GITTE HASLEBO AND MAJA LOUA HASLEBO

PRACTICING RELATIONAL ETHICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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FOREWORD

Kenneth J. Gergen

A few years ago I was deeply upset by a colleague who told me about a failing grade he had given to a young woman. The woman had been the victim of a serious illness and had less than a year to live. Her desperate hope was to complete her university degree before her death. If she passed this particular course, her dreams would be fulfilled; failure meant never achieving her dying wish. From my colleague's standpoint, he was simply carrying out business as usual. If a student didn't achieve a passing mark, a failing grade was the necessary result. Full stop. For me the action was brutally inhumane. I pleaded with him to seek an alternative. In effect, I found the assignment of a failing mark unethical. It was then that I also became aware that indeed the common tradition of assigning grades was not simply a practical matter. It represented an ethical orientation; it was lodged in a longstanding "sense of the good." At the same time, the unreflective assignment of grades was also ethically questionable. When closely examined, then, in our everyday organizational life together, we had a significant ethical dilemma on our hands.

This was an illuminating moment of recognition for me. However, for Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo - the authors of this wonderfully engaging book – the ethical dimensions of everyday life is a major focus of continuing concern. For them, organizational life is not simply composed of activities that are more or less functional in terms of one or more practical

ends. Rather, organizational life is suffused with ethical issues; visions of the good are inescapably insinuated into all our otherwise practical activities.

To understand how this is so, Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo develop a compelling view of the organization as a process of active meaning making. As we speak with each other, as we explain our actions, as we tell stories of the organization, we are not only creating the realities we live by, but also a shared sense of the good. In our conversations we are also subtly defining each other - for example, as worthy of respect or admiration – or not. Issues of the good and the worthy are always with us. At the same time, meaning making is in continuous motion, with multiple views of the real and the good often conflicting. The result is that questions of what is good and how should we best behave in the organization are highly complex.

At this point, one might attempt to articulate a series of organizational values, and to examine their particular applications. Indeed, this is the practice of many organizations, striving as they do for values clarification. However, while discussions of organizational values can make a vitalizing contribution to organizational life, the resulting slates of abstract values - "these are the values we stand by" – are largely inconsequential. It is not simply that over time the value statements typically find themselves picking up dust on the shelf. Rather, such values are stated in the abstract, and there is little means of knowing how they apply in any given circumstance. Further, the importance of various values waxes and wanes with time. New values come into prominence (e.g. environmentalism, localism), and earlier commitments no longer seem so relevant. And, forever, there is competition among competing goods. So, very wisely, in my view, the authors steer clear of presenting their own slate of values for organizational life. Rather, they

sagaciously return to consider the origin of values and their conflicts, name-ly persons in relationship. The result is a vision of relational ethics, one that sustains the very possibility of ethical action.

Of particular significance, they see within the process of daily conver-sation the grounds for a morally responsive and responsible organization. There are, as they elaborate, ways of talking that generate mutual respect and willingness to cooperate. To be morally responsible in this case is to be responsible to processes of dialogue out of which mutually beneficial forms of life are generated. In effect, the emphasis is on relational responsibility. As they illustrate various moral failures in dialogue, and explain relevant the-oretical ideas, they teach us to reflect on our ways of talking and to exam-ine their consequences. They point the way to effective skills for ethical meaning making.

One comes away from this book realizing that when it comes to ordinary conversation, just "doing what comes naturally" is a potential threat to orga-nizational life. In these simple exchanges we create the organization – for good or ill. Reflection is essential. In the reflections of Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo, we find the path to the good illuminated. For this we should be deeply grateful.

AUTHORS' PREFACE
TO THE ENGLISH EDITION (2012)

This book was published in Danish in 2007. In direct translation, the Danish title was *Ethics in organizations – from good intentions to better possibilities of action.* Our primary intention with the book was to unfold relational ethics in organizations to help shape constructive possibilities of action for members of organizations in difficult situations. The book was well received in Denmark, and we note that some of the concepts we launched have subsequently become more firmly established in management, consultancy and the development of HR methods. This applies especially to the use of the concepts of relational ethics, moral obligations in work communities, bifurcation points, and mutual relatedness within organizations.

