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第 1 章 **Maternity, Parenting, and the Loss of the Child**

-- Experience of Pain and Suffering --

Irina Poleshchuk

For a long time in our history of civilizations pain has been an important concept. It has formed our theological doctrines, ethical views, aesthetics, and the ways we perceive things in the history of culture. All these spheres of our cultural and social activity have shaped some facets of human experience of pain, revealing ubiquitous affects of pain conditions. Still, pain remains a common word we use to describe unpleasant feelings in our bodies and minds. It is a universal and yet unique experience that everybody has had, but it is very difficult to conceptualize. On the biophysiological level pain can be caused by injuries to the body, or, using medical terminology, by certain nervous stimuli. However, there are different kinds of pain which are not directly connected to nerve response, or, in other words, to the connection of peripheral nerves with the brain. Our human bodies feel pain, and in embodied pain experience we interpret and construct meanings of pain and suffering. Pain experience is an extensive existential context of pain that has both subjective and intersubjective dimensions.

Evidently, pain is connected to our emotional reactions. It is a complex sensation, and it can be lived through in many ways: physical intensity of pain can influence our moods and emotional states; pain can make us more compassionate, or more angry. In our lives the pain experience can refer to our own pain, which we feel in an immediate way, and the pain of others, to which we do not necessarily have access. Obviously, pain goes beyond being just physical sensation; it becomes a means of communication and messaging, creating a new intersubjective dimension. Depending on the cultural and social contexts, as well as on differences in our biological systems, we experience and interpret pain in different ways.

Many life events can be experienced as painful, traumatic, and as suffering. One of the most striking experiences of physical and mental pain is death. This is not only the approach of my own death in suffering from severe disease, but also how I experience the death of loved ones. Regardless of cultural background, we all suffer when we lose our parents, children, or life partners. One of the strongest and most devastating experiences of suffering and pain is the loss of a child.

In phenomenology, human embodiment, sensations, and emotions have gained great attention. An emotion is not a specific “stimulus” impinging on its appropriate central “receptor organ.” An emotion that is provoked by pain or by the loss of a child, is not something which happens to a person. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that “it is man ... who assumes his emotion and emotion is therefore an organized form of human experiences” (Sartre 1962, 28). What Sartre tends to assert is that there can be no emotion without bestowing meaning on it. “Emotion does not exist, considered as a physical phenomenon, for a body cannot be emotional, but being able to attribute meanings to its own manifestation” (Sartre 1962, 29). Pain experience can be more painful, or less painful, and it is

the human subject who bestows meaning to describe the pain affect. In his work *Pain and Pleasure. A Study of Bodily Feelings*, Thomas Szasz introduces the concept of the “person in pain” (*homo dolorosus*) (Szasz 1988, xxxix). It concerns a person whose humanity is intimately bound to and dependent upon her being in pain and suffering.

Indeed, pain and suffering can acquire meanings related to political liberty, economic rationalism, or psychological reflectiveness. But pain and suffering also accentuate specifically human, often unconscious, and difficult-to-express notions of living through experience. To be sure, here suffering and pain connotes not merely a physical affect of pain but a condition pervading the subject’s entire personality and being in the world.

Critics of modern medicine argue that such subjective experience of pain is often discounted as unreliable and treated as “soft data” to be essentially ignored in favor of the “hard,” objective, quantitative data of laboratory tests. There are no hard data to be noted in the case of pain experience caused by the loss of the child. In revealing the primacy of lived experience over and above any subsequent theoretical scientific account of such experience, the phenomenological account of the experience of pain and suffering on the death of a beloved one discloses the validity of subjective experience and its ethical significance for the intersubjective dimension.

