

Review Essay

Lisa Guenther's *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006; 190 pages.

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Lisa Guenther opens her recent book, *The Gift of the Other*, with a poignant personal anecdote. Her friend has just given birth to a baby boy, and when Guenther visits the new mother and child soon thereafter she is struck by the baby's ability to express at once an extraordinary power and profound frailty. The baby's power lies in his ability to affect everyone around him; people tiptoe while he sleeps and scurry around frantically when he cries. The baby's power, we might say, derives precisely from his frailty. His power to change everything around him emerges precisely from his vulnerability and from the awareness of those in contact with him to respond to that frailty. The anecdote is poignant because it also reveals Guenther's own ambiguous position, which is parallel to the baby's. Guenther's ambiguous position reveals both her power to help, since she is not the one exhausted from just having given birth, and her helplessness, since there are some things that others cannot do for a mother. For example, in this anecdote Guenther describes the baby's inability to "latch on" while breastfeeding. Although breastfeeding can be guided, in the end it is the baby who must figure this out and stick with it.

A newborn baby's inability or unwillingness to eat is one of the most terrifying experiences for a mother since it reduces every moment of eating to a life or death situation; we base the determination of a baby thriving solely on how much the baby ingests and how frequently that substance is expelled. When there is a problem, a newborn's life seems reduced to "ounces in" and "ounces out," and for those in the baby's midst the primary focus is on simply keeping the baby alive. Thus, the power of the Other, initially rooted in the experience of the gestating and birthed baby, is also the gift of the Other; the power of the Other transforms us into ethical subjects, into persons who respond to the Other, a gift that hopefully will be extended outward to other Others.

Guenther confesses that she sees in this concrete situation that which she has been trying to express philosophically: Emmanuel Levinas's references to the maternal body as the ethical relation par excellence. Levinas describes maternity as passivity. It is a responsibility that is not chosen. Instead, it is something that claims me and calls me to respond to the other before I can choose to do so. Guenther appropriates Levinas's view that the maternal body is a simile and does not refer to

women only. She argues that a woman is not a mother simply by being born with eggs or simply having conceived a child; nor is she a mother, in some sense, simply by having given birth. To use a version of Beauvoir's famous quote, one is not born, but rather one becomes a mother.

Guenther's book is both extraordinary and long awaited. She elegantly weaves together material linked by the common theme of natality. The book begins with a philosophical analysis of Beauvoir's account of reproduction, which is then woven into Arendt's discussion of natality. The next three chapters view the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, respectively, through a Levinasian framework in order to see the limitations and value of both Levinas's project as well as the analyses offered by French feminist theory. Her use of these figures and the insight she brings to their own discussions is helpful for seeing how these thinkers are at once critical of conceptions of maternity while also using such conceptions to maintain certain accounts of personhood that themselves need to be questioned.

In her opening chapter on Beauvoir, Guenther considers maternity from two perspectives in Beauvoir's writings. The first examines motherhood in the context of freedom as discussed in *The Second Sex*. This analysis sees maternity, or motherhood, as imposing on the woman, interrupting her own projects, and so forth. Certainly, in light of the time that Beauvoir is writing—with no real access to safe and reliable birth control—motherhood seemed nothing like a choice a woman made about her own life. Yet the emphasis on freedom is softened if read through *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. On this reading, the freedom of the self is not located outside the other but rather "requires the freedom of Others to whom it is nevertheless ambiguously bound" (18).

Guenther's discussion of philosophy's misunderstanding or, worse, neglect of reproduction continues in her analysis of Hannah Arendt. In this chapter, Guenther exposes the difficulty that emerges in Arendt's own distinction between natality, which offers hope for the future in the form of future political citizens, and reproduction, which focuses on the biological birth of a child to a woman. In her distinction between public and private, Arendt situates natality in the public realm and reproduction in the private, thus reinforcing the view that women's work—women's labor—is and should remain invisible. As Guenther argues, this distinction simply serves to undermine the radical nature of both natality and reproduction. Guenther's rereading of Arendt through Adrianna Caverero's work, asks us to consider if reproduction, which necessarily binds together Others, is not itself already political (44–7).

