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第 2 章 Limitations on childcare due to the ideologies of motherhood and An Ettingerian Turn

Valerie Oved Giovanini

1. Motivation and Goal

At the age of 38 I had my first child with a partner who was 10 years my senior. It has been fascinating to find that I could unknowingly adapt to a whole new set of ideals, values, and moral imperatives in my new role as mother despite the restrictions they place on the autonomy of my choices. As a phenomenologist of ethics and moral values, I am curious about how much of my experience and values are shaped by unthought social expectations and norms. Amy Mullin's work helps to understand what is involved in the ideology of motherhood and suggests philosophical challenges to its essentializing assumptions. A discussion of these challenges provides for me the prism through which to look at maternal work as non-gendered and to see caretaking tasks as some that are often spread across diverse persons. Simon de Beauvoir will then orient us to consider an individual's characteristics to evaluate one's ability to engage in "mothering" tasks before I turn inward to Bracha Ettinger asexual matrixial borderspace. Relationality developed through the matrixial borderspace illuminates a psychic space available to any subject who is born from a womb imbued with the ethical capacity to take care of another, despite their sex or gender. Along with Mullin's challenge to the essentialized assumptions in the ideology of motherhood, my goal is to similarly show that the capacity for caretaking extends beyond the female body and mothers who are deemed naturally more capable under the essentialist assumptions of the ideology.¹

2. The Ideology of Motherhood: philosophical and social challenges

Though the word ideology originally referred to the science of ideas, the logic or system of ideas, it became widely known by Karl Marx who referred in *The German Ideology* (1846) to a system of ideas through which the world is interpreted, mostly ideas stemming from one's material conditions and economic class. Later

¹ This paper is the product of my participation in a group of scholars working on phenomenologies of childcare. The ideas developed here are still a work in progress.

considered by political philosopher D.D. Raphael, ideology in its prescriptive sense cannot be supported by rational argument since the matter of the world does not in itself include valuative judgements (1970). If we are to think about the ideologies of motherhood, there is a long discourse about what ideas and values are attributed to a birthing body. In other words, what do the cultural system of ideas and values on the ideology of motherhood attribute and ascribe to female bodies? Is motherhood a source of women's strength, as Annette Baier and Virginia Held argue? Is a mother's time, work, and energy always assumed in the privacy of a household and so limit opportunities for creative growth that don't involve child-rearing, as Shulamith Firestone and Jeffner Allen find? Must it always remain free labor when conducted in the private sphere of the household, as Claudia Card asks? Are the skills necessary for caretaking better intuited in one sex or gender than in another? Is the ability for maternal care only available to those who can biologically reproduce as essentialist feminism assumes, or are there universal conditions from which any can engage these skills and thought processes? Can these assumptions be shifted, if at all? In *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience and Reproductive Labor* (2005)(RPC), Amy Mullen presents the fruitful discourse on ideologies of motherhood, and challenges its assumption of essential motherhood. In a passage that packs a lot of punch, Mullin characterizes:

“...the ideology of motherhood as committed to a view in which mothers meet all the emotional needs of their young children, care for their bodies, and keep them safe, while fathers provide the material resources required for this mothering work. Neither mothers nor children are expected to have significant disabilities. Mothering work is meant to occur chiefly in private homes, and whenever children enter into more public domains, mothers are expected to continue not only to keep children safe but also to ensure that children do not make significant demands on any other adults” (RPC 7).

Privatized motherhood, intensive motherhood, exclusive motherhood, essential motherhood, or what is broadly called the ideology of motherhood assumes that the mothering parent is more biologically connected to a child. As such, from this material condition she is morally capable to meet all their emotional needs, and instinctively knows what is best for their physical wellbeing. Motherhood is taken as a natural, inevitable, and instinctive ability. More than just stating what is biologically the case for women, the ideology dictates what women should do in a moral imperative: through her natural capacity for empathy and self-sacrifice she must pay attention exclusively and selflessly to the care of children in the household and in public, especially during their younger years of dependency.

Also common to these ideologies, the mother who is in a heterosexual relationship is assumed to be in a biological relation to the child, married to, and financially dependent on the husband. Mothering work assumes that the mother is able-bodied and works chiefly in the private home where all the child's physical and emotional needs are met. If she lingers too long in physical or emotional pain, experiences of guilt and shame are produced (Polshchuk, 2021). Furthermore, mothers who cannot or do not want to meet these expectations are considered flawed. Put succinctly by Mullin, “mothers are taught to be sufficient for the happiness of their young children, and young children are thought to be sufficient for the happiness of their mothers” (RPC 121). These descriptions

for what a mother is naturally capable of doing, and how her life can be fulfilled through children can feel quite constraining in an era that challenges essentialist categories, and is especially interesting for moral phenomenologists who look to varied life-world experiences to see how “essences” are constituted through them.

