

Paramedics practice with the sanction of society.

This relationship is moderated by the Social Contract.

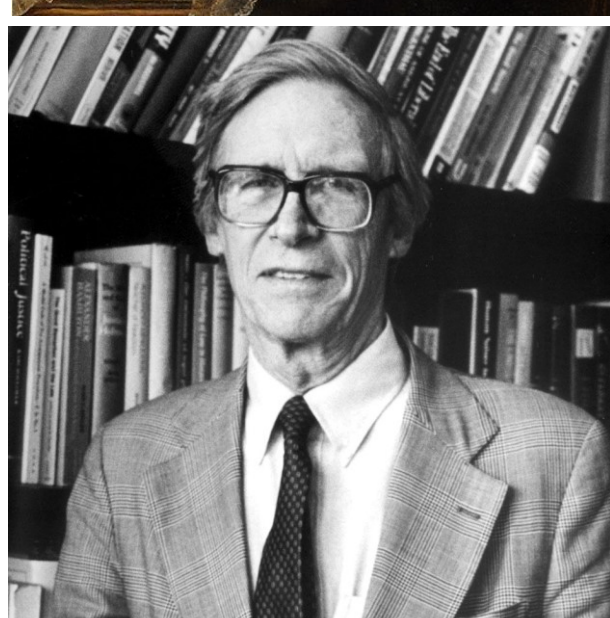
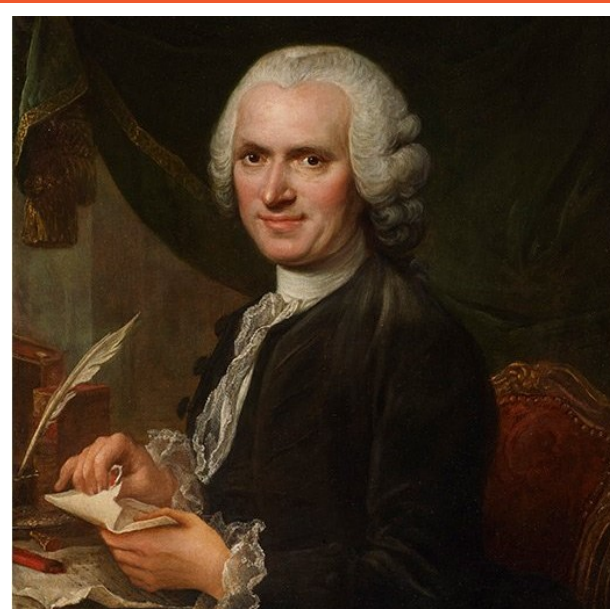
Applying the Social Contract to Paramedicine: Maintaining social mandate and avoiding deprofessionalisation

Professional Power & Social Mandate

Paramedics are a health profession which carries significant privilege and power. Paramedics enjoy a level of access to patients and their intimate information, This is often in settings where there is no previous healthcare relationship and where patients may be vulnerable or overwhelmed Paramedics also enjoy a significant public profile and position of trust within the community (Moritz and Ebbs, 2025, Klepacka and Bakalarski, 2018). Paramedics occupy this professional space as a result of societal mandate. That is, society has empowered paramedics to perform this societal role and provided it the privilege and power to engage in this role (Greenwood, 1957, Freidson, 2008).

The Social Contract

The social contract seeks to explain how societies organise themselves. Originally the work of 17th and 18th century thinkers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it seeks to explain how societies cede power to rulers and institutions in return for certain types of services, for example, protection and order (Rousseau 2003). John Rawls reimagined the concept with justice at the centre of the relationship and included structures to moderate social principles such as government regulation (Marens, 2007).



Top Image: Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Lower Image: John Rawls

“WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

- Uncle Ben Parker, *Amazing Fantasy* #15, 1962

Paramedicine's Social Contract

The social contract between paramedicine and society essentially contains the expectations and accountability for each party, with both accepting the General Will (in Rousseau's parlance) to engage in the contract. As paramedicine has advanced, and the expectations of the public have changed, the social contract is “rewritten” through a process known as “social negotiation”. Paramedicine's social contract is primarily moderated through regulation. The regulator is the arbiter of the social contract and is responsible for ensuring that paramedics meet their obligations and that the public's expectations of professional practice and accountability are met. If paramedics breach the contract, there are consequences up to and including the removal of the practitioner from the profession (therefore removing the power and privilege afforded in the social contract). There are separate social and legal mechanisms if it is society or its members breach the contract. Importantly, while the regulator not only investigates and potentially provides penalties for alleged breaches, it also moderates these claimed breaches, shielding paramedics from unfounded complaints, protecting the integrity of the social contract.

Deprofessionalisation

One of the risks of paramedicine breaching the social contract is a loss of faith in the profession. This may result in a number of potential outcomes may occur. Firstly, the government may increase the level of external regulation of the profession, impacting its autonomy and power. Freidson (1983) argues this was the case for medicine in the 20th century. Alternatively, society can remove the mandate for an occupation to perform a particular role, thus removing its power, privilege and legitimacy.

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