**Mothering Virtues**

In this paper, I want to develop some preliminary thoughts on what virtue ethics might have to say on mothering and the virtues that are involved in being a good mother. I will start off by defending my choice of terminology of mothering virtues rather than parental virtues. Then I will say a bit about the aim of mothering and the relationship between that and the child’s flourishing. Finally, I develop some preliminary thoughts on the specific virtues involved in mothering using the example of patience. My treatment of this topic is not intended to be exhaustive. It is a very large topic, that is little discussed in the literature, and I cannot hope to give a complete account of this topic in this paper. Rather I want to set the terms for future discussions and open up the topic to further development from the perspective of virtue ethics.

**Mothering rather than parenting virtues**

The choice of mothering rather than parenting virtues may, at first, appear controversial. One might assume that the choice is made because of the following reason: mothering virtues are important because mothering is a distinct task best undertaken by female rather than male parents. Such an argument might include a claim regarding the innate suitability of women over men to parenting. Such a view may even be attributable to Aristotle, who saw women as naturally distinct from men, to such an extent as to have their own, limited due to their nature, sphere of virtues. Women, due to their natural constitution, are excluded from the flourishing life, the life of practical wisdom and the exercise of the virtues, because they are not able to participate in it[[1]](#footnote-1). Women are deficient human specimens (similar to children and slaves who are also deficient in their own ways), incapable of producing sperm, and, while useful in their own way, are secondary to men who are fully capable of leading a flourishing life[[2]](#footnote-2). Due to their natural deficiencies, women can only exhibit the partial virtues of the ruled, virtues of assistance,[[3]](#footnote-3) because in women the deliberative part of the soul lacks authority (in slaves the deliberative part is entirely lacking, while children have an incomplete deliberative part)[[4]](#footnote-4).

Aristotle’s views may appear outdated but versions of the essentialist argument that females are naturally suited to parenting persist. Such arguments follow the same kind of structure: they draw a line between men and women based on claims about their differing nature and then structure separate spheres of influence for males and females. These accounts, unlike Aristotle’s which sees women as inferior, may even see an advantage in this division, arguing that, while different, women are as good in what they are naturally suited to as men, but nonetheless that the domains of the two sexes are separate. For example, ethics of care proponents argue that mothering gives voice to women’s unique moral experiences and reasoning, a voice which is different and separate from the male ethic of justice[[5]](#footnote-5). Another version of this argument plays on the alleged importance of the hormone testosterone which is claimed to make men more prone to risk taking, leadership and a goal-oriented approach, while women, low on testosterone, are more nurturing, caring and naturally conservative in their ambitions[[6]](#footnote-6). It’s a small leap from this claim to the conclusion that women are therefore more suited to mothering and homemaking tasks. These accounts might concede, unlike Aristotle, that women’s abilities and potential are equal to those of men, but they still draw sharp lines differentiating the two domains and the proper aims of the two sexes.

There are two problems with this kind of argument. One is that the essentialist claims the division is based on may be themselves spurious, as is the case with Aristotle’s claim on the deficiency of the sex that cannot produce sperm, or the testosterone claim[[7]](#footnote-7) or with the presumption that women are naturally less rational and more self-sacrificing than men[[8]](#footnote-8). The other problem is that accepting the idea of the division of different spheres of influence for the two sexes is only one tiny step away from allowing cultural influences to shape how we evaluate these two domains. Given the sexism prevalent in most societies, labelling activities as essentially female is tantamount to disvaluing them. This denigrating of the female sphere of influence, further fuels the conclusion that women are *only* capable of engaging with female tasks and that they should be discouraged, or even forbidden from, depending on cultural norms, entering the world of men. If women are essentially different to men, and there are two, separate domains of influence, it is easy to see why one could conclude that women had better stick to the female domain and not attempt to engage in the male domain where they are doomed to failure.

My choice of focusing on mothering virtues does not reflect any of the claims above. I do not think that women are naturally (more) suited to parenting, nor that parenting is the exclusive domain of women, nor that women are more successful at parenting than men. I think the essentialist claims underlying the division of responsibility between female and male spheres of influence are at best spurious, at worst ridiculous, and, at the same time, the cultural preconceptions about the value of women influence negatively how we perceive the work women do. And yet, I have purposefully chosen to address mothering rather than parenting virtues for two reasons: the first is that the joys and burdens of parenting fall disproportionately on women – the misconceptions briefly referred to above may have much to answer for in respect to this cultural reality for many women. While women’s nature may open them to the same possibilities as men, the lived reality for most women is much more limiting. For many cultures, to be a woman is to be responsible for most mothering and homemaking work, sometimes in addition to working outside the home[[9]](#footnote-9). Effectively, because of cultural norms, parenting is mothering. The second reason is that mothering tasks are held in low esteem. ‘Women’s work’ is a disparaging term, which refers to a multitude of skilled activities involved in running a household and raising children. In the English language even the term ‘mothering’ can have negative connotations; as well as parenting, ‘mothering’ can be used as a criticism of a mother who overdoes it, who is too attentive, smothering and stifling their offspring’s independence and potential. No equivalent, negative connotation exists for ‘fathering’, fathers who ‘overdo’ parenting are simply heroes to be admired for their extraordinary parenting skills.

