



Maternal Thinking

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MATERNAL THINKING

SARA RUDDICK

We are familiar with Victorian renditions of Ideal Maternal Love. My own favorite, like so many of these poems, was written by a son.

There was a young man loved a maid
Who taunted him. "Are you afraid,"
She asked, "to bring me today
Your mother's head upon a tray?"

He went and slew his mother dead,
Tore from her breast her heart so red,
Then towards his lady love he raced,
But tripped and fell in all his taste.

As the heart rolled on the ground
It gave forth a plaintive sound.
And it spoke, in accents mild:
"Did you hurt yourself, my child?"¹

Many of this story's wishes and fantasies are familiar. Our love for our sons is said to be dangerous to the "maid" who seeks to take him from us. Like the first mother, a mother-in-law is a maid's rival for the sexual possession of a man. We too were maids and lovers before we were mothers; we understand. We understand too that our love may jeopardize our sons' manhood. As "good" mothers we allow our sons contempt for our feelings ("the normal male contempt for women"),² if not for our lives, so that they may guiltlessly "separate themselves" from us. There is, however, an unfamiliar twist to the poem. The lady asked for our head, the son brought our heart. She feared and respected our thoughts. He believes only our feelings are powerful. Again we are not surprised. The passions of maternity are so sudden, intense, and confusing that we ourselves often remain ignorant of the perspective, the *thought* that has developed from our mothering. Lacking pride, we have failed to deepen or to articulate that thought. This is a paper about the head of the mother.

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Central to our experience of our mothers and our mothering is a poignant conjunction of power and powerlessness. In any society a mother is unavoidably powerless. Nature's indifference—illness, death, and damage to the child or its closest loved ones—can frustrate the best maternal efforts. To unavoidable powerlessness is added avoidable social powerlessness. Almost everywhere the practices of mothering take place in societies in which women of all classes are less able than men of their class to determine the conditions in which their children grow. Throughout history, most women have mothered in conditions of military and social violence, as well as economic deprivation, governed by men whose policies they could neither shape nor control.

Powerless mothers are also powerful. "Most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman."³ For a child, a mother is the primary, uncontrollable source of the world's goods; a witness and judge whose will must be placated, whose approval must be secured.⁴ Some of a mother's power is avoidable if childcare is shared, from infancy on, with other adults and older children. However, a mother has a residual power accruing from her capacity to bear and nurse infants. So long as she is able and chooses to utilize her reproductive body in her own and her children's interest, she will, in the predictable technological future, have power to give or deny children to men as well as to maintain some irreducible power over her children by dint of her unique and extraordinary physical intimacy with them.

In most societies however, women are socially powerless in respect to the very reproductive capacities that might make them powerful. The primary bodily experience of mothers is a poignant reminder that to think of maternal power is immediately to recall maternal powerlessness—and conversely. Freudians and feminists have made us aware of the unfortunate consequences of this lethal conjunction. Children confront and rely upon a powerful maternal presence only to watch her become the powerless woman in front of the father, the teacher, the doctor, the judge, the landlord—the world. A child's rageful disappointment in its powerless mother, combined with resentment and fear of her powerful will, may account for the matrophobia so widespread in our society as to seem normal. For whatever reasons, it seems almost impossible for older children or adults to construct a coherent, let alone a benign, account of maternal power.⁵

The conjunction of maternal power and powerlessness makes maternal practices oppressive to mothers and children alike. The oppression is real; much more could be said about it. However,

to suggest that mothers are principally victims of a kind of crippling work is an egregiously inaccurate account of women's own experience as mothers and daughters. Although one can sympathize with the anger that insists upon and emphasizes the oppressive nature of maternal practices, an account that describes only exploitation and pain is itself oppressive to women.⁶ Mothers, despite the inevitable trials and social conditions of motherhood, are often effective in their work.

In articulating those conditions of mothering that allow for happiness and efficacy, we need to remember some simple facts. Maternal practices begin in love, a love which for most mothers is as intense, confusing, ambivalent, and poignantly sweet as any they will experience. Although economic and social conditions, such as the poverty that is widespread and the isolation that is typical in America, may make that love frantic, they do not kill the love. For whatever reasons, mothers typically find it not only natural but compelling to protect and foster the growth of their children. Relatedly, mothers, especially those who have chosen or come to welcome parenthood, experience a social-biological pride in the function of their reproductive processes, a sense of the activation of maternal power. In addition to a sense of reproductive power, many mothers early develop a sense of maternal competence, a sense that they *are* able to protect and foster the growth of their children.

That maternal love, pleasure in reproductive powers, and a sense of maternal competence survive in a patriarchal society where women are routinely derogated, makes one wonder at the further possibilities for maternal happiness in decent societies. Even in this relatively indecent society, mothers are usually socially rewarded for their work by the shared pleasure and confirmation of other women, by the gratitude and pride of grandparents, and frequently by the intense, appreciative paternal love of their mates. Moreover, mothers who work primarily at home frequently have more control over the details of their working day than is available to other workers.⁷ Many mothers, whatever their work in the public world, feel part of a community of comothers whose warmth and support is rarely equaled in other working relationships. Loving, competent, and appreciated, a mother need not experience her work as oppressive. When their children flourish, mothers have a sense of well-being.

On the other hand, no children flourish all of the time. The emotional and physical pains of their children are anguishing for mothers, inducing a sense of helplessness and guilt. Isolation, restricted options, and social devaluation can make mothering grim

even for economically privileged women. It is difficult when writing about motherhood—or experiencing it—to be balanced about both its grim and its satisfying aspects.

Yet loving, competent well-being is an important element in our (my) memories of our mothers and mothering. We must bear these memories in mind if we are to understand that neither the world's misogyny nor our own related psychic dramas have totally prevented us from acquiring an image of benign maternal power. Whatever their scientific status, persistent interest in and positive response to myths of patriarchy show how avidly women search for a society in which mothers are powerful. Feminist utopias are apt to assign government to mothers. "You see we are *mothers*," their authors seem to say, as if in saying that they have said it all.⁸ Cultural myths and our own dreams tell of us a connection we would wish to make with a mother who is socially as well as personally powerful, powerful in adult as well as in infants' eyes. The construction of patriarchal pasts and futures signal longing and regret; longing for a powerful mother we remember and wish we could recognize; regret, often resentful and blaming, that she does not come again after the years of childhood.

My mama moved among the days
like a dreamwalker in a field;
seemed like what she touched was hers
seemed like what touched her couldn't hold,
she got us almost through the high grass
then seemed like she turned around and ran
right back in
right back on in.⁹

It is enormously difficult to come by an image of maternal power that is even coherent, let alone benign: it is easy to come by images of powerlessness and malign power. I consider my attempt to express and respect maternal thought one contribution to an ongoing shared, feminist project: the construction of an image of maternal power which is benign, accurate, sturdy, and sane.

