Finite Responsibility and Infinite Hope with Joel Reynolds

Christiane Wisehart: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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Christiane: Caring for other people can be difficult. Whether it's your own children, your parent, or a friend, care work is emotionally complicated and can be physically messy and uncomfortable. Today's guest, the philosopher Joel Reynolds, argues that the entanglements and complexities of care work are ethically significant. This insight came to him through his own work as a caregiver to his grandfather.

Joel Reynolds: The experience of caregiving or doing any type of dependency work, I think it has to change one's understanding of ethics, or at least I'm not sure how it couldn't. For me, I think it showed me the way that our intimate relationships with other people and the extent to which we are truly close for them and that our time and our emotional attention and even our general attention is actually focused intensely on their wellbeing and thinking through their concerns. It opens a very different vantage point on what it means to be ethical and moral.

Christiane: Stay tuned for all of that and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics!

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Christiane: Normally when I sit down to interview a philosopher, I don't get a lot of insight into their families or personal lives. With the philosopher Joel Reynolds, though, that's exactly where we had to start.

So, my first question... Tell me a little bit about your grandfather?

Joel Reynolds: Papa Dave was before all else a worker and a builder. Over the course of his life, he built hundreds -- he might've actually built thousands, I don't know the exact count -- of homes through Habitat for Humanity and also helped out all sorts of people in our local community in Eugene, Oregon, where I was raised.

Christiane: Joel's grandfather suffered a massive stroke that left the entire left side of his body paralyzed. This meant that Joel and his family had to work in shifts to help care for him.

Joel: It was very difficult for him especially because of his identity as someone who built things and went out in the world and was very active. I ended up being his caretaker for actually a relatively short amount of time. I did some night shifts when there were no other family members able to do them, and I had never been super close to him, which made the care taking relationship a little more unusual than it might've been otherwise. I was close to him in the sense that I loved him and we spent lots of family events together, but it wasn't one of these intimate relationships. So, when this occurred, and then I'm helping him go to the bathroom and I'm

putting on his clothes and I'm situating pillows so that he doesn't get bed sores, it was a very fast shift in terms of the intimacy of the relationship. It was tricky.

Christiane: This care work didn't just give Joel a new perspective on his relationship with his grandfather. It also helped him reframe the way he understood ethics.

Joel: The experience of caregiving or doing any type of dependency work and dependency labor, I think it has to change one's understanding of ethics, or at least I'm not sure how it couldn't. For me, I think it showed me the way that our intimate relationships with other people and the extent to which we are truly close for them and that our time and our emotional attention and even our general attention is actually focused intensely on their wellbeing and thinking through their concerns and putting them even before you in certain situations. It opens a very different vantage point on what it means to be ethical and moral.

In a situation of caregiving, one often doesn't have the luxury of thinking about rights. One often doesn't necessarily have the luxury of reflecting upon various concepts of duty, or even working out the types of virtues that are necessary in the situation. A lot of that will be after the fact. I also think that having experiences like that, if someone already does have views about the role of rights or duties or virtues, when you do things like this, you might come to realize what you thought beforehand was a little bit off, or maybe there's something missing in what you thought was actually necessary or sufficient for these moral terms to have meaning.

Christiane: Joel's work caring for another family member, his brother, led him to question the dominant traditions in moral philosophy: deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics. Joel turned to the work of a philosopher named emmanuel Levinas, whose work is quite different from those three traditions. Levinas inspired a line of thinking called "response ethics." So while consequentialists or deontologists focus on the individual, Levinas and response ethicists say that's the wrong starting point.

Joel: We are already in relationships with other people, and we need to begin from our embeddedness in relationships with others and ask questions about our response to them. The historical focus on an individual subject who's typically thought of as rational, as able-bodied, as a cis white male, you can go on with this for quite some time, that is a very bad starting point for response ethicists, and they want to flip that script. That's part of what makes response ethics I think so powerful, is that it really tries to overturn some of the baseline assumptions of most of the history of Western moral philosophy.

Christiane: "Response ethics" begins with the idea that we should place priority on our response to other people.

Joel: To ethically respond to another is to respond to that which overflows in them and from them. By virtue of being born a human, you could say that one is endowed by our social contracts to have certain rights that transcend any particular fact about oneself. No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, you are more than just a sack of flesh and bones. You have special responsibilities that others, that everyone, owes to you. I think that that idea, that the other is infinitely other, that I am responsible to them in this very profound and deep way, that my existence arises out of all of my responsibilities to them, and it arises out of a shared world with them, I think there's a lot there that's worth mining through.

Christiane: Joel's work connects these key insights from response ethics to another ethical theory: care ethics. Like response ethics, care ethics poses a serious challenge to dominant traditions in moral philosophy. It's an ethical framework that focuses on the role of caring relations between humans.

