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Connell, Sophia Margaret Mothering and intelligence in Aristotle's Biology and Ethics. In: World Congress "Aristotle 2400 Years", 23-28 May 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece. (Unpublished)

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Mothering and Intelligence in Aristotle's Biology and Ethics

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In much modern moral philosophy, parenting, and particularly mothering, is taken to be natural and so downgraded as unthinking. The feminist ethicist Virginia Held, for example, argues that moral philosophy ignores the importance of mother-child relationships as a paradigm for morality. In her view, dominant theories regard mothering as animalistic, instinctive and unthoughtful.¹ Agreeing with that assessment of current attitudes in ethics, Sara Ruddick challenges such views, arguing that mothering is essentially an intellectual activity—in facing often conflicting demands for the preservation, growth and social acceptability of their children, mothers must “daily...think out strategies of protection, nurturance, and training” in order to meet these demands. Furthermore, “in quieter moments, mothers reflect on their practice as a whole.”² What both thinkers fail to recognise is that one philosophical tradition accommodates not only the practical reasoning involved in everyday parental decision making but also the fact that even in non-human animals, this involves intelligence. These positions can be found in the biological and ethical works of Aristotle. By combining the insights found in these works, an Aristotelian model for the ethics of parenting emerges which emphasises the intellectual work required to raise the next generation, something that is good for everyone involved.

I divide the paper into three parts. The first section discusses Aristotle's use of the term *φρόνησις* (practical wisdom) in his biological works where the thinking described relates specifically to parenting and especially mothering. I then explain what it is that goes on in human parenting activities and thinking which (although natural) mark them off from what occurs in other animals. Next I will turn to Aristotle's ethics and his description of human children as friends. In the final section, I will explain the effect of the virtue of caring for younger friends with reference to Aristotle's discussion of a child as a product and the parent as a producer. A striking feature throughout this analysis is the seldom unacknowledged admiration shown for the female sex in the texts of Aristotle. In both human and non-human animals, female parents, even more so than male ones, display superior virtues and intelligence of the correct sort when striving to care for and train the young.

I. Intelligence and Maternal Activities in Aristotle's Biology.

In his ethics, Aristotle distinguishes between natural and real or proper (*κυρία*) virtue, the latter requiring the addition of practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*; see *EN* VI.13.1144b16-17). Natural virtues on their own can sometimes be harmful as the following passage illustrates.

[In general] the horse kind seems to have by nature a parental affection (*φιλόστοργος*). Evidence of this is that often the barren mares steal the dams' foals, and are the ones

¹ See Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26, 37.

² Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (London: The Woman's Press, 1989), 23-4.

that care for them, but through having no milk cause their death. (*HA* VIII(IX).4.611a10).³

Here, because the natural caring virtue is unguided by *φρόνησις*, it is detrimental (see *EN* VI.13.1144b10).

Although they lack proper virtue, non-human parents are referred to as practically wise (*φρόνιμος*) and intelligent (*διάνοια*) in Aristotle's biology. The following passages illustrate this.

Among animals that are wild and quadruped the deer is held to be an intelligent (*φρόνιμος*), not least because it gives birth alongside the roads (for the wild beasts do not approach because of the humans) and, after giving birth, first eats the membrane. Also they run for the seseli and eat it before going back to their young.⁴ Further, she leads the young to her lair, accustoming them to the place where they should seek refuge: this is precipitous rock, with a single approach, where they say the deer finally stands fast and defends itself (*HA* VII(IX).5.611a15-23).⁵

The female cuckoo achieves reproduction intelligently (*φρόνιμος*): for because it is conscious of its own cowardice and its inability to give help, for this reason it makes its own chicks substitutions by stealth, as it were, in order to save them (*HA* VIII(IX).29.618a26-29).

Sometimes male animals also join in caring for the young, although Aristotle regards these activities as paradigmatically feminine.⁶

In general, with regard to their lives (*βίοι*), one may observe many imitations (*μιμήματα*) of human life in the other animals...In the smaller ones, one may observe the precision of their intelligence (*διάνοια*): for example, first, in the case of the birds, the swallow's nest-building. For in the mixture of straw into mud she keeps the same order. She interweaves mud with the stalks; and if she lacks mud she moistens herself and rolls her feathers into the dust. Further, she builds the nest just as men build, putting the stiff materials underneath first, and making it match herself in size. Over the feeding (*τροφή*) of the young both birds carry out the work; they give to each,

³ Trans. D. M. Balme, Aristotle. *History of Animals*, Books VII-X, ed. D. M. Balme (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁴ This is a drug used to sooth post-natal disorders (Hippocrates, *Acut.*7). Deer are also said to have medical knowledge at *Historia animalium* VIII(IX).5.611b21-26.

