

The Freedom to Love: On the Unclaimability of (Maternal) Love

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Introduction

Parental love is foundational for countless other relationships in a person's life. The indispensability of parental love to human flourishing has led some philosophers, such as S. Matthew Liao, to argue that children have a right to be loved by their parents—in other words, it is a duty for parents to love their children and children can make a claim on them for this love.¹ Liao's argument focuses on what children can claim from their parents without making gender distinctions, yet disparate cultural expectations placed on mothers and fathers call for special consideration of whether maternal love ought to be conceived of as a right. That Western thought demarcates paternal love from maternal love in terms of freedom is summed up in Jean-Luc Marion's depiction of a father's relationship to his child. He writes:

Every child is born naturally from its mother, but strictly speaking, it always remains of unknown father; there is no child who is not a foundling—that is to say, received. As a result, it has been admitted since time immemorial that the sole proof of paternity resides in the juridical recognition of the child by the father; paternity is accomplished symbolically, not first of all or always biologically. The father becomes one, in all cases and not only in adoption, only by his decision to recognize, ask for, and claim as his own the foundling and natural child.²

Whereas men's freedom is emphasized in choosing to become a father after a child's birth, it is taken for granted that women automatically will accept and love their children. This expectation emphasizes male freedom and undermines the freedom of women in relation to their children. More so than paternal love, maternal love is conceived, even if tacitly so, to be claimable

¹ S. Matthew Liao, *The Right to be Loved* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 300.



by children, inordinately compromising women’s freedom to love. Expectations placed upon maternal love exceed those placed upon paternal love; this inequality emerges from a variety of sources, including cultural, social, and scientific perspectives. In almost all countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, women spend at least twice as much time on caring as do men.³ In one study assessing the division of time in heterosexual households, researchers found that mothers perform significantly more childcare and housework than fathers, whilst fathers spent more time than mothers engaging in leisurely activities.⁴ This discrepancy evinces cultural attitudes that childcare is obligatory for women in a way that it is not for men. Given the pervasive view that maternal love is innate and effortless,⁵ rather than a matter of choice, it seems that women’s freedom to love their children is constricted doubly by characterizing maternal love as innate and so not a matter of choice and placing an inordinate obligation upon mothers to care for their children thereby unduly circumscribing their choices.

My worry is that these traditional gendered attitudes originate in expectations about female sacrifice and male magnanimity—women owe their children love, and are expected to demonstrate it as a matter of course, while both feeling and demonstrating love for their children remains a matter of choice for men, who may offer it as a gift. For this reason, in this article I focus particularly on maternal love rather than more generally discussing parental love. In this article, I will not engage directly with the literature framing parent-child love in terms of rights and duties. Instead, my aim is to show that maternal love is best conceptualized using the framework of the *gift*.

Making maternal love a duty presents particular problems from a feminist perspective to the degree that it unduly limits women’s freedom and reinforces a common failure to address the problematic implications of doing so. As one feminist scholar writes, the “idealized, *a priori* nature of maternal love promulgated by traditional discourses on motherhood is still widely assumed to be inherent and natural so that scholars rarely question its structure.”⁶ Excessively permeable or

³ “Gender Brief,” OECD Social Policy Division, published March 2010.

⁴ Claire M. Kamp Dush, Jill E. Yavorsky, and Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan, “What Are Men Doing While Women Perform Extra Unpaid Labor?” *Sex Roles* 78, no.11-12 (2018): 715).

⁵ See, for example, Robin Veder, “Mother-love for Plant-Children: Sentimental Pastoralism and Nineteenth-Century Parlour Gardening,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 25-26.

⁶ Tatjana Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” *Hypatia* 32, no. 1 (2017): 152.

even undefined boundaries between self and other create further problems for a feminist love. In this article, I examine the metaphysics of maternal love as a propaedeutic exercise in determining what kind of claims can be made upon it and what possibilities and demands remain when that love is lacking. I consider women's oppression and its implications for maternal love by analyzing authentic love, maternal ambivalence, vulnerability and openness, freedom, and the indeterminacy of the source of love. I conclude that love is a third thing that transcends self and other.⁷ Due to the undefinability of who possesses the love, it cannot be claimed; correlatively, because the realization of love ultimately lies outside one's control, it cannot be considered a duty. Moreover, to make maternal love a matter of moral obligation unduly compromises women's agency. The threat of compromising agency makes crucial the understanding that love is a gift, rather than a right that can be claimed. To conceive of maternal love as both gift and task ultimately protects the freedom of both mother and child.

Authentic Love and Freedom

The work of Simone de Beauvoir suggests at least one reason maternal love cannot be considered as something that can be claimed. For Beauvoir, love is only possible when women are free rather than oppressed. The love, in order to be authentic, must be the fruit of an elective choice rather than of a societal demand that a woman live solely for others. This becomes clear in her description of authentic love between romantic lovers:

Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other; neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world. For each of them, love would be the revelation of self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe.⁸

⁷ I further hold that love is a third thing transcending action and emotion insofar as it is not reducible to either emotion, action, or a combination of the two, but for the purposes of this argument, I will focus on its distinctness from self and other.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 723.

In these considerations, Beauvoir has in mind reciprocal, heterosexual love and yet her insights prove relevant for thinking through maternal love. Although the mother-child relationship is distinct from romantic love given that there are unilateral responsibilities with regard to care, I believe her vision can extend to the mother-child relationship as well as other loving relationships in which loving emotions can be shared, and in which the freedom of both parties is valued. By making love a right that children can claim from their mothers and therefore making maternal love a duty, we unnecessarily render that love unfree and by so doing preclude the very possibility of its authenticity. In order to preserve the freedom necessary for love to be authentic, it is critical to understand maternal love as something that cannot be claimed by others as a right.

