

Treating Disabled Adults as Children: An Application of Kant's Conception of Respect

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A common complaint among people with disabilities has been that we are sometimes regarded and treated as children even when we have the age, maturity and mental competencies of an adult.¹ The concern, more specifically, is that there is a widespread tendency to assume that adults with intellectual, developmental or physical disabilities are especially naïve, vulnerable and lacking in competence, experience and commonsense, which has led to some of the most abhorrent forms of treatment that disabled people have suffered. Disability activists have made substantial progress addressing this concern by, for example, working to secure the civil and political rights of people with disabilities, to protect our moral right to make important decisions about our own lives, and to provide us equal opportunity in education, housing and other facets of life. Despite these advances, many adults with disabilities continue to worry that we are still denied full and proper *respect* because others continue to think of us as children and often express this offensive attitude in ways that may have little or no bearing on our liberty, personal autonomy or wellbeing (Shaw 1994, Shapiro 1994, Charlton 1998).

A non-disabled person, for example, might regard and treat a hearing-impaired person as if she were a young child who cannot understand simple concepts by mostly speaking to her care-giver rather than the disabled person herself, using a “baby voice” with a slow, high, reassuring tone, paying little attention to what she has to say while pretending to understand what she is trying to communicate, impatiently finishing her sentences for her or brushing off requests to repeat himself. A non-disabled person might also respond to the accomplishments and successes of a disabled person in the

patronizing ways that are often directed at children by, for instance, expressing high praise for a piece of art produced by an autistic person even though he thinks it is middling or even dreadful. Like children, adults with disabilities are sometimes dressed in ridiculous ways or left mostly naked, discouraged from engaging in sexual relationships, laughed at for their mistakes, appearance or unorthodox ways of doing things, condescended to when they make demands or raise complaints, and expected to be deferential to the opinions and wishes of non-disabled adults. We are sometimes brazen in our interactions with disabled adults, as when we treat someone's motorized wheelchair as a novel toy, pry into the details of her condition or accommodations, stare at her, or give her a pat on the head. We may act paternalistically toward a disabled person when we assume that we know better than she does what is good for her and how we can be of assistance, rush in to help without asking for her permission or guidance, try to keep her calm and content through concealment or distraction, and balk or scoff when she refuses certain medical treatments that would correct or ameliorate her impairments. Like children, we may not hold a disabled adult to the moral duties and obligations that adults are under and we may mostly excuse some of her moral violations as mainly the result of her supposed immaturity or lack of experience rather than her own free choices. And, society in general tends to have less esteem for disabled adults than for non-disabled adults because, like children, adults with disabilities are often seen as less productive, talented, accomplished, and knowledgeable than non-disabled adults.

My focus in this chapter is on whether, and if so why, it is morally disrespectful to regard and treat a disabled person as if she has the maturity, experience and other competencies that are normally associated with being a child when she actually possesses

the characteristics that are normally associated with being an adult and when the attitudes and actions at issue do not necessarily violate her moral rights and liberties, diminish her opportunities, or materially affect her wellbeing.²

This question is limited in a number of ways. First, the issue concerns only those disabled people who, in fact, have the characteristic competencies of an adult rather than, for example, people with significant cognitive disabilities who may lack these features. Second, the issue is about whether disabled adults are denied moral respect, rather than respect of other kinds, when they are treated as children. Third, the kinds of moral respect at issue are those that may not involve violations of rights or material harm to disabled people. And, fourth, the issue concerns what kinds of moral respect are *appropriate* or *fitting* for adults with disabilities rather than about what moral *duties* of respect we have toward them or what kinds of praise and blame are appropriate if we fail to respect disabled adults properly.

The question I am raising is especially puzzling because regarding and treating a disabled adult as a child in ways that have little or no impact on her rights, liberties, opportunities and well-being is apparently compatible with having and showing the kind of basic moral respect that all persons deserve simply because they are persons. We can, it seems, regard and treat all persons, including disabled adults, non-disabled adults and children, with basic moral respect while nonetheless taking the kind of patronizing and condescending stance toward disabled adults that we normally reserve for children.

Many contemporary conceptions of moral respect are inspired by Immanuel Kant and have tended to focus on how to properly respond to the inherent worth and dignity that all persons have simply because they are persons. Kant himself recognized,

however, that there is also a need to investigate the “different forms of respect to be shown to others in accordance with differences in their qualities or contingent relations” and to include these applications of respect as part of “the complete presentation” of a comprehensive moral system (MM 6:468-9). Unfortunately, Kant did not take on this important task in a sustained or systematic way.³

The general aim of this chapter is to look back to Kant himself for guidance about how to explain and justify what forms of respect are appropriate for different kinds of persons in different types of contexts.⁴ I approach this task by focusing on the specific issue of how Kant’s conception of respect can be applied to cases he does not consider, namely ones in which disabled adults are regarded and treated as children.