My particular project, the expression of maternal thought, connects to a general question. Do women, who now rightfully claim the instruments of public power, have cultures, traditions, and inquiries which we should insist upon bringing to the public world? If the "womanly" can be identified, should we respect it or attempt to surpass it? These questions divide feminists. The ideology of womanhood has been invented by men. It confines as it exalts us. On the other hand, the ideology of androgyny is often a disguised

ideology of manhood that continues the disrespect for women shared by both sexes.

I am aware of the oppressive uses to which any identification of the “womanly” can be put. Our current gender dichotomies are rigid and damaging. Praising cultures of oppression comes close to praising oppression itself. Often we celebrate our mothers’ lives only because we are afraid to confront the damage our past wrecked upon them and us. Despite these doubts, I am increasingly convinced that there are female traditions and practices out of which a distinctive kind of thinking has developed.

Maternal thinking is only one example of “womanly” thinking.¹⁰ In articulating and respecting the maternal, I do not underwrite the still current, false, and pernicious identification of womanhood with biological or adoptive mothering of particular children in families.¹¹ For me, “maternal” is a social category: Although maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient. Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others. And some biological mothers, especially in misogynistic societies, take a fearful, defensive distance from their own mothering and the maternal lives of any women.

Maternal thought does, I believe, exist for all women in a radically different way than for men. It is because we are *daughters* that we early receive maternal love with special attention to its implications for our bodies, our passions, and our ambitions. We are alert to the values and costs of maternal practices whether we are determined to engage in them or to avoid them. Although some men do, and more men should, acquire maternal thinking, their ways of acquisition are necessarily different from ours.¹²

I do not wish to deny any more than I wish to affirm some biological bases of maternal thinking. The “biological body” (in part a cultural artifact) *may* foster certain features of maternal practice, sensibility, and thought. Neither our own ambivalence to our women’s bodies nor the bigoted, repressive uses which many men, colonizers, and racists have made of biology, should blind us to our body’s possibilities. In concentrating on what mothers do rather than upon what we are, I postpone biological questions until we have the moral and political perceptions to answer them justly.¹³

Along with biology, I put aside all accounts of gender difference or maternal nature which would claim an essential and ineradicable difference between female and male parents. However, I do believe that there are features of mothering experience which are invariant and nearly unchangeable, and others which, though changeable, are

nearly universal.¹⁴ It is therefore possible to identify interests that appear to govern maternal practice throughout the species. However, it is impossible even to begin to specify those interests without importing features specific to the class, ethnic group, and particular sex-gender system in which those interests are realized. I will be drawing upon my knowledge of the institutions of motherhood in middle-class, white, Protestant, capitalist, patriarchal America as these have expressed themselves in the heterosexual nuclear family in which I mother and was mothered. Although I have tried to compensate for the limits of my particular social and sexual history, I principally depend upon others to correct my interpretations and to translate across cultures.¹⁵

I speak about a mother's *thought*—the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms. A mother engages in a discipline. That is, she asks certain questions rather than others; establishes criteria for the truth, adequacy, and relevance of proposed answers; and cares about the findings she makes and can act upon. Like any discipline, hers has *characteristic* errors, temptations, and goals. The discipline of maternal thought consists in establishing criteria for determining failure and success, in setting the priorities, and in identifying the virtues and liabilities which the criteria presume. To describe the capacities, judgments, metaphysical attitudes, and values of maternal thought does not presume maternal achievement. It is to describe a *conception* of achievement, the end to which maternal efforts are directed, conceptions and ends quite different from dominant public ones.¹⁶

In stating my claims about maternal thinking, I use a vocabulary developed in formulating theories about the general nature of thought.¹⁷ According to these theories, *all* thought arises out of social practice. In their practices, people respond to a reality that appears to them as given, as presenting certain *demands*. The response to demands is shaped by *interests* which are generally interests in preserving, reproducing, directing, and understanding individual and group life. These four interests are general in the sense that they arise out of the conditions of humans-in-nature and characterize us as a species. However, these interests are always and only expressed as interests of people in particular cultures and classes of their cultures, living in specific geographical, technological, and historical settings. They are always and only responses to some realities—human and nonhuman, natural and supranatural—which present themselves to particular interested people as given. Thinking is governed by the interests of

the practice out of which it arises. Thinking names and elaborates the “given” reality to whose demands practice is responding. It expresses, refines, and executes the interests of the practice in a way that is disciplined, directive, and communicable.

Maternal practice responds to the historical reality of a biological child in a particular social world. The agents of maternal practice, acting in response to the demands of their children, acquire a conceptual scheme—a vocabulary and logic of connections—through which they order and express the facts and values of their practice. In judgments and self-reflection, they refine and concretize this scheme. Intellectual activities are distinguishable, but not separable from disciplines of feeling. There is a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion. It is this unity I call “maternal thinking.” Although I will not digress to argue the point here, it is important that maternal thinking is no more interest governed, no more emotional, no more relative to its particular reality (the growing child) than the thinking that arises from scientific, religious, or any other practice.

Children, “demand” that their lives be preserved and their growth be fostered. Their social group “demands” that their growth be shaped in a way acceptable to the next generation. Maternal practice is governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying these demands for preservation, growth, and acceptability. Preservation is the most invariant and primary of the three. Because a caretaking mother typically bears her own children, preservation begins when conception is recognized and accepted. Although the form of preservation depends upon widely variant beliefs about the fragility and care of the fetus, women have always had a lore in which they recorded their concerns for the baby they “carried.” Once born, a child is physically vulnerable for many years. Even when she lives with the father of her child or other female adults, even when she has money to purchase or finds available supportive health and welfare services, a mother typically considers herself and is considered by others to be responsible for the maintenance of the life of her child.

Interest in fostering the physical, emotional, and intellectual growth of her child soon supplements a mother’s interest in its preservation. The human child is typically capable of complicated emotional and intellectual development: the human adult is radically different in kind from the child it once was. A woman who mothers may be aided or assaulted by the help and advice of fathers, teachers, doctors, moralists, therapists, and others who have an interest in fostering and shaping the growth of her child. Although rarely given primary credit, a mother typically holds

herself and is held by others to be responsible for the *malfunction* of the growth process.

