Chapter 8
Babble and Murk

Introduction

Somewhat provocatively, I have entitled this chapter: 'Babble and Murk'. I do so because professional discourse seems uncommonly cursed with the use of what are sometimes called 'buzz words' – usually as part of catch-cries and slogans that are accepted widely and without much thought. In what follows, I wish to analyse critically some of these and to add some theoretical ideas that will, I hope, be useful background for your thinking. As you might expect, some of these 'buzz words' are more salient in some professions than in others. They fall into two categories.

The first comprises ways of thinking/speaking that have in-built *incoherence* as ordinarily deployed (*babble*) and the second comprises ones that are simply too *vague* or *ambiguous* (*murk*) to be vehicles for sound thought as they stand. I will start with the former sort and proceed to the latter in the second major portion of the chapter.

The list is not an exhaustive one and, although it covers some salient problems, the concepts examined (and their analyses) are meant to be but illustrative. Hopefully what you get from the following is an appreciation that there are inadequacies in some of the concepts deployed in discourse about ethical issues arising in various professions – and some increased sensitivity for your 'crap-detector'. You can get a long way with the repeated interrogation of your thoughts and those of others by the question: 'Just what does that mean?'

Babble

The 'N' Word

In my experience, the most widely misused 'buzz word' is 'needs'. As commonly used, it is so destructive of careful thought that I consider it to be akin to intellectual blasphemy. Thus I have chosen it as our first subject for critical scrutiny.

It is not uncommon for professionals to preach, and be preached at, using slogans employing appeals to 'needs'. It is said that we should pay attention to the special needs of various disadvantaged or unusual groups, or that pupils' or clients' or patients' individual needs should be met by our practice, or that we should remember that schools or hospitals or counselling services etc. exist to satisfy society's educational/medical/psychological etc. needs; and a host of other

slogans and 'one-liners' could be mentioned that use the term 'needs'. Helpful in sorting through this will be to get clear as soon as possible just what is being said when one talks of someone's 'needs'.

So, the starting point for our scrutiny will be a piece of standard conceptual analysis. What does the concept of a 'need' amount to? The first thing to note is that if someone says, for instance, that John needs a sense of positive self-esteem, or even that Jane has a physiological need for food, something *incomplete* has been said, the propositions haven't been finished off. To see the idea here, consider the proposition that little Jamie is taller. It doesn't make sense because it is syntactically incomplete; taller *than what*? – than he was a year ago? than Jenny? what? To use a bit of grammatical jargon, 'taller' is not a one-place predicate term picking out a simple property (like, say, 'square' is); rather, 'taller than' is a two-place relation term signalling a relationship between two objects. In much the same vein, when someone claims that John needs a sense of positive self-esteem one can ask: *For what*? One plausible answer as to what might be meant in this case is that such a sense of positive self-esteem is needed *for*, say, John's happiness. Let's assume that this is what was meant. So we move from the incomplete:

> John needs a sense of positive self-esteem;

to the more coherent:

> John needs a sense of positive self-esteem for his happiness.

Once we have the proposition completely stated, we can unpack it a bit. I would suggest that the above is what we earlier called a mixed proposition; it is to be considered as a shorthand way of advancing *two* quite distinct propositions:

> For John, having a sense of positive self-esteem is a necessary condition, or needed, *for his happiness*;

and:

> It is a good thing for John to be happy.

The former is a descriptive proposition but the latter is a moral proposition. So, as usually expressed, 'needs' claims are incomplete, one needs (!) to know the answer to the question: 'For what?', in order to discover the *goal* or *purpose* of having the 'needed' thing. Sometimes it is fairly clear from the context of discussion but, even if that is so in a general way, it is worth getting *explicitly* clear about. Knowing what that desired goal is is important for your reaction to the claim. The point is that, although the speaker, or author, presumably favours that goal or purpose, *you* might not. And, if you don't, then that difference in valuation would mean that you *reject* the 'needs' claim (in virtue of denying one of its component clauses). If you

didn't care tuppence for John's happiness, then you wouldn't agree that he needed a sense of positive self-esteem (*for* his happiness). And this would be so even were you to allow as true the other clause, the descriptive necessary condition proposition. Let me try another example; it might assist you to see my point here. Someone might say that Jane needs heroin (in order to satisfy her addictive craving). You might disagree, not because you deny that a 'shot' is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of her craving – you might admit this – but because you don't value the *point* of the exercise, that is, you don't value the satisfaction of Jane's addictive craving; thus you deny that she 'needs' heroin. (You might, instead, be inclined to say that she needs treatment – so that the cravings no longer exist to demand satisfaction.)

Let's consider an issue facing teachers, one of the sorts of issues that this book is trying to help you think clearly about. Say I were to ask: 'What should the broad aims of schooling be?'. Say also that, in reply, some teacher said: 'Schools should aim to meet individual student needs'. Think about this in terms of the above analysis. No individual, Jeremy, say, has any such thing as a need *simpliciter*, it is always something needed *for* achieving something else. Once we have some goal *already decided on* for Jeremy (say, having him employable upon leaving school) *then* we can coherently talk of what is a necessary condition, or needed, *in order for* him to be employable. But *without the setting of some such goal*, the purported aim is *empty*. To say that schools should aim to satisfy individual needs doesn't *set* a goal for schools, it relies on a goal having *already* been set. We haven't got a coherent suggestion until we have advice about what various individuals need and we can't know that except by reference to some goal (or goals), some moral stance about how one wants them to be. But *that* was just what one was trying to work out in trying to propose schooling aims! And, given this, why not just skip all the muddle of 'needs' talk and just directly list that goal (or goals if you have different ones for different individuals) as to what you think schools should be aiming to achieve?

Not only is our notional teacher's 'needs' claim no positive (or even coherent) contribution to serious thought about what schools should be trying to achieve, it is *harmful* to such thought. This is for two reasons. The first is that those advancing and listening to such answers might be deluded into thinking that something coherent has actually been said, that a candidate-aim suggestion has actually been advanced. Second, slogans that employ this term have a compelling quality to them, after all, how could anyone but a scoundrel deny people something that they *need*? As the term is usually used, it is also an implicit assumption that whether or not someone needs something is an objective matter, is some sort of empirical fact (perhaps of psychology, or economics, or biology ...).

Thus all of this initially looks beguilingly attractive for it looks as if, in answer to the complex moral question: 'What should teachers and schools be aiming to do?', one could get an objective answer that no one could seriously deny, namely: 'Satisfy the needs of children'. Thinking that one can have uncontroversial, objective, answers to complex value judgemental issues is intellectually naive,

indeed dangerous. Before I close this section, I wish to point out a few more features of 'needs' talk.

First, in the above I have discussed *individual* 'needs' talk but that is not the only way such talk occurs in discussions about what, in our illustration, schools should be doing or, more generally, what professionals and their institutions should be doing. Have a look at the second paragraph of this section. Notable is that sometimes the sloganizing appeals to fulfilling the 'needs' of some *group* like society-as-a-whole or the local community. As before though, just saying that schools should satisfy society's 'needs' is empty and even if one tries to fill it in a bit by saying 'educational needs' and even if one starts to advance proposals like, say, that society needs literate citizens, one has not yet spoken coherently because of the relational nature of 'needs' talk and the absence of a specified goal (whatever society needs literate citizens *for*). As in the above-analysed case of John 'needing' a sense of positive self-esteem, propositions about what, say, society 'needs' are what we earlier called 'mixed propositions' and, when unpacked and stated fully as a descriptive necessary condition proposition and a moral goal proposition, we could, as before, save a lot of fuss by simply stating that goal as the aim in the first place. If one felt that in the society in question literacy was necessary for more informed voting decisions to occur and you favoured such decisions then why not get straight to the moral point and propose that schools should assist students to be informed (future) voters? At least then your cards would be explicitly on the table.

Second, although talk of what John 'needs' usually involves some sort of goal about what the speaker considers to be *good for John*, it doesn't always have to. Sometimes one can talk of what some individual 'needs' and have in mind what is good for some *other* party, as opposed what is good for *that* individual. For instance, say one had an unreformable serial killer; let's call her 'June'. Someone might remark that June 'needs' to be locked away forever. The implicit goal here might have nothing to do with June's welfare so much as with the welfare of the rest of us.

Third, because of the relational nature of 'needs' talk (X needs Y for Z), it is possible for the 'Y' to be kept constant but the other two to vary. So, for instance, one might say, of a scientist, that Bartholomew needs tobacco industry financing in order to be able to do his tobacco addiction research. Mind you, of another scientist, one might say that Boris needs tobacco industry financing in order to fund his tropical villa (different 'X' and 'Z') or that Bartholomew needs better 'grantsmanship' skills in order to be able to do his tobacco addiction research (same 'X' and 'Z' but different 'Y'). My point is that the easiest way to follow all of this is not to merely rave on about Boris's or Bartholomew's needs but to get the mixed proposition disaggregated into its component moral and descriptive components (in the manner of our earlier analysis) so you know just what is going on.

Fourth, note that, in my earlier analytical unpacking of the mixed proposition about John into its component descriptive and moral elements, I expressed the moral proposition component in the form: 'Z is *a good thing*'. This is, as you

should realize by now, a fairly weak endorsement of Z. I just used it in quick illustration but you know enough by now about different strengths of moral endorsement to realize that there is a spread of possibilities. 'More important than anything else' may be what was meant and having to work out not just what the valued goal is how *much* it is valued, adds to the burden of someone faced with an incoherent claim like: 'X needs Y'. Not only should the goal (the Z) be explicit in order to know what's going on but the *strength* of importance given to it. This is because getting this clear might make quite a difference to someone's reaction to the endorsed goal. So, one might accept Z as 'a good thing' but not be as happy about endorsing it as, say, 'the *most* important thing'. It would be helpful to know which was meant (if either; there are other possibilities).

