

# Relationship as a Normative Space

Perspectives on Relational Change in Moral Theology and AI Ethics.  
By *Benedikt Rauw*

A noticeable shift can be observed across contemporary normative theory: moral orientation is increasingly grounded less in isolated acts or allegedly intrinsic essences and more in what occurs within relationships, social practices, and institutionalized forms of recognition. Relationship thus becomes not only an object of ethical reflection but also a methodological key that determines where moral relevance is located in the first place. This paper takes that shift as a heuristic guide and develops a conceptual comparison between two discourses that are usually kept apart: the Catholic moral-theological transition from act- and purpose-centered sexual morality toward a relationship ethics of personal communion, and David Gunkel's relational turn in AI ethics, which challenges the person/thing dichotomy by emphasizing interactional and legal practices of attribution.

The study is guided by three main questions: (1) How does normativity emerge when ethical justification is relocated from prior determinations of what something is (essence, nature, inner properties) to what happens in practice (interaction, recognition, institutional attribution)? (2) To what extent can the moral-theological move from act to covenant be understood as a practice-first logic that corresponds –at the level of normative grammar – to the relational turn in AI ethics? (3) Which additional normative criteria are required to evaluate recognition practices themselves, so that relational approaches do not become exposed to projection, manipulation, power asymmetries, or responsibility diffusion in technologically mediated settings?

The theoretical framework combines key resources from Catholic relationship ethics with relational approaches in AI ethics. On the moral-theological side, the paper reconstructs the shift toward relationship ethics as a double recalibration: it changes the object of moral evaluation (from the isolated sexual act to the quality of a personal relationship) and the method of moral judgment (from a prohibition- and teleology-driven logic

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to a relational interpretation of sexuality as embodied personal communication). The argument draws especially on Wojtyła's personalist norm and on Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, which describes marriage as an intimate community of life and love and focusses on mutual self-gift and responsibility as key moral criteria. On the AI ethics side, the paper focuses on Gunkel's critique of property-based accounts of moral standing (consciousness, sentience, autonomy) and his insistence – framed via Hume's is/ought problem – that normative conclusions about rights cannot be straightforwardly derived from contested ontological claims. The relational alternative locates moral and legal standing in practices of interaction, social interpretation, and institutional attribution; Levinas serves as a resource for reversing the justificatory direction by highlighting how responsibility may arise in personal encounter.

Methodologically, the paper offers an argumentative conceptual comparison rather than an empirical study. It proceeds steps: (1) reconstructing the moral-theological move from sexual morality to relationship ethics; (2) reconstructing Gunkel's relational turn as a critique of ontology-first strategies; and (3) identifying shared patterns and key divergences in order to clarify the strengths, limits, and blind spots of relational ethics. The aim is not to transfer moral-theological norms to technical artifacts but to illuminate how relational approaches generate normativity and how they can be normatively secured.

The main result is that both discourses, despite their different subjects, perform a comparable transformation of normative grammar: they transfer moral questions from ontology-first reasoning to a practice-first logic in which normativity is generated within practices of relationship, responsiveness, and institutional attribution. This shared logic is visible in the reassessment of moral evaluation (act/property vs. relational embedding), in a sensitivity to institutionalization (covenant frameworks; the socio-legal production of the person/thing distinction), and in the diagnosis of fragile boundaries in complex social realities and technological boundary cases.

At the same time, the comparison yields a critical upshot. Catholic relationship ethics remains tied to strong normative commitments – dignity, non-instrumentalization, responsibility and fidelity – that cannot be reduced to social attribution. Gunkel's approach is more diagnostic and status-open, exposing how categories are produced and how power shapes decisions about criteria. Precisely for this reason, relational ethics requires second-order norms that allow recognition and attri-

bution practices themselves to be assessed, so that relationship does not become an alibi for projection, strategic anthropomorphization, or responsibility diffusion. The paper therefore argues that relational ethics is robust only if relationship is treated not as a mere fact but as a normatively qualifiable practice, evaluated with regard to justice, vulnerability protection, and accountability structures.

The paper's main findings are: (a) both fields exemplify a move from ontology-first to practice-first moral reasoning; (b) normativity emerges through recognition, responsiveness, and institutional attribution, not only through intrinsic properties; and (c) relational approaches must be supplemented by criteria for judging recognition practices in order to prevent manipulation and accountability gaps. This connection includes developing a justice- and vulnerability-oriented framework for evaluating recognition in human-AI interaction, translating moral-theological insights on non-instrumental responsibility into protections against AI-enabled diffusion of accountability, and using AI ethics' sensitivity to institutional power to refine theological accounts of how ideals of relationship are socially shaped and can become exclusionary. A next step beyond conceptual comparison would be selective case analyses (e.g., AI in care or companionship) focusing on where recognition is elicited, how responsibility is attributed, and which institutional designs prevent harm and responsibility diffusion.

## References

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### Full Article

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