EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Sarah Bishop Merrill begins her study with a critique of definitions of person. Her survey of the great variety of available definitions shows theorists engaged in the popular philosophical game of Necessary and Sufficient Conditions. While a theorist may recognize a component as required for the definition, that component may be judged—in itself, or in combination with the other identifiable components—insufficient to serve as the definition. The theorist then makes an original contribution to the literature by proposing some other necessary condition, which in itself, or in combination with others, will be enough for the definition to triumph. The winner of the game arrives at the essence, the fixed identity, of what is being defined.

Merrill shows that this form of critical inquiry and theorizing takes place in the realm of logic, largely divorced from clinical experience. While what is added to the definition may be valuable, what is omitted may be vital. We do not want definitions of persons, warns Merrill, that dehumanize some people. With every new definition of person, you and I run the danger of being defined as nonpersons.

Merrill argues for an open-ended approach to definition, whereby we leave ourselves open to growth in understanding and in caring about people, especially those people who can’t speak for themselves. Merrill brings the critical conscience to bear upon personhood. She discusses an interesting field survey applied to patients and health practitioners, which introduces fresh perspectives and subtle values into the consideration of personhood. This unusual presentation of a survey is notable not so much for its statistical weight as for its dialectical usefulness. This is a suggestive model of how philosophical inquiry into life values may be pursued.

Merrill makes a case for an ethics of caring in the clinical context. We must care for persons as we take care of them. This has implications for ethics as a whole. In its scholarship, clinical sensitivity, and humane commitment, this is truly a caring book.

Robert Ginsberg
Executive Editor
Value Inquiry Book Series