

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

Philosophy and the Maternal

Charlotte Knowles

University of Groningen, NL
c.e.knowles@rug.nl

Reflections on the role and position of maternal relations within philosophy as a practical discipline, as a metaphor for philosophical practice, and as a subject of philosophical investigation.

In early 2012, I started as an intern at *Studies in the Maternal*, just a few months after beginning my PhD in philosophy at Birkbeck. Within the field of continental feminist philosophy, the maternal has occupied an important site in the philosophical imaginary, in the work of thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and more recently Alison Stone, Lisa Guenther and Tanja Staehler, to name just a few. Nevertheless, it is only relatively recently that questions of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood have begun to be taken seriously in mainstream analytic philosophy, most notably by Elseijn Kingma and Fiona Woollard's ERC funded BUMP project (Better Understanding of the Metaphysics of Pregnancy), based at the University of Southampton.

Historically, within the field of philosophy, birth, natality and the maternal have featured and functioned far more as metaphor than as concrete, embodied, lived experiences of birth, care and maternal relations. Take, for example, Socrates' image of himself as an intellectual midwife helping others to give birth to their ideas:

[M]y art of midwifery is just like theirs in most respects [real midwives]. The difference is that I attend to men and not women, and that I watch over the labour of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth. (396BC/1997, 150b–c p. 167)

Socrates' appropriation of the image of the midwife to describe his philosophical practice, both recognises the parallels between the work, support and human interdependence needed to bring new ideas and new life into the world; whilst at the same time making a sharp distinction between what is proper to the world of philosophy (men and ideas), as distinct from the realm of the maternal (women and the body).

Such demarcations continue to shape philosophy; a discipline where women remain underrepresented, where the importance of concrete, embodied experience is often overlooked, and where one can still encounter ingrained hierarchical

commitments to mind/body dualisms in various forms. Working as an intern at *Studies in the Maternal* served to bring these exclusions and implicit biases into sharper relief. Thinking about my time at the journal and its associated research network *MaMSIE* (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities Identities and Ethics), prompted me to reflect upon the role maternal relations have played in shaping my own academic practice, thought and development. I now offer a brief overview.

The first paper I edited as an intern at *Studies in the Maternal* was Alison Stone's 'Maternal Memory and Lived Time' (2012). It was refreshing to see the way Alison mobilised, perhaps unlikely figures, to think through the implications of maternal time. I found her use of Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic temporality striking, as at the time I was writing my doctoral thesis on Heidegger. While working my way through *Being and Time*, I went on to read another of Alison's papers 'Nativity and Mortality: Rethinking Death with Cavarero' (2010), which influenced my interpretation of Heideggerian authenticity. Although Alison was critical of Heidegger's claims about the non-relational and individuating nature of Being-towards-death through which we can come to discover our authentic potentiality-for-Being; the text was influential in helping me to develop a more positive reading of Heidegger. I came to argue that authenticity could be understood as precisely *bringing to light* our relational nature and the importance of others in constituting our possibilities.¹

In addition, Alison's work made me think more critically about the way in which death plays a pivotal role in Heidegger's philosophy as the *end* of our possibilities, whereas birth—logically the *beginning* of our possibilities—plays a far less prominent role. Approaching *Being and Time* through a critical maternal lens helped me to think more broadly about the potential biases of thinkers who have ignored or overlooked the importance of the maternal in their philosophies. Moreover, it helped me attend to what a thinker might have said, or even should have said, if he—as it is usually a he—had followed through the logic of his thought. This way of approaching texts in the history of philosophy—as Irigaray perhaps most famously and systematically

¹ See for example Knowles (2017, 2019).

demonstrates—aids us in undertaking a ‘recovery reading’, which opens up new and exciting ways to deploy and implement existing philosophical ideas in different contexts.

The question of how we can use the work of philosophers to think through problems, issues and questions, to which they did not directly apply themselves, is a key aspect of my own philosophical practice. I was guided in this practice by my doctoral supervisor, Susan James. Despite philosophy being a discipline traditionally associated with men (ask someone to describe a philosopher and they will probably paint you a picture of an old white man with a long beard), and despite the fact that philosophy is still dominated by men, as the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK’s report on Women in Philosophy (2011) demonstrates, I was lucky enough to have a wonderful female philosopher as my supervisor.

Sue is the ideal of Socrates’ philosophical midwife. Throughout my PhD, her careful reading and considered comments helped to shape my thought and my writing. She was a guide and a role model, enabling me to ‘determine whether [my mind was] being delivered of a phantom... or a fertile truth’ (Plato 396BC/1997, 150c p. 167). To paraphrase a fellow former supervisee of Sue’s: your supervisor is like your academic parent; you can trace your genealogy back through them to find links to diverse areas of the field, to your philosophical foremothers and forefathers, brothers, sisters and cousins.