My plan is as follows. The first part of this chapter is devoted to explaining and defending an interpretation of Kant’s conception of respect.⁵ In the most basic terms, my view is that respect, for Kant, is the attitude of judging that something has “inner worth” or “dignity” as well as having a special kind of feeling that is caused by this judgment. Respect, as I read Kant, is appropriate only for things that actually have this special value. In Section A, I explain how Kant characterizes “inner worth” or “dignity” and in Section B I describe what things he thinks have it. In Section C, I present and defend my interpretation of the attitude of respect, as Kant understands it, and I suggest that this interpretation can help to resolve a longstanding puzzle about how respect can be both free and inevitable for rational agents. And in Section D, I argue that respectful actions, in Kant’s view, are those that are related in certain ways to the attitude of respect and I describe five such connections that can, according to Kant, make an action respectful or disrespectful. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to consider how Kant’s conception

of respect, as I interpret it, can be applied to the practical issue of regarding and treating disabled adults as children. After noting several straightforward implications of Kant's conception of respect for how to regard and treat disabled people, I examine how respect for the moral law (Section A), respect for autonomy (Section B) and respect for moral character (Section C) can each be applied in ways that explain why we often fail to respect disabled adults by regarding and treating them as children.

<1>I. Kant's Conception of Respect

Respect, according to Kant, is a moral attitude that is appropriate only for things that have a special kind of value, which he calls "inner worth" (G 4:435).⁶ In order to explain and apply Kant's conception of respect, we must, first, consider how he characterizes this moral value, second, examine what kinds of things, in his view, have inner worth and so merit respect, third, explain the nature of this attitude, and, fourth, explain its connection to respectful and disrespectful actions.

<2>A. Inner worth

The inner worth, or dignity, of something is a type of value that does not depend at all on how the thing relates to anything else but is instead good in itself. Inner worth is unconditional because something that has it is good in all contexts, whatever natural desires people happen to have and whatever effects it may produce. Inner worth is an objective value that is necessarily good for everyone, independent of his or her natural desires. Things of inner worth are infinitely more valuable than anything of mere relative worth. And, inner worth can come in degrees that allow for meaningful comparisons between the inner worth of different things, although Kant insists that things of inner

worth cannot be sacrificed for or replaced by other things with equal or greater inner worth.⁷

<2>B. Some things that have inner worth

Kant argues that at least three things have inner worth or dignity:⁸

First, Kant claims that the moral law, which is the complete rational system of moral duties, rights, ends, ideals and virtues, has inner worth. Morality itself, he argues, is unconditionally and intrinsically good; it does not depend for its worth on the natural desires of persons; and it is infinitely more valuable than things of mere relative worth or price.⁹

Kant says that “nothing can have worth other than that determined for it by the law” (G 4:436), which apparently means that the moral law alone determines what things have or lack *inner worth*. In his view, the inner worth of persons, in particular, must therefore be explained and justified by the moral law itself.

So, second, Kant argues that autonomy of the will gives persons who have it inner worth.¹⁰ Autonomy of the will includes the capacity to rationally legislate moral laws for oneself and all other rational agents independent of natural desire and inclination.

Autonomy of the will also includes the capacity to be subject only to moral laws that a person legislates for himself in this way.¹¹ And, autonomy of the will includes rational dispositions and tendencies to govern ourselves by reason in all areas of life. Kant argues, then, that if the moral law has inner worth then beings who have these moral capacities and dispositions to be both authors and subjects of that law also have inner worth.¹²

Kant describes autonomy of the will as a “germ” of goodness that gives those who possess it a dignity (R 6:43). Virtually all human beings, including infants, children, severely disabled people and evil-doers, have autonomy of the will, in his view, even when these capacities are undeveloped, unrealized or entirely dormant.¹³ People can develop and exercise their moral abilities more or less well, but autonomy of the will itself does not come in degrees, so the inner worth of persons that it grounds is the same for everyone who has it.

