

## Xanthippe's Return: Ethical Intuition, Maternal Thinking, and the Perception of Change

As we might remember, at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, when Socrates' friends arrive in his cell to participate in that final, famous, discourse on the immortality of the soul, they find the philosopher recently released from his bonds and accompanied by his wife – Xanthippe – who is holding their child. When Xanthippe sees them enter, she cries out and then, Phaedo informs us, she says “the sort of thing women usually say,” (60a) exclaiming, “Socrates, this is the last time that your friends will talk to you or you to your friends.” (60a) This emotive expression of explicitly feminine concern for the imminent rupture of relation is sufficient for Socrates to instruct Crito to find someone to take her home. And so, Xanthippe, “lamenting and beating her breast,” (60b) is led away by Crito's men, and the stage is cleared for the men to get on with the serious business at hand, the business of ‘doing philosophy.’

As Sara Ruddick has noted, there is something axiomatic in this little moment of stage-setting embedded inside one of philosophy's founding fables. To her mind, it speaks primarily – and evidently – of the dominance of reason over emotion, as evinced also by the dialogue's final scene, when, having drunk the draft of hemlock, Socrates chastises his friends for their tears and pointedly reminds them why he has sent the women away (117d). However, we should note, Xanthippe appears in the *Phaedo*, not only as an emissary of the ‘unseemliness’ of feminine emotion, but also, significantly, as a mother, and moreover, she is banished from the dialogue which represents Socrates' final concerted effort to decisively liberate the truth of the soul's constancy from its contamination by the fallible mutability of the body. Philosophy, as Henri Bergson

reiterated, has always, at least since its Eleatic inception, been in thrall to eternity. And, if it is to be successful in the great enterprise of constructing being *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is clear that she who presides over the cycles of birth, growth and decay – who stands as an index of messy material vulnerability and the illusion of self-originating identity – must, with the help of Crito’s henchmen, be firmly walked off the stage. As Luce Irigaray has famously argued, the discourse of Western rationality - from Parmenidean Being, through Platonic ideality, to the self-grounding of the Cartesian cogito – is predicated on the denial of temporal constitution and spatial relation, a gesture which can be read as an act of ‘symbolic matricide.’ As she writes forcefully in *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, “all Western culture rests on the murder of the mother.” (CC: 81)

What I want to explore in this paper, therefore, is the natural alliance between Bergson’s avowed intention to reconstruct philosophy *sub specie durationis*, and contemporary feminist ethics, specifically the Ethics of Care as represented in Sara Ruddick’s invocation of ‘Maternal Thinking.’ There are two interrelated claims that I’d like to unpack. The first concerns the extent to which Bergson’s distinction between the orders of ‘the geometric’ and ‘the vital,’ and his account of intuition as the ‘way of knowing’ which conforms to ‘the vital,’ can provide resources for the thinking of maternal practice as a mode of ethical engagement particularly concerned with attention to the concrete, the contextual and, most importantly, the growing. In this respect, Bergson’s thought, as a refutation of the ‘eternity-thinking’ so implicated in the historical erasure of the mother, can be read as a gesture of partial recuperation – as easing open of the door to Xanthippe’s return. According to this interpretation, ‘Maternal Thinking’ would appear

as a cashing out of the ethical implications of Bergson's metaphysical project, one, which, however, departs significantly from Bergson's own envisioning of these implications. What I am concerned to raise here then, is the extent to which Bergson's own – arguably gendered – assumptions about the modalities of human action are implicated in his failure to recognize that there is an entire sphere of human engagement, which – as opposed to the contemplative disengagement of the artist, mystic, or philosopher – already regularly deploys the type of concrete durational perception he associates with intuitive awareness. In this sense then, Bergson's ethical thought can be seen as reperforming the moment of Xanthippe's exclusion, one which stands in notable tension with the excavations undertaken by his metaphysics.

