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*Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do:
The Ethics of Ambivalence* by Sarah LaChance Adams (review)

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Book Reviews

Sarah LaChance Adams, *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a “Good” Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence*, Columbia University Press, 2014

When a mother deliberately harms her child, it is tempting to assume that she must be either insane (a “mad mother”) or lacking the “natural” love of a mother for her children (a “bad mother”). We want to believe that such mothers have almost nothing in common with “good” mothers. Drawing extensively on empirical research, Sarah LaChance Adams’ *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What A “Good” Mother Would Do* shows that maternal ambivalence, simultaneous desires to nurture and violently reject one’s children, is both common and reasonable, the result of genuine conflicts between mothers’ interests and those of their children. Both appropriate support and deliberative agency are necessary to avoid maternal ambivalence finding its expression in filicide. As LaChance Adams shows, it is *because of* not *in spite of* these tensions that motherhood is an instructive case for ethics. When we appropriately reflect the lived experience of mothers, rather than relying on long standing stereotypes, we find a new paradigm for ethical relationships. This new paradigm reveals that we require an ethical theory that recognises human needs to care for, to be cared for, and to maintain independence.

The book begins with a notorious example of purposeful filicide: LaShanda Armstrong, who deliberately drove her minivan into the Hudson river with her four children inside. Armstrong and all but one of her children died. LaChance Adams argues that dismissing such cases of purposeful filicide as simply the actions of “mad mothers” or “bad mothers” oversimplifies both these tragedies and the character of maternal love in general. Most maternal filicides do not meet the legal requirements of insanity, but nor can they be simply categorised as bad mothers. Indeed, in many cases, mothers who kill their children see doing so as, in the circumstances, being a good mother (Meyer and Oberman 2001 89; LaChance Adams 2–4). In the first chapter of the book, LaChance Adams connects our inadequate understanding of maternal filicide to a widespread idealisation of the mother’s relationship to her child, which

takes a loving willingness to self-sacrifice as a given. She outlines the major flaws in philosophical treatment of motherhood and shows how her more nuanced account will build upon and improve the philosophies of care ethics, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir.

Chapter Two explores the mother as ethical exemplar as portrayed in care ethics. Care ethics challenges individualistic ways of understanding ethics, which start from a conception of human beings as autonomous, independent beings whose main duty to others is non-interference. As LaChance Adams notes, simply thinking about human reproduction undermines the individualistic picture: “We do not pop out of the ground like mushrooms, as Thomas Hobbes would have us imagine, but out of the womb of a woman. Without a mother, or someone acting as a mother, no human infant would survive for a day.” (18). Unsurprisingly, therefore the mother-child relationship is repeatedly used in care ethics as an ethical exemplar. However, LaChance Adams argues that care ethics focuses too much on the interdependence between mother and child and does not pay enough attention to ways in which the needs of mother and child might conflict. It ignores the mother’s need for individual flourishing. LaChance Adams argues that motherhood is most useful as an ethical exemplar when we recognise both the interdependence of mother and child and the ways in which their needs can conflict.

LaChance Adams argues that maternal experience reveals deep internal conflicts that are relevant to all human beings: “we have *simultaneous* needs to nurture, to be nurtured, and to maintain independence.” We are pulled between two selves: the self as independent and the self as “entangled in indissoluble bonds with others” (LaChance Adams 24). Traditional rights-based ethics and care ethics each recognise one, but only one, aspect of the human condition. To bring the two together, LaChance Adams argues, we need a third approach which: “will be aware of the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of our existence”, addressing the need for constant negotiation between interconnection and independence.

In Chapter 3, LaChance Adams provides her new, nuanced account of maternal experience. This account provides a foundation, not just for the ethics of ambivalence which LaChance Adams develops in further chapters, but for better philosophical engagement with motherhood more generally. It is in many ways, the keystone of the book. Earlier, LaChance Adams stresses the need for an interdisciplinary approach approach to studying motherhood, making use of all available perspectives (LaChance

Adams 23). This chapter provides a model for such an interdisciplinary approach: LaChance Adams weaves together first-person narratives, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, anthropology and history to show just how complex maternal experience can be. In her own words: “I . . . describe the experiences of women who are neither self-immolating saints nor pathological murderers. Their feelings about their children are mixed and varied – not just from woman to woman but within the selfsame woman. A loving mother can be mean, a giving mother can be selfish, a content mother can be filled with rage” (LaChance Adams 28). The phenomenon of maternal ambivalence revealed by LaChance Adams shows a deep love for one’s children co-existing with a wish to “reverse the fact of their child’s existence” (LaChance Adams 28).