Yet many feminist theorists are of two minds about this distinction. On the one hand, they recognize that as long as reproduction and women's work remain private, invisible, and unpaid, it will never be

accorded the value—and all things that follow from that value—it deserves: healthcare, reliable and safe child care, and so forth. However, these feminists also see the problems with moving reproduction in particular into the public realm. Once this happens, women's lives, in particular all activity associated with reproduction, become part of and controlled by the political sphere. One sees the metaphor for this in the pregnant woman's belly, which by virtue of either sticking out farther into public space or carrying a future citizen, seems now to be viewed as public property that can be touched at will. The protruding belly is treated as public property available for any stranger to touch.

We can also see this in the way that the rhetoric about pregnancy has changed. The "modern" pregnancy books are aimed not only at the pregnant women but also their partners, more often than not assumed to be men. Pregnancy is a shared experience and these partners should also deny themselves the same things that pregnant women, according to these books, should not eat or drink: wine, beer, unhealthy food, and so forth. At some point in the 1990s, no doubt the result of viewing pregnancy as a "shared experience," it became fashionable for both men and women to say "*we* are pregnant," as though the woman's biological or physical state of pregnancy were now shared by the male.

Although I can understand the good intentions that might have motivated the use of this phrase, the co-opting of this phrase by men is in fact dangerous since it occludes the risks a woman takes in pregnancy and ironically diminishes the extraordinary nature of the experience. Regardless of the studies of what might be called sympathetic pregnancy in men, the bottom line is that men do not carry the fetus; they do not produce milk when the baby is born; and they do not risk dying either in pregnancy or by complications in childbirth. The co-opting of an experience that is idiosyncratic to women in order to give the appearance of being progressive or involved simply trivializes the experience and reduces it to something that we can all do together, like going to hear a concert or watch a play, even if our interpretations of or relationship to that event might differ. Pregnancy is not something about which we might simply have different interpretations. One either is or is not pregnant, and one either does or does not put one's life at risk as a result of being or not being pregnant.

In chapters three, four, and five, Guenther focuses on Emmanuel Levinas. She puts Levinas into conversation with three different interlocutors: Derrida and Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva respectively. It is through her reading of Levinas that Guenther is able to articulate her original and insightful philosophical analysis of the gift of birth. Her reading of Levinas provides one part of her answer to the question: "How might one respond ethically to the maternal gift of time and existence?"

(2). Guenther's use of birth opens up the possibility of seeing the gift of birth from two radically different perspectives. From the perspective of the one who is born, the gift of birth is a gift from the parent who gave birth, who brought me into existence. From the perspective of the parent, the gift of birth is the gift of the child who, in Levinas's own analysis, interrupts my erotic relationship as an ethical other. The arrival of the child creates entirely new relationships and responsibilities that are created only because of the existence of this child. Guenther's analysis is unique and exciting insofar as she is able to articulate a reciprocal gift in the parent-child relationship that is nonetheless not an actual exchange. That is, Guenther's insight lies in seeing how birth creates two gifts and two responsibilities. The child receives the gift of birth from the mother. The mother becomes responsible in a unique way simply by having given birth. Additionally, this responsibility is a responsibility that will need to be passed to the child so that this child can in turn be responsible to other others. Thus, the child makes the mother an ethical subject in a unique way and thereby demands that she aid the child; the child's gift to the mother is that she makes the mother's generosity possible. That is, the child commands the mother to respond to her and help her develop to be like a maternal body (126). But this is only one side of the analysis. This analysis then leads Guenther to raise the political question of birth and maternity and to ask what a politics of maternity would look like. Guenther's contribution to the question is to examine it through Levinas's ethical project.

In the final chapter of her book, Guenther raises the political question of reproductive freedom and argues that Levinas's ethical project not only can allow for such a freedom but also that his view of the political and his emphasis on social justice require it. Guenther concedes that her position might sound counterintuitive to those who know Levinas's writings well. His hyperbolic ethics does not at first glance seem to accommodate a view that allows for safe, legal abortion, much less one that required it. But Guenther's analysis is both insightful and compelling in that she reads Levinas against himself. She underscores his references to social justice in order to argue that for a woman to be included in such an account she must have available to her the resources that would allow her to terminate a pregnancy—and she argues this case by demonstrating what would be problematic if this were not allowed.