Although I have developed this point using examples connected to particular professional circumstances, teaching, I trust that you can see that similar problems arise with the use of 'needs' talk in almost any professional context.

I also point out that talk of what is *essential*, *required*, *necessary* and so on has exactly the same sort of analysis as 'needs' does and thus has the same set of attendant concerns. The key thing to achieve is to get out into the light of day the morally valued goal; and asking of a needs claim: 'Needs *for what*?' is a way of doing that.

Clashing 'Needs'

Harking back for the moment to my concern that 'needs' worded propositions have a spurious status as apparent objective truths, consider the following scenario in continuation of the above discussion. Tammy asks Timmy and Tommy what broad aims schools should have. Timmy replies that schools should meet individual needs and Tommy replies that they should meet society's needs. As complained of above, such talk is empty but almost no matter what emerges as what Timmy thinks of as a good way (or ways) for individuals to be and what Tommy thinks of as a good way for society to be, there will be clashes. What is good for an individual is often not what is good for the group.

This is fine in and of itself; if Timmy supports one aim and Tommy another, then that is a matter for mutually probing extended enquiry of the sort introduced in earlier chapters. At least, it is fine if each of them realizes that what he is advancing is a moral *judgement* in clash with the moral *judgement* of the other. Such metacognitive awareness can be interfered with if one views one's own stance as *necessarily* correct because it is just advocating what *needs* to be done. Thinking about 'needs' *clashes* might help avoid this. The only necessity in 'needs' talk is the necessary condition descriptive proposition that such-and-such is a necessary condition for the occurrence of so-and-so. And that proposition is neutral about what anyone *should* do (and, being just a claim, might not even be, as a matter of fact, true – a matter to which I will return below). Two people can indeed be in *complete* agreement about the necessary condition proposition, in complete

agreement as to what the *facts* of the matter are if you like, yet still *dis*agree as to what 'needs' to be done because they have rival *goals*.

For instance, Harold might claim that Helga needs more counselling. Harriet might deny that Helga needs more counselling. Harold believes the following descriptive proposition: 'Helga having more counselling is a necessary condition for Helga becoming thoroughly cured'. Harold also highly values Helga becoming thoroughly cured. Harriet does not so highly value Helga becoming thoroughly cured and more values Helga becoming just as cured as *she wishes* to be. Nonetheless, she *agrees* with Harold's necessary condition claim. She just thinks that not only is Helga having more counselling a necessary condition for her becoming more thoroughly cured, it is also going to go beyond the level of cure that Helga wants. Harold doesn't disagree with any of these descriptive beliefs of Harriet's (he accepts that Helga does not want more counselling), he just has different value priorities concerning what is best for Helga, how cured she should be. So, without *any* disagreement as to what is, as a matter of fact, necessary for what, Harold and Harriet disagree as to what Helga 'needs' to do; the disagreement rests upon different *moral* priorities. Despite their direct disagreement concerning Helga, Harold and Harriet might, if intellectually crude, each describe their proposals as catering for Helga's individual 'needs' (although they would likely not employ my 'shudder quotes').

'Needs' and Interests

As touched upon above, sometimes talk of what someone, or some group, 'needs' seems to be meant as a way (however muddly and obscure) of talking about what is good for them, what is *in their interest* as we sometimes put it. Sometimes, though, it seems not to be in line with that analysis (which is basically the one offered earlier). This seems especially so when 'needs' occurs as part of phrases like 'taking account of individual needs' and 'catering for individual needs' and 'being sensitive to, or aware of, individual needs'. In many of these cases, it seems to me that the suggestion is more that the *views* of the individual be 'taken on board'.

On this interpretation, catering for June's individual 'needs' would be not doing what one might judge to be *good for* June; rather, it would be more about doing what *she wishes* to have happen. On this construal, catering for individual 'needs' is taking account of, and acting upon, those individuals' views as to what should happen. So, if you like, it is doing what those individuals are *interested in* rather than what is *in their interest* (as *you* judge it).

One could obviously advance either view and dispute would occur as to when people should be able to do what interests them and when they should have to do what someone else deems to be in their interest. My point here is just that 'needs' talk seems to ambiguously cover each meaning (and, in the mouths of some of the muddlier professionals employing it, an indistinct and undetected amalgam of both). The point of the sub-section is to apprise you of the distinction and to

urge you to be explicitly clear in your thinking (and not to conflate the two) and to closely interrogate others as to just what they mean.

'Needs' and Wants

If the thrust of the previous sub-section was to urge you not to confuse two ideas just because they seemed both to get talked about using 'needs' talk, the point of this one is not to insist on a 'distinction' where it is not at all clear that there is one properly to be made. It is not at all uncommon to hear practitioners of various sorts saying things like: 'That may be what he wants but it is not what he needs'. Oddly, it is when they take the time to attempt to be conceptually subtle that they will tend to wish to think of needs as quite different to wants. It is not quite clear what this comes to but let me get to my criticism of this supposed distinction indirectly. As I have come across it most in educational circles, I will use an example from that profession.

Say that we had a dispute between a student, Jeremy, and a teacher, Janette, about what Jeremy should be learning. Jeremy wants to learn about car engines; Janette wants Jeremy to learn about English grammar. We could describe this is a clash of wants. Or, we could rephrase it and say that Jeremy values learning about car engines but Janette does not value Jeremy learning about car engines. We could describe this as a value clash. Or, with some suitable unpacking as per above analyses, we could describe this as a clash of views about what Jeremy 'needs' to learn. All of these strike me as legitimate ways of construing the dispute between Janette and Jeremy.

As noted, I have heard professionals and particularly, as in our case, teachers like Janette, say things like: 'Jeremy may *want* to learn about car engines but that is not what he *needs* to learn; what he needs to learn is English grammar'. This strikes me as simply addle-pated arrogance on Janette's part. As also noted, Jeremy may want one thing and Janette another. Jeremy may value different things than Janette does. Jeremy's views about what he needs to learn may differ from Janette's – perhaps in virtue of different goals – the Z of our earlier analytical schema. So, we could look one step more deeply and observe, perhaps, that Jeremy learning about car engines is held by Jeremy to be a necessary condition, or needed, for Jeremy to be happy in the short term. On the other hand, Jeremy learning about English grammar is, we'll say, held by Janette to be a necessary condition, or needed, for Jeremy to be the sort of member of society that Janette values. But why 'upgrade' Janette's views to some different status of proposition than Jeremy's? Remember that 'needs' talk is goal-directed. Some *held to be* 'needed' thing is *held to be* a 'need' in virtue of it being *held to be* a necessary condition for some end that is *held to be* valuable. Assuming for the moment that Janette has her necessary condition descriptive proposition competently appraised (a matter I will return to below) the claim rests upon her valuing some end or goal; on something she *wants* to have happen (Jeremy being the sort of citizen that Janette values). It all boils down to a clash of views about how it is best for Jeremy to be. To judge whether Jeremy or

Janette has the better proposal is a matter of looking at what each of them has to say in support of their value judgements; it's not a matter to be settled in Janette's favour by the *fait accompli* of deeming her to *know Jeremy's needs* whereas poor Jeremy merely *knows what Jeremy wants*. Indeed, as will see in the last chapter, one theory about rightness and wrongness is to view moral propositions like these as merely expressing some sort of subjective preference, a 'want' if you like. And, if one thinks in this manner and views values as a sort of want, then 'needs' claims are crucially 'wants' claims in virtue of their implicit goal. Mind you, there are other analyses of rightness and wrongness that are portrayed in that chapter in which what is right is seen as some sort of objective truth. This only changes the detail of the above and the question would then become: 'What makes us think that Janette has more insight into moral truth than Jeremy?'.

The Necessary Condition Component in a 'Needs' Claim

So far, I have been concerned to point out that 'needs' claims rely on *im*plicit valued goals, on moral stances. When unpacking a 'needs' claim, such a moral proposition becomes one of two component propositions. Apart from that goal-stating moral proposition, we have a *descriptive* necessary condition relation proposition and it is the latter that I now wish to make two brief comments on.

My first comment is simply to observe that, as *part* of what is being said in a 'needs' claim is such a descriptive proposition, two people in dispute about what, say, Jeremy 'needs', might *not* be in dispute about the morally valued goal implicit in such talk. Jeremy's friend Jim might agree with Jeremy that the important thing is Jeremy's short-term happiness but be convinced that Jeremy would be very swiftly bored by car engine theory and would be much happier (even in the short term) doing outdoor education. Jim and Jeremy disagree about the truth of the descriptive proposition advanced by Jeremy concerning the link between him learning about car engines and his short-term happiness. Such a dispute is quite different to that between Jeremy and Janette even though each dispute is about what Jeremy's 'needs' are. So, one 'moral' from this is to not just make explicitly clear what the 'needs' claim is saying but to make explicitly clear what the *focus of any disagreement* about it is.

My second comment is to remind you that it is a *necessary* condition proposition that is being made in the descriptive component of a 'needs' claim. This is a *very strong* sort of proposition indeed. My impression is that lots of 'needs' claims are ill-conceived of in that no such strength of relationship is envisaged. The author has often simply not said what she really meant. Take the case of Jeremy above.