Vulnerability

Love has its limits or, at least, lovers have a duty to themselves and one another to enact limits, including in circumstances when “one’s capacity to love is harmed or destroyed by the loved one.”⁹ Yet at the same time, love requires vulnerability. Diane Enns writes that what annihilates the conditions for love is *invulnerability*.¹⁰ In terms of maternal love, this may be one thing that can be deemed a duty: to become and perpetually remain vulnerable to one’s own child. This way of relating lies within a mother’s control—she can choose to be open and receptive to the child, to choose to allow herself to be moved by and deeply affected by her child, and to ensure that this vulnerability is ongoing in the relationship. It further allows for mutual vulnerability between parent and child, allowing for some degree of reciprocity in their relationship.

Such reciprocity is explicitly valued in some cultures. One scholar claims that indigenous ideologies of motherhood are “distinct from patriarchal western models of motherhood”¹¹ and the culturally-specific strategy for empowered mothering she describes involves conceiving of the mother-child relationship as reciprocal. From such a perspective, children are not seen as “helpless babies who need to be controlled” but rather as “independent spiritual beings, who have many

⁹ Diane Enns, “Love’s Limit” in *Thinking About Love: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, eds. Diane Enns and Antonio Calcagno (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 43.

¹⁰ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 44.

¹¹ Kim Anderson, “Giving Life to the People: An Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood” in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007), 775; cited in Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 158.

things to teach their parents.”¹² Along these same lines, Amy Mullin claims that “many of the skills and virtues involved in caring well for a child require a caregiver to acknowledge the point of view of the child in his or her care, and to appreciate the child’s efforts at self-direction as well as the child’s contributions to the relationship with the caregiver.”¹³ Even within western cultures, then, respecting children’s contributions to their relationship to their parents can be conceptualized in ways that enhance freedom for both mother and child.

These perspectives open up the possibility of a love that is conducive to mutual freedom and reciprocal influence in mother-child relationships that points away from making maternal love something that can be claimed as a right. At the same time, insofar as viewing the child as independent and able to reciprocate love is conducive to a mother’s own sense of independence and freedom, it may also prove to be more productive of love than a relationship conceived in more unilateral and self-sacrificial ways. Such a conception of maternal love requires a certain type of trust in the child as a being who can act morally and as one who loves—this conception lends itself to maternal vulnerability that fosters an expansion of a third thing, namely love, that ultimately transcends both mother and child.

Tying trust as vulnerability to the development of subjectivity, Anthony Steinbock writes that trusting is “most deeply an openness to the person as loving—that which reveals ‘person’ as such.”¹⁴ Love, then, is crucial to the subject insofar as love is to be understood as “intertwined with or structured by trust.”¹⁵ Paradoxically, the loving trust that cultivates subjectivity requires a letting go of the self. Elaborating that it is impossible to love without becoming vulnerable to another and without being open to being hurt by them, Enns writes: “Without this opening to the other—an abandoning of the self in the surge of love—we are unable to see ourselves through another’s eyes.” This inability results in a state of being invisible to ourselves that amounts to a sort of blindness. She warns that if we “remain blind in such a way, we can neither give nor receive

¹² Leanne Simpson, “Birthing an Indigenous Resurgence: Decolonizing our Pregnancy and Birthing Ceremonies” in *Until our Hearts are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth*, ed. D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006), 26; Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 158.

¹³ Amy Mullin, “Filial Responsibilities of Dependent Children,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 1 (2010): 161.

¹⁴ Anthony J. Steinbock, “Temporality, Transcendence, and Being Bound to Others in Trust” in *Trust, Sociality, Selfhood*, ed. Arne Grøn and Claudia Welz (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 93; cited in Fiona Utley, “Trust and the Experience of Love” in *Thinking About Love: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, eds. Diane Enns and Antonio Calcagno (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 176.

¹⁵ Utley, “Trust and the Experience of Love,” 174.

love; we remain sovereigns perpetually on guard, deflecting threats, to be sure, but gestures of love and generosity as well.”¹⁶ Love is impossible without vulnerability, I suggest, largely because respect for another’s freedom entails vulnerability to her.

For Enns, the definitive aspect of love is a reciprocal letting be of one another.¹⁷ The moments of self-negation that allow both the other to be and the self to become vulnerable foster a mutual becoming of the selves. The fact that delineation between the self and other remains nebulous and elusive in love seems to contribute to the vulnerability that renders this possible. At the same time, the indefiniteness and ambiguity between self and other lends itself to an argument that love cannot therefore be claimed. Before I develop that argument, I want to look more closely at the value of the ambiguity of the relationship between a mother and her child, from a feminist perspective.

Maternal Love as the Only Authentic Love

Catrin Gibson argues that the indeterminate and therefore ambiguous union of mother and child—by which she means that boundaries between self and other are not clearly distinguished as in other relationships between human beings—makes possible the existence of authentic love. She relies on Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of authentic love, which Sartre himself takes to be (for the most part) impossible. Gibson then uses maternal love, which Sartre does not consider when offering his analysis, to exemplify love in its authentic form. On Sartre’s definition, authentic love is a mutual comprehension of freedom coupled with the generous acceptance of one’s own and the other’s facticity.¹⁸ Whereas Sartre understands all human relationships to be grounded in conflict,¹⁹ Gibson contends that the mother-child relationship is grounded in love.²⁰ As she understands the relationship, both child and mother regard one another as independent, especially as the child learns self-other boundaries from the mother.²¹ The child’s actuation of separation from his mother

¹⁶ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 44.

