ABORTION, POLYPHONIC NARRATIVES AND KANTIANISM: QUALITY OF LIFE MATTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Quality of life perspectives on pregnancy are nothing new in philosophical literature. However, such conversations seem to arise only when considering an alleged right to procreation. While ideas of how other people may be affected by the birth of another individual is at the heart of discussions about abortion in Japan and China, Western philosophers in the 20th Century have focused instead on the moral desirability of having children (Bayle, 1979; Hinson, 1979; O’Neill, 1979; Steinbock and McClamrock, 1994).

Commonly, the literature focuses on the wish to have and raise a child; that is, the desire for pregnancy and its completion. All discussion of a ‘right to abortion’ seems meaningless in a context where the primary desire is to preserve a wanted pregnancy. This is particularly true in pregnancies involving multiple embryos. Here we see that the issue of abortion may emerge only because some embryos might have to be terminated in order that others may survive.

By reflecting upon the above, the primacy of quality of life considerations may emerge as paramount. It will be suggested that issues about quality of life are more morally relevant than rights based considerations, when considering whether to preserve a pregnancy. Further, quality of life actually falls under the wide concept of autonomy. In fact, one might understand part of this paper’s present enterprise as a response to Marilyn Friedman’s “second challenge for feminist relational accounts of autonomy . . . to reconceptualize the notion of selfhood and individuality in a coherent manner” (219). Within a Kantian framework, quality of life is an end of all members of a pregnancy-relationship and, thus, must be respected. Finally, by adding the conception of polyphonic narrative to the Kantian framework, the plausibility of a feminist Kantian perspective, free of isolated individualism and reified abstraction is established.
AUTONOMY AND BENEFICENCE

Onora O’Neill distinguishes between a right to procreate and a right to become a parent. She claims that there is no unrestricted right to procreate, observing “[B]egetters or bearers must have or make some feasible plan for their child to be adequately reared by themselves or by willing others” (1979, 25). O’Neill thereby isolates a problem that can serve as the basis of this paper’s arguments for quality of life considerations; that is, How do we (correctly) identify persons upon whom the child can make claims? For present purposes, this paper demonstrates how this claim is disentangled from the notion of a “right,” particularly a political right.

O’Neill argues that the claim that children ought to have their needs and interests satisfied is separate from determining the party that will satisfy them. She locates the moral salience here in the decision to have a child and the responsibility of decision-makers to consider the implications for the being that they want to bring into the world. The needs and interests (and the assignation of who will satisfy them) need to be seen as something required by not only “the baby,” but by the unique human being who will be a child, teenager, and adult.

In pursuing the project of identifying persons upon whom the child can make claims, O’Neill distinguishes between liberty rights (rights concerning duties of non-interference) and claim rights (obligations that are owed to us and are assigned to particular people). Liberty rights can be understood as strict obligations and as a species of “perfect duties” and are legal requirements such as duties of justice.1 Claim rights can be understood as broad obligations, a species of “imperfect duties,” such as duties of beneficence. Duties of justice, understood as “perfect duties,” are ethical requirements that help us discharge the first part of our Kantian duties, i.e., not to merely use each other. To anyone, regardless of our familiarity with that individual, we owe such duties. For example, physically abusing a parent is legally punishable not because the person is our relative (although morally abhorrent); rather, it is punishable because we are to refrain from physically harming anyone.

In contrast, duties of beneficence, are imperfect duties, i.e., obligations that arise only when we have a particular relationship within which specified persons can discharge these kinds of obligations.2 We may think less of a parent who does not put the needs of his child before his, but we cannot, in usual cases, prosecute such an individual. Likewise we might
think that an adult child failing to call her parent regularly was repugnant, but there is no legal recourse to effect a different, more filial behavior.

One critical difference between the above two kinds of rights is that the latter are much more difficult to discharge and, therefore, satisfy. It is this point that O'Neill repeatedly returns to in her analysis of parental obligations to children. Rights that can’t be discharged are impotent and, in a sense, self-defeating. What use is a “right” if, in reality, it can not be exercised?

However, how will the language of obligation get us any farther in this particular inquiry? It is a central thesis of this paper that it will. First, the language of obligation is present, as we have argued, in the notion of rights themselves. We acknowledge this in the correlation of rights and duties, understanding obligation as a type of duty. Second, the language of obligation can be located in a key term appealed to in philosophical and medical ethics literature that is often associated with rights, i.e., autonomy. We will require it in order to make the stronger claim about the strength of moral obligations: these must be understood as requiring a thicker sense of respect than that grounded in a strict rights’ notion of duty.

