

THE PITFALLS OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN TWO SHORT STORIES BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND KATHERINE ANN PORTER

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Abstract

Theories of morality have warned us about the possibility of power-wielding in caregiving situations. They argue that moral decisions are often slippery slopes that can easily—unbeknownst to those involved—lead to oppression. One reason for the degeneration of care into power can be explained in terms of the solipsistic interpretation of the care-receiver's needs. It is not simply the question of the language barrier. The problem is the nature of the care relationship itself which concerns the authority either granted or assumed by the caregiver. Also, in caregiving situations, the caregiver might use care as a smokescreen to hide their self-serving intentions. To further elaborate, I will draw on Zygmunt Bauman's ideas about care and moral responsibility. His exploration of the problem of care and moral responsibility constitutes the theoretical premise on which I will build my argument using two examples from literature to show how care can lapse into power. I have chosen these two short stories to demonstrate the way caregiving situations are potential mine-fields where a misstep can result in unintended deleterious consequences. Porter's "He" and O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" perfectly illustrate this point.

Keywords: moral responsibility, Bauman, disability, care, power

Introduction

While preparing for a short story course, I came across two short stories, which in some ways, bore an uncanny resemblance to one another. The two short stories are concerned with parental care for their offspring. In both stories, there are mothers who apparently do what they can to protect their mentally disabled children. O'Connor's story published in 1953 is concerned with the life of a mother and her mentally disabled daughter, Lucynell, who because of her mother's gullibility is left high and dry at the end of the story. "He" (1927) is also about the unfortunate fate of an unnamed boy called 'He' who suffers from speech impediments and some abnormalities. Like Lucynell, 'He' also falls victim to her mother's miscalculation and inanities. The physical and mental conditions of the two children have made them helpless creatures at the mercy of their parent's decisions. The children's inability to communicate their needs, at least in a common and perceptible way, compounds further the complexity of the care situation. Having some familiarity with the problematics of moral responsibility and the ethics of care explored by Zygmunt Bauman in his seminal book, *The Postmodern Ethics* (1993), I believe that the two stories might serve as concrete examples for demonstrating the difficulty of negotiating one's moral responsibility toward the other. In the following sections, I will first explain the theoretical framework using Bauman's ideas. Then, I will offer my reflections on the stories using Bauman's thoughts. To prevent my analysis from being a mere facile illustration of the notion of ethics of care, I would like to propose that the reason behind the lapse behind the moral responsibility of the two mothers and the subsequent degeneration of care into power and manipulation can be attributed to a biased attitude toward the disabled and the abnormal promoted by the politics of ableism.

Impediments and Challenges to Moral Responsibility

In *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Bauman warns against the complexity and aporia of moral responsibility for the other. Responsibility generates ambivalence because it is almost impossible to determine when one is overstepping limits or falling short of fulfilling one's obligations. Maintaining the balance is a challenge that is not entirely resolvable. Decisions made with the best of intentions can cause unforeseen and far-reaching ramifications which are not necessarily in the best interest of everyone. Generally, decisions made under such circumstances are always based on one's knowledge of the other. The more one familiarizes oneself with the needs of the other, the easier it is to eliminate risk or reduce unintended injury. Awareness of the demands of the other is an indispensable part of any caregiving initiative. When the care-receiver fails to make their needs and demands understood, the caregiving process or procedure becomes problematized. Faced with the triple task of establishing, construing and meeting the needs of their object of care, the caregiver can be easily overwhelmed by their solipsistic interpretations.

In a similar way, the two short stories under study here reveal that misconceptions about the needs of the two children and a blinkered view are the root causes of the caregivers' failure. In both "He" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (henceforth "The Life"), mothers in the name of maternal care and motherly affection delude themselves and others into believing that they hold the unalienable right to decide for their children. This is clearly reflected in the compartments of both mothers who unilaterally delineate what is right and wrong for their children, often dismissing the objections of others who question their commonsensical authority (which is particularly more noticeable in "He"). The children's inability to voice their concerns or express themselves in a straightforward way and the mothers' reluctance or inability to reconsider their behavioral pattern vis-à-vis their kids aggravates the already subtle nature of moral

responsibility.

