# Cavarero's Puzzle: Ethics, Maternity, and Loving "Wrong"

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**Abstract**

Adriana Cavarero's ethics of inclination presents us with a puzzle. Arguing that inclination, understood as a posture of affective response towards the other (exemplified by the stereotypical image of the Christian Madonna inclining over her child) could help us construct a more peaceful world, she develops the familiar idea that love can help us work towards peace via a revalorisation of maternal love for a collective feminist political project. However, I identify that her argument contains two different models of maternal love. Whilst the first is a self-sacrificing love, the second, I argue, emerges in a subtle shift that renders love a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing. Intrigued by this move that remains unelaborated by Cavarero, I investigate what this means for her theorisation of love's political import. Whilst I argue that the first, Levinasian, self-sacrificing model could too easily transform into violence, I posit that the second is not stereotypical maternal love, but illogical love – love that loves "wrong" in the eyes of our contemporary world. I read this second model as a practice of nonviolence, offering the potential to transform not just our own relationships and sense of self, but the very frames of intelligibility that patriarchal violence depends upon. Whilst my argument does not abandon Cavarero's commitment to revalorise the maternal, it does invite us to re-imagine the everyday narrative of the maternal relation, and indeed, the love relation, not as a challenge to the posture of patriarchy, but as a challenge to its logic.

## Biography

Clare Woodford is Principal Lecturer in Philosophy and Politics in the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE) at the University of Brighton, UK. She has published widely on democratic political theory, aesthetics, ethics, political theology, social policy, and gender theory. Her latest book, a collaboration with Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler, and Bonnie Honig, *Towards a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence* (Fordham UP), brings these thinkers into conversation with other leading feminist and gender theorists to argue that we need to attend more carefully to political infrastructural organisation if we are to construct a less violent world. Her current work involves rethinking democracy, including re-examining its roots in the liberal Christian tradition, in response to the so-called rise of authoritarianism; and an exploration of the role of affect in contemporary movements for social justice.

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Adriana Cavarero's ethics of inclination presents us with a puzzle. Inspired by Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, Cavarero argues that inclination, understood as a posture of affective response towards the other and exemplified by the iconic image of the Christian Madonna inclining over her child, could help us construct a more peaceful world. Her argument develops the familiar idea that love can help us work towards peace via a re-valorisation of maternal love for a collective feminist political project. However, her argument rather puzzlingly contains two different models of maternal love. Whilst the first, more explicit model is a self-sacrificing love, the second, I argue, emerges in a subtle shift that renders love a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing. Intrigued by this move that remains unelaborated by Cavarero, I investigate what this means for her theorisation of love's political import. Starting with the self-sacrificing model, I am concerned that when faced with the threat of violence against those we love,

Cavarero's reading of inclined love as stereotypically maternal, postural, and affective could too easily be transformed into violence. I argue that not just stereotypical maternal love, but affective love in general, always contains within it a capacity for violence. Furthermore, Cavarero's turn to Levinas on responsibility only exacerbates this problem. Developing an original argument that Levinas's theorisation of responsibility entraps his theorisation of love in a violent egology of domination, I suggest that this priority of the self unfortunately carries through into parts of Cavarero's argument, seemingly casting doubt on her thesis that love can escape the "necessary" violence of patriarchy. Yet I argue that we could perhaps escape this concern via what I identify as a second, unelaborated model of love, understood as a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing, since it is active rather than affective, ruptural rather than relational. Despite Cavarero's method of exaggerating stereotypes, I posit that this second model is not stereotypical maternal love, but illogical love – love that loves "wrong" in the eyes of our contemporary world. I therefore read this second model of love as a practice of nonviolence, which offers the potential to transform not just our own sense of self and our relationships with others, but the very frames of intelligibility that patriarchal violence depends upon. Whilst my argument does not abandon Cavarero's commitment to revalorise the maternal, it does invite us to re-imagine the everyday narrative of the maternal relation, and indeed, the love relation, not as a challenge to the posture of patriarchy, but as a challenge to its logic.

## Maternity, Inclination, and Ethics in Arendt and Levinas

Cavarero's project sets out from the premise that the European philosophical tradition has systematically subordinated the female body, and in particular, the maternal body. Because in the Ancient Greek tradition the concept of birth is understood as "a coming from nothing" (Cavarero, 1990: 6–7) rather than coming from a woman, and because the discipline of philosophy inherited its symbolic order from the Ancient Greek world view, Cavarero argues that philosophy is founded

upon an original matricide, since the body of the woman, and in particular, the body of the woman as mother, is denied. Her work seeks to counter this subordination by asking what it would mean for philosophy to take women, women's bodies, mother's bodies, seriously. She works her way through our philosophical tradition by critiquing its blindness to mothers, whilst building an alternative philosophy that starts from maternity. This is not just a philosophical project: it stems from the political contention that the role of the mother, although symbolically revered, is, in practice, ignored, overlooked, and taken for granted. The labour of mothering is not valued in our social order. Hence Cavarero's project is not just to transform our philosophical tradition, but to emphasise the wider value that motherhood has for our social lives.

Cavarero's reorientation to maternity informs her development of an ontology of uniqueness and relationality. She is inspired in this approach by Hannah Arendt, who argued that birth is "the primary category of political thought" (Arendt, 1958: 9), since it is through birth that the new enters our world. Action, which is for Arendt the ability to distinguish ourselves and effect change within human society, re-enacts the capacity for originality that emerges at every birth. Arendt's appreciation of the radical capacity that change can effect in our lives leads her to refer in a secular sense to birth as a "miracle", since through birth, a new person appears to us as unique and unrepeatable (Cavarero et al., 2014: 14). Accordingly, Arendt posits birth as an alternative to the metaphysical tradition's obsession with death (Cavarero, 2016: 111). Furthermore, against the traditional understanding of humans as individual, independent, and self-sufficient, Arendt's emphasis on the importance of appearing to others leads her to understand our political sphere as relational, which she describes with a striking postural analogy. In response to Kant's argument that "[m]an is not only a rational being, he also belongs to the world of the senses which will tempt him to yield to his inclinations instead of following his reason or his heart", Arendt argues that "every inclination turns outwards, it leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world" (Arendt, 2003: 81). Inclination is a sign of being affected by the world, and whilst, for Kant, this is

"inconsistent with human freedom" (*ibid.*: 82), for Arendt, without inclination, without being affected by the world around us, we are not living a political life, and, as such, cannot be free. Yet Arendt does not exploit the critical feminist potential of her work. Despite her focus on birth, Arendt is more interested in birth as an analogy for what she understands as our second birth, which is the moment when we make our entrance as actors onto the political scene (Cavarero et al., 2014: 14). She does not consider the role of the mother, nor the condition of infancy in any detail (Cavarero, 2016: 116). Instead, Cavarero argues that it is in fact the biological scene of birth that is more useful to us in thinking about uniqueness, since in the moment of birth the child appears as unique to the mother yet is utterly dependent on the mother to recognise this uniqueness and respond with care.