Jeremy's *words* (when unpacked) are to the effect that him learning (about car engines) is a necessary condition for his (short-term) happiness. What this says is that *without such learning he won't be (short-term) happy*, such learning is a prerequisite for such happiness. Really? If Jeremy means this seriously, then we have a psychiatric case on our hands! Much of the time some less extreme relationship between the thing 'needed' and its implicit goal is intended. So, what

is Jeremy claiming? Is it that learning about car engines will make him happy (or, to put it more carefully and technically: that learning about car engines is a *sufficient* condition for his short-term happiness)? If so, then a sufficient condition relation (this will *bring about* that) has been muddled with a necessary condition relation (this is *prerequisite for* that). Even that sufficient condition relationship is probably stronger than what is plausibly intended. Not only is Jeremy not likely to be suggesting that he won't be happy without such learning he is also not likely to even be suggesting that such learning will guarantee, or bring about, such happiness (what if he gets such learning but his best friend dies or ...). Much of the time all that seems meant is something like: such learning will likely increase, or help increase (among other things like friends, food ...), my happiness (which I value).

How much easier enquiry and discussion would be if people would try harder to simply say clearly and explicitly what they mean. As 'needs' talk rarely assists in this, I recommend that you drop it. It can be unpacked and made clear but alternative turns of phrase are less fuss and people rarely have the intellectual skills and patience to do the unpacking. If others use 'needs' talk, then try challenging it with something like: 'Meaning precisely what?' or get them to put their point another way.

'Useful' and 'Relevant'

Relevant These are two other 'buzz words' that have much the same problems in their use as 'needs'. They often crop up in discussions (and especially complaints) about some course of action (that it is not useful or irrelevant). Again, a preliminary analysis of these concepts is a good foundation for seeing the difficulties in their usual employment.

When discussing 'needs' talk, I pointed out that the word was used as if it picked out a *property* that something had, rather than made a claim about a *relation*. The same applies here. A course in professional ethics, say, is not able to be coherently claimed to be irrelevant *simpliciter*; it can only be coherently claimed to be irrelevant *to* some task, or to the satisfaction of some purpose, or end, or type of professional activity, or some-such. Only *after* it has been specified just what such purpose is the one under consideration, can one make claims about what is relevant *to that* purpose. So, ethics courses might be irrelevant to the performance of everyday tasks and thus to most tasks undergone in most professions but relevant to understanding how to think about professional ethical dilemmas. Professional experience placements, for instance, might be relevant to the performance of the everyday tasks of most professions but irrelevant to understanding how to think through an ethical problem.

I trust that you can see the similarities to 'needs' talk. Incoherent use of 'relevant', like incoherent use of 'needs', has an inbuilt assumption of superiority in a dispute. A critic of one's argument that, say, ethics should not be in the curriculum of a professional preparation course because the curriculum should be *relevant* and

ethics education is *not* relevant seems to be thrown immediately and unfairly on to the back foot. If the critic wishes to challenge the MP of the above argument then she seems to have to defend the indefensible by favouring irrelevance. How could someone be so stupid as to advocate making undergraduates learn irrelevant stuff? But it is simply unfair to the critic to so conceive of the lines of dispute. All that is happening is that the 'relevance-monger' and the critic have *different tasks* in mind that are deemed important. The proper locus of dispute is whether the curriculum should be limited to helping undergraduates perform everyday professional tasks or whether it should also assist students to think professional ethical issues through. Once such matters have been decided, *then* one can coherently opine about the relevance of this or that particular curriculum item to the endorsed aims. Unless that part of the relation has been set, talk of something's relevance or otherwise is unfinished-off *literal nonsense*.

Useful   Much the same can be said about the misuse of 'useful'. Nothing is useful *simpliciter*; it can only be useful *for* the achievement of some goal, the performance of some task and so on. And what is useless for one purpose can be useful for another. When people advocate that any suggested activity, or skill, or item of knowledge should be 'useful', they usually have some set of approved-of tasks implicitly assumed as what usefulness is to be tied to. And if they complain of the 'uselessness' of, say, critical thinking, it is only a lack of usefulness for the achievement of the purposes, or the performance of the tasks, that *they endorse as worthwhile* that is being asserted. But unqualified talk of 'uselessness' sounds more objective, more matter-of-fact, than that. It might be conceivable that something is absolutely without use for any task whatsoever but that is *not* what is being asserted when people complain of something's uselessness; rather, it is uselessness *relative to* whatever purposes, or tasks, that person endorses as *worthwhile*. And, as you might guess by now, the real focus of controversy might be more on what these ends should be rather than on the matter-of-fact issue of what is useful as a means for the achievement (or not) of this or that end.

So, much the same lesson as for the dreaded 'N' word: if you must use this suite of 'buzz words' then, for the sake of your own and others' intellectual health, realize that they are relation words and state, or ensure that all concerned understand, the value goals, or tasks, or whatnot that the claims are relative to. And when you hear others committing the above errors, get into the habit of asking: needs/relevant/useful *for what*? As noted with 'needs', sometimes the goal is clear from the context of discussion but often it is not, or is worth explicit pinning anyway so that it is perfectly clear just what is being subjected to possible critical challenge.

'Growth', 'Development' and 'Maximizing Potential'

Ever heard or read things like the following?

> Schools should aim at students' educational *growth*.

> Teachers have a duty to foster the social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth of the children that they teach.

> My personal goal as a teacher is to try to maximize the individual potential of every child that I teach.

Yes? I thought they might sound familiar. My suspicion is that, like many people, you will have a 'warm rosy glow' of empathy with such sentiments. You might even have an 'Of course this is right' reaction to them. Regrettably, none of the above means much and all count as empty 'feel good' sloganizing for much the same sorts of reasons – hence their treatment together in this section.

Although very (indeed, scandalously) prominent 'buzz words' in educational circles, especially in talk of aims, these crop up to some extent in some other professions as well so, although this section is particularly directed at teachers (and my examples will be from that profession), it should be worth others' attention as well. You should reflect upon the discourse of your own profession and I will merely observe that the so-called 'caring' professions (another buzz word perhaps) and various professions connected to commerce and business seem to use them.

What's wrong with this way of talking (and thinking)?

'Growth' and 'Development'

If I say that Janice has grown, meaning by this that she has *physically* grown, then it seems in many contexts to be an entirely descriptive proposition. I might be observing that she is taller or heavier or whatnot; in short, I am saying that a physical *size* change has occurred and, moreover, on that parameter of physical size, Janice has gone in the direction 'larger' rather than 'smaller'. All harmless enough but, of course, being a descriptive proposition, it is, as it stands, and in and of itself, neutral when it comes to setting any moral direction for one's interaction, professional or otherwise, with Janice. One could, I suppose, have a schooling aims proposal to do with physical growth and say something like:

> Schools should aim at fostering students' physical growth.

Meaning what ? Well, meaning: try to help them get taller or heavier or whatnot. Silly sort of aim you might think but at least it is fairly clear. This concept of physical growth is, I think, the core notion that the metaphor of 'growth' (as used in educational aims and curriculum discussions and, as noted, in some

other professions) rests on. The trouble is that as soon as we go beyond this core conception to the metaphorical derivatives of it, we find crucial *differences* that make for the emptiness of the slogans using such metaphors. How so? Let's take an example to see. Say that a principal were to write in a newsletter to parents some such assertion as this:

> As a result of our survey of parents, a key feature of the coming year will be an increased focus on the emotional growth of our early childhood pupils.

We have two key words here, 'emotional' and 'growth'. This looks to be a straightforward counterpart of the core idea of physical growth except that this time it is emotional, and not physical, growth spoken of. Appearances mislead however. In the everyday sense of the phrase that we had as our core notion, we had some sort of size parameter in mind and it was fairly clear what counted as growth on that parameter – a *bigger* size: more height, more weight or whatever. In the case of talk of emotional 'growth' things are trickier. 'Emotional' picks our parameter out (or perhaps a cluster, or family, of more individualized parameters). And, knowing that growth is being advocated at least tells us that *change* on that parameter is wanted – one can't 'grow' in *any* sense by staying the same. So far, so good; but that is as far as the good news goes with this metaphor. The crucial problem is what *sort* of change upon some emotional parameter or other is to be granted the honorific label 'growth'?

One could try to run with a feature of the core physical idea of growth and just say: '*More of* (whatever) counts as growth in (whatever)' as we would say more height counts as growth in height. Paradoxes abound however. Let me select as an example of an emotional parameter: racial intolerance. According to the above idea, emotional growth on the parameter of racial intolerance would be *more* racial intolerance! I doubt that this would be what the principal had in mind. Some of you might feel that I've played a trick here and that the trick is betrayed by the negating prefix 'in' in '*in*tolerant'. The *real* parameter is tolerance, you might say, and accuse me of a perverse negative labelling in terms of its opposite, intolerance. Thus, if tolerance is the real parameter then growth on it will be *more* tolerance. Nope, won't work; that is just muddled. Why?

First, it is not as if tolerance and intolerance are two distinct emotional parameters; rather, they are opposite ends or directions along the *same* parameter. More intolerance is less tolerance and so on. So, going *which* way on that joint parameter is to count as growth? There is no automatic answer.

Again, you might disagree and insist that, because it is 'tolerance' and its negation '*in*tolerance', getting more tolerance is going in the positive direction and more intolerance is going in a negative direction thus the former is growth and the latter regression. Nope; nothing of importance here hangs on which end of the parameter gets labelled with the primary term and which with the negation of that term.

To see this, try another emotional parameter: hatred and non-hatred. Here the grammatically primary term is 'hatred' with the negative being '*non*-hatred'. So, following the advice of the objector in the above paragraph, emotional growth on this parameter would be more hatred.

In short, neither end of any emotional parameter has the sort of inbuilt 'growth' direction favouring it in a parallel to the way that growth on a simple physical parameter like height means getting taller. The metaphor is misleading.

You might feel that this is a lot of philosophical fussing of the worst sort and that 'everyone knows' what constitutes emotional growth: more tolerance, less hatred and so on. Nope; the above is *not* mere fussing and is rather important as an antidote to some dangerously simple-minded tendencies in educational (and some other professional) discourse. How so?