This book has become a source of inspiration for reflective managers and consultants and has been included in the curriculum of many educational programs and training courses on management and consultancy work. During the three years since the first edition came out, we have also had the opportunity to discuss the concepts, concerns and messages of the book in an international setting. We have found it particularly rewarding to discuss the perspectives of relational ethics with Peter Lang, Kenneth J. Gergen, Mary Gergen, Sheila McNamee, W. Barnett Pearce, John Winslade, Ilene Wasserman and Jill Freedman– all of them inspirational people whose thinking and work have had a great impact on our consultancy work and writing

over the years. In these discussions it was exciting for us to encounter interest and curiosity about the ideas in the book, which were unfortunately inaccessible, as the book was only available in Danish. That led to the idea of having the book translated into English and published by the TAOS Institute. We owe a great debt of gratitude to, especially, Kenneth J. Gergen, Sheila McNamee and Dawn Dole, who have been instrumental in making this possible.

After the decision to translate and publish the book we have abbreviated the Danish book in an attempt to further clarify its key messages. We would like to thank our translator, Dorte H. Silver, who has done a very competent job. We are keenly aware that translation is a demanding task that not only involves comprehensive language skills but also the ability to grasp subtleties of meaning in different cultures. The latter aspect is particularly challenging in a book of this nature, where the key underlying point is the creative powers of language in specific contexts.

The book is written in a Danish setting and influenced by a Scandinavian, democratic approach to management. The nine stories take place in a Danish culture with its underlying assumptions and norms, but we hope that the key features and aspects will be recognizable to an international audience. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2006) wrote, translation is impossible: The best we can hope for is to become guests in each other's cultures. We hope that readers from other parts of the world will find it interesting and worthwhile to become guests in a Danish culture as they read this book.

One particular challenge in connection with the translation was the many references in the original edition to Danish books and articles that have not

been translated into English. Most of these references have been omitted and the points of view explained, but we have left some of them in, as they are simply indispensible.

Another challenge was the translation of words dealing with ethics and moral. The word e*thics* comes from the Greek "ethikos", which stems from "ethos", meaning *custom*. The word *moral*s comes from the Latin word "mos", meaning *mores, customs, manners, morals*. Thus, the original meaning of the two words is very similar. Indeed, the word morals (*moralis*) was coined by Cicero as a translation of the Greek ethikos in his work "De fato" from 44 BCE. In contemporary use the two terms are sometimes used inter-changeably. We have chosen, however, to distinguish between them. When we use the word *ethics,* we refer to ideas, principles and reflections on an abstract level as in the naming of ethics theories like the theory of virtue, the theory of duty, the theory of utility – and in our case: relational ethics. When we use the word *moral*, we are addressing dilemmas, choices and actions in everyday life in organizations. In line with this thinking we have chosen this book's title: *Practicing relational ethics in organizations*, thus address-ing both reflections and actions.

We hope that this book – in its current English edition – may help build relationships and dialogue across national, cultural and organizational boundaries.

Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo
2012

AUTHORS' PREFACE

TO THE DANISH EDITION (2007)

This book is the result of a lengthy process. For years, it has lived in our thoughts, our conversations and our work as organizational psychology consultants. We are convinced that members of organizations want only the best for themselves and others. Their intentions are good: Managers, consultants and employees all want to help create a meaningful work life that produces important and visible results, and they want to help create a good future for the organization as a whole. In other words, they wish to make constructive contributions and be recognized for their competences – and they are increasingly concerned about achieving this in morally appropriate ways.

Nevertheless, sometimes things go wrong. In surprising ways, events in organizations can lead to loss of face, violations of personal dignity, and damaged relationships. The effects can be far-reaching and detrimental. Managers, consultants and employees spend a great deal of energy on trying to avoid or handle these negative effects, which takes time and energy away from the work at hand. In addition, loss of face or violations of dignity can impair the desire and willingness to communicate, which hampers cooperation. The costs can be so high that members of the organization call in sick, feel compelled to leave the scene and look for work elsewhere, or are dismissed for want of a better solution. Many of these actions can

be seen as the result of powerlessness and a sense of having run out of options when the dialogue breaks down, and one is left to face one's doubts, worries and troubling moral concerns alone.

