REVIEW ARTICLE

The Gift of the Mother


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In The Gift of the Other, Guenther negotiates between and among various feminisms—existential, political, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist—and her chief ethical interlocutor Levinas. She offers lucid and insightful critiques of Beauvoir, Arendt, Derrida, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cornell, among others, all the while concentrating on and opening up Levinasian ethics toward the possibility of an accord or dialog between the identity politics of feminism and the infinitude of alterity.

I think the absolutely contrary contrary [le contraire absolument contraire], whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine. (Levinas, 1987: 85)

A footnote in Emmanuel Levinas’s *Time and the Other* explains how Simone de Beauvoir uses this sentence in her 1949 *The Second Sex* to condemn Levinas for sexism. For Beauvoir, Levinas, in the privileged position of the male subject, disregards the feminine, assigning it a secondary status and thus creating the uneasy and unjust analogy male:absolute::female:other. We can barely imagine the state of feminism today without Beauvoir’s misreading of the Levinasian Other. But we cannot simply discount such misunderstandings. Throughout history, confusion and obfuscation themselves have contributed much to our academic conversations, offering insights and alternative perspectives even though incorrect assumptions undergird them. Think of where French existentialism
would have been without Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, a text whose philosophical import Sartre ostensibly ignores in order to propose his own humanist version of the *Existenzphilosophie* of Dasein.

In her 2006 *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* Lisa Guenther addresses the seeming contrariety of Levinasian ethics and feminism’s identity politics. There appears a disparity between Beauvoir’s call for a feminist move beyond maternity and Levinas’s obvious privileging of not only ‘feminine’ alterity but also the role of motherhood. Yet as Guenther sees it, both ethics and politics share a common source: the maternal body. Guenther situates the mother as the initial abode of the Other, but this in-dwelling of the mother’s material flesh demands a rethinking and reworking of the contentious demands society places upon mothers and their contested roles. Guenther reads Levinasian ethics from the perspective of its feminist critique while also viewing feminism and its politics through a Levinasian lens. By putting these two fields into dialog, Guenther fleshes out the overlapping currents that inform them, moving both back toward the site of their literal and figurative embodiments. For Beauvoir, giving birth amounts to little more than reproducing the systemic, patriarchal displacement of and violence toward women; motherhood becomes another name for existential alienation. After navigating through Beauvoir’s politics, Guenther proposes that the strangeness of the child ‘need not signify alienation’ at all; that the child instead, in the way it opens a future not entirely of the mother’s choosing, ‘makes an ethical response to birth possible’ in the first place (Guenther, 2006: 26).

We ourselves mistake the essence of our own subjectivity when we think of ourselves as fully formed individuals bearing no debt or responsibility toward anyone else. Such a misconception of the self is a denial of the sociological as well as phenomenological truths of conception, birth, and early childhood development. We are always already indebted to others who have borne the burden of our gestation, and those others have always been women. Forgetting our births, we institute politics as a means of rebirthing ourselves, as a way of establishing the lie of self-sufficiency within a closed economy of egoist phallogocentrism. The liberal ideal of an individual with universal rights inscribed within one’s own personhood and identity as protected under the aegis of juridical institutions requires this lie in order to preserve and maintain the illusion of freedom and choice.

For Hannah Arendt, natality serves as a disruption of the fatalism of politics. We do not merely spin in self-contained, self-defined circles destined to die and to be forgotten. Through giving birth, we break this fateful cycle. The continuous interruption of others coming forth onto the political stage allows for the possibilities of a future that would be otherwise than what came before. Natality as action does not merely tolerate a self-propagating participation of political actors but demands it (Guenther, 2006: 32). Moving beyond the mere reproduction of the *animal laborans* and the production of *homo faber*, the political actor
sustains a public realm in which the polis can effect freedom and equality. But this freedom among citizens nonetheless necessitates a stratum of the non-free; that is, women and slaves.

Through the promise of politics, Guenther rethinks Arendt’s natality as an exposure ‘to the double contingency of time and the Other’ (Guenther, 2006: 38). This promise offers hope for a future that opens onto more than sheer repetition of the past. Moreover, the past itself is refigured through the trope of forgiveness:

To forgive is not to repeat the past, but to let it go, letting the past remain as past rather than continuing to dominate the present or future. . . . In this sense, forgiveness is the gift of the Other, a gift of time that one cannot make for oneself, but only give or receive or pass along to others. Forgiveness confirms the life of the Other as a contingent human life, subject to error and insufficiency, but also open to the response of other imperfect actors. I forgive the Other for not being perfect and complete, for not existing as a masterful work of art. In so doing, I confirm the fact of her natality and grant her the open-endedness that natality implies. Forgiveness does not exclude memory; we do not need to forget to forgive. Rather, forgiveness requires a certain kind of remembrance, understood here as an interaction with Others regarding the past. . . . To forgive is to give the past of the Other back to her, but to give it back differently, transformed by the act of forgiveness. (Guenther, 2006: 38-39)

Guenther thus offers a corrective to Beauvoir’s existential feminism. By examining how political action operates as a modality of ethical inter-action, she brings together the essentially embodied politics of women with Levinas’s ethical project.

