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As the title indicates, this book attempts two tasks—to articulate an ethical stance adequate to the contemporary experience of aging and to apply this ethic to long-term care in the United States. Moses emphasizes that contemporary Christian ethics can no longer view elderly persons as merely passive recipients of the care of others but rather must understand them as agents in their own right.

Moses articulates her ethical stance by recourse to the principles of dignity, equality, mutuality, and participation (148). She develops her argument by first describing the status quo regarding aging in the United States, articulating the inadequacies regarding the way in which our culture continues to deal with the issue of aging. She then offers two models that can serve as alternatives to the present situation. The first is the outreach to elderly persons developed by the Community of San Egidio, a lay community founded in Rome and now present in several countries that has chosen care for the elderly as one of its ministries. It bases this outreach on a highly developed notion of friendship. The second is the Green House Project, a new concept in long-term care begun in the United States that attempts to change the culture of long-term care by means of greater participation on the part of residents.

She continues her argument by moving to the Bible, using both Hebrew and Christian scriptures to demonstrate that the transition into old age does not “entail the notion of moving into a period in which one no longer had any purpose or responsibility” (101). She maintains that an ethic informed by the biblical witness “must demand an approach to long-term care that reflects the insight that the elderly . . . are participating subjects within the community (109, author’s emphasis).

She bolsters this biblical understanding with insights from a wide range of contemporary theological perspectives, from Karl Barth to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Finally, the book returns to the insights developed from the Community of San Egidio and the Green House Project and calls upon churches to go beyond models of care that keep the elderly in roles of need and dependence and to ensure that the elderly remain moral subjects with their own aspirations and responsibilities, emphasizing that old age remains a time of growth and development.

The book is especially successful when it analyzes the external factors, often systemic, that contribute to unnecessary disempowering of elderly persons, which in turn diminishes their participation in Church and society. It reminds the Christian community of its responsibilities to ensure the dignity and participation of the elderly in the Christian community and in society in general.
The book is less successful in responding to those factors internal to the life of the elderly person, often arising from diseases, both physical and cognitive. These diseases can often contribute to the isolation and marginalization of elderly persons. The author mentions these conditions several times but does not actually develop an adequate ethical response to them. For example, the author discusses Alzheimer’s disease on only relatively few occasions. She acknowledges that such issues are “disquieting.” It would considerably strengthen her argument, however, if she were to explain more fully how her principles of dignity, equality, mutuality, and participation can apply to situations where elderly persons are unable to exercise their agency—to articulate or even understand their “aspirations or responsibilities” because of physical or cognitive incapacity. To me, the crucial issue is how we are able to ensure respect for the dignity of elderly people in these circumstances.

In spite of this limitation, this is an important book that should be read by all in health care. It challenges the way things have normally been done, and it places the question of elder care within the ethical context of social justice, asking how the Christian community and the greater society can truly respect the dignity of their elderly members.