**Is it okay to let my child be stung by a wasp? The perils of formulating a moderate account of maternal duty**.

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I recently told my uncle that I thought I had come up with a way of showing that a mother who saw her child about to be stung by a wasp should try to intervene. I’d been working on this for several months. My uncle did not look very impressed. To be fair, it doesn’t sound like a very impressive result. Surely it is just utterly obviously that mothers should protect their children from wasps?

So why had this taken me months of work? I am trying to come up with a moderate account of maternal duties. Maternal duties pick out what a mother is morally required to do for her children. In doing so, I’ve discovered that it is harder than it might at first appear to come up with a moderate account of maternal duties that recognises ‘obvious’ duties like the duty not to let your child be stung by a wasp. I’ve also found that in the context of maternal duties, even more than in other contexts, we need be cautious before we accept our judgments about what seems obvious. Yet, it is absolutely vital to come up with a good moderate account of maternal duties – because doing so is necessary to protect vulnerable women and children.

*How it all started: Philosophy of Pregnancy, Birth and Early Motherhood, The ‘Mommy Wars’ and Bad Models of Maternal Duties*

My work on maternal duties is part of a larger project on the philosophy of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood at the University of Southampton. This project is led by Elselijn Kingma and myself. We are looking at metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues surrounding pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. Originally this project was focused on pregnancy. Elselijn explores fascinating questions about the metaphysics of pregnancy: should we see the foetus as something that sits inside the pregnant woman (like a tiny person in a spaceship) or as part of her (like a tail on a cat)? I argued that pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience: there is some knowledge, which is relevant to the ethics of abortion, which you cannot fully grasp if you have not been pregnant. However, my interests started to expand beyond pregnancy into early motherhood itself. I became convinced that we, as a society, seriously overestimate maternal duties and that this has bad effects on the wellbeing of new mothers and their neonates.

For example, a confused understanding of maternal duties contributes to the toxic atmosphere surrounding decisions about whether to feed new babies breastmilk or infant formula. We find it very difficult to simultaneously acknowledge the health effects of different feeding decisions and to avoid implying that mothers who use formula should feel guilty.

[New mothers report](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19602520) feeling shamed for not breastfeeding, and constantly having to defend their use of infant formula from strangers on social media or in public places like cafes. Coming at a time when new mothers are extremely vulnerable, such guilt and shame can have devastating consequences.

I’ve spoken to many health professionals and parent supporters who are all too aware of these vulnerabilities. They agonise about how to inform parents without inadvertently hurting them. They want to support all parents but they are unsure how to do it.

Something that might help would be if we recognised that the health benefits of breastfeeding give mothers a *reason*, but not a *defeasible duty* to breastfeed. *Defeasible duties* are associated with *guilt*, *blame* and *requirements to justify* our behaviour. If you have a duty to do something then you are required to do it and if you don’t then, other things being equal, you should feel guilty and people with appropriate standing can blame you. A defeasible duty is just something that is a duty unless it is outweighed or undermined. If you have a defeasible duty to do something, then you are required to do it unless there is some good reason not to do it that is strong enough to over-ride the defeasible duty. Failure to comply with your defeasible duties requires justification. If you don’t do what you have a defeasible duty to do, others are entitled to ask you why you didn’t do it. If you don’t have a good enough justification or excuse, they can blame you and you are supposed to feel guilty.

So, for example, I have a defeasible duty to turn up to teach my lectures. This duty can be outweighed. If I get trapped under a falling tree on my way to the lecture and would need to gnaw off my own leg to get there in time, then it’s okay for me to skip it. However, I need some good justification or excuse for not turning up. If I don’t turn up, I can expect to receive lots of emails from my students asking me where I was. If I say that I just felt like staying in bed, they would blame me and I should feel guilty.

Reasons function quite differently to duties. Reasons make our behaviour good or rational or reasonable without (necessarily) connecting to guilt, blame or requirements to justify. If I have a good reason to do something, then it can make sense for me to make serious sacrifices or overcome significant difficulties to do. It might be that others should support my efforts, either by praising me or by helping me. But if I have a reason without a defeasible duty, then others do not get to press me to justify my behaviour or to blame me. For example, I have a reason to run a marathon to raise money for cancer research. It would make sense for me to make serious sacrifices to do this and even to rearrange my life to make it happen. My friends and family should encourage me, and perhaps even help me out by e.g. looking after my children while I train. Unfortunately, it is looking increasingly unlikely that I will ever run a marathon to raise money for cancer research. And I don’t have to justify this to anyone. I don’t have to feel guilty even if I don’t have a really good reason. I don’t have to feel guilty even if, as I suspect, running a marathon would overall be both good for me and good for cancer research.

