

Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional

William F. May

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(286 pages)

William F. May has had an extensive career as an ethicist, holding various prominent positions, including, president of the American Academy of Religion, founding director of the Maguire Center, founding fellow of the Hastings Center and member of the ethical foundations subcommittee of the Clinton Task Force on National Health Care Reform. Currently, in addition to holding the title of Maguire Professor of Ethics Emeritus at Southern Methodist University, he serves on the President's Council on Bioethics. As a member of the Council, he recently voted in favor of allowing the creation and destruction of cloned human embryos for research. This will come as no surprise to readers of *Beleaguered Rulers*, as May's consequentialist approach to ethics does not admit of moral absolutes or exceptionless moral norms (181).

In the book under review, May intends to "explore the varied links between the professions and civic responsibility in America" (9). His thesis: "Since professionals perceive themselves as marginal and beleaguered, they tend to overlook their duties as public servants ..." (6). In each of the eight chapters, a different profession is examined "as a point of entry for interpreting American culture" (9). He believes that three "marks" distinguish the professions: intellectual (what one professes), moral (on behalf of whom one professes), and organizational (with whom one professes)" (7). Professions covered include: doctors, lawyers, engineers, corporate executives, politicians, journalists, clergy, and academics.

Among the text's strengths is the attentiveness given to the role of the virtues in the professions, promoting the interpersonal over the financial and a consistent defense of the universal destination of goods with special concern for the poor. In contrast to the growing pressure on professionals to become impersonal experts who dispense technical advice, May offers the following insightful sentence: "The doctor uses science, but healing also requires practical wisdom in bringing science artfully to bear in order to restore harmony to the patient's universe" (47). A true professional is not merely concerned with means but also with the relevant ends of his or her art. The reduction of professionals to "tools" for use by consumers is a threat to the very existence of the professions, and this book is a welcome antidote to that disease.

May readily recognizes that the financial, social, and educational structures (what we might call "the moral ecology") surrounding the professions profoundly shape the practices of professionals. For example, if we want medicine to be more interpersonal, if we are offended that a trip to the doctor's office is an experience akin to getting an oil change, then short rotations, twelve-hour days, and other doctor-patient-destroying practices must be removed from the training of new doctors. It is not without reason

that the clinical portion of medical education is referred to in many medical schools as the “cynicals” (271).

Another virtue of this book is May’s consideration of professional ethics within the context of religious faith. In spite of the fact that the vast majority of Americans describe themselves as “religious,” most contemporary texts on professional ethics typically treat Christian moral principles briefly, if they are mentioned at all, in a historical section and then move on to something more “objective.” In contrast, May believes that Christian sacramental theology and Old Testament exegesis are relevant to, among other things, considerations of engineering ethics (109). In another place, after describing the theological debate over the significance of our being created in the image of God, he then illuminates the relevance of that debate to business ethics and corporate governance (144). It is as rare, as it is enjoyable, to find a chapter on business ethics that illustrates a point by referring to Balaam’s ass from the Bible’s Book of Numbers (158)!

In my opinion, although the above strengths predominate, a few weaknesses run through this work. First, while the text excels at paying attention to the social implications of professional conduct, it only pays minimal attention to the well-being of professionals themselves. Professionals are almost exclusively considered as an instrumental means to social goods. A virtue, a disposition to action, is an element of a person’s character. While others certainly benefit from a professional’s mastery of various virtues, the main beneficiary is the professional himself or herself. The professional who is honest, truthful, or concerned with the common good is, according to Aristotle, that much better a person and thus, that much better a professional.

Second, the book displays a consistent distrust toward corporations, market forces, and individual self-interest while, in my opinion, underestimating the risk to the professions from governmental regulation. In repeatedly recommending regulation as a solution to perceived defects in the professions, May is advocating a cure that most professionals find worse than the disease (272). Self-regulation, at least in significant part, is an essential characteristic of the professions. The greater the legal regulation of a profession, the greater role that lawyers play in governing that profession. For example, when medical students graduate today, they frequently take a modified version of the Hippocratic Oath that includes the promise to “give no medicine that is illegal.” In doing this, doctors give, unknowingly, to be sure, their obeisance to lawyers.

May repeatedly suggests that market-based incentives for giving clients what they want are corrupting. As an alternative, he promotes paternalism as an ethical mandate that requires “professionals [to] address the deeper needs of their clients and patients and not just [the clients] marketplace wants and desires” (10, 38). In saying this, it seems to me that he gives too little responsibility or credit to the clients and places a frightening amount of power in the hands of professionals. I want my doctor to follow my express wishes, not his or her judgment of my “deeper needs.”

—Nicholas C. Lund-Molfese

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