I want to discuss mothering virtues because mothers not only bear the brunt of parenting, but, ironically, the value of this work goes unacknowledged. I want to focus on mothers in a small effort to redress this balance because the parenting work, carried out mainly by mothers, is important and deserves dedicated attention from philosophers. Therefore, given the long history of lack of acknowledgement of the importance of mothering work, both by philosophers and by societies in general, I think it is best to think of it and discuss it as what it is: mothering rather than parenting. Not because women are innately suited to mothering, but because women are culturally relegated to mothering while, at the same time, the domain of women’s work is disparaged and considered to be inferior to the tasks undertaken by men. Should there be a cultural shift in the roles of women and men, I would be happy to change the terminology as what I have to say applies, in theory, if not in practice, to both mothers and fathers.

One may worry here that focusing attention on mothering virtues may both idealize and devalue them. Carol Gilligan has raised similar concerns about care work, which is both idealized, but at the same time devalued[[10]](#footnote-10). However, my aim is neither to idealize not to devalue mothering virtues. By focusing on mothering virtues we are examining a fundamental part of what it is to be human and to lead a flourishing life. The virtues of mothers are not an ideal conception of an impossible target but a lived reality for human beings like us; beings who have young with long term nurturing needs – but more on this later on. I am not aiming to provide an analysis of a theoretical standard, but an examination of a practical, lived reality, a wealth of knowledge and skills gained through the practice of mothering. The activity of mothering is already devalued and this is quite evident in the lack of academic attention to mothering. Despite the huge increase in interest in virtue ethics in every aspect of the theory including how virtue ethics would deal with different applied ethics issues, there is almost no discussion of mothering virtues. I hope this paper goes a small way towards redressing this balance.

**Mothering and the Child’s Flourishing**

In what follows I want to sketch out the outlines of an Aristotelian account of mothering. As we have seen, this will not based on what Aristotle thought about mothering, but rather will be an exploration of what a virtue ethical account of mothering might be like.

The first thing to note about mothering is that it is relational, it involves a relationship between the mother and the child. The relationship begins with an initial commitment by the mother. I think there are interesting issues regarding the initial nature of this commitment, for example, the differences in mothering originating from an accidental or even a forced event as opposed to a conscious decision to become a mother, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. There are also interesting complications regarding the termination of mothering, e.g. it seems to me that a mother who looses a child can be said to continue to be a mother despite her bereavement, whereas a mother who abandons a child is no longer its mother, but again there is no space to deal with these ideas here.

In addition, there are further questions about the nature of the mother’s commitment to the child, e.g. the extent of the commitment, whether there are any circumstances under which one can justifiably break the commitment, etc. Rosalind McDougall understands commitment as a parenting virtue[[11]](#footnote-11), however I am not sure this is entirely right. For commitment to be a virtue it would need to be a stable and reliable character disposition to respond committedly to situations that require commitment. However, the commitment on the part of the mother does not seem dispositional, but rather it is an instance or an act of, or a choice to make a commitment. The act of commitment, by definition, involves future dedication, but that by itself doesn’t make it a virtue, in the same way that the act of engagement involves future undertaking to get married but isn’t a virtue. Nor does this act of committing conform to a gradual, developmental model essential to the virtues, that is, it is not plausible to say that committing to bringing up a child is a disposition one develops over time by exercising the relevant skill, habituating the relevant emotions and choosing in accordance with the right reason. We can accept that mothering ought to involve a commitment to bringing up a child and that this commitment should, ceteris paribus, persist over time without necessarily seeing this kind of commitment as a virtue.

For our purposes it suffices to say that mothering involves an act of committing to the child, a special commitment to act as mother to the child. This commitment involves a special kind of affection, one that is oriented towards benefiting the child for his own sake. Aristotle uses this idea of the special affection mothers have for their children, an affection for the sake of the child, as a basis for his analysis of friendship. A friend is a person who wishes good for the other and for the friend’s sake, just like a mother wishes for the good of her child[[12]](#footnote-12). In the same passage, Aristotle points out another similarity between friends and mothers: both share in the sorrow and the joy felt by the friend/child. This seems to be an extension of wishing good for the sake of the child; if this good is thwarted the mother feels the same pain as the child, if this good is achieved, the mother shares in the joy.

However, we should be weary of carrying the analogy too far because the mother/child relationship differs significantly from the relationship between friends. The difference goes beyond the idea of lack of equality;[[13]](#footnote-13) mothers and children are not merely unequal partners like friends might be, but the child is unformed, and this is a crucial detail. One of the most important characteristics of children, for the purposes of our discussion, is that they are immature moral agents, who undertake a character developmental journey and begin this journey unformed (other than by natural tendencies and genetic make-up). Friends do not stand to each other in the same relation. While moral progression and the shaping of one friend in light of the values of the other may be part of friendship[[14]](#footnote-14) (and arguably, must be part of perfect friendships), friends, unlike children, arrive to the friendship with a certain level of moral maturity. Because of this, the influence of the mother goes beyond the influence of the friend; she guides the character development journey both from the beginning and early when initial experiences are particularly and profoundly formative. The mother’s influence is stronger, and its effect is felt at a more fundamentally impressionable stage than the influence of one friend on another. Not only that, but the choice of friend is made freely by both parties, presumably, in the case of perfect friendships, based on mutually admirable characteristics and the sharing in the noble and the good, something which does not apply to mothering. Mothers do not choose their children - even though they may choose to have children in the first place - and children have no say in the choice of mothers. In this sense mothering is a unique relationship and we must be weary of carrying the analogy with friendship too far.