So, back to how we feed babies. We currently act as if the health benefits of breastfeeding give mothers a defeasible duty to breastfeed: we treat mothers as if they are required to breastfeed unless they have a good enough reason not to; others feel entitled to ask mothers to justify their decision not to breastfeed and act as though, if the mother cannot give a good enough justification, she should feel guilty and others can blame her. Instead we should recognise that the health benefits of breastfeeding give mothers reason to breastfeed: a mother who makes considerable sacrifices to breastfeed, who works at overcoming difficulties or who rearranges her life to breastfeed is not being whimsical or silly. Others – including friends and family, employers, and the general public - should encourage her and support her. However, a mother who decides not to breastfeed does not have to justify this decision to others and she does not need to feel guilty.

Getting rid of the assumption that if there are benefits of breastfeeding then mothers who do not breastfeed should feel guilty would have lots of good effects. It would help mothers who decide not to breastfeed or cannot breastfeed. It would also help those who want to simply share information about breastfeeding.

The problems we face in discussion of breastmilk and formula are part of a much larger problem in our understanding of maternal duties. We, as a society, have a seriously inflated view of maternal duties. We treat mothers and pregnant women as if they have a defeasible duty to perform each action that might benefit their child. That’s why we tend to act as if it follows from the fact that breastfeeding has health benefits that the mother has a defeasible duty to breastfeed. I call this a maximal maternal duty to benefit.

This kind of maximal maternal duty is far too strong. It makes every aspect of a mother’s behaviour the business of others. Being subject to this kind of scrutiny is bad in itself, but it is also likely to have serious effects on a mother’s wellbeing. It should be possible to become a mother without taking on these extreme duties.

So I think I have some good arguments that we vastly overestimate maternal duties in general and that there is no defeasible duty to breastfeed in particular. But people keep asking me about wasps. They are worried that if we reject the duty to breastfeed, then we need to reject too many other maternal duties – including for example the duty to protect your child from being stung by a wasp. It obviously is not enough for me to reject a few models of maternal duties. It isn’t enough for me to say what maternal duties we *don’t* have. I need to say something about what maternal duties we *do* have. I need to come up with a moderate account of maternal duties: an account which avoids the extreme demands (which undermine women’s wellbeing and make talking about parental decisions so tricky) but still recognises some plausible set of maternal duties.

I think we do need an account of maternal duties. Defeasible duties play an important role in moral practice. They allow us to hold others to account. They help us to protect ourselves and others. Children are extremely vulnerable. They need our protection. It is true that our thinking about motherhood often seems to overemphasis the role of maternal behaviour in children’s wellbeing. Children are affected by many others factors including paternal behaviour, socioeconomic factors and the actions of wider society. These factors are all too often ignored in discussions that place all the responsibility for children’s wellbeing on mothers. Nonetheless, mothers do have a significant influence on their children’s wellbeing. We need a moderate account of maternal duties, which appropriately recognises the responsibilities mothers have to the vulnerable children in their care without being intolerably demanding.

*Sufficiency Models*

If we are looking for a moderate account of maternal duties, then the most obvious approach might be a ‘sufficiency account’. While the maximal account says that a mother has to do everything for her child, sufficiency accounts say that she just has to ‘do enough’ or to give her child a ‘good enough chance’. We don’t have to be the best possible mothers, we just have to be good enough mothers.

The sufficiency account sounds very appealing but it faces some serious problems. One worry with sufficiency accounts is that they struggle to recognise many duties to do specific things at a specific time - or at least can’t recognise these duties while remaining moderate. For example, most people would agree that mothers have defeasible duties to put their child in an age appropriate carseat or seat belt whenever the child rides in the car. But no moderate sufficiency account seems to be able to recognise this.

The risk of not using a car seat on a given occasion is small. The risk that a given child traveling without a car seat *on a single journey* will be killed or injured is extremely low. A defeasible duty to do anything that would produce a similar decrease in risk would be intolerably burdensome. A ‘good enough chance’ of having a good life must be compatible with being exposed to risks, even risks of serious harm, that are as low as the risk of a single car journey without a car seat. Equally, it’s hard to imagine that failing to plug your child into their car seat on a single occasion means you have not made enough sacrifices to keep them safe. So it looks as if the moderate sufficiency account can’t recognise a defeasible duty to use a car seat on every drive.

