RELATIONAL PROCESS
FOR ETHICAL OUTCOMES

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The concept of process ethics is as exciting in implication as it is ambiguous in articulation. And it is this very ambiguity that, in the end, will enable visions of process ethics to germinate, evolve, and enrich our dialogues on both therapy and relations in society more generally. In the present offering I would like to share only one way of entering the discussion of process ethics, but one that will resonate with much that Swim and many of her colleagues have offered on the subject. And it will also demonstrate why I believe ambiguity to be such a precious gift to our proceedings.

ETHICALLY GENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Let me begin by focusing on the active process of relationship itself—from the mutually coordinated movements of mother and child to the more highly complex dances of the culture—for example, between skilled debaters, partners in romance, friends out for an evening of lively talk, or therapist and client. Very often, such patterns of coordination provide deep pleasure, perhaps feelings of nurturance, safety, a sense of accomplishment, optimism, joy, or ecstasy. Let's call such ongoing coordinations *generative* (as opposed to degenerative). In many relationships of the generative variety, participants also wish to ensure their continuation. They want to protect them from erosion or defection, or from outside interference or annihilation. They want to ensure that the valued coordination remains in place. One major means of securing assurance is through the development of codes—often unwritten and informally maintained but sometimes publicly articulated—for example, in systems of rules, regulations, organizational values, ethical standards, and laws.
   While such attempts at securing a generative way of life are surely under-

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standable, we must also be attentive to their shortcomings. We must realize at the outset that the codes are not themselves "the good," which the participants wish to sustain, but security or policing measures. This is to say what Swim and her colleagues call "content ethics" are not in themselves the ethical conduct that is so important in our lives; they are but a possible means to an end that lies elsewhere. There is no principled need, then, for codes of good conduct—or what may variously be called "ethical principles," "value clarification," "the bill of rights," or a "code of professional ethics." Such efforts come into play primarily when there may be threats to the valued order.

CONTENT ETHICS RECONSIDERED

At this point, we are positioned to ask whether such codes indeed function to sustain the coordinations we so deeply value. If they are optional in principle, why must we pursue them? Do they necessarily function as we hope or are there alternative means of sustaining the good? I do not wish to propose that codification (content ethics) is inconsequential. In many cases, particularly in matters if societal laws, its existence may be enormously important to sustaining or changing the society. However, we must also be attentive to its shortcomings as well. One of these is of central significance: Content ethics are created within social enclaves for sustaining a particular way of life. In this sense, they always stand in an alienated or antagonistic relationship to that which lies outside. For participants to embrace that which lies outside weakens the traditions within. Yet, in the highly complex societies of today, people typically find themselves engaged in multiple reality making groups—perhaps a professional group that demands intense loyalty and long working hours, a family that places a premium on "family time," a friendship group that judges loyalty in terms of evenings out, aging parents who require time and dedication to sustain "the family," and so on. The demands within each domain jeopardize the generative processes in the others. And, as often happens, when the internal demands are accentuated, they often engender resentment and a sense of oppression. That which was prized for its generative potentials now takes on the qualities of a yoke. In effect, when there are multiple commitments, the policing of the boundaries may have degenerative effects on the very relations one wishes to protect. In the zeal to protect what is dear in a relationship, the qualities that render it dear may be destroyed.

Further problems also inhere in drawing tight the reigns of ethical content. The chief problem with codifications of principles, ethics, or standards is that they are not easily negotiable. They function as articulated limits with the implicit subtext, "if you go beyond this limit, you are no longer one of us." In other terms, codifications serve as terminators of conversation. Additional words—of

critique, reflexivity, doubt, or emendation—are threatening and unwelcome. There are "principles at stake," as it is said. Such terminating tendencies are especially problematic in a complex society in which there are multiple and disparate enclaves of meaning making. If we look across the array of ethnicities, religions, national traditions, geographical regions, sexual preference groups, professions, and specialized political communities that make up the nation, we find enormous differences in the sense of the ethical. Highly disparate forms of relationship may be fulfilling for different peoples. Increasingly, these groups come into conflict, with the ethics of one hostile to the commitments of others. Consider here, for example, the emergence of environmental activism, gay and lesbian activism, militia movements, identity politics, the religious right, and the pro-choice movement, among others. To the extent that content ethics function as matters of principle, productive dialogue across the borders is curtailed. Antagonism and hostility prevail, and there is little means of moving toward a condition of generative relationship.

PROCESS ETHICS AS RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

What we find, then, are two major ways in which content ethics may have a detrimental impact on relational processes—within and between groups within society. Or to put it another way, ethical stipulations may have a corrosive effect on the generative forms of relations out of which the very desire for ethics—or the valuing of relationship—is founded. It is at this point that we begin to appreciate the need for forms of relational process that restore and replenish the generative moment. We require means of moving in conversation and related actions that enable us to glide more easily across the boundaries of colliding commitments, and that open the possibilities for growthful dialogue across otherwise antagonistic communities. We may call such forms of conversation "process ethics," relational processes that establish the very condition of ethical consciousness. Elsewhere, my colleague Sheila McNamee and I (McNamee and Gergen, 1998) have spoken in terms of "relational responsibility," that is, forms of action that are responsible to the sustenance of relationship. In this special section edited by Swim, a variety of authors suggest a range of such possible actions. They celebrate such qualities as humility, caring, trust, and honesty. In the same manner, McNamee and I have outlined various conversational means of moving beyond individual blame to growthful dialogue. We outline, for example, the conversational virtues of polyvocality, and relational, intergroup, and systemic accounts of our actions. However, in the end, we must avoid concretizing the possibilities. We must leave this space of action ambiguous, for to codify the essentials of action is again to recapitulate the problems of content ethics. It

is the space of ambiguity that invites all voices into the conversation, that invites improvisation, that enables new adjustments to be made, and ultimately enables us to relocate that which we can prize in our lives together.

REFERENCE

McNamee, S. & Gergen, K. J. (1998). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*. London: Sage Publications.