Reflecting on the ground breaking work of John Hardwig in “What about the Family? The Role of Family Interests in Medical Treatment Decisions,” and its influence on medical ethics literature, we can trace a trend from a patient-physician model that tends to focus on patients’ rights and autonomy to a model that tends to emphasize the moral relevance of others’ interests, particularly those of the patient’s family (1990, 5-10; 1993, 20-27). Hardwig attempts to move medical ethics’ discussions out of a rights-based perspective to one that acknowledges the moral force of reciprocal obligations between those individuals who are intimately part of a patient’s life. He believes that rights-based discussions of medical treatment fail to recognize the obligatory force of such relationships. In Hardwig’s view, the moral force of those relationships that the patient has must be considered since people other than the patient herself are affected by decisions made about patient treatment. His perspective is intended to make room for others who are impacted by the patient’s decision and is not meant to ignore or replace patient decision-making. In fact, one might understand Hardwig’s perspective as relational.

In the more traditional patient-physician and patient-centered rights perspective and even in Hardwig’s alternative perspective, considerations of patient treatment and care based on autonomy are construed as mark-
edly different from those that would be based on beneficence. In other words, people have a moral obligation to benefit others, even sometimes promoting their happiness. Here, we must be clear about whether one believes that happiness refers to a felicific calculus of hedonistic/psychological pleasure, i.e., pure felt pleasure. Alternatively, we can understand happiness as human flourishing, much like the Greek sense of ‘eudaimonia.’ Quality of life considerations and their connection to beneficence and, ultimately, autonomy are necessary parts of a conception of happiness understood as human flourishing as a moral being.

The purported dichotomy between autonomy and beneficence — and, in feminist literature, justice and care — references a similar problem for both philosophical theory and medical ethics. The source of the problem stems from a misunderstanding of the idea of autonomy, particularly the Kantian one. Barbara Secker attempts to clarify the issue by suggesting a distinction between “Kant's concept of autonomy” and “the Kantian concept of autonomy.” Arguing that both concepts may be troublesome when applied to bioethical issues, Secker offers “a more promising concept of patient autonomy.” Unfortunately, this account, like many other attempts at refuting or revising the conception of Kantian autonomy rests upon a simplistic Kantian concept of autonomy rooted in Mappes’s and DeGrazia’s introductory remarks in Biomedical Ethics (1996) which perpetuates the dichotomy between autonomy and beneficence (1999, 43-66). However, in Kant, a fully moral agent is one who discharges moral duties that come under the heading of justice and rights and who freely performs obligations that are understood as stemming from beneficence. The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative also distinguishes between treating people as mere means and treating them as ends, understood as our rational capacity of setting goals. We discharge duties of justice when we avoid the former, and demonstrate our respect for persons when we act on our obligations grounded in beneficence. Thus, autonomy and beneficence are not mutually exclusive; rather, both are required for full Kantian moral agency.

In contrast, a thicker sense of respect is available when we actively take on the projects of others with whom we have entered into voluntary relationships. Ultimately, full Kantian moral agency requires us to do more than refraining from some activity that harms someone. O'Neill makes a similar claim and implies such a distinction about respect when she states “[M]aking another into a tool or instrument in my project is one way of failing to treat that other as a person; but only one way” (O'Neill, 1989, 105). This paper builds upon O'Neill’s discussions and
suggests that there is a gradation of moral respect that rests on whether one is merely avoiding treating people as mere means or whether one is, in fact, actually promoting people’s ends. As discussed more fully later, this will require actions that are “subject only to free self-constraint, not to the constraint of other men, and because they determine an end which is at the same time a duty” (Kant, *The Metaphysics ofMorals, Metaphysical Principles ofVirtue*, 395).

There are four kinds of respect, stemming from the performance of duties of justice and obligations of beneficence. The first kind of respect is based on our avoiding treating people as mere means. We can also understand this as the kind of respect that comes out of a rights-based ethical framework. This is the thinnest sense of respect. Some would argue that we show a lack of respect when we treat others as mere means. This may be true. However, it is a thin sense of respect that stems from discharging negative duties by following principles such as justice, for, in doing so, we are merely refraining from harming individuals and not actively promoting their ends. This distinction can be understood as the difference between external action (through the notions of right or ‘recht’) and internal end-setting (through the notions of virtue and moral worth) (Kant, *MM, MPV* and *The Metaphysical Principles of Right-MPR*).