Third, if the moral law and autonomy of the will both have inner worth then, Kant argues, a person’s character can also have inner worth when her free choices, policies and strength of will conform to the requirements of morality. The character of a person, in Kant’s view, consists of her maxims, intentions, ends, policies, fortitude and other acts or features of her that are under her voluntary control.¹⁴ Other characteristics of persons, such as her natural and social endowments, are not part of her character because she is not responsible for them.¹⁵ Nothing that is a matter of luck can contribute to or detract from the inner worth of a person’s character.¹⁶

Unlike the first two things that have dignity, namely morality itself and autonomy of the will, the inner worth of a person’s character comes in degrees depending on how well her choices and other aspects of herself that she is responsible for measure up to an ideal of a morally perfect person.¹⁷ All persons have an equal inner worth because they have autonomy of the will, but the character of some people has more inner worth than others because their choices more closely align with the requirements of morality.¹⁸ “All men are equal”, Kant reportedly said, “and only he that is morally good has an inner worth superior to the rest” (H 27:462). When someone, for example, has a basic, life-

governing commitment to morality along with the strength of will to carry it out, Kant says that his character has “the maximum of inner worth (of human dignity)” that is “superior to the greatest talent” and “beyond all price” (A 7:295, 292).¹⁹ A person can never be entirely lacking in inner worth, because his basic moral capacities to be author and subject of the moral law guarantee him the same inner worth that all autonomous persons share, but his character may nonetheless be “worthless and contemptible” (CPrR 5:161) when, for example, his basic principles are in direct opposition to the moral law.²⁰

<2>C. Respect for things with inner worth

Respect, according to Kant, is a moral attitude that is appropriately directed only at things that have inner worth or dignity. Morality itself, autonomy of the will and a morally upright character all, in his view, possess this special kind of value, so each of them merit respect. But what, more specifically, is involved in respecting something that has inner worth, according to Kant?

Respect, as I interpret Kant, is the attitude of making a certain kind of judgment and having, as a result of making this judgment, a special kind of feeling. When we respect something, we judge, at least implicitly, that it has inner worth.²¹ We judge, in particular, that it has intrinsic features that make it good in itself independent of its relation to our natural desires, judgments or those of anyone else.²² We also judge that it is good in all contexts and necessarily good for everyone. And we judge that it is more valuable than anything of mere price and that it cannot be exchanged for anything of equivalent value. We can have more or less respect for something, in Kant’s view, depending on the degree of inner worth we judge it to have or the relative priority we give to this judgment over others.

When we judge that something has inner worth, this judgment causes us to have a special kind of rational feeling that can motivate us to act.²³ The feeling of respect, according to Kant, has a negative effect, which is to actively hinder and resist inclinations that lead us to have a mistakenly high opinion of our own inner worth in comparison with the thing we respect. Its positive effect is to produce esteem or reverence for that thing.²⁴

As rational agents, Kant thinks we necessarily have moral attitudes of respect for things that actually possess inner worth, at least when we are aware of them and when our rational capacities are sufficiently developed. We necessarily judge, in particular, that morality has inner worth, that persons have an equal inner worth because they have autonomy of the will, and that the character of a moral saint has more inner worth than that of a scoundrel.²⁵ Yet, surprisingly, Kant also claims that the respect we have or lack for things is not inevitable but is instead somehow free and under our voluntary control.²⁶ He says, for example, that we can “claim” (MM 6:463) and “demand” (MM 6:465) respect from others. We can also “deny” (MM 6:463) that others have any inner worth, “withdraw” (LP 9:484) or “put aside” (MM 6:470) the respect we have for them, “grant” (V 27:708) them the respect they are owed, and “confine” our self-respect to its “legitimate bounds” (V 27:635).²⁷

Here is one way to resolve this apparent tension between the inevitable respect we have for things that have inner worth and the control we have over our judgments of inner worth. As rational agents whose rational capacities are minimally developed, we necessarily judge that certain things have inner worth, which causes in us feelings of respect for them. We also have the freedom, however, to reaffirm, endorse, sincerely hold, attend to and prioritize these judgments that we inevitably find ourselves with. But

we can also renounce them, “disavow” them (MM 6:435), refuse to attend to them, distract ourselves from them and form competing judgments that we prioritize over them.²⁸ We can never entirely extricate from ourselves the respect we have for certain things, so we are always at least dimly aware of their inner worth, but we are also subject to various deliberative tendencies that lead us to discount those judgments in favor of competing ones that we can freely form and endorse. We are naturally disposed, for example, to make inflated judgments about the moral quality of our own character because we tend to compare ourselves to other people, yet our rational capacities and dispositions necessarily lead us instead to judge our inner worth by the standards of morality itself, and competent rational agents have the power to decide for ourselves which of these conflicting judgments of respect to endorse and prioritize.²⁹

<2>D. Respectful actions

Kantian respect, I have argued, is most fundamentally an attitude, namely one of judging that something has inner worth and, as a result, having a feeling of respect for it. Actions, according to Kant, can also be respectful or disrespectful, in an extended sense, when they express, presuppose or otherwise stand in certain relations to attitudes of respect and disrespect.

