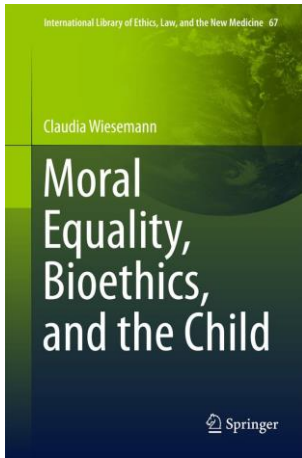




Claudia Wiesemann



Review:

Moral Equality, Bioethics, and the Child

Springer International Publishing
Switzerland 2016, pp. 155

Reviewed by
Mihail-Liviu Dinu

The present volume is part of an interdisciplinary book series *International Library of Ethics, Law and the New Medicine*, and the author Dr. Claudia Wiesemann, who is professor and Director of the Department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine, in Göttingen University Medical Centre, Germany. The present volume is divided into three chapters: Part I. An Outline of



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the Debate on Moral Equality; Part II. The Theoretical Framework of a Moral-Equality Approach, Part III. A Moral-Equality Approach to Childhood and Other Situations of Dependency.

The first chapter is an interesting approach to the well-known question: *Are children the moral equals of adults?* (4). The legitimate answer brings us to the concept of moral equality which will be seen through the optics of various child ethics. The noticeable subchapter called "*Moral adulthood*" underlines the need of acknowledgment of childhood as an adult moral status. As so, the "*parental paternalism*" can hardly be justified in the age of equal human rights (4).

Claudia suggests that we must conceptualize the moral status of the child by taking the child's moral perspective. The focus is here in the term of considering each child as "*moral agent*" in the literal sense of the term, at every age. A moral agent is one who is capable of moral feelings and who acts in accord with those feelings in ways that other moral agents can understand and share. As long as we treat children as human beings without moral views of their own, we will fail to acknowledge *their moral equality*.

However, some classical liberals, including H. Tristram Engelhardt, cling to the idea that children are their parents' property, are owned by their parents (22). However, instead of marginalizing the childhood ethics, she proposes *The Stewardship Model*, in which the steward represents the child as a holder of moral rights; the parents do not violate the rights of the child, protect and promote the child's rights (23), allowing the adult to interpret the needs and interests of child.

Since the ethical actor is a competent adult human being, "*the adulthood*" can be seen as a form of oppression and discrimination comparable in its implication to racism or sexism (29). Moral adulthood is incomparable with the idea of moral equality of children, so "*benevolent paternalism*" is necessary for a moral reason. The new conception of parenthood has challenged the traditional family parenthood in the context of modern reproductive technology (37).

In the second part, the moral equality approach is focused on *natality* as a form of unchosen relationship and as an anthropological condition which has a profound effect on the relationship between children and caregivers and how we conceive parenthood.

From the ethical perspective, parenthood is an example of responsibilities for the consequence of the fact that adults had sexual intercourse (50). It should imply: care, protection and love as a basis in parental promise; but the modern medical innovation like preimplantation or prenatal genetic diagnoses challenge biological, social and cultural parent-child relations (54).

Natality and parenthood also generate the family as a moral unit (55); the family constitutes a particular moral space that has to be exempt from social expectations to fulfill its social role.

Parent-child relation is based on trust, but unlike the adult trust the child one is less sophisticated, but it should be taken seriously (70). Notwithstanding, it is true that the parents have responsibility for children and exert power over them. This paternal protection comes not from nature, moral superiority or authority, but from respecting a trusting child as a moral being (84).

In the last part of the chapter, the author develops another interesting view of the autonomy of choice and states that "*respect for autonomy is the foundation principle of the liberal state*" (87). On the one hand we have some ethicists that argue against moral autonomy to any person under the age of legal majority, but on the contrary, we should have respect for autonomy by respect for the future autonomy of the person that child will become.

Claudia stresses on the view of Beauchamp and Childress regarding medical decision-making who conceptualize autonomous decision with regard to *normal choosers* who act "(1) intentionally, (2) with understanding, and (3) without controlling influences that determine their action" (92).

Next, she underlines that child caring is based on the respect for the child as a person. Also, the children should profit from adults experiences and strong guidance, in a mutual process.

In part three of the book, Claudia Wiesemann suggests that there is no certain age when the moral autonomy occurs in childhood, some children naturally developing a tendency for individual and critical reflection at early ages (126). Even so, it is up to the parents to balance their child need for trust and autonomy, but parental care has to be modified according to the child's individual reactions as a moral agent. As long as parents and children share the same moral goals, trust-based paternalism will be uncomplicated. This way, trust, and autonomy are dialectically interrelated as moral qualities of human development (127).

The aim of the last chapter is to translate the moral equality approach into clinical practice. For this point, it is needed to reframe some of the fundamental concepts to the ethical debate, to respect the child's moral dignity.

Through this book, Claudia Wiesemann succeeds to create a pertinent bioethical answer to the contemporary existential questions. Today, the most challenging problems for modern liberalism are to be found in the way we conceive and raise children. It is fascinating how bioethics provides some of the today's most controversial issues in childhood ethics and is ideally suited to test a new understanding of the moral status of the child.

National legislation and local traditions can effectively impede acknowledging the major concern of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, that the child's moral dignity is always to be respected.

With a large table of contents, and a vast bibliography at the end of each article, I would recommend this book for students, doctors, researchers and to those interested in children's rights and dignity in the context of contemporary bioethics.