Certain internal ends must be set to demonstrate respect. Merely performing an external action that is in conformity with the Categorical Imperative without setting the appropriate internal end may not command any notion of respect. Yet, even if there is some kind of respect resulting from the performance of such an action (if performed from duty), such respect is different in degree of moral approbation from those actions that arise out of more intimate kinds of relationships that provide the occasion for treating particular, identifiable individuals as the persons they are. Hence, “if we fail to respect or to share the other’s ends, the failure is imputable to us” (O’Neill, 1989, 125). Thus, the responsibility to perform actions (which stem from beneficence) and the respect following the performance of these actions demand that a particular designated person has clearly set her own internal ends which include the ends of others, without coercion.

In contrast, the responsibility for performing external actions which are understood as duties of right (or juridical and perfect duties) are primarily understood as falling upon any individual and, as general kinds of duties, are not assigned to any particular person. The performance of these kinds of duties represents the exercise of external freedom. Although actions performed according to these kinds of duties are cho-
sen, the duties themselves may be coerced. My keeping a promise in the form of a contract, for example, to any person can be enforceable by systems of justice (such as societal laws that enforce keeping a contract) and a motive underlying my promise keeping is threat of enforcement. If the external freedom of others is infringed upon, the use of force may be used against the agent so that she and her “use of freedom” are returned to a “lawlike state.” To treat someone as an end-in-her/himself is to recognize one’s own ability and the ability of others to identify and freely take on distinctively human ends. Hence, the first kind of respect is so designated because the agent has performed only one kind of duty, which does not entail any free or uncoerced setting of ends.

Next, we have a second kind of respect that results from not hindering people’s pursuit of their ends. Although respect in this sense stems from the obligatory force of voluntarily entered into relationships, it is still negative in the sense of not actively promoting such ends. While there is a recognition of the setting of a free and unforced end of another and one’s self, the end (or ends) of the other has not been acted on — they have only not been interfered with. This kind of respect is less thin, but not as substantial as a third kind of respect, one which is generated by going beyond negative duties (respect in the first sense) and negative obligations (respect in the second sense) and actually benefiting the person qua person. Meeting this third kind of respect requires that an individual do all that she can to help others achieve their goal. This can also be understood as an imperfect duty of virtue, given that a positive end is set and being promoted. This third degree of respect has the agent act freely on her end of promoting the end (or ends) of the others. It is subject only to free self-constraint, extending beyond external freedom (MPV 395-96).

Finally, there is a fourth sense of respect where new, mutually accepted and acted upon ends are generated. A caveat or, perhaps, a reminder is required. Each formulation of the Categorical Imperative entails the existence of all the other formulations. This means that the universalizability criterion and the kingdom of ends formulations are also present. The fourth sense of respect makes this quite clear — an individual sees herself legislating laws for herself as a fellow rational being and understands that her fellows do the same. The point of emphasizing the Formula of Humanity is to set out what the content of any law that is legislated or moral maxim is, viz, members of humanity understood as ends-in-themselves thus acknowledging their capacity to freely set ends (Grounding, 437; MPV, 392). In concert with the other member(s) of a
freely entered into, specified relationship, the agent has revised her initial end of promoting the end of another and has set a new end that she and another have created and will act upon. Like her own initial end, the newly created end is one that has been freely entered into and cannot be coerced. This is the richest sense of respect and the hardest to achieve. These four gradations of respect each reflect a more morally mature and praiseworthy discharge of the requirements of the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative.

Thus, a more morally praiseworthy sense of respect arises out of the discharge of obligations of beneficence based on relationships that we voluntarily enter into (O’Neill, 1980, 285-94). Although it may not be immediately clear whether the fourth and final sense of respect is possible when any of the involved parties lacks full deliberative capacities, it will be one of the stronger senses of respect. In the present discussion, we would say that parents have obligations toward their own children. These obligations are different from the kinds of duties they owe children to whom they bear no biological relationship. As discussed in a previous example we might also say that adult children have obligations towards their aged parents. Although morally reprehensible, paying for medicine for one’s aged father, for example, is not a legal requirement unless stipulated by some legal directive or agreement. In Kantian language, there is an obligation and, hence, an imperfect duty of benevolence to provide medications, if required to merely make the parent’s life more comfortable.4