One way actions can be respectful or disrespectful is by presupposing that the person performing those actions judges that something has or lacks inner worth. The act of demanding that another person regard himself as worthless, for example, may presuppose that the person making the demand judges him to be worthless.³⁰ And certain forms of genuine fawning, flattery, groveling, or prostrating may presuppose that we regard ourselves as having an inferior inner worth to others.³¹

Our judgments of inner worth can also presuppose practical judgments about what we regard as appropriate or inappropriate actions to take toward the thing. If we judge that something has inner worth, for example, then we are also committed to judging that it would be inappropriate to destroy or sacrifice the thing for something that lacks inner worth, which would explain why such an action is disrespectful. Or, according to Kant, doing our duty from duty is a respectful action because our judgment that the moral law has inner worth commits us to judging that we ought to follow the moral law and to do so because we judge that it has inner worth.³²

We can also express our attitudes of respect or disrespect if we have these attitudes and if we intentionally make use of literal or figurative signs, either outwardly to others or inwardly in our own thinking, that have come to have the same meaning as, or to presuppose, our judgments of inner worth.³³ We can, for example, use language to assert that we have respect for a person but we can also use language to rebuke, censure, criticize, disparage, condemn and cast aspersions. Shouting and using dismissive tones as well as laughing, scoffing and sneering at others can also express our attitude that something has or lacks inner worth. And we can express contempt for others by portraying them as something that symbolizes lack of inner worth, such as leading them around on a leash, tarring and feathering them, mocking them and making them seem ridiculous.³⁴

Our actions can be respectful or disrespectful when they reveal, display or indicate that we have an attitude of respect or disrespect for something, much as “smoke signifies fire” (A 7:193).³⁵ Human beings may have natural tendencies to act in various ways when we respect something or when we hold it in contempt. These actions,

according to Kant, may not have an established meaning that something has or lacks inner worth, but they would nonetheless count as disrespectful if they provide strong evidence that the person who performs them has an underlying attitude of respect or disrespect. For example, we may tend to act submissively toward or highly praise someone we regard as far superior to us in terms of inner worth. If we have contempt for something, we may be tempted to laugh, sneer or stare at it.³⁶

Finally, we can act in ways that tend to reinforce or undermine the attitudes of respect that others should have even when we do not have those attitudes ourselves. Our aim may not be to lead others to form judgments of inner worth, to revise the ones they have or to assign them different priorities, but our actions can nonetheless have the effect of enticing or leading them to do these things.³⁷ Kant claims, for example, that when human beings are aware of immorality in ourselves or others then our basic respect for the offender and the entire species as autonomous persons tends to diminish, sometimes to the point of utter contempt.³⁸ In light of this human tendency, along with the many moral imperfections that Kant thinks human beings have, spying on the morals of others, publicly divulging or gossiping about their immoral acts, allowing others to become too familiar with our thoughts and actions and tempting them to immorality are disrespectful actions because they tend to make people aware of immorality and so undermine our attitudes of respect for others as autonomous persons. Human beings also have a tendency to lose respect for the moral law when, for example, someone publicly rebukes it or openly and contemptuously violates it without just punishment. These actions, Kant says, tend to have “the effect of bringing into contempt the law of morality” (V 27:663) and to “set off a more general resistance” to it (E 8:37).³⁹

<1>II. Applying Kant's conception of respect

A central aspect of the moral life, according to Kant, concerns not just the actions we take or the maxims we adopt, but also the judgments we make about the value of things. The moral law must be scrupulously observed and followed but it also deserves our respect; autonomous persons must not be coerced, manipulated or intentionally harmed but they too are worthy of respect for their moral capacities; and we should all strive for moral perfection but the characters of those who come closer to achieving this ideal merit greater respect than the characters of less upright people. Our judgments of inner worth are themselves subject to moral evaluation while our actions can also be morally criticized as appropriately respectful or disrespectful in virtue of their connection to the moral attitudes of respect we should have.

Now that we have a better idea of how Kant, as I interpret him, conceives of respect in the abstract, we can turn to consider how it applies to questions of disability. Kant's conception of respect has several straightforward implications for how, in particular, to have and show respect to people with disabilities. First, in order to respect the moral law, we must understand and appreciate the basic rights that it affords to disabled people.⁴⁰ Second, it is disrespectful to regard disabled people as mere objects or animals, to judge that their impairments, unrealized talents or dormant moral capacities disqualify them as moral persons, and to mock, ridicule or defame them in ways that express, presuppose or reinforce the judgment that they lack the kind of inner worth that all autonomous persons possess. And, third, disabled people do not deserve less respect than others because of their impairments, appearance, economic status or any other factors that are beyond their control.