To challenge the essentialist assumptions in the ideology of motherhood about a woman’s exclusive and natural ability to care for a child, first I look to certain communities to see how mothering work in the life-world is more often distributed across the community and to diverse populations, rather than reserved solely for the biological mother. Another challenge to the essentialist assumptions in the ideology of motherhood I will briefly discuss is how the work can be understood as a set of genderless tasks for which an individual is deemed more or less capable, rather than based on their sex. To address the female bodily specificity that is seen to better nurture their young, in the final section of the paper, I will challenge the ideology in a turn to Bracha Ettinger’s formulation of matrixial borderspace. Anyone borne of a womb has the potential to develop skills for caretaking usually attributed to women. Rather than make the argument as Simone de Beauvoir and other liberatory forms of feminism do that the female sex can find purpose outside the household, my goal is to find the relational and ethical kernel in subjectivity as such, so that men can feel secure in the tasks of caretaking. The goal is not to remove the importance of a mother’s “maternal insights,” but to say that with the right attention and development of these skills, other genders can value more and feel less shamed for engaging in caretaking.

The prevalence of the ideology of motherhood is staggering and not under dispute. Mullin cites numerous empirical- sociological studies that show the pervasiveness of this ideology, such as public-policies around childcare, studies of the experience of caretakers and their employers, to various representations of mothers in media (RPC 121), but more importantly she also presents philosophical challenges to the ideology. To philosophically challenge the ideology of essential motherhood, Mullin describes reproductive labor as a social practice that is not known through a women’s nature or instincts. Rather, in practical life what is considered mothering work is distributed across many caretakers and to diverse populations (RPC 121, 132). The distribution of caretaking work to others outside the private home, or others outside the biological relation between mother and child supports the view that she is not solely capable to care for her young. Lower economic-classes challenge the ideology and reveal its false and dangerous assumptions, such as working mothers who are aware of the impossible expectations demanded from mothers. They see paid work and child rearing as complimentary tasks, rather than as a choice to be made between raising a child or earn a living. Inevitably the workload must be distributed across members of the community to show up for work, while having a child’s needs met. Working mothers have had to decipher who is best capable to help in this work. Disabled mothers who rely on a collective approach to fulfill a child’s needs also experience the challenge they pose to essentialist assumptions made about what a caretaker looks like (RPC 136). Anytime deeply nurturing relations are shown across gender, sexual orientation, or between those who are not biologically related to the child the ideology is challenged (RPC 128).

In fact, a diverse range of people participate in childcare, which leads Mullen to ask who maternal thinkers can be if they are not limited to a biological mother. They are multifaceted and as diverse as the childcare

providers that assist in her work. Mullin takes a survey of those who engage this kind of thinking and finds that “maternal” thinkers are a range of diverse persons. Quotations around the word mothering intends to put in question the role of essence that a biological mother has in the mother-child relationship. In addition to the embodied experiences of caretakers who work with others and so reside in the margins of the ideological narrative, Mullin challenges the essentialist assumptions in caretaking by describing the work as a set of genderless skills that desire specific outcomes. Individual persons are better or worse suited for these tasks regardless of sex or gender. As outlined by Sara Ruddick (1989), mothering work is a discipline all its own. Rather than being naturally endowed with these skills, they require development of intellectual and emotional capacities using reason and logic, the need to make judgements, such as calculating threats to the child, to understand hunger cues, to ask questions and formulate adequate responses that foster a child’s physical, intellectual, and emotional development (RPC 123).

These skills that Ruddick emphasizes in caretaking challenge the view of an intellect that is in control and holds mastery over every situation, as advocated by moral norms applied to the thinking and moral “man” in Western philosophy. Maternal thinking does require a set of intellectual demands that women are more often nurtured to possess, such as openness to changing situations, tolerating ambiguity, relishing in complexity and multi-tasking, as well as the use of story-telling to help develop a coherent sense of self.² The diversity in intellectual and emotional skills, while expected of the mothering population, leads Mullen to question the *maternal* in maternal thinking, and I want to continue to question whether childcare is exclusively tied to the mother, a mother, or to a female body and suggest that the originating site of relational and ethical subjectivity can open the skillset to others.