According to Bauman, whether the other communicates their needs clearly or is silent, the moral self has to represent the content of the message as its knowledge (p. 90). Because the self's representation of the other's demand is indeed a re-presentation of it and thus not completely identifiable with it, a distance opens "between the Other as she-may-be-for-herself and the other I am for—the distance which was not there before" (p. 90). It is on the basis of this re-presented demand that the self (read the care-giver) acts. The result is that the other's demand is likely to be misrepresented and tampered with. In such a situation, 'the other' might either remain silent or voice their disagreement. At any rate, the self as the authorized agency feels obliged to overcome what it sees as the other's "ignorance or mis-interpretation of her own best interest" (Bauman, 1993, p. 91). This is clearly true for the present short stories in which both mentally disabled kids, as care-receivers, are almost literally ignored as no attempt is made to mitigate their speech disorder. As such, their emotional responses manifest themselves in facial expressions or postures and gestures which often go unnoticed, ignored or are likely to be misapprehended by their immediate caregivers, that is, their mothers.

Maternal Care in "He" and "The Life"

"He" is about the poor family of the Whipples who have a "simple-minded" (Porter, 1979, p. 49) unnamed son. Mrs. Whipples, the mother of the family, misses no opportunity to boastfully brag about how much she loves her second son, particularly in the presence of neighbors. She is obsessed with keeping up appearances in every possible way. Intolerant of the neighbors' sympathetic words, she feels strongly obligated to exaggerate the son's strength, stamina and fearlessness in order to give an appearance of normalcy to her family. She is happy that nothing can hurt him like when "a plank blew off the chicken house and struck Him on the head and He never seemed to know it" (Porter, 1979, p. 50). 'He' would never complain

about the food or "mind the cold" (p. 49). When the neighbors admonished Mrs. Whipples for letting the son climb up the tree, she took their remarks as insinuations about the abnormal condition of her son. Enraged by their intrusive comments, Mrs. Whipples "could hardly keep her hands off Him for acting like that before people, a grin all over His face and her worried sick about Him all the time" (p. 51). The son's inability to express discontent, fear or pain emboldened Mrs. Whipples to choose him for carrying out ever more daunting tasks such as sneaking into the pigsty to snatch the piglet or pasturing a temperamental bull. Finally, the mother's desire for maintaining the appearance of normalcy in her family catches up with her. One winter morning when her son is working on the farm, he slips on the ice, hurting himself so badly that for the first time in his life 'He' starts wriggling uncontrollably with pain on the ground and is inconsolably restless. After this incident, 'He' is bedridden for four months until the doctor convinces Mrs. Whipples that her son needs to be hospitalized. The epiphanic climax of the story occurs on the day of departure when 'He' is about to be carted way to the hospital. It is at this moment that Mrs. Whipples sees the reality of her relationship with her son: "Mrs. Whipples couldn't believe what she saw; He was scrubbing away big tears that rolled out of the corners of His eyes. He sniveled and made a gulping noise" (p. 58). The child's demonstration of his feelings comes as a shocking revelation to Mrs. Whipples:

Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears, maybe He had been scared that day with the bull, maybe He had slept cold and couldn't tell her about it; maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him. . . She had loved Him as much as she possibly could, there were Adna and Emly who had to be thought of too, there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life. Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born (p. 58).

