

The Mother's Care(ss)¹

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AFTER THE BIRTH OF MY SONS IN 2014 AND 2017, I started to engage with feminist philosophies of motherhood. Upon revisiting Coleridge's ideas on education, I realised that the significance he attached to motherly care in the first years of the child's development anticipated many of the insights of both 20th-21st century feminist philosophies and child psychology. Coleridge was revolutionary in considering the physical presence, and especially the loving touch and mirroring eyes of the mother as the ground of all human development; ultimately, according to Coleridge, it is the mother's loving care and her caress that elicit our humanity. In *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016), Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero shows that Western thinking is replete with the figure of the *homo erectus*: humans and not animals because they stand erect, their hands are free, and their eyes look straight ahead. Taking the example of Kant, she argues that humans in the West have always been represented as self-sufficient, and autonomous, and the (Kantian) person is not only singular but also single, giving laws for self-conduct independently of others. In this view, whenever the individual becomes prone to inclinations (physically or psychologically), duties are abandoned with the respect for the law within, which is supposed to make one human.

In the chapter 'Kant and the Newborn', Cavarero describes Kant's annoyance with mothers and children. She writes:

They bother him because they are both borderline figures between the animal and human world: mothers because they pamper and care for human pups, and as such demonstrate an inclination that resembles the females of other species; children because, in essence, they still resemble animals'.²

According to Kant, the first cry of the newborn already signals its striving for independence and autonomy and pain at being dependent on the mother, rather than the need for response, care, and nursing.³ Besides Kant, philosophers as different as Rousseau and Buffon see the mother-child relationship from a similar perspective: the mother is reduced to a function, a means to an end; the child desiring independence from the mother. In Buffon, the mother is a womb that protects and restrains the child, who cannot wait to be born and set him or herself free.⁴ As for Rousseau, although he is a revolutionary in recommending mothers breast-feed their children, rather than employ wet nurses, what lurks behind his advice is not the acknowledgment of

¹ This is an extract taken from my longer essay in Peter Cheyne (ed.), *Living Ideas: Coleridge and Other Dynamic Idealists on Life and Matter* (in progress).

² Cavarero, Adriana, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016) 27-28

³ Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 27-8

⁴ Buffon, Count de (Georges-Louis Leclerc), 'Of Infancy', ch. 2 in *Natural History Containing a Theory of the Earth, a General History of Man, of the Brute Creation, and of Vegetables, Minerals, &c. &c.* (1707-88), Vol. 3 (of 10), tr. William Smellie (London, 1791), 346.<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45639/45639-8.txt>

the prime emotional significance of mothers *per se*, but rather the utility of strengthening the intra-familial and, therefore, the social bond.⁵

In England, maternal breastfeeding had already become fashionable by the 1750s among the middle and upper classes; according to Susan Greenfield and Carol Barash, the image of the tender, full-time mother was invented in the eighteenth century.⁶ Against this background, Coleridge's philosophy of motherhood seems both odd and revolutionary, anticipating many insights gained not only from 20th-century psychology but also from 21st-century feminist philosophy. While his position can be considered as the continuation of an eighteenth-century ideology of domesticity, elevating the intimate bond between infant and mother, his foregrounding of the role of the mother in the development of humanity was also a philosophical position, to be compared with thinkers such as Kant and Rousseau. Conspicuously, for Coleridge, the mother is the prime embodiment of the love upon which our humanity is predicated, or, more precisely, maternal love is the primary condition in the process of *becoming* human, of the process of individuation. Coleridge praises the child's earliest bond with the mother until he or she 'leaves the gentle teachings of his first home' to engage in the 'austere discipline of the understanding' with the help of male educators (*OM* 136).⁷ I have argued elsewhere⁸ (*Modern Coleridge*, 125–40) that for Coleridge, the mother serves as the initial medium between God and the child, her pious face being the first indication of God's presence: 'That which the mother is to her child, a someone unseen and yet ever present, is to all' (*OM* 126). An answer to the enigma of the child's existence, it is the mother's love that guides the child across the bridge between biological species and individual person.

