaining complex subjects to the public is just another form of teaching I agree with that, except it's a lot harder. You can do it successfully with students in a back and forth interaction, where you can bring out the complexities, but in a public forum it's much harder to do without distortion.

Finally, the third risk I want to mention is exaggerated consensus. This returns to an issue we encountered earlier today—the disagreement about consensus between Naomi [Oreskes] and Rob [Socolow]. Part of our authority as experts comes from the fact that other experts agree with us. If there is opinionated chaos among experts, there's no reason to listen to any of them. Not only the effectiveness but the rationale for respecting experts and professionals is that on the whole they have reached, at least for the time being, a rough consensus on a particular question. But, as we heard earlier, part of the reason for respecting professionals, especially scientists, is that they're open to being wrong, to entertaining disagreement, to appealing to evidence, not merely or mainly the fact that other scientists agree with them

On climate change, there isn't much disagreement that humans cause some of it and that the effects are already very harmful. But that consensus breaks down as soon as we talk about what to do about it. It is not obvious that it is possible in the public sphere to keep

the distinction between the causes and the remedies. Some people say if you agree on the causes and harms, you certainly shouldn't be in favor of nuclear power. But at least one respected climate change scientist is in favor of nuclear power. So, consensus is an issue, I think, that we haven't fully dealt with.

I've pointed to three risks of going public—reflecting some internal tensions in the professional role. We've heard today some examples of how these arise in four areas of professional life, and it should be clear that it's not enough to say that we should get more resources, we should get more funding. We have to resist political pressures. We have to rethink our purposes within our own professions — and maybe we can learn from other professions—how the role can be reconceived without losing what is valuable in the traditional role—without losing what gave us the authority to speak as professionals in the first place.

I want to invite discussion now, and I begin by posing what I see as a central question that's run through the conference today: How can we preserve what was valuable in the traditional professional roles while broadening the responsibilities of professionals to engage in the public sphere? To deal with new challenges that are in many ways unprecedented —climate change being our primary example today? I've suggested that there are conflicts between these traditional values and the new responsibilities. But some of you may think I've created a false conflict. Some of you earlier insisted that that advocacy and analysis are not incompatible. Perhaps they're not in some ways, but they are in others. I am simply asking for more struggle in our discussion, a little less consensus on turning professionals into witnesses in the public sphere.

*[“Witnessing Professionals and Climate Change”](#) was a workshop hosted by the [Social Science Research Council](#) [Anxieties of Democracy](#) program as part of its [Working Group on Climate Change](#). The workshop was hosted in collaboration with Princeton University's [University Center for Human Values](#), [Program in Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy](#), [Climate Futures Initiative](#), and the [Princeton Environmental Institute](#).*