To recap, perfect duties are always required of us and imperfect duties are required of certain people who stand in relationship to each other in a particular way. A full Kantian moral agent, it has been argued, must discharge both kinds of duties. Hence, we find in a Kantian understanding of autonomy that morality requires performing the requirements of both autonomy and beneficence. Additionally we see that a relational understanding of moral obligation is actually embedded in the concept of autonomy itself. A final point of clarification will be required, however. In introductory remarks to Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar argue that there is a distinction between the concept of autonomy and various conceptions of autonomy (2000). It is their central thesis that a feminist reinterpretation of autonomy yields a particular conception of autonomy, called relational autonomy. This paper rejects this view and has argued that autonomy itself has an important relational quality on a fair and reasonable reading of Kant’s text. In fact, the Cate-
The Categorical Imperative itself presupposes a relational autonomy. First, there is the requirement to promote the ends of others, which is part of what it means to be a fully developed autonomous agent. Second, the relationship between the Formula of Humanity and the other formulations of the Categorical Imperative (especially the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends) further support the thesis that all members of a relationship treat each other as fully participating members of a community. This means that they share a common set of goals and values (understood as ends) as well as some ends, which are unique to each member. All members are to promote these ends.

Finally, four kinds of respect, based on a gradation of moral respect that rests on whether one is merely avoiding treating people as mere means or whether one is, in fact, actually promoting people’s ends have been distinguished. Each kind of respect is dependent upon whether duties of justice or obligations of beneficence are performed as well as whether there is a sense of free and uncoerced setting of ends. The most morally robust form of respect results from not merely discharging duties that we would owe anyone; rather, this kind of respect rests on our meeting our obligations to those whom we are in a position to know best because we are in a particular relationship with them. In fact, it is our possession of a “detailed and intimate” knowledge of those people that means we can, in fact, fully discharge duties and obligations that autonomous Kantian moral agency requires (O’Neill, 1989, 252-77). Without such knowledge, it would be impossible to identify and to further people’s ends at all.

The next section will focus on questions that arise when adjudicating selective termination. It will be a given assumption of this discussion that we cannot presume that the embryo is already a person, hence not having a moral right not to be terminated. Instead, the conversation of a couple, one not predicated on the presumption is imagined. Indeed, in this conversation, the notion of a ‘right to life’ will not come up at all.

**Abortion and Reproductive Technology**

The introductory remarks have already suggested that cases where ‘selective termination’ is the issue will be considered. One might readily suppose that the quality of life of the embryos selected to survive will come up only if there is some value attached to those selected for termination. For if there is no value attached to embryos about to be terminated, then morally we may terminate any number of them for the sake
of some recognized value, such as optimizing the chances of birthing a normal healthy human infant.

Now suppose the pregnancy entails multiple embryos ranging from seven to two in number. Further assume that the people involved in deciding whether and how to preserve the pregnancy make their decision on the basis of consequentialist moral reasoning, with a desired outcome of preserving the pregnancy. The value of a given embryo depends in great part on the probability of its being born normal and healthy, which is directly related to the number of womb-partners it has. Even if the value of one of seven is low (based on probability of birth), the total value of all seven may be much lower than the value of one or two. If this were the case, it would seem that the termination of all but one or two embryos is morally required. Yet, who are the relevant decision-makers who will determine this value? The physician, the begetters, or, some surrogate decision-maker for the embryos themselves?

Indeed, one might question the moral reasoning behind this appeal to a consequentialist standard of moral decision making. One might argue that from a more general point of view the lives of all the embryos are equally valuable. There appears to be no basis to favor any one of the embryos over another. Furthermore, one will need to determine what other relevant factors may be present, such as the health of the woman, and the couple’s desire for and ability to take care of more than one infant. These additional factors are a necessary part of quality of life considerations.