The first thing to note is that, although there might be considerable agreement as to what counts as 'growth' on many emotional parameters, there will be others which are controversial. For instance, does it count as emotional 'growth' for a child to become increasingly proud about getting an 'A', or a merit certificate, or winning a race at the school swimming carnival? People will be in dispute about the moral worth of such feelings of pride. What can be said in the face of such disagreement? It's not as if either party in the dispute is in factual error in the way that a 'flat-earther' is. The dispute is a *moral* one about what sorts of emotional qualities are good ones for people to have. It is dangerously simple-minded to think that there is some sort of 'simple fact of the matter' as to what is emotional growth and that everyone knows those facts. Best that all concerned realize that moral *judgement* is involved.

Even more dangerous is when there is not much actual raging controversy and a sort of in-the-background moral 'taken for grantedness' is going on. I'll switch to a related notion, development and, in particular, *social* development, for my example. At one time it was almost uniformly agreed that being patriotic, having a special commitment to one's country was the better end of the patriotism/non-patriotism parameter of social change to be at. Thus, a person becoming more patriotic would count as becoming more socially developed on that parameter. There would now be more criticism of such views on the grounds that such nationalism is a sort of selfish and dangerous 'tribalism' and the view that it is more socially *developed* to be less, not more, patriotic would be more prevalent than in the past. Never mind what the merits of either view might be, the point is that for *any* view to be soundly held it has to have been subjected to probing criticism and this is unlikely to occur if it is just being automatically assumed by everyone to be right. Whether increasing or decreasing patriotism counts as social development is something more likely to be deliberated upon now than it would have been in the past when everyone just automatically 'knew' that patriotism was right (or, put in our terms, that a more patriotic citizen was more socially developed than a less patriotic one). As you would realize, however, even if this one is now more contested, we have our own taken-for-granted assumptions concerning other matters.

So, in summary, coherent talk of 'growth' (or 'development') requires *clarification* of which parameters one is speaking of (and finer-grained clarification than just the generic 'emotional' or 'intellectual') and a moral *judgement* as to which end of the parameter is the good end. Slogans that are unclear and have their correctness taken for granted are no substitute for carefully thought-through views on complex matters.

'Maximizing Potential'

Before leaving this family of misused 'buzz words', I'd like to touch on propositions like one of those earlier listed:

> My personal goal as a teacher is to try to maximize the individual potential of every child that I teach.

All of what has been said above about 'growth' and 'development' applies again here but with one additional twist.

Presumably an individual has some potential for kindness *and* some potential for cruelty so is one to take it that, if one is to maximize his potential across-the-board then it should be each that is maximized? But that is *impossible*. As explored in the last sub-section, the two are simply opposite ends of the same parameter and someone becoming more kind is the same thing as that person becoming less cruel. One *can't* maximize *every* potential because of such clashes. So, as you would guess from the foregoing, some moral judgements have to be made and, as with 'growth', this involves deciding *which* end of, say, the kindness/cruelty parameter is the good end.

Problems with the 'maximize potential' slogan go beyond this though. Even if one has morally determined, for each 'potential' parameter, which end is the good end, there will *still* be clashes. Let's be conventional and say that kindness is judged the good end of the kindness/cruelty parameter. Say also that truth-telling, or honesty, is judged to be the good end of the honesty/lying parameter. Wonderful, you might think; so, if we morally endorsed maximizing Jenna's potential on these parameters, then we would maximize her potential to be kind and to be honest (just what right-thinking teachers would want). What does that proposal mean? Presumably: 'make' her as kind as possible and as honest as possible. But this is incoherent because of possible moral clash situations where to tell the truth is to be *un*kind. Maximizing her honesty is in clash with maximizing her kindness. So, the upshot of this is that one has to again make moral judgements about the *relative* importance of various qualities that a student might be brought to have (or to have more than at present). Priorities have to be set for the 'maximize individual potential' proposal to even start to make sense. So, if one thought that kind lies should sometimes be told, then one would not favour *maximizing* her potential for honesty; some lesser commitment would be sought. The tools of thought presented in earlier chapters should help you to work out these priorities.

Indeed, further priorities have to be set even when clashes of the above sort are *not* present. Even were one to have a consistent set of 'potentials' in mind, say, for simplicity's sake, ones that were simply rank-prioritized in terms of importance, one *can't* maximize them all simply because there are *too many*.

You and I have all sorts of 'potentials'. We each have the potential to be better (and to be worse) at distinguishing leaf types than now. Same with balancing small pebbles in a pile, riding a unicycle, whistling out of the corner of the mouth, cooking omelettes and so on. The list is huge. One simply hasn't the time to maximize *every* potential – even if one knew which direction counted as better and even if they were ranked in order of importance. (And note that some of these 'potentials' will seem to be of trivial importance – neither a good thing nor a bad thing to any extent much at all.) Obviously some picking and choosing will have to occur. But how, and on what basis?

You might think that once one has rank-ordered one's priorities, and knows what 'potential' one judges to be more important than what, it would be a simple matter of maximizing one's top priority and then, if there is time left over, moving down to one's second priority and so on. I doubt, however, if that is indeed a strategy you would wish to espouse. To make a similar point to one from earlier chapters, most 'potentials' are able to be fulfilled to a greater or lesser *extent*; it is all a matter of the *degree* of their satisfaction. Call a score of ten out of ten (in some chosen direction on some parameter of possible change) a maximization of that 'potential'. However, not all *failures* to maximize are equal; seven is closer to one's ideal than four. This constitutes a complication for the above-contemplated 'working down the list' strategy. Let me illustrate. Say that one had prioritized Judith's potentials as follows:

1. Competent spelling;
2. Clarinet playing;
3. Avoidance of superstition.

And so on.

Never mind for the moment whether you would have these priorities or not and never mind just how they might get clarified. Say that Judith is already a fairly competent speller (a score of 7, say) and that she is a child prodigy at clarinet playing (a score of 9.5, say) but that she has had a Christian upbringing and thus has a tendency to superstitious belief (Christianity being, we will say, so classified) and so is currently rating 2 out of 10 on that parameter. Say further that, although the ranking is as shown, the decline in importance from 1 to 3 is not immense. Now, at 7, we clearly do not have 'potential' 1 maximized. We could devote time and energy to moving it as far towards 10 as possible but let's assume that to do that would consume all of our available resources. That would mean ignoring 'potentials' 2 and 3 in our list. 2 might not be a source of concern as she is close to 10 anyway but what of 3? Given the closeness of deemed importance, despite the lower rank order, would a better strategy be to work on undermining

her religious faith because of her comparatively low score on that superstition-avoidance 'potential'?

Perhaps so. Indeed mightn't we want to have a complex strategy of intervention on a number of parameters depending on the importance of this, that and the other 'potential' and on the current *degree* of satisfaction of them? I suspect so.

There is one further complication which I wish to mention. Perhaps any aim of maximizing some 'potential' should not just be governed by its importance and by Judith's current score on it but by the *feasibility* of one's intervention. If she now scores 6 and with massive diversion of resources one might be able to increase that to 6.1 then is the 'game worth the candle' even if it is a hugely important 'potential' being worked on? Having a near futile aim is, well, a bit futile!

Accountability

Although it crops up in many professions, I will again begin my illustration of the problems with this concept by discussing the way it crops up in the teaching profession.

There seems to be an increased trend towards demanding that schools, teachers and so forth 'be more accountable'. First thing to note is that there is no such thing as being accountable *simpliciter*; one is always accountable *to someone or other* and *for something or other.* Sometimes this is *to* society as a whole *for* the achievement of certain outcomes (as in much current discussion of literacy and numeracy benchmarks). Sometimes it is to parents for their child's educational 'progress'. Sometimes it is accountability for some matters to some people and for other matters to other people. Much as was the case with 'needs' etc., accountability is a relational concept, not a simple predicate. (A related turn of phrase with similar conceptual un-packing, and problems, is: 'answerable to'.)

One difficulty with ignoring this is that one gets empty sloganizing. I have seen things along these lines in mission statements and the like: 'The school acknowledges that it is accountable to parents, students and the wider community'. On *what* matters is the school to be accountable to parents, on what *other* ones to students, on what *further* ones to the wider community? Unless things are clarified the commitment is empty babble. As we will see, on a more than minimal interpretation, one can't be accountable for *one* thing to *more than one* group. This might not be immediately apparent so let me spend some time on the point. First, we'll need a bit more analysis of the concept of accountability. If I am accountable to you for eating my greens at dinner, then what does this amount to? At the very least, it means that I owe you an account of my greens-eating or otherwise at dinner. You are being granted the right to know what I did. If this is all that is meant, then certainly one could be accountable in that sense to more than one person. But this is a minimal sense. There is also usually an element of granted power and control involved in accountability talk. In this stronger sense, in the case above, you are, in effect, being granted the *power* to determine what I eat at dinner (at least in part, that is, as to whether I eat greens or not and maybe concerning how big a portion

I am to eat). My reporting to you, my giving an account of my activity at dinner concerning greens-eating, is merely information for you to use in your legitimate *control* of me. Perhaps if I have done what you wished, then I will be praised or rewarded; if not, I might be chastised or punished in some way. If one takes this latter, more robust, sense of accountability in which some sort of *power* is granted to the person or group to whom one is accountable for something, then one can't be accountable to more than one group for the same thing. Go back to the greens case. How could I be accountable to both you and Jeremiah for eating my greens at dinner? You might disagree with Jeremiah as to whether I should be eating greens at all or, if so, what sort, how much and so on. I can't serve two masters if their demands conflict. So unless it is just a minimal reporting that is in mind, one can't be accountable for some aspect of one's activity to more than one master.