Aristotle tells us that every activity and every pursuit aims at some good,[[15]](#footnote-15) so what is the aim of mothering? Given its relational structure and the special affection mothers feel for their children, an initial assumption is that the aim of mothering is the good of the child. For virtue ethics the good that all things aim at is the eudaimon life, the life lived in accordance with virtue[[16]](#footnote-16), so one could argue by extension that the aim of mothering is the eudaimon life of the child, the flourishing life. This claim raises two possible areas of discussion; the first is how is the mother’s own flourishing related to that of her child? There are interesting question here regarding the compatibility of a life of mothering with other aims, the special nature of a relationship that requires the mother to do what is best for the child and the extent to which the child’s flourishing contributes to the mother’s flourishing. However, I will set these aside in favour of considering the second area of discussion; namely, what is involved in ensuring a child flourishes?

A flourishing life is a life lived in accordance with the virtues. The virtues in turn are purposeful dispositions, involving a choice to act in accordance with the right reason. The nature of the choice is important, virtue must be chosen, knowingly and for its own sake. Mistaken or accidental choices that merely result in the right action do not count as virtue, nor does the right action chosen for the wrong motives[[17]](#footnote-17). For our purposes this means that the flourishing life lies in the choice of the person leading it. While education, habituation, role modelling, external influences, opportunity for practice and other external circumstances all contribute to (or thwart) the road to virtue, the choice to do the right act for the right reason and involving the right emotion, remains in the hands of the person choosing[[18]](#footnote-18). Therefore, the role of mothers is, by definition, limited to a supportive one. Mothers may nurture, support and create the right conditions for virtue, but to lead a flourishing life, the child must, eventually as a mature adult, choose virtue, knowingly and for its own sake. No mother can choose virtue on behalf of her child, the flourishing life is the life of the practice of virtue and the child (or the adult he will become) must exercise the virtues for himself.

Because of all this, there are two ways in which one can go wrong when thinking about mothering and flourishing. The first is to become confused over who is responsible for what, and the second is to lose track of the claim that character traits are constitutive of as well as conducive to flourishing. I will examine each in turn. Rosalind McDougal is one of the few authors who discuss parental virtues. Consider her starting claim:

The general neo-Aristotelian view described in the previous section involves the underlying assumption that the ultimate purpose of human agents is to bring about human flourishing. Defining right action in terms of character traits that tend to make human lives go well assumes that agents ought to be in the business of promoting human flourishing. Thus, in order to transfer the neo-Aristotelian claims to the parental context specifically, we need to make a structurally equivalent assumption in the parental context, that is that the primary purpose of parenthood is the flourishing of the child.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Now there seems to be at least one, distorted claim in these assumptions that resembles a consequentialist theory rather than a neo-Aristotelian one. The ultimate good for human beings is the flourishing life, the exercise of virtue, but this is an individual end for each human being. If flourishing is the exercise of virtue and the virtues involve choice, then each agent has to make her own choice each time the particulars of the situation demand it. This is quite a different claim from a demand to maximise flourishing for others or generally maximize flourishing in the world. It is impossible for a virtuous agent to bring about human flourishing in general or in others because it is not within her power to do so. Each agent must choose virtue knowingly and for its own sake, so, by definition, the flourishing of others cannot be one’s purpose. Therefore, the primary purpose of mothering cannot be the flourishing of the child as that choice belongs exclusively to the child.

Sonya Charles argues along similar lines that “…the primary goal of parenting is the child’s flourishing,”[[20]](#footnote-20) but this would make parenting impossible. The goal of parenting cannot be the child’s flourishing because the only one who can make the choice, the Aristotelian *prohairesis*, is the child himself. Now, one might object that I am being uncharitable here, a small modification could make this argument work: the mother is not responsible for the child’s flourishing but she can aim at creating conditions that facilitate this flourishing. On the one hand, I think this is right, this is the way to understanding mothering and I will say more on this below. On the other hand, saying that the mother’s primary purpose is to bring about the child’s flourishing is quite a different argument from saying that mothers should create conditions that are most conducive to the child flourishing. The second argument leaves the choice to lead a flourishing life up to the child, who is also responsible for determining what constitutes a flourishing life for him, in his particular circumstances and faced with the situations he is faced with. This is a significant difference: part of leading a eudaimon life is the shaping of one’s life by one’s choices, choices which reflect the particulars of the situation which include one’s unique viewpoint. If a mother aims at the child’s flourishing she takes over his choices and the shape his life will have. If the mother creates conditions conducive to flourishing she supports the development of a flourishing life to the extent that she is capable of, and increases the chances her child will make the right choices, but the choices and the form of the flourishing life remain the child’s.

