

# **What do you profess, professor?**

A few thoughts on professors past,  
present and future

An Inaugural Lecture

by Professor Michel Clasquin-Johnson

15 October 2014

Department of Religious Studies and Arabic

University of South Africa

# Introduction

One might think of this as a bar mitzvah.

At the age of thirteen every Jewish boy (and increasingly, every Jewish girl) gets to stand before the congregation, read a section of the Torah in the original Hebrew with as much fluency as he can muster and proudly pronounce "Today I am a man". Now, at the age of fifty-four, I too get to stand before this congregation, read from a text and declare, "Today I am a professor". With less of the pride a thirteen-year old might feel, I hope, but hardly with less apprehension.

"Professor". It has a nice ring to it, one must admit, but what does it mean? Etymologically, a professor is someone who professes something, and to "profess" originally referred to a declaration made by someone about to enter a religious order.<sup>1</sup> This meaning of the term survives in attenuated form as "profession of faith", but in the Middle Ages, a profession was a declaration of intent, a call to action, not a wishy-washy list of statements requiring one's verbal consent. Our earliest ancestors in the professing business did not celebrate a career milestone: they were about to enter into a lifetime of chastity, poverty and obedience. To profess was a serious business.

Since then, the chastity requirements for those about to profess have been lifted, provided one goes about things discreetly. Poverty no longer applies: a professorship may not be a certificate of entry into the upper strata of the kleptocracy, but at least it ensures a comfortable middle-class existence. Obedience, however, has remained in force. At some rarefied level, we enjoy a hypothetical freedom to think whatever we wish and express our thoughts in any form, but at a more down-to-earth level we are constrained by factors far beyond the control of any professor. As a South African professor, the CHE<sup>2</sup> will tell me what to teach and the NRF<sup>3</sup> will tell me what to research. Only within those broad constraints is the professor free to explore the limits of his or her freedom.

As academics, we are all heirs to the great Socrates' assertion that the unexamined life is not worth living.<sup>4</sup> But what of the professor? There seems to be precious little professorial self-examination going on. What does it mean to be a professor today, not only in the eyes of other professors, but in the eyes of the wider world that pays the professor's salary? What should the professor, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, profess? We may even tread on dangerous territory and ask whether the world of the future will feel the need of such creatures as professors. I shall of

---

<sup>1</sup> "Professor", OED. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152043>, (accessed 10.29.13).

<sup>2</sup> Council on Higher Education.

<sup>3</sup> National Research Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, n.d. Apology [WWW Document]. The Internet Classics Archive. URL <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html> (accessed 2.6.14).

course, studiously resist interrogating the present in this regard. I have a decade to go before retirement, after all.

Why do this today, as a freshly minted professor? Would it not have been better to wait till the end, and let the world have the benefit of many years of professorial experience? It would, and perhaps it will still happen that way when I revisit the topic at my retirement speech. But will I get you all together in this vast hall for that occasion? I doubt it. So let this be the hypothesis, to be confirmed or refuted over the next ten years as the world adjusts to the existence of professor Clasquin.

## **Professors in the media**

I want to start by looking at the image of the professor presented in wider society, that is, in popular culture. What images of the professor are beamed at our world on a daily basis and do these images have any basis in reality?

I will situate this address within the broad field of Popular Culture Studies, a young and growing field of investigation. The Open Court Publishing Company has an ongoing series of publications on Popular Culture and Philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Today, it is even possible at some institutions to earn a degree majoring in Popular Culture Studies<sup>6</sup> and the theoretical underpinnings of this new field is well on the way to being developed<sup>7</sup>. However, it has yet to catch on in South Africa.

