

Michael Quante, Menschenwürde und personale Autonomie. Demokratische Werte im Kontext der Lebenswissenschaften

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The consequences of modern medical technology continue to pose a challenge to practical philosophy as well as political philosophy. Nothing less than the essence of democratic liberalism is affected when it comes to reproductive cloning, preimplantation genetic diagnosis or active euthanasia. Is the respect for autonomous persons compatible with designing their genetic identity? Does the respect for autonomous persons require us to allow for mercy killing? Today's democracies struggle with questions like these. They search for coherent answers in accordance with their cultural and political traditions. Moral philosophy has to respond to this particular dimension of technological progress.

This is the starting point of Michael Quante's book. His topic is a somehow peculiarly German one, yet, by raising the question of how to reconcile democratic concerns with modern biotechnological progress, it gives answers to problems of global interest.

German democracy is based on the concept of human dignity. This foremost constitutional value is pivotal for any ethical debate. However, it has been criticized for either being vague or theologically laden. Though being a liberal philosopher, Quante defends the concept by showing how it can be used in a meaningful way. He argues that human dignity is a fundamental value not derived from other moral values; it refers to the value of individual, pluralistic and autonomous conceptions of human personhood. Quante perceives his endeavour as an interpretation of bioethical problems in the light of democratic values.

In three chapters he unfolds his understanding of human dignity, personhood, and autonomy and how the three interrelate. He does so with particular attention to ethical problems of reproductive medicine, human genetics, and end-of-life decision making. Chapter one is devoted to the question of how an absolute concept of human dignity can be reconciled with the necessity to evaluate human life by quality-of-life criteria. For example, in preimplantation genetic diagnosis, a hotly debated topic of German bio-politics, some say a selection of embryos could be justified by the expected quality of life of the future

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human being. Critics hold that this is not compatible with a strong concept of human dignity thus denying third parties like parents the right to judge the value of life of their offspring. To overcome this “bad dialectic” (p. 30) Quante distinguishes four types of quality-of-life standards: the naturalistic standard, the social standard, the intersubjective-rational standard, and the personal standard. Only the naturalistic and social standards should be considered problematic, he argues. The intersubjective-rational and the personal standards are in accordance with a concept of human dignity that refers to the paramount relevance of autonomous personhood in democratic societies.

In chapter two, Quante explores how the concept of personhood can be meaningfully applied to ethical problems of end-of-life decision making, cloning or neuro-enhancement. Though Quante acknowledges the vagueness of this notion, he shows how it could be useful as a context-sensitive heuristic concept. Chapter three, eventually, presents old and new challenges to the concept of autonomy. On one hand, Quante discusses autonomy problems in end-of-life decision making, on the other hand he reveals challenges to the concept of informed consent due to advances in genetic diagnoses, in particular the right not to know, and conflicting interests of proxies, insurances and employers.

Throughout these chapters, Quante defends his thesis that ethical decision-making based on quality-of-life assessment is not a danger to, but an exigency of democracy. He holds that the inalienable right to human dignity is best lived up to by respecting an autonomous person’s evaluation of a meaningful life. And, vice versa, it is the plurality of interpretations of a meaningful life that gives rise to democratic respect for human dignity.

Quante’s subtle analysis of the varying ethical conceptions of quality-of-life assessments is helpful in many regards. It is most promising that he links his ideas with a secular concept of human dignity as an unalienable right, thus enriching the political debate on the consequences of biomedicine for modern democracies. However, it is evident that his concept will encounter serious problems when it comes to decision-making for the incompetent. Quante argues that in these cases the intersubjective-rational standard should be applied as standards of plausibility and reasonableness anyhow play a role in autonomous decision making. But then the question remains: Whose standards? Which plausibility? He does not explain how such a standard could be derived, given that there is an ethically and politically accepted plurality of interpretations of a meaningful life.

Secondly, because he closely links personal autonomy and the inalienable right to human dignity, he interprets personal autonomy as a kind of democratic duty. In discussing preimplantation genetic diagnosis, Quante holds that only those genetic conditions that prevent the embryo from becoming an autonomous person (like anencephaly) could reasonably justify embryo selection (p. 61). Other conditions (like cystic fibrosis or Huntington’s disease), it follows, would not justify embryo selection because this would violate the concept of human dignity by humiliating persons living with these conditions. How then justify suicide or active euthanasia, cases with which Quante is obviously less concerned? Why does a person with Huntington’s disease committing suicide or asking for active euthanasia not violate the human dignity of all other patients concerned?

The book is a compilation of articles that have been published separately in the years 1997–2006. Even parts of the introduction and the conclusion have been published elsewhere in different contexts. Thus, every now and then the text suffers from redundancy. Whereas the line of argument is admirably concise within the different chapters, this is not so with regard to the whole text. Although, in the introduction, Quante outlines a full scenario of democratic values like autonomy, justice, or solidarity, he does not deal with them equally in the following text. The conclusion brings together the arguments from chapter one, but not two and three.

These flaws, however, are but a minor nuisance. It was a worthwhile endeavour to assemble the separately published but, nevertheless, argumentatively linked papers in such a compendium. Quante is a prolific thinker. It is inspiring to follow his analytic line of argument. Liberal democracies will need more of these books.