Further, distinguish another two distinct types of accountability. Matrix style, this distinction 'cuts across' the above one between: 'mere reporting of information to someone about some activity' and: 'holding oneself responsible to someone who has legitimate power over you concerning some activity'. To illustrate, let's draw the distinction within the former, minimal, sense of accountability. For me to be accountable to you in this sense is for you to have a right to know what I'm doing; but what sort of right? In an earlier chapter we distinguished a descriptive sense of 'rights' from a moral sense. The former was when it was a legal right; the latter was when it was a moral right – ditto with accountability. It could be that I have a legal duty of reporting my activity to you; or it could be that I have a moral duty of reporting my activity to you. The same distinction can be drawn within the stronger, power-granting, sense of accountability. It could be that you have been legally granted that power over me; or it could be that you have been morally granted that power over me. Both might apply, or neither, or just one or the other.

In summary, if you must talk of accountability, then be sure that it is *clear* who is accountable in *what way*, for *what*, to *whom*. Again though, my suggestion is to simply drop the word. If, say, by asserting that a school should be accountable to its parent body for the school's level of academic success in the curriculum against national benchmarks you mean that the parent body collectively should have power to control the school concerning that level of success, then say just that in so many words. And note that this seems to grant parents all sorts of corollary powers. Say that some poor results were partly because of a poor principal's leadership. Presumably if the whip is in the collective hand of the parents, then they should be able to move to improve that success by firing the principal and hiring one with more promise. Or, if it is lack of tuition time that is the problem, then the parents should be able to get that increased and if that involves students and teachers working longer hours then so be it, the parents have spoken. And so on. (And if you don't allow these corollary powers, then what on earth would you mean by saying that parents should have *power* over the school concerning, in our case, academic success?) If such a power claim *is* meant, then *explicitly* saying this 'up front' instead of spouting platitudes about accountability to parents would certainly make it much clearer just what was being proposed and thus would

present a clearer target for critical challenge. Note what a different scenario it would be if all that was meant by: 'accountable to' in this context was our minimal sense and the suggestion was merely that parents should be *told* about the school's academic success but the school didn't have to respond to a lack thereof in any way that parents might wish.

Summary Remarks on Babble

The message from the above analyses is that it is delusional to think that a range of questions about what various professionals should do, can be answered in any straightforward way by utilization of sloganistic babble of the sort considered. Our 'accountability' discussion should be fresh in your mind and the earlier slogans amount to something like:

> Work out what mix of qualities (to what extent and with what relative importance) you think it is worthwhile for an individual to have and then act in whatever way gives you the best overall result concerning that mix.

Well, whoopee! That's not a very helpful piece of guidance in response to any question – all the hard work remains ahead. It is about as helpful as saying: 'You should do the right thing' in response to the query: 'What should I do?' from someone faced with a complex moral problem.

Murk

In the above sections, I have argued that a number of 'buzz words' and slogans that crop up in professional discourse are so incoherent, as they are ordinarily deployed anyway, that it might be best to simply avoid them. There are some other slogans which are also troublesome, not because they're incoherent but because they are *obscure*. In this section I wish to look at some of these. As I said at the start of the chapter, I am not attempting discussion of an exhaustive list of these, or even an exhaustive discussion of those that I do talk about. Rather, what I go through below is meant to be illustrative of an analytical intellectual approach to such murk. Hopefully, the following sections will help you to be attuned to the sorts of problem that I have in mind and you will be able to transfer such scrutiny across to other instances of murk that crop up in your own professional discourse.

Equity

There are a number of related terms which are used in the discussions that I have in mind, terms like 'equity', 'equality', 'fairness' and so on. I will focus on the first of these.

It might be thought that if a term is thought obscure, then clarification of it is a simple matter of looking it up in a dictionary. Regrettably, things are rarely that simple. Let's try such tracking of a web of connected concepts in a dictionary – starting with 'equity'. In my edition of Webster's, this notion is unpacked by reference to fairness or impartiality or being just. And, as this has replaced murk by more murk, following a couple of these further down the definitional trail, we get appeal to the notions: 'unbiased' and 'un-prejudiced'. And, if, to resolve this further murk, we track one antonym ('bias') we get: 'that which causes the mind to incline towards a particular object or course' and, tracking 'prejudice', we get the suggestion that it is a view that is held without proof or competent evidence – although it seems 'valid' to one's own mind (I use 'shudder' quotes because this is not like our use of 'valid' when we were discussing the logical merits of an argument).

Mostly, this is not much help in that all we get is an extra list of labels that are just as murky as what we started with. It is simply not clear for most of them just what precisely is involved. It is not as if any of them are 'double-Dutch', we *sort of* grasp what is meant but then that was true of 'equity' as well. The point is that what we are getting is not at a level of conceptual sophistication that is adequate to the demands of serious thought; things are still too sloppy.

The very last bit of our dictionary paper chase may look somewhat more promising in that you might think that you have a good grip on what counts as *proof* and *competent evidence* and, even if not, feel that scientists (or, perhaps, philosophers of science) could swiftly render advice. Perhaps so, but think about our proposition types: this latter tactic sounds fine for pinning down what counts as competent evidence for *descriptive* propositions but less so for *moral* propositions. As we have seen in the book to date, one might be able to 'prove' a moral proposition in the sense that we can link it to some premises from which it validly follows. And, for the descriptive premises forming that case, one could happily talk of competent evidence (as pinned down by appeal to scientists perhaps) but what of the *moral* premises? Things are much trickier. We will explore the status of moral propositions more in the next chapter but, as things stand so far, it is by no means clear that the sort of moral principles upon which (as premises) you might basing your moral (conclusion) stance are matters upon which 'competent evidence and proof' bear in any objective sense of the words that parallels what applies for descriptive propositions.

As for the 'inclination of the mind' offering that we got at one point from the dictionary, it seems no help at all in our context as *any* moral principles you have will presumably incline you towards some course of action – they are, after all, what we were speaking of as *motivating* principles when we first introduced them.

So, not much help really and, as usual, *all the hard work of conceptual clarification lies ahead of you* even once you have consulted the dictionary. Dictionaries aside then, what are we to make of 'equity' slogans? As noted above,

our treatment won't be exhaustive but simply illustrative of some issues for further thought.

Part of the idea seems to be something like *equal treatment* – to treat people differently is inequitable. Everyone's favourites here are various groups like black people, women, old people, homosexuals, physically disabled/handicapped people, poor people, Jews and so on. The suggestion is that to treat these folk equitably means that they should be treated *equally to* any other folk.

As a first approximation, then, our analytical offering would be to suggest that treating people equitably is to treat them equally. You might think that this all sounds very promising but it simply won't do. Why so?

Are we to take it that treating Jim and Julie equally is doing exactly the same thing to/for Jim and Julie no matter what those individuals are like and no matter what the circumstances in question are? But a moment's thought makes this seem to be a daft suggestion.

Say Jim is drowning and Julie isn't; on the face of it, unless we throw each a life raft (or neither) we would be acting inequitably (as above analysed). Or, say Julie is a convicted fraud and Jim isn't; presumably equity, unpacked as equal treatment, enjoins that each should go to prison (or neither). Clearly if by 'equal treatment' we mean identical treatment 'regardless', that would be so but that is not what anyone wanting to wield the murky term 'equity' would have in mind, so a more sophisticated analysis is in order.

Such a more sophisticated go at things is to suggest that to treat people equitably is to treat them equally *with respect to those parameters relevant to the decision situation at hand* (and to not take account of other factors or features of the individuals). What is meant by this? Well, when it comes to jailing people as frauds, or not, Jim and Julie should be treated on the basis of their status as frauds or not and nothing else. The only relevant parameter is whether one is a fraud or not. This would be equal treatment for each in the sense that the very same fraudulence test would applied to each and the same punishment would apply to each, contingent upon them being a fraud. Irrelevant to the equitable application of the 'jail frauds' principle to them will be that Jim is a black Jew or that Julie is a paraplegic lesbian.

The key idea here is that we are unpacking 'equity' as not just crude identity of treatment 'no matter what' but as treatment that appeals to, and only appeals to, those parameters deemed *relevant* to the case at hand.

Again, this might look OK at first glance but appearances deceive. Jim, we have said, is black. Presumably, in accordance with the usual rhetoric surrounding 'equity', it would be inequitable to fail to hire Jim and to instead hire Jade, a Caucasian, if that was just because Jim was black and despite them rating equally on the criteria advertised for the job. So far, so good; but change the story a little bit and make the job one on the staff of the Ku Klux Klan. And, forgetting for the moment that current law would probably forbid this, say that the ad for the job stipulated as one of the necessary criteria: 'Must be Caucasian'. Here, by reference

to a criterion relevant to the job, Jim would miss out and Jade would not. By reference to our analysis, this is equitable but would you be happy to call it so?

Now try it the other way around. In Australia, at least, some aboriginal organizations can legally insist upon aboriginality as a criterion for appointment to some 'culturally sensitive' jobs. What is usually said of such situations is that the organizations are still complying with equity demands because aboriginality is just as much a qualification for that sort of job as, say, being able to drive a truck is for a job as a truck driver.

So what, you might think, what is wrong with that? One possible problem is that the *very same argument* seems to apply to the Ku Klux Klan case as well. Say that the job involves lots of anti-black and white supremacist sermonizing; it is quite plausible that Jim's blackness is an impediment to satisfactorily carrying out the demands of the job.

In short, it is not at all clear that you could consistently consider the aboriginal organization employment conditions equitable and not the Ku Klux Klan ones – at least according to the unpacking of 'equitable' that we have offered so far.

You might also want to think about the case of so-called reverse discrimination. Some organizations insist upon a certain quota of people of some under-represented sort in their job profile. So, as an example, one Australian political party has a quota for female candidates such that Jill might get to be the candidate over Jonas simply because of her sex and with no suggestion that she will thereby make a better parliamentarian than Jonas would. Similarly, many American universities and colleges once had (and may still have) student intake quotas concerning various minority groupings in society that were under-represented in higher education. Is this equitable? It certainly *isn't* in any unpacking which appeals to *equality of treatment* on parameters *relevant to the tasks at hand*.