¹⁷ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 32.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 510; cited in Catrin Gibson, “Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship,” *Sartre Studies International* 23, no.1 (2017): 60.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1943, 1984), 555.

²⁰ Gibson, “Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship,” 76.

²¹ Gibson, “Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship,” 68.

facilitates their relationship.²² This points to an empowered and autonomous form of love on the part of the mother.

According to Gibson, mother and child relationships prove themselves to be forms of authentic love because they are not characterized by a Sartrean desire to be God to the other; these relationships are authentic insofar as there is a mutual comprehension of the other's freedom. Freedom is maintained in the relationship because, although one cannot say so without qualification, "giving birth is ultimately a matter of choice."²³ Further, the relation exemplifies authentic love because mother and child are generous to each other.²⁴ Instead of seeking to become God in relation to the other, the mother reaches out to the child, making her an absolute end.²⁵

Gibson argues that one way in which this is instantiated is through the mother's generosity to the fetus from the time of conception, by overriding her immune system to support the embryo and later fetus's life.²⁶ This generosity results from the ambiguous relation arising from the blurred lines between self and other in the mother-child relationship; this generosity is further reciprocal since throughout pregnancy, labor, and childcare, the mother and her child "come into intimate contact with each other's facticity and accept each other in generosity."²⁷ Furthermore, in the authentic love of the maternal relationship, mother and child see each other as subjects—this is evinced by such typical behaviors as giving each other time to respond to each other even when the baby is preverbal.²⁸ Moreover, on Gibson's view, there is no shame or displacement due to the fact that the relationship is both permanent and irreplaceable.²⁹

In privileging mother-child relationships as exemplary of authentic love, Gibson hopes to show that the realization of authentic love is precluded in romantic love not due to the nature of human beings, but as a result of the patriarchal situation in which they live. This patriarchal context oppresses women largely by undermining their subjectivity and freedom.³⁰ I suggest that to conceive of love as a right of children is to stake a claim on mother's emotional responses to their

²² Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 69.

²³ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 73.

²⁴ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 69.

²⁵ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 70.

²⁶ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 72.

²⁷ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 73.

²⁸ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 72.

²⁹ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 73.

³⁰ Gibson, "Authentic Love and the Mother-Child Relationship," 61, 76.

children, rather than solely on their actions towards them.³¹ To do so may demand something that is both impossible and unnecessary to make obligatory, which may further result in undermining women's subjectivity and freedom. At the same time, conceptualizing maternal love in terms of rights may risk the loss of love's authenticity in a way that also undermines the development of a child's subjectivity and freedom.

Maternal Ambivalence

Beyond the issue of ambiguity in the relationship between a mother and her child, the issue of ambivalence proves helpful in facilitating authenticity, subjectivity, and freedom in love. Beauvoir offers an example of maternal ambivalence in *The Second Sex*, when she describes a woman who was unsure whether her child was the offspring of her husband or of her lover; it was not until she made the choice to consider her husband to be the father that she took positive emotional interest in the child.³² Arguing in support of the importance of maternal ambivalence, Tatjana Takseva posits it as an important component of maternal love that offers an empowering space to mothers. This ambivalence includes "loving and hating the same child" and can provoke conflict in a mother to the degree that these mixed feelings clash with the dominant discourse about maternal love.³³ Yet if women can overcome the guilt and anxiety over countering cultural norms and can "accept ambivalence as a creative rather than a threatening force in their love toward their children," they turn out to be happier mothers.³⁴ Whereas obligatory maternal love limits a woman's freedom, a constructive and productive use of ambivalence enhances it in ways that further support her well-being.

The issue of maternal ambivalence points to the fact that on some level, women's feelings toward their children prove to be mercurial, which poses a significant challenge in regarding maternal love as a duty. If maternal love is binding as such, then it is clearly more than emotion and more than action insofar as emotional states vary and imperfect actions do not entail that one

³¹ Mhairi Cowden, *Children's Rights: From Philosophy to Public Policy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 151-152.

³² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 550.

³³ Takseva, "Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering," 158; Takseva also relies on Parker to make this point, see Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago Press, 1995), 4.

³⁴ Takseva, "Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering," 158.

does not love. Adrienne Rich, in her extended philosophical analysis of maternal love, admits that she always believed that it is or at least should be “quite literally selfless,”³⁵ which for her meant that it could be sustained at every moment. Yet, she shares in her book a letter sent by her adult son: “You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there *is* no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment.”³⁶ Takseva insists that women’s belief that they must love in this impossible way is the fruit of patriarchal ideologies of motherhood that have defined the terms of maternal love such that “a good mother always and in every second of her existence feels nothing but pure love and unadulterated joy for her children.”³⁷ In contrast to this engendered, internalized cultural belief, many women respond ambivalently to their children; these responses can be constructive for both mother and child. Moreover, this ambivalence resists the circumscription of love imposed by patriarchal standards.

In order to discuss ambivalence within the dynamics of mother-child love, Takseva focuses on women who were raped during the Bosnian genocide and became mothers as a result. Like Beauvoir’s example above, these women’s narratives illuminate that love is not always innate, but instead comes about, at least in part, as a result of a choice and personal discipline. One woman declares, “I had to work very hard to love my child.”³⁸ From this and other examples, Takseva concludes that love is not a matter of nature, but of commitment and practice. In fact, she definitively states that “maternal love is not something that ‘naturally’ springs into being with the act of giving birth ... it too, like love in any other close relationship, requires conscious and ongoing renewal of commitment.”³⁹ This implies that love may also be a matter of creativity. Takseva concludes from her observations that maternal love ought to belong to the same category as other loves, rather than standing apart as a disparate thing. According to her, women who can see their children as separate individuals whose mental states change benefit by gaining an interactive awareness, greater self-understanding, and therefore a more empowered mothering practice.