As Guenther demonstrates, by using a very strange case of egg donation, where the eggs were culled from an aborted fetus, the anti-choice side undermines its own position when it is suitable. When this political position argues against abortion, it avoids any discussion of the woman's personhood and her ability to be self-determining. That is, it avoids seeing the mother as a human being who also has concerns and

interests. However, when this very strange instance of egg donation arose, the anti-choice side assumed the position that it would be horrible for a child to know that it came from simply a mass of cells. That is, in arguing against this kind of egg donation, the fetus is referred to not as a person, which is the usual rhetoric. Rather, the fetus is referred to as simply a mass of cells. Thus, if we do not acknowledge a woman's personhood, which would entail acknowledging her as someone who has interests, concerns, desires, etc., then have we not simply reduced her to a mass of cells, a vessel for carrying a fetus? Has not the anti-choice side already condemned thinking of a human being this way?

The pro-choice side does not fare much better. For example, this side often concedes that abortion is a "problem" and then uses the problem as a means to advance discussions regarding birth control. However, to link these two issues—increasing birth control usage and decreasing the number of abortions—might overlook the real issue at hand. A woman, even a woman who chooses to become pregnant, may at any time find her life threatened or endangered by that pregnancy. In fact, a June 2007 issue of *Newsweek* ran an article that confirmed this point: one of the leading causes of death for women is still childbirth. To say, as we often hear in the rhetoric, that birth control will eliminate this "problem," misses what is fundamentally at stake: whether or not the pregnancy is planned, a woman puts her life at risk either by being pregnant or by giving birth.

Additionally, the anti-choice view that in an unwanted pregnancy the woman can "simply put the child up for adoption" fails to understand why this is an ethical problem in the first place. Aside from the risk of life mentioned above, this view completely misses the ethical relation, the intertwining of bodies and lives that emerges in pregnancy. Conversely, the pro-choice side, for many reasons, does not want to admit of the possible trauma, grief, and pain experienced by a woman who chooses to terminate her pregnancy. Thus, both sides miss what is at stake in pregnancy, two lives that are bound together and whose lives have become so entwined that the status of one may very well effect the status of the other.

The proliferation of rhetoric surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing in books, magazines, television programs, and other popular media sustains and perpetuates stereotypes of both women and men, but in particular the models of motherhood that our culture promotes. My concern, then, emerges from two places: the current rhetoric surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering and, as a result, the actual efficacy of the maternal body as an ethical paradigm. Let me begin by stating that I am in wholehearted agreement with Guenther's view that Levinas's use of the simile indicates his own wish that the maternal body

be viewed as the ethical paradigm in order to teach something to all of us. That is, his intention philosophically is not to place ethical obligation solely on women, and more particularly on mothers (however we define that state of being); rather, his intention is to use the maternal body as an image to teach something to everyone. We should all become like the maternal body, which expresses the complex system of two beings entwined in each other, where one being commands the other to respond and the other is called to be an ethical subject. I not only agree with Guenther's reading, I have argued something similar myself. (Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). Yet even as I have argued this point myself, there are moments when I question the efficacy of such a model.

Maternity describes a relationship, an experience, in which only some can participate. The maternal body describes, in spite of itself as an apparent abstraction, a relationship between a particular woman (not only her body) and a particular child. It is because the child develops, because the child is not conceived as fully developed, that a particular, idiosyncratic relationship between the parent and child emerges. Is it possible, then, to translate the paradigm of the maternal body into an ethical paradigm for all? What would it mean to do this effectively? In what ways does the maternal body yield an ethics that is undermined for precisely the reasons that give rise to that ethics in the first place? In what ways are we unable to become like the maternal body, and what are the consequences of that problem? On the one hand, Levinas's use of the maternal body is nothing short of brilliant. On the other hand, I am not as convinced as others might be that exchanging the father-son relation found in *Totality and Infinity* for the maternal body found in *Otherwise than Being* as the ethical relation par excellence gets him out of the "tribal" trap. I see the point. I am not convinced that the move to the maternal body gets us out of that problem.

If we recall Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, a critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's emphasis on a universalized moral law as the determining feature of ethical development, then we must take into account the particular bond, the particular obligation that parents, and mothers, have towards their children. In what significant ways is the maternal body idiosyncratic such that it might actually fail as an ethical paradigm? In what ways is our relationship to our children so particular that our children simply are not like others? A recent article in a parents's magazine has the author "confessing" that she gives favored treatment to her daughter's friend (over her daughter) who is spending the day with them. One can see how this happens: there is a sense of vulnerability that a child has when he/she is alone and there is no one specified to

look out for him/her. We might even see this as what we are called to do ethically, since the child has been entrusted to our care by her parents. It might be as simple as a crude form of hospitality; when one hosts a guest, the guest gets to choose which activity we do and which piece of cake she will eat. This rule is much easier understood in the abstract than in practice by a five-year-old and the crushed look on my own daughter's face when we have tried to follow it seemed nothing less than a look of having been betrayed in the worst way, by her own mother.