The story ends on this revelatory and contrite note, leaving the reader astounded by the complexity of human relationships and lack of foresight. The ending clearly corroborates the dubious and ambivalent position the mother is stuck in. What was obvious to the readers now dawns on the mother who has been turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the reality of her child's mental and physical conditions. The repetition of 'maybe' is noteworthy. Even at this point in the story, Porter leaves a narrow margin for uncertainty. The paragraph is also remarkable in that it grants a rare glimpse into the mind of the alleged caregiver, the mother, who seems to reevaluate her earlier position vis-à-vis her child and by professing her love perhaps she wants to calm her troubled conscience. This declaration of love is immediately undercut by a deep sense of regret for his ever being born. I think this last statement speaks volumes for the emotional ambivalence that imbues the life of those who are in close contact with a congenitally disabled child. O'Connor's "The Life", like the previous story, points to the predicament of moral responsibility. The story concerns the life of Mrs. Crater, a widow, and her mute and mentally challenged daughter, Lucynell. Their life changes with the arrival of a tramp named Mr. Shiftlet who, as his name indicates, tends to be shifty and deceitful. A close reading of the first paragraphs of the story reveals the confrontational approach of the two adults to one another. O'Connor jumps back and forth between descriptive snapshots of the one-armed Mr. Shiftlet and the toothless old woman in a cinematic style. This is, I believe, important, as the silent Lucynell later becomes the object of a bargain. Shiftlet is bent on impressing the old woman with his world-weariness and intellectual maturity. At the same time, the old woman appraises him based on his dexterity and skillfulness which can be helpful on a farm that has fallen into disrepair after her husband's death. Each sees in the other something they need to have. Each recognizes the weak spot of the other and proceeds in accordance with this knowledge to reach the desired goal. Mrs. Crater wants to have a son-in-law who can both look after the place and her daughter. As a tramp, Mr. Shiftlet's attention is drawn to the

dilapidated car collecting dust in the shed. The stage is set for the bargain. Mr. Shiftlet starts mending and repairing here and there:

He had not been around a week before the change he had made in the place was apparent. He had patched the front and back steps, built a new hog pen, restored a fence, and taught Lucynell, who was completely deaf and had never said a word in her life, to say the word 'bird.' The big rosy-faced girl followed him everywhere, saying 'Burrtdtdt ddbirrrtdtdt,' and clapping her hands. The old woman watched from a distance, secretly pleased. She was ravenous for a son-in-law. (O'Connor, 1971, p. 150)

The next thing to do is "to make the automobile run" (p. 150). It is at this point in the story that the old woman suggests the possibility of marriage between Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell:

That night, rocking on the porch, the old woman began her business, at once. 'You want you an innocent woman, don't you?' she asked sympathetically. 'You don't want none of this trash.' 'No', I don't,' Mr. Shiftlet said. 'One that can't talk,' she continued, 'can't sass you back or use foul language. That's the kind for you to have. Right there,' and she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands. "That's right," he admitted. "She wouldn't give me any trouble." "Saturday," the old woman said, "you and her and me can drive into town and get married." (pp. 151-152)

The marriage proposal makes him uneasy. He does not have money and marriage needs money. Mrs. Crater assures him that Lucynell is a content girl who knows nothing about hotels or honeymoons. Desperate for a son-in-law and knowing that Mr. Shiftlet is a footloose and fancy-free person, she tries to make the conjugal affair as materially appealing as possible. She reminds him that by marrying her daughter he would "be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world", that in addition, he would have a farm with a well 'that never goes dry' and a house that 'is always warm in the winter and there's no mortgage on a thing about this place. And yonder under that shed is a fine automobile" (p.

152). All can be acquired if he agreed to marry her legally and properly. Finally, Mr. Shiftlet acquiesces to her plan on the condition that he can take Lucynell on a short honeymoon by the newly repaired car. The story ends with Mr. Shiftlet heading west after he has dumped his mentally disabled bride in a diner.

Like the previous story, Mrs. Crater is concerned about the life of her child. Her actions and decisions are naturally out of goodwill and are justifiably so. Being a decrepit and aging mother, she must be apprehensive of a future when she will not be available for her disabled child. Yet, we can blame her for not seeing through Mr. Shiftlet's humbuggery and guilefulness or having let herself believe in the uprightness of Mr. Shiftlet.