Kant's idea of respect, however, does not yet explain the more specific kinds of respect that people with disabilities of various kinds may deserve. In particular, is it disrespectful to regard and treat a disabled but competent adult as a child as long as we otherwise uphold, understand and appreciate her basic rights, judge that she has the same inner worth that all autonomous persons share, and afford her the respect she deserves for her moral character? Kant leaves questions of this sort for further philosophical reflection within the basic moral framework he has defined. In the remainder of this chapter, I begin the task of systematically interpreting and applying Kant's notions of respect and inner worth by sketching three arguments for the claim that regarding and treating disabled adults as children is, in many cases, disrespectful.

<2>A. Respect for the moral law

The moral law, according to Kant, is a rational system of duties, ends, ideals and virtues that has inner worth and so merits respect. To fully respect the moral law is, most generally, to judge that it has inner worth, to prioritize this judgment over any conflicting ones, and to have certain associated feelings that are caused by this judgment. One way to respect the moral law is to comply with its requirements out of our recognition of its inner worth.⁴¹ Properly respecting the moral law, however, also requires us to understand its requirements and to take them seriously, to hold the moral law "in highest esteem" (MM 6:394) and to want others to do so as well, to defend it, and to abandon any judgments that entail or imply that it lacks inner worth. We fail to respect the moral law in these further ways if we, for example, judge that it is indulgent, lenient, malleable, absurd or silly; if we judge that it is dependent on prudence, custom or religion; or if we

scorn, disavow, ridicule, or publicly rebuke it in ways that presuppose, express or reinforce mistaken judgments about its worth.⁴²

One way to apply the idea of respect for the moral law to more specific contexts is to examine the nature of the moral law itself. Without making too many assumptions about the precise content of morality, we can assume that this system defines various offices and positions that persons can occupy if they meet certain qualifications. The most basic moral position is the one that is shared by all persons who have autonomy of the will. All autonomous persons, including infants, young children and severely disabled people, have this basic moral status, which guarantees them certain basic moral rights.

The moral law, however, likely defines other kinds of positions that persons can occupy if they, for instance, have certain realized talents and abilities or occupy various social or political roles. Citizens, judges and heads of state along with doctors, teachers, parents, children and competent adults likely have special moral rights, duties and responsibilities as well as characteristic moral virtues and ideals that they have reason to aspire to. Kant argues, for example, that all autonomous persons have innate rights to lawful freedom and civil equality under the laws of a state, but only some people are “active...citizens” (MM 6:314) who have sufficient understanding and independence to qualify for the right to vote and to otherwise manage affairs of state.⁴³

Children, according to Kant, have a special place in the moral law. Young children, for example, have rights to protection and education, but they lack the realized moral capacities and concepts that are necessary for them to have moral duties.⁴⁴ Once a child’s capacities for moral understanding, judgment, reason and reflection are somewhat

developed; when she can understand moral notions such as duty, dignity, evil and injustice to some extent; and when her actions can be imputed to her then she comes to acquire her “[duties] as a child” (LP 9:482), such as ones concerning cleanliness, obedience to rules and not harming other children.⁴⁵ Only later, once her moral capacities and concepts are fully developed, does a person become a competent adult and so acquire the full gambut of her “[duties] as a human being” (LP 9:482).

If we suppose that the moral law deserves respect and that it defines a basic status of personhood along with additional offices, roles and positions that people can occupy then, whatever the exact nature of these positions, they too have inner worth and so deserve respect as part of the moral law. Judging that these positions have inner worth, however, not only requires us to live up to the requirements, virtues and ideals that we may have in virtue of the various morally defined roles we occupy. Fully respecting the moral law also requires us, for example, to understand the other positions it defines as well, including any duties, rights or eligibility requirements that they involve; to value and esteem these positions, whether we occupy them or not; to defend them from being violated or abused; and not to ridicule, disavow or publicly rebuke them.

It is possible for us to disrespect a morally defined office or position in the abstract by, for example, scorning or ridiculing the very idea of a judge or legislator, but we can also disrespect the positions that the moral law defines by the ways we regard or treat the people who occupy them. We fail to respect the position of judge, for example, if we deny that the person before us is a judge because we are mistaken about the relevant qualifications or about whether she satisfies them. We also fail to respect the position she occupies if we ignore or scoff at her legitimate rulings, contemptuously violate her legal

orders or mistakenly regard her legal decisions as simply the result of her emotions, biases or other factors that are beyond her control.

If respecting the moral law has these kinds of implications for how we regard or treat people who occupy the various positions it defines then it can be disrespectful to regard and treat a disabled adult as a child. Suppose a disabled person is, according to the qualifications set out in the moral law, a competent adult with all of the rights and duties that this position affords. This morally defined role is, I assume, different from those of a young child or an adolescent. The precise nature of these various moral offices depends on the content of the moral law, but let's suppose that, as a competent adult, this person is morally responsible for her actions while a young child is not; that she has the right to form and pursue her own conception of the good while a child must be partially directed in such matters by someone else's reason; and that she has a right to privacy as well as rights not to be coerced, manipulated or deceived whereas these rights are far less robust in children.