Because it can serve as a site for freedom, maternal ambivalence can become a tool of maternal empowerment that provides mothers with “a counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal

³⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), 3.

³⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 3.

³⁷ Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 159.

³⁸ Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 161.

³⁹ Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 161.

discourses of ideal motherhood” when consciously recognized and utilized by the mothers themselves. This constructive use of their own ambivalence toward their children enables women to employ autonomy in “authoring their own maternal experience.”⁴⁰ This is crucial given the belief that in order to empower their children, women must first be empowered themselves.⁴¹ When mothers can view and accept themselves without idealization, they gain in both emotional and ethical forms of maturity which manifests itself positively in the lives of their children in terms of empowerment. When they disburden themselves of anxiety and guilt, they can find and create “more constructive behavioral frameworks of mutuality and reciprocity in their care for their children.”⁴² Opening a space for maternal ambivalence as constitutive of maternal love redefines it in ways that expand the capacities of both a mother and her child. It further allows for more empowered relationships between children and other caregivers and frees women from the patriarchal discourses on motherhood that are damaging to them. I emphasize here that engaging in this ambivalence allows a woman and her child to recognize themselves as co-creators in the relationship of love between them rather than as mere passive inheritors of it.

Freedom and Openness

Shelley Park likewise takes up the issue of freedom in maternal love. She claims that technologies of co-presence—such as baby monitors or cell phones—allow women to be creative and make more conscientious choices about love that facilitate their independence and cultivate their relationships. She writes that the “cyborg mother does not just instinctively respond to her child’s cry.” Instead, this mother decides conscientiously to turn communication devices on or off. Whenever a device seeks her attention, she exercises intention and choice regarding if and how she will respond. Park concludes from this that cyborg love is more likely than other forms of maternal love to be “experienced as the practice of freedom.”⁴³ Distance and innovation allow a

⁴⁰ Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 164.

⁴¹ Andrea O’Reilly, “Introduction” in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2004), 12-13; cited in Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 165.

⁴² Takseva, “Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering,” 165.

⁴³ Shelley Park, “Cyborg Mothering” in *Mothers Who Deliver: Feminist Interventions in Interpersonal and Public Discourse*, eds. Jocelyn Fenton Stitt and Pegeen Reichert Powell (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 72. Park clarifies that a cyborg mother uses her agency when she carefully chooses her tone and words to reprimand a child over

woman space to determine her own conscientious, individual, and authentic responses to her child. While Park does not do so, I wish to add that the very practices that she prescribes as freeing for women can, when implemented in ways appropriate to the context as well as the age and needs of the child, also foster independence in the child by presenting her with occasions to learn to soothe herself and practice independent problem solving in the absence of her mother.

Park ties her discussion of freedom and maternal love back to the issue of openness. She relies on Kelly Oliver who writes that it is “only through vigilant reinterpretation and elaboration of our own performance” of opening ourselves up in relation to others that we can maintain a loving attitude.⁴⁴ In this construction of love, Oliver is influenced by Julia Kristeva, who defines love as “openness to the other.”⁴⁵ Oliver observes that “love is not something we choose once and for all. Rather, it is a decision that must be constantly reaffirmed through the vigilance of self-reflection.”⁴⁶ Although I would not reduce love to openness, I maintain that remaining open to the other constitutes a critical component of loving relationships and that it can more clearly be seen as something that results from choice than can the feeling of love. For this reason, remaining open can be considered part of the task of love that sits within the control of a mother. Because it is conducive to bringing about the feeling of love, it may contribute to the experience of love as a further possibility.

Rather than being compulsory, “loving from afar” proves to be “liberating.”⁴⁷ Space between child and mother creates new possibilities for relationships: technologies of co-presence “make possible extensions and transformations of ourselves that engage in the critical self-reflection necessary to loving one another consciously and intentionally across emotional and cognitive, as well as geographical and temporal, boundaries.”⁴⁸ The expansiveness of love’s possible conformations highlights the freedom of expression of those who love. When combined

electronic communication so that her loving concern is better reflected than might occur in the “exasperation of the in-person moment” (Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 73).

⁴⁴ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 220-21; quoted in Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 73. On this point, Oliver is influenced by bell hooks.

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch on Feminism in the United States and France,” in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, updated ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 381.

⁴⁶ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 220-21; quoted in Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 73.

⁴⁷ Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 73.

⁴⁸ Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 73.

with the attendant indefiniteness of love, this supports the notion that conceptualizing love as a right, duty, or obligation unnecessarily constrains and diminishes it.

Ultimately, Park suggests that familial intimacy in general and maternal love in particular can be transformed by technologies of co-presence.⁴⁹ The potential of love, including familial love, to be transformed through agentic choices about how to traverse the chasms between individuals speaks to the metaphysics of maternal love insofar as it suggests a possibly profound malleability, not to mention multiformity, of the mother-child relationship. Technologies are liberating in that women are not forced to respond unthinkingly to every demand on their time and attention; rather, technologies “enable the critical distance necessary for love that is reflective and transformative.”⁵⁰ Focusing so much on the autonomous choices of mothers in creating patterns of loving relationship may seem to shortchange children in terms of an ability to claim a right to be loved. Yet if love by its very nature requires the sort of freedom described by the feminist scholars discussed in this article, then love can only exist in a way that eludes the making of claims upon it.