Alongside the influence of Arendt on her work, the centrality of the asymmetrical encounter between mother and child in Cavarero's work is inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's ethics as first philosophy. It is worth exploring the relationship between Cavarero and Levinas's work here, as it helps to delineate the precise contours of Cavarero's project. The central feature of Levinas's work is his theorisation of the encounter between self and other, in which he argues that the self can no longer ignore the demand to respond to the suffering of the other. In looking into the face of the other, Levinas argues that the contingency of our subject positions is revealed. The self recognises his own vulnerability in the suffering of the other. For Levinas, ethics is first philosophy because if philosophy, understood as thinking the world, is to offer us a world that can resist domination, it must be seen to start from this moment of encounter and openness. Levinas's ethics presents an appealing critique of western philosophy and its grand self-contained systems of knowledge (e.g., Kant, Hegel, Heidegger) and offers to undermine the domination, western-centrism and hubris of philosophy, whilst avoiding descent into nihilism, by shifting our focus onto the suffering of others and away from our own selfish interests.

For Levinas, the encounter with the face of the other produces a struggle at the heart of ethics, which he believes can undermine all that we took for granted about ourselves and our

right to our world and property. Rather than a ground that prescribes how to respond to an encounter, Levinas's ethics is a call to respond that arises from the interruption of the encounter (Fagan, 2016). Ethics here refers to the problematisation of our conduct towards others, rather than to an instruction with regard to how to respond properly. Indeed, many philosophers of the ethical turn read Levinas's encounter between self and other as an encounter that is also a dilemma. It ruptures the traditional sense of our home, our property, and our selfishness – it obstructs our presumed exclusive right to our home, family, and possessions – and insists that the other comes right into the heart of our lives (Derrida, 1999: 71; Critchley, 2014: 16–7). As Cavarero emphasises in her reading of Levinas (2016: 167–8), it also causes us to respond to one particular other, placing them above other others. In this way, Levinas acknowledges the partiality and impossibility of our ability to respond fully to all. Far from effacing politics, this encounter is understood to be politics. It interrupts our world, our very comprehension of the world, to allow for a reconfiguration of relations that may no longer exclude that other (Forti, 2015: 115), although it will still be far from perfect.

Despite the promise of Levinas's critique of the metaphysical tradition, Cavarero argues that he is still held captive by the unrealistic independent, self-sufficient male subject, instead of what she argues is the more realistic experience – usually associated with the female – of human dependency and care for one another. Cavarero is struck by Levinas's example of a mother who fears for the life of her child as an illustration of how the "I" can disregard concern for its own life and instead care more about the life of another (2016: 166). However, similarly to her critique of Arendt, she notes that Levinas uses the female and the maternal as analogies, failing to understand the implications that an actual maternal body could have for his philosophy. First, Cavarero observes that his conceptualisation of the relation between self and other excludes the female, and operates on an erect and vertical plane where the masculine self must be transcended to move upwards towards the Other (*ibid.*: 141). This, in Cavarero's view, incorrectly assumes that the face-to-face encounter arises from an upright posture between self and other. She suggests that it

would be far more likely that the asymmetric relation Levinas describes would be embodied by the inclination of one towards the other. Furthermore, Cavarero seeks to escape Levinas's move to transcend the body in a way that responds to prior feminist critique. Irigaray argued that Levinas's failure to include the woman in the encounter denies women the possibility of ever engaging in the ethical sphere – they are constrained to the home (pre- or post-ethics), objectified, and denied subjectivity. Similarly, Sandford argued that since the notion of the feminine plays a key role in our understanding of ethics – by objectifying the passionate bodily behaviours that masculinity always seeks to transcend – it is impossible to reconcile any feminist position with such an ethics (2000: 139). Cavarero's solution is to bring Levinas's ethical encounter back down to the ground by recasting it as the encounter between mother and new-born child.

Cavarero's second critique concerns Levinas's emphasis on violence. She argues that, in the moment of birth, the vulnerability of the human cannot be denied. Although the philosophical tradition assumes that in growing up, we lose our vulnerability, and become independent, self-sufficient adults, Cavarero argues that we always remain vulnerable. Whilst the philosophical tradition has focused on death as the event that shapes our lives the most, she follows Levinas's observation that the etymological root of vulnerability could be either *vulnus* (wound) or *vel* (caress). Despite this, Levinas's reading of the face of the other as a prohibition on killing (Cavarero, 2016: 156), rather than an invitation to care, emphasises the capacity to wound such that his subject is predominantly characterised by death and violence. In contrast, drawing on Levinas's discussion of the caress in a sexual encounter, Cavarero asks whether our vulnerability has to communicate only kill-ability, or whether it could mean caress-ability instead. She argues for a shift from one to the other. She argues that the very possibility of ethics emerges from this double valence so apparent in the natal scene. By emphasising birth instead of death, Cavarero argues that we can recognise that there is always scope for change and renewal, however dire our circumstances. In this way, Cavarero's project can be read as a reworking of Levinas's ethics, maintaining the centrality of the

asymmetric encounter but replacing death with birth, rectitude with inclination, and the violent wounding of the patriarchal order with the love of the maternal caress.

## Medusa, the Madonna, and a Medea Problem

Although Cavarero's call for inclination to become a fundamental schematism (2016: 129) could be taken to imply that her ethics imposes a ground, she clarifies that her work acknowledges the Levinassian ambiguity encapsulated in every encounter as presenting us with the responsibility to choose. She does not assume that all mothers are caring. She acknowledges that the maternal relation is ambivalent since it is also, in the patriarchal symbolic order, associated with horror – embodied in its most extreme form in the decapitated head of the Gorgon Medusa (2008: 13). Because Medusa was pregnant at the time she was decapitated, the face of horror is, Cavarero argues, not just female, but the face of the mother. She suggests that the petrifying face of Medusa suitably embodies the sinister associations that patriarchal thought identifies with motherhood. This arises from the horrifying observation that the mother is able to either preserve or destroy her child. Patriarchal thought thus idealises and demonises the mother. From this, Cavarero draws two further observations. First, that the symbolic importance of this fearsome side of the maternal relation does not emerge from just any post-natal relation between any care-giver and the infant, who they could destroy. The horror stems particularly from the very fact that it was the mother who gave birth to the child, arguing that the Ancient Greek tale of Medea, who murdered her own children, is deemed to be particularly shocking because it was she who bore them (*ibid.*: 27). Second, for Cavarero, maternal care is thus presented as a polarity of relations which she argues are represented in the symbolic patriarchal order via the opposing maternal images of the Medusa – fearsome and life crushing decapitated head of a woman separated from her womb – to the aforementioned Christian Madonna, as "the stereotype of self-sacrifice" (*ibid.*). Between these two poles, I note, Cavarero identifies that the

tradition of ethics – despite philosophy's ignoring and subordinating real women – objectifies women as its measure and marker; as the model of the most excellent ethical comportment and of the most horrific and depraved.

