

Be No Man's Lackey? Kantian Duties of Parenthood and Self in the Face of Coercive Labour

George Arnott

Dalhousie University

In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant states that while human beings as a species are merely beings of “an ordinary value,” a human being “as a person,” is to be “exalted above any price.”¹ He defines the person as a subject “of a morally practical reason” and that they carry an inherent ‘humanity’ within that “is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other human being, but which he must also not forfeit.”² This frames Kant’s concerns regarding servility, that in an attempt to surrender one’s humanity by subordinating their needs and autonomy to another, they will not be able secure the amount of respect they are owed as a person qua person. As Kant himself states so succinctly, one ought to “Be no man’s Lackey.”³ This tenet of his, however, may be in tension with

¹Immanuel Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals” in *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans. & ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 6:434.

²Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals,” 6:434-435.

³Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals,” 6:436.

the realities of life for those of lower socioeconomic standing, for whom submitting to forms of ‘coercive labour’ may be their only means of survival. And this tension would be further exacerbated by the Kantian duties of parenthood. For Kant, one’s duty to their child does not merely fall into the category of ‘duties towards others,’ as this child is not only a product of their parents’ procreation, but also of their rational autonomous decisions. It is a “necessary idea,” says Kant, “to regard the act of procreation as one by which we have brought a person into the world without his consent and on our own initiative, for which deed the parents incur an obligation to make the child content with his condition so far as they can.”⁴ It is this tension that will be the focus of this paper, asking: can Kantian Ethics be seen to permit a parent to enter into the servility of coercive labour in order to provide for their child? Through an investigation of the limits of parental obligations as well as the harms of servility, I will argue that the conception of parenthood as ‘procreation without consent of the child,’ can prove to be a mitigating factor that permits servility in order to honour these obligations.

Nicola Phillips describes the relationship between coercive labour and poverty as a “circular” relationship.⁵ Poverty produces vulnerabilities that “necessitate the prioritization” of immediate goals at the expense of savings and financial stability and this exposes workers to exploitation which “in turn serves as the key mechanism of impoverishment.”⁶ Not only are there immediate moral harms

⁴Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals,” 6:280.

⁵Nicola Phillips, “Unfree Labour and Adverse Incorporation in the Global Economy: Comparative Perspectives in Brazil and India,” *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2, 175.

⁶Phillips, “Unfree Labour and Adverse Incorporation in the Global Economy,” 176. Coercive labour, or as it is labelled in its more systemic form ‘adverse incorporation,’ deserves far more attention than can be given in this paper. While it is a varied and wicked problem, for this paper it will be defined as the circular relationship where impoverished people are exploited for labour at unfair wages or conditions which serves to further entrench their poverty.

then, but economic trappings one may be unlikely to escape. In allowing oneself to be used as a means only to further the interests of their employer, the ‘Coerced Parent’ appears to disobey Kant’s Formula of Humanity and submit to a life of servility.⁷ Kant states that as a necessary duty to oneself, they must ensure “their action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself.”⁸ What makes this so harmful may seem murky at first. As Thomas E. Hill observes, while the Coerced Parent disavows her moral rights as a person in submitting to coerced labour, “the rights which [she] denies are [her] own.”⁹ And so following, even if it is a moral failing, it is perhaps a failing that deserves pity only. Hill, however, pushes back on this assertion by reminding us of the essential connection between duties to self and duties to others. “A person who fully respected a system of moral rights,” observes Hill, “would be disposed to learn his proper place in it” and this is the “disposition that the servile person lacks.”¹⁰ A person who allows an abuse of their own rights of humanity would be less likely to uphold the rights of others, something that cannot be allowed within the Formula of Humanity.

Turning to the Formula of Humanity, we see that the obligation to “as far as one can [...] further the ends of others” is a meritorious duty.¹¹ This means that there is leeway in both how one pursues

⁷“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” Immanuel Kant, “The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” in *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans & ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 4:429.

⁸Immanuel Kant, “The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans. & ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 4:429.

⁹Thomas E. Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” *The Monist* 57, no. 1, 97.

¹⁰Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” 99.

