

## **Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a “Good” Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence**

Sarah LaChance Adams  
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In the introduction, Adams invites the reader to her project with examples of the phenomenon of filicide. She demonstrates the absurdity of the dichotomies between “good and bad” mothers and “bad and mad” mothers. As we know, maternal love includes contradictory impulses and emotions. Adams’ project is to show us how maternal ambivalence is morally productive insofar as it helps us to recognize the alterity of others, and it is namely because of the tensions inherent to mothering that it is an instructive case for ethics. Adams argues that “the ambiguity of human relationships results in an ambivalent ethical orientation, contingent as it is on negotiating the interrelated yet separable interests of the self and the other” (4). It is with this contradiction of our intersubjective existence in mind that Adams offers an alternative philosophical treatment of motherhood with focus on the concrete experience of mothers.

Following the introduction, the book is deployed in five chapters. First, a methodological chapter on the mother as ethical exemplar in care ethics, where Adams lays out her assumptions, motivations, and intentions for her project. This is helpful and engaging. Adams puts words to the importance of the maternal and why we should study mothers. In the chapter “Motherhood’s Janus Head”, we are presented with a solid review of the pertaining psychology and psychoanalytic theory. Although Adams aptly discusses several relevant psychoanalytic writers from classic thinkers like Freud, Winnicott and Klein, to contemporaries like Kristeva, Parker, and Chodorow, I was puzzled and disappointed that she did not include Benjamin, who is arguably one of the most important thinkers in modern feminist psychoanalytic theory on the ethical implications of maternal subjectivity. Adams’ passion for a new care ethics that brings in the maternal is captivating namely because she points out our “simultaneous needs to nurture, to be nurtured, and to maintain independence” (24) – which is Benjamin’s (1994) theory of intersubjectivity in a nutshell. Adams then presents a chapter on each of the three philosophers her analysis centers around; Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir. As a reader from outside of philosophy, these chapters made me realize how difficult an endeavor it is to develop a philosophy of care. The chapter on Levinas was especially challenging to grasp and get excited about. It seems odd that Adams has chosen Levinas, when she also explains in great

detail all the ways he fails at recognizing the reality of mothers. The chapter on Merleau-Ponty is more convincing. Adams demonstrates how his idea of the maternal experience as “dehiscence in the flesh” captures the ambiguity and emphasizes the crucial role of ambivalence. In the chapter on de Beauvoir, Adams seems to be back on solid feminist ground with de Beauvoir’s strong case against perfectionistic motherhood. This chapter was especially encouraging in its unapologetic insistence on the ethical importance of the assertion of maternal subjectivity.

It might be unfair of me to focus on what is absent, but I would have loved to read Adams’ comments on Baraitser’s esteemed book *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruptions*, which also addresses (and critiques) Levinas and namely explores the understanding of the interruption of the other as the opening for ethics. Another minor weakness of the book lies in the occasional use of philosophical concepts without clarifying notes and definitions, namely Adams’ specific use of the concepts (for example, what exactly is meant by “intersubjectivity” since it is clearly not the psychoanalytic understanding). This might make some of the philosophical theory hard to approach for readers outside the field.

In conclusion, Adams argues that filicide is essentially a social problem. I am persuaded by her arguments and touched by her urges for solutions informed by care ethics, and I am even left longing for more of the social justice advocacy that seems to motivate her. Another strength of this book lies in its delineated focus of maternal ambivalence and the phenomenological approach. Adams clearly resists the urge to digress too far into other related topics or to expand her analysis to cover everything related to ethics and the maternal. I enjoyed reading so thorough an exploration of one topic, and its complexity deserves this exploration. Adams does a remarkable job of demonstrating the usefulness of philosophy when consistently connected to the concrete experiences of mothers. Although Adams’ aim as philosopher is to develop a care ethics based on maternal feminist phenomenology, continuing the work of Sara Ruddick, I also read this book as profound advocacy for Maternal Mental Health. I believe Adams’ insights are valuable for anyone working with mothers.

## References

- Baraitser, Lisa. *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruptions*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Benjamin, Jessica. “The Omnipotent Mother: A Psychoanalytic Study of Fantasy and Reality.” *Representations of Motherhood*. Eds. Donna Bassin and Margaret Honey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. 129-147.