From early on, certainly by the middle years of childhood, a mother is governed by a third interest. She must shape natural growth in such a way that her child becomes the sort of adult that she can appreciate and others can accept. Mothers will vary enormously, individually and socially, in the traits and lives that they will appreciate in their children. However, a mother typically takes as the criterion of her success the production of a young adult acceptable to her group.

These three interests in preservation, growth, and acceptability of the child govern maternal practices in general. However, not all mothers are, as individuals, governed by these interests. Some mothers are incapable of interested participation in the practices of mothering because of emotional, intellectual, or physical disability. Severe poverty may make interested maternal practice and therefore maternal thinking nearly impossible. Then, of course, mothers engage in practices other than and often conflicting with mothering. Some mothers, aware of the derogation and confinement of women in maternal practice, may be disaffected. In short, actual mothers have the same sort of relation to maternal practice as actual scientists have to scientific practice, or actual believers have to religious practices. As mothers, they are governed by the interests of their respective practices. But the style, skill, commitment, integrity, with which they engage in these practices, differ widely from individual to individual.

The interest in preservation, growth, and the acceptability of the child are frequently and unavoidably in conflict. A mother who watches a child eagerly push a friend aside as she or he climbs a tree will be torn between preserving the child from danger, encouraging the child's physical skills and courage, and shaping a child according to moral restraints—which might, for example, inhibit the child's joy in competitive climbing. Although some mothers will deny or be insensitive to the conflict and others will be clear about which interest should take precedence, mothers typically will know that they cannot secure each interest, will know that goods conflict, will know that unqualified success in realizing interests is an illusion. This unavoidable conflict of basic interests is one objective basis for the maternal humility which I will shortly describe.

A mother, acting in the interest of preserving and maintaining life, is in a peculiar relation to “nature.” As a childbearer, she often takes herself and is taken by others to be an especially “natural” member of her culture. As a childtender, she must

respect nature's limits and court its favor with foresightful actions ranging from immunizations; to caps on household poisons; to magical imprecations, warnings, and prayers. "Nature" with its unpredictable varieties of dirt and disease, is her enemy as much as her ally. Her children themselves are natural creatures, often unable to understand or abet her efforts to protect them. Because they frequently find her necessary direction constraining, a mother can experience her children's own liveliness as another enemy of the life she is preserving.

It is no wonder then that as she engages in preservation, a mother is liable to the temptations of fearfulness and excessive control. If she is alone with two or more young children as she tries to carry out her responsibilities, then control of herself, her children, and her physical environment is her only option, however rigid or excessive she looks to outsiders. Though necessarily controlling in their acts, *reflecting* mothers themselves identify rigid or excessive control as the likely defects of the very virtues they are required to practice. It is the identification of liability as such, with its implication of the will to overcome, which characterizes this aspect of maternal thought. The epithet "controlling mother" is often unsympathetic, even matriphobic. On the other hand, it may, in line with the insights of maternal thought, remind us of what maternal thinking *counts as* failure. To recognize excessive control as a *liability* sharply distinguishes maternal from scientific practice.¹⁸

To a mother, "life" may well seem "terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you give it a chance."¹⁹ In response, she develops a metaphysical attitude toward "Being as such," an attitude which I call "holding," an attitude which is governed by the priority of keeping over acquiring, of conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child's life. It is an attitude elicited by the work of "world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair . . . the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life."²⁰

The recognition of the priority of holding over acquiring once again distinguishes maternal from scientific thought, as well as from the instrumentalism of technocratic capitalism. In recognizing resilient good humor and humility as achievements of its practices, maternal thought takes issue both with contemporary moral theory and with popular moralities of assertiveness.²¹ Humility is a metaphysical attitude one takes toward a world beyond one's control. One might conceive of the world as governed by necessity and chance (as I do) or by supernatural

forces that cannot be comprehended. In either case, humility implies a profound sense of the limits of one's actions and of the unpredictability of the consequences of one's work. As the philosopher Iris Murdoch puts it: "Every 'natural' thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance. . . . One might say that chance is a subdivision of death. . . . We cannot dominate the world."²²

Humility which emerges from maternal practices accepts not only the facts of damage and death, but also the facts of the independent and uncontrollable, developing and increasingly separate existences of the lives it seeks to preserve. "Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of virtues."²³

If in the face of danger, disappointment, and unpredictability, mothers are liable to melancholy, they are also aware that a kind, resilient good humor is a virtue. This good humor must not be confused with the cheery denial which is both a liability and, unfortunately, a characteristic of maternal practice. Mothers are tempted to denial simply by the insupportable difficulty of passionately loving a fragile creature in a physically threatening, socially violent, pervasively uncaring, competitive world. Defensive denial is exacerbated as it is officially encouraged, when we must defend against perceptions of our own subordination. Our cheery denials are cruel to our children and demoralizing to ourselves.

Clear-sighted cheerfulness is the virtue of which denial is the degenerative form. It is clear-sighted cheerfulness that Spinoza must have had in mind when he said: "Cheerfulness is always a good thing and never excessive"; it "increases and assists the power of action."²⁴ Denying cheeriness drains intellectual energy and befuddles the will; the cheerfulness honored in maternal thought increases and assists the power of maternal action.

In a daily way, cheerfulness is a matter-of-fact willingness to continue, to give birth and to accept having given birth, to welcome life despite its conditions. When things fall apart, maternal cheerfulness becomes evident courage. There are many stories of mothers who, with resourcefulness and restraint, help their children to die well. The most common but disturbing stories concern mothers who accept their sons' wartime deaths, the most affecting, those which involve the deaths of small children in families.²⁵ These visible and accessible examples are but the manifestation of psychic strengths that have been developed in conditions of mothering which are invisible and frequently denied. Resilient good humor is a style of mothering "in the

deepest sense of 'style' in which to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do."²⁶

Because in the dominant society "humility" and "cheerfulness" name virtues of subordinates, and because these virtues have in fact developed in conditions of subordination, it is difficult to credit them, easy to confuse them with the self-effacement and cheery denial which are their degenerative forms. Again and again, in attempting to articulate maternal thought, language is sicklied o'er by the pale cast of sentimentality and thought itself takes on a greeting card quality. Yet literature shows us many mothers who in their "holding" actions value the humility and resilient good humor I have described. One can meet such mothers, recognize their thought, any day one learns to listen. One can appreciate the effects of their disciplined perseverance in the unnecessarily beautiful artifacts of the culture they created. "I made my quilt to keep my family warm. I made it beautiful so my heart would not break."²⁷