If we incorrectly judge that this disabled person is, morally speaking, a child rather than a competent adult then we fail to respect the moral law because we are mistaken about the qualifications, rights, duties, virtues or ideals of a position that it defines. We may not actually treat her unjustly, infringe on her freedom, deceive her, or take advantage of her, but our judgment that she is a child is itself a way of disrespecting the moral law, as are any actions that express, presuppose or reinforce this judgment in ourselves or others. Portraying her or acting as if she is a child, for example, could be disrespectful, as could brushing aside her legitimate complaints, refusing to hold her responsible for her actions, acting as if she is not subject to the moral duties of a

competent adult, expecting her to be deferential to our opinions and wishes, rushing in to help her without asking for her permission or guidance, and regarding certain forms of assistance we give her as charity rather than as owed to her as a competent adult. Much will depend on the content of the moral law, but in regarding and treating a disabled but competent adult as if she were a child, we fail to have and show proper respect for her place in the moral law and so fail to fully respect the moral law itself.

<2>B. Respect for autonomous persons

Autonomy of the will is basically a set of moral capacities and dispositions to be author and subject of the moral law. Those who have autonomy of the will, according to Kant, have an equal inner worth that deserves respect. Respecting persons in this way, and so judging that they have an inalienable inner worth, requires us, for example, to refrain from regarding or treating them as mere animals or objects.

We can begin to apply this idea of respect for the autonomy of persons to specific circumstances by investigating the nature of autonomy and, in particular, examining the capacity to be an author of the moral law. Kant's conception of autonomy has been understood in different ways, but on some views, a person is a co-author of the moral law if the moral law is justifiable to her and all other persons if they were fully rational and if they were to take up a suitably impartial and equal point of view. One way to respect autonomous persons, on this view, is to act only in ways that are justifiable to her from this moral perspective.⁴⁶

Disagreement persists about the nature of this hypothetical standpoint, but one feature of it could be that ideally rational agents evaluate moral principles, virtues and ideals on the basis of the rational interests that they and others have.⁴⁷ These rational

interests might include interests in developing, protecting, exercising and perfecting their powers of reasoned thought, judgment and choice in all areas of life. The capacity to be a co-author of the moral law, on an account of this sort, includes the capacity to take up this perspective and to co-legislate shared moral principles on the basis of the rational interests that persons have in virtue of their powers and dispositions of moral, prudential and theoretical reason.

If autonomy of the will gives those who have it inner worth, and if autonomy of the will presupposes that persons have rational interests of this sort then my suggestion is that respecting persons as autonomous agents also requires us to respect their rational interests by judging that they too have inner worth. Much will depend on the nature of these rational interests and on how they are appropriately prioritized and ordered, but if this view is correct then respecting a person's rational interests requires us not only to promote those interests but also to regard them as important and worthy of our attention and to avoid undermining, denigrating, dismissing or failing to recognize these interests in ourselves and others.⁴⁸

Supplementing Kant's conception of respect in this way allows us to draw out additional implications for how to respect autonomous persons of various kinds. To take just one example, consider the rational interest persons have in exercising their rational capacities. Respecting people in the use of their reason seems to require us to recognize and appreciate when and how well they have done so, to approach such people with reason and argument rather than with power and manipulation and to take up their points of view. We must also, it seems, refrain from mistakenly assuming or acting as if such people lack rational powers altogether or that their reasoned judgments are absurd or

nonsensical. We need not agree with the choices, values or beliefs that others have or regard them as fully rational, but respecting their use of reason apparently requires us to search for and approve of any reasoning that may have led them to these judgments while also perhaps trying to identify any errors that led them astray.⁴⁹

Some people, particularly young children, do not usually exercise their rational capacities very well, so we may be correct in supposing that their choices and values are not especially well-considered, that they are mostly directed by instinct and inclination, that they have limited knowledge of relevant facts, and that, in certain areas of life, they must be guided by the reason of others until they are competent to use their own rational powers. Because young children tend to exercise their rational capacities very well, respecting the use of their reason may not always require us to take up their point of view, to take their opinions and desires very seriously or to refrain from regarding their judgments as absurd or especially foolish. We may not disrespect the interest they have in exercising their rational powers by expecting deference to our opinions and wishes or rushing in to assist them or concealing facts from them that would make them less rational. We may have other kinds of reasons for doing or not doing these things, but often our emphasis is instead on respecting the interests of young children in developing their rational capacities so that they are eventually in a position to exercise them well.