Furthermore, between these two poles, although on the side tending towards Medusa that is occupied by bad mothers, Cavarero locates Medea. Cavarero argues that despite multiple interpretations of Medea as a hateful mother, she did love her children. As Euripides' text shows, she agonised over her decision that they had to die by her own hand. Cavarero implies that it is perhaps because Medea loves her children that she kills them (*ibid.*). Despite, or perhaps because of, her love, Medea deemed their deaths to be "necessary". It is this "necessary aspect" that for Cavarero "makes the violence consummated in this scene a peculiar form of horror" that emerges from the violent patriarchal "imaginary of the West" (*ibid.*). In considering how we might resist this horrifying tradition, Cavarero returns to Arendt's analogy of inclination. She observes that the philosophical male subject is a subject of uprightness with its associated language of rectitude, righteousness, and verticality, and as such, seen through the lens of Arendt's comments, has limited relevance to embodied human lives, particularly the maternal. Cavarero employs Arendt's reading of inclination to undermine the pompous philosophical tradition of righteousness with its exemplary figure of the upright, independent, self-sufficient man. She asks what might happen if we were to establish an ethics that instead of the relentless postmodern attempt to "fragment the subject" sought instead to "incline it" (2016: 11). Her answer combines Arendt's relational conceptualisation of the human as "leaning outward" towards others, with Levinas's focus on vulnerability (*ibid.*: 12) to argue that human lives are irrevocably interconnected. Rather than seeking to hide our dependency on others and our vulnerability to each other, we should recognise it and use it first to undermine the liberal myth of the sovereign individual upon which, she argues, the patriarchal philosophies that lead to war and violence are based. Second, in place of this myth, we can use our recognition of dependency and vulnerability to inspire us to behave more altruistically towards others.

As noted above, Cavarero has often referred to the Christian Madonna as the symbol that best embodies maternal love (2008; 2014; 2016). In particular she refers to the image of the Madonna by Leonardo da Vinci – *The Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* – which, she argues, subverted contemporary conventions to portray the Madonna as human and ordinary. Of course, there are risks that using what is still such a traditional image could reinforce a stereotype of women as sweet, inclined, passive, affectionate, maternal, pure, and caregiving. However, Cavarero acknowledges that whenever anybody seeks to use maternity as an example, they are always accused by critics of furthering sexism, entrenching stereotypical ideas of women as caregivers and thereby "confirming the self-sacrificing and self-effacing role attributed to women" (2016: 124). Indeed, she argues that it is the "burdensome self-sacrificing stereotype" that causes many scholars to avoid discussing motherhood at all. Ironically, the fear that celebrating maternity could be seen to lumber women with the expectation that they enact such self-sacrificing love contributes further to the disappearance of the mother from philosophy (*ibid.*: 13–4). Yet if we are too cautious, Cavarero fears we will miss out on the valuable and easily accessible contribution that motherly love could make to our world (*ibid.*: 14), by enabling a critique of the patriarchal symbolic, and exemplifying an alternative model of ethical behaviour. She is not arguing that only mothers, or women, should seek to imitate the supreme example of altruistic love that Leonardo's Madonna embodies, but that everyone should imitate it. What if – she appears to ask us – we were all to relate to each other in the way that Leonardo's Madonna relates to her child? What if we were to remodel our communities around the love that mothers give, a love that is usually unnoticed and taken for granted? Wouldn't these changes make the world a much better place? She hopes it would enable us to challenge "the violent practices of domination, exclusion, and devastation of which the subject itself is an accomplice (ranging from racism to sexism, to homophobia, as well as war and other regular or irregular forms of destruction)" (*ibid.*: 12–3). By deploying everyday, easily available resources, Cavarero hopes we could revolutionise human relations. The appeal of such a promise

leads me to ask what it would require of us in practical terms?

In seeking to answer this question, some difficulties start to emerge. To encapsulate these, let us return to Medea's impossible bind. Euripides portrays Medea reflecting long and hard on whether to murder her children. Cavarero emphasises that Medea did love her children, and thus instead of the stereotyped image of an irrational psychopath, Cavarero brings into focus a woman whom patriarchy has forced into an impossible dilemma. Now that Jason, her children's father, has remarried, it is likely that the citizens of Corinth will seek to destroy her children to ensure they will not grow up to challenge their stepfamily's hold on the throne. Faced with the near certainty that her children will be butchered, and her lack of agency as a woman to protect them (even if she remarries, her new husband may want them dead), she decides that it is better that she kills them herself, to protect them from what may be a worse death at the hands of others. Cavarero observes that this symbolic myth, central to our tradition's conceptualisation of womanhood, indicates that to care for some we may have to do violence against them.

Would the Madonna's inclined love be able to challenge such violent structures? Medea is, in Cavarero's reading, inclined towards her children. Is it not possible that somebody seeking to enact the Madonna's maternal love might, if they were in difficult circumstances, end up enacting that of Medea – if for example, their infant, too, was trapped and threatened with death, with no protection from a human or superhuman father, and no escape route (to Egypt say)? It is not clear how the inclined love of the Madonna could transform Medea's impossible bind, or whether something more may be needed. There are two issues at stake. First, how could the love of the Madonna transform Medea's love into a non-violent love that could change the outcome for Medea's children – how could the Madonna have helped Medea incline differently? Second, how could the love of the Madonna transform the conditions under which Medea lived so that others might not face equivalent tragic choices in the future – how, in the future, could we avoid the dilemma between loving and committing violence?

## Loving to Death

Let us start by examining the Madonna's inclined love in more detail. What does it consist of in practical terms? Little is known about the Madonna's mothering style. Cavarero's reference to female stereotypes implies that she was a caring and responsive mother, but what did that look like on a practical level? Surely new mothers in first century Palestine were confronted by choices concerning how best to care for their child? For example, when the infant Jesus woke his mother for the umpteenth time at night, did she let him "cry it out"? Did she sigh wearily before guiltily stumbling to attend to him? Did she ever perhaps think "my life was easier before he was born", before berating herself for not being a good enough mother? In real terms, what does inclined love require of mothers relating to their children, and what then does it require of us when we relate to non-family members, to strangers, or to enemies even?

In response to these questions Cavarero's model mother is first and foremost inclined. This is strikingly one dimensional, which is, of course, the intention. Cavarero purposefully distils the image of the mother inclined over her child into a simple inclined line. Elegant though this is, there is a risk that this reduction erases the complexity of our moral lives, rendering itself ill-equipped with regard to the question that still challenges us most today – how to respond to others without committing or exacerbating violence? How to avoid doing evil? As such, Cavarero risks her argument falling prey to the same abstraction of motherhood that she criticises in the work of others who have made use of the maternal scene in philosophy. Perhaps we need to be careful not to overread the postural argument, and should instead turn to Cavarero's descriptions of inclined love to help us map the parameters of the mother's actual body in its three dimensionality.

