

Book Review

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Professional Ethics

By F. A. R. Bennion.

Pp xiii + 278. (Charles Knight: £3 13s)

In recent years the professions have come under closer scrutiny than ever before - from the Monopolies Commission, the Prices and Incomes Board and from economists and sociologists. Much of the criticism has been uninformed and Mr Bennion's comprehensive book on 'Professional Ethics', the first systematic analysis of the subject which has appeared in Britain, is, therefore, extremely timely. The author as a barrister and former secretary of a leading professional association is well-equipped to lead the reader through the complexities and perplexities of professional ethics. It is indicative of the difficulties of the subject that the earlier part of the book is taken up by a discussion of what constitutes a profession. In a significant phrase the author concludes that the true professions are the 'consultant professions', and that while others such as the Armed Services, the Church and Teaching may come within the wider professional sphere they cannot properly claim full professional status.

The activities of the consultant professions and their field of operation - in health, rights and property - are considered in detail under the headings of Competence, Humanity, Discretion, Impartiality, Responsibility and Integrity. The conclusion is reached that advisory services are best provided by independent practitioners answerable to an autonomous professional association. While not all critics of the professions may agree with this conclusion, the onus is clearly on them to support their views with equally well documented arguments. This has not yet been done and certainly not by Professor Lees, perhaps the most vocal critic of professional restrictions, to whose views the author devotes a good deal of attention.

It is clear from the chapters on advertising, on fees and other problems, that no claim is being made that the professions are free from imperfections; generally the author welcomes the changes which are taking place towards a liberalisation of the codes of ethics and anticipates that the pace of change will accelerate. One of the biggest problems facing the professions today is how this can be achieved without destroying what is valuable in the structures built up over the years - in some cases over a very considerable number of years. It is pointed out that the first code of professional conduct was laid down by Hippocrates in 400 BC! In a thoughtful final chapter the author looks to the future and advances a proposition that to strengthen the position of the professions there should be formed a Council of the Consultant Professions, on the analogy of the Confederation of

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British Industries. It is suggested that in the long run this may be the only alternative to more state intervention and control.

Mr Bennion's knowledge of the Institute and its detailed code of ethics is impressive. If his survey of the large number of other professions referred to is as accurate, his book can be thoroughly recommended both as a useful work of reference and as a stimulating exposition of the rules and philosophy of professional ethics.

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