Though many attribute these capacities to a natural endowment, such as describing themselves as “maternal by nature,” different people may fill these roles better than others. A survey of these skills as well as who can perform them serves us in two ways: on the one hand we can begin to have a realistic view that first, there is a set of unique skills that meet the needs of children. Additionally, a realistic view of this work and who can carry it out opens the role to those who fall outside the paradigm set up by the ideology of motherhood, such as individual men, adoptive parents, or people who don’t conform to heteronormative standards. We may also start to relieve certain mothers of this work when they as individuals are not particularly good at these skills. To keep this role as a woman’s “motherlike” nature on the one hand prevents her from developing other employable skills since her fulfillment *should be* found in the house. There she is neither financially compensated, nor does she become competitive where she would make a living wage. Additionally, the attribution that this skill is a natural endowment sets mothers up, “for exploitation by governments or other employers, since good mothers love children naturally and care for those children whether or not they are compensated for their work” (RPC

² More on nurturing females who develop these skills necessary for caretaking and so seem naturally more capable will be discussed in the section on Ettinger. She explains that while relationality in the womb is a grounding experience for subjectivity as such, the future potential for a female subject to give birth places the primacy of relationality in the male subject’s past, but significant for the future potential of female specificity (MB 142). The relational space of the womb is therefore not excluded from male subjectivity but requires careful attunement to the differences she develops in caretaking.

125). Those who provide childcare, those who receive it, and its distribution across sexes, social classes, and ethnicities illuminates the reality that this work is multifaceted. Unfortunately, a mother's shame associated with outsourcing maternal labor or for men who work in caretaking fields, and the scarcity in public resources available for childcare due to the limits placed by the ideology marginalize these populations (RPC 136-140). Simone de Beauvoir may be instructive on how to move these multifaceted populations out of the margins and broaden interest in these tasks. An individual's particularities and personal situation should be emphasized for their caretaking ability, rather than to be assumed to fit a role because of their sexed or gendered nature.

Equality among mothers or parents is not the argument here but rather the need and ability to meet each person in their specificity should instruct a social structure for caretaking. The experience of caretaker is not homogenous, just like the person who carries them out is not homogenous to one gender or sex. At the end of Beauvoir's chapter in *The Second Sex*, "Situation: *The Mother*," she writes that to avoid a meager existence and relation between mother and child she needs to establish her own existence. The birthing parent does not wish to be generalized as a mother, a wife, a woman, but wants to be *this* mother, *this* wife, *this* woman, *this* person and "that is the satisfaction she will seek in social life" (TSS 527). An assessment of character should be carried out, rather than a blanket assumption that her body is fit for the job. A system for childcare that would like to reduce mortality rates in mothers and infants, for example, would need to assess her personal education level for caretaking, their access to preventative care like abortion treatments, and to pay attention to the person's specific experiences of childhood. Beauvoir is criticized for giving too much credit to the conscious moral action taken by women as a way for them to achieve liberation. Many women become mothers not by choice, but due to socio-economic influences like an inability to access preventative healthcare. Jacques Derrida's (1994) hauntology is instructive on ways to listen to psychoanalytic clues about a woman, mother, or an individual's ability to care for another. The ways in which each has been cared for as a child will emerge when the time comes to take care of another. To consider the diversity in character of a woman who is thrown into the task of motherhood is to ask whether there are any lingering repressed traumas that may prevent her robust relation to the child. To Beauvoir's credit, however, these assessments can shed light on the diversity of mothers in their situation and the possibility of their success as a caretaker. As individual persons, it can be asked which of the parents would be the better primary caretaker.

With the help of Mullin's work on the ideology of motherhood, we've considered social challenges found in practices such as working or disabled mothers who distribute the work of caretaking to others in the community. We've also managed to see the work of caretaking as a list of genderless intellectual capacities to carry out, and to be assessed by the character of an individual rather than a blanket endorsement by one's gender. Beauvoir further points to the moral leap inscribed in the female body by this ideology. She writes that motherhood cannot be a natural endowment since "nature can never dictate a moral choice; this implies an engagement, a promise to be carried out" (TSS 522). A moral choice and obligation for care is not guaranteed to be carried in one type of biological body or another, but in the attitudes and choices taken by an individual.

How the responsibilities entailed in the care of another will be carried out is an individual matter, rather than a biological one.