Regarding and treating a disabled adult as a child in these ways, however, can be ways of failing to respect her use of reason and so failing to respect her as an autonomous person. We might express our mistaken judgments that a disabled adult lacks realized rational capacities or does not use the ones she has well by, for example, refusing to listen to her or engage with her judgments, finishing her sentences for her, ignoring her

opinions, mostly speaking to her care-giver rather than the person herself, refusing to give her the benefit of the doubt or to look for the use of reason that went into her opinions and wishes, belittling her values as mainly the result of sour grapes, false consciousness, or lack of commonsense, or counting her interests in comfort or leisure as more important than her interest in exercising her rational abilities. When we treat a disabled adult as a child in these ways, we fail to fully respect her autonomy because we do not recognize, value and appreciate the interest she has in exercising her rational capacities.

<2>C. Respect for the moral character of persons

A person's choices, actions, ends and values can, according to Kant, give her character more or less inner worth depending on how well they compare to the moral law. Any features of a person that she is not responsible for do not add to or detract from the inner worth of her character. Simply having a disability, therefore, does not make someone more or less deserving of respect, even if her disability affects her relative worth in terms of her usefulness, popularity, wealth, social standing, level of achievement, and so on. Ridiculing or laughing at a disabled person for her impairments, appearance, speech or mistakes in reasoning can be disrespectful when they express, presuppose or reinforce the false judgment that her disability or its effects diminish her inner worth.

In Kant's view, the character of a disabled person who studiously develops her natural abilities of body and mind despite obstacles and adverse circumstances may even deserve more respect than non-disabled people who are more talented or accomplished if rational agents have an imperfect duty to perfect their natural talents and if her projects of

self-perfection were done from moral motives. We may not admire her as much as those who are naturally gifted or easily accomplished, but she may deserve additional respect for her perseverance and fortitude.⁵⁰

The respect that a particular person deserves in virtue of the quality of her character depends, in part, on how well she fulfills the specific moral requirements that she is subject to. These requirements, I assume, differ depending, in part, on the abilities a person has. One way we might fail to have proper respect of this sort for a person's character is if we do not understand the moral duties that she is subject to. A disabled adult may be living up to her moral requirements quite well and so deserve additional respect but we may mistakenly regard her as a child who is subject to a different set of duties or to no duties at all. The particular moral standards we would then be using to evaluate this person's character would be skewed, which may lead us to afford her more or less respect than she deserves because we fail to recognize her moral successes, we do not hold her accountable for certain actions that are imputable to her, or we judge that she fails to satisfy certain duties that she is not subject to.

<1>III. Conclusion

A central feature of the moral life, according to Kant, concerns the judgments of inner worth that we make and the ways that these judgments can be presupposed, expressed or reinforced in our actions. The moral law, autonomous persons and those who have a morally upright character all deserve our respect, in Kant's view, but a comprehensive theory of respect must somehow move beyond these abstractions in order to characterize and justify the forms of respect that are appropriate for particular persons in specific contexts. I have attempted to illustrate how Kant's conception of respect can

be interpreted and supplemented in ways that have specific implications for the kinds of respect that disabled adults deserve. The strategies I have described for applying Kant's conception of respect are also, I hope, useful starting-points for the urgent practical task of systematically investigating and justifying the various types of respect that we owe to people in marginalized groups more generally.

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¹ I am grateful to Tom Hill, Mark Timmons, Richard Dean, Oliver Sensen, Markus Kohl, Cindy Stark, Robert N. Johnson and audiences at UNC Chapel Hill and the University of Utah for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

² Assessing this general complaint, however, raises a number of issues that I will not address here. There are conceptual questions about what it means to be a child, to be an adult, and to regard and treat someone as a child. There are also empirical questions about how common it is to regard and treat adults with various kinds of disabilities as children, what attitudes people tend to have toward those they see as children, and whether some biologically mature disabled people qualify as children or child-like in certain contexts.

³ References to Kant's works are to the standard Prussian Academy edition using the following abbreviations: G - *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, MM - *The Metaphysics of Morals*, CPrR - *Critique of Practical Reason*, CJ - *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, R - *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, A - *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, E - "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment," TP - "On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice," CB - "Conjectural beginnings of human history," IUH – "Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim," CF - "The Conflict of the Faculties," SB - "Observations on the feeling of the sublime and the beautiful," LP - "Lectures on Pedagogy," H - "Kant's practical philosophy: Herder's lecture notes," C - "Moral philosophy: Collins's Lecture notes," M - "Morality according to Prof. Kant: Mrongovius' lecture notes," V - "Kant on the metaphysics of morals: Vigilantius's lecture notes."

⁴ Kant briefly discusses what kinds of respect are appropriate for old people (CF 7:99) and, in his classes, he reportedly discussed specific types of respect for scholars (C 27:461). For some contemporary attempts at applying Kant's conception of respect to specific groups, see Sensen (2014), Noggle (1999), Buss (1999).