Phenomenological interpretation of such pain experience tends to hold a “human vision,” focusing on existential layers of the embodied subject. Suffering is experienced by the person, not merely by bodies. It occurs at the reflective level and is intimately related to the manner in which the person apprehends the pain affect, what meanings she assigns to the pre-reflective sensory experience. Physical and psychological pain can result in suffering but suffering is not limited to pain. It is about particular interpretations assigned to the pain sensation: pain experienced in making love, pain at the last stage of cancer, and pain caused by the death of the other person are different experiences of suffering. The assigned meaning will finally determine the feeling of the self, the degree of destruction of habitual embodiment, and will affect the horizon of life possibilities. Thus, devastating pain and long-lasting suffering caused by the death of a child are able to shift or even completely destroy our goals or attention. The usual constellation of our lived horizon and our feeling of time are strongly affected and are in constant change. It is not easy for the person experiencing physical or psychological suffering to communicate the pain experience to others. In particular, it is often extremely hard for people who have lost loved ones to give an account of their experience of pain.

In phenomenology, pain represents contextualized situations in which our embodiment is apprehended both as a material, physical entity and as a being-for-the-other. How does the death of a child affect our intersubjective world? How is the mother–child relation displaced? What happens to the maternal body and to our embodiment in the experience of the death of one’s child? In what way is this pain different from other types of pain? How does the intersubjective temporal horizon change? In this paper I want to tackle the concept of the maternal body and maternity as metaphor, as an ontological condition and ethical modality, but also as practice. I discuss how the maternal body changes when the mother loses her child and how the temporality of parental relation is modified.

1. The Event of Death

Before approaching pain experience in the death of a child I touch upon account of death in Levinas's ethics. Evidently, we assume that death comes in many different ways, depending on how the person is involved in this event. The person who is dying has a different life horizon and a different sense of self than those who are mourning or caring for them in their last stages. The parent witnessing the devastating disease of their child is living through a process which affects not only understanding the shifts of their own embodiment, but also inevitable transformations in social and communal relations. It is important to be aware that the sense of temporality is very specific for the person who is experiencing the pain of loss.

In a biomedical context the death of a human being is understood as the end of biological function of the body, which would be very similar to the function of all other species of our organic world. The end of life is a natural process needed for the renewal of other earthly beings. In the context of nature, human life and death are events similar to other organic mechanisms, which does not imply emotions and sensations. Whatever happens to the human body, the world of nature continues to exist. However, in the context of phenomenology, the inevitability of the event of death is a production meaning that enriches our comprehension of the past, present, and future. Death is revealed as the end of the very individual meaning of the life horizon, when time is not anymore available to the subject.

In phenomenology, existential philosophy, and hermeneutics the event of death has received a large range of interpretations, bringing forth the complex structure of subject. For Heidegger, the way toward death is what bears meanings to our existence. Each step we make in our life is symbolically heralded by the end that is yet to come, which is always shimmering on the horizon of our possibilities. The event of death enriches the endless list of possibilities at the present moment, contributing to the richness of existence (Chanter 2001, 104). To grasp the sense of the subject, in Heidegger's terms the sense of Dasein, is to see mortality as always present in the subject's being: "Death is not to be thought of as an additional, accidental event, without which Dasein's structure cannot be understood, or without which Dasein remains incomplete, but rather as the inevitable end to Dasein" (Chanter 2001, 105).

In Levinas's ethics the phenomenon of death represents the radicality of alterity, i.e., the absolute otherness that goes beyond the totalizing activity of our consciousness. He writes that "the relation with death, more ancient than any experience, is not the vision of being or nothingness" (Levinas 2000, 15). The relation with death, or the presence of death on the temporal horizon, is a means of mediating between the subject and the other person. The absolute alterity of death transcends any conceptualization of our relation with the other human being, in particular in parental relations. Levinas interprets the event of death as an attempt to escape falling back into the sameness of the subject, of being locked in oneself. Thus, contrary to Heidegger, Levinas sees death not as "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein" but as "the impossibility of possibility": "Death – suffocation in the impossibility of the possible – opens a passage towards descent" (Levinas 2000, 57).

It is not a matter of Dasein constructing the sense of its own temporality, possessing itself and its death. It is not a question of authenticity or inauthenticity; rather, the subject is faced with the radicality of the alterity that resists all possible existential projects and irreversibly breaks through the linear temporal flow of any intersubjective relation:

In the being for death of fear I am not faced with nothingness, but faced with what is against me, as though murder, rather than being one of the occasions of dying, were inseparable from the essence of death, as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other. The violence of death threatens as a tyranny, as though proceeding from a foreign will. The order of necessity that is carried out in death is not like an implacable law of determinism governing a totality, but is rather like the alienation of my will by the Other (Levinas 2004, 234).