And, of course, those nasty wasps are buzzing around. Suppose my six-year-old child is sitting next to me in a sunny garden. An angry wasp begins buzzing nearby. She starts to panic, wave her arms around and scream. Unless I lift her away from the wasp, she is likely to get stung. Barring a history of severe allergy to wasp stings, it is likely that the only significant consequences if my child is stung will be that she will experience quite a lot of pain for a relatively short period of time. This will have very little impact on her life as a whole. It certainly will not mean that she does not have a good enough chance for a good life on any plausible understanding of what a good enough chance for a good life involves. And it is very unlikely that failure to save my child from the wasp will show that I have not sacrificed enough to keep her safe.

So it looks as if sufficiency accounts can’t recognise that I have a defeasible duty to protect my child from getting stung by a wasp. But, as with the car seat, it just seems obvious that I do have this duty.

This leaves me with a problem. I still think we should reject the account of maternal duties which holds that mothers have a defeasible duty to do anything that might benefit their children. That is just far too demanding. It must be possible to become a mother without signing on to have every action scrutinised for others. But the most obvious moderate account of maternal duties seems to have results that most people will find extremely hard to believe. The view that I don’t have a duty to put my child in a car seat or to protect my child from wasp stings is going to be too much for almost everyone.

*Worries about intuitions*

As I told my uncle, I think I might have figured a way out of this problem. I think I can come up with a plausible moderate account of maternal duties that recognises duties to use car seats and to save a child from a wasp sting.

So it seems like I might be able to come up with a moderate account that fits with our judgments about car seats and wasp stings. I might be able to deny that mothers have a maximal duty to benefit their children while still holding on to some of those duties that seem obvious to us. But instead of telling you what my theory is, I want to discuss another problem for coming up with an account of maternal duties. I’m not sure whether I *should* be trying to get my theory to fit my intuitions about these duties.

I am convinced to my bones that mothers should use an appropriate car seat every time they put their child in a car. It would be very hard for me to let go of this belief. It just seems obvious to me. Unfortunately, I am not sure how much I should trust what seems obvious to me in this case.

I am a product of my time and culture. I was raised in Scotland in the eighties. The public education campaigns of the time deeply influenced me. I can still hear the narrator of my favourite Saturday morning cartoon cavalcade telling me to ‘Belt up in the Back’. I can still remember the ominous voice describing how Jimmy killed his mother because he did not wear a seat belt. (When the car crashed, Jimmy was flung forward, hitting his mother’s seat and breaking her neck.) Until recently, I had an unconscious but firmly rooted belief that anyone who got in a car without a seatbelt would probably end up dead before they left the driveway.

I’m also the product of a society that holds women in general, and mothers in particular, to many, many rules. The idea that mothers have a maximal duty to benefit, that they should be doing everything they can to benefit their children, is deeply engrained in our culture. It is engrained in me.

So I take my reactions to these cases with a pinch of salt. Neither my instincts about risk, nor my moral instincts, are to be fully trusted.

This is a serious problem. It is very difficult to do ethics without appeal to intuitive judgments about particular cases. I, like many ethicists, normally use an approach called [reflective equilibrium](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reflective-equilibrium/). This approach attempts to try to find a balance between abstract principles and our reactions to particular cases. A theory is cast into doubt if it conflicts with our persistent beliefs about particular cases. The persistent beliefs are the ones that we find it hard to let go of, even after reflection. No matter how appealing an abstract principle is, if it tells me that it is okay for someone to execute an innocent person to avert a riot or that it doesn’t matter how we treat future generations, I just won’t be able to accept it. Other judgments about particular cases are slightly less fixed: we’re prepared to revise these judgments if we have to, but still, on balance, we find a theory more convincing if it fits with them than if it doesn’t. Reflective equilibrium requires us to scrutinise – and update - our reactions to particular cases in the light of our abstract principles and our abstract principles in the light of our reactions to particular cases. Showing that your account is both based on intuitively appealing principles and fits well with persistent judgments about particular cases is normally a good way to convince people it is correct.

So trying to do ethics when you can’t trust your judgments about particular cases is strange and difficult. This means that finding an account of maternal duties is doubly difficult: first, it is a challenge to come up with an account that matches our intuitions about particular cases, but, even more seriously, it is not clear which, if any of these intuitions we should be trying to match. So many of our instincts on what mothers owe their children are based on a mistaken tendency to overestimate maternal duties. Which judgments, if any, can we trust?