

Edited by Sheila Lintott

# MOTHERHOOD

## PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE



### The Birth of Wisdom

Foreword by Judith Warner

书馆

Series Editor: Fritz Allhoff



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*To my mother,  
Dorothy June Lintott*



## FOREWORD



How fitting it is to have a book of essays dedicated to the subject of motherhood and philosophy. For ours is an age where philosophies of motherhood abound. They clash. They compete. They battle for preeminence. They are not, for many of their adherents, mere matters of personal preference or individual parenting style. Breast or bottle, co-sleep or cry it out, home school or preschool, 2 percent or skim, opt-in (to our competitive, performance driven society) or opt out – all of these things are discussed and debated, argued over, made obsessions, with a sense of urgency that is all but universal among mothers in our time. They provide fodder for endless moralizing – a not-too-moral activity very different from the serious considerations of the moral issues surrounding motherhood you'll find here in the section devoted to "Mom's Morality." They are the material of elaborate

self-justifications, the basis of too-easy judgments. They are, for many women now it seems, the building blocks of identity.

One would think that motherhood, of all categories of activity or states of being, could, in the abstract, at least, be something that one could just do. That a mother might be someone you could just be. That's an impossible dream in our culture, of course; in any culture, most likely. But still: Does motherhood really have to be as complicated as we – the current generation – have made it seem? Does every gesture, every decision, every plan of action, every choice, really have to be so freighted with meaning?

We have seen, over the past ten years or so in America, a number of trends regarding the emotional experience of motherhood. There was, first, the unquestioning embrace of a kind of child-centeredness that led mothers to sell their souls for a shot at maternal saintedness – the trend I've long come to think of as Total Reality Motherhood or called the motherhood religion. And then there was a backlash: the I'm-too-cool-for-that, slacker mom, three-martini-playdate moment of correction. These days, I often hear mothers, and a new wave of younger mothers in particular, striving to achieve a kind of balance in their emotional approach to motherhood. They want to bond without fusing, to be present for their children without disconnecting from themselves. They love their children and care deeply about mothering them, of course. But they don't necessarily want to make a fetish of motherhood. They have looked hard at those of us who have been defining motherhood for the past decade or two. And they don't want to be like us at all. They raise the possibility that there is perhaps room for thinking seriously and carefully about motherhood without making it into a religion or an all-consuming obsession; that perhaps a "Mommy Brain" can think *and* be, as the authors in the first section of this collection aim to do.

Despite all this, in the media, and in particular, in the blogosphere and the hellish domain of mommy chat rooms like UrbanBaby, Mommy War battles continue. They're not really about that old saw, working vs. non-working motherhood. (In this recession, or jobless recovery, just about everyone is working or wants to be.) But they're about everything and anything else and generally boil down, as Ayelet Waldman made so clear in her book *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace*,<sup>1</sup> to turn around the theme of who's in and who's out, who's good and, in particular, most deliciously, who's bad. (For a discussion of some purportedly good/bad celebrity examples, see chapter 15 in this collection.)

Of those mothers deemed bad, Waldman writes, "By defining for us the kinds of mothers we're not, they make it easier for us to stomach





what we are.” She asks: “Is there really no other way to be a mother in contemporary American society than to be locked into the cultural zero-sum game of ‘I’m okay, you suck?’”

There could be another way.

“Pain is inevitable: Suffering is optional,” contributor Sheryl Tuttle Ross reminds us at the beginning of her splendid essay, “Mindful Mothering.” Confusion, exhaustion, frustration, sadness, but also joy, pleasure, inspiration, and hope are all inevitable parts of motherhood. So much more – the anguish over breastfeeding, over sleeping arrangements, over how to live, how to teach, how to be a role model; in short, how to *perform* motherhood are optional. The degree to which we turn ourselves inside-out about motherhood, the degree to which we torture ourselves in striving to master it, the investment we make in our decisions, the degree to which we confound our identities with our mothering decisions – all these things can be taken or left. The practice of motherhood does not have to be elaborated into an identity-decreeing philosophy. The practice should be able to be enjoyed and fully, deeply experienced, as the authors in the section here called “Labor Pains” explore.

Yet, how we talk about motherhood influences what we think of mothers and what mothers think of themselves. So, the ideology of motherhood is not just of theoretical importance, it has an impact on how mothers live and how mothers feel. The divide between the fantasy world of contemporary motherhood and the real life experience is canvassed from various perspectives in the final section of this volume, “Is It Everything You Thought It Would Be? Fantasy Meets Reality.”

Certain dilemmas of motherhood – or, more accurately put, of motherhood in our society – are inevitable. It is inevitable that mothers living in a society that has refused to march forward into modernity with them will experience great difficulties. I believe it’s the material conditions of mothers’ lives in America that has led to the base levels of unhappiness, overwhelmedness, self-doubt, anxiety, and guilt (feeling “crappy,” as Waldman once put it to me) that plague so many mothers and cause them – as crappy-feeling people will – to lash out at other mothers who differ from them. It’s the outer-directed symptom of what Elizabeth Butterfield so convincingly describes here, in her essay “Days and Nights of a New Mother.” Mothers’ anxiety about their lives causes them to cloak themselves in the inauthentic identities she describes, the false selves which serve as a form of self-protection. Buttressing these false selves are the reified philosophies that set mothers apart, lock them into



attack mode, and, maybe most tragically, guarantee that they won't face squarely the objective contradictions of their lives.