Cavarero notes that the philosophical tradition has always treated the notion of human inclination with suspicion, assuming it to be opposed to rational thought. It therefore associated inclination with the passionate and lascivious feminine realm which philosophers both desired and feared (2016: 3). Cavarero defends this understanding of inclination

against the sexism of traditional philosophy. She argues that the way that "sweeping passion" can intervene in our lives to upset that which we thought we knew and "dispossess" our sense of self can be valuable as it challenges our assumptions about how people should relate to one another (*ibid.*: 6–7). It challenges the desire of male philosophy to be upright, to have a dependable sense of self, and pushes us to appreciate the way that, through *eros*, our lives are interconnected. Indeed, inspired by the quotation from Arendt given above, she argues that inclination is affective and that the "leaning out of the self" that Arendt describes is an example of ecstasy – an experience in which the self "exits itself" (*ibid.*: 7). Furthermore, Cavarero opens *Inclinations* with an epigraph which defines inclination as "a disposition toward affect [...] which comes from certain likable qualities in the object: but it may become affect or impetuous love" (*ibid.*: 1). Yet despite this insistent defence of *eros* for philosophy, she rather surprisingly later argues that the inclination that can resist patriarchy, whilst inclined and affective, is not erotic.

This argument against *eros*, unnoticed in existing commentary, arises from Cavarero's mobilisation of the image of the Madonna as the exemplar of inclination. This image "excludes any interference by *eros*" (*ibid.*: 10), thereby enabling us to focus on the inclined posture of woman that arises from her "destiny of maternity" (*ibid.*). Free of the complications of *eros*, Cavarero identifies the inclined love of the Madonna as the aforementioned love of a mother for her child as described by Emmanuel Levinas (*ibid.*: 166–7): "love [...] without further purpose, without any ambition to possess or any anxiety of control, satisfied in its sublime composure" (*ibid.*: 174). It is here that Cavarero finds the requirement that this love should not be erotic, it should be "non-concupiscent", in Levinas' terms. In this subtle shift, unnoticed by commentators, I suggest that a Madonna rather different from the aforementioned self-sacrificing Madonna appears. This second Madonna is a non-stereotypical mother. Despite Cavarero's prior fear that she will be accused of employing a stereotype, she emphasises that this post-Levinasian Madonna need not be identified with the type of non-concupiscence that is understood as female purity and sacrifice associated with patriarchy's stereotypical good

mother. Instead, contra her earlier suggestion that the Madonna's is a "self-sacrificing" love (2008: 27; 2016: 102–3), Cavarero's reflection on Levinas leads her to assert that this second model of maternal love is "a type of altruism that is not abnegation and martyrdom, suffering, and renunciation" (2016: 174). This argument indicates that as long as maternal love remains self-sacrificing, it can be subordinated within patriarchy. However, when it rejects self-sacrifice it "presents itself as unusual, problematic [...] a sure and practical love, so everyday and spontaneous that it does not express signs of suffering or self-sacrifice, and even less of excessive self-awareness" (*ibid.*).

Contra Levinas' failure to take the reality of the maternal body seriously in his work, Cavarero emphasises that this love is bodily "[i]n the final analysis, the smile and inclination of Leonardo's Mother suggests that there is a carnal sense of existence, as mundane as it is prosaic, that consists primarily in her irrevocable inclination toward the other" (*ibid.*: 175). Furthermore, this is a love that is more intimately connected to the female body than the male. Cavarero has already argued that due to cultural stereotypes, women are more likely to realise the fact of human interdependency (2015: 107) as a form of innate knowledge that appears to women because of female biology. The ability to give birth exposes women to the fact of human vulnerability in the figure of the newborn. Thus, she argues, society would be less violent if we were to include women more in social organisation (*ibid.*: 107–9). Accordingly, we can conclude that this love is an ontological, maternal, affective, everyday care for the other that stems from our bodily existence as human beings. However, it is still not clear how this love can be practised to confront the violent forms of domination that Cavarero hopes it can oppose. We need to know more about how this second Madonna's love differs from Medea's love for her children.

If we consult Euripides' text, we see that the word Medea uses to refer to her love for her family is *philia*. This *philia*, although often reduced in contemporary understandings of Ancient Greek to brotherly love, in this context refers to instinctive family feeling, parental as well as brotherly and sisterly – albeit, of course, a sorority that is within the

patriarchal family structure. Although Cavarero's discussion of love is limited to *eros*, *philia* or familial love does appear implicitly in her discussion of Levinas, for it is *philia* that a mother feels when she fears for the life of her child. How then to ensure that this non-concupiscent yet still familial love avoids Medea's murderousness? Given the entrapment of Medea in patriarchal *philia* that ties a child's destiny to the protection of their father, one alternative might be to consider what sorority could offer in place of *philia*. Could a family love that rejects the righteous masculinist symbolic offer a way out for Medea?

This question has already been explored by Bonnie Honig, whose critique of Cavarero's work (2021a; 2021b) draws on Euripides' *The Bacchae* to reflect on the power of sorority in inspiring and supporting the women in the play, who, driven into a bacchic frenzy by Dionysus, have halted their housework and fled the city to live an enchanted life together in the woods. However, Honig notes that their idyll is short-lived, with the women soon committing gory acts of violence to protect their freedom, culminating in the dismembering of Pentheus, the King, with their bare hands, even though Agave, the leader of the women, is Pentheus' mother. Honig asks if this means that caring must be intertwined with murderousness (2021b: 66). Although the sororal community is, in Honig's reading, a horizontalist power, it ends up defending itself by re-enacting the violence of patriarchy. Ultimately, the women's sororal protest fails to overturn the law of Thebes, indicating that sororal love cannot provide the solution we were hoping for. In these examples, care requires murder. In both examples, mothers kill their sons. In the patriarchal order, familial love cannot resist the pull of violence. Despite Cavarero presenting the Madonna and Medusa/Medea pairing as opposite poles of motherly inclination – care or violence, love or hate – it is not maternity that is ambivalent as to whether it will enact love or hate. Rather, love, understood as an emotive family tie, is itself ambivalent. Love itself comprises a "necessary" violence. If the Madonna's love is motherly love, even if it is not self-sacrificing, it is familial love. It is thus still not clear what protects the Madonna's love from Medea's fate, nor how it can change the patriarchal symbolic that enables love's slide to

violence.