In discussing the alterity of death, Levinas intends to hold the possibility for a diachrony in time, which means that the timeline is split and not linear anymore for the subject. In other words, time is disturbed by the event of death. According to Levinas, Heidegger's view of being-toward-death is necessarily substituted by unconceivable ominous alterity, which is "at the same time menace and postponement. It pushes on, and it leaves time" (Levinas 2004, 235). The Heideggerian concept of toward-death designates an authenticity and uniqueness of the subject. It is not a threat but an open horizon of life possibilities. In Levinas's view, for the subject the account of death is a revision of meanings created by the temporal flow: "To be temporal is both to be for death and to still have time, to be against death" (Levinas 2004, 235). This break or distortion makes temporal flow diachronic. The threat of "my" death or the death of the other person affects and resides in my existence, carrying inside it both menace and fear. The event of the death of the other person is an instant, a temporal break, which is lived by the subject as an impossibility of every possibility. To experience the pain caused by the death of the other is to experience passivity of sensibility, which paralyzes a life horizon. Thus, following Levinas's line of reflection, the fear for my life is strongly connected to the fear of the alterity of death and it is not just the fear of nothingness. The threat of death turns into fear of the death of the other person, and this death is absolutely unforeseeable. Levinas interprets the event of death as a total negation. While Heidegger sees potentiality in the toward-death where the subject reveals a possibility of bringing of meanings into her life, in Levinas's ethics death tends to "describe an empirical and normative limit to all possibility and to my fateful powers of projection. My relation to finitude limits my potentiality and my ability to be" (Critchley 2014, 320). Thus, by emphasizing the radical alterity of the death and especially the death of the other person, Levinas wants to accentuate that death always paralyzes the temporal and ethical horizon of intersubjective relation, here, the intersubjective relation with the child.¹

¹ On this subject see the article by Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: thinking least about death—contra Heidegger", Springer Link, Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11153-006-9101-x> (Accessed: 10 May 2020).

Another important theme I would like to tackle is temporal horizon, which is implemented in our relations to the world and with others. Heidegger claims that time is the horizon for understanding and interpreting being (Heidegger 1995, 351–352). We need to explicate time as the horizon for constructing meanings in terms of temporality, as being of Dasein. Heidegger discovers that this projection presupposes a temporal openness or clearing of being itself. In other words, the temporality of Dasein mirrors the temporality of being. Since we can discover in the temporality of Dasein only the mirror image of the temporality of being, being as such remains concealed. In general, for Heidegger, temporality is the condition of being and time is the site where the drama of the comprehension of being by Dasein takes place. In this sense, the temporal line in which the death of the other takes place, discloses a particular construction of meanings for subjectivity.

Levinas writes: “the fundamental relation with being, in Heidegger, is not the relationship with the Other, but with death, where everything that is non-authentic in the relationship with the Other is denounced, since one dies alone” (Levinas 1982, 58). Levinas’ argument here is that Dasein exists only in dialogue with being. To put it differently, the death of a child would show the subject’s relation with being, but not with meanings incorporated in intersubjective space created by the presence of the child. The fundamental encounter for existence is not with other beings, but with being itself. Here, temporality is a condition of encounter, but, according to Levinas, it does not represent the possibility of a radical transformation of Dasein, or of the subject, after its understanding of being. In other words, in the context of Heidegger’s philosophy, facing the event of loss and experiencing pain, parental subjectivity is not going through a transformative process that would bring it beyond the self. Levinas’s own view on this point is that time should be understood as the condition of encounter with the other (with the child), which gives to the subject a possibility to transcend itself:

Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time (Levinas 1985, 77).