Perhaps a better route for this discussion is to move from calculating probability of birth to considering quality of life once born. Consider a distinctively feminist framework of a theory of care — Gilligan’s theory of care — and its claim of the importance of moral obligations arising out of distinctive relationships. Both pro- and anti-abortion positions have employed this theory in support of their positions. Pro-abortion positions are usually bolstered by a more traditional analysis of what a person is and the rights that persons have (Jagger, 1979; Markowitz, 1990). Yet, this consideration is central to rights theory and is also often an object of feminist criticism. The anti-abortion positions are sometimes grounded in a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of nature (Purdy, 1996; Rudy, 1996; Warren, 1997). Further, there is neither explicit or implicit reliance on nor appeal to the notion of rights. Human beings, qua persons, on this view are not creatures that are privileged over other living things. Hence, all claims to life are valuable and are equally worthy of preservation.
If this interpretation about Kantian moral obligations arising out of particular relationships and its emphasis on kinds of respect is correct, the Kantian account will be preferable to non-Kantian ones. First, it suggests how one might think about abortion issues in general, from a non-political rights view. Second, it acknowledges that the ends of all members of a relationship must be carefully considered. A woman facing the decision of whether to terminate a pregnancy must include a sense of what she owes to others with whom she shares or will share her life with. In matters of freely chosen pregnancies, perhaps most clearly seen in those involving technological interventions, it is hard to imagine that she has not made a determination of what the quality of her life will be. This determination surely includes the recognition of others whom she loves that make her life worth living and consideration for the quality of their lives as well.

In Kantian terms, a female begetter's moral deliberations about preserving or terminating a pregnancy must include consideration of the ends of the partner begetter, the unborn, existing young human beings, as well as other people including elderly dependent relatives. Respect for these ends are necessary, but not sufficient, constituents of the female begetter's inclusive end of quality of life.

This recognition of the need to acknowledge others’ ends is a necessary part of the ethical deliberations of the fully autonomous agent given that she is required to discharge duties of justice and obligations of beneficence. Bearing her own moral scrutiny as an autonomous agent, she should assess the kind of respect that is possible to give to the members of the pregnancy relationship. She is morally required to respect each member of that relationship as fully as possible, for, it has been argued, she is in the unique position of having the ability, based on knowledge of the parties' ends, to do so. But, there are differences in the kind of respect that she can give, since the most morally mature kind of respect rests on our performing obligations to those whom we are in a position to know best.

Under the first kind of respect, based on refraining from treating people as mere means, a minimal respect might require the woman not just viewing her partner/begetter as merely a sperm donor and, thus, having no part in deliberations about preserving or terminating a problematic pregnancy. Not viewing the unborn entity in the pregnancy relationship merely as a means to maintain the partner-begetter's and the woman's relationship also reflects the thinnest sense of respect. From a rights-based view, someone who views herself as “pro-life” and chooses
to not have an abortion on the sole basis that it is wrong to kill anyone reflects this first sense of respect. As a duty of justice based on the notion of ‘right,’ the action, while chosen, can be based on coercion. Further, there is no consideration of the unique relationship between the unborn and the female begetter. However, a woman who has made a conscious decision to bring “her” or “her and her partner’s” child into the world has a particular kind of responsibility, an obligation, to that unborn. She does not have this kind of obligation to the unborn of other people since she is ‘in’ a specific relationship with her own unborn.

One might argue that there may be no felt connectedness with the unborn. There are at least two possible responses. First, the relationship is based on being in the relationship and not on one’s feeling(s) about the relationship. Second, the female begetter may have existing children who she “knows” better. This means that she will have obligations to additional interested parties in the relationship. Thus, she owes something more than the first kind of respect, hence discharging merely a duty of justice. The remaining and more morally salient kinds of respect demand considerations beyond avoiding merely using another and, in addition, acknowledging and acting upon the ends of others. In the case of a pro-life decision not to terminate, this decision must include consideration of the ends of the unborn.

Analogous to an assumption about the unborn having an interest in living which underlies Don Marquis’s claim about the impermissibility of abortion, a Kantian moral agent could claim that there are ends of the unborn that must be respected. The most important of these ends is the opportunity to have a future including setting goals and achieving them. _A fortiori_, death would preclude such a future (Marquis, 1989). Yet, certain kinds of birth defects might also make such a future impossible; hence, the Kantian could argue for the permissibility of abortion.

However, a problem arises given that the unborn itself fails to be seen as a moral agent having such ends. This problem is, in part, perspectival: while the female begetter must consider the ends of all involved, from the deliberator’s own point of view it is difficult to identify and then respect the ends of those who can not speak for themselves.

Imagine a woman who decides not to have an abortion. Her decision is based on the belief that killing in general is wrong and that terminating her own unborn is even worse. She may argue that she is in a particular relationship to the unborn and she owes the second kind of respect. This means that she is required to not get in the way of people’s pursuit of their end; hence, termination is morally impermissible, since
life is necessary in order for an end to be pursued. Although respect in this sense stems from the obligatory force of voluntarily entered into relationships, it is still negative in the sense of not actively promoting such ends.