¹¹Kant, “Groundwork,” 4:430.

this duty and to what extent. This leeway appears to be constrained, however, by Kant's duties of parenthood. As observed by Heiko Puls, conceiving a child is "usually based on a free decision" and therefore "subject to the parent's rational control."¹² Puls continues, stating that because of this, the "capacity for procreation" has a "transcendental dimension" as well as a "merely biological" one.¹³ Following this, sexual partners as rational persons understand that even if they do not intend to procreate, their autonomous actions may result in procreation. And they must, therefore, at least acknowledge the potential person that may come about from their sexual act. As Puls describes of this child that may come into being, their "existence is only due to a free action of [their] makers" choice.¹⁴ This is why the obligations of parents can be set more rigorously than the standard duties towards others. The leeway to help 'as far as one can' is normally defended by the fact that the other is an autonomous person, who ought to define their own (permissible) happiness and seek it. Meaning that our duty to aid them is by helping to remove undue obstacles from their path. In the case of one's child, however, the act of procreation "has to be understood as bringing someone into a condition to begin with" and because of this, parents "have to make [that child] content 'with their condition'."¹⁵ The potential personhood of a 'theoretical child' has been actualized through the autonomous sexual act of their parents who now have an obligation to 'make good' on those actions by securing that child's contentment with their condition of existence."¹⁶

The tension presented then can be summed up as two potentially

¹²Heiko Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," *Kantian Review* 21, no. 1, 55.

¹³Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," 55.

¹⁴Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," 56.

¹⁵Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," 57.

¹⁶Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," 58.

conflicting maxims:

- a) 'I will not allow myself to be forced, nor will I willingly enter, into a compact of servility that would harm my autonomy or diminish the dignity that my personhood demands'.
- b) 'I am obligated to care for my child and will endeavour not only to provide that care, but to ensure their contentment and happiness with the conditions of their existence'.

While usual circumstances would allow both of these maxims to be followed, in severe socioeconomic situations as described by Phillips, parents may seemingly be forced to choose.

Erica A. Holberg touches on this tension, arguing that Kant “cannot countenance a certain kind of failure to respect oneself that can occur within oppressive social contexts.”¹⁷ She worries that because “oppression can deform a person’s growth into autonomy,” one may act servile not in conflict with their value of personhood, “but because apprehension of this value has gone missing.”¹⁸ Holberg continues, stating that we may hold “a fantasy of moral agency as always achievable independently of social conditions” and that this may lead us to unfairly blame servile actors.³ In holding to this fantasy we would hold persons accountable for actions they performed through a ‘learned ignorance’ that they therefore should not be held culpable for. This is an imperfect argument, however, to defend the Coerced Parent as I define them. While the Parent may be performing their servile role through a learned ignorance, they may also know fully well that their personhood demands more

¹⁷Erica A. Holberg, “Kant, Oppression, and the Possibility of Nonculpable Failures to Respect Oneself,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophie* 55, no. 3, 285-6.

¹⁸Holberg, “Kant, Oppression, and the Possibility of Nonculpable Failures to Respect Oneself,” 286.

and still choose to subordinate themselves to coercive labour. And furthering the argument of nonculpability, even if the Coerced Parent could permissibly subordinate themselves to ensure their legal obligations to provide food and shelter are met, what about their obligations towards contentment and happiness? Let us say that the Parent could provide the basic legal requirements without entering coercive labour, but not in a manner where their child's contentment could be realized. Either by having to work so many hours in a non-coercive environment that the child would be neglected or by needing to move to a remote area where the child would become alienated from society. To justify the knowingly servile parent then, who may attempt to secure for their child even more than is legally (versus morally) required, merits further argument.

In 'The Right to Lie', Christine Korsgaard may present an argument sufficiently analogous to serve in this context. In citing Kant's 'murderer at the door' example, she argues that from the perspective of the Formula of Universal Law, the breaking of a perfect duty by lying to the murderer "can be shown to be permissible."¹⁹ Korsgaard maintains that lying as a general principle could not be universalized as lies are meant to "deceive, but if they were universally practiced they would not deceive."²⁰ Korsgaard uses this observation to her advantage, however, by arguing that when the murderer is at the door, deception is already at play, as the murderer is unlikely to openly announce their intentions. "A murderer who expects to conduct his business by asking questions," she contends, "must suppose that you do not know who he is and what he has in mind."²¹ This would mean that lying to murderers at the

¹⁹Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 15, no. 4, 327.

²⁰Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," 328.

²¹Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," 329.

door could be universalizable because the murderer believes you are unaware of their intentions and therefore are unlikely to lie. As Korsgaard continues it is then “permissible to lie to deceivers in order to counteract the intended results of their deceptions.”²² We are allowed to lie because we can see it to be universalizable and because without the ability to lie, evil people would be able to use our morality against us.

Korsgaard expands this argument to include coercion, saying that it “and deception violate the conditions of possible assent, and all actions which depend for their nature and efficacy on their coercive or deceptive character are ones that others cannot assent to.”²³ And it is this expansion that may be of use to permit the actions of the Coerced Parent. Korsgaard utilizes her above arguments to present a concept of Kantian Ethics as a ‘two-level theory’. Kant holds that “we are always to act as if we were living in a Kingdom of Ends,” notes Korsgaard, but this could lead to “disastrous results” such as allowing ourselves to be manipulated by the murderer at the door.²⁴ Instead of always working from this ‘ideal state’, she contends that we must depart from the stricter directions of the Formulas of Humanity “when dealing with evil” because it is incapable of doing so, it was “not designed for use when dealing with evil.”²⁵ And so because of this, we might adopt an ideal/non-ideal conception of Kantian Ethics where we may treat the Formulas of Humanity as a guide to work towards while not doing what is at all times impermissible, violating the Formula of Universal Law.²⁶ If the above is true, it does indeed arm the Coerced Parent with fur-

²²Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” 330.

