

The Myths of Maternity – Editor’s Introduction

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Maternity is a concept as well as a practice. Interestingly, the concept (not to mention the practice) has been amply utilized in the history of philosophy even though it has often been undervalued and generally mischaracterized. The following happily found cluster of essays engaging with maternity, essays that were all received as open submissions and were accepted through our standard review process, offer explorations of both the concept and the practice of maternity as well as the connection between the two. They seek better ways in which to understand the meaning of the maternal in relation to philosophical fecundity, to rationality, and to the personal politics of reproducing human beings.

The first two essays take up currently contentious questions of maternal practice about which feminists can be found to be in conflict. Breastfeeding, as all expectant parents come to know, is a fraught ideological arena of debate. So much more than issues of health or workplace accommodation is involved in the culture-wide discussion occurring today about breastfeeding. In their essay “For Shame: Feminism, Breastfeeding Advocacy, and Maternal Shame,” Erin Taylor and Lora Ebert Wallace helpfully disentangle the elements of guilt and shame that are sometimes quite purposely elicited by advocates of the practice. They contest the emerging consensus among practitioners in the health field that it is wrong to use guilt to persuade new mothers to breastfeed, a consensus motivated by the argument that guilt is a tool of social regulation and thus of normalization. Against this, Taylor and Wallace point out that guilt is also a moral motivation for a variety of commendable duties. Of course, guilt in regard to breastfeeding should be shared with social environments of various sorts that prohibit the practice or make it extremely difficult. But guilt is not necessarily trauma-inducing, they argue. The more problematic issue for mothers, and for feminism, are the shaming practices that induce feelings of maternal and womanly failure.

Feminists have also been vociferously debating natural childbirth for several decades. Many feminists have voiced skepticism toward the natural childbirth movement for its romantic idealization of birth, a view that, like classical romanticism, assumes nature to be intrinsically good when properly divested of cultural distortions. Yet many feminists have also engaged in a critique of the excessive medical interventions in childbirth that reduce women’s agency. As Jane Clare Jones shows in her essay, “Idealized and Industrialized Labor: Anatomy of a Feminist Controversy,” although both of these forms of critique seem to be on the same page in criticizing culture-based interventions, they actually offer radically distinct portrayals of childbirth, one that places a high value on women’s autonomy and another that is skeptical toward the modern valuing of choice. Jones’s concern is that both critiques have confused ideas about the determinative role of culture in women’s childbirth experiences. In particular, the critics of the natural-childbirth movement have used an “all is culture” strategy against the “nature is best” argument, claiming that discourse determines experience all the way down. Neither view

plausibly represents the actual permeability and entanglement of nature and culture. An appreciation of this entanglement can yield new birthing norms, Jones argues, not in order to discipline mothers, or shame them once again, but to augment a more realistic resistance to current obstetric practices.

The tradition of psychoanalysis has taken up notorious positions toward mothers and mothering, making use of both guilt and shame, which has generated another lively feminist debate within psychoanalytically inclined feminism. This debate has concerned the sphere of the maternal in both its literal and its figurative senses, relevant to actual mothering practices as well as the way the maternal role is conceptualized in Western culture. Alison Stone's essay, "Against Matricide: Rethinking Subjectivity and the Maternal Body," examines the still-influential view that the mother-child bond represents a threat to individuation, maturation, and subject-formation. Stone explores this idea through its complicated representation in the work of Julia Kristeva. For Kristeva, the mother-child bond occurs in a context prior to language or symbolic communication, and therefore in order to enter society as a speaking subject the child must gain some distance from its mother. Stone argues that this account is based on an inadequate understanding of the nature of language. A more correct understanding would show that maternal forms of gestural and emotive communication make possible, rather than inhibit, the development of linguistic competence. While reconceptualizing and revaluing the realm of the maternal, Stone ultimately effects a move away from a gender-specific practice by arguing that parent-child relationships can have shared characteristics across gender differences.

The remaining two essays in this found cluster take up questions more centrally concerned with the mythos of the maternal in the history of philosophy. This includes not just the famous appropriation of maternal power in the idea of philosophy-as-midwife, but also the history of ideas about philosophy's capacity for regeneration and creation. Rachel Jones's essay, "Irigaray and Lyotard: Birth, Infancy, and Metaphysics," shows that elements of the classic mythos of maternity are still operative in contemporary philosophy. Philosophy continues to define itself in terms of a creative capacity to think beyond the confines of existing convention, yet this capacity is seen as somehow emerging out of nothingness, requiring both parricide (rejection of tradition) and matricide (denial of material encumbrances). Philosophical creativity is thus linked to transcendence. By contrast, actual bodies engaged in creative reproduction are always figuratively sequestered to the devalued realm of the particular, just as the love for actual living beings is negatively compared to the love of a transcendently conceptualized reason. This contrast is related to a long history of ideas about the contentious relationship between souls and bodies, wisdom and eros, philosophy and the realm of material reality. Jones's essay contrasts Irigaray and Lyotard on just these points, showing that Lyotard's attempt to critique Western metaphysics from within fails to challenge either its derogation of the material or the maternal.

The concept of the maternal is not only related to creativity and regeneration, but also to hospitality, or the capacity to welcome a stranger into one's home. The ability to be positively receptive toward an unknown Other is both practically and figuratively connected once again to a feminine disposition that has its most extreme manifestation in maternity. By linking maternity with hospitality, it is also possible to rethink maternity as an intentional receptivity, requiring active preparation rather than the passive or docile fecundity of an automatic response. Yet Irina Aristarkhova argues in her essay "Hospitality and the Maternal," that the newfound interest in practices of hospitality as a foundation for political culture among such philosophers as Derrida and Levinas continues to disavow it as a material practice and to fear its association with the feminine. Both Levinas and Derrida, however, offer a more robust account of hospitality than

does Kant, for whom a welcoming attitude toward strangers should be contingent on whether the strangers conform to preset standards of behavior. Aristarkhova suggests that thinking through the relation between hospitality and the maternal will illuminate both the nature and the value of a radical receptivity and shed light on numerous current conflicts over how we should configure social relations between hosts and guests of various sorts.

Although maternity continues to be a neglected area of philosophical work, these rich essays should help to reveal the important philosophical issues involved in the topic.