## **The professor as wizard**

The professor and the wizard (and the wizard's female counterpart, the sorceress) have a lot in common in popular culture. Both deal with otherworldly knowledge that lies concealed in long-forgotten vaults. Both may affect a nonchalance of dress and personal grooming. Both may control powers above the reach of the average person. To the uninitiated, there is little to choose between magic and quantum physics. Indeed, to the uninitiated, there is little to choose between the incantation of magical formulae and the philosophy of, say, Jacques Lacan. The professor serves society as a magician, hopefully a benign one.

This association has a long history, and to some extent it is based in historical fact. Our academic forebears were not pure, idealistic rationalists who spent their days in

---

<sup>5</sup>Popular Culture and Philosophy® series [WWW Document], n.d. Open Court Publishing Company. URL <http://www.opencourtbooks.com/categories/pcp.htm> (accessed 2.14.14).

<sup>6</sup> e.g. at Bowling Green State University. See Department of Popular Culture [WWW Document], n.d. Bowling Green State University. URL <http://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/cultural-and-critical-studies/popular-culture.html> (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>7</sup> Storey, J., 2006. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction. Pearson Prentice Hall.

the higher reaches of philosophical abstractions. They were alchemists, astrologers and pedlars of spells and potions. Isaac Newton, one of the founding fathers of modern science, was so fascinated by alchemy and the occult that John Maynard Keynes, in a 1946 lecture to the Royal Society, was able to say that "Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians".<sup>8</sup>

Let us examine a concrete example of the image of the professor as magician in popular culture. Obliging, we have a recent example who is both a professor and a magician.

Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore is a fictional character in J K Rowling's popular Harry Potter series of books and the spinoff movies. He is certainly called "professor", so we may overlook the embarrassing technicality that Hogwarts College is technically a high school rather than a university. There is some latitude available for this: in the arts of music, fencing and jujitsu<sup>9</sup>, the term "professor" has historically been used more loosely than in academia. Perhaps we may add magic to this list. Rightly or wrongly, Dumbledore has been one of the most prominent professors in popular culture in recent years. He has become sufficiently familiar to be parodied in "The Simpsons" without needing to be referenced explicitly by name.<sup>10</sup>

Dumbledore fulfils the physical stereotype of the professor as wizard: he is elderly, wears his hair and beard long and unkempt, and dresses in long robes. Naturally, he is in possession of enormous reserves of arcane knowledge and magical abilities. In this he echoes every popular-culture wizard before him, from Merlin to Gandalf. But he is not just a magician. One imagines he could have spent his time doing whatever it is that wizards normally do, but Dumbledore has chosen otherwise. He has chosen to devote his life to teaching and research. He is indeed a professor.

But where does this portrayal leave us real-life professors? Sad to say, we have no magic wands hidden in our offices, and we rarely have the opportunity to save the world from the Death Eaters. The nearest we come to true wizardry is that some of us may approach the stereotype in our physical appearance, none better than Professor Jonathan Z Smith. For all that what we do may appear to the outside world like arcane, even occult knowledge, we must be humble and admit that we know better. It is true that I know things that my plumber does not, but by the same token my plumber knows many things of which I am woefully ignorant. To be a professor is to work with knowledge. But almost everyone who is employed these days works with knowledge of one sort or another.

---

<sup>8</sup> Keynes, J.M., 1946. Newton, the Man [WWW Document]. University of St Andrews, Scotland. URL [http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Extras/Keynes\\_Newton.html](http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Extras/Keynes_Newton.html) (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Biographies [WWW Document], n.d. Pacific Jujitsu Alliance. URL <http://www.pacificjujitsualliance.com/bios.html> (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>10</sup> The Simpsons: The Haw-Hawed Couple [WWW Document], n.d. TV.com. URL <http://www.tv.com/shows/the-simpsons/the-haw-hawed-couple-914674/> (accessed 6.9.14).