One of the challenges in dealing with moral dilemmas is an inadequate language about moral dilemmas and ethics. In our consultancy work, we have noticed that many organizational members search for words, they can use in their ethical reflections on moral questions. We hope that this book will contribute to building a richer language, a greater vocabulary, and new navigational tools that members of organizations can use to address moral dilemmas. A richer language for dealing with morality and ethics is a matter of giving new life to familiar terms and conceiving new key terms and concepts. In this book we will strive to bring these terms and concepts to life by applying them in relation to nine stories which we have collected over the years. The stories illustrate how morality and ethical considerations are embedded in all our actions in organizations, and how we can enhance our awareness to particularly important bifurcation points where one's choice of words and actions can have decisive influence on whether we affect our social world for the better or for the worse. In the stories, for the sake of anonymity, we have altered the participants' names as well as certain factual information that does not affect the understanding or the point of the story.

This book is mainly intended for managers, consultants and employees who are interested in the moral and ethical aspects of everyday events in organizations, and who wish to learn how they can help improve conditions and results in the work community. The book will also be relevant for students with an interest in communication, organizational psychology, ethics, manage-

ment, human resource development, and organizational development.

We would like to thank our colleagues and partners, as well as our customers and participants in training courses. These collaborations have given us a rich source of inspiration for developing new ideas, incorporating important issues, and defining the overall themes of the book. Through these relationships we have learned about the many moral dilemmas that preoccupy organizational members. While incorporating a wide range of concepts and ideas, this book also has a strong experiential basis as we share our own and others' experiences with navigating in complexity and unpredictability guided by a desire to help construct a better social world. This interest is shared by many managers, consultants and employees who want to discover how relational and more respectful methods can be used to create improved possibilities of action and better results in organizations.

We would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to discuss the topics of the book with us or offered feedback on the first drafts of chapters. In particular, this includes Peter Lang, Jane Palm, Ulla Andersen, Flemming Andersen, Peter Hansen-Skovmoes, Lone Clausen, Karen Faurfelt, Michala Schnoor, Katrine Bastian Meiner, Povl Dolleris Røjkjær, Mette Borg Jensen, Britta Gerd Hansen and Troels Østergaard Jørgensen. We are also very grateful to the managers, consultants and employees who have contributed with stories, and who have spent time and effort letting us interview them and later reviewing our narrative summaries of their experiences. These contributions have been crucial for our ability to connect ideas, assumptions and models from the abstract world with the complexities of concrete everyday life, where many actors' thoughts and

actions are interwoven to create the social world that becomes our reality.

We would also like to thank our publisher, Dansk psykologisk Forlag, where Editors Marianne Kølle and Lone Berg Jensen have provided highly professional feedback – and sometimes very challenging comments – as this book came together. Their belief in this project and support along the way has been of great value to us.

Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo
June 2007

LIST OF STORIES ON
MORAL DILEMMAS IN ORGANIZATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1:

WHY RELATIONAL ETHICS?

Sometimes people in organizations experience humiliation, hurt and disrespect. It is our firm conviction that this is not a result of bad intentions but instead an unintended effect of vague ethics theories and inadequate navigational tools when organizational members find themselves in moral dilemmas. We are convinced that relational ethics will be of great value and use with respect to creating better social worlds in organizations and in society.

In our experience, managers, consultants and employees are increasingly concerned with moral questions such as "What should I do in this difficult situation?", "How can I face myself if I respond in kind?", "How do I decide between options A and B, when it seems like a choice between a rock and a hard place?", "How do I implement this tough decision with the least amount of damage?" or "How can I act sensibly when a colleague disregards my points of view and ridicules me?"