Love as a Third Thing

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks to the fact that love creates a new relationship that can make ambiguous the boundaries between self and other. He writes:

*To love is inevitably to enter into an undivided situation with another One is not what he would be without that love; the perspectives remain separate—and yet they overlap To the very extent that it is convincing and genuine, the experience of the other is necessarily an alienating one, in the sense that it tears me away from my lone self and creates instead a mixture of myself and the other.*⁵¹

The elision of boundaries that Merleau-Ponty describes points to the creation of a third thing that is amorphous, making duties and claims difficult to locate. This proves to be true even

⁴⁹ Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 71.

⁵⁰ Park, “Cyborg Mothering,” 71.

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 183; quoted in Utley, “Trust and the Experience of Love,” 172.

more so when one considers each relationship of love to be an entirely new creation, as F.O. Matthiessen suggests in describing a love relationship that does not conform to patriarchal stereotypes: we “must create everything for ourselves.”⁵² The co-creation of a shared world is both an act of love and an act of trust.⁵³ The love that exists between two is more than the love of each combined—this makes the boundaries between self and other less definite and even more so makes indefinite what can be claimed as one’s own from this conglomerate entity.

In a similar vein, Enns observes that as with other emotions, “love may take on a life of its own that becomes bigger than the one who feels it.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the emergence of love is not completely traceable. Enns writes that love is “born in a moment of *unnamable* affinity.”⁵⁵ Speaking to the issue of union that borders on amalgamation while distinguishing the love she describes from a Christian notion of transcendent love, she elucidates that such “love rises from one body to enfold another.”⁵⁶ Although she does not intend to, such language encapsulates an experience of pregnancy. In depicting the love she experiences for a partner, Enns gives an apt description of maternal love: *“I swell with love for you. I surge toward you and experience the overwhelming pleasure of the flow of passionate feeling, desire, and care. My life becomes meaningful in a way it was not before, urgent, in the awareness of the fragility of your life. I love you because I can. Because you are there naked before me, suffering, surviving, loving me with all your singularity, in ambivalence and failure. I love you for the vulnerable self that you laid at my feet and out of the stubborn belief that my love is omnipotent.”*⁵⁷ Love involves an essential freedom and yet concretizes in a way that surpasses what freedom is able to effect. Acknowledging love as a matter of freedom without overstating the case by making it solely contingent upon agency preserves women’s freedom doubly by both acknowledging their creative contributions to love and not making it a matter of obligation.

Luce Irigaray relies on a notion of love as a third thing precisely because she is concerned with the cultivation and protection of dual subjectivities. Naming the problem that for woman, “nothing is ever finite,” Irigaray is acutely aware of the ambiguous boundaries between self and

⁵² Uncited source quoted in Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 41.

⁵³ Utley, “Trust and the Experience of Love,” 182.

⁵⁴ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 39.

⁵⁵ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 39, emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 39.

⁵⁷ Enns, “Love’s Limit,” 40, emphasis mine.

other and the resultant need for the containment of each of the parties in a loving relation. The woman, according to Irigaray, “needs to be situated and valued, to be *she* in relation to her self,” rather than just being a self in relation another.⁵⁸ Having framed the issue in this way, she writes: “What we need is to discover how *two* can be made which one day could become a *one* in that third which is love.”⁵⁹ As two subjects unify into a single relation, a third thing is produced or introduced: love. The question remains, how can two unify without one subsuming the other?

Irigaray’s solution to this problem is to impose a grammatical intervention between two lovers, alternatively rendering the phrase “I love you” as “I love *to* you.” Highly relevant for understanding maternal love in a way that fosters the independence and well-being of the child, this “to” preempts and disallows a reduction of a person to an object, instead securing the maintenance of two intentionalities and preserving the possibility of reciprocity.⁶⁰ Irigaray writes that this “to” serves as the “site of non-reduction of the person to the object.” Conversely, “I love you ..., I order you, I instruct you, ... always risk annihilating the alterity of the other, of transforming him/her into my property, my object, of reducing him/her to what is mine.” The “to” further serves as a “barrier against alienating the other’s freedom in my subjectivity, my world, my language.”⁶¹ Love, as third thing irreducible to the subjects in relation, guards against breaking down boundaries that would otherwise protect dual subjectivities.

Revisiting an earlier theme of mutual becoming, Irigaray maintains that offering freedom for the other to become herself requires that one extend the same freedom to oneself. Irigaray names the obligation one has to oneself by virtue of one’s relationship to the other. “Being faithful to you requires being faithful to me. Does existing not mean offering you an opportunity to become yourself?”⁶² Fiona Utley suggests that giving each other space and opportunity to become occurs when each individual is taken in by love as something separate from each individual and the couple that they constitute. She opines that love will “endure, not only if you facilitate my development

⁵⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

⁵⁹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 66.

⁶⁰ Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: A Sketch of Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 110-111.

⁶¹ Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 110.

⁶² Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2001), 15.

and I yours, but as we are able to enfold each other into what this is.”⁶³ The third thing of love, which transcends both partners, facilitates mutual independence and becoming.

Irigaray underscores that such independence is her objective when she writes on silence and subjectivity in a way that requires drawing the distinction between a prenatal and postnatal relationship between mother and child: “Listening to the other, sparing them some silent time, is respecting his or her breath, too. Only a mother breathes for her child. Once born, we all must, should, breathe for ourselves.”⁶⁴ Although her purpose is not to discuss maternal love, her imagery of a child breathing independently of the mother supports the position that I am defending in this article. She elaborates on the efficacy of the lover’s silence for the beloved: “I give you a silence in which your future—and perhaps my own, but *with* you and not *as* you and *without* you—may emerge and lay its foundation.” This silence, she maintains, is the “primary gesture of *I love to you*. Without it, the ‘to,’ such as I understand it, is impossible.”⁶⁵ Silence allows the beloved to develop herself independently of the one who loves her. Irigaray is clear that this silence is necessary for dual subjectivities when she writes that this silence is the “condition for a possible respect for myself and for the other within our respective limits.”⁶⁶ In the absence of such silence, language would encumber freedom.⁶⁷ True relationship is possible just because dependence, and therefore domination, are precluded. The indirection underscores that one is to encourage the other’s becoming without ultimately claiming responsibility for it. Love is a third thing that both parties relate to and help create, yet this love remains apart from each individual and therefore also remains to some degree out of their control and outside their sphere of ownership.