Necessary violence is not limited to familial love. Note that Euripides' Medea speaks of both *eros* and *philia* – her love for Jason is sometimes *eros*, sometimes *philia*, whilst her love for her children is *philia*. Yet it is her feelings of rage towards Jason – the object of her *eros* – that also inform her decision to kill their children. This indicates that necessary violence is related to both *eros* and *philia*. Indeed, we may be less surprised to note that *eros* is also intimately related with death in our symbolic imaginary. In *Horrorism,* Cavarero discusses the relationship between *eros* and the cruel, violent, and murderous passions. Her reading of Bataille notes that this relationship emerges from the patriarchal myth of the male sovereign subject. Since the unspoken secret is that this subject does have a limit, its destruction takes on a sacrilegious, erotic significance (2008: 50). Although Cavarero suggests that Madonna's non-concupiscent love is free from *eros*, she does not consider it to be free from familial love; it is instead modelled upon it – upon maternal love for the child.[2] Both *philia* and *eros* are affective, emotive forms of love, often understood today to be instinctive. As the aforementioned epigraph of *Inclinations* insists, inclination "comes from certain likable qualities in the object" (Cavarero, 2016: 1). *Philia, eros,* all involve inclination towards, a preference for one, or some, over others; whether we understand this as instinctive or socially constructed to further a blood line, or erotic and desiring, or a mixture of all of these, it favours those we find attractive, desirable, or alluring. Indeed, it seems it is the presence of affectivity that enables us to care but also provides the impetus for violence. The passion that drives affective love is the passion that drives the destructiveness that comes when this love is threatened or threatening. It seems that necessary violence can emerge from any form of love – including that which derives from the maternal body. Thus, rather than a pole of relations between horror and care, violence and love, death and birth, we find instead that it is affective love itself that violence stems from.

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[2] In *Antigone's Claim,* Judith Butler indicates that these forms of love are only separated by repeated citation of kinship laws. Butler thereby indicates that their separation is not necessary, it is normative (2000).

Love sometimes generates hate, care can generate horror, the birth of some requires the death of others. It is not clear that the natal scene of familial love, everyday, mundane, prosaic, and ordinary, all too ordinary, can escape this. Here we are confronted with the ultimate problem of ethics. How to care, how to love, without causing or enacting violence and destruction either towards those we care for and love, or towards others?

This presents us with a problem concerning the limits of ethical relations, a problem that has been raised repeatedly with regard to  the work of Levinas. Although praised for triggering an "ethical turn" in 20th century philosophy, he was however criticised for identifying limits to the relation of openness to the other in the face of the animal, and in the Palestinian enemy of the Israeli state. Whilst Cavarero's critique of Levinas suggests that, despite the potential of his ethics, he remains preoccupied with the philosophy of death and of rectitude, she fails to confront this limiting aspect of his work and, as such, could be seen to inherit what I am here referring to as the problem of "necessary" killing. Let us once again return to Levinas to explore how this problem arises in his thought so that we can investigate whether Cavarero's work can respond.

## Responsibility

Notwithstanding Levinas' endeavours, a certain conservatism has been observed in his ethics. For a struggle to be produced by the Levinassian encounter, we need to be able to see the face as a human or, in some way, already valued as a "face" – so we can then engage with concern over the question of how to respond (Butler, 2004a: 150; Derrida, 2008: 237). What makes such an encounter occur? What makes it interrupt our world and result in a possibility for a change of affective flows from and towards the other, unless we are already predisposed towards that change? Something more is needed to jolt us out of our habitual response of ignoring or responding violently to the homeless person, the plight of immigrants, or other commonplace forms of exclusion (Badiou, 2002; Hallward, 2002; Bosteels, 2007). Political work at the threshold of

recognisability is necessary to convince the self that it should or even could respond compassionately.

Without this step, there is a risk that Levinas' other remains fixed in their otherness maintaining a position of privilege for the self (or "same"). For Levinas' other to be recognisable as one in need of response, it needs to be recognisable, even if only in part, as the other. This means, it has already to be identifiable within our current system of representation, even if it is as that which cannot (yet) be represented. The other is therefore already identifiable and anthropomorphised. It is this that enables the other to be identified in any encounter, as, for example, the poor or excluded of the northern hemisphere, and even to identify these more easily with already identifiable hierarchies within which the white, male, Christian of European origin remains at the top. As many critics have noted (Dussel, 1999; Badiou, 2000; Derrida, 2001; Hallward, 2002; Rancière, 2002; Bosteels, 2007; Eubanks and Gauthier, 2011), non–Europeans, non-Christians, and non-males have so regularly been associated with animals and the non-human that it is less likely that any encounter with them would provoke a radical interruption in our daily lives.

That this fixing of the other may not be completely inadvertent is seen in the way Levinas reserves a position for the enemy – as he who transgresses – within his ethical schema:

> The Other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be [...]. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy (Levinas, 1989: 294).

This can be interpreted to imply that the other, to whom one must be completely open, is only the other that behaves properly. The other only has a right to disrupt the self's home insofar as they respect the rules of those who abide there. There is a point at which the other to whom we must be open has transgressed too far and becomes the enemy, the permanently excluded other, who can be killed. Levinas's "what can you do?" signifies an acceptance of Medea's "necessary violence". In this way, Levinassian ethics does not

necessarily challenge the current order in which we live. In this respect, the Levinassian ethical turn has extinguished politics understood as contestation over who counts. Ethics functions here to curtail discussion. Political change is limited to reaching out to the understandable other, leaving us to exclude and abandon the incomprehensible or unrecognisable other. How does Cavarero's reorientation to the natal scene help us avoid this limiting move?

Rather than help avoid the limits we find in Levinas, there is a risk that Cavarero's emphasis on vulnerability could entrench them, making violence more likely. Jacques Rancière argues that, in our present symbolic order, the incomprehensible suffering of the holocaust has highlighted our extreme vulnerability and portrayed the human as tragic – born "too early": completely dependent on others and at risk of being wounded (2002: 4). He thereby argues that the holocaust has dramatically expanded our comprehension of the extent to which our vulnerability exposes us to the risk of cataclysmic suffering at the hands of others. In comparison to such horror, he argues that everything else could be rendered indistinct and undifferentiated, and after such horror we may struggle to believe that redemption or moral action is still possible. We cannot deny that extreme suffering is possible. In fact, for Rancière, it starts to appear more likely just because it can be said to have happened before. This is because our response to the ambiguity of vulnerability depends on what Rancière refers to as our "order of the sensible" – that which we take for granted – what Judith Butler calls our "frame of intelligibility" (2010). If we understand our current frame as one which already highlights our extreme vulnerability to others and is structured by contemporary crises – for example climate change, war, poverty, global inequality – a logical response might be to perceive ourselves as necessarily called to compete with others to survive. *Vel* could lead to *vulnus*. Madonna to Medea.

Rancière's emphasis on the order in which we live sheds a new light on Medea's dilemma. Why would it have been possible for Jason or the citizens of Corinth to respond with violence instead of care when confronted with the vulnerability of Medea's children? Why, in fact, were they so likely to fail to see the vulnerability that we today are supposed to identify

with the idea of childhood in general? Even if we are to recognise vulnerability, what is to stop us from following Medea in killing the vulnerable to help them escape a worse fate? In this way, it is possible that the turn to vulnerability may, within our current frame, intensify the risk of violence and, with it, acceptance of Medea's "necessary" violence. How can Cavarero's maternal love guard against this? How might it transform the frame which preconditions the possibilities available to us?