These examples describe situations in which one has time to pause and ponder on a moral question – with oneself and maybe others. However, many everyday situations unfold so quickly that we act without much thought. We operate on autopilot and pick what seems like the only available option. In a common-sense moral order we tend to be directed by righteous indignation and to award ourselves the right to assess the moral quality of other people's actions without much consideration for the context that they

occur in. In common-sense morality, we often see the world in black and white, opposites, conflicts, and good versus bad, and we hold each other to account, make others see the error of their ways, assign guilt and blame – all in the hope of making other people wiser and better human beings. In theory, the logic may seem strong, but unfortunately it does not work that way in practice. Instead common-sense morality, moral indignation and assignment of guilt and blame damage relationships, create separateness, and narrow our scope of possible actions. What, then, do we do? What paths can we take to rise above everyday judgmental morality?

One possibility might be to turn to classic ethics theories, such as virtue ethics or the ethics of duty, which offer universal guidelines and categorical requirements for moral behavior. These ethics theories are an integrated feature of Western culture and part of the basis for the ethical reflections of organizational members. However, as these theories are universal and categorical, they do not serve as helpful tools in specific and difficult situations. There will always be too many exceptions to the rules in the shape of particular circumstances and complicating details. Therefore there is a need for concepts and navigational tools that will assist organizational members in unique situations, which can be understood in different ways and often involve many conflicting considerations.

Another approach – besides the classic ethics theories – is to rely on one's gut feeling and intuition. When we find ourselves in a moral dilemma and are unable to find rational reasons for choosing either A or B, eventually we often rely on what feels right and argue that "I did this because it just felt like the right thing to do." We cannot explain in words why we did what we did. This ethics approach is related to the notion of remaining authentic

(true to our feelings), open (sharing our feelings) and honest (telling the truth about our feelings). These particular ethical values are often at play in organizations. When authenticity, openness and honesty are high on the agenda, conversations risk becoming less than constructive and perhaps even downright destructive: "I'm just saying this in the interest of being open" and "Well, to be quite honest …" are phrases that often precede damaging criticism of a colleague's actions or personality. The idea of relying on subjective gut feelings as the basis for a moral choice springs from the assumption that there is a truth and that this can be found in the mind of the individual. Based on both theory and our practice as organizational psychology consultants we consider this path to be counterproductive as it serves to divide organizational members and tempts them to reserve the right to view the world in one particular perspective: their own limited point of view.

In our work as organizational psychologists and in our writings, we have thus chosen to develop a third path, which we call *relational ethics*. Taking this path requires abandoning the universal definitions of true and false, good and bad, right and wrong and turning instead to an emphasis on co-construction of meaning, coordination of actions and mutual relatedness among organizational members.

In this book, we focus on unfolding relational ethics in an organizational setting, although we are convinced that the use of relational ethics might help create a better social world in many other settings: in international negotiations, the media, our education system, family life, etc. We view organizations as work communities where moral obligations and entitlements are defined in part by the membership of the organization.

Essentially, organizations contain both common and conflicting interests and perspectives, and access to influence is not evenly distributed. We are also concerned with the link between ethics on the one hand and results and organizational efficacy on the other, and we do not consider it relevant to ask *whether* a particular company can afford to work with ethics right now. On the contrary, we are convinced that ignoring the many moral and ethical aspects of everyday events has a strong negative impact on the bottom line. As illustrated by the nine stories in this book, the loss of personal dignity and lack of appreciation can mean that much work time is spent repairing dignity and damaged relationships. Therefore, we believe that all organizations at all times must deal carefully with moral questions. No organization can afford not to.

The purpose of the book is not to make everyday life in organizations simpler or more predictable. Rather we wish to inspire the readers to embrace complexity, changeability and unpredictability and to acknowledge their own capacity for doing this. The book does not provide a list of correct answers. We do not intend to provide tools for managing and controlling events or for reducing unpredictability. There is already an abundance of books that aspire to do this. Since complexity and unpredictability are general conditions of everyday life for all of us, it may be more helpful to heighten our awareness of our own role in the events that unfold and of the situations and outcomes we are involved in creating. To think that we can control events would be an illusion, but giving up and trying to stay out of events implies a neglect of responsibility. Neither is desirable. Instead, we hope to steer a middle course: to see our own role and contributions and to create and choose possible actions based on an awareness of the concerns

we ought to show other members of our work community.

