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## Values Emerging in Limit Situations: The Need for a Responsive Ethics

In his book, *Phenomenology, Role and Reason*, the phenomenologist Maurice Natanson describes how human beings are normally engaged in their ordinary activities in a socially shared lifeworld. The taken-for-grantedness of this reality can be shattered, however, if individuals undergo what Natanson calls a "disintegrative experience." Such experiences occur when persons must confront serious illness, injury, or death. In these situations individuals discover that their normal patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior no longer suffice to enable them to deal with the unfamiliar predicament that now menaces them. Indeed they have lost their way. According to the philosopher Karl Jaspers, they are thrown into "limit situations" (Grenzsituationen). Such situations are called "limit situations" precisely because people find themselves extremely limited in the choices they can make, limited in the solutions available to them, and limited in ethical norms to guide them. In any event, the disintegrative situation cannot be handled with the commonsensical concepts, morals, and recipes for action that do ordinarily suffice in everyday life. Drawing from two volumes written by Richard Zaner, Anne Geddes Stahlman Professor of Medical Ethics and Philosophy of Medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, in which he relates his interactions as clinical ethicist with patients and their families at Vanderbilt, we disclose the narratives and voices of the patients who have been cast precisely into such limit situations. The loss of life's map arrests or roots them in an agonizing present and they must search for whatever (hitherto buried) resources of value, purpose, and decision they can unearth in order to arrive at a decision or destination and meet the future in a way that they will find bearable. We conclude with Jaspersian remarks about the difficult process of "coming to oneself" that occurs in such predicaments and affirm Zaner's "responsive ethics" as an approach to the depths of the self that must be activated to confront what remains of the future.

Objectives:

- 1) To help clinical ethicists, i.e., ethicists directly involved in clinical consultations, recognize the thoroughly unfamiliar "limit situations" in which patients and families usually find themselves when they confront serious illness or injury.
- 2) To offer indications about ways the clinical ethicist can approach such situations that, while not "solving" the problem, facilitate the difficult personal struggles that the persons involved must endure.
- 3) To point to the different slant this recognition of limit situations gives to the notion of a "responsive ethics" which brackets presuppositions and allows the patient and the family to have control and dignity in finding alternative paths

forthcoming in

Stephen Modell, *Philosophical Studies in Medicine and Health*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

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