## The professor as harmless idiot-savant

At least the image of the professor as wizard carries with it some grandeur. The next portrayal is far less flattering. Here the professor is presented as a bumbling, socially inept, sexually inadequate fool who could never survive for long outside the sheltered workspace of a university campus. He<sup>11</sup> may be a genius in his field, but he is a failure in the everyday business of human interaction. We have two case studies here: professor Julius Kelp and professor Sherman Klump, but essentially they are the same person because in 1963<sup>12</sup> and 1996<sup>13</sup>, respectively, they both starred in a film named after them: "The Nutty Professor".<sup>14</sup> This is hardly the only such portrayal in the popular media: professor Ned Brainard in the 1961 film "The Absent-minded Professor"<sup>15</sup> was revived in 1997 as professor Phillip Brainard in the film "Flubber".<sup>16</sup> Then there is professor Calculus in the Tintin comics<sup>17</sup> (Indeed, the absent-minded professor is one of Hergé's favourite stock characters<sup>18</sup>). Absent-mindedness and the professor are so closely-linked in the popular imagination that the OED regards it as necessary to note the fact that these words are commonly combined in a phrase<sup>19</sup>

How far back does this stereotype go? One of the earliest Greek philosophers was Thales of Miletus (c. 624-c. 546 BCE). Thales was a dedicated stargazer. Indeed he would walk around with his eyes lifted to the night sky, ignoring his immediate

---

<sup>11</sup> We may safely use the masculine pronoun here. Female professors are rarely portrayed using this stereotype.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057372/>, Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117218/>, Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>14</sup> A lesser-known 2008 film in the series follows on from the 1963 Jerry Lewis movie, ignoring the Eddie Murphy films completely. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0839930/>, Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054594/>, Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119137/>, Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Cuthbert Calculus [WWW Document], n.d. Tintin Wiki. URL [http://tintin.wikia.com/wiki/Cuthbert\\_Calculus](http://tintin.wikia.com/wiki/Cuthbert_Calculus) (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>18</sup> See List of absent-minded professors [WWW Document], n.d. Tintin Wiki. URL [http://tintin.wikia.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_absent-minded\\_professors](http://tintin.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_absent-minded_professors) (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>19</sup> "Habitually inattentive or forgetful; distracted or preoccupied to the extent of being unaware of one's immediate surroundings. Freq. in *absent-minded professor*." - "absent-minded".OED. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/243406>, Accessed 2.6.14).

surroundings. This practice eventually led him to fall down a well (or, in some variations of the story, into a ditch).<sup>20</sup>

There may well be an element of truth to this stereotype. Not all professors fit it, of course, perhaps not even the majority, but while there are no hard data available, there have been arguments raised that the modern university is an especially suitable environment for high-functioning autistic persons:

Many autistics are disadvantaged or overwhelmed by processing particular stimuli from the outside world and thus are subject to perceptual overload as a result. For some autistics, that is debilitating, but for many others it is either manageable or a problem they can work around. The result is that many autistics prefer stable environments, the ability to choose their own hours and work at home, and the ability to work on focused projects for long periods of time. Does that sound familiar? The modern college or university is often ideal or at least relatively good at providing those kinds of environments.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, it is not so much a case of the autistic child acting like a “little professor” as the professor once having been that autistic child.

## The professor as evil genius

Let us return to the wizard-like professor for a moment. We have stipulated there that the professor would hopefully be a benign wizard, but what if he was not? What if the professor's capacity for innovation was bent towards evil?

The archetypal evil professor has been with us for a long time, and the literary and film world persist in resurrecting him. He is Professor James Moriarty, arch-nemesis of Sherlock Holmes. Interestingly, he was not originally a major figure in the Holmes canon. Arthur Conan Doyle, having grown thoroughly sick of his most famous character, decided to kill him off, and introduced Moriarty to do the deed. The “Napoleon of Crime” appears in person in just two canonical stories, although references are made to him in five others. In none of these stories is it ever made clear where “professor” Moriarty teaches. The most direct description is as follows:

---

<sup>20</sup> Plato, n.d. Theaetetus [WWW Document]. Internet Sacred Text Archive. URL <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plato/theaetet.htm> (accessed 6.9.14). cf Laertius, D., n.d. Lives of the Philosophers: Thales [WWW Document]. Peithō's Web. URL <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dlthales.htm> (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>21</sup> Cowen, T., 2009. Autism as Academic Paradigm [WWW Document]. Chronicle of Higher Education. URL <http://chronicle.com/article/Autism-as-Academic-Paradigm/47033/> (accessed 9.13.14).