Love as Gift

In the remainder of this article, I will argue that theorizing maternal love as a gift rather than as a right enhances the freedom of both mothers and their children. As that which is offered from free will and not out of obligation, love as gift supports subjectivity. For Marion, whose work largely focuses on notions of the gift and givenness, it is constitutive of one’s personhood that they

⁶³ Utley, “Trust and the Experience of Love,” 183.

⁶⁴ Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 121.

⁶⁵ Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 117.

⁶⁶ Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 117.

⁶⁷ Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 117.

have the free will to love.⁶⁸ Claudia Welz holds that conceptualizing love as a gift affords understanding giving as a self-fulfillment that “edifies the self” and that it “receives in giving.” Moreover, due to the abundance of gift, the self “receives new energy to give.” She elaborates that giving “out of love does not involve purposeful giving-for-the-sake of, but rather the gratuity of a free gift given for nothing.”⁶⁹ According to her, love as gift incorporates the notion that one receives as well and is “enriched by one’s readiness to give.”⁷⁰ Significantly, she observes that the “logic of gift leads into surplus rather than loss, or into surplus despite loss.”⁷¹ Part of why love as gift can function in this way, according to the Derridean perspective, is that the concept of gift opens up a space for alterity that is necessary for preserving the possibility of a love beyond economy.⁷²

In a way helpful to the present argument, Kristeva theorizes the concept of the gift in terms of the maternal. Conceptualizing the mother’s desire as a *pure gift*, she holds that this gift is not directed at the child but benefits the child in its excess—and helps the child to separate from the mother.⁷³ Rather than existing in an economy of exchange in which the anticipation of a particular response or of some kind of reciprocity encumbers the giving, “the gift, in its purity (outside of the logic of return), simply affords an *openness to the other*. It does not close, make present or grant being but opens up.” This openness to the other “constitutes the lining of our being.”⁷⁴ In other words, the gifting of the mother’s love makes possible a particular kind of relationship to self, world, and other without definitively realizing it. Moreover, crucial to the concept of the gift is that the source is concealed,⁷⁵ further pointing to love as that which creates apertures affording development that continues indefinitely rather than as a closed system of exchange.

⁶⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 29.

⁶⁹ Claudia Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice,” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 50, no. 3–4 (2008): 251.

⁷⁰ Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice,” 250-251.

⁷¹ Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice,” 250.

⁷² David Newheiser, “Eckhart, Derrida, and the Gift of Love,” *The Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 6 (2015): 1017. NB: According to Derrida, “if there is gift, the given of the gift ... must not come back to the giving ... It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange” (Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7).

⁷³ Kathleen O’Grady, “Melancholia, Forgiveness, and the Logic of *The Gift*” in *Women and the Gift: Beyond the Given and All-Giving*, ed. Morny Joy (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 106-107.

⁷⁴ O’Grady, “Melancholia, Forgiveness, and the Logic of *The Gift*,” 107.

⁷⁵ Jean-Luc Marion writes that a “gift without relation to any giver no longer bears the mark of any process of givenness, and thus appears as alien to what is given in it. Paradoxically, a gift truly given disappears as given, too. It

Love as Both Task and Gift

While love is partially within our control, it also blossoms into something that exceeds it. Depicting loving relations as a willed opening up to the other that can consummate in a mode of relating outside our complete control, one scholar summarizes the Derridean perspective: we must continue to “give as best we can, but the fact that our efforts are insufficient opens the prospect of something better than what we are able to realize of ourselves. Love represents such a beyond.”⁷⁶ This suggests that love is both task and gift. For my purposes here, I distinguish task from gift by relying on the Kantian distinction between practical love (actions) and pathological love (feeling). While actions can be duties, the emotions that ideally attend those actions, and which may result from them, cannot be commanded. Given this, the full experience of love cannot be claimed as a right, which would constrain women’s freedom and erroneously imply that they have complete control to realize it, yet it does call for their agentive participation. In order to make this case, I draw on Søren Kierkegaard’s formulation of love. For him, as for Irigaray, love exists separately from the two that love each other as a third thing.⁷⁷ Positing love as a third and separate entity between the two persons in a relationship of love might function similarly for Kierkegaard as it does for Irigaray by ensuring that two people do not become falsely dependent upon each other in an inauthentic mode of love.

It is critical to Kierkegaard’s view that, in a loving relationship between two people, their distinct identities remain intact as “I” and “you,” but at the same time he is emphatic that love cannot admit the presence of “mine” and “yours.”⁷⁸ Love, when it is truly such, resists the ability to be claimed as “mine.” The change that takes place when true love is present is so radical in upsetting notions of ownership by blurring the divisions between each person’s claims, that Kierkegaard deems it a “revolution.”⁷⁹ Not just one, but both subjects must renounce claims to what is “mine” and “yours” if authentic love is to obtain. The “more profound the revolution, the

appears henceforth only as a *found* object: a thing, a being or an object, which is found there, in front of me, by chance and without reason, such that I may wonder what status I should grant it” (Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 78).