Yet this issue of favoritism speaks to something more serious than something we are willing to engage. Too often, the real issues, the controversial issues, of motherhood go unaddressed, as if motherhood were always an idyllic adventure. For example, the flip side of the peaceful Madonna figure is the mother who will do anything in order to protect her children at all costs. Returning to my discussion above, we need to ask what if these two children were put at risk; it is that standard question we have all heard in an Ethics 101 class. Which child do you choose? (Ishmael and Isaac?) I am not sure this "decision" is always a matter of conscious choice. On Kohlberg's model, we should be perfectly able to save either child; in fact, we should be able to risk our lives to save that child. However, my response in this situation and to my own child might be the outcome of the relationship that has developed wherein with each passing day my obligation is not reduced or "paid off"; rather, it increases. If forced to save one over the other, I might respond by saving my child precisely because that action is what emerges from the relationship. My life as a mother is a daily exercise in caring for my children such that I might "not know any better" than simply to protect them. I might also respond by not risking my life to save someone else's child precisely because I am responsible for children of my own. The fact that the mother I mentioned above wrote an article confessing her feelings about this dilemma reveals her own ambivalence with regard to the favoritism and her need to justify her actions.

My intention is not to condemn one action or the other; rather, I wish to ask what it means that we do not see our children as equals to the children of others and what this means for an ethics? The classic model of ethics—an *agapic* kind of love—simply does not hold when it comes to our own children. How, then, do we develop an ethics that is independent of the familial relationship? What might the political sphere need to look like in order to ensure that all are taken care of when the ethical relation fails, not because people do not respond but because there is only so much one can do—and because the ethical often compels us in very idiosyncratic ways, to this particular person rather than that one?

Levinas's analysis in *Totality and Infinity* is significant insofar as it reminds us of the unfolding of the closed society that we find in the

erotic relation to the opening onto society that happens with the birth of a child. The couple is irrevocably turned out into society, and thus they should be focused on political concerns like education and health care—for everyone, not only for their own child. The movement of responsibility from eros to fecundity to fraternity outlines the movement from ethics to politics. Yet if this analysis is to make sense, if Levinas's ethics is as radical as he presents it, then the ethical cannot disappear into the political. Its germ must remain; the unique face to face relationship that characterizes the ethical must be present even at the level of political discourse. Levinas sees something that does not completely disappear in the ethical relationship that forms between parents and children. These relationships do call us to be ethical and they do call us to raise our children to be ethical, to give the gift to others. But they do so precisely because of the unique relationship, the originary relationship that began in the womb and continued after birth. As Merleau-Ponty tells us in "The Child's Relations with Others," we are felt before we are seen. The gaze of the other, particularly the gaze of the parent, is experienced against the backdrop of a touch that entwines us with the other.

Guenther's analysis of the political at the end of her book is extraordinary in its insight regarding the issue of reproductive freedom for women. Nonetheless, I can see the difficulty associated with an ethics that emerges from such an intimate relationship and which points to a larger problem of cultivating ethical individuals. In the same way that a mother is not a mother simply by giving birth, we might say that a child does not become an ethical agent simply by having been born of a woman, that is, simply by having experienced natality. How does one become the ethical subject, especially if one is not called to it in pregnancy? How do we ensure that this child will give this gift to others? A similar analysis, then, needs to be done with regard to other political and social issues. This analysis needs an account of moral cultivation, or moral education, which is implicitly present in Levinas's work even if not properly developed. Thus, while I agree with Guenther that Levinas calls us to be "like a maternal body," he does not provide the mechanism for doing so. In particular, he needs to explain how men would enact this modeling.

This point, however, is less a criticism of Guenther's book than it is a comment on Levinas's own project. In fact, Guenther's book demonstrates both the depth of the phrase, "like a maternal body," while also revealing the limits of that model for an ethics. Her book is beautifully written and well organized. It is, without doubt, a substantial contribution to the fields of Levinas studies and feminist theory.