

The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero¹

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This paper was initially written in response to Adriana Cavarero's talk at the *Mother Trouble* conference in May 2009. Cavarero's recent work aims to raise discussion of maternal care to an ontological level, departing from its usual treatment as a matter of ethics. In a spirit of sympathetic engagement, I would like to raise four main questions about Cavarero's approach to the maternal as she has developed it in this talk and her work more broadly. My questions concern: Cavarero's relation to Arendt; her concentration on the male rather than female child; the distinction between birth and care-giving; and maternal ambivalence.

My first question is how far Cavarero is faithful to Hannah Arendt in thinking of the human condition in terms of natality (as Cavarero does across much of her work, from *In Spite of Plato* (1995) onwards). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that 'men are equipped for... making a new beginning' – performing new actions, through which they reveal themselves as unique individuals – 'because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners' (1958, p. 211). Arendt also refers to the 'bare reality of our original *physical* appearing'. Arendt recognises that we appear in the world as specifically embodied beings, which is the condition of our being able to perform new actions, to appear in our uniqueness to others in and through our bodies.

However, Arendt does not make the further specification that Cavarero does: that appearing is coming into the shared world from out of the mother's birth canal. Arendt never says that 'beginning' is being born *of* or *from* someone, one's mother, and neither does she define beginning as being *given* existence by one's mother. This omission is connected to the division that Arendt constructs in *The Human Condition* – taking her ontological categories from the patriarchal social world of classical Greece – between physical reproduction carried out at home *versus* natality and appearance before others in the polis. Arendt thus splits birth from natality across a series of oppositions – necessity / freedom, reproduction-as-labour / action, sameness / difference, repetition / novelty,

private / public. Cavarero re-unites these dimensions by reconceiving natality as the human condition of appearing in the world *through* physical birth from one's mother's body. This is not to say that Cavarero understands birth in narrowly biological terms. In re-uniting the ontological and the corporeal, she reconceives birth as having existential significance, as the event through which existents who are in each case unique appear in the shared world amongst a plurality of others. This is important and insightful. But, I would suggest, it is Cavarero's view rather than Arendt's, and arises from a transformative and not strictly faithful reading of Arendt.

Secondly, turning to Cavarero's conference talk more specifically, she reads Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* as disclosing the vulnerability of the child in the face of the mother, a vulnerability that belongs primarily to the male Christ-child. (For the painting see:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Virgin_and_Child_with_St._Anne_\(Leonardo_da_Vinci\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Virgin_and_Child_with_St._Anne_(Leonardo_da_Vinci))). Cavarero stated in her talk that 'the child in question is a son and not a daughter' and that 'we are actually observing a scene where the child is a male: Jesus'. However, she clarified that, although the infant's vulnerability is dramatised here in the case of a male child, ontologically this vulnerability is shared by all infants: boys and girls (and intersexed) alike. The fact that the infant depicted is male, she thus suggests, is inessential to the ontology of infant vulnerability. But, of course, the infant's maleness *is* essential to the Western aesthetic-religious tradition to which da Vinci belongs, in which the infant is paradigmatically a (divine) son and the mother is always mother of the son, never the daughter.

I am unhappy with a reading of infant vulnerability that has roots in this patriarchal tradition. However, we can re-read Leonardo's painting in a way that challenges the tradition's exclusive orientation towards mothers of sons. In his 1910 essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud pointed out that there are two mothers in the painting (1985, p. 205-7). Reciprocally, there are two *children* in the scene – not only Jesus but also Mary. Mary is in her mother's lap (indeed, she completely fills it). Although now an adult and mother herself, Mary comes to her adulthood and mothering from having been a vulnerable infant cared for by her mother Anne – a vulnerable child that, psychically, Mary will always in part remain. Mary has grown to occupy a space delimited by the body of her own mother. Thus the painting shows us that Mary as mother – any mother – is always also the daughter of her own mother. As such, a mother can never be

Alison Stone,
The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero

exclusively inclined towards her infant, never caught up in an immediate one-to-one relation with that infant. Psychically, the mother is inescapably in a triangular relation, held between her infant and her own mother (Stern 1995), insofar as her own relation to her infant both recapitulates and differs from her past relation to her own mother. Only *as* a daughter, held in her mother's lap, can Mary be a mother. To include the mother's mother, we need to reconceive the mother-infant relation as triadic, triangulated (psychically, not necessarily empirically) between mother, child, and mother's mother.