Departing from the dominant trend inherited from Deleuze to cast Bergson's guiding distinction as that between 'the virtual' and 'the actual,' the relevance of Bergsonian metaphysics to feminist ethics can best be illuminated, I think, by starting from the distinction between the orders of 'the geometric' and 'the vital' elaborated in the third chapter of *Creative Evolution*. Here, Bergson develops his earlier contrast between the 'qualitative multiplicity' of duration and the 'quantitative multiplicity' of abstract time in order to provide an account of *durée* as the fundamental feature of organized or living matter. The ontologico-epistemic order of the 'geometric' denotes the co-implication of inert matter, the faculty of the intellect, and the type of generalizing knowledge produced by the intellect. When taken as the object of the spatializing geometrism of the mind, inert matter is conceived on the basis of the juxtaposition of atomic elements understood as purely external to each other, and which exhibit an identity or mechanical repetition

over time easily amenable to intellectual generalization. By contrast, the metaphysics of permeability which underlies Bergson's notion of 'the vital,' delivers an account of each individual moment as impregnated with the past in a manner which renders it qualitatively unique and, moreover, open to an under-determined future. The repetitious nature of inert matter means that, over time, it changes by that process which Bergson denotes as *unfolding* or *unfurling*, the mechanical revelation of already pre-determined elements, while, by contrast, it is only in the case of matter marked by its own history that we encounter the phenomenon of real growth, or creative evolution. In the first introduction to *The Creative Mind*, Bergson is keen to underline what he sees as the 'radical difference' between "an unfurling whose distinct parts are placed in juxtaposition to one another" and the real "evolution whose continual phases penetrate one another by a kind of internal growth." (CM: 20)

It is this concern for growth which gives an initial indication of the resource Bergson's notion of 'the vital' might offer to an ethics of 'Maternal Thinking.' In her groundbreaking essay of 1980, Ruddick traced the contours of the 'metaphysical attitude' that arises out of the demands of maternal practice, an attitude she termed 'holding.' The primary element of this metaphysical orientation is, she argues, 'preservative love' – the fierce inclination towards the safe-keeping of a child – but, Ruddick notes, this tendency is necessarily held in an always-ambiguous tension with the fact that "the 'being' which is preserved...is always developing, building, purposively moving away." Consequently, "in response to change" Ruddick argues, "the 'holding' preserving mother" must be "simultaneously a changing mother." (MTa: 352) This aspect of maternal practice, which

in her extended text of 1989, Ruddick explicitly thematized as the concern for ‘fostering growth,’ demands a ‘way of knowing’ the world far removed from ‘geometric’ concepts and laws, those eternal abstractions culled from nature’s repetitions. For, as Bergson reminds us at the start of *The Perception of Change*, while it would be inadvisable to deny the utility of ‘abstract and general ideas’ – and, as we will see, Bergson in fact conceives them as *all about their utility* – what they profoundly lack is the capacity to adequately grasp the reality of change, or rather, we should say, to grasp the change which *is* reality.

As distinct from the philosopher, the maternal practitioner – confronted daily with the mutability of life – is, Ruddick suggests, simply not granted the option of disavowing the reality of change. Thinking, Ruddick suggests, arises always in response to the requirements of practice, and, as such, the success of the enterprise of care cannot be determined on the basis of the desire for metaphysical security, but only in response to the concrete demands and “historical reality” of a particular “biological child in a particular social world.” (MTa: 348) The child demands that their existence be preserved and their growth nurtured, and this necessitates a mother’s attention to the specificity of real needs; needs which change in response to contextual fluctuation and developmental process. As Bergson suggests in *Creative Evolution*, intellectual knowledge is not fit for this task, primarily because when it “undertakes the study of life, it necessarily treats the living like the inert.” (CE: 15) The insistence on deploying only this type of knowledge in response to the changing demands of a child would soon result in a mother’s inability to recognize the specificity of, and respond appropriately to, those demands; it would, in

fact, constitute a failure of Care. Thus, the practice of providing adequate care necessitates that the maternal thinker grant “innovation precedence over permanence, disclosure and responsiveness over clarity and certainty.” (MT: 352) Moreover, because the practice of science is, Ruddick continues, based on the decision to take only “the reliable results of *repeatable* experiments...as real...its learning will” by necessity “be quite different in kind from maternal learning.” (MT: 353) The mother’s conceptual schema, as one formed “in relation to the progressing life of a person” rather than “the world described by science,” will consequently bear far more resemblance to the “Aristotelian biologist’s than the Platonic mathematician’s.” (MT: 352)