Another approach to challenge the essentialist assumptions in the ideology of motherhood is to move from the social to the psychic interior space of subjectivity and explore whether there is an ontological ground for relationality and caretaking. In other words, are the intellectual skills required in “mothering tasks,” especially those that require fragmented attention, available to any sex and gender? I’d like to turn to Bracha Ettinger’s feminist critique of psychoanalysis and her phenomenological analysis of a nongendered matrixial space that is the seed of an ethical trans- and intersubjectivity. Her development of terms such as empathy in compassion, matrixial borderspace, metamorphosis, sub-non-conscious and the archaic woman-m/Other supply anyone born of the womb-space a paradigm based in “mothering relations,” but which are not restricted or exclusive to mothers, women, or female bodies. Given Mullen’s description of motherhood as a set of tasks, Ettinger’s matrixial paradigm can invoke a new approach to caretaking that with sufficient attention and care will open to anyone.

3. Bracha Ettinger’s *Matrixial Borderspace*

Where do we go if we want to challenge an ideology that connects the biology of a woman to the caretaking of a child? Of course, the stronger claim is made in the ideology that more than her being sufficient for the physical, emotional, and intelligent flourishing of a child, the child is sufficient for the wellbeing and purpose of her life. More than the physical fact that her body and person is sufficient for the child is that this is what she *should* do during her life for fulfillment. As Mullin points out, more than a descriptive claim is made in the ideology of motherhood. A prescriptive, moral claim is made about what she *should* do. Rather than argue that she can find fulfillment and purpose in a life unrelated to childcare, as Beauvoir and the liberal work-model have done, I’d like to argue that any sexed and gendered body can find fulfillment and purpose in the skills required for childcare or caretaking. To challenge the essentialist assumptions of the ideology, Mullin looks at social conditions that spread caretaking across many people. Due to culturally enforced shame, these shared tasks, however, mostly fall to other women in the community such as grandmothers and aunts. The gendered problem in caretaking is not resolved, only dissolved from one woman to many in the challenge social cooperation poses to the ideology of motherhood. I would like to turn inward to the intra- and interpsychic makeup of subjectivity that is always already born from another. As an embodied universal condition from which every subject emerges, the pre-natal relation is a condition that is prior to the development of an idea of death. We can turn to the internal psychic makeup with Bracha Ettinger’s feminist critique of psychoanalysis and her phenomenological development of the matrixial borderspace as a prenatal openness to challenge essentialist assumptions in the ideology of motherhood.

Bracha Ettinger has developed a language across her work, and especially in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006) to find how the prenatal relation is the very condition for subjectivity.³ There is a persuasive argument in the claim that the embodied experience of interconnectivity at the origin of life can hold a strong sway over the development of meaning in our lives, more than the idea of our death as thinkers from Socrates to Epicurus, and Martin Heidegger have argued. Ettinger's idea of a matrixial borderspace serves to explore whether it is possible to imagine a new ethical paradigm where intersubjectivity is most fundamental to the human condition, and so empathy, compassion, and caretaking are a human potential available to each subject, rather than just in a birthing mother. Under the condition that a certain type of knowledge is heeded, namely from a matrixial voice, the capacity to care and the moral injunction to care can then open to all gendered bodies, including male, paternal ones (MB 185-6). To find this universal condition of care and compassion intra-subjectively, I find helpful Ettinger's notion of an asexual space in the matrixial womb, in the archaic m/Other to challenge the specialized role of "maternal" in caretaking. Though Ettinger acknowledges a wom(b)an's bodily specificity that affects a mother's potential and the possibilities she can imagine for her future, there is a prenatal openness and learning that is experienced between fetus, placenta, and hosting mother that can assuage the deep biased of an individuated subjectivity imagined in phallic modes of understanding, namely where the subject is divided from any other and must find a way to justify its relations, a justification still forthcoming in the general history of philosophy, and phenomenology in particular. Finally, this asexual prenatal space as the condition of an intersubjectivity made-up of a matrixial apparatus can dissolve the isolated subject and provide a new ethical paradigm from which we derive more value for caring paternal figures—that is not for the "father," but for any person born to other parents.

It is important to clarify that while the matrixial borderspace and linking is available in the formation of subjectivity as such, female and male subjectivities are distinguished from each other in their bodily specificity. Both subjectivities are formed in the past as a fetus in "an archaic out-site and past-side – out of chronological time as 'anterior,' which is true of male and female subjectivities (MB 142). But because female subjectivity has the potential to make from the womb a space for another, it is also an "in-side and future-side – as an actual, future, and 'posterior' time," whether she bears children or not. In a dissolution of strict divisions of time and space, the originating womb space experientially provides an outside and past that simultaneously contributes to the present interiority of every subjectivity. On the other hand, while it is only an experience in an archaic past for him, "totally -outside and too-early that it is forever too late to access," the doubling of this experience in the materiality of her life privileges her ability to meet the past with her future (ibid.). Here we may see that the horizon of her life imbues her with a "knowledge" restricted from male subjectivity. Still, there are capacities available to both subjectivities, "males, however, like women, are in contact with this time and space through compassionate joining-in-difference with others in transference relations, and via art-objects [...] An aesthetic-artistic filter, the matrixial apparatus serves both males and females who can yield to and tolerate this fragile