I wonder if we could begin, thanks to Guenther’s insights, to think the maternal as the origin—however anarchical (and only insofar as human beings are concerned)—of the material as a way of remembering our own unthought and forgotten beginnings as others welcomed by (m)others. Guenther gestures toward such an understanding as she considers the welcoming of the stranger:

I can be “alone” and at home with myself only because I have always already been welcomed by an Other. The feminine welcome both gives me autonomy and attests to the fact that I am never absolutely autonomous, despite what I might assert. Precisely by giving the self this capacity to assert its radical autonomy, the feminine welcome also gives the lie to this assertion, reminding us of the sense in which all mastery depends on an Other who lets one be masterful, and so implicitly undermines the totality of this mastery in advance. (Guenther, 2006: 63)

The mother’s welcome gives the child the possibility and ability to assert herself as autonomous while also establishing the ethical relations necessary for that child to become responsible for the Other, even so far as to become responsible for the Other’s responsibility.
Welcoming then displaces and disrupts egoist subjectivity, making way for the Other’s arrival.

Guenther seeks an ethical imperative within the gift of birth—the political and philosophical ramifications of the embodied physicality of giving birth—which she also reads as the givenness of birth: ‘This gift is unique in that it gives rise to its own recipient; the child who receives the gift of birth exists only thanks to this gift. In this sense, birth is not only given to me; it also gives me, bringing me forth into a world in which I have always already responded to Others’ (Guenther, 2006: 2). Guenther understands birth both as a gift from the Other, thus allowing for the possibility of my own existence, and as a gift of the Other, whose conception and reception opens a space of alterity wherein ethics—as first philosophy—arises. The emergence of the Other from the maternal self serves as the ethical paradigm, particularly as one recognizes the debt one owes to (m)others who have allowed for her or his own emergence into this shared world. In giving birth to an infant Other, a mother welcomes that Other into a possible community and charges her or him with the radical responsibility toward others within that community. In this way, we owe the primordial ethical debt first to our mothers. But because repayment is impossible, our givenness disperses and disseminates our obligations to others. In becoming responsible to and for the Other, we also become responsible for the Other’s responsibility toward others.

Because a mother does not possess her child, she, through giving birth, becomes dispossessed even of her own identity and individuality. The womb, then, fulfills its function as an anarchic matrix of ethical relations that do not necessarily subsume any particular individual within a thematizable comprehension so much as allow for the openness of alterity as relations between and among diverse and diffuse others. In giving birth, the mother receives the gift of the child; that is, the promise of a future. By receiving the child into the world, the human species too has the potential of an expectant future. From the delivery room toward the deliverance promised by the future, the infant resists incorporation into the same, offering its own transcendence through and by way of its immanent corporeality. The enfolding of subjectivity with alterity marks the human body as the site of ethics. Without the material integrity of the individual predicated upon and by the necessary alterity of the mother, one is even less capable to suffer others, to bear responsibility for them. The mother’s body serves as host to the child. She provides a space for the child within her own flesh. She welcomes and receives this stranger from within her body, and the child receives nourishment from this host.

But politics can efface the mother, reducing the maternal body to mere vessel designed to serve the greater good, to (re)produce in order to provide the state with citizens, consumers, soldiers. The maternal body situates both ethics and politics. Although Levinas avoids maternity throughout much of his work, Guenther adroitly
uncovers and exposes a maternal thread that attempts to remedy this apparent oversight. Guenther’s reading restores the inviolable and sacred maternal order to Levinasian paternity and fraternity, but this restoration is more than mere superimposition of a feminist critique over Levinas. Instead, Guenther discovers the possibility of just such a corrective within Levinas’s writings themselves, especially within his deployment of scripture. It is within the maternal problematic that Guenther compellingly opens Levinasian paternity toward a feminist critique by closely examining the biblical passages with which Levinas bolsters and sustains his own philosophical task. In the feminization of Zion (Isaiah 49) and in the Mosaic charge to become ‘like a maternal body’ (Numbers 11), Guenther finds an undercurrent in Levinas’s work that allows for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of not only Levinas but also his female and feminist interlocutors.

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Bibliography


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