Thinking that the aim of motherhood is to promote the child’s flourishing also involves a second distorted claim. The second distorted claim is that the virtues are solely conducive to flourishing. This is a consequentialist type of reasoning, which assumes that the child needs the virtues as a means to flourishing. McDougall defines the virtuous person as one who has character traits conducive to flourishing,[[21]](#footnote-21) making it appear as if the reason the virtuous person has for exercising the virtues is in order for her to flourish. But this is not a very Aristotelian line of argument. The virtuous person exercises the virtues because this is what is appropriate to do in light of the noble and the good. The virtues are *constitutive* of the eudaimon life not merely conducive to it. To live the life of virtue *is* to flourish, the virtues do not contribute to flourishing in an incremental, consequentialist manner.

Additionally, this distortion leads naturally to another one. If, according to McDougall and Charles, the virtuous person possesses her character traits because they are conducive to flourishing then the role of the parent is to possess those “character traits conducive to the flourishing of the child”[[22]](#footnote-22). So the parent must develop good character traits in herself so she is able to develop good character traits in her child, so that he in turn can live a flourishing life and, in an extension of this argument, the child can now benefit “…the wellbeing of whichever wider communities the child is part of”[[23]](#footnote-23). The ultimate aim of parenting in this line of consequentialist reasoning is now the benefit of the wider community.

McDougal’s treatment of her proposed virtue of acceptingness is similarly problematic. She argues that

[b]ecause a child’s characteristics are unpredictable, acceptance is a parental virtue. The flourishing of the child is facilitated by the parent’s embracing of the child regardless of his or her specific characteristics. Unless the parents act acceptingly toward the child’s characteristics, the child’s contentment and self-esteem, and the parent’s ability to enjoy that child, are all in jeopardy.[[24]](#footnote-24)

However, this account of acceptingness is untargeted, it doesn’t give any guidance on which characteristics of the child the parent ought to accept and which to reject, which in turn makes shaping, nurturing and encouraging the child in a certain direction problematic as the direction is vague. If the parent ought to accept every characteristic the child happens to have, character education, development and progress are pointless. I think that perhaps McDougal confuses here a legitimate demand for unconditional love on the part of mothers, with a proposed virtue of acceptingness. One could argue that mothers have an underlying, unconditional love for their children, a love that remains strong regardless of the specific characteristics of this child, but this love is compatible with a critical reflection on the child’s temperament. This unconditional love does not mean unconditional acceptance, and it is compatible with recognizing that some of the child’s natural tendencies out to be extinguished, moderated or guided in another direction, in light of the noble and the good. It also means that the choices of the adult the child becomes can be open to criticism by the parent, while nonetheless holding on to the underlying feeling of love.

When McDougal attempts to define the limits of her virtue of acceptingness she inevitably falls back on consequentialist considerations. For example, she claims that “…violent behaviour inhibits the child’s ability to form relationships with others, compromising his or her capacity to flourish and so would not be perceived acceptingly by a virtuous parent”[[25]](#footnote-25). We wouldn’t expect an Aristotelian theory to issue a blank ban on violent behaviour. Violent behaviour may be closer to the mean of excess and less likely to be justified but to know if violent behaviour is the right response we would need to know the particulars of the situation. Some situations, towards some people, at some times, require a violent response, and in those situations violent behaviour is the right behaviour. What determines this is practical wisdom, the skilled ability to judge morally relevant particulars, a skill

which is exercised in light of the noble and the good. For example, punching Nazis may be the right thing to do in some circumstances and the child should be encouraged to see punching Nazis in those circumstances as the right thing to do. If punching Nazis compromises the child’s ability to form relationships with Nazis, this wouldn’t be a problem. If doing the right thing compromises one’s relationships with people who cannot see this as the right thing, this is mainly a problem for those who exhibit blinkered perception, not for the person doing the right thing. McDougal falls back on consequentialist considerations to make sense of her parental qualities. Given this kind of argument there are only two options: either bite the bullet and acknowledge that this is now a consequentialist argument and work on justifying the claim that maximizing the community’s welfare, forming relationships with others, etc. should be one’s ultimate aims, or reconsider the relationship between the mother’s purpose and the child’s flourishing along Aristotelian grounds. I will attempt to do the latter.

The virtuous mother possesses those character traits that are an expression of the highest function of human beings, i.e. an expression of reason. These character traits, the excellences in reasoning, are *constitutive* of the flourishing life; to flourish is to act in accordance with reason. Mothers can wish for a similar life for their children, in fact given their admiration of the noble and the good hoping that their children will share in the noble and the good is the central hope of mothering, but they cannot bring it about directly, and certainly not through the maximisation of character traits or their good consequences. What mothers can do is create conditions conducive to the development of appropriate character traits. Aristotle makes this argument explicitly for fathers. He tells us that in cases where the state neglects the moral education of its citizens “it would be the duty of the individual to assist his own children and friends to attain virtue, or even if not able to do so successfully, at all events to make this his aim.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The role of the father, according to this quote, is limited both in its nature to assistance, and limited in terms of its probability for success given the other factors that affect character development. Whether these character traits do eventually develop in the mature moral agent will depend on many other external factors, many of them subject to luck, and on the agent’s own choices. The mother’s influence then is potentially substantial, but it is limited both in scope and in nature.