Preserving the pregnancy is thus required for the second sense of respect. This kind of respect is less thin, but not as substantial as a third kind of respect, one which is generated by going beyond negative duties (respect in the first sense) and negative obligations (respect in the second sense) and actually benefiting the individual. However, without altering the example, it is not clear how she would be able to offer anything more than the second sense of respect. Presumably she would need more detailed knowledge of the unborn, its capacities, skills, more complex goals, etc., to achieve either the third sense of respect or the fourth sense of respect where new, mutually accepted and acted upon ends are generated.

**CORRECTING RIGHTS THEORY: KANTIANISM, FEMINISM AND POLYPHONIC NARRATIVES**

This paper has claimed that quality of life considerations are more important than rights-based considerations. However, it may be that what has actually been demonstrated is that emphasizing quality of life considerations can be understood as a corrective to rights-based theory. Further, a broader notion of autonomy might be required, for, as has been argued, autonomy and beneficence need not be interpreted in opposition or conflict with each other. Yet it has been a central thesis of this paper that the Kantian notion of autonomy is itself relational. To support this latter claim, this paper has sought to demonstrate how the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, The Formula of Humanity, can provide a framework for avoiding this seeming dichotomy. Obligations of beneficence are a species of duty required for full Kantian autonomous moral agency and, in fact, are embedded in the concept of autonomy itself, demonstrating that the Kantian concept of autonomy is indeed relational.

This paper has provided an account of a continuum of moral respect that might be useful in deliberations about various issues that sometimes arise for a female begetter, including preserving or terminating a pregnancy. Each of the four kinds of respect is determined by whether one is merely avoiding treating people as mere means or whether one is, in fact, actually promoting people’s ends — ranging from the thin-
nest sense of respect that stems from only avoiding treating people as mere means and, thus, discharging negative duties of following principles such as justice, to the thickest sense of respect that results when we actively take on the projects of others and, together, form new projects with those whom we have entered into voluntary relationships. This continuum reflects how full Kantian autonomous moral agency requires us to do more than refraining from some activity that harms someone.

Notice that if a woman decides against termination on the sole grounds of a legal prohibition, there is no moral choiceworthiness to her action. Seen in this way, a woman’s decision to preserve or terminate a pregnancy can never be seen as a moral one, if her ability to freely choose whether or not to have an abortion is either absolutely denied or restricted by law or some other coercive mechanism. Morality is about the ability to make a choice. Hence, this paper has focused on the point of a view of a woman, understood as a fully autonomous agent, making that choice; not from the point of view of a disinterested spectator assessing that choice. Indeed, the choice to become pregnant and bear a child is one that also entails (or at least should entail) the choice to become someone who is responsible for raising another human being. In discussions concerning whether the decision to become a mother can be understood to be autonomous, Diana T. Meyers writes “[I]f the value of motherhood is embedded in women’s bodies, and if, therefore women’s critical reflection about becoming mothers is usually superfluous, it must be shown that being a mother is an all but incontrovertible value comparable to life itself” (42-43).

As a Kantian, feminist, and reconstructionist, I would like to find a middle ground between notions of autonomy, freedom, care, other-regardingness, and respect for human as well as non-human nature. Within a Kantian framework, it has been demonstrated that quality of life is an end of all members of a pregnancy relationship and, thus, must be respected. Further, it has been argued that obligations of beneficence are a species of duty required for full Kantian autonomous moral agency. This means that obligations of beneficence and hence the idea of a ‘relational autonomy’ are embedded in the concept of autonomy itself. By demonstrating how Kantian moral obligations actually arise out of particular relationships, typical objections of abstraction, impartiality and universality can be blocked.

Yet, this account is not without its problems, given the inability to go beyond a second sense of respect. Recall, because of the embryo’s inability to participate in the pregnancy preservation conversations, the
remaining more robust forms of respect cannot be acted upon. Thus, how can we support the premise of the arguments thus far that the strength of the Kantian position is its ability to demand respect for all parties? If we take seriously the demands of autonomy (understood as relational) and the requirement of respect towards others that are embedded in the Categorical Imperative, more work needs to be done. Perhaps, a more robust analysis of the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends could be provided; yet, the relationship between members of this ideal construct are fully rational choosers and the unborn is (minimally) not a full member of this community. Or, turning to other works by Kant which address parent-child relationships might be fruitful. Yet, such accounts are few and lack direct discussion of the particular issue of this paper — members of a pregnancy relationship, one of which is unborn.