He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty. At the age of twenty-one he wrote a treatise upon the binomial theorem which has had a European vogue. On the strength of it, he won the mathematical chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearances, a most brilliant career before him. But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers. Dark rumours gathered round him in the University town, and eventually he was compelled to resign his chair and come down to London. He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organiser of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city...

—Holmes, "The Final Problem"

It was left to later derivative works to flesh out the Moriarty character with a backstory, and most variations have him as Holmes' old schoolmaster or tutor at university who turned to crime after Holmes graduated. At least we do know what discipline he taught: mathematics. In Alan Moore's comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and the 2003 film<sup>22</sup> loosely based on it, professor Moriarty finally emerges from Holmes' shadow and becomes a villain in his own right. In the comic book series he is engaged in a gang war with Fu Manchu. In the film, he almost precipitates a premature beginning to World War One.

Moriarty had one redeeming feature as the founding father of the evil genius stereotype: his criminal empire was his and his alone. The evil professors who followed him were more likely to be henchmen to a less intellectually gifted but more practical capo. We do not need to spend much time on these lesser professors: their role in literature and film is to supply the chief villain with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of super-weapons. A recent example is Professor Zündapp in the animated film *Cars 2* (2011).<sup>23</sup> Typically, we are not told the name of his university or his discipline. "Professor" merely serves as a symbolic reference to intelligence and inventiveness gone wrong.

It is interesting to note that there is one long-standing series of popular culture works that eschews the evil-genius view of the professor. In all the James Bond novels and movies, there are evil scientist sidekicks aplenty, but none are ever named as professors.

There are other kinds of evil professors, of course. In the 2014 film *God's Not Dead*<sup>24</sup>, Professor Jeffrey Radisson is not trying to take over the world, merely to break down the slightest trace of religious faith among his students. Every review of

---

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0311429/>, accessed 8 September 2014

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1216475/>, accessed 8 September 2014.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2528814/>, accessed 8 September 2014.

the film by an actual professor seems to point out how unrealistic the entire scenario is. Even a review on a Christian website feels the need to say that

The story is always the same: an arrogant, frothing-at-the-mouth atheist faces a Christian student who exposes him as a fraud. Evil is shamed, Good is proclaimed. Only, this never happened, at least, not that anyone can credibly verify.<sup>25</sup>

## The professor as action hero

One of the most popular depictions of the professor in popular culture takes us so far away from reality that you will have to forgive me if I do not spend too much time on it. The action-hero professor is the modern, clean-shaven incarnation of the wizard.

Professor Charles Francis Xavier, for example, has all the attributes of a wizard except the hair. He has advanced powers, knowledge of matters denied ordinary mortals, and a propensity to get involved in matters involving the future of the world. Not only that, he has established a school for gifted youngsters (i.e. mutants) that parallels Dumbledore's Hogwarts College. Different versions of his academic bona fides exist that place him in a professorship either at Columbia University<sup>26</sup> or at Oxford<sup>27</sup>. Regardless, by the time we meet him in either comic book or film version, his professorial days are far behind him and the title is a mere honorific.

Less cleanly shaven, but equally a modern incarnation of the wizard is Professor Henry Walton Jones, Jr., commonly known as Indiana Jones. For once, we see a fictional professor and we are actually told where and in what discipline he exercises his craft: Jones is a professor of archaeology at Marshall College, a fictional institution in Connecticut<sup>28</sup>. In his case, it is knowledge rather than special abilities that enable him to triumph over his adversaries.