Joel: The way that I explain care ethics is as follows. Have you ever felt that something is wrong, despite being told by others that it's right? Have you ever felt that black and white ethical rules, like never steal or never lie, don't make sense for every single situation? Well, psychologist Carol Gilligan, one of the founders of care ethics, she argues that those intuitions, they reveal something profound about the nature of human morality as such.

Christiane: Instead of focusing on strict rights, or principles, care ethics focuses more on responsibilities and relationships. Care ethics also has more of a focus on context and situation. The theories that ground care ethics come out of the specificity of actually caring for others.

Joel: If you are a care ethicist, you're going to think much more about the situation, you're going to think much more about the relationships. You're not going to begin from asking what the individual agent should do relative to various abstract norms. Honestly, I just think that's a better way to do ethics. You can also think of this in terms of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. Do you want to try and figure out what's right based upon a very sanitized understanding of a perfect situation, or do you want to actually begin with the messy complicated world we live in, where people have all sorts of biases, and people have histories, and people have different sorts of power relations and social relations? My hunch is, whatever benefits ideal theory might have, at the very least, we better have a lot of non-ideal theory if we're worried about making the world that we live in today a better place.

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Christiane: So at this point you might be thinking that it makes sense that Joel connects care ethics with response ethics. They both focus on responding to others in the real world. And unlike the dominant types of ethical theories, neither care nor response ethics focuses on strict, abstract principles of right and wrong. In spite of this, philosophers haven't historically connected the two theories. However, Joel argues that understanding care ethics and response ethics together is important. He explained that care ethics can help resolve the "responsibility paradox" that's at the heart of response ethics. So remember when Joel was explaining response ethics and he said,

[**Joel (on tape)**: the other is infinitely other,]

That's an important part of the responsibility paradox. The idea that other people are "infinitely other" is a concept known as "radical alterity."

Joel: Alterity is just a fancy word for otherness. Radical alterity refers to a very simple insight. It is impossible to exhaust one's knowledge of another person, or even another being, for that matter. Radical alterity simply means that the other is infinitely other. Another person or another being is always and going to forever be an excess of whatever I know about them. This may sound strange, but just think about the simple fact that no matter how well I know you, I will

never know or understand everything about you. Your being overflows. It is in excess of what can be known about you. This is true for people we think we know very well, close friends or family members. It's in this sense that the other, for Levinas, is infinite.

Christiane: In response ethics, we are responsible to other people. And because people are infinitely other, that means that ethically speaking, we're infinitely responsible to them.

Joel: Levinas thinks that in understanding that who I am, my very subjectivity arises out of response to the infinite other, that I'll see that I have an infinite responsibility to them. Very provocatively, and I'm not actually saying I agree with this, but very provocatively he thinks that our responsibility to others is just built into the very fabric of our existence.

Christiane: This infinite responsibility idea kind of terrified me when I discussed it with Joel.

Christiane, fading up: ...You're maybe blowing my mind a little bit here, but I think it's a really hard thing to imagine acting out in one's own life, because if I'm infinitely responsible to you and everyone else in the world, then I literally have infinite responsibilities, whereas with something like utilitarianism, even if the stopping point is really far away, I can see that there's a stopping point, or with virtue, I can see that there's some boundary there.

Joel: You hit the nail on the head. Response ethics in some ways is one of the more demanding moral theories because of this particular problem. So Levinas, at one point, argues that the more I answer to the other, the more I am responsible. This formula is very strange. Now, before going to bed at night, maybe you've done this, maybe you haven't, I have thought to myself about all the things that I have and have not accomplished. When I think about that, I of course realize all the things I could have done, all the ways I could have helped, and yet I didn't. Well, all of the things that I didn't do have effects in the world, and in every moment, it's not clear that what I'm doing is the best thing or even the right thing. If you feel this, then you might begin to see that your responsibility is in some sense endless. Now, this is a scary thought. I really think this is a scary thought, and I want to also add, I think this is a deeply unhealthy thought. I'm not confident that if one thought in this manner runs one's entire life, that would be a good thing. I just want to flag that for all sorts of reasons.

Christiane: So let's say that you agree with Levinas that the other is infinitely other and you're on board with response ethics. But, like Joel, you understand that this infinite responsibility towards others is not exactly the best thing for you as a healthy human being. If I spent every waking moment, every dollar, every ounce of my emotional labor in the service of others, not only would I still not be able to take care of everyone and everything, I would probably burn out pretty quickly. That's where care ethics comes in.

Joel: If we understand response ethics as arguing for the idea that I'm infinitely responsible to another, and that this infinite responsibility makes up my sense of self, and if we agree with care ethicists that in order to understand the differences between right and wrong, and what we should do and the type of person we should be, we need to think very carefully about the context dependence and specificity of our particular relationships and our particular situation in the world. I think there's something very profound happening when those ideas are put together, and they both make intuitive sense to me based upon my experiences of caring for family members. I came to argue that these two traditions should be thought together because I

experienced their connection in my own life. I *feel* a link between the ideas that I am who I am because of others and the idea that I can only understand what it means to be ethical by reflecting upon my responsibility to others as a baseline.