To illustrate how moral issues and ethics are embedded in all our daily actions in organizations we tell nine stories from life in organizations. Some of these stories will seem quite recognizable and thus help us demonstrate how everyday events contain both practical wisdom and challenging moral issues. Other stories are very dramatic. The first time we heard them, they seemed hard to believe, and we discussed how real life exceeded our imagination. Nevertheless, they are actual stories from everyday life in organizations. Each of the stories is told by a manager, an employee or a consultant. The stories are personal tales about events, in which one or more of the persons experienced doubts or moral dilemmas and found it hard to see a constructive way forward. In our use of the stories we entertain a variety of ideas, interpretations and possibilities of action as they might appear from the perspectives of the narrator and other actors. Thus, we introduce additional hypothetical voices. Using a hypothetical language lets us play out a variety of possible ways for the actors in a given story to attribute meaning to the events and move on. The hypothetical language springs from the awareness that events in organizations are unpredictable and open to multiple interpretations, and that any utterance and any action can lead in many different directions. We also attempt to use a dialogic approach in our writing, inviting the reader to enter into the various and often conflicting ethical considerations that we discuss. We try to write in a way that lets our readers discover all the practical wisdom that they already possess. By practical wisdom we mean the skilled capacity to coordinate our actions with those of others in a changing world – without necessarily understanding what goes on in another person's mind.

We have found inspiration in linguistic philosophy, moral philosophy, ethics theory, sociology, social psychology, organizational theory, management theory, psychology, anthropology, and communication theory. In our presentation of key concepts, we strive to include the context in which the ideas were developed. This effort has involved a far-ranging search for concepts, ideas, models and approaches that might help us explore and unfold what ethical reflections on moral issues might involve. We aim to present other authors' theoretical contributions briefly yet loyally. However, this is not in any traditional sense an academic book with in-depth criticism of shortcomings and inconsistencies in other authors' contributions. We choose to focus mainly on those authors whose contributions we find particularly relevant and useful in relation to the topics of the book. The book should also serve as a guide for the reader in the field of a very extensive literature, while we as authors clearly indicate when we take over and seek to further develop the concepts and make them useful in an organizational setting.

Choice of possible actions should be guided by an awareness of the – often implicit – assumptions about people, organizations, learning, change, development, etc. In this book we seek to make these implicit assumptions explicit – both with regard to making sense of everyday events in organizations and with regard to HR methods and tools. Insight into these assumptions is a prerequisite for choosing appropriate actions and methods. Any possible action and any method are anchored in a theory and an epistemology that rests on certain assumptions. Essentially, choosing tools for organizational development means choosing an epistemology and thus also ways to influence and thereby to obtain potential consequences. Thus, the book

may also serve as a guideline for managers and HR consultants who are responsible for choosing among a wide range of methods, tools and external consultants.

To us, drawing on the complexity, ambiguity, fluidity and unpredictability of everyday life means abandoning the notion that actions of organizational members can be planned and steered in predetermined directions. It also means abandoning the notion that committing plans to paper increases the likelihood that managers and employees will actually carry out the plans. In other words, we have to abandon the current planning and control rationale, where even personal development is put into a schedule, subjected to scaled ratings and implemented like a military operation with painstakingly developed objectives and phases.

In Chapter 2 we offer an introduction to epistemology and compare the key assumptions in realism and social constructionism. We also unfold seven basic assumptions that spring from social constructionism and demonstrate how social constructionism is related to relational ethics.

In each of the following five chapters we address a key concept from social constructionism and show how the concept can be used to shed light on the co-creation of meaning, the coordination of actions, and the mutual relatedness in organizations. The five concepts are: context, relationship, discourse, appreciation, and power. It is our conviction that these five concepts can offer a fruitful and helpful basis for discovering the moral compass points that make up a relational ethics.