Thirdly, and returning to Cavarero's work generally, I am concerned that she may run together *birth* – which until now has necessarily been of a mother as female – with *care* – which need not be given by mothers or women. Of course, a pervasive assumption in many social contexts is that the women who bear children must nurture them. But Cavarero knits birth and care together in a unique, philosophical, way. She does so by suggesting that in and from birth, the infant is exposed to others in the world through his or her primary exposure to the mother, on whom the child radically, asymmetrically, depends. Corresponding to this exposure, the mother is inclined toward the vulnerable infant – inclined towards (but also away from) care. Certainly we must always be born of a woman. But must it be that same woman who cares for us in our infancy? Must this care be given by a woman or parent at all? Has Cavarero inadvertently elevated contingent social facts to ontological status?

At this point Cavarero's thought reflects a broader tension between two feminist goals: revaluing mothering and motherhood, and questioning the gender division of labour. If we re-emphasise the ethical or (in Cavarero's case) ontological importance of the mother, then this tends to reinforce the mother's socially assigned position as principal childcarer. Conversely, if we question that position and seek to subvert and undermine the gender division of childcaring labour, then this tends to conceal the specificities of maternal experience and to render the figure of the mother once again invisible. I offer no solution, merely suggest that it is important that we remain aware of this tension as we negotiate it.

My fourth and final theme is maternal ambivalence. For Cavarero, the mother's inclination is ambiguous. She inherently has the possibility of turning away from her vulnerable child, rejecting his or her call for care. Just because it calls for response, the call brings with it a choice about whether and how to take it up, whether and how to respond, so that there is no necessity that the mother respond to the call with care.

Alison Stone,
The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero

Maternal rejection and turning-away are *ordinary* possibilities – Cavarero’s word (in her conference talk). They are ordinary possibilities because they are rooted in the inherent structure of infant vulnerability and maternal inclination: they are normal, grounded in the human condition, not anomalous or deviant. The mother *always* has the possibility of wounding as well as caring, leaning towards or turning her back. The infant’s call opens up these two possible directions of response, neither of which can become available without the other. As such, ambivalence seems to be ontologically constitutive of the maternal position – and this gives us the basis of a welcome non-moralistic approach to maternal ambivalence.

However, as Cavarero argues in her recent book *Horrorism*, ‘The Crime of Medea’ that if the mother actually does turn away and reject her infant, then she commits ‘evil’ and she ‘denies the human condition’ in which we are born in utter dependence and vulnerability. Medea is Cavarero’s paradigm of this evil, ‘the absolute icon of female violence’ (2009, p. 101). The *possibility* of turning away may be ordinary, but for Cavarero turning away itself – deciding in favour of this possibility by *actually* turning away – is condemned as a violation of the human condition. If the possibility of ambivalence is built into the maternal position, actual ambivalence is not: the mother’s task is to take the path of care even though the path of rejection is always available too. Presumably part of Cavarero’s motivation for making these claims concerns the nature of response and responsibility. Insofar as the other’s call makes us responsible, *able to respond* – enabling our response rather than setting off a merely automatic or instinctual reaction – that call must open up to us the possibility of refusing it.

In sum, Cavarero closes down the helpful approach that she had opened up by once again telling mothers who experience ambivalence – and that is, to some degree, all mothers – that they are in the wrong. Perhaps her point is that it is normal for mothers to feel some ambivalence, but that they should not act upon it. And certainly there are different levels and kinds of ambivalence. For most mothers, though, ambivalence – or more precisely the hateful side of ambivalence as the polar conjunction of love and hate (Parker 2005, p. 7) – covers a spectrum of emotions and reactions of routine anger, frustration, despair, impatience, retaliation, envy, dissatisfaction, boredom and so on. Regarding this ‘ordinary’ ambivalence, I want to question the idea that mothers should (or even can) refrain from acting upon it.