In short, there is nothing new here. The action-hero professor may add an element of twentieth century athleticism to his wizardly predecessors, but that is as far as it goes.

---

<sup>25</sup> Noble, A., 2013. "God's Not Dead," But this Trope Is [WWW Document]. Christianity and Popculture. URL <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2013/10/gods-not-dead-but-this-trope-is/> (accessed 8.9.14).

<sup>26</sup> Uncanny X-Men #192-193

<sup>27</sup> Origins of Marvel Comics: X-Men #1. 2010

<sup>28</sup> Fulks, T., 2008. Indiana Jones teaches at Marshall [WWW Document]. Charleston Daily Mail. URL <http://web.archive.org/web/20080528045617/http://www.dailymail.com/News/statenews/200805260088> (accessed 9.14.14).

## The professor as an actual working scholar

What do all the above characterisations of the professor have in common? They all ignore the reality of what real-life professors do every day: learn and teach.

It often is quite difficult to discover what a professor in popular culture is supposed to be a professor *of*. Professor "Indiana" Jones may be an archaeologist, but we rarely see him in the lecture hall or even at a site digging up the past. Professor Moriarty was Holmes' tutor ... in what subject, exactly? Professor Xavier is a professor in, well, parapsychology, one supposes. Indeed, the professorial archetype most likely to be seen on campus in popular-culture portrayals is the harmless idiot-savant.

Research and tuition, not madcap adventures or attempts at world domination, is what engages most professors on a day-to-day basis. This is not particularly cinematic, of course. It does not even make for a good novel, and popular culture has rarely tried to depict this reality. When it did, however, it gave us the most truly terrifying professor of them all: professor Charles W. Kingsfield, Jr.

Professor Kingsfield teaches Contract Law at Harvard. At least he does in the novel<sup>29</sup>, motion picture<sup>30</sup> and television series<sup>31</sup> all under the same title of "The Paper Chase".<sup>32</sup> As portrayed by John Houseman, Kingsfield is a brilliant but intolerant and tyrannical scholar. The novel, film and TV series all commence by him selecting a hapless student and declaring him academically dead in the first lecture of the first semester.

The author of the original novel, John Osborne Jr, has gone on the record that Kingsfield was indeed a composite personality constructed from a number of Harvard law professors he had known as a student at that institution in the late 60s<sup>33</sup>. His creation has had an extraordinary influence in establishing the image of the professor as an all-knowing, emotionless, tactless curmudgeon. Kingsfield himself has become an almost universally recognised symbol of this kind of professor. Thirty years after his first appearance, a legal scholar felt the need to mount a defence of Kingsfield. The need to do this is because Kingsfield had crystallized an image of the professor that the public was no longer prepared to accept:

---

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/236244.The\\_Paper\\_Chase](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/236244.The_Paper_Chase), accessed 8 September 2014.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070509/>, accessed 8 September 2014,

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077058/>, accessed 8 September 2014

<sup>32</sup> In South Africa, the TV series was broadcast dubbed into Afrikaans under the title "Beste Professor".

<sup>33</sup> Walsh, C., 2012. "The Paper Chase" at 40 [WWW Document]. Harvard Gazette. URL <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/10/the-paper-chase-at-40/> (accessed 9.12.14).

Over thirty years have passed since Professor Kingsfield first appeared as a character in *The Paper Chase*. He instantly became a powerful symbol of what many thought was wrong with legal education. For many years, he remained synonymous with a particular form of the Socratic method, so demanding and unkind that it rendered students bitter, unhappy and cynical. ... Among the criticisms leveled at the Socratic method in the hands of professors like Kingsfield are that it results in poorly trained lawyers; it causes incivility between attorneys; it discriminates against women; and it causes law students to lose their ideals. Partially in response to such attacks, law schools have become gentler places in a misguided attempt to become kinder to their students.<sup>34</sup>

six years later, Kingsfield was still a byword among legal scholars:

While Professor Kingsfield surely sits at one end of the spectrum for professorial style, the Socratic method he uses endures. Even professors who are not as intimidating and dismissive as Kingsfield still use the method. It is, as one text notes, law school's "signature pedagogy." It's the way the law school professors across the country have been teaching law students about legal analysis for more than a century.<sup>35</sup>

If we stipulate that Kingsfield-style professors once existed, then do they still roam the corridors of academia? I have never met such a creature myself and I doubt if professor Kingsfield would survive very long in today's educational millieu, where the emphasis is on student-centredness.