⁷⁶ Newheiser, “Eckhart, Derrida, and the Gift of Love,” 1018.

⁷⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 121.

⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 265.

more completely the distinction ‘*mine and yours*’ disappears, the more perfect is the love.”⁸⁰ Although Kierkegaard makes these assertions in the context of self-sacrificial and self-giving love that might appear problematic to feminists, I have argued elsewhere that his construction supports women pursuing their own projects as a common interest, rather than dissolving themselves in the agendas of others.⁸¹ Moreover, for the purposes of my argument here, this conception of love maintains the freedom in love while illuminating how love precipitates into something sufficiently indefinite to problematize the making of claims upon it.

For Kierkegaard, love by its very nature eludes any tendency to make it transactional or economical. In fact, not only is each individual expected to see themselves as infinitely indebted to love,⁸² one is to offer love as a gift that appears to be the property of the other.⁸³ Welz explains that this demands of us “not to make the other dependent on receiving.”⁸⁴ Instead, Kierkegaard prescribes helping the other “to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone—that is the greatest beneficence.”⁸⁵ With regard to maternal love, this notion of love as gift can work to encourage a child’s independence from her mother. To construe maternal love as a right to be claimed implies an excessive dependence on the mother that could undermine the child’s developing sense of self even while delimiting the mother’s sense of freedom. To conceive of maternal love as gift is to empower the mother by the notion of giving,⁸⁶ and to expand the child’s potential for increased independence.

Although Kierkegaard claims that one who loves ought to understand herself as a debtor, this only operates from a subjective standpoint (and ought to do so on both sides of the relationship) and the debt is to love itself as that which is infinite, rather than reducing love to a finite object that exists as “love in the one person and love in the other person” in way that would problematically facilitate comparison and support claims to entitlement.⁸⁷ From a Kierkegaardian point of view, it is possible that it is one’s “duty to remain in love’s debt” precisely because doing

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 266.

⁸¹ Deidre Nicole Green, “A Self That is Not One: Kierkegaard, Niebuhr, and Saiving on the Sin of Selflessness” *The Journal of Religion* 97, no. 2 (2017): 169

⁸² Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 252.

⁸³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 274.

⁸⁴ Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice,” 252.

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 274.

⁸⁶ Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice,” 257.

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 182.

so circumvents the temptation to enter into an economy of love. Welz contrasts Derrida's warning against the debt that results from the act of *receiving* love with Kierkegaard's depiction of love as a debt that arises from *giving*.⁸⁸ She sums up that for Kierkegaard, "love is that gift and that modality of giving and receiving, which alone allows us to give without self-congratulation and to receive without entering into the cycle of possible restitution."⁸⁹ Although Kierkegaard anticipates an agentive relation to love, individuals ought not to have an overdeveloped sense of control over it since for him, love's source remains hidden and "unfathomable" even to the person who experiences it and seeks to externalize it.⁹⁰ To be sure, each person ought to consider it her duty to love through practical actions, but the experience of loving feelings is a gift both to the beloved and the one who loves, the source of which remains hidden.

The Role of Duty within the Mother-Child Relationship

My use of Kierkegaard here is complicated by the fact that he does in fact argue that love is something that can be claimed, including by children from their parents. He writes: "*Your friend, your beloved, your child, or whoever is an object of your love has a claim upon an expression of it also in words if it actually moves you inwardly. The emotion is not your possession but belongs to the other; the expression is your debt to him, since in the emotion you indeed belong to him who moves you and you become aware that you belong to him.*"⁹¹ Kierkegaard specifies here that one has claims upon expressions of love, that is—practical love. On my view, what preserves freedom in the Kierkegaardian conception is the fact that it is the agent's own development of love that is primary: it is only after the feeling of love arises within the agent that it can be said to belong to the beloved. This is presumably because once love arises and is present between the two, the normal conceptions of what is "yours" and "mine" vanish. I take Kierkegaard to be speaking about what can be expected once pathological love has presented itself; he is not making the claim that one must generate pathological love on demand. On my reading, given the dual nature of love as both task and gift, this would prove to be an impossibility. Furthermore, Kierkegaard makes explicit

⁸⁸ Welz, "Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice," 256.

⁸⁹ Welz, "Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice," 256.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 10.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 12.

that love is only recognizable through its external manifestations and it is this practical love that serves as the focal point of his reflection.⁹²

In these ways, Kierkegaard works to preserve freedom in love and further points to its unclaimability. It is helpful to look at Harry Frankfurt's notion of love and freedom in order to help unpack the relevance of Kierkegaard for the present argument. Holding that at its heart love is neither cognitive nor affective, Frankfurt maintains that love is volitional.⁹³ Since it is fundamentally associated with agency, love determines whether actions are or are not autonomous. Frankfurt agrees with Kant that the necessity of actions does not compromise the ability to perform them autonomously—their necessity actually proves to be conducive to autonomy. Yet, he disagrees that autonomy requires submission to duty. For Frankfurt, what makes actions autonomous is that they are performed out of love, regardless of whether or not they are in conformity with duty.⁹⁴

This formulation does not negate the possibility of parental love being required as duty, but in his descriptive account of parental love, Frankfurt observes that he meets his children's needs out of love rather than duty. For him, there is no reason to invoke the moral law in this instance: "Parents are generally not concerned for their children out of duty, but simply out of love; and the love, needless to say, is not a love of duty but a love of the children."⁹⁵ Liao argues that duty and love may be simultaneous motivations and I do not deny this possibility.⁹⁶ However, where cultural pressures already place excessive pressure on women to conform to ideals of motherhood, the discussion of rights and duties may act as more of a buffer than a catalyst to love. Privileging the freedom of love over a duty to love in regard to the mother-child relationship can prevent women from feeling unduly burdened or constrained in relation to their children, which could actually create a hindrance to love that would not exist without it.