Reading ethics as rupture requires an eschatology of faith: an assumption – or at least hope – that the type of rupture that allows us to recognise vulnerability as something that should be responded to with care will happen. But when we know that so many encounters every day do not rupture, what is different about one that does? Is there a way that we could make an encounter more likely to rupture our everyday ordinary? For this, we need to turn to our second question. If the Madonna's love cannot help Medea in her response to the situation in which she finds herself, could it instead have changed the conditions under which Medea's children would be killed – could it help to transform Medea's frame of intelligibility? Cavarero's critique of philosophy has already powerfully described the structures of patriarchy that force our love into impossible choices or keep us so busy we have no time to realise how our actions might make us complicit in violence towards others. Yet, how might we persuade those who do not recognise the patriarchy she highlights that we are vulnerable to one another? One might acknowledge that we are not short of knowledge concerning how we should behave towards one another, however violence continues to tear our world apart. Rather than drawing attention to more models of good behaviour, our challenge is rather to overcome these structures in the face of opposition. Before anyone, particularly a woman, might be willing to enact the Madonna's love, measures might be needed to ensure that they would not just be taken advantage of. How might Cavarero's natal scene persuade patriarchal structures to replace violence with inclined love?

Indeed, the question of how our social norms or frames of intelligibility shape our possible response is raised by Derrida's critique of Levinas when he distinguishes the response to an

encounter from what he refers to as the "quasi-moment" of interruption (1999: 59), which has to in some sense "precede" the encounter. This "irruption" (*ibid.*: 63) is required for us to perceive the other as "Other". Derrida suggests that one way to conceptualise this might be to argue that we need to reach out not just to the recognisable other but to the "unrecognisable other" (2008: 109). However, he acknowledges that this still privileges the perspective of the subject and, as such, could be seen to "surreptitiously" extend "the similar" (*ibid.*), since bringing the unrecognisable into the sphere of the recognisable could thereby reserve a privilege for the self or "same". Yet, I am led to wonder if we could go one step further and consider whether there is anything we could do to make the "quasi-moment" of interruption more likely to rupture the position of the subject?

Levinas, Derrida, and Cavarero's aim is to reflect upon our condition of  relationality itself (our ability to relate to one another). They are understandably  suspicious of any move that might seem to remove the subject's capacity to respond – to be responsible. Responsibility is, for Levinas "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (Cavarero, 2016: 167), so much so that he does not want the I to get lost even in a moment of ecstatic union with the other (*ibid.*: 148). Likewise, Cavarero is concerned to avoid what she refers to as the "post modern [...] fragmentation of the subject" (*ibid.*: 11), since she, too, wants to insist that the moment of encounter – this time embodied in the figure of a mother inclined over her infant – is one of responsibility. Although it does not determine what the response might be, she claims that the very posture of inclination indicates a "disposition to provide" a response (*ibid.*: 105). Even Derrida, who dwelt often on the aporia of responsibility, merely whittles away at the issue of response, reducing it, but still retaining it, as a limitless duty that precedes any calculable debt (1999b: 7, 58), despite acknowledging the violence that could also be retained in such a moment (*ibid.*: 58–61). For Levinas and Derrida, something must remain of the separation between self/other positions for a relation to exist. Thus, despite Fagan's argument that Levinassian ethics could avoid providing a ground for an order (Fagan, 2016), it does still provide a ground, even if only in a minimal sense, by

maintaining a relationship of responsibility between self and other. This maintenance of the possibility of responsibility preserves the primacy of the subject and continues to subordinate the other to the "same". I fear that, contrary to Cavarero's intentions, there is a trace of the upright philosophical tradition in this commitment to response/ability. Ironically, this egology of responsibility may be the last obstacle to overcome if we are to undermine the self's domination of the other.

Can Cavarero offer another way to interpret the encounter so central to Levinas? If the encounter requires the "unknown" (Derrida, 1992b: 170) and is anachronistic (Levinas, 2007), then its logic is not one of relation but is rather one which ruptures current relations, and our subjectivity, so as to effect subjectivation. Cavarero does not need to fear the fragmentation of the subject, since this would not be a permanent state of affairs. Instead, all that is required is a quasi-momentary disjuncture, to allow for the possibility of a radical reconfiguration of our relations. Returning to Cavarero's critique of Levinas, I ask what it would take for the "I" to "get lost", albeit just momentarily, to enable us to reconfigure our relations.

## Ecstasy

When Cavarero comments on Levinas's aim to avoid the "I" getting "lost", she is discussing the risks posed by the ecstasy of an erotic encounter. For Levinas, even in such a moment when we may feel ourselves "swept away", we are, in actual fact, ensuring our own continuation through procreation – the generation of an I that is both the same (it is part of the father), and the other (it is not an absolute replica) (Cavarero, 2016: 148–9). Although the self in this example is not thought to be lost, it is "called into question" (*ibid.*: 155) by its confrontation with the other. Although Cavarero seems to defend Levinas' move, since it enables the self to maintain responsibility for the other, we have seen that she provides us with a different reading of ecstasy. For Cavarero, such a moment is "the removal of self control", which causes the I "to get carried away and to exit itself

[...]. Erotic inclination, accordingly, has an intrinsically ecstatic effect" (*ibid.*: 7).

Perhaps the ecstatic is Cavarero's way of provoking the "quasi-moment" of disjunction. We have seen that Cavarero associates the ecstatic with inclination – leaning outside of the self – more generally and not just with love or the erotic. Although she has not theorised the ecstatic further, Cavarero's work has for a while now been in conversation with that of Judith Butler, who argues that, in order to understand how the Levinassian encounter can alter our frame of intelligibility, we need to add in an account of the role of affect. Butler, too, notes that love, in the form of sexual passion, is not the only way to experience ecstasy. She suggests that other strong passions such as grief and rage can cause us to undergo the ecstatic (2004: 20). Although ecstatic grief or rage may sound a little strange to our ears, Butler is drawing on the understanding of ecstasy as standing outside oneself, which she equates with the idiom of being "beside oneself" with grief or rage (*ibid.*). For Butler, as for Cavarero, the ecstatic is not just a type of experience – our capacity for ecstasy, for experiencing a subject position outside of ourselves; it is an ontological structure of the body (2010: 33), which reveals our dependency on others, since it is others who provoke our experiences of ecstasy. For Cavarero, this indicates that the self is always already inclined towards others. Noting that our ability to recognise the other is dependent not just on the other, but on the normative order that structures our ability to recognise them, Butler suggests that the affects we experience, such as anger, pleasure, love, are not only the medium for understanding our world but also the means in which we might critique and change it. Interpretation of an encounter occurs in the field of intelligibility that is the social. It calls on "certain interpretive frames" in order for us to make sense of what we are feeling (*ibid.*: 34). Because these frames are "mediated [...] they also call into question the taken-for-granted character of those frames, and in that way provide the affective conditions for social critique" (*ibid.*). This is an attractive argument. The shocking impact of strong affects such as impassioned love, grief, or rage, could effect this change of their own accord – when we are affected deeply, our way of understanding the world is challenged for a moment – thrown

out of kilter. That which we took for granted has suddenly been shown to be lacking. To enable this to happen, all we have to do is to be open to our feelings, and our body will do the rest.