One might argue that perhaps it's the choices that mothers have in this generation – the greater spectrum of possibilities for self-definition, with the greater anxiety such freedom necessarily entails – that lead them now to so insistently and assiduously take refuge in such highly elaborated forms of self-armor as the “serious mother” stance that Butterfield explores. But I don't think that's truly the case.

I think it's the limits that are placed on mothers' freedoms, the impediments that stand in the way of their making truly free choices that, in fact, cause them so much pain. Mothers today have been led to believe that they are free to choose. They've been told that – if they are at all well-off or well-educated – they have no right to yearn for more. It's been made clear to them that demanding more – like structures to promote work-family balance – is just a sign of being spoiled; mere “whining.” And they've been sold a bill of goods that teaches that their problems are theirs alone, and if they can't work their lives out, in ways that are satisfying and on a most basic level just make sense, it is their fault alone.

Yet, the truth is, most of the time, mothers who want to balance work and family simply face a wall of impossibility. Full-time work in most professions demands extremely long hours and around the clock availability. Part-time work – which poll after poll shows mothers would prefer – is only in the rarest cases economically feasible and virtually never comes with benefits. Childcare is so expensive that it often forces lower-paid mothers out of the workplace. Afterschool programs are too few and often too mediocre to give most families meaningful and guilt-free coverage in the afternoons.

The list of lacks facing mothers, and families, in all demographics, goes on and on. But the bottom line is: in response to an unchanging landscape of roadblocks and impossibilities, mothers, feeling powerless, resort to magical thinking. They spin stories that will protect themselves and their children from the callous indifference of the outside world. As self-justifying philosophers of motherhood, they find ways for the ambiguities of existence to resolve themselves into solid certainties. And reality just gets blurrier and blurrier. We need books like this one to deconstruct such magical thinking and ground us in solid thought.

Does long-term breastfeeding inoculate children against stress and strain, rejection and failure, cruelty and despair? Probably not. But it does offer mothers and babies an oasis of calm and connection in an otherwise dislocated and harshly demanding world. Does co-sleeping



produce children who will venture forth in life forever swaddled in warmth and surrounded by love? Probably not. But it does compensate parents and children cozily for the stressful lives they must live out in the world. These are valuable things. But the truth is: except for behavior that flies to extremes, most of what we do as mothers is pretty much good enough. Mostly not perfect and mostly not so bad.

Does attacking mothers' choices produce anything of value for children? Surely not – but perhaps in a world in which most mothers feel they don't have the power to really change things for their families, the attacks feel like social activism.

It would be so much more constructive to be honest with ourselves. To “stay with” the anxiety and anger and frustration and despair that result from mothering in a political culture that refuses to join the rest of the developed world in making family life livable and workable and, even, pleasurable.

Being fully present for our children – the goal, I believe, we all aspire to – also means being willing to be fully aware of all the unacceptable contradictions in our lives. And it means trying to do something about them. This multifaceted, inclusive, inviting essay collection provides a space in which we can start to think critically and honestly.

## NOTE

- 1 Ayelet Waldman (2009) *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace* (New York: Doubleday).



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been a labor of love for me, pun intended, and at this point in my life it has seemed equally impossible (I am, after all, a philosopher with two little kids) and inevitable (I am after all, a philosopher with two little kids). My reflections on motherhood are rooted in the ancient history of my childhood, in the time I spent with my mom – most memorably, our many long days together at the beach – and in my thinking about my mom – something I have done and will in all likelihood do every day of my life. So, my largest debt of gratitude for helping to make this book, and much else, possible is owed to my mother, Dorothy June Lintott. I thank too the mothers and allomothers who have helped me understand, through their lived examples, the philosophical significance of motherhood and mothering. Through their modeling and talking with me about mothering, I have learned much of practical and theoretical value. These people include, although not exclusively, my husband Eric Johnson, sisters Kathy Bice and Monica Lintott, sisters-in-law Christine and Greta Lintott, aunts, cousins, nieces, grandmothers, in-laws, and, lucky for me, many friends, notably Martha McCaughey and Maureen Sander-Staudt, who provided prompt and critical review when I most needed it, and all of the “Bucknell Mamas,” who provide support, laughter, and wine when I most need them. My children, Sonja and Jack, teach me more about mothering and about myself than anyone or anything, sometimes, in fact, more than I care to know. Singly and jointly they have helped me become a mother and have opened my world to emotional and intellectual expanses I never dreamed possible before them. Eric has my deep gratitude for being a real partner with me and a patient editor