This embeddedness, intertwining and enmeshment in human relations is another thing that my work at *SiM* and *MaMSIE* helped to highlight. The work of maternal scholars in general, and within my own field of feminist philosophy, illuminates the importance of recognising the ways in which we are socially embedded and relational beings. Feminist philosophers have been, and continue to be, particularly instructive in encouraging people to resist the caricatured picture of Hobbesian ‘mushroom men’—who spring up without mother or father (Benhabib 1987). Instead, philosophers like Cheshire Calhoun, Seyla Benhabib, Marilyn Friedman and Nell Noddings emphasise the importance of relationships of care and dependence for us to be autonomous, functioning individuals. Recognising this means not only

appreciating the importance of our academic networks, but also our personal ones: taking account of the people who shape us into, and enable us to be, the people we are.

Working at *Studies in the Maternal* highlighted the importance of recognising those maternal practices that allow us to create and to go out into the world. In this context, I often think about my own wonderful mother, Liz Knowles, who has from the start shaped my personality, my thinking and my academic practice. My mother never had the opportunity to go to University, but it was always something that she wanted for me. She supported and encouraged me endlessly, and still does. She is the strongest, funniest, woman I know, and I really would not be who I am as an academic or a person without her. She encouraged my feminism as a teenager growing up on the Isle of Wight, and she showed me that there were possibilities beyond island life—a place that was recently described by the then chair of Ofsted (the UK Office for Standards in Education), David Hoare, as ‘a ghetto’ (Halliday and Weale 2016). I see her turns of phrase in my writing and teaching. I see her influence in the way that I engage with texts and listen to others. I see the confidence she has given me to speak my mind, to call out sexism when I see it, and to use humour to make a point. During my time at *Studies in the Maternal*, I helped to set up the moderated blog for MaMSIE and contributed one of the first posts: ‘Rebirth for the Royals?’ (2012); a critical look at the then-imminent birth of Prince George. In this post, I see my mother’s sharp wit and the humorous, angry way we both engage with an issue. I still particularly like the line: ‘The absurdity and irrelevance of whether Kate’s gynaecologist is or is not the former fiancé of Jill Dando aside...’.

Although philosophy may have historically been antagonistic to our ability to appreciate and attend to maternal relations, owing to the way philosophy often ignores, downplays and excludes considerations of the maternal, things are changing. This struck me at an inaugural lecture I recently attended for a former colleague, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Catarina opened her lecture with these lines:

When she was about 7 years old, my daughter Marie liked to read very short informative books called ‘informatieboekjes’... Inevitably, at some point she

found the 'informatieboekje' on philosophy, and so she could finally learn more about the thing that kept her mother so busy. After she read the book, the following conversation ensued:

- “So Marie, what is philosophy?”
- “Philosophy is about asking lots of questions, and when you get answers you ask even more questions,” (Touché)
- “And what else did you learn in the book?”
- “There was also the story of a man in Greece who walked around asking everyone all kinds of questions, and eventually people got angry at him and he had to die.” (2019)

By opening her inaugural lecture with an anecdote about her daughter, Catarina reminded us that philosophy and life cannot, and perhaps should not, be kept so separate. That the businesses of being a mother and of being a philosopher are not incompatible. Both are messy, trying, satisfying, and frustrating. By confronting us with the maternal in the realm of a philosophical rite of passage, Catarina both echoes Socrates and challenges him: resisting the separation of mind and body and the exclusion of women from the realm of the philosophical; while at the same time emphasising the way in which philosophy involves a provocation, a bringing forth in, and of, the Other.

Catarina's lecture ended with reference to her daughters and to her parents, particularly her mother, who she argued instilled in her 'a love for knowledge and an insatiable curiosity' that she now, in turn, tries to transmit to her own daughters (2019). Catarina's lecture emphasised how maternal genealogy can produce philosophical questioning, and it showed that the maternal in philosophy need not only be confined to the place of metaphor. Reflecting on my time at *Studies in the Maternal*, I see how my own work has been influenced by maternal relations both actual and metaphorical, both inside and outside the academy. I'm so happy to have been part of this wonderful journal and its research network and to have been invited to reflect in this way on the event of the journal's 10th anniversary – happy birthday *SiM*!

Editor's Note

This contribution to the 10th anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal* were invited by the editorial team. As such they were internally reviewed by the journal's editorial team.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Charlotte Knowles is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Groningen. Her research interests lie in feminist philosophy and phenomenology, with a focus on questions of freedom, complicity and resistance in gendered contexts.

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