

Explaining the World *Philosophical Reflections on Feminism and Mothering*

This essay explores the evolving systems of justification and morality that emerge from mother and child dialogues. Contrasting a mother's ethic of care with a surrounding cultural climate of violence, I argue that children are capable of providing insight to this seeming social contradiction. I focus on a series of conversations I've had with my now five year old son with regard to naturally occurring harm (i.e. floods, disease...) and human created harm (i.e. war, violence, physical intimidation). I argue that my son's efforts to "make the symbolic real" are consistent with philosopher Gareth Matthews' (1980) claim that young children are capable of complex philosophical thinking though it may go dormant at about eight or nine years of age. My view is that philosophical thinking between mother and child typifies the feminist ideal that respectful investigation can occur between two parties who are unequal in terms of social power. Though my son is smaller, less experienced, and physically weaker, he has come to believe that these qualities will not be relevant in others' assessment of his explanations of the world.

In the context of academic scholarship, there is something both banal and transgressive in writing about child rearing. Banal because if one appeals to experiences with one's own child the work risks being seen as something like an episode of *Kids Say the Darndest Things!* Or even worse, the professional equivalent to a parent pulling pictures out of a wallet while you are forced to smile and coo.

But it is also transgressive, particularly for a woman, to focus on child rearing in a professional context. The efforts women have made to be taken seriously in academic and professional realms has often meant that they have had to minimize or downplay their role as mothers and care givers. It is also transgressive particularly in my own field of analytic philosophy, to appeal to

something so particularized, so intimate and subjective as one's relationship to one's own child. Philosophy in the western tradition has had a long history of aiming toward general, universal principles of human experience that transcend the daily rituals of tending to the immediate needs of the very young.

Nevertheless, research that starts with one's own child is not anomalous in mainstream academic scholarship. For instance Jean Piaget (1957), in his research on children's cognitive development, very often used his own children as subjects of his research. For this reason Piaget referred to himself as a "father/experimenter." In this essay, I will adopt a somewhat similar perspective though unlike Piaget I will not describe my role as mother/experimenter but instead as "mother/philosopher." However like Piaget, I will attempt to transform what I believe to be fairly ordinary experiences with my own child into some cogent reflections on the general nature of philosophy, feminism and the reasoning that occurs between parent and child.

My research and scholarly interests have generally focused on social and cultural standards of rationality and reasonableness. Though my interests in feminist philosophy and social theories of knowledge have led me to question norms of "objectivity" I have still conducted my own scholarship from the perspective of an objective analyst. This present project then takes a different turn. Starting from my own experience as a feminist philosopher interested in knowledge, theory construction, and justification I examine my role as the mother of a young child, who, like most young children, is constantly in the process of building and rebuilding his theory of the world. Noam Chomsky (1959) has described the young child learning language as a "little linguist" constantly in the process of confirming or disconfirming their theory of grammar. I would like to offer some perspective on the young child as the "little epistemologist" constantly in the business of seeking the best account of their experience guided by norms of consistency and coherence. With regard to some philosophical skills, ones that are particularly of interest to feminist philosophers like empathy, care, and responsibility to others, young children may be in a better position than perhaps more mature children or adults.

That children are capable of sustained philosophical thinking is well illustrated by philosopher Gareth Matthews in his book *The Philosophy of Childhood* (1994). Matthews writes: "... my own research suggests spontaneous excursions into philosophy are not at all unusual for children between the ages of three and seven; in somewhat older children, though, even eight-and-nine year olds, they become rare, or at least rarely reported. My hypothesis is that once children become well settled into school they learn that only useful questioning is expected of them. Philosophy either goes underground to be pursued privately and not shared with others, or else becomes totally dormant" (1994: 5). Matthews' exploration into the value of children's philosophical thinking is unique in the philosophical literature. Though concerned to map out the parameters of "human" reasoning, most philosophy in the Western tradition has devalued or completely ignored the thinking of children.