Meanwhile, Coleridge's understanding of human individuality can also be placed in the context Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of inclination, which is part of a recent tradition of feminist philosophy that stakes human uniqueness on the concept of inter-relationality. For Coleridge, human uniqueness emerges from the newborn's asymmetrical relationship with his mother, entailing a helpless dependency on her care and caress. The significance of the mother in Coleridge's scheme of education has been touched upon by critics, including myself, and the focus has generally been on how Coleridge anticipates later psychological findings.⁹

What has remained unelaborated so far is how Coleridge grounds humanity in maternal love as a symbolic embodiment of God's love that subverts Western philosophical tradition.

Through relegating Platonic 'sight', so influential in the history of Western

⁵ Brace, Laura, 'Rousseau, Maternity and the Politics of Emptiness', *Polity*, 39.3 (2007), 361–83.

⁶ Barash, Carol, and Susan C. Greenfield, *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865* (London: Lexington Books, 2015).

⁷ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 15: *Opus Maximum* (c.1823), ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002). 136

⁸ Timár, Andrea, *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits* (London: Palgrave 2015)

⁹ E.g. the editorial notes to *Opus Maximum* 120–132; Ruderman, David, *The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form* (London: Routledge, 2016).

metaphysics, Coleridge recuperates the Aristotelian emphasis on touch and anticipates twentieth-century feminist philosophies of care and caress. "The infant follows his mother's face as, glowing with love and beaming protection, it is raised heavenward, and with the word "GOD" it combines in feeling whatever there is of reality in *the warm touch*, in the *supporting grasp*, in the glorious countenance".¹⁰ In other words, when Coleridge predicates the infant's humanity on the love of the mother and writes that 'Ere yet a conscious self exists, the love begins; and the first love is love of ... another' (OM 121), he not only evokes the love of God radiating from the mother's face, but articulates the yearning for the 'touch' and 'caress' of the mother, which, reciprocated and responded, becomes constitutive of the child's self: 'I am not here, touch me, Mother, that I may be here!' (OM 132). From the beginning of the love relationship between mother and child, touch grounds our humanity, and paradoxically precedes all knowledge and self-consciousness, as the child 'knows not what the Mother is, but still less does it know what itself is.' (OM 121).

The child feels God's love reflected in the mother's eyes, and embodied in their close, immediate relationship of proximity. The infant clings to the mother's body and is answered by her tender kisses and embrace. The mother's passionate response to the child's uniquely human condition of nakedness, vulnerability, exposure, and utter helplessness thus gives birth to the humanity of the child, as if it was a second birth. "The first dawnings of [the infant's] humanity will break forth in the Eye that connects the Mother's face with the warmth of the mother's bosom." (OM 121). The humanity of the child awakens in mimesis, in the imitation of the mother radiating humanity responding with love and protection to the demands of the child. 'In vain would the conditions, the possibility, of the human have been inlaid, were not the human, in its full development, already there to meet and protect it.' (OM 121). (Later, I will outline how Coleridge presents the predicament of the 'savage child', of the new-born deprived of the care(ss) of a human mother.)

When the mother experiences the passion of love, as the unconditional acceptance and recognition of the child ('a love that asks no leave of the judgement' (OM 121), her caress and embrace of the child are also *as if* unconscious. The child is looking up to the mother, stretching forward its limbs, and the mother's 'hands close as it were of th[em]selves'. (OM 121). Again we witness a circular process: the child gives birth to the mother, to the mother's love, as her care(ss) can only emerge as a response to the child. In other words, although it is already there to respond to the child's demands, motherly love is predicated on the birth of the child. In 'Ode to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire', Coleridge presents the virtues of the Duchess, a mother, as being born from the experience of childbirth:

O Lady, nurs'd in pomp and pleasure!
Where learnt you that heroic measure?'

¹⁰ Coleridge, *Opus Maximum* 131, italics added

....
 You were a Mother! at your bosom fed
 The Babes that lov'd you. You, with laughing eye,
 Each twilight-thought, each nascent feeling read,
 Which you yourself created. Oh! Delight!
 ...
 The Mother of your Infant's Soul;
 ... from his aspect sweet
 New influences in your being rose,
 Blest Intuitions and Communions fleet
 With living Nature, in her joys and woes! (PW 254)

Culturally, the idea that the child's birth awakens motherly love is associated with the Nativity, signifying the birth of love on earth. Indeed, as opposed to the maternal instincts of the animal, motherly love is also illuminated by what Coleridge calls the "divine Fiat".