However, Cavarero and Butler's understanding of the ecstatic as an ontological structure of the body, albeit one that is productively provocative, risks blinding them to how strongly our affective responses are themselves socially conditioned. Although no one can deny that there are times when affective experiences alter one's perspective on the world, given the state of contemporary society, why is it not happening far more often? When we are conditioned to interpret certain affective responses in a certain way, it is not clear when affective experiences will transform our frame of intelligibility rather than being made sense of within that frame. I may feel pity or distress for a homeless person, yet, at the same time, I may conclude that it is just not practical to stop and speak to her, to invite her home for dinner, or offer her a place to stay. Furthermore, affect still requires the subject to remain in order to indicate who or what has been affected. Despite the potential for the ecstatic to interrupt, or, in Butler's terms, "dispossess" the self, Cavarero and Butler's turn to ecstasy does not quite escape the egology of relatability – of responding to and being responsible for the other (*ibid.*: 33). Is there another way to move outside of the self that might momentarily disjoin our affective flows, providing an opening for our relations to be restructured in a more productive way? If we start with the issue of the frame rather than the self, we find ourselves approaching the problem from another direction. Rather than remaining caught in the aporia of rendering the unrecognisable recognisable, can we instead seek to render the recognisable unrecognisable – rupturing our frame of intelligibility to provoke a transformation in our ways of relating to one another?

## Loving "wrong"

If an interruption of the type Derrida calls for were to take place, our identifications with subject positions (both self and other, for example) would be momentarily challenged, to

prevent them from functioning by making them nonsensical (Cavell, 1991: 131; Rancière, 1999: 29–30; Norval, 2009: 75–6; Woodford, 2017: 152–3). Before we can even consider the responsibility or irresponsibility – of how and to whom we respond (Derrida, 1992a; 2008), something would need to "annihilate" our current perspective (Cavell, 1991: 131), prevent it from functioning. It is not that the positions of self or other cannot be distinguished but that any reason for seeing them as such appears lacking, illogical. Such a disruption would have to operate on the terrain of perception, to open space for a change in the ordering of the frame itself, not just reconfiguration within the order (Rancière, 1999: 28, 30). From the confusion it would create, other possible relations may be constructed. This conceptualisation of rupture is aesthetic. It understands the disjuncture to go all the way down – to scramble meaning such that our usual relations fail. Furthermore, in the characterisation of such a moment in Rancière's formula as an interruption of the sensible, it can be seen to intervene in our affective experiences – our sensibilities. To scramble them, confuse them, render them nonsensical, just long enough for us to see that, although we may not yet have a solution, our normative frame is lacking. Yet how might our actions towards one another – our current relations – prompt such a rupture in the way we relate?

I suggest that another feature of Butler's work can help here. In her work on performativity, Butler theorises that our normativity is established by the precedent of iteration. She therefore argues that we can challenge norms, initially focusing on gender norms, by performing them wrongly; parodying them in order to demonstrate their limitations and prove that alternatives are possible (2006). Although I have argued elsewhere that we might do this by playing with performativity more widely (Woodford, 2023), in this article, I want to explore specifically the question of whether Butler gives us another way to understand Cavarero's aforementioned subtle but undeveloped shift from self-sacrificing to non-self-sacrificing maternal love. Indeed, in some Christian traditions, the love of Cavarero's Madonna incorporates but also far exceeds the moment of maternal care as interpreted by Cavarero, and even challenges the female gender stereotype (e.g. Beattie, 2002;

Woodford, 2021; and Woodford, forthcoming). Radical, popular, and folk Mariology traditions emphasise how the love the Madonna practiced was not familiar familial (filial) love. It was a love that ruptured the order of men, the values of patriarchy. She is believed to have loved God enough to eschew social conventions and agree to carry his child despite the scandal it would cause to her family – in a challenge to her filial relations. Furthermore, although she demonstrated love and care for her son, she raised him to love others, all others, more than his human family. She raised him in fact, to sacrifice his life for others. Finally, she raised him to espouse perhaps the most ruptural love of all – love for enemies[3]. Was it in fact this love, which was so dangerous, that meant he could not be allowed to live? In all these ways, perhaps we could say that the Madonna loves "wrong". She does not follow the patriarchal model for love of self and love of family over others. Could the second Madonna's love be a love that loves wrongly? If so, could loving "wrong" – loving in a way that goes against the values of patriarchy – help us challenge the affective egology of our ordinary, self-preserving love relations upon which our current violent world relies?

Although wheeling out the commandment to love one's enemies may seem a little tired, appearing to recall much ink spilt already by Levinas, Derrida, Cavarero, and others, I here sketch a novel reading of affect that might help us to retain the spirit of Cavarero's argument whilst overcoming the trap that Levinas falls into when, despite his extensive work on ethics, he reserves a position for the enemy. I want to ask what type of love is commanded here? Although it might, in some circumstances, be possible to summon compassion for our enemies if we hear that some calamity has befallen them, are we being asked to affectively love in the sense of feeling compassion and warmth for our enemies at the very moment when they may be vindictively persecuting us? Is it not more likely that for many of us mere mortals we would be affected by feelings such as fear, hatred, or anger at such a moment?

[3] I am not arguing here that Mary had full knowledge of Jesus' calling, but that her maternal influence in shaping his personality and outlook is often undervalued or completely ignored (in line with Cavarero's argument about mothers in general) in any discussion of the Christian story.

Although in the Greek version of the Gospels the commandment to love your enemies is rendered using the term *philia*, which may appear to tie us back into the patriarchal realm of familial relations, if we refer to the original Aramaic word for love, it is, as in English and Hebrew, more ambiguous, and crucially, can refer to love as an action, not just as a feeling. Thus, we can render this command as an instruction to act without violence towards others despite how we feel towards them. To act peaceably towards them despite being affectively moved to do the opposite.