The breadth of research discussed by LaChance Adams brings home how pervasive maternal ambivalence is. The evidence of maternal ambivalence spans cultures, classes, races, and historical time periods. This is not simply a 21st century phenomenon. Indeed, LaChance Adams claims that maternal ambivalence is the result of mother’s needs for both connection to and separation from their children, which is likely to be part of all mother-child relationships. Nonetheless, LaChance Adams is careful to recognise the relationship between maternal ambivalence and cultural or individual pressures and constraints: the precise situation in which a mother is trying to negotiate these conflicting desires can either support her endeavours or undermine them by exacerbating conflicts.

Maternal ambivalence can lead to tragic outcomes: dramatically, as in the murder-suicide with which the book opens, or mundanely, as when a mother simply resigns herself to her identity quietly slipping away. Nonetheless, we should not see maternal ambivalence simply as a problem. LaChance Adams argues that we should recognise it as “a psychological achievement” (64) with a “wisdom of [its] own” (70). “The acknowledgement of ambivalence makes possible [a] genuine discovery of relationship as it unfolds and sensitivity to the developmental needs of both mother and child”(65).

Ambivalence is particularly striking in the maternal case because of the child’s vulnerability, the high expectations of society and the bodily connection between mother and child. Its lessons are relevant much more widely. First, relationships in general require both intimacy and individuation: even in the most intimate relationships we cannot “overcome the insurmountable alerity of the other” (70). Second, the thinking about maternal ambivalence, and its relation to situation, shows

the need to both embrace our responsibilities to the defenceless and to provide caregivers with opportunities for independence – and that this must be the responsibility of both individuals and society as a whole (71). Third, recognising the possibility of failure to help others is a critical part of an ethical orientation in both the maternal case and more generally (71).

The next three chapters engage with Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir in turn. Existential phenomenology provides a deeper exploration of the idea, already recognised by care ethics, that from the beginning of experience, I understand myself in relation to others. It recognises both the way that our relationships to others pervade us to the core and the chasm between self and other. LaChance Adams shows how this aspect of existential phenomenology allows the work of each of these three philosophers to provide elements that are missing in care ethics' approach to motherhood – while also identifying the ways in which a more nuanced account of maternal experience may have helped the existential phenomenologists. The structure of this section of the book is progressive: each philosopher is shown to contribute something that their predecessor missed, moving towards a more robust account of maternal experience and the ethics of ambivalence.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas uses pregnancy and motherhood as the image of all ethical relations. For Levinas, to be an ethical being is to be summoned to give despite oneself, without having chosen to give (Levinas 105). Indeed, on his view, this ethical responsibility is the true foundation of the self. Until we are compelled to face our responsibility to others, we do not become ethical subjects (Levinas 1998 114). The demands of the other interrupt our enjoyment and self-creation (Levinas 1998 72–72), enabling us to forge a new identity. Although our relationships with others are central to our self-identity, there is a gulf between the self and the other that cannot be overcome. This 'radical alterity' is a central concern of *Totality and Infinity*. LaChance Adams draws on the personal accounts of mothers to show that maternal experience does indeed reflect this kind of ambiguous intersubjectivity: unchosen compulsion to care for another coupled with awareness of the other *as* other.

Nonetheless, LaChance Adams argues that there are serious problems with Levinas's account of maternity. "Unfortunately, Levinas appropriates the maternal perspective without consideration of the experience for actual women" (LaChance Adams 108). Levinas' solution to conflicts of interest is to yield to the other, to be like the mythical mother who is infinitely compassionate. Levinas does not recognise that infinite demands deplete

us, undermining our ability to respond to others (LaChance Adams 101). Even if we see this as simply an ideal for mothers to aspire to, this still lets mothers down: “When mothers think they should be able to give to their children infinitely and are unable to do so (as no human could), they feel guilty, angry worthless, ashamed, depressed and fearful of the judgment of others . . . What is more helpful to women is an accurate understanding of their own experiences; for this, the maternal icon must be dethroned.” (LaChance Adams 102).

LaChance Adams turns to Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir to provide what Levinas is missing: “a more careful logic of ambiguous intersubjectivity, an understanding of how asymmetrical relations can nevertheless be balanced, the factor of social context and support, and, finally, a better idea of how ethical failure relates to ethical success” (LaChance Adams 108).