If Mrs. Whipples' self-deluding tendency is created by the obsession with normalcy, Mrs. Crater, in a similar vein, strives to compensate for her daughter's disability through material palliatives such as the automobile and a permanent residence. Their blinkered visions preclude them from seeing the reality of their children's condition. Both mothers are also blameworthy because they blindly adhere to a self-serving idea of the truth about their offspring.

The endings of both stories are similar in that they perfectly illustrate the unpredictability of care situations and the difficulty of achieving the desired outcome. Despite differences between the two stories, they both depict the complexity of moral decisions concerning the other. The problem with moral situations is that the self has no yardstick with which to assess the soundness of moral actions. The non-existence of any touchstone for evaluating the validity and fruitfulness of decisions is the core argument of recent studies which emphasize the indeterminacy and ambivalence of moral responsibility. The stories also corroborate the postmodern stance explicated by Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics* according to which morality cannot be formulated in terms of non-aporetic and universalizable ethical codes. This postmodern approach rejects the previously trusted foundations

of morality best formulated as prescriptive laws premised on reason and commonsense. The definitiveness and conclusiveness that characterize prescriptive moral codes can be considered as their strength and weakness. Strength, because the self acts as an agent discharging pre-defined duties. As a result, the self cannot be held accountable for the success or failure of the situation. The weakness is that every moral situation is taken as a specimen of a general model and is, by default, treated universally in a similar way. Thus, no room is left for exceptions. The postmodern conception of morality stresses the exceptionality of every moral encounter. In this way, it emphasizes on the fact that responsibility is not transferrable or negotiable. In other words, "the substitution of heteronomous, enforced-from-outside, ethical rules for the autonomous responsibility of the moral self can lead to the incapacitation, even destruction, of the moral self" (Bauman, 1993, p. 12).

The problem facing the two mothers or any moral self is two-fold: assessing the situation and responding based on that assessment. In both steps, there is the likelihood of having one's judgment impaired through misapprehension or misconception. Hence the self as the caregiver is entangled in the difficulty of establishing a relationship with the other in a meaningful and constructive way. This creates a double bind because, as I said earlier, the degree to which the self is willing to relinquish part of its proverbial authority or retain it as an indispensable part of any caregiving situation. Thus, for Bauman (1993) "morality is incurably *aporetic*" (p. 11, emphasis in original). The *aporia* becomes particularly noticeable in caregiving situations where the complete implementation of the moral impulse requires the total commitment of "the moral actor" to seriously try "to stretch the effort to the limit" (p. 11). It is in this "context of ambivalence . . . shot through with uncertainty" that every "moral impulse . . . taken to its extreme leads . . . to domination and oppression" (p. 11). Pitfalls of moral responsibility become visible as we realize how care situations are volatile and can precipitate a crisis.

Disability and Care

My analysis would be incomplete if I did not investigate one possible reason behind the mothers' failure. Here I am specifically referring to a possible external factor that could have shaped the mothers' perspective. There is no denying that if the kids did not have a disability they would have been treated differently. Rather than seeing disability as an intrinsic factor, it is, as suggested in disability studies, an extrinsic element created part by ableist ideologies: "Disability is not just a bodily category, but instead and also a social category shaped by changing social factors—just as is able-bodiedness" (Nielsen, 2013, p. 12). It is argued that ableist views arise from a tendency to equate able-bodiedness with normalcy devaluing thus difference and abnormality (Campbell, 2009, p. 5). What follows from these statements is that disability is not a fixed and unchanging category but what is generated in a discursive and contextual way. The disabled are those who deviate from the same. The preponderance of the able-bodied is a determinant that throws the disabled into stark relief. The abnormal is seen as a problem only because of an intolerance of the deviant. "The seduction of sameness" (Campbell, 2009, p. 4) as Campbell puts it, might be responsible for the lapse in parental responsibility. The mothers in both stories either long for creating the illusion of normalcy or tap into cultural and social expectations to gloss over their child's disability. This results from a vision that considers normalcy as a fixed category not as relational and functional. Thus, what is to blame is a set of beliefs and values that permeate society and inculcate a worldview according to which normality is perennial and ineluctably given. Everyone raised within the parameter of such conceptual and cultural economy would tend to construe normalcy as a preexisting and stable condition while disability as secondary and deviant.