In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge refers to the 'Position of the Aristotelians'—expressed in Aquinas's dictum, "There is nothing in the mind that was not previously in the senses"—as a *half-truth* taken up by Locke, which should be complemented by the spiritual ground of our humanity, that is, by the will that is not nature (79–80), to round it out into truth. Yet, since humans do belong to nature too—"Man hath from Birth that which is common with the Animal, and that which is especially human" (AR 122)—it seems that only maternal love, as spiritual *and* sensual care(ss), can respond to the riddle of our humanity, to our uniquely human predicament of being both life and mind.

In the *Opus Maximum* Coleridge describes what happens if the mother alienates the love of the child, and directs it towards what is sensuous around him. Then, the infant 'may be made to exhibit the pride of the Horse, the rage of the Turkey, the Vanity of the Peacock', that is, he may become disturbingly similar to beasts—not to mention that anthropomorphism renders beasts disturbingly similar to humans too. Earlier in the same passage, Coleridge also outlines the predicament of the new-born when deprived of the care(ss) of a human mother, who calls out what is latent in the child:

In vain the conditions, the possibility, of the human have been inlaid, were not the human, in its full development, already there to meet and protect it. Only by disproportion of the means to the ends will the babe [survive], abandoned from its birth and suckled in the Forest by the blind and kindly instincts of nature in the Goat or the Wolf. Its eye will remain glazed; its lips, the seat of expression for appetite and rage alone. The tongue will utter the sound of Ape; the very ear will be deaf to all but the inarticulate sounds of Nature.' (OM 120)

This passage suggests that maternal care(ss) is of prime significance in sustaining the difference between animals and humans: although the infant raised by animals will only be *like* an animal ('Its eye will remain glazed; its lips, the seat of expression for appetite and rage alone. The tongue will utter the

sound of Ape; the very ear will be deaf to all but the inarticulate sounds of Nature”), and will ‘never be indeed an animal’ (OM 121), in order to become an individual, a person, he must necessarily be loved, cared for, and caressed by his mother from birth. Deprived of maternal caress, his humanity remains *forever* in a dormant state, and his fate will be similar to that of the wild boy found in the forests of France who, despite all the efforts put in his later education, was never able to learn a language.¹¹ Maternal love as both spiritual and sensual thus turns out to be the possibility condition of all (later) educative process;¹² without it, our humanity will never become manifest. In other words, so that human uniqueness can ever be realized, it is indispensable that the infant be met with maternal care(ss) at its birth.

The child’s awareness of moral truths, however, comes about with the rise of self-consciousness, which is accompanied by ‘*dawning* presence of the mother’.¹³ In this second stage, signalled by the use of the first person pronoun (the child speaks of himself as ‘I’, rather than imitating others who speak about him in the third person), the infant acquires a sense of ‘alterity in itself’, and becomes a person. Self-consciousness then generates a conception of life ‘elevated into that of personēity’ (OM 134). Hence, while the ground is the love of the mother conveying the love of God, the child’s sense of individuality, and it is his capacity for self-reflection that establish his moral personhood, and his *awareness* of the divine Personēity. This is also the developmental stage, when (at the dawning presence of the mother) the father enters the picture: he will serve as a model for the Coleridge ideal of the educator, who actually elicits Personhood and the *awareness* of the moral law. However, although in *Church and State* Coleridge famously calls for a ‘national education’ to educe and elicit “the latent *man*’ 48), led by a parson modelled on the figure of the father, the *Opus Maximum* still suggests that if the mother’s love has not elicited the latent man in the first place, then education simply remains groundless.

¹¹ OM 120 n.155.

¹² See the discussion of *Logic* in Timár, *A Modern Coleridge*, 107–24.

¹³ OM134, italics added.



STC at 34

Washington Allston (1779-1843); oil, unfinished; 1806; (30 x 25 in.)

Fogg Art Museum, Harvard; MP cat. 10