

BOOK REVIEW

The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought

Mara H. Benjamin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018
(ISBN: 978-0-253-03432-8)

Ruth Groenhout

Department of Philosophy, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, NC, USA
Email: rberndgr@uncc.edu

In the philosophical analysis of gender-connected concepts, intersectionality has become a central and vibrant theoretical structural consideration. Mara Benjamin's *The Obligated Self* is a welcome contribution to this discussion, bringing conceptions of maternal subjectivity found in the Jewish religious, historical, and ethnic context into clear focus. The book offers a range of topics—obligation, love, power, teaching, the Other, the Third, and the Neighbor—and in each case considers how the topic has been and continues to be understood in the Jewish context. In some cases, the focus is on Talmudic veins of thought; in others, on the Jewish philosophical approaches of Herman Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas; and central to all cases is a strong background of how the ideas have changed and been debated over long periods of time.

Although intersectionality is recognized widely as an essential feature of any gender analysis, there is a tendency for those concerned about it to focus on race and ethnicity, and sometimes class. Though there is widespread recognition that other aspects of human life—age, disability, social and historical context—are important aspects of how gender is constructed as well, it is more difficult to find developed accounts of these other components, and the merger of religious and (some) ethnic identities is another area where further analysis offers important contributions. Given the rich heritage of Jewish thought and culture, as well as the deeply thoughtful Talmudic history, Benjamin's contribution offers an important addition to considerations of how understandings of gender connect with Jewish identity. It is also a careful analysis of the many ways that an intellectual tradition with a long history of patriarchal thought nonetheless may have elements of women's experience interwoven into its analyses and debates.

This aspect of the book is particularly strong in the discussion of teaching, given the classical rabbinical tradition of identifying teaching as, in Benjamin's terms, "a key paternal obligation, perfected in the sage who teaches his disciple" (61). The Jewish historical tradition includes lengthy periods during which the teaching of Torah was an exclusively male practice, and during which mothering practices were not explicitly considered teaching at all, but merely events that occurred before male children reached the age of being capable of intellectual study. Benjamin connects the explicit accounts of rabbinical teaching, which for the most part exclude consideration of maternal

practices, with the embodied understanding of teaching that one also finds in the Torah. In these other contexts maternal care is clearly included, particularly in the accounts of the Divine who teaches human people both by the Torah and by the interactions that take place in their day to day experiences. The latter accounts evoke the language of a maternal parenting of vulnerable children, including breastfeeding, and are connected with the complexities, emotional exhaustion, and growth and development of both mother and child, that inhabit the realm of close embodied relationships. The contrast between these two streams in the tradition is fascinating, as is the focus on embodiment in a wide variety of human practices that results from the second. Bringing the two streams together enables Benjamin to conclude that “teaching does not demand detachment from but rather invites attention to the body; the one-taught retains her otherness; and the teacher herself is destabilized and re-created” (70–71). For those of us who teach, the description rings true.

Benjamin’s focus, as indicated in the title, is the gendered nature of maternal subjectivity, historical understandings of motherhood, and actual practices of parenting. As in the case of the chapter on teaching, each of the specific topics of the seven chapters is developed fairly extensively, moving back and forth between the range of contributions to the historical and religious tradition of which they are a part. The first half of the book focuses on a range of conceptual issues, and the second half focuses on specifically relational issues, more commonly discussed (in a philosophical context) in continental and feminist analyses: the concept of the Other, of nonbiological caregivers (the Third), and Neighbors. Depending on how one structures a class on gender issues, several of these chapters could contribute discussion-generating development of basic concepts such as power and its complexity in relational matters.