Nevertheless, there are positive elements we can take from this stereotype. Kingsfield's students hate him at times, but they respect his apparent omniscience and his unflappable competence. Kingsfield pre-presents the somewhat old-fashioned ideal of the unquestioned expert who has read everything there is to read in his field, an ideal fast receding from reality as the amount of knowledge generated in even the most obscure disciplines spins out of control. If that is what the public thinks we professors are, then we will be happy enough to bask in that glory as kinder, gentler Kingsfields.

---

<sup>34</sup> Vitiello, Michael. 2005. "Professor Kingsfield: The Most Misunderstood Character in Literature." *Hofstra Law Review* 33: 955–1015. Available online at [http://www.hofstra.edu/PDF/law\\_lawrev\\_vitiello\\_vol33no3.pdf](http://www.hofstra.edu/PDF/law_lawrev_vitiello_vol33no3.pdf) (accessed 2014-09-12).

<sup>35</sup> Mазzie, L., 2011. Ponderings of a Law Professor: The Socratic Method as Law School Pedagogy – Does it Exclude Voices? [WWW Document]. Ms. JD. URL <http://ms-jd.org/blog/article/ponderings-law-professor-socratic-method-law-school-pedagogy---does-it-exclude-voices> (accessed 9.12.14).

## The professor today and (one devoutly hopes) tomorrow

Those of you who teach at a university will immediately recognise the truth in the following statement by Theall:

College teaching is a profession built on top of another profession—a meta-profession. Individuals come to the professoriate with specific—professional—knowledge and skills, including content expertise, practice/clinical skills, and research techniques. These skills constitute what may be called the base profession of college faculty. But college professors are immediately called upon to perform at professional levels in four possible roles: teaching, scholarly or creative activities (including research), service to the institution and community, and administration.<sup>36</sup>

This is true not only of the professor but of academics at all levels. When one arrives at the academic life, one has had a thorough training in one's discipline, whether it is Afrikaans or Zoology. This training will normally have included some element of the basics of research. Tuition is something you are magically expected to be able to do, and do well, from day one, even if, like most academics, you have no actual qualifications in educational theory. I'll not talk about administration, except to note that the heroic efforts of departmental secretaries are probably all that is keeping down the suicide rates on most campuses.

But is that all? Is a professor simply someone who teaches and does research? Not according to Walter Noll, himself a professor of mathematics. In his essay "The Role of the Professor"<sup>37</sup> he writes:

The teacher's focus is on his students. His task is to convey a fixed body of knowledge to his students and to worry about the best way to do so. He normally follows a textbook and a "syllabus". ... The professor's focus is on his subject. He "lives" his subject and cannot easily switch it off, even while lying in bed awake or on vacation. He recreates the subject in his mind each time he lectures on it. He

---

<sup>36</sup> Theall, M., n.d. The Multiple Roles of the College Professor [WWW Document]. NEA. URL <http://www.nea.org/home/34715.htm> (accessed 6.9.14).

<sup>37</sup> This essay, originally written in 1992 and revised in 1997, was never published in a formal peer-reviewed journal, but it has become widely known and cited all the same and Noll has delivered it at a variety of forums, for example at the 2008 World Universities Forum in Davos, Switzerland (see <http://u08.cgpublisher.com/proposals/94/index.html>).

cannot know, in the beginning of a course, exactly how and in what order he will present the material.