Yet as a mother/philosopher I witness daily the dynamic interplay between my own efforts to set up some guiding principles for my child, and my child's response in testing the consistency of those principles against his own experiences. As a feminist, I am cognizant of the harm that hierarchies and dualities can do in explorations of knowledge and value. As a result, I have consciously sought to create the conditions for a joint partnership in explaining the world with my son. Of course I am aware that because I have more experience I can set boundaries and remind my son that "The stove is hot!" But it is in the deeper structural elements of how we explain the world that I see the tremendous potential for fruitful partnership. Philosopher Virginia Held has written: "There are no firm, precise, or lasting boundaries between the symbolic and the material in human affairs. Creating new cultural realities also means that you have now created new conditions for human behavior" (1993: 9). Nowhere does the lack of boundaries between the symbolic and the material seem more real to me than in raising a child. The framework of principles and values that I share with my child, become the very fabric of his world. And when that fabric fails to match up with what he encounters, he forces me out of a dire sense of consistency to either reframe my principles or make them real. In this way, parent and child together have to find a reasonable way to explain the world.

I was initially struck by my own son's tendency to construct grand unified theories when we were playing with his toy castle one afternoon, just before his third birthday. "You know," he said, "...every King has to be a man." Unable to resist my own training to form counterexamples I asked, "What about when I play that I am King?" He considered this for a moment and then said, "Oh yeah, every King is a man unless it is a Mommy King." What was remarkable to me about the comment was that it was so representative of trends in theory construction generally. As Thomas Kuhn has pointed out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), historically, when a broad conceptual scheme faces a counter instance one viable strategy used by the theory's adherents is to subsume the instance under the theory.

The great twentieth-century American philosopher W.V. Quine (Quine and Ulian, 1978) offered some of the most powerful metaphorical images for theory construction and human knowledge building. One of these images was of a "Web of Belief" to illustrate how individual systems of human knowledge are constructed in an intricate web of intersecting beliefs with seemingly unrevisable beliefs at the core and less central beliefs at the periphery. The web metaphor lets us see the interconnections among beliefs and how a change in belief can resonate in a more or less significant way with the whole network of corresponding beliefs. As I witness my son constructing his own web of interconnected beliefs I also see how changes or revisions in his belief system permeate through other seemingly unrelated beliefs. At just around the age of two-and-a-half, when he started to understand that there was a difference between cartoon or drawn animals that do talk and photographs of animals in jungles or zoos that do not talk, I found him in our friend's kitchen asking her

dog if he could talk. He is consistently at work matching the shape and design of his belief system with the shape and design of his experiences. And as I will argue, my role in helping him to do this forces me to reshape and revise my own view of the world.

Another metaphor for theory building that Quine (Quine and Ulian, 1978) offers is that of a person on a raft, roaring down a raging river. Constructing our theory of the world is like riding the raft and in the midst of the journey, we discover it needs repairing. We cannot stop the journey to assess the damage but rather we must repair and mend while we are moving, we have to grab for what we can while we are in motion and essentially do the best we can. In the same way, as children and adults trying to make sense of the world we have to revise, repair, and carry on all in the midst of the raging flow of experiences. The inputs do not stop because we are confused or because we have hit an inconsistency. We are forced to make some kind of sense or at least bracket the problem because we cannot make it all stop.

In my role as mother/philosopher I see evidence of this dynamic process of theory construction with my son, in two philosophical domains. The first involves matters of violence, peace and social justice; what we might think of as problems rooted in human choice and behavior. The second, what philosophers have traditionally called “natural evil,” includes illness, natural disasters, and natural death or problems that do not directly stem from human choice and behavior. While I recognize that these issues are not often paired with a sentimental view of the young child, I do want to show that they are relevant in the dialogues of parent and child. And in addition, I want to offer how my training in feminist philosophy has provided me with a more substantive lens from which to build a theory of the world with my son.

Negotiating peace and violence

We brought our son home from the hospital on the evening of September 10, 2001. After two days in the luxury of University of Michigan’s “birthing center” my husband and I looked forward to returning home to relish the two weeks (his paternity leave) we had together to just be a family. However, our pretense to some sense of control and preparedness was completely overturned the next morning. As I sat nursing my son on that brilliant fall morning my husband who had just gone out for bagels came flying back in the house. The way he ran in I thought he was going to be sick but instead of heading for the bathroom he ran straight for the TV. “What is it?” I asked. And then the events of September 11th unfolded before our eyes. Having been born and raised in New York City, with all my family and many of my closest friends in Brooklyn and Manhattan, I spent the day in a sheer panic unable to get through to my father, my brothers, my best friends. Our week of getting to know our baby and sharing childbirth stories with friends and family turned into the nightmare we all shared, as we watched thousands of people murdered on television.