In response to Levinas, Alphonso Lingis in *Deathbound Subjectivity* (1989) emphasizes that the sense of conscience and the sense of morality are anticipatory, i.e., conscience calls me onto being; I have to become. To put it differently, conscience anticipates the limits of the possible, the possibility of impossibility: “Once one has anticipated one’s death one has anticipated what is possible, all that is possible” (Lingis 1989, 113). For Heidegger, as Lingis shows, the sense of the possible and the sense of the ethical are the same thing, and moreover, they are the veritable sense of the future. Lingis proceeds to situate morality within the moment of the present. The sense of morality is to be found in the vertical dimension of immanence. It is what we absolutely could not get our hands on. However, Heidegger focuses on the future. He identifies the original and veritable sense of the future with the sense of the possible (Heidegger 1995, 286). To grasp the sense of the future is to have a sense of the possible, that is, not what we represent to ourselves by prolonging the lines of the actual but what comes of itself. Lingis distinguishes a specific kind of future which can be bound to the Levinasian

understanding. The future is what comes to us from the other, and not what we produce (in a Heideggerian line of reflection); in this case, it comes from very personal relation with the child. For Heidegger, it is not that we have a sense of our death in the future but we have a sense of the future in our sensing of death. To clarify this thesis Lingis adds: “we anticipate a sense of our future in that dimension of immanence upon which our moral anxiety opens” (Lingis 1989, 114). Thus, in the context of Levinas’s ethics, the event of the death of a child would eliminate the present and the future, since for the parental subject the meaning of the future is constructed not alone, but by relation with the child.

In the next section I move to maternity, the maternal body and paternal relation, and how these modalities are changing while experiencing the pain of the loss of a child.

2. Maternal Embodiment and Ethics of the One-for-the-other

Paternal relationships change over time and as the child reaches different ages. The mother–child relation goes through different stages: the period of gestation, the birth of the child, the very first months, and the first years of growth. Each stage brings a new sensibility to the maternal body, questing the singularity of the mothering subject and modifying the horizon of intersubjective temporality. Thus, the death of a child at a different age (the death of the fetus, during the first hours or days after the birth, or in the early years) will bring various modalities of being in pain and suffering for maternal subjectivity. Evidently, the experience of the death of a child would be different for the father. In this paper I concentrate on the age from early childhood until adolescence.² My goal is to bring into dialogue an intersubjective space initiated by the event of the death, and to accentuate the devastating character of pain. To approach the experience of pain and suffering in maternal and paternal subjectivity I address Levinas’s account of maternity and the modality of the one-for-the-other.

Let me touch upon the process of gestation and mother–child connection during pregnancy. Literally one could say that a pregnant mother is inhabited by another body, or another person. In “Pregnant Embodiment,” Iris Young mentions that during the period of pregnancy the maternal body is in full awareness of her boundaries, inside and outside. The growing life of the fetus expands the maternal body, restructuring its borders and that body’s possibilities. It challenges the unity of the body–mind connections, constantly bringing various distortions (nausea, insomnia, hunger, dizziness, heaviness). Young notes: “The integrity of my body is undermined in pregnancy not only by this externality of the inside, but also by the fact that the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux. In pregnancy I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins” (Young 1990, 50).

² The phenomenological explication of the event of the death of the fetus during pregnancy requires a separate analysis and is a very dense research topic for another project.

The pregnant maternal body might be experienced as being decentered or even split. It is both one and double. Often pregnant persons explain that they feel themselves and they do not feel themselves anymore. Or rather, they feel invasion. The fetus moves inside the belly, affirming its existence, but also establishing new borders and bringing new focus and new sensations of locations inside the body of the mother. The pregnant body becomes a shared self, a shared space, and a shared nutritional capsule. Gradually the mother becomes aware that the sense of herself, her identity, does not belong only to herself. It is divided and invaded. The more concrete example of the shared maternal body is breastfeeding: nurturing and feeding the other are about having two bodies that are sharing one border, affecting the interdependent common space of mother–child connection. Indeed, many mothers report their experience of a crash of identity in breastfeeding. During gestation and the first early years the child is inhabiting the mother’s body, in Levinas’s words, the child as the other is felt under the skin of maternal subject, shifting habitual limits, desires, and needs of women: “Eight years in, I can’t always tell the difference between my children’s needs and my own. [...] The needs of our children and our world and ourselves merge and divide and merge again, until sometimes you can’t tell one strand from another” (Weaver-Zercher 2010, 42–44).