Consider here a possible comparison between the role of the state and the role of a mother. For Aristotle the state is a state by virtue of being “an association intended to enable its members, in their households and kinships, to live *well.*”[[27]](#footnote-27) The state is not responsible for the choices of its citizens but it is a collection of cooperative citizens who come together with the purpose of creating conditions favourable to the development of eudaimonia. Similarly, we could argue that mothers are mothers in virtue of having a relationship with their children intended to enable them to live well. Mothers as enablers is quite a different conception of mothers as maximisers. The purpose of mothering cannot be the flourishing of the child, despite the claims of McDougall and Charles, because this is neither an aim mothers can bring about nor one they should attempt to bring about. The choices involved in the exercise of the virtue remain the adult’s the child will become and if these choices are not made in a genuine manner by the person making them then they do not count as his. The role of mothers is to influence circumstances within their limited sphere of influence in a positive manner, that is, in a manner that nurtures rather than hinders that development of virtuous character traits. Aristotle warns us that the mind of a person who lives in accordance with passion cannot be changed by argument, he is not amenable to the attractions of reason because he has not been prepared to receive them. Instead “…the soil must have been previously tilled if it is to foster the seed, the mind of the pupil must have been prepared by the cultivation of habits, so as to like and to dislike aright.[[28]](#footnote-28)” It seems to me that the cultivation of this ‘natural affinity for virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base’[[29]](#footnote-29) is the role of mothers.

It is important to note here that the influence of mothers is only one of the many possible factors that can go towards influencing the moral development of a child. A number of other external goods, not least of all the influence of fathers, will be crucial in orienting or failing to orient the child towards the noble and the good. The precise influence of a particular mother over the development of a particular child will depend on the circumstances and a decision on what is appropriate in each case cannot be made in advance of knowing all the particulars and their combination in this situation. This is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of practical application based on a skill of moral perception and practical judgement. Given the wide range of factors that influence character development, from educators, to peers, to role models, to opportunities for habituation, to the cultivation of emotions, to situational variables that introduce temptations and challenges, etc., it is plausible to say that the influence of mothers on children is one of many factors. However, the extent of that particular influence will vary depending on circumstances and some of these circumstances, which cannot always or completely be controlled by mothers, may place an unfair burden on mothers. For example, just as an absent, disinterested and disengaged father may place the financial burden for raising a child entirely on the mother, an absent, disinterested and disengaged father will place the parenting burden for raising a child entirely on the mother. In general, given the wide variety of factors that affect character development, it is unlikely that mothering will be the only influence on a child, however, the scope and influence of a particular mother’s parenting over her child cannot be determined in advance of knowing all the other details of the situation. Without doubt circumstances that place a particularly heavy burden on mothers are unfair both to them and their children, but considering the ramifications of such situations further is beyond the scope of this paper.

We will now go on to consider what is involved in creating conditions that are conducive to the development of the virtues and how this aim is limited in its scope and nature.

**Mothering Virtues**

If the virtues are constitutive of the eudaimon life and virtues are chosen knowingly and for their own sake, the mother cannot choose virtue for her child. What she can do is create conditions that nurture and support the development of virtue and avoid circumstances that hinder and obstruct virtue. In the remainder of this paper I want to ask what kind of virtues does the mother herself need in order to facilitate the development of virtue in her child; which character traits in the mother create a positive developmental environment for the child. These may be specific iterations of virtues Aristotle has already discussed or they may be new virtues that are relevant to mothering. Positing virtues which are unique to the domain of mothering or revealing new domains for existing virtues is entirely in accord with Aristotle’s approach to enumerating the virtues. The virtues are underpinned by practical wisdom, the skilled cognitive/affective judgement of particulars in light of the noble and the good. The particulars and their possible combinations are *apeiron*, which refers to “the uncircumscribable range of potentially noticeable features and the consequently unlimited possibilities of action that inhere in each situation.”[[30]](#footnote-30) If the possibilities of particulars are infinite then new virtues or new applications of existing virtues will be relevant in new circumstances. In the same way that we can discuss the kinds of virtues needed in times of global climate catastrophe even though Aristotle lived in times of climate stability, we can discuss mothering virtues even though Aristotle was mistaken about the essentialist nature of women.

Not only are the virtues relative to particulars that may have different degrees of relevance at different times, but they may also differ from person to person. Aristotle himself acknowledged this in his discussion of magnificence. The virtue of magnificence can only be exercised by those who have considerable wealth, and Aristotle was able to accommodate that peculiarity[[31]](#footnote-31). The circumstances that generate the wealth also generate choices with respect to what one does with this wealth. But the scope of the choices is limited to those who possess the wealth, in the same way that mothering choices are, unproblematically, limited to mothers[[32]](#footnote-32). While Aristotle presents us with a list of virtues then, this list is not intended to be exhaustive. It is indicative of responses generated to particular situations, by particular people, in specific times and cultures. If one’s individual instantiation of the eudaimon life includes mothering then the particular circumstances of being a mother to this child generate particular demands. Becoming a mother is an opportunity to exercise virtues relevant to mothering in the same way that becoming wealthy is an opportunity to exercise virtues relevant to the spending of wealth.