³ Prenatal refers here to the last intrauterine period when we assume that phantasy life has begun (see Ettinger, pg. 218 on matrixial subjectivity).

positioning vis-à-vis their I, the Other, and the world” (ibid). Art creations, relations of transference, and compassionate relations that nurture differences can help access this prenatal relationality for both sexes. The possibility is repressed in the past, dug deep and buried, however, when characteristics and values like yielding to the other, fragmentation, and fragility, are not prized.

Rather than compete with phallic approaches to knowledge, knowing, and grasping the other, Ettinger develops the asexual character of the matrixial apparatus that sits alongside these dominant forms of knowledge. ‘Matrixial’ which in Latin means *womb* develops along-side phallic knowledge-structures that exist already, such as in rationalist approaches and their normative moral injunctions. The matrixial difference is “a subjective dimension that is not derived from the exchange of signifiers and does not refer to the phallic field and to the rift of castration. [...] Even though it is feminine, this difference isn’t the effect of social structuring (Gender) nor an essentialist datum or deterministic result of a biological difference. It is woven in a human relation and there in some human language – to begin with, in the language of bodily signs or the language of affective channelings, the language of transference that “speaks” with its sensations and affections among subjects that co-emerge or co-fade in a matrixial alliance” (MB, 183). Only feminine because of its origin in the female body, the capacity to affectively communicate is not gender or sex specific. Sufficient for the relation is to have been born from a womb and to have an affecting body with which to communicate. Vibrations that belong to the senses awaken a sensibility for linking to another. Communication described as vibrations and resonances elude strict divisions between light/dark, inside/outside, present/absence, identity/non-identity, where, “in the matrixial-resonance camera obscura, the primordial silence is a sound affected by a rising and loosening, a reverberating and dissolving. It is what will become, in a flashback, the silence of my voice conjoined with the fluctuating sound of the world, mediated by the sound of the acoustic echoes and resonance of a maternal body and voice” (MB 186). In the matrixial, language extends beyond signifiers-as-words and into the affect of sensations that swerve, intertwine, and interweave borderlines and open borderspaces to co-create with others.

Borderlinks between subjects are felt rather than known, echoes are heard rather than seen in a stabilized visual sphere. In what is described as the matrixial stratum of subjectivization, the fragmented *I* is always related to the *non-I*. Connected through conductible borderlinks and exchanging affects that are redistributed through pathic information, objects are now hybrid-objects that share a borderspace of primary differentiation (MB 109). Two or many do not dissolve or subsume the other. Differences remain based on webbing links that never create an essence. Traces of events in each subjectivity forms an interlaced web, first in one’s transsubjectivity (intra-psychic), and then in intersubjective relations between two or more, “something *between* the grains reports and transfers itself. Differentiation and difference in co-emergence are attuned by metamorphosis⁴ that create – and that are created with-in – relation-without-relating in permutations of distance-in-proximity along borderlinks, transiting between presence and loss, subject and object, the foreigner

⁴ Metamorphosis is the process of relating to the other without subsuming their difference (MB 154). If the Other is the archaic m/Other, as she has been made in psychoanalysis, then “metamorphosis implies nonphallic ways of contacting her, with implications for both male and female infants. The phallic difference doesn’t concern man only. In a similar way, the matrix doesn’t concern women only, even if it is doubly connected to the female’s Real” (MB 139).

and myself" (MB 109). When this "nonphallic subjective dimension" *between* subjectivities can emerge to preserve each in their difference, and traces of a feminine that is known through the womb is claimed, these relations can be "culturally reported, [and] then *the (phallic) paradigm itself should rotate*. In the shift from the individuals knot to a matrixial web of borderlinks, a feminine jouissance between trauma and phantasy engraves subknowledge between phantasy and desire, in an enlarged subjectivity" (MB 102). Each subject becomes fragmented but also enlarged, to already encompass others. These others include other people, other objects, other species, and the earth. The need to justify each of these as unique forms of life that deserve protection is reduced when they all equally require unique care to preserve their difference.