Being a mother is an experience of ambiguity when often it becomes impossible to distinguish woman’s identity, her life perspectives, understanding of her own time, and her cultural and social embodied manifestations from the life perspective of her child. This collision of life projects could result into existential rupture in the woman: to remain the nurturing mother or to pursue her own identity which is not always about being the mother. Evidently the maternal subject challenges the assumption that subjectivity always stays the unshakable one, or holds the unity of the self. The ethical demand of the other can disrupt the habitual horizon of any subject and such ethical distortion does not belong only to motherhood or to parenthood in general. However, the maternal subject might experience the ethical address and the need of the other (of the child) much stronger, since being a mother is constantly living the modality of being the one-for-the-other: responding to societal expectations, carrying primary responsibility, anticipating needs of the child, and building a possible future horizon for the child.

To a certain degree, this short description of the maternal subject finds its phenomenological resumption in Levinas’s account of fecundity and maternity. Stella Sandford in *Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Levinas and Plato* (2002) criticizes the sexist implications of associating maternity only with woman. According to her, the maternal subject does not necessarily bear female aspects (Sandford 2001, 189). She emphasizes Levinas’s reference to the biological origin of the notion of fecundity and maternity as well as its ontological, ethical, and social meaning. The metaphor of maternity is interpreted as a universal model and a paradigmatic ethical relation, i.e., “maternity must and does give way to paternity, that is to the law of father” (Sanford 2001, 199).

Qualities initiated by the maternal subject, such as generosity, welcome, and hospitality, are meant to revive the feminine in the structure of the subject even when the being is not female.

Maternity is thought to be the starting point for ethics and it requires unconditional hospitality and acceptance despite the mother's own needs. Maternity tends to put aside any cognitive activity of the subject and, according to Levinas, it converts self-concern and self-satisfaction into concern and responsibility for the child. It creates a space for opportunity to disclose a source of the intersubjective relation within the interiority of the self. Maternity frames and puts into question all possibilities of the life as mine and as belonging only to the well-designed sphere of being singular and individual. For Levinas the metaphor of maternity and also the very concrete practice of being a mother discloses an origin or a birth of conscience; it is both an ontological category and an ethical paradigm. The hospitality and the generosity of maternity opens up the possibility of being-for-the-other, that is, an ontological category turns into ethical significance.

3. Temporal Horizon of Maternity: from Futurity of Ethical Possibilities to Disruption

Maternity does not only establish origins of unconditional responsibility, or problematize the social and ethical embodiment of women but also it designs certain structure of shared temporality. During gestation and early years of her child mother is experiencing but also building a new sense of time. The meaning of the present is strongly regulated by the possibilities and expectations of the mother-child relation or for the child in the future (health, personal development, education, career). Indeed, the ever-present responsibility for the child restructures the feeling of time as "mine" for mothers and for fathers: their perspectives or life horizons are not anymore bounded to their understanding of the self. Rather responsibility for the other and shared intersubjective space of the child-parent relation lines up the future horizon, the sense of self, connected to the child, and to sensibility.

The question which disturbs Levinas is: "How can the ego that I am remain myself in a you, without being nonetheless the ego that I am in my present – that is to say, an ego that inevitably returns to itself? How can the ego become other to itself?" (Levinas 1985, 91). The answer is maternity and parental relations. In being a parent, the subject transcends itself and, at the same time preserves the alterity of the other (of the child). However, the meaning of temporality and especially of futurity can be different for mothers and for fathers. In a son, the father keeps his own subjectivity but also transcends it by having his own future in the other person: "paternity is not simply the renewal of the father in the son and the father's merger with him, it is also the father's exteriority in relation to the son, a pluralist existing" (Levinas 1995, 92). In a father-child relation, the child is not mine in the sense that my creation or object belongs to me. The moment of the birth of a child proves the moment of encountering the other person. The future that subjects attempt to catch in erotic love, that experience of the not-yet-come, beyond all possibilities, is the very future that comes to the father from his child. It is a presence of the future in the present, since the father is obliged to take responsibility now and with a projection into the future. This future is also the parent's future but it cannot be anticipated in the same way as the subject makes plans about its own future (Levinas 2004, 267–269). In this sense being a father manifests as a specific care for the future of the other and thus

temporality gets its ethical significance – it is care in the present for the future of the child. How does it happen?