⁵ For further discussion of various aspects of Kant's conception of respect, see Wood (1999, 2009), Kriegel and Timmons (This volume), Herman (1984), Hill (2000c), Reath (1989), Cranor (1980), Dillon (2016).

⁶ C 27:357-358, 407; M 29:631-2; V 27:664-5.

⁷ G 4:428; MM 6:435-6, 462; M 29:631.

⁸ For further discussion of Kant's conception of dignity, see Sensen (2011).

⁹ MM 6:397; G 4:435, 442; CPrR 5:147, 161; C 27:322; M 29:624.

¹⁰ G 4:435-6; MM 6:436.

¹¹ G 4:431-2. See also Hill (1992).

¹² G 4:435-6.

¹³ MM 6:280-1; A 7:127, 327-8, 269-70; LP 9:489; C 27:462; V 27:509, 670.

¹⁴ G 4:435; R 6:30-1. This may be somewhat overstated in light of puzzling passages in which Kant apparently claims that the consequences of immoral actions can be imputed to a person (e.g. MM 6:228), although perhaps Kant is referring to legal rather than moral imputation. For a discussion of these issues, see Hill (2000b).

¹⁵ SB 2:213.

¹⁶ See Darwall (1977).

¹⁷ G 4:398-9, 435; MM 6:435, 441-2, 463; CPrR 5: 76-7, 147-8, 153-4; R 6:30-1; C 27:436; V 27: 664-5, 695.

¹⁸ V 27:695; M 29:604-5; H 27:39-40.

¹⁹ G 4:426; MM 6:405; R 6:39-9; A 7:291-3; C 27:281; M 29:631. For further discussion, see Dean (2006).

²⁰ MM 6: 390, 429, 441; R 6:30-1; M 29:632; V 27:604; C 27:341.

²¹ MM 6:435, 441-2, 454; G 4:403, 428; CPrR 5:88; CJ 5:264; E 8:36; M 29:624; C 27:407, 458; V 27:635-6, 667, 709, 727. My suggestion is that this is the idea Kant is conveying when he says that respect involves being conscious of, appreciating, acknowledging, and judging that something has inner worth.

²² SB 2:213.

²³ CPrR 5:76-80.

²⁴ CPrR 5:78-9; MM 6:402-3.

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- ²⁵ CPrR 5:76-7; MM 6:402-3, 449, 463; R 6:49; C 27:407; V 27:665.
- ²⁶ MM 6:466; A 7:170; C 27:409.
- ²⁷ See also MM 6:435, 441, 449, 464; CPrR 5:159; C 27:409, 457; V 27:610, 667, 708.
- ²⁸ MM 6:400, 438.
- ²⁹ MM 6:437. See also MM 6:441, 459-60; CPrR 5:78; R 6: 33-4; TP 8:308-9; CF 7:82, 94; IUH 8: 30; V 27:703-8.
- ³⁰ MM 6:465.
- ³¹ V 27:705; H 27:39.
- ³² C 27:335-8.
- ³³ A 7:192; MM 6:437, 464; C 27:457; H 27:41.
- ³⁴ MM 6:332-3, 437, 467; CPrR 5:77; A 7:265, 281; E 8:37; SB 2:249; C 27:336-7, 458; H 27:72; V 27:667, 708.
- ³⁵ A 7:194; H 27:40-1.
- ³⁶ V 27:707; R 6:103; A 7:133; C 27:342; H 27:41.
- ³⁷ MM 6:470, 73; CF 7:14; C 27:411.
- ³⁸ MM 6:394, 455, 464-6, 474; CF 7:14; V 27:687, 707.
- ³⁹ For other examples, see MM 6:466; CB 8:113; CF 7:14; C 27:456; V 27:664, 706-8.
- ⁴⁰ See Hill (1991).
- ⁴¹ MM 6:390; M 27:1426, 29:623-4.
- ⁴² MM 6:437, 461, 464; CPrR 5:77; M 29:624; C 27:435.
- ⁴³ MM 6:314-15; TP 8:290-5; A 7:210.
- ⁴⁴ MM 6:280-1; A 7:268-9; LP 9:441, 445-6, 453, 460, 465, 481-3, 489, 492-4; V 27:509, 670.

⁴⁵ A 7:328-9; LP 9:482-3, 489, 499.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Hill (2000a), Rawls (1999), Cureton (2013a).

⁴⁷ I develop a view along these lines in Cureton (2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2016).

⁴⁸ There is some evidence that Kant may have endorsed something like this argument, or at least its conclusion. See A 7:127, 143; C 27:460.

⁴⁹ MM 6:463-4.

⁵⁰ MM 6:228, 391-2; CPrR 5:77-8; CF 7:99; C 27:322.