In Chapter 3 we address the concept of context. By context we mean the meaning-constructing pattern within which events unfold. *Context* is not simply something that "is", or which we are "exposed to", but rather some-

thing that is created through language. In order to grasp what this means we open with a philosophical discussion of language. In analyses that are based on common-sense understanding and realism, language is treated as a means of describing a pre-existing reality. Social constructionism instead focuses on the creative powers of language and how we use language to affirm or alter the social world that we experience as our reality. We review some of the main contributions from the linguistic philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin. Next, we turn to W. Barnett Pearce's social constructionist perspective of communication and illustrate how meaning is constructed through speech acts and episodes. In organizations, meaning is created in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways that no single individual can grasp in its full extent. The exploration of the concept of context leads to a moral obligation, which we call social responsibility. When we assume social responsibility we embrace the idea that we are not simply subjected to events but co-creators and thus co-responsible for constructing situations in which all involved can contribute constructively.

In Chapter 4 we take a close look at the concept of relationships. Realism and social constructionism both focus on the importance of relationships, but there are some key differences between the two points of view. In this chapter we discuss how relational thinking varies with epistemology. Here too, we draw inspiration from the linguistic philosopher John Austin, who sheds light on the relation-building power of language and on the embeddedness of moral obligations and entitlements in language. Next, we turn to examples from narrative-inspired anthropological research that explores how words take their meaning from the cultural context. Our interest in the relation-building power of language leads to the moral compass

point that we call the obligation to engage in dialogue.

In Chapter 5 we turn to discourses and narratives. We discuss how historically and culturally shaped discourses deliver material for living stories in organizations. A narrative perspective on stories about events in organizations makes it clear that the narrative plot defines positions and determines how organizational members are assigned certain positions rather than others and thereby are attributed "personal traits". In this chapter we review discourses that are common in many organizations, such as the discourse on change management, the discourse on individual dysfunction, diagnosis and treatment, and the discourse on documentation and evaluation. Discourses and narratives offer a limited number of positions. The positioning of managers and employees determines their moral obligations and entitlements. This chapter illustrates the creative powers of discourses and stories. When, for example, stories involving villain and victim positions become dominant in an organization, the moral obligations and entitlements are defined in ways that are hard for the individual organizational member to escape. In Chapter 5 we demonstrate how discourses and stories that shape subject-object relationships are not helpful in creating a better social world. The narrative angle on events encourages us to listen in a discursive manner, that is, to pay attention to the positions we place ourselves and others into and to assume a shared responsibility for ensuring a positioning that shapes mutually respectful relationships and makes dialogue possible.

In Chapter 6, the focus is on recognition and appreciation. Initially, we discuss John Dewey's ideas on exploration as experiential learning, change, participatory knowledge and moral education. John Dewey was an important source of inspiration for the development of both the CMM theory

(Coordinated Management of Meaning) and Appreciative Inquiry. We also include the German philosopher and social critic Axel Honneth, who has written seminal works on various forms of recognition, as his ideas may provide inspiration for a further development of the use of Appreciative Inquiry in organizations. Next, we illustrate how Appreciative Inquiry can serve as a valuable alternative to traditional problem-solving approaches in organizations. We unfold the basic assumptions about learning, change and development and illustrate the link between these assumptions and ethics. Appreciative Inquiry leads to a moral obligation, which we call inquiry of value to the work community. It is not sufficient to consider and reflect on a situation based on realism. In a social constructionist perspective, it is important to include thinking about how one's own and others' positions and actions can be of value to the entire work community.

In Chapter 7, the focus is on power. Organizational members do not have the same opportunities for making their voices heard, shaping constructive contexts and assuming moral obligations in accordance with a relational ethics. This chapter draws on ideas by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to explore the role of traditional and modern power in organizations. Next, we turn to the Australian therapist Michael White, who has explored modern power and normalizing judgment. The chapter introduces the moral obligation of helping to create a scope of possibilities where managers and employees can interact as morally responsible and reliable individuals who enter into mutually respectful relationships.

The closing chapter of the book gathers up the many threads we have spun and demonstrates how moral obligations and entitlements are interwoven and combine to form the content of relational ethics. A pattern emerges

that may serve as a source of inspiration both in making constructive contributions in the everyday flow of events in organizations and in developing new HR methods appropriate for strengthening teamwork, work quality, creativity, and the organization's overall results.