The birth of a child breaks the time of subjectivity as continuity. Levinas argues that the future of the son is “my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other” (Levinas 2004, 267). In being a parent, given as a relation to the future, one can be saved from the endless repetition of being a singular subject and from being attached to oneself. But also, in parental relation the subject finds the birth of another who is not equal or identical to themselves, and who avoids any possession, because in his child the father goes beyond the fulfillment of all the possibilities of his own ego. The child as a result of the erotic situation appears to be a specific locus of transcendence, where the subject, while preserving itself, is given the possibility of not inevitably returning to itself. The father desires his child as a renewal of his own desire to have another future. i.e., the future to realize responsibility. Thus, parenting is the engendering of responsibility in the time of the infinite without end.

Thus, the relationship with a child establishes an “absolute future”: a child is not an identical replication, because in replication the alterity of the other person is totally neutralized. In parenting it is preserved. This peculiar modification of temporality is not, however, an attempt to reclaim lost opportunities; it is not a “search of lost time.” It is rather the only possible actualization of responsibility. The identical in this case is opposed to the true future of the child – the future that is beyond the limits of its own predetermination.

It is important to keep in mind that maternity in parental relation is a modality for unconditional responsibility and of ethical shared horizon found in mother–child and in father–child relations. Levinas speaks about maternity as a certain sensibility found in any subject. Yet the same logic of alteration between immanence and transcendence is manifested as the-other-in-the same, in the maternal body found only in women’s experience: “it is being torn up from oneself, being less than nothing, a rejection into negative, behind nothingness; it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same” (Levinas 2006, 75). Specifying the essence of the maternal subject, he writes, “sensibility is being affected by a non-phenomenon, a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other” (Levinas 2006, 75). Levinas wants to stress the immediacy of the bodily sensation, which exposes the parenting subject and especially others to the signifying of the child as the other-in-the-same. For Levinas, maternity is a sort of the bridge which connects the subject with transcendence. It reactivates a preoriginal ethical body inseparable from the parental subject (Levinas 2006, 78). To put it otherwise, maternity extends temporality of the subject into the preoriginal past, when, for instance, response to the need of the child comes before any self-awareness. Let me examine this thesis.

In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas writes a fascinating passage:

The subjectivity of flesh and blood in matter – the signifyingness of the sensible, the-one-for-the-other itself – is the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives. Not because, as preoriginal, it would be more original than the origin, but

because the diachrony of sensibility, which cannot be assembled in a representational present, refers to an irrecuperable pre-ontological past, that is of maternity” (Levinas 2006, 78)

The ethical subject as one-for-the-other (for the child) is born only in maternity, meaning depositing itself, a depositing which, according to Levinas, is the very possibility of giving (ibid., 79). This giving could be described as a gift of the body, food, and clothes to the child even before the parenting subject has been born as a sensible subject, even before it has free will. The maternal subject already anticipates the appeal of the child that has not yet come. My argument differs from Levinas’ which claims, as in the quotation above, that maternity bears a sense of a pre-ontological past. Maternity gives also a new perspective on the future. The parent is welcoming the other by giving food, clothes, and the body:

sensible experience as an obsession by the other, or a maternity, is already corporeality. [...] The corporeality of one’s own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or a denouement of being. [...] one-for-the-other, which signifies in giving, when giving offers not the superfluous of the superfluous, but the bread taken from one’s mouth. Signification signifies, consequently, in nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relation, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality (Levinas 2006, 77).

The gesture of giving signifies here a move toward the future but the act of giving itself is formed in the present. The parent is giving food to the child at present, and the origin of the present and the future is in the child. I accentuate here that the subject does not possess the present and the future; time belongs to the child.