²³Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” 333.

²⁴Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” 340.

²⁵Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” 346.

²⁶Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” 348.

ther options to protect herself from servility. But Korsgaard's arguments imply that the Parent would be permitted to resist the coercion in question. Much as the person who lies to a murderer, the Coerced Parent may be allowed to break away from perfect duties as the maxim; 'I will disobey laws that entrench coercion in order to safeguard the autonomy of myself and others of lower socioeconomic status' could be seen as permissible. But this is quite separate from the question I have posed. In asking whether it could be permissible to submit to rather than resist coercive labour, this argument again seems insufficient. Further, in saying that one's only allowed action in the face of coercion is resistance, one might be required to perform in ways that are 'morally extraordinary'. And, as discerned by Holberg, the fact "that some individuals manage to be morally extraordinary does not impose on all of us the moral duty to be extraordinary."²⁷ In sufficiently oppressive conditions, resisting may place the Coerced Parent in a situation where they are unlikely to be able to fulfill their obligations to their child.

Returning to Thomas E. Hill, his concern is that the harm of servility is that the servile person "does not satisfy the basic requirement to respect morality."²⁸ It is one's lack of demanding the respect their humanity dictates that demonstrates that they do not understand the moral system around them and could not then meaningfully contribute to it. This would indicate, however, that according to Hill acting in a servile manner may not be the same as being truly servile. If someone acted "servile despite their moral knowledge," states Hill, whether they are actually servile "should depend upon why the deferential role is played."²⁹ And he continues that

²⁷Holberg, "Kant, Oppression, and the Possibility of Nonculpable Failures to Respect Oneself," 296.

²⁸Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 99.

²⁹Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 96.

“[i]f the motive is a morally commendable one” then they could be found to not be servile. In engaging with this argument from Hill, we can see how, while Holberg’s and Korsgaard’s arguments are not sufficient on their own for our purpose, understanding them is necessary for seeing the possibility that such conduct is permissible. That the Coerced Parent must understand that they are not acting from ‘learned ignorance’ or maladaptive preferences but from their own fully rational capacities. And that while oppressive situations may allow the suspension of perfect duties in order to resist, that is not the same as suspending duties to self in order to submit. But, if Hill is correct and the greatest danger of servility is a lack of understanding of moral worth, then the Coerced Parent, operating from a rational and clear-headed view of their own worth and the oppressive situation they are in, may be seen as not truly servile. And this would allow the Parent to prioritize maxim b and earn a (coercive) living that can fulfil their obligation to ensure their child is content and happy with their existence. To this, however, Hill adds a caveat. That there may be “some minimum degree of respect from others,” a respect where others “acknowledge fully, in words as well as action, the person’s basically equal moral status as defined by his other rights.”³⁰ To give “even tacit consent” to the denial of this respect, asserts Hill, would be to surrender rights one “cannot give up” and “[t]o do this, barring special explanations, would mark one as servile.”³¹

The above may demonstrate that in certain extreme cases of coercive labour, the Coerced Parent’s maxims remain intractable, but I contend that the obligation of parenthood meets this stipulation of ‘special explanation.’ That while disobeying maxim a or b would

³⁰Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” 101.

³¹Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” 102.

result in a diminishing of one's autonomy, favouring maxim b's obligations of parenthood presents a perhaps novel situation where one's humanity is disavowed, but is also exercised. Procreation, as outlined by Puls, has a transcendental component within Kantian Ethics. Parents have a duty to ensure their child is content and happy with their existence "because the parents are causally related to the existence of the need for happiness of the person they created."³² Meaning that even in subordinating themselves to extreme forms of servility, the Coerced Parent may still be seen to be exercising their humanity by continuing to fulfil the obligations that came from their autonomous decision to procreate. An 'ideal state', as highlighted by Korsgaard, would provide that all are able to fully follow the Formula of Humanity and so the potential necessity of servility would be removed. In the harsh situations of lower socioeconomic status, however, entering into coercive labour may be permitted provided the Coerced Parent understands the rights that they actually deserve and knowingly accept less only to fulfill their obligations of parenthood. And finally, even in extreme cases of servility where the Coerced Parent waives rights that they 'cannot in fact give up', they may still be permitted to submit. As, in doing so they diminish their autonomy but also affirm their understanding of morality by honouring the rational consequences of their autonomous decisions.

³²Puls, "Kant's Justification of Parental Duties," 58.

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