Following Bergson, it seems possible to construe the way maternal practitioners attend to the changes in a child as a type of intuitive awareness. Just as the ontologico-epistemic order of ‘the geometric’ devolves out of the co-implication of inert matter and intellect, so the order of ‘the vital’ is marked by the association between organized, durational being and that “special attitude” (CE: 217), or ‘way of knowing,’ which Bergson terms intuition. What we might understand then as the ‘vital attitude’ – the attitude which is capable of “grasp[ing] the inner movements of life” (CE: 53) – cannot, by its very nature, be given, as Bergson tells us in the second introduction to *The Creative Mind*, “a simple or geometrical definition.” (CM: 34) But what is made clear in this essay is that he considers intuition to consist in the ability to “grasp a succession which is not a juxtaposition, a growth from within” and which hence allows us – or the maternal thinker – to “follow the undulations of the real.” (CM: 31/32)

What is particularly striking about the lectures delivered here in Oxford a century ago is Bergson's elaboration of the possibility of – and barriers to – the realization of this “intuition of change.” (PC: 131) What Bergson presents in these two talks is, I think, one of his clearest articulations of what, following Howard Caygill's wonderful address at the Bergson conference in London this February, we might call the thesis of hyperaesthesia. That is, for Bergson, intuitive awareness – the grasping of the metaphysical reality of change – does not consist in a retreat from, or an attempt “to rise above our perception of things” but rather from a “plunging into” our perception for the purpose of “deepening and widening it,” enabling it thus to “expand and extend.” (PC: 134) This is the case because, as Howard suggested, Bergson's critique of abstraction derives from the fundamental conviction that we habitually perceive far more than our intellect allows to enter into everyday awareness. The faculty of conception, he tells us in *The Perception of Change*, operates through a hypostatic “crystallization of...perception” (C: 141) which “eliminate[s] from the real a great number of qualitative differences” and thus functions to “extinguish in part our perceptions and weaken our concrete vision of the universe.” (PC: 134) As he also notes in the final pages of the *Two Sources*, returning us once more to the opening pages of *Matter and Memory*, contra a materialist science which views the brain as both the origin and repository of our images of the world, we should better understand it as merely a “filter or...screen,” (TS: 315) an organ whose essential function is to limit access to immediate consciousness.

What Bergson repeatedly suggests in *The Perception of Change*, is that the enlargement of intuition is possible only on the basis of a suspension of the intellect, a suspension

which he conceives as corresponding exactly to a disengagement from the exigencies of practical utilitarian activity. The “solidification” of our perception is undertaken, he tells us simply “with an eye to practice;” (PC: 141) it being “the necessities of action” which (PC: 136) prompt the “constant effort of the mind to limit its horizon” by selecting “from the immensely vast field of our virtual knowledge,” only that “which concerns our action upon things.” (PC: 137) The reason for this is simply that, as we have explored, the intellect isolates repetitions in nature – effectively hypostatizing our perception of flux – in order to facilitate our effective manipulation of objects, and thus, it reveals to us “less the things themselves than the use we can make of them.” (PC: 138) Consequently, the enlargement of perceptual intuition is naturally conceived by Bergson as a corollary of the disengagement from practical activity, and corresponds, therefore, to the adoption of the contemplative pose of the poet, artist, mystic or philosopher. As he notes, it is only men whose “faculty of perceiving” has been detached from “their faculty of acting” who are able to “look at a thing” and “see it for itself and not for themselves.” (PC: 138) That is, according to Bergson’s theory of action, it is only the professionally disengaged who are capable of perceiving the independent life, and durational flow, of any object of perception.

What strikes us when we come to this aspect of Bergson’s account from the perspective of feminist ethics is the gendered nature of the assumption that the utilitarian mastery of objects constitutes the entire field of human activity. To Bergson’s mind, action-in-the-world – the quotidian business of getting on with living – simply *is* the manipulation of objects for the purposes of self-preservation and survival, and consequently, he can only

