

Melissa Burchard
Philosophical Reflections on Mothering in Trauma
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No one expects even an average day of mothering to be easy, but as Melissa Burchard recounts in *Philosophical Reflections on Mothering in Trauma*, things can get oh-so-much worse. Exploring the philosophical implications of mothering children who were harmed by others, Burchard employs narrative methods and feminist phenomenology to draw from her own lived experience as an adoptive parent of abused children. The overall result is a readable philosophical tome that is deeply engaged and reflective. Burchard's personal stories pose significant philosophical questions relevant to the broad human condition, including the meaning of parenthood and childhood; what it is to love, know, desire, nurture, and coerce; how one engages the process of self-construction amid crisis; and why parents of abused children must "live in the ambiguity of not knowing which decisions are right and which are wrong" (i). Interspersed with philosophical musings and journal entries, Burchard offers creative analyses of popular culture and its portrayals of good and evil (à la the Harry Potter books and *The Walking Dead*). Burchard's testimonials are courageously honest and often disturbing in her willingness to face the deep harms of abuse. As such, the book serves as a corrective to ideal philosophies far removed from the messy thoroughfares of domestic households devastated by sexual and physical abuse. As Burchard demonstrates, because a great many children and parents *do* encounter grave mistreatment and adversity in their lives, there is a tremendous need for non-ideal feminist, philosophical, and interdisciplinary reflection on how best to mother the traumatized, and on the sober realities thwarting this practical aim.

The first section examines the epistemologies of disorder and trauma, demonstrating that trauma requires distinct epistemologies capable of acknowledging secrets, and enabling the traumatized and their advocates to speak the unspeakable—"a real life story of abuse and trauma, a lived experience of pain and evils" (7). Oftentimes, abuse leads children to develop nonstandard patterns of thought regarding what it means to know, not only because abuse leads to secrets, but because victims are comforted by not knowing (22). Burchard links her own experience of having recovered repressed memories of sexual abuse to thorny epistemological questions of embodiment, power, and ignorance. Children generally, but traumatized children more particularly, "make knowledge through their bodies" based on what they actually live. What traumatized children know is that they live under constant threat physically and epistemologically, in having their knowing selves undermined as "wrong, crazy, spiteful, and otherwise not to be believed" (21). Burchard thus values the chaos story as a kind of anti-story

telling the caustic and tongue-tying effects of trauma. Empathetic listening and witnessing provides a space where the traumatized can place their painful events in order to scrutinize and step away from them, and hopefully, make better “choices through the telling of story, such that events no longer control the survivor” (42). Burchard admonishes society to know the atrocity of chaos and not to turn from it, lest we make it more bearable and tolerable.

Burchard then explores the “moral matters” of mothering in trauma, specifically, moral agency, problematic desires, and the shortcomings of some therapeutic responses to trauma. The meaning Burchard ascribes to the phrase “morality matters” is that morality, like gender, can be “attributed to embodied persons as part of their identities” in that “as we select what we value, morality comes to matter. As value is inscribed on bodies . . . morality materializes” (49). At the same time, moral sensibility erodes for those dealing with trauma, dissolving their ability to think cohesively, as moral luck, privilege, and skewed moral development combine chaotically. Burchard notes that abuse turns bad moral luck into victims believing that they deserve abuse, with delayed moral development and visceral, strangely justified feelings of hate, underscoring that some wrongs cannot be righted. Such feelings force mothers to confront the ambiguities of child-rearing and life more generally. Burchard posits that these moral ambiguities ought to be faced and can be alleviated by recognition of our being “autokoenenous” (55), or fully enmeshed and interdependent with others.

Burchard finds no easy answers here, confessing that she does not always practice the morality she preaches. Although committed to promoting agency in her children, she sometimes makes choices that seemingly control them. She confides that “the tough part is responding without taking over,” especially when abuse makes children accomplished, self-protective liars who have been awakened to sexuality too much and soon (59). Burchard strives to understand why adults desire to have sex with children, desires that are obviously wrong, yet are all too frequently experienced. She traces the origins of pedophilic desire to a quest for control, a pleasure-gratifying drive for consumption amplified by consumer culture, and a rationally strategic need to target those least able to resist or repel (69). The sexual abuse of children warps victims in directing their sexual desire toward socially inappropriate objects that thwart maternal bonding, as the abused child is unable to prevent “crossing over from the desire for comfort and ordinary mommy love into desire for contact that he should be ignorant of. Innocent of” (71). Such “warpedness” requires therapeutic interventions rather than punishment. But as Burchard observes, many therapies problematically duplicate Cartesian mind–body separation and further abuse traumatized children as they therapeutically seek to coercively “re-form” survivors (82).