The characteristics of the human infant generate particulars that are of relevance to our question. Humans have a long period of immaturity, both in terms of their physical competences and ability to care for themselves independently, and in terms of their moral maturity and ability to make meaningful choices. Human infants are dependent on their carers for a long, developmental period. In order to reach independence, they need a nurturing environment, provided by an adult who can provide for their needs. These needs include basic needs for nourishment, shelter, sanitation, etc. but also more complex needs like protection from violence and abuse, stability, emotional support, access to education, and so on. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; it is merely indicative of some of the needs that are generated by the child’s long period of immaturity and the requirements they place on mothers to meet them[[33]](#footnote-33).

During this same period of immaturity, children will take the first steps in the long process of moral character development. The first step in this process is the Aristotelian requirement for a good upbringing. A good upbringing provides surroundings that encourage virtue, so that the child acts virtuously even before he comes to understand the requirements of virtue[[34]](#footnote-34). This is developmental move from acting virtuously because one is conditioned to do so, to coming to understand the rational basis behind the virtuous actions and choosing them for their own sake. To begin with the child must be exposed to the right kinds of situations. Aristotle tells us that

It is by taking part in transactions with our fellow-men that some of us become just and others unjust; by acting in dangerous situations and forming a habit of fear or of confidence we become courageous or cowardly. And the same holds good of our dispositions with regard to the appetites, and anger; some men become temperate and gentle, others profligate and irascible, by actually comporting themselves in one way or the other in relation to those passions.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The child’s contacts with other people are an opportunity to practice justice, situations that provoke fear or pleasure are opportunities to learn to manage fear and pleasure appropriately, and when children find themselves provoked to anger they can practice developing a calm disposition.

In addition, being exposed to situations that require a particular response will, gradually, allow the child to develop discriminating capacities, to come to see certain kinds of situations as requiring a particular response and to, eventually, come to understand aspects of these requirements to act virtuously. The role of mothers is to help children construe situations in a particular way, as requiring a particular response as well as to help them develop the right emotions required for moral perception and moral motivation[[36]](#footnote-36). Moral perception, the ability to see salient moral features of situations, perceiving their relevance and importance, is an ability that is developed incrementally. One doesn’t just come to understand justice, rather one catches glimpses of the virtue in different situations, as well as coming to understand exceptions, nuances, clarifications, omissions, distinctions, etc through the gradual exposure to instances of the virtue and the attempts to practice it. An understanding of global inequalities starts with being told to share the precious red truck and having this advice repeated, explained and encouraged until it becomes part of what one does on the road to becoming part of who one is. It is the role of mothers to help their children see the world in a particular way, as containing morally salient features which provoke appropriate emotions and generate the right reasons to act.

The development of the right emotions and the right reason involves a long period of habituation and a move from doing to understanding. There are a number of accounts in the literature of how this move is made, but I think that the most convincing ones involve a gradual process, which involves a cohesive development of both emotions and reasons such that the child comes to see particulars in the light of the noble and the good[[37]](#footnote-37). The child is taught to habituate himself in ‘the that’, coming to see the world in a particular way, that is, as requiring a just, kind or temperate response and therefore understanding ‘the because’ of virtue[[38]](#footnote-38). Moral education in the early stages then is very much a process of guiding the child to becoming sensitive to the world in a particular way, that is, to seeing salient particulars, to having the appropriate emotional reactions to circumstances and to shaping himself into the sort of person who can do all this. The role of mothers then is to create conditions that orient the child towards the noble and the good and make it possible for him to be habituated in virtue. Repetition and habituation are pointless if they have a mechanical, unreflective nature. Habitual learning should be goal oriented, in this case towards the noble and the good, so that successive attempts are seen as successive trials towards the goal. Not a mindless repetition of the same action, but a process of guided learning, where the child learns from his mistakes, responds to failure with improvement, begins to understand differences, etc[[39]](#footnote-39). The role of the mother is to guide this process.

**The Virtue of Patience**

We will now consider how all these ideas work in the case of a particular virtue, the virtue of patience. For Aristotle, patience is a virtue concerned with the appropriate application of the feeling of anger. The virtue of patience has not seen much attention from Aristotelian scholars. Righteous indignation is sometimes discussed in the context of the doctrine of the mean as an example of an appropriate amount of anger which is also a large amount of anger[[40]](#footnote-40), but it seems, as Aristotle points out, that most cases of patience will tend to be found closer to the vice of deficiency, that is, lack of anger[[41]](#footnote-41). As one would expect the virtue of patience is not the same reaction in every circumstance, but a discriminating skill, a feeling of anger “…on the right grounds and against the right persons, and also in the right manner and at the right moment and for the right length of time”[[42]](#footnote-42). So the kinds of circumstances that might require the exercise of patience will be diverse. What I would like to do in the remainder of the paper is highlight some circumstances in which the virtue of patience is exercised in a distinctive way in the domain of mothering. This is a particular iteration of the virtue of patience, one that is relevant to the mother/child relationship, and one that has seen almost no attention in the literature.

Here are some examples of the kinds of circumstances that require patience in the mothering domain: A mother faced with having to look after a nine month old baby who is going through, yet another, sleep regression, while entertaining and keeping safe her other young child, will need endurance, both physical and mental, in order to make it through the day (and night) with good grace. A mother who has to deal with a self-centred young child (as most young children naturally are) will have to display consistency in applying boundaries and consequences. A mother who bears the brunt of the child’s stress and anxiety because home is where the child feels safe to let these emotions out, will need perseverance in the face of rejection. A mother shaping a different relationship with a teenage child will have to exercise emotional forbearance in the face of provocation.