Mothers not only must preserve fragile, existing life. They must also foster growth and welcome change. If the "being" which is preserved seems always to be endangered, undone, slipping away, the "being" which changes is always developing, building, purposefully moving away. The "holding," preserving mother must, in response to change, be simultaneously a changing mother. Her conceptual scheme in terms of which she makes sense of herself, her child, and their common world will be more the Aristotelian biologist's than the Platonic mathematician's. Innovation takes precedence over permanence, disclosure, and responsiveness over clarity and certainty. The idea of "objective reality" itself "undergoes important modification when it is to be understood, not in relation to "the world described by science," but in relation to the progressing life of a person."²⁸

Women are said to value open over closed structure, to eschew the clear-cut and unambiguous, to refuse a sharp division between inner and outer or self and other. We are also said to depend upon and to prize our private inner lives of the mind.²⁹ If these facets of the "female mind" are elicited by maternal practices, they may well be interwoven responses to the changeability of a growing child. A child is itself an "open structure" whose acts are irregular, unpredictable, often mysterious. A mother, in order to understand her child, must assume the existence of a conscious continuing person whose acts make sense in terms of perceptions and responses to a meaning-filled world. She knows that her child's fantasies and thoughts are not only connected to the child's power to act, but often the only basis for her understanding of the child and for the child's self-understanding.³⁰

A mother, in short, is committed to two philosophical positions: she is a mentalist rather than a behaviorist, and she assumes the priority of personhood over action. Moreover, if her “mentalism” is to enable her to understand and to love, she must be realistic about the psyche whose growth she fosters. All psyches are moved by fear, lust, anger, pride, and defenses against them, by what Simone Weil called “*natural* movements of the soul” and likened to laws of physical gravity.³¹ This is not to deny that the soul is also blessed by “grace,” “light,” and erotic hungering for goodness.³² However, mothers cannot take grace for granted, nor force nor deny the less flattering aggrandizing and consolatory operations of childhood psychic life. A mother must again and again “regain the sense of the complexity and the reality and the struggle . . . with some pity, some envy and much good will.”³³

Her realistic appreciation of a person’s continuous mental life allows a mother to expect change, to change with change. As psychologist Jean Baker Miller puts it: “In a very immediate and day to day way women *live* for change.”³⁴ Change requires a kind of learning in which what one learns cannot be applied exactly, and often not even by analogy, to a new situation. If science agrees to take as real the reliable results of *repeatable* experiments,³⁵ its learning will be quite different in kind from maternal learning. Miller is hopeful that if we attend to maternal practices, we can develop new ways of studying learning appropriate to the changing natures of all peoples and communities, for it is not only children who change, grow, and need help in growing. Most obviously those who care for children must change in response to changing reality. And we all might grow—as opposed to aging—if we could learn how. For everyone’s benefit, “women must now face the task of putting their vast unrecognized experience with change into a new and broader level of operation.”³⁶

Miller writes of achievement, of women who have learned to change and respond to change. But she admits:

Tragically in our society, women are prevented from fully enjoying these pleasures (of growth) themselves by being made to feel that fostering them in others is the only valid role for all women and by the loneliness, drudgery and isolated non-cooperative household setting in which they work.³⁷

Similarly, in delineating maternal thought, I do not claim that mothers realize in themselves, the capacities and virtues which we learn to value as we care for others. Rather, mothers develop *conceptions* of abilities and virtues according to which they measure themselves and interpret their actions. It is no great sorrow that some mothers never acquire humility, resilient good humor,

realism, respect for persons, and responsiveness to growth, that all of us fail often in many kinds of ways. What is a great sorrow is to find the task itself misdescribed, sentimentalized, and devalued.

Acting in the interests of preservation and growth, women have developed a maternal perspective. This perspective has its degenerative forms, such as the cheery denial that sometimes passes for cheerfulness. Preservation can turn into the fierce desire to foster one's *own* children's growth whatever the cost to other children. Holding—world-preservation and world-repair—can turn into frantic accumulating and storing, especially under the pressures of consumerism. Yet though liable to degenerative forms, this is a perspective which any moral or thinking person might profitably consider.

With regard to the third interest governing maternal practices, the interest in producing a child acceptable to the next generation, worthiness is quite problematic. Families and societies have an interest in reproducing their members in a manner and with a result they can appreciate. Women, themselves half of family and society, share that interest. Yet they act in a society in which they are relatively powerless in respect to men and governor-experts of both sexes. Powerlessness is exacerbated by the *matrophobia* I earlier described, by self-contempt, and by numerous demoralizing, frightening physical and psychological violences perpetrated against all women. In response to maternal powerlessness, to a society whose values it cannot determine, maternal thought has opted for inauthenticity and the “good” of others.

By “inauthenticity” I designate a double willingness—first a willingness to *travailler pour l'armée*,³⁸ to accept the uses to which others will put one's children; second a willingness to remain blind to the implications of those uses for the actual lives of women and children. Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture. Like the “holding” of preservation, “inauthenticity” is a mostly nonconscious response to Being as Such. Only this attitude is not a caretaker's response to the natural exigencies of childtending, but a subordinate's reaction to a social reality essentially characterized by the domination and subordination of persons. Inauthenticity constructs and then assumes a world in which one's own values don't count. It is allied to fatalism and to some religious thought, some versions of Christianity, for example. As inauthenticity is lived out in maternal practice, it gives rise to the values of obedience and “being good”; that is, it is taken as an achievement to fulfill the values of the dominant culture. Obedience is related to humility in the face of the limits of one's powers. But unlike humility, which respects

indifferent nature, the incomprehensible supernature, and human fallibility, obedience respects the actual control and preferences of dominant people.

Individual mothers, living out maternal thought, take on the values of the families and subcultures to which they belong and of the men with whom they are allied. Because some groups and many men are vibrantly moral, these values are not necessarily inadequate. However, even moral groups and men almost always accept the relative subordination of women, whatever other ideals of equality and autonomy they may hold. A “good” mother may well be praised for colluding in her own subordination with the destructive consequences to herself and her children that I’ve described. Moreover, most groups and men impose at least some values that are psychologically and physically damaging to children. A mother practiced in fostering growth will be able to “see” the effects of, for example, injurious stratification, competitiveness, gender stereotyping, hypocrisy, and conscription to war. Damage to a child is as clear to her as the effect of a hurricane on a young tree. Yet to be “good,” a mother may be expected to endorse and execute inimical commands. She is also the person principally responsible for training her children in the ways and desires of obedience. This may mean training her daughters for powerlessness, her sons for war, and both for crippling work in dehumanizing factories, businesses, and professions. It may mean training both daughters and sons for defensive or arrogant power over others in sexual, economic, or political life. A mother who trains either for powerlessness or abusive power over others betrays the very life she has preserved, whose growth she has fostered. She denies her children even the possibility of being both strong and good.