Burchard’s third section contains a most intriguing practical analysis for feminist philosophy, offering fresh insight into cultural stories and symbols used to understand and overcome the ordinary helplessness of trauma. Looking more closely at monster and hero stories featuring vampires, zombies, Mr. Hyde, Harry Potter, Willie Wonka, Darth Vader, and Gollum, Burchard stresses that for the abused child, *monsters are real* and *monsters are actually us*. Abused children see all adults as potential monsters, and can be retraumatized by hero stories that verify the messages of their own terrifying realities— “there are adults who are willing to harm them, [who] cannot be trusted to protect them, and they themselves are special, but what this means is . . . something bad” (109). Burchard worries that popular hero stories like J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books and J. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* undermine the agency of abused children by teaching them that the only way out of abusive traps is a false hope for magic, or violence, offering nothing that they could actually apply to their own experience, other than escape by chance or magic. Stories that Burchard find more beneficial are those

that help a child develop real characteristics for survival, and that feature “realistically caring and helpful adults who make a difference,” rather than alienated hero figures seeking domination over those who oppose them.

Burchard ends the section with a study of evil, both real and fictional, and the difficult question of what evildoers deserve. Looking again at popular series like the *Walking Dead* and *Star Wars*, she detects a culture that understands the dehumanizing effects of trauma, but problematically casts trauma as that which *causes* evil and creates monsters. Blaming victims obscures questions about justice and accountability for perpetrators of evil. Evil is unspeakable and unintelligible, but it may also be motivated by the pursuit of perceived goods, sometimes as benign as a strong work ethic. Evildoers do not deserve cruel and unusual punishments for their crimes, but Burchard is mindful that the most despicable punishments (for example, being forced to eat feces, locked in isolation, starved, scalded, beaten, raped, and so on) are all things that adults do to the children they abuse. For this, evildoers deserve to be held responsible and prevented from harming again. Yet although punishments for abuse are morally justified, they make those who inflict them worse, similar to how evil-doing disfigures evildoers into the diabolical. The disfiguring effects of evil are astutely represented via pop-culture villains like Voldemort and Darth Vader (and one might add Dorian Grey), but as Burchard cautions, these fictional tales distract us from the everyday real evils that surround us, as well as how trauma constitutes and perpetuates evil.

Burchard closes her book by examining how there can be healthy identity-construction following abusive relations, and how children can be aided in the construction of a “new me.” She surmises that this process proceeds better with collaborative identity-reform strategies, rather than antagonistic approaches. Although all parenting involves construction of and evolution of identities for parents and children, this process requires deliberate direction for adoptive parents because “for my child to become mine, he may need to become less someone else’s” (142). Just as previous attachments complicate the bonding of adoptive parents and children, so do experiences of trauma, which cause children to develop slave-like identities requiring well-defined and stable boundaries. In establishing boundaries, parents walk a tightrope where they must “be masterful, but reject the position and identity of the ‘master’” (146). Abused children need to be seen as different than they were before, and parents must be prepared to be seen by such children as abusers, scrutinized with gazes that are penetrating and unceasing.