The matrixial gaze sheds light on that which comes before phallic knowledge, though its affects ground the subjective possibility to speak, create, and relate with and through others. The matrixial gaze illuminates how it is possible to affect and be affected by ideologies with others in a mutual world. The matrixial which is not meant to replace the phallic paradigm and its totalizing effects have left Ettinger to resort to aesthetic means for communicating these insights, shown through blotches and stains in her artwork (MB 133). A mental hidden place, a metaphoric crypt, holds the subjective wound of separation from the mother's womb (MB 163). Even though the psychic-self has the capacity to see itself as an individual "bachelor" subject, loss and mourning of this origin remains in a joint affectivity and transsubjective memory sharable in "asymmetrical metamorphic exchanges" (MB 167). After this split from the m/Other, the child will emotionally invest elsewhere but always retain the possibility to invest in the traces of an-Other in reciprocal yet asymmetrical relations.

In processes such as the metamorphic encounter-event there is a dissolution of the unified self that philosophical theory has prided since Plato's idea of a rational soul and that Descartes continues into the modern era. The language of phenomenology provides a methodology to understand how experience of the lifeworld shapes and constitutes essences. A constituting intentionality that is directed at an object interpreted in a new light, for instance the biological body of a woman or man, can alter what may have once been conceived as it's *a priori* nature. The turn to allow for many perspectives to constitute an object has cast a suspicious light on the prior belief of the isolated and mastering subjective ego. An option we are left with about the nature of subjectivity, Ettinger writes,

"In the matrixial perspective, *becoming-together* precedes *being-one*. As a consequence of this sexual difference stemming from the feminine, the 'woman-not-All' is *not the Other* but the co-emerging partial self and Other, or a different kind of *relations* to the Other. [...] Borderlines between subjects and objects become thresholds, borderlinks between partial-subjects are transgressed, and traces of diffracted objects are shared between, and transferred among, several partial-subjects with-in- active-passivity metamorphosis. This sharing and this transferal are created from, but also create, a borderspace where the passage occurs from unintelligible traces to the subsymbolic" (MB 72).

To avoid a return to traditional notions of subjectivity, what Ettinger calls the subsymbolic in a nonconscious space is necessary to imagine a communication before the development of conceptual knowledge

and language that are based in logic. Subsymbolic meanings can be shared through what is called a wit(h)ness for an affective curative response, whether through art-creation or other affective relations (MB 116-8). A wit(h)ness can be a psychoanalytic counselor, friend, or expressed in an act, such as an apology or recognition of an atrocity committed. Additionally, there is a suggestion to speak of metamorphic processes of transformation in a non-conscious shared cavity where “the psychic voice-link opens in us a matrixial time-and-space of encounter where, like in a resonance cavity, inside and outside vibrate together. The matrixial resonance camera obscura where metamorphic event-encounters take place locates the inside as a shareable space-and-time and the outside as in-corporated-without-fusion” (MB 186-7). Based on diffused vibrations in the womb, the sounds inside and outside oneself, feelings, and multisensory resonances ontogenetically create event-encounters that form the specificity and difference of each unique individual. The non-conscious cavity borne of this influence in the womb is mutual among any others born in this condition. It provides a capacity to hear and form a relation beyond conscious thought. Subjects that are dissolved and destabilized into particles and connect in the sub-non-conscious sphere challenge distinct phenomenological categories of absence/presence, one/many, before/after that traditionally ignore traits necessary for caretaking.

The view from a matrixial borderspace, however transgressive to traditional concepts of subjectivity, allow subjectivity to linger at the risk of its fragmentation, refraction, dispersal, and pain in wit(h)nessing the other. Here “is in itself a bridge to an accessing of the other already in the feminine: it is inscribed in a psychic matrixial channel, opened first between a future-mother and a prenatal subject-to-be, where the mother’s psyche and the subject-to-be achieve separation in a non-symmetrical way in the same movement of joining, so that grains of subjectivity emerge in both partners, although they will carry different weight for each partner” (MB 145). Where this space opens communication between two partial subjectivities, the prenatal openness and maternal gaze highlights an ontogenetic interconnectivity. Reduced is the enigma of how sharing one’s trauma, phantasy, language, and meaning-making with others makes for the possibility of a co-response-ability with/for the unknown other (MB 89). The mystery of how mothers care in a “maternal instinct” is not so fraught if a view of the pre-natal can come to the fore as a condition for all fragmented subjectivities. Ettinger goes on to specify a new ethical paradigm that emerges out of conceptualizing a nonphallic subjective dimension open to anyone born of a womb. A difficulty that Ettinger points out is how to articulate a way of relatedness that comes before the formation of conceptual knowledge. Here is an archaic, originary nonconscious, which although related to a female body and then filters into general-human awareness, requires we invent another way to describe meaning production/donation/revelation (MB 108-9).