The strain of colluding in one’s own powerlessness, coupled with the frequent and much greater strain of betraying the children one has tended, would be insupportable if conscious. A mother under strain may internalize as her own values those values which are clearly inimical to her children. She has, after all, usually been rewarded for just such protective albeit destructive internalization. Additionally, she may blind herself to the implications of her obedience, a blindness which is excused and exacerbated by the cheeriness of denial. For precariously but deeply protected mothers, feminist accounts of power relations and their cost call into question the worthiness of maternal work and the genuineness of maternal love. Such women, understandably, fight insight as others fight bodily assault, revealing in their struggles a commitment to their own sufferings which may look “neurotic” but is in fact, given their options, realistic.

When I described maternal thought arising out of the interests in growth and preservation, I was not speaking of the actual achievement of mothers, but of a conception of achievement. Similarly, in describing the thought arising out of the interest in acceptability, I am not speaking of actual mothers' adherence to dominant values, but of a conception of their relation to those values in which obedience and "being good" is considered an achievement. There are many individual mothers who "fail," that is who insist on their own values, who will not remain blind to the implications of dominant values for the lives of their children. Moreover, I hope I have said enough about the damaging effects of the prevailing sexual arrangements and social hierarchies on maternal lives to make it clear that I do not blame mothers for their (our) obedience. Obedience is largely a function of social powerlessness. Maternal work is done according to the Law of the Symbolic Father and under His Watchful Eye, as well as, typically, according to the desires, even whims, of the father's house. "This is my Father's world/Oh let me ne'er forget/that though the wrong be oft so strong,/He is the ruler yet." In these conditions of work, inauthentic obedience to dominant patriarchal values is as plausible a maternal response as respect for the results of experiment is in scientific work.

On the other hand, interest in producing an acceptable child provides special opportunities for mothers to explore, create, and insist upon their own values, to train their children for strength and moral sensitivity. For this opportunity to be realized, either collectively or by individual mothers, maternal thought will have to be transformed by feminist consciousness.

Coming to have a feminist consciousness is the experience of coming to know the truth about oneself and one's society. . . . The very *meaning* of what the feminist apprehends is illuminated by the light of what ought to be. . . . The feminist apprehends certain features of social reality *as* intolerable, as to be rejected in behalf of a transforming project for the future. . . . Social reality is revealed as deceptive. . . . What is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening.³⁹

Feminist consciousness will first transform inauthentic obedience into wariness, uncertain reflection, at times, anguished confusion. The feminist becomes "marked by the experience of moral ambiguity" as she learns new ways of living without betraying her woman's past, without denying her obligations to others. "She no longer knows what sort of person she ought to be, and therefore she does not know what she ought to do. One moral paradigm is called into question by the laborious and often obscure emergence of another."⁴⁰

Out of confusion, new voices will arise, voices recognized not so much by the content of the truths they enunciate as by the honesty and courage of enunciation. They will be at once familiar and original, these voices arising out of maternal practice, affirming its own criteria of acceptability, insisting that the dominant values are unacceptable and need not be accepted.

How *does* the male child differentiate himself from his mother, and does this mean inevitably that he must “join the army,” that is, internalize patriarchal values? Can the mother, in patriarchy, represent culture, and if so, what does this require of her? . . . What do we want for our sons? . . . We want them to remain in the deepest sense, sons of the mother, yet also to grow into themselves, to discover new ways of being men as we are discovering new ways of being women.

What do we mean by the nurture of daughters? The most notable fact that the culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. . . . The quality of the mother’s life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter.⁴¹

I have been arguing that maternal thought as it is governed by the interest in acceptability is clear and distinct enough to be expressed, but is not yet worthy of respect. The interest in acceptability will always shape maternal practices and provoke mothers to affirm and announce *some* values, their own or others.⁴² The production of a child worthy of appreciation is a *real* demand which a mother would impose on herself even if it were not demanded of her by her community. The only question is whether that demand is met by acquiescence or the struggles of a conscience attending clearly to the good of children. When mothers insist upon the inclusion of their values and experiences in the public world which children enter, when they determine what makes their children acceptable, the work of growth and preservation will acquire a new gaiety and joyfulness.

Finally, I would like to discuss a capacity—“attention”—and a virtue—love—which are central to the conception of achievement that maternal thought as a whole articulates. This capacity and virtue, when realized, invigorate preservation and enable growth. Attention and love again and again undermine a mother’s inauthentic obedience as she perceives and endorses a child’s experience though society finds it intolerable. The identification of the capacity of attention and the virtue of love is at once the foundation and the corrective of maternal thought.

The notion of “attention” is central to the philosophy of Simone Weil and is developed, along with the related notion of “love” by

Iris Murdoch, who was profoundly influenced by Weil. Attention and love are fundamental to the construction of “objective reality” understood “in relation to the progressing life of a person,” a “reality which is revealed to the patient eye of love.”⁴³ Attention is an *intellectual* capacity connected even by definition with love, a special kind of “knowledge of the individual.”⁴⁴ “The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.”⁴⁵ Weil thinks that the capacity for attention is a “miracle,” Murdoch ties it more closely to familiar achievement. “The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are ‘looking,’ making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results.”⁴⁶

For both Weil and Murdoch, the enemy of attention is what they call “fantasy,” defined not as rich imaginative play, which does have a central role in maternal thinking, but as the “proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images.”⁴⁷ Fantasy, according to their original conception, is intellectual and imaginative activity in the service of consolation, domination, anxiety, and aggrandizement. It is reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain, self-induced blindness designed to protect it from insight. Fantasy, so defined, works in the service of inauthenticity. “The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed on the real situation”⁴⁸—or, as I would say, on the real children. Attention to real children, children seen by the “patient eye of love” “teaches us how real things [real children] can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.”⁴⁹

Much in maternal practices work against attentive love: intensity of identification, vicarious living through a child, daily wear of maternal work, harassment and indignities of an indifferent social order, the clamor of children themselves. Although attention is elicited by the very reality it reveals—the reality of a growing person—it is a discipline that requires effort and self-training. Love, the love of children at any rate, is not only the most intense of attachments; it is also a detachment, a giving up, a letting grow. To love a child without seizing or using it, to see *the child's* reality with the patient, loving eye of attention—such loving and attending might well describe the separation of mother and child from the mother’s point of view. Of course, many of us who are mothers fail much of the time in attentive love and loving attention. Many mothers also train themselves in the looking, self-restraining, and empathy that is loving attention. They can be heard doing so in any playground or coffee klatch.