Clearly, many other mothers and fathers throughout the world are forced

to deal with the horrors of war in a much more devastating, brutal, and heart wrenching way. Still comfortable in our middle-class lives, the violence of September 11th and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and now Iraq, have required very little of my small family in terms of material sacrifice. I don't pretend that my child has had to face the horrors of war up close, but nevertheless as long as he has been alive, there has a constant "culture of violence" more palpable for many Americans since our involvement in the war.

Feminist scholars in particular have been apt to recognize that military violence is not a distinct species of violence isolated from other social practices. As philosopher Sara Ruddick has argued in her book *Maternal Thinking*:

A continuum of harm, indifference, and willful injury connects bedroom, boardroom, death row, and battlefield; school room, university, welfare reductions, and precision-guided bombs; racial profiling, racist employment practices, and environmental hazards in the backyards of the poor. Children are taught not to hate force but to applaud it; they learn an elementary indifference to others' pain. (1989: 16)

However, the relationship between a mother and child with its emphasis on attentive care, loving connection, the devoted concern for the well-being of the body, and the peaceful, non-violent resolution of conflict, is more in line with what feminists have described as a "culture of care" and runs counter to the competing culture of violence. Much of the first several years of raising a child involve for most parents, creating this culture of care. The daily rituals of feeding, bathing, and dressing, all put the gentle care of the child's vulnerable body at the forefront of a parent's consciousness. When a child thrives, it is in the context of this loving attentive care. The violence and harm inflicted on human bodies during war run counter to every life preserving effort that parents engage in when raising a young child.

I first began to notice my son's struggle with these clashing cultures of care and violence when he started to ask why certain creatures were so "grumpy." In an animal encyclopedia given to him by a relative, he discovered a very vivid photograph of a snake with a small mouse squarely in its jaws. Outraged he brought it to my attention and demanded to know, "What is this grumpy snake doing to this mouse?" He sensed the danger in the picture and the powerlessness of the mouse about to be eaten. But I also recognized his absolute indignation that this was not the way to handle things. He knew already by the age of three, that biting, hitting, and punching were not options even if you felt like doing them. In terms of standard developmental models, his newfound restraint was right on target with most other children his age. So then what was this grown snake doing and what were we going to do about it? His general outrage at this kind of behavior resurfaced again and again as he discovered grumpy dragons, grumpy witches, grumpy people all using unacceptable

methods in their interactions with others. Though we limited his television viewing and had never taken him to the movies, there were enough violent scenarios for him to wrestle with in his investigations of the animal kingdom, his trips to puppet shows, and his exploration of fairy tales. “Why are they so grumpy?” he always demanded to know. I tried to explain grumpiness in terms of a lack of love and affection and caring. “Some people are grumpy because no one really took care of them and made them feel loved so they don’t really know how to treat other people well. They’re unhappy and they take it out on others.” I could hear him then trying this out, saying to friends or relatives. “Some lions bite zebras because they’re grumpy and no one loved them.” I then had to explain why we don’t hold animals morally responsible for their actions. “They’re like babies” I proposed “they don’t really have any language and they don’t understand so we can’t be angry with them for hunting and biting other animals.” As time went on, I saw his concerns shift dramatically from animal suffering to the matter of human violence and inflicted pain and suffering.

I think my son’s most jarring encounter with the senselessness of human violence came after he saw a knight’s joust at a local Renaissance festival. The sight of four men dressed in full armor on horseback, carrying long jousting lances and charging at top speed was initially irresistible. He begged to get front row seats and squealed with excitement. But as the battle went on and the actors faked terrible injuries with phony blood and then eventually a painful death my son began his persistent chain of questioning. He couldn’t get the points out fast enough, tripping over his own thoughts and almost ranting into the noise of the crowd. “Why did the white knight, I mean how did the blue knight, why did the horse, who had the sword...”