Alison Stone,
The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero

The expression of ambivalence can have beneficial effects on children. Some expression of maternal anger and frustration can help children to become responsible; to learn that not all their demands can reasonably be met; to learn to show care and empathy for others; and to appreciate the mother's independent existence as a real other with emotions of her own. As Renata Salecl remarks, 'a mother's ambivalent attitude paradoxically opens space for children to distance themselves from the mother and thus acquire [a] certain "freedom"' (2004, p. 118). Some expression of felt anger is of relief to mothers, and can take mediated, symbolic form – as in nursery rhymes: 'When the bough breaks the cradle will fall/ Down will come baby, cradle and all' (Winnicott 1958). The experience of ambivalent feelings cannot be easily divorced from acting upon them. Because the work of childcare is in large part that of relating to children, interacting affectively with them, ambivalent feelings cannot but find some expression in mothers' modes of relating – variously in their being relatively distant, irritable, didactic, strict, impatient and so on.

So I am not convinced that mothers can or should reject the path of turning away. If mothers inherently have two pathways of response to the child's call, then it violates their own structural position as mothers never to take the pathway of rejection. This will call for an endless, enormous effort of self-repression and self-censorship. If the ambiguity of inclination is ordinary, then it is important that mothers feel and give some level of expression to their ambivalence – in the name of affirming the human condition, which encompasses not only the child's vulnerability but *also* our (mothers') own dual possibility of response.

Perhaps, from this perspective, we can re-read *Medea*. After all, Medea as Euripides portrays her loves her children dearly and passionately, as she used to love their father Jason (who has abandoned her and taken a new wife).² She does not reject or turn away from them, even when she murders them. Rather, psyching herself up to kill them, she tells herself: '... Just for/ this one short day be forgetful of your children,/ Afterward weep; for even though you will kill them,/ They were very dear' (Euripides 1955, p. 101, li 1247-10). How then are we to understand Medea's murderous act?

According to the feminist classicist Helen Foley, statements such as the above indicate that Medea is divided within herself. She is divided between her caring maternal self and her attachment to norms of masculine heroism. Ultimately the former gives way and the latter wins out: Medea cannot 'heed her own maternal voice' (Foley 2001, p.

Alison Stone,
The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero

268). On this reading, Medea as mother is inherently inclined to care, but the patriarchal warrior code that she has internalised silences her maternal voice. The disadvantage of this reading is that it denies ordinary ambivalence by suggesting that Medea is not ambivalent at all *as* a mother but only because she refuses to let herself *be* a mother. So I want to suggest an alternative reading in which Medea kills as a mother, but a mother who – because she cares for her children – insists that their father Jason must also assume his responsibilities for them.

Euripides portrays Medea as driven to kill her children not out of hatred for them but to take revenge on Jason who has abandoned her and them. Medea kills her children, violating her own feelings of care, so as to communicate to Jason that this is effectively what *he* is doing to his children – consigning them to (legal, social) non-existence – by taking his new wife. After murdering them, she tells Jason: ‘They died from a disease they caught from their father... The gods know who was the author [the *true* author] of this sorrow’ (1955, p. 105-6, li 1364, 1372). Medea kills her children to convey to Jason that it is he who does not love them as he ought, although he professes to do so – whereas she, although the murderer of her children, actually *does* love them and so cannot endure Jason’s treatment of them (‘[Jason:] Oh, children I loved!/ [Medea] I loved them, you did not’; p. 107, li 1397). Medea’s maternal feelings *motivate* her to kill her children, because she knows that without Jason her children have no protection or standing in life. She wants to spare them the second-class status that awaits them.

Not that I would leave in a country that hates me/ Children of mine to feel their enemies’ insults... My children, there is none who can give them safety... I shall have done a dreadful deed. For it is not bearable to be mocked by enemies. (p. 86, li 781-2, 793, 796-7)

She loves them too much to allow this fate to befall them: ‘I wish you happiness, but not here in this world./ What is here your father took’ (p. 95, li 1073-4). If this ethic is heroic, nonetheless it is driven by passionate maternal love. Medea kills because she cares, not because she turns her back on care. *Because* she cares, she wants others – notably Jason, the father – to share in the caring work so that it can be done better.

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Alison Stone,
The ontology of the maternal: A response to Adriana Cavarero

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² Early in the play *Medea* is described as having ‘turned from the children’ (Euripides 1955, p. 60, li 36), and she ‘hates’ and ‘curses’ them (because of their now-hateful father Jason; p. 63, li 112-3). Subsequently, though, she never ceases to express deep love for her children. Perhaps Euripides is indicating that *Medea*’s love for her children is ambivalent, but that this ambivalence is incorporated into her love and is not the motivation for her to murder the children.