I am not saying that mothers, individually or collectively, are (or are not) especially wonderful people. My point is that out of maternal practices distinctive ways of conceptualizing, ordering, and valuing arise. We *think* differently about what it *means* and what it takes to be “wonderful,” to be a person, to be real.

Murdoch and Weil, neither mothers themselves nor especially concerned with mothers, are clear about the absolute value of attentive love and the reality it reveals. Weil writes:

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail . . . belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, “What are you going through?”

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” . . . Only he who is capable of attention can do this.⁵⁰

I do not claim absolute value but only that attentive love, the training to ask, “What are you going through?” is central to maternal practices. If I am right about its place in maternal thought, and if Weil and Murdoch are right about its absolute value, the self-conscious inclusion of maternal thought in the dominant culture will be of general intellectual and moral benefit.

I have described a “thought” arising out of maternal practices organized by the interests or preservation, growth, and acceptability. Although in some respects the thought is “contradictory,” that is it betrays its own values and must be transformed by feminist consciousness, the thought as a whole, with its fulcrum and correction in attentive love, is worthy of being expressed and respected. This thought has emerged out of maternal practices that are oppressive to women and children. I believe that it has emerged largely in response to the relatively invariable requirements of children and despite oppressive circumstances. As in all women’s thought, some worthy aspects of maternal thought may arise out of identification with the powerless and excluded. However, oppression is largely responsible for the defects rather than the strengths of maternal thought, as in the obedient goodness to which mothers find themselves “naturally” subscribing. When the oppressiveness of gender arrangements is combined with race, poverty, or the multiple injuries of class, it is a miracle that maternal thought can arise at all. On the other hand, that it does indeed arise, miraculously, is clear both from literature (Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, Maya Angelou, Agnes Smedley, Lucille Clifton, Louisa May Alcott, Audre Lorde, Marilyn French, Grace Paley, countless others) and from daily experience. Maternal thought *identifies* priorities, attitudes, and virtues, *conceives* of

achievement. The more oppressive the institutions of motherhood, the greater the pain and struggle in living out the worthy and transforming the damaging aspects of thought.

It is now widely argued that the most liberating change we can make in institutions of motherhood is to include men equally in every aspect of maternal care. I am heartened to read that "societies that do not elaborate the opposition of male and female and place positive value on the conjugal relationship and involvement of both men and women in the home seem to be most egalitarian in terms of sex role."⁵¹ To prevent or excuse men from maternal practice is to encourage them to separate public action from private affection. Moreover, men's domination is present when their absence from the nursery is combined with their domination of every other room. To familiarize children with "natural" domination at their earliest age in a context of primitive love, assertion, and sexual passion is to prepare them to find equally "natural" and exhaustive the division between exploiter and exploited which pervades the world. Although daughter and son alike may internalize "natural" domination, neither, typically, can live with it easily. Identifying with and imitating exploiters, we are overcome with self-hate; aligning ourselves with the exploited, we are fearful and manipulative. Again and again family power dramas are repeated in psychic, interpersonal and professional dramas, while they are institutionalized in economic, political, and international life. Radically recasting the power-gender roles in those dramas just might revolutionize social conscience.⁵²

Assimilating men into childcare both inside and outside the home would also be conducive to serious social reform. Responsible, equal childcaring would require men to relinquish power and their own favorable position in the division between intellectual/professional and service labor as that division expresses itself domestically. Loss of preferred status at home might make socially privileged men more suspicious of unnecessary divisions of labor and damaging hierarchies in the public world. Moreover, if men were emotionally and practically committed to childcare, they would reform the work world in parents' interests. Once no one "else" was minding the child, there would be good daycare centers with flexible hours, daycare centers to which parents could trust their children from infancy on. These daycare centers, like the work week itself, would be managed "flexibly," in response to human needs as well as "productivity," with an eye to growth, rather than measurable "profit." Such moral reforms of economic life would probably begin with professionals and managers servicing themselves. However, even in nonsocialist countries, their benefits could be unpredictably extensive.

I would not argue, however, that the assimilation of men into childcare is the primary social goal for mothers to set themselves. Rather, we must work to bring a *transformed* maternal thought into the public realm, to make the preservation and growth of *all* children a work of public conscience and legislation. This will not be easy. Mothers are no less corrupted than anyone else by concerns of status and class. Often our misguided efforts on behalf of the success and purity of our children frighten them and everyone else around them. As we increase and enjoy our public effectiveness, we will have less reason to live vicariously through our children. We may then begin to learn to sustain a creative tension between our inevitable and fierce desire to foster our own children and the less compulsive desire that all children grow and flourish.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to believe that mothers, just because they are mothers, can transcend class interest and implement principles of justice. All feminists must join in articulating a theory of justice shaped by and incorporating maternal thinking. Moreover, the generalization of attentive love to *all* children requires politics. The most enlightened thought is not enough.

Closer to home again, we must refashion our domestic life in the hope that the personal will in fact betoken the political. We must begin by resisting the temptation to construe “home” simply-mindedly, as a matter of justice between mothers and fathers. Single parents, lesbian mothers, and coparenting women remind us that there are many ways to provide children with examples of caring, which do not incorporate sexual inequalities of power and privilege. Those of us who do live with the fathers of our children will eagerly welcome shared parenthood—for overwhelming practical as well as ideological reasons. But in our eagerness, we mustn’t forget that so long as a mother is not effective publicly and self-respecting privately, male presence can be harmful as well as beneficial. It does a woman no good to have the power of the Symbolic Father brought right into the nursery, often despite the deep, affectionate egalitarianism of an individual man. It takes a strong mother and father to resist the temptations to domination and subordination for which they have been trained and are socially rewarded. And whatever the hard-won equality and mutual respect an individual couple may achieve, so long as a mother—even if she is no more parent than father—is derogated and subordinate outside the home, children will feel angry, confused, and “wildly unmothered.”⁵³

Despite these reservations, I look forward to the day when men are willing and able to share equally and actively in transformed maternal practices. When that day comes, will we still identify some thought as maternal rather than merely parental? Might we

echo the cry of some feminists—there shall be no more “women”—with our own—there shall be no more “mothers,” only people engaging in childcare. To keep matters clear I would put the point differently. On that day, there will be no more “Fathers,” no more people of either sex who have power over their children’s lives and moral authority in their children’s world, though they do not do the work of attentive love. There will be mothers of both sexes who live out a transformed maternal thought in communities that share parental care—practically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Such communities will have learned from their mothers how to value children’s lives.