LaChance Adams argues that Merleau-Ponty provides the best characterisation of the ambiguity of our relations with others, enabling us to recognise our fundamental interconnections with others and our separation from others as two sides of the same phenomenon (153). LaChance’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty is rich, with many overlapping themes. I will only give a brief outline here. The understanding of maternity as a case of “dehiscence in the flesh” plays a key role. “The flesh” is Merleau-Ponty’s term for the continuity between the self, other and world (Merleau-Ponty 1968 123). According to Merleau-Ponty, we each perceive a prereflective coherence between ourselves and others: prior to reflection, we do not distinguish between ourselves and our perceptions. This continuity extends to others as well. We meet others as fellow sentient beings in a public world that we hold in common. (LaChance Adams 112) Nonetheless, inherent to the very idea of the flesh is a gap or dehiscence: “We both encounter the world through smell, taste, vision and thoughts. She sleeps she dreams, and wakes up, just as I do. Yet, there is always something of her that I cannot reach.” (LaChance Adams, 120). Pregnancy and motherhood in general bring this apparently paradoxical simultaneous interconnection and separateness “into relief” (LaChance Adams, 120). However, it applies much more widely, to all our connections with others. LaChance Adams argues that to fully understand Merleau-Ponty’s conception of human relations, and how he can see these two seemingly contradictory aspects of human relations as “two moments of *one* phenomenon – ambiguous intersubjectivity”, we must explore his use of Hegel’s immanent logic of human experience to (LaChance Adams 140).

In the fifth chapter, LaChance Adams explores Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood and how it supports, and can be further supported by, the interdisciplinary work on maternal ambivalence. She argues, "Beauvoir's characterisation of the mother-child relationship is a vivid, and at times raw, example of her philosophy of intersubjective ambiguity. Beauvoir realises that mothers often find themselves in violent opposition to their children, whose wellbeing is also essential to them" (LaChance Adams 170). Nonetheless, Beauvoir is sometimes optimistic about motherhood: it is a possible venue for transcendence (Beauvoir 1949 55) and enriching (Beauvoir 2010 554). Many of her negative evaluations of motherhood are best understood in the light of her emphasis on situation. Having children threatens a women's wellbeing because of the oppressive circumstances in which mothers find themselves: the combination of the dependency of their children and the cultural belief that women are naturally solely responsible for them (LaChance Adams 174, 178, 183). "In a properly organised society where the child would in great part be taken care of by the group, where the mother would be cared for and helped, motherhood would absolutely not be incompatible with woman's work." (Beauvoir 2010 569).

In her exploration of Beauvoir's work, as in earlier chapters, LaChance Adams displays maternity as both unique and an exemplar for human life in general (LaChance Adams 158). On Beauvoir's account, we must all face the possibility of ethical failure: our own freedom depends on the wellbeing of others, but conflict – and thus failure to fulfil everyone's needs – is inevitable. Because the mother, more than anyone else, is expected to provide complete care for her children, this ethical failure is a constant threat to her. The ethical 'failure' can be positive: "the ongoing struggle to meet the conflicting, yet interdependent, needs for care and freedom of both the self and the other- can contribute to both their flourishing" (LaChance Adams 171). It can help the mother to form an identity of authentic ambiguity (LaChance Adams 185), in touch with a central truth of the human condition (LaChance Adams 186). Indeed, Beauvoir sees failure as a necessary condition for ethics (LaChance Adams 185). Nonetheless, it can also be tragic. Sometimes, the needs of everyone cannot be met (LaChance Adams 171) and we must face the real pain of sacrificing the freedom or care of one for another (LaChance Adams 158, 174–176).

In the final chapter, LaChance sums up her proposed ethics of ambivalence. Our relations to others combine insurmountable conflicts and deep connections that are necessary for our own freedom and identity.

This combination makes both ethical failure, and ethics itself, possible. These conflicts require active negotiation: the ethical subject needs to use deliberative agency to balance her own needs and those of the other – noting that each needs both connection and freedom. Sometimes, not all needs can be met. Sometimes, we must deny others even what is needed for life itself. “Love, even maternal love, does not conquer all” (LaChance Adams 151).

Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What A “Good” Mother Would Do has important lessons for both philosophers and for wider society. As a society, we must debunk the myths of maternal self-sacrifice and recognise both the reality of maternal ambivalence and our collective responsibility for the lives of children. Philosophers must engage properly with the realities of mothers’ lives. Rather than drawing on idealisations or shallow stereotypes, they must take seriously the complexity of motherhood. In doing so, they can *both* help to improve the way society understands and treats mothers *and* gain access to a rich philosophical resource for understanding our ethical life.

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