Perhaps the idea behind equity is more one of equality of *opportunity*, not equality of *treatment*. Let's tease things out a bit. Say that the college has an entrance examination for some course that is in much demand and that its offers for places in the course are made on the basis of one's score on that test with the highest scores getting offers and then down the range until the course quota is filled. In one sense this is equality of opportunity in that anyone can sit that test, they all get equal time during the test and so on. But what if one comes from a background that doesn't have English (say) as a first language, or one that has an anti-educational socio-cultural climate so that one's educational level at the time of sitting the test is below what it might otherwise have been. It might, indeed, be below the level of someone of poorer genetic endowment with respect to intelligence but with a more robust educational background. In a sense, such a person is educationally handicapped and it's akin to letting amputees and the fully-legged all run a race and then rewarding winners. So, perhaps somehow one should apply handicaps in the racing sense to the test and place different score demands on people sitting it depending on the sorts of factors mentioned above. Would that be equitable treatment? I think that it is more like what people have in mind when wishing to wield the murky notion of equity in scenarios like entry

to universities. In effect, one is trying to compensate for previous differences in experience that make members of some groups less able than others (or than they might otherwise have been) in whatever the test is measuring.

Mind you, one has to be cautious here. There is enough to the 'nature' side of the 'nature/nurture' dispute to say that, regardless of similarity of experiences and so on, some people are simply genetically less intelligent than others. This is hardly their fault any more than an educationally impoverished upbringing is their fault. So, should test results be somehow further adjusted for this? At this point it is becoming very unclear just what discriminatory function a multiply hedged-about test could perform. Make the 'playing field' totally level and presumably everyone will get the same score. The lesson from the above is that 'equality of opportunity' is by no means a very clear offering in analysis of what is meant by 'equity' and, if this path is to be explored further, then much intellectual sweat would have to be expended on getting it clear to all concerned just what was meant.

We could continue teasing out aspects of the notion of equity with more elaborate analyses but I suggest to you that, if the task is to find out the 'real' meaning of 'equity', then first, there probably isn't any such precise meaning that isn't without puzzling anomalies where you would hesitate about the application of the word and second, it is a waste of your time anyway to bother.

It is the second of these points that is the more important.

Ask yourself why you even wanted to know what equity amounted to. I would think that it would be because you are wrestling with some vexing professional ethical issue where it looked as if some of the options might be usefully classified as equitable ones or not. So, you might have generated a little three-line argument along the lines of, we'll say, one should always act equitably, hiring a black over a white in virtue of skin colour is not equitable so, one should never hire a black over a white in virtue of skin colour. But an early demand upon our arguments was that they be *clear* – in particular, that *key* ideas like those in the moral premise principle be clear. And, as ought to be blatantly apparent by now, 'equity' is not immediately clear and it would be no easy task to craft a satisfactory working definition. Say that you did pin the concept down to your satisfaction. Never mind what emerged and let's just say that your analysis of 'equity' was 'XYZ'. You could, of course, set this up as your own working definition of 'equity'; and, so long as 'XYZ' itself was clear and all concerned kept in mind just what *you* meant by 'equity' and didn't keep mentally writing in their own interpretive tendencies instead, an enquiry could proceed satisfactorily enough.

The trouble is, though, that 'equity' is a term whose obscurity is such that fairly different threads of meaning can be prominent in various people's minds. In short, it is asking a lot of participants in an enquiry to expect them to keep in mind *your* stipulated interpretation of it as 'XYZ ' and not slide away to some *other* meaning that is in *their own* mind. Indeed, given the murkiness of the concept, you might *yourself* even slide around between the XYZ interpretation that you have crafted after some tightening up and others that were murkily floating around in your mind at some earlier stage.

The upshot is that it is sometimes easier and wiser to simply drop obscure buzz words like 'equity' and, instead, carry out your enquiry in terms of whether, say, XYZ should always be pursued.

To go back to one of our examples from earlier, don't bother to fuss about whether the Ku Klux Klan hiring the white over the black was equitable or not, just focus on whether it was morally defensible or not. Then, pursuing this issue, focus upon on *clear* features of the situation (and the presence or absence of equity is *not* clear). So, although most of the job's tasks were skin colour indifferent (typing speeches, constructing crosses, buying matches etc.) one of them (inciting feelings of white supremacy) was not. I put it to you that, in this case, the hiring issue will quickly segue into an enquiry into the morality of the *job* itself that the people are being hired for. And none of that is going to be much helped by focusing on 'equity' (whatever that might mean).

In short, to avoid lots of diversions devoted to making sure that everyone doesn't get at cross-purposes with each other by having different interpretive slants on what 'equity' amounts to, I suggest that you simply drop the word and put your moral point (and have others put theirs) directly in terms of whatever you more or less had in mind and were using 'equity' as a tag for. That way, you will get more directly to the issues that are of importance to you without having to divert to flailing around trying to clarify some murk.

Respect

We have touched upon this one in our 'lying nurse' example but lots of professions waffle on about respecting clients, or cultures, or beliefs, or ... ; quite what does this come down to?

My message here will be the same as with everything in this part of the chapter: what is meant is obscure, the obscurity can cause confusion and mis-communication, clarification is pointlessly time-consuming and it is better to just avoid the jargon, even if it gives you a nice warm glow inside. Why not just put your point using whatever concepts you would appeal to were you to be asked what you meant when you spoke of respect? Given the potential that there is for misunderstanding, the elements of that definitional story would probably have to emerge sooner or later and it might as well be sooner and pre-emptively of questions being asked as to what was meant.

So that you can see why I think that there is a problem with 'respect', I will offer some analytical comments. I am not going to give a laborious conceptual analysis of 'respect' in its multiple applications and meanings. What I will do instead is choose one scenario for one profession and suggest that similar sorts of problems (to those arising in our illustration) would arise also in many other scenarios and professions.

Consider the case of a social worker, Paul, working in an indigenous community which has still retained much of its traditional belief system concerning the workings of the world, religion and morality. Paul is instructed by his superiors

that, in carrying out his work, he must be respectful of these traditional beliefs. Just what is he being instructed to do?

Two things are worth distinguishing immediately: how one *thinks* is one thing and how one *behaves* is another.

On the face of it, respect looks like a *mental* quality, a mental attitude towards something or someone. So, on this line of analysis, Paul is being instructed as to what to *think*. What, then, would count as Paul engaging in respectful *thinking* concerning these traditional beliefs?

One thing that can be swiftly ruled out is the suggestion that Paul is being instructed to think their beliefs to be true (if what we have in mind are descriptive propositions) or to share their ethical code (for moral propositions). I will focus just on the case of descriptive propositions, although some of the discussion applies to moral ones as well.

The *descriptive* components of their belief system might be simply false, or, at the very least, without any clear warrant as true. It is somewhat strange, indeed futile, to ask Paul to override his rational faculties and adopt a set of beliefs that he realizes to be false or without justification. Such belief shifts are not subject to such imperatives. Even if you told me that I would die unless I believe that the earth is flat, I can't just sit down and change my belief as an act of will. So whatever else mental respect might involve, it had better allow that one might 'respect' another's descriptive beliefs *despite* thinking them false or irrational.

It is worth raising, and rubbishing (without intellectual 'respect' in any sense perhaps) one view that sometimes gets appealed to here. It amounts to a form of relativism about truth. So, we get this sort of thing said: 'Paul should realize that, although the indigenous beliefs are beliefs that are not true *for him*, they are true *for them*'. Even if initially attractive to you, you should realize that this is ridiculous as soon as you begin to push things a bit. Say that one of the traditional beliefs is that the earth is flat (and that Paul shares the modern scientific view that it is 'round', or, to be more precise, an oblate spheroid). Is it being claimed that he should believe that, although it is true for him that the world is round, for them, it is true that the world is flat. This seems contradictory. If to say that a belief is true is to say that it captures some aspect of what reality is really like then, as the world can't be both flat and round, saying that the indigenous belief system (or that particular bit of it) is true for them can't be using 'true' in any such ordinary way. (Note that one could allow that someone *thinks* something to be true without at all being committed to the view that it *is* true.) Given this perversity of usage, I suggest that you don't even consider confusing the thinking of all concerned by talking in this 'true for him but not for me' type of way. There is a considerable literature on the topic of relative truth (including a book by me from this publisher) but it is a quite technically complex topic and I would suggest discretion is the better part of intellectual valour here.

So, if respecting their belief system's *descriptive* propositions can't mean believing all of them to be true (or 'true for them') because some will be false and/or irrational, what could be meant?

All that might be meant is thinking that, although some of what they believe is false, nonetheless, that is *their* business and it is no part of Paul's business to ... well, what? If he thinks their belief to be false then, as we have seen, presumably that is OK. So, perhaps the idea is that he is to believe that people should not have their false beliefs challenged, that they should be able to continue to be deluded without being made aware of why their beliefs are false. I have said that 'respect' is a muddly notion but even in some fairly un-analysed and intuitive sense, this sounds more like an exercise in patronizing, than respecting, someone's beliefs. Why should they be deliberately kept from knowing the full story on some matter (the shape of the earth, in our illustration)? Why would one want Paul to believe that such a policy of continuing their ignorance is a good thing?

Perhaps the motivation here is that, if indigenous believers were apprised of the correct story, then they might change their views. But so what? Isn't the move from ignorance to knowledge an intellectual step forward? Perhaps the idea is that 'ignorance is bliss', that an abandonment of false belief might lead to a loss of cultural self-confidence, social breakdown or whatever. It is not clear, however, that a culture based on falsehood is worth preserving. And on the debate goes.