Barbara P. Solheim explores, and ultimately denies, that there can be a duty to love children. Relying on the Kantian distinction of practical and pathological love, she holds that while practical love can be a duty, the emotion that may or may not accompany it cannot be insofar as

⁹² Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 8.

⁹³ Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129.

⁹⁴ Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, 131.

⁹⁵ Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, 140.

⁹⁶ Liao, *The Right to be Loved*, 127.

our emotions ultimately elude our absolute control.⁹⁷ Distinguishing between a responsibility to attempt to cultivate an emotion and a responsibility to succeed in so doing, Solheim importantly maintains that although one cannot be duty-bound to love, a duty-based parental morality could require a duty to try to love.⁹⁸ Pushing her view forward in light of the concepts of task and gift, I argue that the tasks of love are duties, but the feeling of love is a gift: we may work towards that gift by performing the tasks, which may create a situation that is conducive to the feeling of love, but it is not finally a matter of control and so ultimately we must remain at the mercy of the appearance of an external third.

What can be claimed as rights are the various aspects of care that lie within a person's control. Mullin similarly holds that loving children cannot be deemed a duty, although she accepts that emotions are not outside a person's control and are involved in duty-bound ways of relating such as developing trust, gratitude, and reciprocity of valuing. She claims that what is obligatory and "morally crucial" is to "make sustained efforts to think of and behave toward others in certain norm-governed ways." She explains that finding another endearing depends on more than one's own moral cultivation: "it also requires people to find themselves particularly in sync with or moved by others, and we differ enough from one another not always to be able to do so with any given other person."⁹⁹

There are norm-governed ways in which mothers ought to relate to their children, and these practices may be regarded as loving, yet love itself eludes such normative constraints. Practices construed as loving and viewed as conducive to love may be considered tasks that are duty-bound, while a fuller experience of love, including the feeling of it, remains a gift that exists as an external third and as such cannot be made subject to constraint.

Feminist scholarship insists upon rethinking maternal love as something that is free and able to preserve dual subjectivities, requiring an openness in which each member of a relationship is vulnerable and can be moved by the other. Connecting responsibility with "response-ability," Oliver claims, serves as the foundation of personal subjectivity. Insofar as subjectivity is something to which people have a right, I argue that Oliver's notion of "response-ability" is what

⁹⁷ Barbara P. Solheim, "The Possibility of a Duty to Love," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (1999): 8.

⁹⁸ Solheim, "The Possibility of a Duty to Love," 12, 15.

⁹⁹ Amy Mullin, "Filial Responsibilities of Dependent Children," *Hypatia* 25, no. 1 (2010): 169-70.

can be claimed and therefore what qualifies as maternal duty. It is an obligation for a mother to be responsible and “response-able” because it is required for the attainment of the other’s selfhood. Even as a child has a right to her mother’s responsiveness and can make a claim on it, love is a third thing beyond the self and the other and therefore cannot itself be truly controlled and therefore neither demanded nor claimed. Claims that might be made on the maternal relationship, such as openness, vulnerability, responsibility, and “response-ability,” are all features of a relationship that are conducive to the experience of love—and perhaps even creatively productive of the feeling of love—yet they are not identical to love. As that which remains unclaimable, love remains free and therefore capable of being realized in its most authentic form in which the subjectivity and freedom of both parties are able to flourish.

Conclusion

Making maternal love a duty proves to be constraining and is inherently unbalanced in terms of power and control. It may further inhibit the child’s own development as an independent being who requires respect and some distance rather than to feel entitled to claim maternal love in a way that might suggest excessive dependence. Moreover, love cannot be a right that children can claim from their parents because love does not occur on demand. Maternal ambivalence provides support for the argument that maternal love may result from commitment and practice, rather than from duty. In addition, vulnerability and openness to the other within a loving relationship, when considered as matters of choice, are controlled by the mother and are neither innate nor the result of obligation. Once love arises, it does so as a third thing distinct from both individuals in the loving relationship, unifying them without subsuming one into the other.

To limit maternal love as something a child can claim from her mother is not only to compromise the mother’s agency in problematic ways that exacerbate the undue and disempowering expectations placed on women, it further can work to limit the child’s own agency by making her feel that she is dependent upon her mother’s love for her flourishing. To do so would compromise a truly authentic and efficacious love, which otherwise works for the independence of the beloved by making itself inconspicuous, even invisible. Working from a notion of love as gift, rather than right, affords both mother and child greater agency in relation to each other. It also preempts the establishment of modes of subordination to one another that make

the mother beholden to the child and make the child unnecessarily dependent upon the mother in ways ancillary to the practices of care that allow children to thrive. Maternal love is neither necessarily innate nor can it simply be willed into existence—what does lie in a mother’s control is to seek to love through care practices that include empathy, respect, and so on.

In conclusion, there are many care practices (tasks) that are conducive to love arising that are rights children can claim, and this may include “response-ability” and openness from the parent, but the love itself remains distinct from these practices and does not fall under that category. Love is a gift, not just to the recipient, who as a result of this cannot claim it as her due, but also to the one from whom it emanates, who therefore cannot be duty-bound to offer it. Love remains a third thing that can be hoped for and worked towards through the tasks of love but not determined fully by either the one who bestows it or the one who receives it. As both task and gift, love can be aimed for by care practices deemed loving and these may be duties in parent and child relations, but the experienced emotion of love itself remains both elusive and untraceable, ultimately lying beyond our claims.

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