The ethical paradigm conceived here is not meant to follow the law-and-order paradigm as described through normative moral codes, but as a call to participatory witnessing as wit(h)nessing. While it calls for the view of a fragmented ego, the disintegration of the self allows for each’s participation in a drama that is wider than the self, usually of the child in maternal care. The self can stretch to include others, such as children, animals, the earth, all of which have come to the brink of disaster at the expense of an ego that has been charged with justifying their existence rather than wit(h)nessing alongside them. The experience of an ego in disintegration

and fragmentation that gives asymmetrically, without the expectation of return, is familiar to the ways in which mothers describe their everyday with toddlers. In *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*, Lisa Baraitser writes a phenomenology of a mother's work that is often interrupted by screeches from a toddler. They make demands for immediate care because of hunger, or teething, or because they are over-stimulated, cold or hot, bored or tired? She is called by a screeching halt from her work to a primordial expression of pain, unknowing what is the source of affliction, and it raises "autonomic arousal levels in the listener, increasing the heart rate and skin conductance" (ME 72-73). The physiology of her individual body changes in its response. How she experiences this interruption is closely linked with how she experienced care as a child, her levels of control, omnipotence, dependency, and more than these bodily and psychological affects, Baraitser questions how she can think or gather thoughts in these situations? Like Ettinger, Baraitser notes that interruptions are usually figured as an exception to overcome, to find a path over, work around, neutralize and avoid.

If these experiences, however, ground "maternal" subjectivity where it is possible to operate in some realm of thought, and work as caretaker for the life and consideration of another, then maybe it's time "to allow for another description of the kind of 'thinking' that is possible for a mother to do in these situations [...] one that forces a mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside of her usual repertoire, pushes her to a state of being 'beside herself' with all the overtones this brings of intensity, exhilaration and excitation as well as anxiety and despair" (ME 74-75). Not only are there the negative attributes to see in this disintegration, the anxiety and reticence when faced with the needs of another. There is a new process of thought conducted here that if the condition for its possibility can be generalized to all subjectivity, then a great disservice has been done to the male sex who has become excluded from this type of "knowing". All that is required to come into view is the fullness of a matrixial space and the form of nonconscious, unlearning, and multi-sensing available there.

The matrixial-resonance pre-forms through trans-sensorial affects, like acoustics entwined with touch, touch with movement, and in capacities like empathy that subjectivity uses not only to conceive of the other but also to com-passionately *feel into* the other. The amount of compassion that accompanies empathy in relating to another is one way that Ettinger contributes to phenomenological discourses on intersubjectivity, and which illuminates how caring relations are typically occluded from them. Intersubjectivity is a fundamental building block for the life-structures that we inhabit.⁵ The ability to see the other object as a subject who is similar to myself constitutes the empathic relation.⁶ Empathy has come to the aid in phenomenological analysis to inform intersubjective relations and the mutual life-world, but how each can see into the other is left open ended. On the other hand, for the matrixial borderspace the *I* is connected by empathic traces to the *non-I*, and there is room in the trans-subjective condition for any partial subjectivity to develop with its partial others (MB 107). Insights from Ettinger's practice as psychoanalyst can supplement this phenomenological insight in the distinction between empathy with and without compassion. Compassion is a term relatively absent from most phenomenologies on empathy, but empathy without compassion harms the matrixial psychic tissue. On the

⁵ Husserl, Edmund (*Husserliana*, vol. VII, p. 435).

⁶ Stein (1917); Beyer (1996); Zehavi (2018); Jardine (2022).

other hand, there is an affective difference when compassion accompanies empathy in a heightened creativity and a broader ethical horizon because now a bridge is attempted between the *I* and *non-I*. The *non-I* is transconnected to the *I* from a proto-ethical compassion to responsibility (MTS, 2006). For example, when it is known that another witnesses my suffering, but no compassionate attempt is made to relieve it, I feel alone and isolated in the pain. The effect of my suffering is doubled when empathic eyes show no compassion. Ettinger's psychoanalytic insight can supplement the phenomenological view because it provides this matrixial web that is intersubjectively intertwined, and always already affected and affecting others through compassionate relations.