My point is that it looks lovely to say that Paul should 'respect' their (descriptive and false) beliefs but if the unpacking of that goes down a path such as the above, then the 'loveliness' of what he is being asked to think becomes highly contentious.

In any event, how is it a proper professional ethical demand upon Paul to try to dictate his *attitude* to the question: 'Should people be able to continue in false belief without any attempt to apprise them of the objections to these beliefs?'.

In short, if expecting or demanding that Paul respect others' beliefs amounts to trying to constrain Paul's own *thinking*, his views as to the proper reaction to false believers, then is such attempted censorship of his thought really able to be sanitized by calling it a demand for respectful thinking?

As I have said, all that I intend in all of the above is to 'start some hares running' and suggest that demanding that Paul be respectful of others' (descriptive, but false) beliefs looks odd if it is a change in his *mental attitude* that we are demanding.

Perhaps, though, it is not respectful *thinking* that is demanded but respectful *behaviour* (including verbal behaviour). So, even if Paul thinks that the indigenous belief system is primitive rubbish and that only the wilfully dimwitted would not have chucked it on the scrapheap of false theories long ago, he had better, qua respectful social worker, keep those thoughts to himself. It might be that, despite the mental attitude flavour of 'respect' talk, trying to work out what sort of *thinking* is being demanded of Paul is a blind alley. Perhaps it is not mind control but *behaviour* control that is intended. Even if it is a good idea for a deluded indigenous group to have their false descriptive propositional beliefs challenged at some stage, by someone (perhaps those in educational institutions), it might be insisted that Paul, *qua social worker*, should be no part of such intellectual remediation. If you like, it is not so much that Paul should respect their false

descriptive beliefs as it is that he should *treat* the believers in a certain way – with respect, so to speak.

This looks like progress; at least we have some sort of grip on what might be meant here. The analytical elements that seem to have emerged so far are that Paul is not to *say* that their beliefs are false (even if he were to give reasons) or behave in any other manner that suggests that the beliefs are false. Perhaps though, it is a weaker suggestion that, although he cannot *initiate* such remarks, he is able to offer them *if asked* things like: 'Do you think, as we do, that the earth is flat?'. It is hard to see what he could do but say: 'No'. Perhaps he is supposed to dissemble as to the belief-worthiness of various views and offer something more 'diplomatic' like: 'No, but of course that is just my point of view and I recognize that there are other beliefs, like yours, that are equally legitimate'. But this is to ask him to lie in his teeth. The belief that the earth is not flat is *not just* his view and the rival 'flat-earth' view struggles to be called 'equally legitimate' if by that is meant anything like that it satisfies defensible standards for the justification of belief claims.

So, is he just to say: 'No' (and nothing more) on the grounds that it would be disrespectful to say anything further? Perhaps so, but perhaps this is being, in another sense, *dis*-respectful. Again, it sounds close to being patronizing in that it sounds like the topic of the falsehood (even the near certain falsehood in our scenario case) of their beliefs is one to be avoided as, well, what? – too threatening to their self-image, or self-respect, or something of that sort?

Anyway I hope that the above 'talking aloud on the page' analytical exercise illustrates how a fairly common professional 'buzz word' is problematic in ways that can be simply overlooked by thoughtless sloganizing in its terms. As you should realize, the above is only illustrative and by no means constitutes a thorough analysis. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter and, as I have said, to be avoided anyway by simply *saying what it is that one wants Paul to do using less junk-jargon.*

Tolerance

Closely related to the above 'respect' 'buzz word' is 'tolerance'. In a number of professions, practitioners are exhorted to be tolerant of the viewpoints of others that are different to their own and sometimes to be tolerant of behaviour that acts out such beliefs and, especially, values. I won't offer even the (incomplete) level of analysis given above for 'respect' and will but point to some of the things that would have to be thought about were you to go down such an analytical path.

> (In order to be tolerant) should one permit any action to occur so long as it is *conscientiously held to be right* by the agent concerned (or the culture/group/ religion of that agent)?

> What if such an action is wrong according to *your* values?

What if it is also wrong according to some *broader* grouping (like a society or a nation)?

Does it make any difference whether it is a *legal* action or not?

What of that special sort of action, speech? Should tolerance conceived of as the demand that one allow just *anything* to be said?

What of thought? Does tolerance demand that we permit *anyone* to think *anything* or should we be able to instil/indoctrinate *some* views?

And so on.

In short, it is just obscure (in a way that is fairly useless as moral guidance) to preach tolerance without a considerable amount being said and if that amount has to be said (for clarity's sake) then why not just say it immediately, say precisely what one has in mind 'up front' and eliminate the dodgy word 'tolerance'? On pain of paradox, *no one* can advocate permitting *any* action at all to occur, few would advocate totally un-restrained speech (although that is, at least, an un-paradoxically coherent position) and many have concerns about permitting people to even *think* whatever they like (say their thoughts will motivate them to bad actions and you have no way of stopping such actions but might have a way of stopping the thoughts ever arising, or continuing, by subjecting them to childhood moral indoctrination, or 're-education' when adults; in such a situation, perhaps one should so indoctrinate).

My point is that these are all huge moral questions that will require much careful thought and such thought is *not* advanced by deployment of vague slogans like: 'We should be tolerant of those who differ from us'. However rosy a glow such vague twaddle engenders, the hard ethical work of thinking things through still lies ahead of you.

Freedom

As I said in Chapter 1, many professional ethical problems arise because the profession is somehow connected with doing things that clash with other individuals' freedom of thought or action or, to use another word I employed then, their autonomy. In this section, I'd like to spend a little time talking about what freedom might amount to. Quite a lot of philosophical sweat has been expended on trying to pin down the concept (or concepts) of freedom and it is by no means in as a bad shape as others considered above and, with a little bit of self-conscious caution, the term is one that can be deployed in enquiries to good intellectual effect.

A good place to start is with the distinction made by the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin in a 1958 work (*Two Concepts of Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford). The distinction is between what are sometimes called '*negative*' and

'*positive*' freedoms. We have spoken of freedom in the context of what to *think* and how to *act* and the positive/negative freedom discussions in the literature have mostly concentrated upon action. As we will shortly see, however, it is a distinction that is useful for our purposes when applied to freedom of thought as well. The distinction has its obscurities but is not a bad tool at all if used carefully.

Put briefly, to have *negative* freedom is to have no externally imposed constraints or forces governing what one does. *Positive* freedom is best thought of as the *ability*, or capacity, to do something. In quick illustration, I have negative freedom to jump to the moon, no one is stopping me, but I am unable to do it, I do not have that positive freedom.

Why the tags: 'positive' and 'negative'? A negative freedom, to jump, say, is an *absence* of various external forces stopping one from acting as one wishes to (or forcing one to do what one does *not* wish to). A positive freedom is the *presence* of a capacity to do some act. And one can have one and not the other. We have seen negative, but not positive, freedom present in the 'jump to the moon' example and one might have positive freedom to get up out of a chair (one is not a quadriplegic, say) but not have negative freedom (the psychiatric nurses have strapped you in place).

Generally speaking, most professional ethical dilemmas concerning freedom are ones that concern *action*, not thought, and *negative* freedom, not positive freedom. In short, many professions involve stopping people doing what they wish, and have capacity, to do. Accordingly, I will first spend a little time on *negative* freedom concerning *action* and then briefly touch upon the other three 'cells' of our cross-cutting matrix of possibilities.

Stopping people doing what they wish to is obviously more salient in some professions than others. In a dramatic way, police are an obvious case but what of others? Rather a lot depends upon how broadly one construes the idea of constraining someone from doing something (or forcing them to do something else). Strapping someone down or grabbing them and physically moving them (manhandled into a police car, say) are obvious ways in which all other options become unavailable. I am, in the sense associated with the concept of positive freedom, still able to stand up (if only I were not strapped down) or walk down the street (if only I were not being shoved into the police car); I am just not (negatively) free to exercise that ability (or positive freedom).

Most professions do not involve much force in this physical sense of the word but what of threats? This scenario is often of this sort: 'Unless you act as I wish you to, you will be punished'. I put it to you that quite a lot of professions involve something of this sort, even if the pill is sugar-coated by euphemism. In one sense, complying with such threats is still an exercise in free choice but in another, it isn't. Consider these two scenarios.

Say that you were tossing up between two options, one of which has rather damaging consequences for you. You see a brawl in which a weaker person is getting hurt (and will soon be seriously hurt) by a stronger person. Though no martial arts expert, you know that if you intervene, you could stop things.

Mind you, you would yourself get a bit hurt in the process. Being of a timid and fearful nature, you decide against intervention. Whatever one might think of the rightness of that choice, it seems to be a clear case of you having negative freedom – no one is dragging you off away from the fight or blocking your intervention. Basically, it looks like you deciding freely, based upon your appraisal of the options and their consequences.

Now change the scenario a little. The 'you' in this scenario comes across someone lying in the gutter bleeding and you are inclined to assist. Then you notice someone else, another bystander seemingly. The other person, 'Bruno' I will call him, moves across to you and says that unless you move on and avoid interference, he will make sure that you get your face rearranged later in a less public place. You decide that discretion is the better part of valour and move on. Later, when the story comes out about the bashing and your presence, rapidly becoming absence, a friend berates you: 'Why didn't you help?'. You answer that you couldn't, Bruno stopped you. In this scenario, did you have negative freedom? In effect, you are claiming that you did not.

Each scenario has two options, one of which is dangerous to you. The main difference for our purposes is that, in the Bruno scenario, the danger has been deliberately added as a feature of one option by human action – the threat.