Despite the difficulty of enacting such love, I suggest that it is this form of love that Cavarero's second Madonna exemplifies. It may seem self-sacrificing to fail to defend oneself with violence in the face of violence – how could this have helped Medea? Yet to stand up and resist the normative order by acting against its rules can imbue a subject with a strength, a dignity that interrupts the everyday frame in which we co-exist with our enemies as well as our friends. Such an interruption opens a possibility that we might reconfigure the way we are responding to one another. Might the confusion of such unexpected behaviour prior to any need for a response put into question the planned violent response from one's enemy, or our own desire to respond violently to others? Doubtless it would often fail to have this effect, but the surprise, dignity, and drama of such a moment has the potential to render our current relations to one another in a new light. To show them as lacking or inadequate. This is less self-sacrificing than self-making – a subjectivating moment. I am not blithely suggesting that this would be easy to achieve, simply that this might be the secret of the altruistic, yet not self-sacrificing love, of Cavarero's Madonna.

Understood in this way, perhaps love of enemies could provide a strategy for making those quasi-moments of interruption more likely by being *a priori* peaceable towards those we are not meant to love before any encounter with them to which we must respond. Conceptualising such a moment as a political strategy, rather than an ethical or ontological one, removes it from the sphere of response and responsibility. It troubles our affective inclinations by, where necessary, resisting them. Of course, such a strategy of *a priori* nonviolence is not

failsafe, but rather than succumb to a situation in which one either relies on hope or kills one's loved ones, it gives an active and productive strategy aimed at transforming one's situation positively. Could the unexpectedness, the illogicality, of this love give us the strength that would allow us to stand up, to fight for the impossible, to make an argument for survival that we may not feel we could ordinarily make, to build a new world in the world?

Since there are no good grounds to distinguish inequalities between us, from such a moment, there arises the possibility that we can transform our social order not just to render the unrecognisable recognisable, but to include it on the same terms – simply because there is no reason not to do so. This is not a way of restoring the individualistic egology of equality which, according to Cavarero, seeks to smooth over the asymmetry of our lives (and which could be seen as Derrida's motivation to plump for responsibility, with its associated ills, as what he saw as the lesser of two evils), since it does not aim to dissolve subject positions so as to render us substantively equal in any way (2016: 154). Instead, this is an equality that only ever emerges negatively – from the failure of any basis for inequality. Thus, it is no threat to human uniqueness. It just prevents us from using the distinctions stemming from uniqueness as an excuse for domination.

Yet, if the Madonna's love is not maternal love, but love of enemies, must we understand it as alien to human love, whether maternal or non-maternal? Despite the necessary feminist task of identifying the often overlooked labour of motherhood, must we conclude that human maternity can only vacillate in this ambivalent matrix of care and violence? I do not think so. Cavarero has already begun to distinguish this "wrong" love from the patriarchal stereotype of maternal love, and, for Cavarero, it is in the patriarchal order that maternal love becomes entangled with violence. Indeed, could an *a priori* refusal of violence – not as an ontological condition – but as a political strategy, be part of a non-patriarchal maternal practice? A way to raise human beings who may be able to construct "political orders in which peace is not the temporary result of war" (Cavarero, 2015: 110)? The alternative is to accept the violence of one's society, as demonstrated by Medea, who,

accepting that her children's fate was defined by their relationship with their father, took it upon herself to enact that violence. Yet it was hardly a solution. Despite her victorious exit, how to carry on living after that?

I am not trying to demonise Medea, but I do wish to avoid the recurrence of such tragic choices. If we accept the argument that Medea perceived that she had no choice, then we need to ask how loving "wrong" could transform our collective frame, and how it could impact our world rather more quickly than waiting for future generations to be raised as more peaceable. Let us observe that few mothers give birth alone – but the moment of birth itself is already enmeshed in a network of social relations. Cavarero is aware that maternal love is not enacted in a void, yet her formulation of the Levinassian encounter also only contains two figures. Critics of Levinas have long noted the individualism of his encounter, which is not necessarily evaded by his conceptualisation of politics as the introduction of a third party, since this just multiplies what are still individual experiences. For the Madonna's love to inform a feminist politics, we need to ask how it could be enacted collectively, and  what we could do as a collective to support it? Returning to the example of a Levinassian encounter with a homeless person, the type of shock it might be expected to provoke depends not just on the self's disposition but also on their material circumstances. If the self also has no home, or no food, then in some sense there is less distance to overcome to recognise the other as the self. Medea was not just angry with her husband. She was frightened, humiliated, rejected. This rendered her defiant but not in a position to negotiate. She had lost her social status and, with it, her confidence to pose an alternative. Our ability to enact nonviolent love is not limited to the resources at our disposal. Hence its  potency. Yet, a lack of resources will always render its enaction more difficult. In order to better support the conditions under which nonviolence can be enacted, it is necessary that we do not wait to first change the frame of our social order, but simultaneously intensify the fight against inequality – not just to resist it in moments of political struggle, but to construct institutional infrastructures to replace and improve upon those we have lost to neoliberalism in the last fifty years. Nonviolence as a strategy requires this dual

approach, on both the individual and the collective front.

## Conclusion

Rather than an ontology of vulnerability and inclination towards the other, I have proposed that the love of Cavarero's Madonna is a ruptural love, a love that is "wrong" by the standards of the world, characterised by nonviolent action. Despite the elegance of Cavarero's theory of postural inclination, the Madonna's love will often need to be enacted contrary to our inclinations. To answer the question of how nonviolent love might persuade the patriarchs, it does not wait to persuade them. It ruptures the  patriarchal values of family and friends first by repeating the norms of love in a manner deemed "wrong", interrupting the way we usually relate to one another, and opening up the possibility for a change in our patterns of relationality. Rather than an affective maternal love figured as a relation between selves, it mobilises an alternative theorisation of maternity which figures this relation between selves in constant negotiation with a wider societal normative frame. This model of maternity is subjectivating rather than self-sacrificing, inculcating this "wrong", illogical, and dangerous love in its love objects, giving them the power to intervene in and transform the violent relationships of our contemporary world.

And what of Cavarero's argument that something about the experience of giving birth exemplifies this love? Is there not an illogicality in a mother's inclination towards a new-born? An illogicality that patriarchy, with its romantic representations of motherhood, fears to acknowledge in case it tempts women to abandon their responsibilities? Pregnancy, birth, and motherhood are detrimental to the upright, independent self. Pregnancy strains the body's resources, changes one's body; the labour of birth often drives women to the limit of their physical ability; and the months that follow usually make extreme physical and mental demands in a very particular way on a mother's post-natal body. Indeed, I recall stories of mothers who, upon giving birth, do not report a sudden rush of affection for their new-born child, but exhausted, bleeding, in shock, and

feeling more vulnerable themselves than the new-born who is already comfortably in the arms of a caregiver, illogically, irrationally, and despite perhaps needing to be cared for themselves, without knowing why, reach out their arms, to meet the often tearful infant who has caused them (and will continue to cause them) so much trouble. Not yet because they love, not yet because they care, and not yet because they see the infant as vulnerable. Perhaps they reach out because, in that moment, as their former self recedes, they are curious about what "new" this unique being might bring to their life – and to the  world.

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