One of the strengths of Benjamin’s discussion is the recognition of the complexity and constantly changing nature of the deeply relational practices of parenting/mothering. In chapter 3, “Power,” this recognition provides a context for a discussion of the “complex, sometimes paradoxical manifestations of power between parents and children” (37). Benjamin celebrates and sees the importance of the shift from seeing power as “power over” to empowerment, and the importance of collaboration for some positive relationships of power. But simultaneously the discussion also acknowledges the complexity, fragility, and limited nature of the parenting relationship. “Parents cannot escape risk, conflict, failure, limitation, and loss that accompany their sojourn through childrearing,” Benjamin writes (46). Nor can they avoid the mixed experience of seeing successful empowerment as connected to a loss of the connection to the child themselves as the child grows into adulthood. Parenting thus creates a vulnerability that is embedded in being a parent. Recognition of the complexity of relational connections, the absence of easy answers about how one should use, refrain from using, or otherwise engage in imbalanced power relationships is an important aspect of these analyses.

The subtitle of Benjamin’s book makes clear that it focuses on maternal subjectivity. Although the term *parenting* exists as a reference to gender-neutral childrearing, Benjamin positions herself in the context of feminist analyses of mothering practices for several reasons. One is the historical and cultural context within which her analysis functions. The technically gender-neutral term *parenting* suggests that gender was not relative to parenting roles in the past, but focusing on mothering brings the complex gendered context of the different roles and power dynamics of mothering and fathering into view, and also recognizes how these roles connected with different embodied sexual identity at various times in history and in various parts of the religious tradition. Benjamin avoids simplistic gender assumptions and does not assume that gender and

sex are universals, timeless abstracts, or the like. This is another strength of the book, and a welcome addition to conversations about how gender identities function in a variety of contexts.

At the same time that several of these chapters could be worthwhile contributors to a variety of conversations, from a strictly philosophical point of view, some of the chapters would need some supplementation. Chapter 5, for example, focusing on the Other and the connections between human relations and moral identity, treats Levinas quickly and gently. But the chapters in *Totality and Infinity* that Simone de Beauvoir had already critiqued shortly after it appeared are not mentioned, though the gendered tropes are fairly problematic (Sandford 2000). Chapter 6, titled “The Third,” offers a conceptually complex account of how caregivers who are not the mother of a child, including nannies, domestic caregivers, wet nurses, and others, were understood in the Jewish tradition. The story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarai is one of the points of focus, but the text does not mention Hagar’s son Ishmael at all, nor the centrality of Hagar and Ishmael in Islamic thought. A supplement to this chapter that focuses on both Islamic and Womanist accounts of Hagar would raise issues and connect with concerns about relational power and control that are much needed (Williams 2013). Likewise, the final conceptual chapter, focusing on neighbors and the relational connections to people who exist outside maternal/child relationships, briefly mentions the ways that a parent may see their own child as the child would appear to others, neighbors, and how that structures relationships. Again, there is need for some supplement here: Eva Feder Kittay’s discussion of the notion of responding to others as “some mother’s child” would be a vital enhancement of the discussion in this chapter (Kittay 1999).

The Obligated Self discusses numerous issues, not the least of which is the constantly complex issue of identity, spirituality, and religious tradition, juxtaposed with gender roles. It covers important issues, offers careful analysis of how one religious tradition has produced a range of approaches to the relationships between mothering and gender identity, and is a welcome addition to the discussion.

References

- Kittay, Eva Feder. 1999. *Love’s labor: Essays on women, equality, and dependency*. New York: Routledge.
- Sandford, Stella. 2000. *The metaphysics of love: Gender and transcendence in Levinas*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Williams, Delores S. 2013. *Sisters in the wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-talk*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

Ruth Groenhout is the Distinguished Professor of Healthcare Ethics at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her primary areas of research focus on healthcare ethics, feminist theory, and ethical theory. Her books include *Care Ethics and Social Structures in Medicine* and *Connected Lives: Human Nature and an Ethics of Care*. Recent articles include “Beauvoir and the Biological Body,” in the Blackwell *Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, “Of Medicine and Monsters: Rationing and an Ethics of Care,” in *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, and “Virtue and a Feminist Ethics of Care,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*.