To cope with all of this and work out if one had negative freedom or not, one would have to do further analytical work. I raise it just to show you that it *might* be plausible to call the Bruno case one of force (and loss of negative freedom) in some extended sense, even if, in another sense, it doesn't seem to fit because the intervention option was not physically blocked off – you *could* still have done it, albeit at the expense of some personal injury later.

So, although not a bad tool, the concept of negative freedom should be used with some caution and it is probably better to say things like: 'In one way I was free but, in another sense, I was forced to leave'.

In each scenario, I made reference to 'your' personality profile and, in particular, to your level of timidity and this moves us nicely into a discussion of grey areas for the idea of *positive* freedom, or ability. *Are* you indeed even *able* to intervene if you are too scared to? Are you 'programmed' by your genetic inheritance and various environmental influences upon you to avoid the intervention option and thus count as 'psychologically disabled' when it comes to being anything but timid? Is it but an *apparent* ability in that, although you are physically capable of carrying out some action, you are not *psychologically* capable of doing so? Note that we do sometimes think of people as psychologically incapable of doing anything other than what they end up doing – with instances being the insane, the drugged or the hypnotized. Although these would be fairly clear-cut cases, perhaps the net for psychological *in*ability should be spread more widely.

What we are beginning to get into here is what is known in the philosophical trade as 'the free-will/determinism' debate. When you avoided trouble in either scenario, were you exercising your powers of free will or were you acting out your psychological programming? And ditto, for that matter, were you to intervene.

There is a vast and readily available literature on this sort of issue (almost any introductory philosophy text will introduce you to the main threads of discussion) and I don't wish to pursue it in its own right in this chapter. My point with the above is simply to say that, much as thinking about what constituted external force or constraint led us into grey areas (the Bruno scenario), so does thinking about the possibility of 'programmed' psychological tendencies lead us to grey areas in the idea of being able, or unable, to do certain things (even if negatively free to do so). Again, if you are going to talk of freedom in considering any of these 'ethical dilemma' types of situations, then caution is the lesson.

The above discussion has addressed two of our matrix cells: negative and then positive freedom concerning *actions*; what of *thought*? I suppose that there are scenarios with people stopped from thinking particular thoughts (negative freedom style) but more frequent are cases of removing, or preventing from ever developing, someone's *capacity* to think certain things. In short, we are denying positive freedom. Counterparts of the strapping down, or even the less clear-cut Bruno case that we used in illustrating loss of negative freedom concerning one's actions are not going to loom large in most professional lives (even if they exist, and don't, upon closer analysis, turn out to be better thought of as cases of removal/prevention of positive freedom). Accordingly, let's focus upon *positive* freedom of *thought* (the capacity/ability to think various things) and the denial of such freedom.

Try this scenario. Isabel is brought up by a fundamentalist religious sect and is schooled and socialized into belief in the religious tenets of that sect. Does she have the ability to think atheistic thoughts? Perhaps not – if by that is meant *seriously consider*, and perhaps move to endorsing, atheism or agnosticism. The issue here is one of what is sometimes called: 'indoctrination' (another somewhat obscure term but probably clear enough for present purposes). As you would predict, the major professional locus for such concerns about freedom of thought is teaching. Nor is it just religious schools that are concerned to instil or reinforce religious beliefs, or values, that are in question here – most schools attempt to instil some moral values even if not religiously based. Moreover, it is not just schools and teachers that come up against (positive) freedom of thought issues. Think back to our discussion of 'respect' and 'tolerance'. Lots of professions' activities come into contact with beliefs and values of other religions, cultures, sub-societal groupings of various sorts and so on. As discussed earlier, there is usually some pressure to be respectful, in some sense(s) of these words, of such alternative views (and, perhaps, of behaviour resulting from them). One common rationale for this is that people should be able to think what they like, especially on such matters as religion and ethics.

One challenge to this sort of rationale comes from the last bit of the above remarks. What if what someone is thinking concerning religion is not so much a set of thoughts that is their *own* as it is a set of thoughts instilled into them *by others*? To be 'respectful' of someone's *own* views on some matter is one thing but perhaps it is another thing to ask one to be 'respectful' of views that are, in

one sense, *not* their own. Perhaps we should *not* treat someone's religious beliefs, say, with professional 'kid gloves' if that person is some sort of victim of their indoctrinators and is unable to seriously entertain any non-theistic views. Indeed, would it be more an act of respect for their mind to try to save such a person from the consequences of them having suffered intellectual abuse, much as we would charge various professionals with the task of 'saving' people from the consequences of physical or sexual abuse? If not, what is the morally significant difference between the two sorts of situation?

I won't pursue matters further but I trust that you can see how issues concerning (positive) freedom of thought (and prior interference with its range) might be something impinging upon quite a few of you, not just teachers (and, presumably, ministers of religion).

So, to close on 'freedom', the two cross-cutting distinctions between freedom of thought and of action and between freedom from external constraint or force (negative freedom) and the capacity or ability to do something (positive freedom) are useful elements in your conceptual framework for the consideration of a number of issues that arise in professional ethics. But, as we saw with some of our 'grey area' scenarios, things can get complicated and we have only touched on some of those complications.

As with earlier considered, and murkier, terms and turns of phrase, my advice here is to work out just what you are trying say and , if you are to use 'freedom', then ensure that it is *sufficiently qualified* to be clear enough for the task at hand. And, when responding to its misuse by others, take some time to seek clarification of just what they might mean.

Rights and Duties

With these two, it is not so much that they are obscure as it is that they are somewhat misused by professionals; so here the murk is more in the mind of the thinker than in the concepts themselves. Nonetheless it is worth just a sketch of the ideas.

First, let me remind you that we drew a distinction way back in Chapter 2 between a legal right and a moral right with the former being a descriptive matter and the latter a moral one. We could similarly draw a distinction between a legal duty and a moral duty. In what follows, I discuss only moral rights and duties. (It would not be terribly hard to transfer the elements of the discussion across to the legal case.)

Say that I asserted that everyone has the (moral) *right* to free speech. What does this amount to? – basically that it is up to, say, me to decide whether to speak or not and, if I speak, to choose what to say. All of this is to be without 'let or hindrance' by anyone else. In effect, to consider me to have that right is to consider speech to be an area of morally legitimate negative freedom for me; when it comes to speaking, all options are for me alone to choose from.

Contrast with that the suggestion that I have a (moral) *duty* to be polite. If it is a moral duty, then that is a (moral) restriction on my (legitimate) exercise

of negative freedom. The option of speaking impolitely is being withdrawn as not a morally legitimate one. There is a little bit of a grey area here concerning negative freedom in that I might still be not *stopped* from speaking impolitely so, in *that* sense, the option is open, but if I do choose to speak impolitely then I will be morally condemned (unless a higher duty enjoined the impoliteness – a complication I turn to in the next section). Whereas if I had the (moral) *right* to free speech, then I could not be held to have acted wrongly if I exercise that right by choosing to be impolite and should not be stopped (again there is a possible complication concerning clashes with more important values). One may not personally be pleased with the choice made but the moral right to free speech is the right to make that choice; the choice is a morally permissible one.

So, in summary, and skipping some complications just mentioned, to judge me to have a moral *right* in some domain is to judge me to have legitimate negative *freedom* of decision in that domain. To judge me to have a moral *duty* in some domain is to *restrict* what it is morally legitimate for me to do in that domain (and might but won't necessarily, involve stopping me from doing anything but whatever it is that is my duty).

I wish to make two further points about this pair of concepts before closing. The *first* is that having a right to X is *incompatible* with having a duty to X. Why? – because the former is freedom talk and the latter is restraint talk. So, for instance, to have the right to life is *precisely the same right* as having the right to death. What it means is that, when it comes to life and death, it is morally legitimately your shot (perhaps literally) to call. In short, such negative freedom means that committing suicide is a legitimate exercise of the moral *right* to *life*. Many people who talk of the right to life do not seem to realize this implication and my suspicion is that they really mean a *duty* to live. So, let's analytically contrast the *right* to life with the *duty* to live. If I have a moral duty to live, then, unlike the case of a right to life, suicide isn't morally legitimate (again, there are complications about overriding a duty by an even more important duty but this complication doesn't affect the point at hand). One can, of course, have both rights and duties *but not about the same thing*. I have found that this is a source of confusion in that many professionals write/talk as if one can have both a right and a duty to do the same thing.

That said, there *is* a conceptual connection between rights and duties (and this is the *second* of my closing points). Your rights, while imposing no duties on *you*, entail duties for *others*. If *you* have a moral *right* to free speech, then a direct entailment of that is that *I* have a moral *duty* to not prevent you from exercising that right. Given that right, it would be wrong (*prima facie*, again, let's ignore the complication of higher moral priorities for now) for me to stop you saying what you please (or stop you remaining silent if that is what you please – one can exercise the right of free speech by being an elective mute). Thus far is uncontroversial; what is more controversial is whether I not only have the duty to (passively) not interfere with your exercise of your right but also the (active) duty to defend, promote and so forth your (negative) freedom of action. It seems

that one can jump different ways on this matter depending on the particular right in question.

A quick sketch I realize, but enough, I hope, to assist some reflective analysis of your moral views.

PS: In some professions it is more common to hear talk of 'rights and responsibilities'; for most purposes, 'responsibility' is interchangeable with 'duty' in such usage.

Final Remarks

So, a summary on *murk*? – simple: things might not be as clear as a superficial glance would take them to be, so spend time to get them clear. Much can be done by slowing an enquiry down and trying to de-'buzz word' it or, at the very least, making sure that things are clarified enough for serious thought to be carried out in their terms.

As for *babble*: avoid it.

Suffice it to say in closing, there is an awful lot of ill-conceptualized thought around the professional ridges that doesn't do much at all to advance the cause of having a sophisticated treatment of complex issues; try to do better, please!!