Christiane: In his work connecting response ethics and care ethics, Joel describes the actual labor that informed his thinking. Because Papa Dave's stroke left him partially paralyzed, he was unable to use the bathroom by himself. So whenever Joel had a shift taking care of him, it meant he had to help him at every point of the process, including cleaning him after a bowel movement. In small, messy moments of care like that, there's a world of meaning and potential problems. Joel had to be mindful of his grandfather's actual body. He had to make sure he cleaned him thoroughly without hurting him. But he also had to pay attention to things like his grandfather's sense of pride and dignity. Joel had to be mindful of *both* his grandfather's body and his emotional state while taking care of him.

It's this combination of actual material needs and the needs of another person's spirit and mind that is central to Joel's thinking about ethics. He explains that there are three crucial types of moments in care work that can serve as a reminder to keep care for body and mind balanced.

Joel: One of these is leveling. One of these is attention. And one of these is interruption. These moments are fluid. One will shift between these depending upon the particular situation, depending upon the particular person or persons you're caring for, but the argument is that these will be part of the structure of what it means to care well. Let me give an example of leveling. If you've ever cared for someone, you will fall into patterns. So, for example, you might learn how to change a diaper very quickly and effectively and you'll be able to do that without giving much thought or any thought at all regarding the particular being whose diaper you're changing, and that's leveling. That's when you're actually caring well precisely insofar as even for a moment you ignore or flatten out the particularity of the person you're caring for.

Perhaps a more provocative example is giving a shot. Children, and some adults, regularly will scream and they may even be very afraid of the needle, and the good nurse or other medical practitioner will ignore the potential pain and suffering of that patient. They will ignore what they are seeing right in front of them in order to do this other act that they know is required for good care. So, what I argue is that at the level of the practitioner's lived experience when they ignore that other person, they're leveling the other person, but that's a crucial component.

Christiane: In contrast to these moments of leveling are moments of attention.

Joel: An example of attention is that when you care for people, you learn to listen to their words and their body and even their environment. Or, I should say, when you care for them well, you learn how to do this. A different way to phrase that is that you must attend to them as they are experiencing the world. Attention, of course, is what we typically think of when we talk about care. It's a type of singularized focus. And this is another moment. This is perhaps the primary moment in order for care to be done well.

The third moment is what I call interruption. No matter how good one is at attending to the other or in the right situations leveling them, a caretaker must be ready to be interrupted. The cared for, the person being cared for, always reserves the right to break through any care-giving practices, and you can think, if we go back to the example of the child who needs a shot, the

child who needs the shot might interrupt their leveling by becoming physically aggressive or by fainting. And in those situations, the medical practitioner, the caregiver is faced with a dilemma. How do you continue on given this interruption? This might mean that you need to wait to give them a shot for another day; it's just too much today. This might mean that you use a lidocaine patch, so that the person knows that the pain will be significantly reduced from what it usually is. It also might mean in some cases that you just have to give them the shot anyway. This is going to be highly context dependent.

Christiane: These moments, these fragments of time in care work are incredibly important to giving good care. If you bring these ideas, these habits of leveling, attention and interruption into your care work, you'll be poised to care for another person in a more ethical way. You'll be able to care for their material and emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs.

Joel: It requires a type of practical wisdom that is an art. It's not just a skill. This, I think, actually brings us back to the idea that the other is infinite. We can't in principle and ahead of time know exactly what good care is going to look like in a specific context. We must forever learn, and in some cases relearn and even unlearn, how to respond and to respond well to others in a particular situation or moment.

Christiane: By learning how to respond well to others using the lens of care ethics, we can begin the process of confronting Levinas' infinite responsibility.

Joel: If one takes care ethics ideas about the context dependence and complexity of care seriously, and if one takes Levinas' idea of infinite responsibility seriously in an existential sense, there is a fundamental tension, because one can do everything that one can and to the best of one's abilities and have never done enough. And I think that idea is actually destructive. It's at least destructive if one really takes it seriously and it digs deep down into one's psyche. And you can point to the necessity of self-care, you can point to all the evidence about moral distress and burnout among professional dependency workers or care givers or medical professionals. You can point to lots of facts and concepts that suggest that this is a tension that actually can hurt one's ability to care well. So, the solution I propose is it's a fusion that tries to dissolve the tension.

[music under Joel speaking]

Good care is based upon the hope of caring better. A care that is ideal and it's never achieved, because again, one might always be wrong, the other might interrupt. You're always having to relearn how to care in the moment. Care ethics I think is born out of this hope, this hope that one will always care better, but care ethics puts that hope to work, and work is always finite. There are only so many hours in the day, and there's only so much one can do. Work has limits and work has ends, and work is humble in a way that brings hope down to earth and makes it really real. We need both, I think. We need a hope that never ends, and an ethic of work that knows where to end. We need finite responsibility with infinite hope.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Joel Reynold's work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org where we have a list of his scholarship and other related resources.

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