The metaphor of maternity reveals the mother–child relation, which is slightly different from the father–child relation. In the father–child relation, the parental subject both remains itself and becomes other than itself: “Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me” (Levinas 1985, 91). Yet, in the mother–child relation the child belongs to the substance of the mother, of her body; it is of the mother. There is a sharing of substance that finally leads to total substitution: in feeding the mother gives herself to the child; it is one-for-the-other without remaining the same, without preserving herself, and without building just her own identity.

The metaphor of the maternal body can be applied to any intersubjective relations. Its ethical strength goes beyond parental connection with the child. To be in the ethical modality of the maternal body means to bear responsibility for the other person as if she would have been my child, as if I would have gestated and given birth to her in my flesh. As if I would be a mother even to the stranger. To support this argument Levinas quotes the biblical book of Numbers to explain the ethics of maternity:

In proximity the absolutely other, the strange whom I have “neither conceived nor given birth to,” I already have in my arms, already bear, according to the Biblical formula, “in my breast as the nurse bears the nursling” (Numbers XI, 12). He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor. It is incumbent on me (Levinas 2006, 91).

What we see here is that eventually the ethical subject and unconditional responsibility are rooted in the modality of being a mother, in maternal hospitality, welcome, gift, food, and sharing her body.

How does the event of the death of a child transform the ethical modality of the maternal body? This transformation involves a high degree of symbolization of pain. The usual experience of pain – whether it is acute, chronic, or psychological – is also a means of communication with the self, with embodiment in the world, and with the other/s. It opens up new meanings but does not necessarily demolish the intersubjective world or the self. Indeed, the feeling of the self can go through tremendous transformations: it can mutate or it can be reborn in pain. Acute pain can be healed, and chronic pain can be accepted and incorporated into new modes of life. The pain experienced on a child’s death is not the type of pain that can be released.

The pain from the loss of a child often erases not only maternal embodiment but any individual and social presence in the world. Many parents who are living through the event of the death of their child say that it is impossible to return to their normal lives. The sense of what is normal or what the person should do is not there anymore. Pain takes over the whole existence of the person, destroying her sense of the shared common embodiment established long ago in gestation, feeding, and caring. In this context, mothers can experience the death of a child more strongly and as more devastating than fathers, since the pain of the loss not only affects all aspects of their life but is also felt in different levels of their embodiment. The maternal body shared with a child is not only ceasing to exist but also influences the sensibility of being-for-the-other. In other words, the mother will no longer feel the responsibility of nursing, feeding, gifting the body, being with the sleepless, crying, or ill child.

The event of the death of her child redesigns the border of the mother’s body, marking the empty loci in the body’s spaces. The maternal body now belongs to no one. It is as if the mother’s body is broken and unrepairable. The pain of the loss affects the dynamic horizon of the futurity, rendering the parental subject passive. For both the mother and the father, the effect of the loss paralyzes reactions, responses, and actions, bringing the subject into a frozen state, inhabited with deep trauma. This passivity does not preserve and respect the manifestation of the other person, but rather it is a silent passivity of nothingness and of the void of being. Thus, the temporality that had been shared with the child, the meaning of time that had come from the child is disrupted, as if time had stopped flowing, when the present and the future are no longer bright and full of potentiality. Rather, time is stuck in the now, as if it suffocates and the parental subject cannot breathe anymore. The passivity brought with pain is reinforced by the fact that, for instance, the gesture of giving is eliminated, as if an intention of care is not fulfilled and never will be.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that the maternal body is just a metaphor. It is formed in maternity but is also continuously present in parenting relation as an ontological condition and ethical modality. It creates a shared intersubjective space between the child and the parent, enlarging the temporal horizon where the meaning of time is structured by the needs and demands of the child. This maternal embodied presence is transformed, or even destroyed, in the experience of pain caused by the event of the death of the child. In this paper, I sketched possible perspectives for further investigations. I believe that these traumatic trajectories of parenting (such as when the subject is still aware of being a parent after the loss or whether social parental embodiment is still present) require a more rigorous phenomenological analysis.

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