I have used different terms to talk about patience, such as endurance, consistency, perseverance and forbearance, because of the multifaceted nature of this virtue[[43]](#footnote-43). Aristotle uses a place holder name for patience, *praotis*, and warns us that there no recognized name for the mean in respect to anger[[44]](#footnote-44). This is because there are many iterations of patience and this may be why patience hasn’t received the attention it deserves, as we may be less aware of these separate instances being part of the same virtue. Perhaps the virtue of patience has been overlooked because we have not recognised the many instances in which it is relevant. And yet, it is a crucial mothering virtue. The mother whose anger is frequently misapplied, who becomes apathetic rather than enduring, risks becoming neglectful. The mother who is inconsistent with respect to demands and punishments, causes confusion and instability. The mother who becomes defensive in the face of understandable rejections gives the wrong emotional example. A mother who reacts harshly and indignantly in the face of provocation, risks further provocations and the escalation of a situation that should have been managed more constructively. An environment governed by neglect, confusion, instability, harshness or apathy is not conducive to the development of virtue and may even push the child towards vice. The mother’s moderation of her anger must be appropriate to the situation and the person; in mothering she will come across great provocation to go wrong, because of physical factors such as lack of sleep, or because of the relentless or mundane or repetitive nature of some mothering tasks, or because of the challenges inherent in dealing with an immature human being. The circumstances of mothering as such that they put great pressure on the exercise of patience, if the mother fails to be patient, her impatience is a vice that impacts severely on the child, because it creates conditions that push the child towards vice rather than encouraging him towards virtue.

Determining the right amount of anger appropriate for each situation will depend to a great extent on the person whom the anger is directed at. In the case of mothering one’s anger is directed towards a child and because children are immature human beings special considerations apply. In order to know how much anger is the mean, or appropriate, amount a mother has to know her child both as an individual and as a being in the early stages of a long, moral development process. Consider this example: a young girl repeatedly interrupts her mother’s conversation with a friend to draw attention to her own achievements. If an adult were to behave in this way we would consider them to be rude, but we don’t make the same character judgement about the child. The child is unaware of the importance of privacy, respecting other people’s needs, not drawing undue attention to oneself, etc. and she is unable to regulate her feelings regarding her own exaggerated self-importance in relation to the concerns and needs of others. These reactions may be exaggerated by natural individual flaws of temperament, but they are, to an extent, shared by all children who are at this early moral developmental stage. Being self-centred is part and parcel of being a young human. And yet, the child is not rude because she lacks understanding of the context and impact of her actions and she shouldn’t be judged to be rude unless she turns into an adult who behaves in a similar manner[[45]](#footnote-45). A mother cannot exercise the virtue of patience unless she has an appreciation of the developmental limitations of young children as well as an understanding of the individual make-up of her child, e.g. the extent to which the child is being wilful or mischievous in acting this way, what kinds of strategies (distraction, time to calm down, attention, explanation) will be effective in changing the child’s behaviour, etc. Patience is not pure indulgence here, it is a moderated response, once which takes into account the origins and motives of the disruptive behaviour, one which can develop effective strategies for dealing successfully with the behaviour the moment it occurs and one which prevents the behaviour from continuing to the point where it becomes an ingrained characteristic and the child turns into a rude and self-serving adult.

Knowing one’s child is not a virtue in itself, rather it is an ability that underpins mothering virtues like patience. A similar ability of knowing and understanding others underpins other virtues, such as liberality, magnificence, friendship and justice, all of which may involve an assessment of the motives and intentions of others. A number of abilities underpin the virtues from moral perception, to moral imagination, to self-knowledge, to empathy, to practical know-how relevant to different situations. Knowing and understanding others is of particular relevance to patience in mothering. Anger in a child may be the result of stress from having to contain oneself and behave well in school all day long, or the result of unmanageable feelings of jealousy and love towards a new sibling, or the result of a struggle to gain more independence, or the result of a character flaw that leads to exaggerated reactions. Being able to correctly understand what is provoking the anger is crucial in knowing the correct response, one which will create a positive environment for the child to succeed in moving on from this inappropriate reaction.

Finally, one last function for patience, along with other mothering virtues, is that it serves as a role model for the child. Observing a patient mother, being the recipient of patient reactions and benefiting from the exercise of the virtue will help the child come to understand what is involved in being patient himself and its relation to the noble and the good. Role modelling is one of the most compelling ways in which we catch these all-important glimpses of the noble and the good, which, over time, contribute to a fuller understanding of the demands of virtue.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have focused on mothering virtues, not because of some essentialist claim imposing a division between female and male spheres of influence, but rather because the tasks of parenting fall disproportionately on women and are, precisely because they are carried out by women, held in low esteem. My focus on mothering virtues rather than parenting virtues is an attempt to redress this balance.

I have tried to develop a virtue ethical account of mothering, starting off with the observation that mothering is relational, it begins with a commitment to mother and involves a special kind of affection towards the child for his own sake. We saw how the mother/child relationship is similar to friendships, but we should not take this analogy too far because children are immature moral agents so the influence of the mother goes beyond that of friends.