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy more broadly have developed an effective terminology for intersubjective processes like identification, projection, and transference that distinguish the ways in which each subjectivity is related to its others. Psychoanalysis and its cartography of psychic structures bypass the philosophically problematic distinction between subject-object, mind-body or my-mind and your-mind. Its bias that perpetuates ideologies of motherhood, however, lies in a paradigm where all meaning is constructed through the Oedipal-castration complex, or not at all. For psychoanalysis, the feminine is always the dark continent which cannot be given to understanding, or else it is the irrational, psychotic, and hysteric. Blindness to the womb is an ideological preference, perpetuated in Freud's castration complex, according to Ettinger (MB 173). It is not so much about erasing motherhood or mother/child relations per se, but about a relationship formed from a female corporeal specificity that links to a "before" unknown other, "bounding with unknown others in the process of becoming and transforming oneself – puts patriarchy in danger. The feminine different difference was sacrificed, I believe to protect the masculine narcissism in the name of both sexes, to preserve the phallic psychic integrity of both male and female subjects, to reflect/maintain/reproduce/transmit its structure, and to establish identificatory love to the paternal only" (MB 105). In her feminist critique, Ettinger takes the psychoanalytic givenness of interconnectivity and finds the phenomenological borderspace in the womb to philosophically justify how intersubjectivity is possible, and further develops how trans- and intersubjectivity can relate in this language of resonances that links one partial self with its partial other (paradigmatically experienced in the maternal relation). In addition the universalized ability and need for compassion to accompany empathy in caretaking, which is largely relegated to a woman's natural capacity, the womb makes all of us partial to another.

It was fruitful to pair Baraitser's insight on maternal ways of knowing through fragmentation and disintegration that arises from caretaking, along with Mullin's emphasis on caretaking as a list of genderless tasks. Ettinger's emphasis on a genderless matrixial borderspace that opens this form of relationality between any fetus and its womb spreads these genderless tasks and fragmented subjectivities to everyone. The specialized ability for "maternal care" to continue this matrixial form of metamorphic communication is due to social, normative moral codes that require she develop this mode of thinking and response. Despite the challenge working mothers pose to the ideology, her shame and personal fulfillment depend on the capacity to attune to another's needs in the face of her fragmented ego. More than the set of genderless tasks in maternal work, this mode of response-ability is available as an ethical kernel in subjectivity. It is precisely what makes each human.

As Ettinger writes “femininity, I propose transforms from within what it means to be a subject, for it is the kernel of ethical being, the ultimate measure of the ethical relationship. [...] The kernel of subjectivity, its knowledge and sense, its vulnerability, and its ethical standing, are conditioned by the difference of the feminine, which therefore cannot remain so utterly Other” (190). Due to a shared pre-history already in the womb, asymmetrical relations for a fragmented self can open the possibility for men to engage in caretaking tasks, rather than remain an essential nature exclusive to females.

4. Conclusion

Parenting advice that I’ve often seen includes using imaginative play, storytelling, and empathy to help diffuse difficult situations. A tantrum can subside if in response to my child’s fear of going to sleep I tell them “me too.” Empathy goes much further than explaining the logic or reasons that justify his need for sleep, though I’ve tried these too. They simply don’t work as effectively as when I’ve picked up Mr. Elephant and said that he is also scared of the dark. Mr. Elephant tells me in my ear that it is helpful to breathe and listen to ocean sounds that play in the dark room. This ability to sooth at this moment includes an intuitive listening to David’s specific fear and finding its solution, while I recognize and wit(h)ness this irrational fear. Nothing different happens in a dark room than it does in a lit one, except in our imagination. And I can enter his in these modes of sympathy with empathy while my nerves are jolted, and my being is frazzled. It often takes at least 15-20 for this bedtime routine. But the way I yield certain tools over others, namely of sympathy with imaginative play over power or rational explanations, make our bond stronger. I don’t want to say that I have a natural ability to access these skills and tools but feel comfortable to seek them out. It’s what I’m supposed to do for my child. But am I, as a female, as a mother, as a woman, exclusively capable of these skills?

I hope to open here an ethical potentiality that extends across humanity -- from the ones who have shouldered much of the work in child caretaking, and to the other who has been mostly excluded from its possibilities namely fathers, grandfathers, and uncles lest they be shamed. I presented an alternative imaginary to the one associated with the essentialist model at work in the ideology of motherhood where any gender has the potential to nurture the matrixial aspects of an *I* that from its time in the womb finds traces of itself in the *non-I*. Even though traces of this space considered in the matrixial borderspace precede knowledge and must remain as such, the ability to care for traits such as fragmentation, empathy through compassion, and attuning to different needs of the other before they are subsumed by the *I*, are all possibilities important in caretaking that can be developed by norms sensitive enough to listen with another ear to metamorphic encounter-events. Maybe only in the cultural adoption of these traits, mobility can increase for women to find sufficient purpose outside of the household and sufficient support will be provided for men if they wish to find purpose within it. The benefit spreads not just to males and females, men, and women, but to individual people who can find fulfillment in caretaking tasks across these identities, or maybe in new ones waiting to be discovered.

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