In his book, *From Paris to the Moon*, Adam Gopnik’s (2000) wonderful account of raising his American child in Paris in the early 1990s, he describes “Why the Ape, Why the Man” moments with his son. The reference is to a visit Gopnik took with his then four-year-old son Luke to an aging dusty paleontology museum just outside of Paris. Upon entering the “Big Hall of Evolution” Gopnik and his son are faced with a huge statue with the title “The Great Struggle.” The statue shows a great ape with his hands wrapped around a beautiful human youth. The youth, as Gopnik explains, “before being killed by the ape, managed to plant an ax in the ape’s side, where it left a hideous and gaping wound, perfectly cut in the stone.” (2000: 185) Luke couldn’t get the questions out fast enough and all it sounded like to Gopnik’s ears was “why the ape, why the man, why the ape, why the man.” Gopnik’s son, like mine, was so filled with the combination of revulsion, curiosity, dissonance, and injustice at the sight of unrestrained violence that he went into overdrive processing the information. My son talked about the joust for weeks. He asked again and again why the blue knight sworded the white knight and whether the blue knight was still able to be a knight. He wanted to know what we would do if the blue knight came to our house. “Would you or Daddy sword him?” he asked totally prepared to revise the entire web of his belief system in light of this new radical data.

“No,” I told him, “we don’t hurt people’s bodies.” This was something he already knew but how then were adult knights getting away with it? He asked about the knight’s parents and wanted to know in detail where their mothers and fathers were? And who let them battle that way? I realized just how wildly inconsistent this battle seemed with everything my son knew from the loving care he received at home to the gentle nurturing environment of his preschool to the tenderness he was shown by our friends and family. How could it be that people could hurt other people in this way? Where were the consequences for such outrageous behavior? As he said to me during this period “if I throw my hard toy at you mom you should take it away and if a knight swords another knight you should take his sword away and never give it back to him.”

I see now how my son and I together will learn and relearn concepts of peace, fairness, and conflict resolution. In his demand for reasons and explanations he is guided by the culture of care we have raised him in and the culture of violence that surrounds us. In his relationships with adults, relationships of inherently unequal power where he is clearly the weaker and smaller, he has come to trust that he will not be totally dominated, that his interests will be affirmed and that every effort will be made to maintain connection through reasoned conversation. His size, his lack of experience, and his vocabulary have not been held against him in his interactions with bigger, more powerful and more well versed adults. As a result he has model for equal treatment that is independent of power and expertise. Yet another reality surrounds us and uses these properties as a justification for mistreatment and inhumanity.

The principled commitments on the part of parents, teachers, and adult friends to be respectful and concerned are transformed by my son into the very substance of the world. His map of reality integrates these principles as organizing forces. For this reason, a battle between knights represents a fault line in the material circumstances of the world, not just an ideological difference between pacifism and violence. The constant backdrop of the war has not yet surfaced in his awareness, but already my husband and I are preparing ourselves for how we will explain this conflict and what it will mean for all of us collectively, in committing ourselves to making a culture of care more real than a culture of violence.

Natural evil, illness and dying

One morning, while listening to the news on the radio, a report came on about three people killed in a fire. “What happened?” my son wanted to know. At this point, he had some grasp of the concept of death mostly because a small bird had flown straight into our window one weekend morning and fell instantly to its death right beside our door. We went outside to inspect and it seemed immediately he understood the profundity of the situation. “Its hurt?” he asked. We bent down to look more closely but it was clear that the bird’s necked had snapped. “Its dead” I said. “This means the poor bird won’t wake up.” I gave him a short succinct explanation on death coming after one is very,

very old or very sick and the sadness that follows for those who live. For a few days after, my son kept checking and rechecking this new information. “If you die you never wake up?” “Yes,” I would tell him. “But you and Daddy are not so old or so sick so you won’t die?” “We won’t die for a long, long time. Not until you are very grown up and are able to take care of yourself and have friends who will be grown up and can take care of you too.” However, when we heard the radio report about the fire he flinched. “Some people died in a fire.” I was prepared to have to explain how fires start and reassure him that we were very safe and had smoke alarms and the rest when his question surprised me. “Why won’t they say the names?” I wasn’t sure. The reporter gave the report but never identified the victims. My son kept listening and was repeating out loud “Who? Who?” And yelled toward the radio: “Say who is in the fire!” Later that day in the car he would not let it go. “Why don’t they say on the radio who was in the fire?” I explained that they were not people we knew and maybe the reporter didn’t have the names. “Why not!” he bellowed. “Who was it? Say the names, say the names.” The same thing happened again when coverage of the Tsunami included reports of thousands dying in floods but no names were given. My son, while visiting our relatives over the winter vacation, heard his uncles discussing the reports of how many people died in the water. “Who are you talking about?” he demanded. Then he came to me and said, “They’re not saying the names. Who are they talking about that died in the water?” My response that we wouldn’t know the names even if we had them didn’t seem to quell his desire. “But what are the names?” he repeated.