Staying true to her open-eyed look at the realities of trauma, Burchard closes the volume with a meditation on moral failure and distress, the need for play, the limits of love, and the communal effects of trauma. In recounting her sense of failure in being unable to keep her family intact (due to unhealthy relations between her children, she ultimately separated them), Burchard moves the philosophical focus from why and how parents fail, to what that failure feels like. Burchard urges parents to stay mindful that even legitimate demands may be impossible to fill, and that it is important to “cultivate a sense of ‘good-enough’ to help us continue caring in spite of moral failure” (153). By cultivating this sense, parents are able to challenge the lie that love can conquer all and the dangerous demand for unconditional love. The goals of parenting must be characterized by reciprocity, meaning to “wish for and work to support what is best in and for the one I love, on some reasonable and intersubjectively supported vision of what is best” (170). In addition to avoiding the pitfalls of impossible demands, Burchard reminds parents that the capacity for joy and play is essential to counter trauma, as is, for her, a philosophical analysis of it all. She closes the book by underscoring this point: “It is through

philosophical stories that I seek a reasonable account of good and healthy functioning. . . . [This approach] could be beneficial to almost anyone, given that the world of human living presents most of us with difficulties we may be unable to resolve or see our way through without some effort at making sense of it all" (172).

Although Burchard clearly demonstrates the deep philosophical implications of mothering children who have suffered trauma, she leaves the reader with questions both personal and philosophical, including: What precise events prompted Burchard to separate her children? What were the family/community dynamics of this decision? And what has happened to them since? To what extent can a narrative philosophical approach be employed without chancing voyeurism or sacrifice of privacy? How do we define and know "abuse" and "trauma"? In what ways do intersectional dynamics of class, race, sex, gender, ability, and so on deepen and complicate the analysis of trauma? How might the reflective experiences of abusive/estranged parents, extended family, and child victims differ from those of adoptive/foster parents? Do fathers parent in trauma differently from mothers, and how should we delineate such family roles? By what means does trauma affect the entire "autokoeneous" family/community? Can we say that some perpetrators are also victims? Why is trauma often cyclical and what more can be done to understand and break these cycles?

In particular, in the age of the #MeToo movement, questions of how we identify "abuse"/"trauma," and whether there are some false dichotomies in the perpetrator/victim designation of abuse are worth exploring for feminists. Without denying or minimizing the depths of evil that is child abuse, thorny epistemological questions about the ontology and recognition of abuse and trauma prompt further analysis. If, as Burchard acknowledges, victims often repeat what was done to them, and abuse leads to developmental delays in moral maturity, does this imply flaws with the tendency to feel hatred toward perpetrators of child abuse? Is the desire to punish child abusers a failure to extend care to former child victims (now adults) who may not have received the therapies they needed? As much as we may want to say that at age eighteen formerly abused adults ought to and do possess the moral agency needed to restrain from acting on abusively formed desires, given Burchard's analysis, it may be that they lack the knowledge and character to do so, due their own moral bad luck. Should such abusers also be brought into the circle of care for the benefit of themselves, family, and community? This shift in caring attention brings in more moral ambiguities that blur the sharp meaning and agentic attribution of "abuse," "responsibility," and "evil."

On this point Burchard could further develop the epistemological standards of an ethic of care, which looks to settle questions of what counts as "care" and "abuse" by listening to the subjective assessments of those who were intended objects of care. Of course, as Burchard's analysis reveals, this process is complicated by factors of age, memory, understanding, manipulation, character, custom, and the opacity of self-knowledge. Yin/yang-like, evil can be conceptualized as often originating from good and caring intentions, and vice versa. No doubt there is something morally repulsive in finding "sympathy with the devil," and it may be generally impossible for mothers of traumatized children to empathize with abusers of their children, especially when the abuse was heinous, well-documented, and continues to be lived out in painful bodily and emotional experiences. But feminist philosophers have to think more about how to recognize and respond to abuse in everyday family life, such as how to distinguish what might be developmentally ordinary sexual play between children (playing doctor), from more abusive sexual predation. They must consider how many parents turn a blind eye to abuse occurring in front of their faces in the spirit of "care." Feminists also need to be wary about how the attribution of

“abuse” is misused to the detriment of mothers, especially mothers socially disempowered by race, class, and gender. Sexual mores about pedophilia, sexuality, gender, as well as disciplinary and parenting practices are subject to cultural and temporal variation, and what is and appears as “harm” may be organic, but also subjectively or interpretively superimposed as “harm” in one cultural space but not another (the objections to transgender children in the “wrong” locker room being just one example). Ultimately, however, this book offers a rare subjective glimpse into the complicated world of mothers of children traumatized by prior family abuse, and is sure to be a pivotal work in feminist philosophy on mothering and trauma.