envision the escape from the hypostatic domination of the intellect via the retreat from practical engagement. It is, arguably, this assumption, which leads Bergson, in the *Two Sources*, to establish the Christian mystic as the apotheosis of the type of intuitive awareness capable of overcoming the defensive postures of closed morality and religion. If man is to arrive at the love of man, he can do so only, Bergson thinks, by leaving behind the demands of the world. But what, of course, is excluded by this aspect of the story is the fact that, in every corner of the everyday world, we find an entire sphere of human activity which aims, not at the domination of objects, but at the tending and nurturing of other living beings. Much of this activity is undertaken by those we call mothers, but there is also, we should note, the daily work of healers, teachers and gardeners – all of whom, if they are to be successful in their tasks must, as we have suggested, attend to the objects of their care with an awareness which respects their independent life and is, moreover, attuned to the mutability of that life. As Bergson reminds us, the intuitive perception of durational being is a matter of letting our awareness slip into the stream of life, and it should not, therefore, strike us as surprising to recognize that the care of life should demand this type of intuition.

If Bergson is right, therefore, that the expansion of intuitive perception necessitates moving beyond the confines of the intellect, he was perhaps mistaken to conceive this expansion as possible only through the abnegation of all practical activity. What the existence of ‘maternal thinking’ suggests is that the precondition of the perception of change depends, not on the disavowal of all practice, but rather, on the object and ends to which practice is oriented. While both Care and mastery are, in differing respects, aspects

of the effort to preserve life – one concerned principally with the preservation of self, while the other the preservation of others – they are, however, distinguishable in terms of their attitude towards their object, and the emotional tenor which informs that attitude. Mastery, as has often been noted, is marked by the desire for domination, and is, ultimately, impelled by a demand for indemnification which issues in the intention to construct the fortress of the self as, in Descartes famous words, the ‘master and possessor of nature.’ As the critique of Enlightenment rationality has been at pains to reiterate, it is in the service of this drive that the intellect has so frequently been put to work. By contrast, the nature of Care – the fact that it demands attention to the mutability of the living – requires that it relinquish an attitude of inveterate control towards its object. As Ruddick has argued, mothering is distinguished not only by a commitment to care for another “creature who perseveres in its own being,” (MTb: 71), but, moreover, “to give birth is to create a life that cannot be kept safe, whose unfolding cannot be controlled, and whose eventual death is certain.” (MTb: 72) It is on this basis that Ruddick recognizes that the safe-keeping impulse of preservative love must be always tempered by an attitude to the world that she terms ‘humility,’ an attitude which relinquishes the desire to dominate and commits itself to working with the ambiguity of “the independent and uncontrollable,” the “developing and increasingly separate existence[s] of the lives it seeks to preserve.” (MT: 351)

What I would like to suggest, in conclusion, therefore, is that the ethical unfolding of Bergson’s metaphysical critique might have taken a different turn had he recognized the existence of modalities of human action which do not function according to the geometric

logic of utilitarian mastery. The issue is not whether we engage in action, but why we engage in action – and, to return us once more to the moment of Xanthippe’s exclusion – the emotional tone of that engagement. Bergson suggests in *The Perception of Change* that philosophy’s love-affair with eternity arises from an intellectual error, from an attempt to resolve the contradictions created by Zeno’s spatializing representation of movement. But arguably, Zeno’s *reductio* was always already motivated by the need to do away with the ambiguities and vulnerabilities implied by the reality of change. As Bergson recognizes, we have an “instinctive fear of those difficulties which the vision of movement as movement would arouse in our thought” (PC: 145) and, like Descartes thrown into the whirlpool, the “spectacle of...universal mobility” may lead to a kind of vertigo, to the fear that “the mind will drown in the torrent-like flow of all things.” (PC: 150) The pre-condition of perceiving this flow would be, therefore, not a withdrawal from all action, but a mode of engagement undergirded by a commitment to tolerate the existential insecurity which issues from the fact that life is ambiguous, mutable, and, at all times, exposed to vulnerability in its very essence. It is not insignificant that both Bergson and Ruddick, were, in their own ways, campaigners for peace, for both saw that the logic of geometric exteriority was implicated in a culture of abstraction and exclusion capable of the most terrible violence against what, following Butler, we might call ‘precarious life.’ However, I would suggest, a certain gendered blind-spot in Bergson’s vision of human action led him to establish the mystic as the apostle of an anti-intellectualist ethics of love, while I, following Ruddick, consider there to be far more political potency in recognizing that it is the mother who – through the daily practice of embracing ambiguity – is best placed to grasp “what is most living in the real.” (PC: 144)