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I am grateful for Judith Warner's interest in this project and willingness to contribute a foreword to it. In her weekly *New York Times* column, "Domestic Disturbances," Warner confronts a broad range of issues, from the (mis)representation of mothers in media and popular culture to children's mental health issues and treatment, mother's mortality, competition between mothers, breastfeeding rights and controversies, and domestic violence – always speaking with brave honesty and humble self-reflection. Warner is also the author of the best-selling *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (2005), a motherhood book among motherhood books! Although she declares clearly on the first page of *Perfect Anxiety* that it is not a self-help book, her analysis of the anxiety surrounding motherhood today and its root causes helped me, for one, to put my own motherhood anxiety in perspective. Warner writes to and for mothers as friends; indeed, when I read her work, I am reminded of David Hume's observation that one chooses a favorite author as one chooses a friend. Warner is definitely one of my favorite authors and I believe she is a friend to all mothers. Hers is an important voice of our time and I am delighted to have it as part of our maternal chorus.

An impressive number of scholars submitted their work for consideration for publication in this volume. Those selected worked very hard, many taking time away from their own families to do so, and I am extremely appreciative for the time and energy they devoted to this project. Much credit is due to Agnus, Aeden, Aiden, Alice, Arden, Ariadne, Benjamin, Eleanor, Ella, Emilie, Gary, Gavin, Graham, Jack, Jacob, Jayden, Joie, Joseph, Julia, Kevin, Leah, Liam, Maddy, Matilda, Michelle, Molly, Ruby, Sam, Sonja, Stephen, Toby, Tula, William, Wilkes, Zack, and Zoe for letting their mommies and/or daddies do a little work from time to time.

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This book was originally conceived during a research leave funded by Bucknell University and I am grateful to the university and my department, the Department of Philosophy, for their support.

I also thank you, the reader, for your curiosity and open minded interest in motherhood. I hope you enjoy the volume, that it encourages you to think more about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, and that it reminds you of the many relationships that mothering fosters – including the unique mother-child relationship, but also bonds between women, between women and men, between generations, and more. May reading this volume also prompt you to call your mother if you are lucky enough to be able to do so. Finally, I extend a sincere “thank you” to moms everywhere. This is as much a celebration of you as it is an inquiry into your realities.

Sheila Lintott  
Lewisburg, Pennsylvania



# CONTENTS

Foreword	x
Judith Warner	
Acknowledgments	xv
Sheila Lintott	
Navel-Gazing at Its Finest:	
<i>An Introduction to Motherhood – Philosophy for Everyone</i>	1
Sheila Lintott	
PART I MOMMY BRAIN: Truth, Knowledge,	
and Belief in Mothering	15
1 How Many Experts Does It Take to Raise a Child?	
<i>Mothering and the Quest for Certainty</i>	17
Sue Ellen Henry	
2 Creative Mothering: <i>Lies and the</i>	
<i>Lying Mothers Who Tell Them</i>	29
Amy Kind	
3 Pro-Choice Philosopher Has Baby:	
<i>Reflections on Fetal Life</i>	41
Bertha Alvarez Manninen	
4 Kim, Ellen, and Zack’s Big Adventure:	
<i>Lesbian Mothers Raising a Boy Steeped in His Masculinity</i>	52
Kim Anno	

PART II	LABOR PAINS: The Work and Wonder of Being a Mom	63
5	Days and Nights of a New Mother: <i>Existentialism in the Nursery</i> Elizabeth Butterfield	65
6	Mindful Mothering: <i>How Feminist Buddhist Practices Enhance Experiences of Beauty</i> Sheryl Tuttle Ross	77
7	A Face Only a Mother Could Love? <i>On Maternal Assessments of Infant Beauty</i> Glenn Parsons	89
8	Kevin, Coming Into Focus: <i>On Getting to Know My Son</i> Laura Newhart	100
PART III	MOM'S MORALITY: Ethical Issues in Mothering	115
9	Making Choices: <i>The Ethics of Infant Feeding</i> Chris Mulford	117
10	Lactational Burkas and Milkmen: <i>On Public Breastfeeding and Male Lactation</i> Maureen Sander-Staudt	129
11	On "Crying-It-Out" and Co-Sleeping Kevin C. Elliott and Janet L. Elliott	141
12	Natural Childbirth is for the Birds Jen Baker	154
PART IV	IS MOTHERHOOD EVERYTHING YOU THOUGHT IT WOULD BE? FANTASY MEETS REALITY	167
13	The Off Button: <i>Thought Experiments and Child Control</i> Sara Goering	169
14	The Virtues of Motherhood Nin Kirkham	180





15 The Media Proudly Present: “Lessons”  
From Celebrity Moms 191  
Clemence Due and Damien W. Riggs

16 God, Mom! *The Blessings of Breasts and Womb* 202  
George A. Dunn

A Brief Afterword: *Some Words from*  
*Contributors’ Kids on Motherhood and Philosophy* 213

Read All About It: *A Feminist Bibliography*  
*on Pregnancy and Mothering* 215  
Compiled by Amy Mullin

Notes on Contributors 222