NOTES

I began circulating an early draft of this paper in the fall of 1978. Since then, the constructive criticism and warm response of readers has led me to believe that this draft is truly a collective endeavor. I would like especially to thank Sandra Bartky, Gail Bragg, Bell Chevigny, Nancy Chodorow, Margaret Comstock, Mary Felstiner, Berenice Fisher, Marilyn Frye, Susan Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Jane Lilienfeld, Jane Marcus, Adrienne Rich, Amelie Rorty, William Ruddick, Barrie Thorne, Marilyn Blatt Young, readers for *Feminist Studies*, and Rayna Rapp.

¹From J. Echergray, “Severed Heart,” quoted by Jessie Bernard, in *The Future of Motherhood* (New York: Dial, 1974), p. 4.

²Ruth Mack Brunswick, “The Preoedipal Phase of Libido Development,” quoted by Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 196, footnote.

³Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 11. My debt to this book is profound and pervasive.

⁴For an extensive discussion of the power of mothers, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). In expressing our fears of maternal power Dinnerstein sometimes, unfortunately and unwittingly, gives voice to the very matrophobia she decries.

⁵In traditional heterosexual parenting, a returning father may distract even the nursing mother from her child, demanding attention and service which is frequently more alienating, more threatening to a mother’s self-possession than children’s demands. To the extent that the infant is sensitive to the gender of the mother, as Dinnerstein and others claim, to that extent it would be dimly aware of the gender-linked character of the interruption. In any case, the child will soon become aware that females are care-takers whose work and caring is endlessly interruptible.

On the politics of interruption, see Michelle Cliff, “The Resonance of Interruption,” *Chrysalis*, no. 8 (Summer 1979); Pamela Fishman, “Interaction: The Work Women Do,” *Social Problems* 25, no. 4 (April 1978); and Don Zimmerman and Candace West, “Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversations,” in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley, Mass., Newbury House, 1975).

Many fathers are of course, socially unappreciated. Poor, declassified, or “failing” fathers know the pain of introducing their children to a world in which they do not

figure. Sometimes their powerlessness is visited directly upon the mothers. Even when it is not, mothers suffer a double powerlessness when the “fathers” of her kin and cultural group are degraded by the Laws of the Ruling Fathers; the “world of the fathers” belongs neither to her sons nor to the men her daughters will live among.

⁶I am indebted to Susan Harding for this point (personal conversation and lecture notes from the Residential College, University of Michigan).

⁷For an analysis of the evil of factory work which emphasizes workers’ loss of control of their time, see Simone Weil, “Factory Work,” in *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: McKay, 1977). For a similar comparison of mothers’ control over time compared with that of other workers, see Barbara Garson, “Clerical,” in *All the Livelong Day* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975). Of course, many mothers also work in factories, stores and fields; and some mothers work in managerial, professional, and executive positions. The issue is whether mothers have more control over time and order of their work (in the Weil sense) in their maternal than in their other working hours. Mothers do not have control over their *lives*, and this relative absence of self-determination has consequences which I will specify.

⁸Carol Pearson, “Women’s Fantasies and Feminist Utopias,” makes the general point that in several feminist utopias, “human kinship procedures can govern an entire society because the people in the society are mothers.” See *Frontiers* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1977). Pearson quotes extensively from *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “You see we are *mothers*” is taken from *Herland* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). For a clear discussion of the significance of matriarchy, see Paula Webster, “Matriarchy: A Vision of Power,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 141-56.

⁹Lucille Clifton, “My Mama Moved Among the Days,” in *Good Times* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 2.

¹⁰Among other possible aspects of women’s thought are those that might arise from our sexual lives, from our “homemaking,” from the special conflict women feel between allegiance on the one hand to women and their world, and on the other hand, to all people of their kin and culture. Any identifiable aspect of women’s thought will be interrelated to all of the others. Because women almost everywhere are relatively powerless in relation to men of their class, all aspects of women’s thought will be affected by powerlessness. Whether we are discussing the thought arising from women’s bodily, sexual, maternal, homemaking, linguistic, or any other experience, we are faced with a confluence of powerlessness and the “womanly” whatever that might be.

¹¹The pervasive and false identification of womanhood and biological or adoptive motherhood injures both mothers and nonmothers. The identification obscures the many kinds of mothering performed by those who do not parent particular children in families. It frequently forces those labeled “nonmothers” to take a distance from their own mothers and the maternal lives of all women. Out of justified fear and resentment of the obligation to mother, these “nonmothers” may become caught up in socially induced but politically myopic efforts to divorce female identity from any connection with maternal practices. Meanwhile, mothers engage in parallel self-destructive efforts which further divide women from each other. In their fight to preserve their nonmaternal aspirations and projects, mothers may belittle the importance of maternal experience in their lives. Or out of fear of their own anger at a limiting social identity as well as out of legitimate fury at the devaluation of mothers and motherliness, they may overidentify with the maternal identification foisted upon them, letting their nonmaternal working and loving selves die. Whichever we mothers do, and frequently we do both, the cost to our maternal and nonmaternal works and loves is enormous.

¹²For the most complete and sensitive account of girls’ special relation to mothers’ mothering, see Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*. See also Jane Flax, “The

Conflict Between Nurture and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 171-89.

¹³See Nancy Chodorow, "Feminism and Difference: Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," *Socialist Review*, no. 46 (July-August 1979). "We cannot know what children would make of their bodies in a nongender or nonsexually organized social world. . . . It is not obvious that there would be major significance to biological sex differences, to gender difference or to different sexualities" (p. 66).

¹⁴Examples of the invariant and *nearly* unchangeable include: long gestation inside the mother's body; prolonged infant and childhood dependence; physical fragility of infancy; radical qualitative and quantitative change ("growth") in emotional and intellectual capacities from infancy to adulthood; long development and psychological complexity of human sexual desire, of memory and other cognitive capacities, and of "object relations." Features which are *nearly* universal and certainly changeable include: the identification of childbearing and childcaring, the consequent delegation of childcare to natural mothers and other women, the relative subordination of women in any social class to men of that class.

¹⁵To see the universal in particulars, to assimilate differences and extend kinship is a legacy of the ecumenical Protestantism in which I was raised. I am well aware that even nonviolent, well-meaning Protestant assimilations can be obtuse and cruel for others. Therefore I am dependent on others, morally as well as intellectually, for the statement of differences, the assessment of their effects on every aspect of maternal lives, and finally for radical correction as well as for expansion of any general theory I would offer. However, I do not *believe* that the thinking I describe is limited only to "privileged white women," as one reader put it. I first came to the notion of "maternal thinking" and the virtues of maternal practices through personal exchange with Tillie Olsen and then through reading her fiction. My debt to her is pervasive. Similarly, I believe that "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" by Audre Lorde, *Conditions*, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 30-36, is an excellent example of what I call "maternal thinking transformed by feminist consciousness." My "assimilation" of Olsen's and Lorde's work in no way denies the differences which separate us nor the biases that those differences may introduce into my account. These are only two of many examples of writers in quite different social circumstances who express what I take to be "maternal thinking."