To clarify the point, let us look at both stories in light of the argument mentioned above. For instance, let us review the way Lucynell's mother

intended to marry off her daughter. To compensate for her child's domestic abilities, Lucynell's mother capitalizes on her innocence, docility and reticence as good virtues likely to be valued in a patriarchal society: "You want you an innocent woman, don't you? . . . One that can't talk," she continued, "can't sass you back or use foul language. That's the kind for you to have. Right there," and she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 151). This way of characterizing betrays a general tendency to see 'the different' as tractable and thus relationally acceptable. The desire for sameness cuts both ways: it can end in the marginalization of the other or its subsumption into the same. Both trends happen here. Despite Mr. Shiftlet's pretensions to be morally intelligent as reflected in his pontification about society being indifferent or not caring to take any trouble (p. 150), he leaves his bride high and dry. In doing so, he shows his moral depravity and duplicity by not upholding ethical values whose absence he diagnoses in society. By teaching the girl the word 'bird' he also confirms what was said earlier about the need to see disability contextually and relationally: "Lucynell's inability to speak is a social problem, not an individual's personal tragedy. Her muteness has at least as much to do with how society treats her as it does with what abilities she was born with or without" (Basselin, 2013, p. 61).

The penchant for masking deficiencies under the veneer of normalcy is overwhelmingly robust in Mrs. Whipples. It reaches the highest point concerning her son and grows into an obsession. She is obviously under tremendous pressure to maintain the semblance of normalcy at the cost of jeopardizing her son's well-being. Instead of improving her son's living conditions, she assigned him tasks which were pretty daring and risky just to prove he was a normal kid. Thus, she succumbs to the community's expectations of ordinary non-disabled kids. In her insistence on treating her child as a regular kid with concomitant capabilities, she betrays her being in a state of denial. Instead of accepting the reality about her kid, she deliberately turns a blind eye to the status quo, resorting to a policy that

aims to iron out the difficulty rather than address it. Both mothers' claim to maternal love seems to be sheer pretense which the more overblown the more self-deluding it becomes. The fact that neither mother ever attempted to improve their child's social and intellectual skills using an educational program or plan indicates their indifference to or acceptance of their child's situation. For example, in "He", Mrs. Whipples takes advantage of her child's physical strength aided by his unmindfulness to run household chores. He is not given any education to improve his cognitive and mental function. To conclude this section, I believe Pushkin's maxim summarizes both mothers' attitudes beautifully: "dearer to us the falsehood that exalts than hosts of baser truths" (as cited in Chekhov, 2006, p. 209).

Conclusion

The two short stories perfectly illustrate the difficulty of attaining the desired outcome in caregiving situations and fulfilling one's responsibility. The two mothers faced with the daunting task of providing care and protection for their children inadvertently bring harm to them. Deluded by their idea of protectiveness and care for their kids, they fail to see that their decisions are sometimes tainted by self-interest and are therefore self-serving. For example, Mrs. Whipples seems to be more concerned with keeping up appearances and maintaining a public impression of normality than being genuinely worried about the wellbeing of her son. Similarly, Mrs. Crater appears to be willing to marry her daughter off to any man in order to have some able-bodied person to see to the maintenance of the farm and the house. All in all, caregiving situations call for an unwavering vigilance on the caregiver's part to forestall any lapsing into complacency. At the same time, one needs to be able to distinguish the truth of the other's demand from one's interpretation of that truth. To what extent one is reading meaning into the other's demand or command is that which separates power from care.

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