

## **Relational Ethics: The Full Meaning of Respect**

A book review by Linda Read Paul, RN, MN, CHPCN(C)

Authors: Vangie Bergum and John Dossetor, with foreword by Solomon Benatar

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The authors of this evocative text assert that relationships are the location for ethical action and that human flourishing is enhanced by healthy and ethical relationships. They also contend that professionals are characterized by commitment to relationship – with the people they serve and with each other. In our world of modern healthcare, however, this commitment to relationship can be obscured by an emphasis on advanced technology, consumerism, legal liability, bureaucracy, objective rationalism, and individual autonomy. The aim of this book is to refocus healthcare ethics on the nature and significance of relationship.

By delineating a comprehensive and philosophically grounded relational ethic for healthcare, the authors call us to attend to the art of ethics. The focus of relational ethics is on whole people as interdependent moral agents and the quality of the commitments between them. The space between people is defined by the authors as the ethical space or the relational space, a space that must be nurtured and respected if ethical practice is to be enacted. Attention is focused on the particular, the context, the process, and the dialogue.

In the second chapter of the book, the authors draw from the works of Sally Gadow and Edmund Pellegrino to situate their relational ethics approach within the context of the historical development of bioethics knowledge and theory in the Western world. Relational ethics is presented as a timely, progressive, necessary approach that builds on, rather than undermines, the usefulness and importance of ethical theories, normative ethical principles, virtue ethics, feminist ethics, and ethics of care. The authors contend that knowledge of each of these approaches to healthcare ethics is vital yet is insufficient without a fuller exploration of the relationships within which the ethical moment is enacted. Ethical principles are described as the means by which we come to know and to attend to the bones of the person - the general, objective part. Through a relational ethics approach, we can put the flesh on the bones of personhood.

The ideas in this book emerged from a Relational Ethics Research Project that started in 1994 at the University of Alberta. An overview of the project, including its intents and purposes, origins, methods and procedures, and outcomes, is provided in chapter one. Over the course of this project, a group of professionals and academics, the Interdisciplinary Research Group, regularly gathered together to discuss prepared scenarios and ponder how to nurture ethics in health care. These discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for themes using interpretive methods within the tradition of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Excerpts from these transcripts are included throughout the text to help illustrate the concepts presented.

In chapters three through six, the major themes identified in the research project as describing the nature of the ethical relation in healthcare are contemplated in depth. The authors use engaging stories – expressions of ethical moments – to bring each theme to life. The stories illuminate the reality of personal human experiences and the importance of relationships, and help us understand how ethical healthcare is practiced.

The four major themes developed in the book are mutual respect, engagement, embodiment, and environment. Mutual respect is identified as the central theme of a relational ethic. Respect is described as interactive and reciprocal, with an emphasis on respect for and acceptance of difference. In coming to mutual respect, there is a need to be both respectful of others and also respectful of oneself. The theme of engagement implores the cultivation of a sensitivity that promotes authentic connection. True presence, personal responsiveness, and empathy are key components of engagement. In the theme of embodiment, the feeling body is integrated with the thinking mind. Scientific knowledge and human compassion are given equal status and the importance of emotion and feeling in ethical action is appropriately accredited. The theme of environment expands the concept of the relational space beyond the individual level and explores the web of relations that tie the individual to the health care system, the community, the globe, and the earth. Two additional themes - freedom and choice, and uncertainty and possibility - are explored in less depth in the text. The authors suggest that the individualistic freedom of liberal philosophy must be linked to responsibility to our larger community. They also contend that the relational space is an ambiguous space without certainty and that this uncertainty can open possibilities and contribute to good outcomes.

This text represents a significant contribution to the body of health ethics literature, arguably the most comprehensive overview of relational ethics published to date. While the authors concede that the writing may be characterized by ambiguity and complexity, the inclusion of narrative helps bring the content to life and make it more accessible to the reader. Bergum and Dosseter have set out to offer a text that may do something to us – encourage us to act more thoughtfully, to ask more questions, to continually reflect on how we relate to others, and to develop an attitude of deep respect for the ethical practice of human relations in healthcare. They have tried to open the possibility of causing an epiphany – a sudden shift in perspective that changes the way something is understood. To these ends, they have admirably succeeded.