I have come to realize that part of my son’s understanding of injury and death is that it is serious business that requires a solemn and respectful understanding of who exactly was involved. And if illness and death are natural and inevitable, which he seems to find reasonable, then there is at least a responsibility for those of us who are well, to remember the sick and dying in a respectful manner. Just identifying “people” as dying runs counter to his expectations about how such a matter should be discussed. The impersonal way in which we process death and dying presents significant obstacles to my son in his efforts to remain consistent in his own thinking.

If illness and death are inevitable, there is still the requirement that those who die be remembered and that their life be understood with meaning and in context. Going back to my son’s surprising outrage at a report on three people dying with no identifying names given, the outrage may reflect his own efforts to make sense out of the naturalness of dying and understand these deaths as lives well lived. It is also consistent with his sense of connection with other living things. “Chimpanzees have mothers and fathers right?” he’ll ask, and “my friends at school wear pajamas and sleep in a bed at night too?” That we all have names and that our names designate our unique humanity and worth, are further principles for organizing the world.

I am reminded of Maya Lin’s seemingly naïve and simple design for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. Initially many Americans

objected that it was just a big slab with names written on it. What kind of tribute was this to those who had died? How did it represent the valor and courage of those who were willing to die? However after some time, “the wall” became the most visited monument in the nation. One critic wrote: “In viewing the long stretch of names you are not told what to think or feel. The power of loss is impressed onto you by the simple presentation of names, each one a world unto itself” (Totty, 2003: 123). The childlike demand to know: “Who? Who? Say the name!” This may also be a demand for a better death, a demand for those of us who are in the position to remember, to take on the responsibility of adequately memorializing those who have died. This strong empathetic response that so many children seem to have does not mean that they are in a position to offer a moral justification or give an account of their methodology in reasoning through moral problems. But it does indicate a working understanding of some of the central paradigms for moral assessment including compassion and care for those in need.

As a feminist philosopher raising a young child, I have come to believe that children can be quite competent partners in developing large scale, consistently structured theories of reality. My own child’s capacity to construct a meaningful view of the world and then his subsequent protests when that view fails to measure up with his experiences has forced me to take seriously the blurry boundary between ideology and activism. In creating a culture of care with our son we have also had to face the culture of violence that also threatens our efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. I recognize that I can’t create an alternative reality to the one in which we live and neither would I want to. Rather, together parent and child must find points of entry and consistency between one realm and the other. In trying to make sense of the clashes between care and violence for my son, I have come to see very clearly that it is not just the absence of harm that marks safety but rather the success at creating a variety of peaceful options. In the language of political theorist Linda Rennie Forcey (2001), it is not efforts at peacekeeping or peacemaking that transform a violent society but only through the work of peace building.

My son has demanded that I refocus and redefine a number of things that in the past I either misidentified or ignored. He demands, for instance, that we not only visit the library but also sing its praises. “The library is great, great, great” he crows. Because he can’t believe that he is allowed to take home a huge number of books, movies, and puppets. This is so unlike our visits to the mall for instance. After driving by a cemetery every day on the way to school he asked what the place was. I gave him a brief explanation and he immediately changed the name “cemetery” to a “remembering park.” Now when we pass the remembering park he points out to me in a solemn voice “the people standing in there are together with the trees and grass and they’re remembering the people who died and who they miss.” And his comment forces me to notice that in the middle of the afternoon there are individual people here and there standing around graves. He is confident that “trouble makers” and “bad guys”

can be transformed with enough love and care. If not, they will have to sit, and not move, and listen to him talk to them in his loud voice. “I will tell them: You stop doing that!” he roars. But in each of these instances I see the possibilities for a different world. The library is not a good civic gesture but instead a model for demonstrating how pleasures like literature, art, and music can be both precious and still shared freely. Paying attention to the cemetery means that we don’t forget to maintain a somber and respectful awareness of death and the wounds it leaves on those who survive. And if we believe that people can be persuaded with either enough love or passionate dialogue we have a reason to develop critical thinking as an alternative to adversarial models of “might makes right.”

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