In ensuring the child flourishes we must be weary of drifting into consequentialist justifications and we should recognize that the adult the child becomes is the only person who can make the choice to lead a virtuous life. Therefore, the role of mothers is limited to guiding, shaping and influencing the conditions that affect a child’s moral development and doing so in light of the noble and the good is the exercise of mothering virtues. The kinds of virtues relevant to mothering are the ones that apply to its specific circumstances in the same way that the virtue of magnificence is relevant to those who own large amounts of wealth. The child’s long process of moral character development begins with a good upbringing. Crucial to a good upbringing is exposure to the right kinds of situations that offer glimpses of the noble and the good, the development of discriminating capacities and the habituation of emotions.

Finally, I illustrated how all this might come together using the virtue of patience. Patience is a virtue regulating the exercise of anger. It is a discriminating skill that involves the appropriate response with respect to anger depending on different circumstances. It is also a multi-faceted virtue that involves endurance, consistency, perseverance and forbearance. Mothering involves multiple instances of the exercise of the virtue of patience, it involves great provocation to go wrong with respect to this virtue and failing to be patient can distort the child’s development by creating conditions that hinder virtue. Patience is a skill that can only be exercised with knowledge of the child it is targeted towards and this knowledge of another person is not a virtue, but an ability that underpins several interpersonal virtues. Finally, patience serves as a role model for the child in his journey to discover which virtues are relevant to him and the circumstances he finds himself in, as well as in his effort to shape his flourishing life.

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2. Aristotle *De* *Anima*, Book 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mariska Leunissen, *From Natural Virtue to Moral Virtue in Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Chapter 6 in particular gives a detailed account of these ideas in Aristotle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aristotle, Politics, 1260a 10-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, Carole Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cordelia Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, London: Icon Books, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cordelia Fine, *Testosterone Rex: unmaking he myths of our gendered minds* (London: Icon Books ltd., 2017) and *Delusions of Gender* (London: Icon Books ltd., 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a critique of the essentialist claim at the heart of the ethics of care see for example Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, New York: Basic Books, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender*, London: Icon Books ltd., 2010, chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Carol Gilligan, “Looking Back to Look forward”, Classics@ 9. Washington DC: Centre for Hellenic Studies, 2011. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out this possible objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rosalind McDougal, “Acting Parentally”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31:601-605, 2005 and “Parental Virtue”, *Bioethics*, 21(4):181-190, 2007. I will continue to use the term ‘parenting’ if referring to the work of other authors who use the term themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, 1166a-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Charles relies on the friendship analogy to illuminate the mother/child relationship, and while she acknowledges the lack of equality in mothering relationships, I don’t think she goes quite far enough in appreciating the limitations of the analogy. Sonya Charles, *Parents and Virtues*, Latham: Lexington Books, Kindle edition, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On the significance of role modelling in friendship and its differences to role modelling in children see Andreas Vakirtzis, “Mimesis, Friendship and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics”, *Rhizomata*, 3(2): 125-142, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, 1094a 1 -3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, Book 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For all this see Aristotle *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, Book 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For more on the role of reason and choice in Aristotle see Nafsika Athanassoulis, *Morality, Moral Luck and Responsibility*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rosalind McDougall, “Parental Virtue”, *Bioethics*, 21(4):181-190, 2007, p.184. See also Rosalind McDougall, “Acting Parentally”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31:601-605, 2005, p.603. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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27. Aristotle *Politics* 1280b 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, 1179b 20-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics*, 1179b 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009, p.312. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 4 sec.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For more on this with respect to magnificence see Nafsika Athanassoulis, “A Defence of the Aristotelian Virtue of Magnificence”, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 50(4): 781-795, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. These demands are not placed exclusively on mothers, they could burden equally fathers, other family members, educators, the state, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics* 1103b 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Aristotle, *Nichomachean* *Ethics* 1103b 14-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For more on all this see Nacny Sherman, , *The Fabric of Character*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. One of the authors who sees the process of habituation as a mechanical one is Howard J. Curzer, “Aristotle’s painful path to virtue”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 40:141-62, 2002, but I tend to agree with authors who view this process as a gradual development of reason, such as Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989 and Ioannis Vasiliou, “The role of good upbringing in Aristotle’s ethics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,*  56(4):771-97, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. These terms were introduced by Miles F. Byrneat, “Aristotle on learning to be good”, in Amelie O. Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. For more on this see Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 178-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. James O. Urmson, « Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean », *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 10(3):223-230, 1973, p.225. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics* 1125b 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics* 1125b 30-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Pianalto develops a similarly multi-faceted account of patience, although it is not entirely clear how all these different aspects of patience come under one heading. For Aristotle, the notion of the noble and the good works to unify different aspects of the virtue. Matthew Pianalto, *On Patience*, Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2016, ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Aristotle, *Nicomachean* *Ethics* 1125b 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. A similar example regarding a child who invades a private space is made by Benson in order to discuss freedom and responsibility, Paul Benson, “Freedom and Value”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 84(9):465-486, 1987, pp.476-8. Benson’s example is discussed in terms of virtue ethics by Sonya Charles, *Parents and Virtues*, Latham: Lexington Books, Kindle edition, 2019, loc. 266-295. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)