¹⁶Nothing I say about maternal thought suggests that the women who engage in it cannot engage in other types of intellectual discourse. A maternal thinker may also be an experimental psychologist, a poet, a mathematician, an architect, a physicist. I believe that because most thinkers have been men, most disciplines are partly shaped by "male" concepts, values, styles, and strategies. However, unless we have identified "male" and "female" aspects of thought, the claim of gender bias is an empty one. I do not doubt that disciplines are also shaped by transgender interests, values, and concepts, which women, whether or not they engage in maternal practices, may fully share. To the extent that the disciplines are shaped by "male" thought, mothers and other women may feel alienated by the practices and thinking of their own discipline. Correlatively, when thinkers are as apt to be women as men, thought itself may change.

¹⁷I derive the vocabulary most specifically from Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). However, I have been equally influenced by other philosophical relativists, most notably by Peter Winch, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna. See, Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society" and other papers, in *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, Zettel*, and *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, 1956, 1967, 1969). Kessler and McKenna, *Gender* (New York: Wiley, 1978). I am also indebted to the writings of Evelyn Keller, especially "Feminist Critique of Science: A Forward

or Backward Move,” “He, She and Id in Scientific Discourse” (unpublished manuscripts); and “Gender and Science,” *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 1, no. 3 (1978).

¹⁸ See Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* for the view that scientific knowledge is organized by its interests in control.

¹⁹ The words are Mrs. Ramsay’s in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1927), p. 92.

²⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women,” in *Working It Out*, ed. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon, 1977). Italics mine.

²¹ For the comparison, see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken, 1971). Popular moralities as well as contemporary moral theory tend to emphasize decision, assertion, happiness, authenticity, and justification by principle.

²² Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book 3, Proposition 42, demonstration. See also Proposition 40, Note and Proposition 45, both in Book 3.

²⁵ For an example of the first, see Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1925), in which Lady Bexborough opens a bazaar holding the telegram announcing her son’s death. Her action is simultaneously admirable, repellent, and politically disturbing as I hope to show in the section on acceptability.

²⁶ Bernard Williams, *Morality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 11.

²⁷ The words are a Texas farmwoman’s who quilted as she huddled with her family in a shelter as, above them, a tornado destroyed their home. The story was told to me by Miriam Schapiro.

²⁸ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 26.

²⁹ These are differences often attributed to women both by themselves and by psychologists. For a critical review of the literature see Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974). For a plausible account of women’s valuing of inner life, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1975). Maccoby and Jacklin are critical both of the findings I mentioned and of adequacy of the psychological experiments they survey for testing or discovering these kinds of differences. I make little use of psychology, more of literature, in thinking about the kinds of cognitive sex differences I discuss. Psychologists are not, so far as I know, talking about women who have empathically identified with and assimilated maternal practices, either by engaging in them or by identifying with their own or other mothers. It would be hard to identify such a subgroup of women without circularity. But even if one could make the identification, tests would have to be devised that did not measure achievement, but conception of achievement. Mothers, to take one example, may well prize the inner life, but have so little time for it or be so self-protectively defended against their own insights (as I will discuss shortly) that they gradually lose the capacity for inner life. Or again, a mother may not maintain sharp boundaries between herself and her child or between her child’s “outer” action and inner life. However, she *must* maintain some boundaries. We value what we are in danger of losing (e.g., inner life); we identify virtues because we recognize temptations to vice (e.g., openness because we are tempted to rigid control); we refuse what we fear giving way to (e.g., either pathological symbiotic identification *or* an unworkable division between our own and our children’s interests). It is difficult to imagine tests sophisticated and sensitive enough to measure such conceptions, priorities, and values. I have found psychoanalytic theory the most useful of psychologies and Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* the most helpful in applying psychoanalytic theory to maternal practices.

³⁰ One reader has suggested that my account of a mother attuned to her own child’s thoughts and fantasies is biased by my white, middle-class experience. By appreciation

of a person's continuous mental life, I do not mean only the leisurely (and frequently intrusive) hovering over the child's psyche, hovering which is often the product of powerlessness and enforced idleness. The appreciation I think of is often a kind of pained groping for the meanings that a child is giving to its own experiences, including to its own sufferings. I believe I have heard these gropings both first-hand and in literary reflections of mothers who are not white and/or middle class. For two of many examples see Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" from *Tell Me a Riddle* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1956) and Audre Lorde's "Man Child." If my interpretation of others' experiences is wrong, other women with different lives will correct me. Expressing maternal thinking is necessarily a collective project.

³¹ Simone Weil, "Gravity and Grace," in *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), first French edition, 1947), passim.

³² Weil, "Gravity and Grace," and other essays in *Gravity and Grace*. Both the language and concepts are indebted to Plato.

³³ Bernard's words in the summing up of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1931), p. 294.

³⁴ Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 54.

³⁵ As Habermas argues, *Knowledge and Human Interest*.

³⁶ Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, p. 56. This vast experience is unrecognized partly because psychologists assume that while mothers are responsible for preservation, fathers are responsible for growth. This view of psychologists "denies the possibility of a maternal nurturance which actually encourages autonomy. But what is nurturance if not the pleasure in the other's growth? if not the desire to satisfy the other's needs whether it be the need to cling or the need to be independent?" Jessica Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited: or, A World Without Fathers?", *New German Critique*, no. 13 (Winter 1978): 35-57.

³⁷ Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, p. 40.

³⁸ I am indebted to Rich, *Of Woman Born*, especially chap. 8, both for this phrase and for the working out of the idea of inauthenticity.

³⁹ Sandra Lee Bartky, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Mary Vetteeling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston and Jane English (Towata, N.J.: Littlefield Adams, 1977), pp. 22-34, 33, 25, 28-29.

⁴⁰ Bartky, "Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," p. 31. On the riskiness of authenticity and the courage it requires of women see also Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, chap. 9.

⁴¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, pp. 198, 211, 246, 247.

⁴² For a discussion of the relative weight of parents' and children's values in determining children's lives, see William Ruddick, "Parents and Life Prospects," in *Having Children*, ed. Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁴³ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Collected Essays*, chosen and translated by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Also, *Simone Weil Reader*, p. 333.

⁴⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Simone Weil, "Reflections of the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), p. 115.

⁵¹Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

⁵²Rich, *Of Woman Born*; Dinnerstein, *Mermaid and Minotaur*, passim.

⁵³Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 225.