The researcher's focus is on the discovery of new results. He is the creator of new knowledge. His nightmare is to get stuck in his search or to learn that what he has found has already been discovered shortly before by somebody else. Priority is very important to him and will sometimes induce him to rush into print prematurely. ...The professor's focus, on the other hand, is on understanding, gaining insight into, judging the significance of, and organizing old knowledge. He is happy if he can find a new conceptual framework with which to unify and simplify the results that have been found by the researcher. Before going into print, he lets his ideas ripen. Priority is not an issue for him.<sup>38</sup>

To Noll, then, a professor is someone who teaches and researches, but these activities only resemble what non-professors do on a superficial level. The professor is a free spirit whose teaching is not bound by a curriculum and whose research is performed on a schedule determined only by the professor him- or herself. Noll does not deny the reality of teaching and research as we know it today. He clearly realises that there are students to be taught according to a predetermined curriculum, and that there are research targets that need to be met. He sees “professing” as a third activity, over and above these humdrum realities of contemporary academia.

In the Faculty Handbook of this University, under "Criteria for Faculty Appointments", I can find almost nothing that relates to professing a subject in the sense described above. Such professing rarely gets much recognition. Most of the rewards in academia go to those who excel in research or in teaching.

I find much in Noll's analysis with which to sympathise. He posits “professing” as an extra element, an intrinsic motivational aspect that distinguishes the professor from the secondary school teacher and the laboratory assistant. But there is a small terminological problem here. Noll's unpublished, but widely influential essay is American in origin, and academia in the United States generally recognises just two grades of tenured academic: the assistant professor and the professor, with far more use made of part-time, untenured academics. But in the South African context, where we see a more complex situation with typically five levels from junior lecturer to full professor, this could be misread as applying to the full professor, and perhaps the associate professor, only. And that would be incorrect. Examples of Noll's third activity of “professing” can be seen all around us, in the work of individuals who have not yet been promoted to the professorate. Like the quote by Theall that opened this section, Noll is giving us a good indication of the *academic* in general, but the question still remains: in our context, what is different about the professor?

---

<sup>38</sup> Noll, W., 1997. The Role of the Professor [WWW Document]. Noll's papers. URL <http://www.math.cmu.edu/~wn0g/noll/> (accessed 6.9.14).

## Conclusion - the professor as confessor

I would like to conclude by bringing together the various elements we have examined so far and advance a conclusion of my own. Let us begin with this very occasion, this glorious relic of the medieval origins of the modern university that we call the inaugural lecture. The word “inaugural”, by the way, comes from the Latin *augur*, a Roman priest whose function was to determine the will of the gods as it applied to the state, normally by an examination of the entrails of a sacrificed animal. The Romans would perform this augury whenever a new emperor was announced, for example. Outside of academia, inaugurations are still mostly restricted to political figures, and a newly appointed president may give an inaugural address. It seems, therefore, that we academics have misappropriated this ritual from the political sphere.

Who gets to deliver an inaugural lecture? The newly appointed professor. There is no equivalent ceremony when, for example, a lecturer becomes a senior lecturer. More puzzlingly, there is none when you become, say, a Dean. Of course Deans will give addresses from time to time, and a newly appointed Dean’s first address to his or her academics will be followed with keen interest. But there is no qualitative setting aside of time and occasion, no sense that this will be a turning point in the individual’s career. This ceremony, the inaugural lecture, is uniquely reserved for when the academic becomes a professor. And it is not optional. I believe the inaugural lecture is not in fact written into our conditions of employment. But it is written into the far more binding conditions set by centuries of academic traditions. It would be a brave professor indeed to say “away with this medieval nonsense!”

And what is this lecture? There are invitations, yes, and there are requests to RSVP, mostly for catering purposes. But the inaugural lecture is essentially a public event. Anyone is welcome to walk in off the street and attend this lecture. This is the university saying to the world, “Look at the person we have chosen to call *professor*. Feel free to stand in judgement”.