For now, asking, “Whose voice is missing?” is the next step, allowing us to take seriously why and how we account for the interested parties in a pregnancy relationship. This attention to voice, that is, considering who the relevant speakers are (or at least ought to be) and what their stories are, might strengthen the Kantian perspective and perhaps result in a distinctively feminist Kantian perspective. The importance of different voices is emphasized in the notion of a “polyphonic narrative,” understood as a vehicle to construct an all inclusive feminist perspective that acknowledges more than two voices or two perspectives through which a distinct narrative, representing the interests of all participants, explicitly present or not, will be constructed (hooks, 228; Kristeva, 1986; Martínez-Fernández, 2000). Further, this conception must be understood as a necessary feature of a Kantian account, for it will allow us to give voice to, in addition to identifying, all interested parties as well as their particular interests in considering the desirability of preserving or terminating a pregnancy. There is no sense to be made of a self, independent of or from others. Our moral decision-making process does not occur from or in an ideal or hypothetical perspective; rather, it is a process that includes the particular concerns of others as well as ourselves.

Further this attention to voice strengthens the focus on what we owe to each other based on ties of love that connect us through our relational commitments. Feminist theories that incorporate care ethics are theoretically grounded in the idea of webs of relationships — relationships that are woven by women, lovingly spun as well as destroyed when the occasion warrants. In contrast, the rights’ perspective has a language of bindingness that suggests coercion and slavery.
It is doubtful that the rights’ perspective can or should be ignored, jettisoned, or rendered impotent. A woman must be free in the practical sense to make a decision. And, while that freedom seems to be so abstract in the words and mouths of philosophers, it is quite real when we make a decision that, in part, relies on the ability of others to help us act on that decision.

Politically, rights theories are necessary, for they do obligate others to agree to refrain from prohibiting us from making real, practical choices. Morally, however, these kinds of theories blind us from seeing all that is required to make those choices — in the case of determining whether to preserve a pregnancy, the members of that relationship, their quality of life considerations and our quality of life which is inextricably connected to theirs. Does this mean that a woman gives up her right to an abortion, based on others’ explicit or implicit considerations of quality of life? Absolutely, not. Rather, she chooses whether or not to exercise this right. This choice is the expression of quality of life concerns for self and others and, hence, of relational autonomy — viz., the free and uncoerced choice of an individual who understands, acts upon, and respects the well-being, life plans, and activities of herself and others, both near (e.g., family) and far (any fellow human being).

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NOTES


I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point. Also, there are some promises that are not enforceable by legal coercion. See endnote 4.

A question may arise as to whether this may be a perfect duty, if the medication is required to sustain life. The case of providing medication for parents is complex — clearly, there is no threat of legal action if the medication is for a ‘better life.’ The beneficent action would be to make the parent’s life more bearable if not happier. In addition, this may be seen as action that could be grounded in the duty of gratitude, another imperfect duty (MPV, 455). Such action stems from “a heartfelt benevolence on the part of the benefactor” (MPV, 455). The point here concerns legal enforceability, with a continued focus on distinguishing between duties of justice and duties of beneficence (one kind of imperfect duty). Also, it would be remiss not to point out that the coercion of external action that distinguishes perfect duties may not always be legal. An anonymous reader suggests it is incorrect “to think that all perfect duties are legally coercible (the example of the obligation to provide medication being ‘not a perfect duty’). This is incorrect according to the MM — some perfect duties are unenforceable by legal sanction (i.e., suicide) and some perfect duties ought not to be enforced.” Yet, the threat of legal sanctions may keep an individual from performing an act of suicide if the agent assumes that the attempt could be unsuccessful; hence, a sense of legal coercion would be still present.

E-mail correspondence with H. William Davenport.


Clearly, this problem is not unique to this particular issue. Indeed, it occurs whenever there is a situation in which are participants are not fully formed moral agents, such as children or the elderly. Often, requirements of paternalism in the best sense seem to replace obligations of beneficence.

I have avoided a discussion of duties (perfect and imperfect) to oneself purposely so that the focus is on the relational quality of autonomy and on the duty of beneficence to others.

REFERENCES


