

The Kantian Perspective: Female Genital Mutilation

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According to the World Health Organization, female genital mutilation includes procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (World Health Organization, 2014). It is practiced most commonly on the grounds of western Africa, eastern Africa, northeastern Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Female genital mutilation is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women (World Health Organization, 2014). Immanuel Kant believed that the motive behind one's actions determined that action's morality. From a Kantian perspective, female genital mutilation is not moral.

Categorical imperatives command us to do things whether we want to or not, with the result that if we ignore or disobey them, we are acting contrary to reason (Schafer-Landau, 163). The formula of universal law is a categorical imperative that states, "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." This means that you can act only if you would will that everyone else acts the same under the same circumstance.

Kantian ethics is a form of deontological ethics, which believes that the rightness or wrongness of actions does not depend on their consequences but on whether they fulfill our duty. Duty is to do the right thing even when your instincts are against it. An action has moral worth if it is done from duty, not just an action that conforms to duty. To figure out whether you are performing an action of moral worth, you must ask yourself, "Is my action done according to a universalizable maxim? Did I choose that maxim because it is universalizable?" Kant believed that lying, stealing, and murdering are always immoral because you cannot will these actions to be universalized.

Female genital mutilation is practiced on girls from infancy to age fifteen, and sometimes on adult women. It is a tradition that has been carried out for centuries and is considered necessary in preparing a girl for adulthood and marriage. Female genital mutilation is also a way for men to ensure their wives' fidelity by decreasing their pleasure during sexual intercourse thereby decreasing their libido. A girl who has not been circumcised would be looked down upon by

her society and would not be eligible for marriage, making the pressures to be circumcised extremely high. The clitoris is considered a manly part of a woman's femininity because of its ability to be erect, therefore she is considered unclean until its removal (Nordqvist, 2012).

The act of female genital mutilation has not been proven to have any health benefits. On the other hand, it has many harmful side effects for both young girls and women. Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock, hemorrhage, sepsis, urinary retention, open sores in the genital region, and injury to nearby genital tissue. Long-term complications include recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts, infertility, an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths (World Health Organization, 2014).

Under Kant's formula of universal law, female genital mutilation would not be permissible unless everyone would undergo genital mutilation for the same reasons. Female genital mutilation does not promote any benefits for the victim, it is for the benefit of the male that it is undergone. Unless the male can undergo a procedure that affects him in the same way with the same harms that it affects the female and for the pleasure of the female, it cannot be compatible with the formula of universal law.

When it comes to duty, Kant would not consider female genital mutilation a duty. If it were a duty, it would come from our good will. Our good will is the ability to reliably determine what your duty is, and a steady commitment to do your duty for its own sake (Schafer-Landau, 173). Duty can be determined without our desires and emotions, solely using reason. Kant believed that dutiful actions motivated by emotions or desires lack any moral worth (Schafer-Landau, 175). Not only does female genital mutilation contradict duty, it is not even permissible to be carried out.

Kant also formulated the categorical imperative as the principle of humanity. The principle of humanity states, "Always treat a human being (yourself included) as an end, and never as a mere means" (Schafer-Landau, 169). An end is a goal that you are aiming for while a means is the method or instrument you choose to get there. There are two types of ends: subjective and objective. Subjective ends are determined by people. Objective ends are ends that have no relation to the value people put on them. An objective end is considered valuable even if no one wanted it. Kant believed that rational nature exists as an end in itself.

Female genital mutilation uses women as a mere means to achieve a certain end. A narrowed vaginal opening is believed to enhance a husband's sexual pleasure and the challenge of penetrating a tight opening is considered to be linked to a man's strength and virility (FGM New Zealand, 2011). Another end that can be achieved by mutilation is controlling women in their society. Women can be controlled with female genital mutilation by forcing them to be sexually unsatisfied no matter who their partner is. Female genital mutilation denies the rights of a female because it is against her own free will. She is not given the choice of whether or not she would like to have the procedure done. It is forced onto her as a tradition passed down from generations before.

One can argue that female genital mutilation is considered moral because it is a cultural tradition. Some cultures believe that it empowers a female making her worthy of marriage. Not undergoing female genital mutilation will cause her to be looked down upon by the society in which she lives in. Not being eligible for marriage can reduce her chances of happiness and starting a family. Kant believed that good consequences do not justify an immoral action, such as female genital mutilation.

A male from a culture that believes in female genital mutilation could say, "I can will as a universal law the maxim that all women should be circumcised." Kant believed we have a duty to seek the happiness of others. Female genital mutilation does not result in happiness for the female. It is done as a social behavior and does not promote the wellness of females. Unless this man can will that all women be circumcised with pure intentions and everyone would act the same under the same circumstances, it does not fall under a universalizable law.

I don't think that female genital mutilation should ever be considered moral. It is a traumatic experience that causes many health risks with no benefits. It can cause harm not only to the one undergoing the circumcision but also to her unborn children, by increasing their risk for neonatal death (World Health Organization, 2014). For Kant, all human beings have intrinsic worth because of their rationality. A woman is a human being. Anything that belittles a human being is considered immoral. Therefore, female genital mutilation is considered immoral.

References

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