The professor may spend the rest of his or her career wrapped up in top-secret researches, and may teach arcane specialties that mean little to the public at large. After tonight, you may never hear my name again. But for this brief moment, I stand before the public. I display what, if anything, I have learnt since the day I registered as a fresh first-year student, and the world at large, as represented by your good selves, can judge whether Unisa did well or not by making this appointment.

Let us return for a moment to professor Walter Noll. He had a distinguished career as a mathematician. But something strange happened when I used the Google search engine to look him up. The first entries on him were a wikipedia page, an obituary, a tribute page at his old university. Fair enough. But the first piece of writing by Noll himself to show up in the search listing was not one of his many contributions to mathematics, but his short, unpublished article on the role of the professor! This result differed when I used a different search engine, and search results change over time. Even so, it is instructive that at the time I made this search, the thing Noll was

most famous for was the one time he ventured outside the narrow confines of Mathematics.

Finally, let us reconsider the stereotypes of the professor we have observed in popular culture. Academic ranks and titles vary across the world. But when there is a need for a hero, or a villain, with a certain intellectual ability, the title invariably given is "professor". No wizard-like figure in literature is announced as "dean", no action-hero as "reader", no harmless idiot as "junior lecturer". There are intellectual figures who are not (yet) professors, who are simply titled "doctor" - Indiana Jones is addressed as such in "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" - but out of all the university job titles available, it is only the professor who has emerged in the public imagination. To be a professor is not merely to enter another step on the corporate ladder of a university. It is to become part of the popular imagination of what the university is all about, what research and learning essentially are. You are no longer merely an individual doing a job, who could be doing another job. You have become trapped in a social web of symbols, in fact, you have yourself become a symbol.

It is no longer enough to do research and tuition, as Noll rightly suggests. If you had not been doing those things for the last twenty years, then you would not be a professor today. But I disagree with Noll that the thing that further distinguishes the professor is a movement inwards, ever deeper into the discipline. On the contrary, the professor, like no-one else, is the public face of the university. It is in the third activity, the little-discussed area of public outreach, community engagement, community service, call it what you will, that we see the calling of the professor.

The professor is called upon to transcend the boundaries of the discipline in which he or she spent twenty years developing as an academic, to think big thoughts, to dream big dreams and to share those ideas publicly. Indeed, while not every academic need to wait that long before developing into a public intellectual, by the time you become a professor that is your role. This is what the public expects from you when you accept that title. This is why the university spends money to introduce you to that public at your inaugural lecture. The old activities of research and tuition continue as before: this is a new burden, and a new joy.

The movement of the professor is therefore outwards, towards an increased engagement with other academic disciplines, other institutions, other philosophies, other communities. The professor cannot hide when the media come looking for a juicy quote. The professor cannot claim that he is still learning, even if he still is. The professor needs to edit wikipedia articles, not anonymously, but logged in as an expert in her field. The professor needs to write newspaper articles, books for the general reader, to answer questions in online forums, to engage with communities that have little experience of intellectual enquiry.

This is why there will be a need for professors as long as there are universities. The title itself may change. It may or may not be tied to a vocational position - as once it was tied to line management position of an academic department. But the need for someone to stand in the glare of public scrutiny and calmly say "this is what we have learned" will not disappear. Somebody will be needed to profess.

To conclude, however, I shall not profess to you. Instead, I shall confess. I confess that in the years leading up to this moment I have wrapped myself up in my discipline like a chrysalis in a pupa. That was right and good. My discipline has trained me, taught me, nurtured me, but now the time has come to break out from that pupa, to face the world.

What kind of professorial insect will emerge? A bright scarlet butterfly or a drab moth? Perhaps some of us will meet again in ten years at my retirement party and you will then tell me.

My name is Michel Clasquin. Today, I am a professor.