⁵ When bears are in flight they push their cubs in front and pick them up and carry them; and when they are being overtaken they leap up into the trees. And after coming out of the hibernation-place they first eat arum (see *HA* VIII(IX)6. 611a33-35). Cranes are also *φρόνιμα* because they warn each other of dangers (see *HA* VIII(IX)10).

⁶ In animals, nurturing activities are overwhelmingly feminine—so much so that when a male animal takes over, the words Aristotle uses to describe his care are that he “does the female tasks,” for example at *Historia animalium* VIII(IX).47.631b2-4: “On the death of a hen, a cock has been seen to undertake the female tasks, leading the chickens about and rearing them (*ἐκτρέφοντες*).”

watching habitually the one that has already had it, so that it should not get it twice. And at first they themselves throw out the dung, but when the nestlings have grown they teach (*διδάσκουσι*) them to turn around and discharge it outside (*HA VIII(IX).7.612b18-32*).

The intelligence we observe in these animals includes the use of ingenious methods, requiring some learning and thus primitive experience (presumably based on memory).⁷ They take into account new information about their circumstances (as in the case of giving birth by the roadside) and about their own characters (as in the case of the cuckoo). Non-human animals are also skilled at training their young, even when faced with unforeseen situations, for example teaching them to respond to new threats by hiding. They can train the young to live better, as in the case of waste disposal in swallows.

Humans are the “most *φρόνιμος*” animal, according to Aristotle (*GA II.6.744a30*). In fact, *φρόνησις* does not properly apply to any other animal; when he uses the term in his zoology, this is most likely to be in an extended sense.⁸ What is missing in non-human animals is conscious deliberation and choice. All the activities that aid the survival and development of the young in the above examples require intelligence but lack choice. For example, although aware of her own cowardice, the female cuckoo is not in control of her response to this; she cannot choose to advocate the course of action taken any more than the mare can choose not to steal the foal. Non-human animals cannot deliberate (see *HA I.1.488b24*) or choose (see *EN III.2.1111b8-10, II.6.1106a36*). This is what sets apart people—and also what saves Aristotle from any crude biological essentialism in his ethics of parenthood.

II. Human Mothering

Humans, in common with other animals, desire to reproduce themselves (see *Pol. I.2.1252a25-29*) and have inclinations to care for and train their young.

It would seem that nature resolves to prepare for there being a feeling of care for the offspring. This is created in inferior animals only until the birth, in others until development is complete and in those that are more intelligent, until they are brought up (*ἐκτροφήν*). Those with the most share of intelligence (*φρονήσεως*), become intimate and friendly toward them after they have fully matured, as happens in the human kind and some tetrapods. It occurs in birds until they have given birth and raised the chicks. For this reason, the females that haven’t sat on the eggs, when they have lain them, fall into a worse condition, as if being deprived of one of their inborn natural traits (*τῶν συμφύτων*) (*GA III.2.753a7-13*, my translation).⁹

⁷ At *Metaphysics I.1.980a27-b27* Aristotle explains that some non-human animals can have memories and experience but do not generally have “art and reasoning.”

⁸ See James G. Lennox, “Aristotle on the Biological Roots of Virtue: The Natural History of Natural Virtue,” in *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, eds. J. Maienschein and M. Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23-8.

⁹ See also *HA VIII.1.588b31-589a3*.

Unlike non-human animals, human beings must choose to advocate the nurturing relations that exist naturally. For Aristotle, the human good consists in exercising our virtues (*EN* II.2.1106b16). This activity, in turn, depends on possessing practical intelligence—*φρόνησις*—the ability to judge the situation correctly and respond appropriately, weighing up different commitments and concerns (see *EN* II.2.1104a7; VI.4.1140a25-28). It also involves a continual reassessment of one's overall aims in light of one's current decisions.¹⁰ Caring for and raising a young person, if it is to be done successfully, resulting in someone who will be a capable adult member of society, clearly requires this intellectual virtue.

To gain further insight into the way in which parenting, virtue and *φρόνησις* are related, we must look to Aristotle's account of friendship. When humans care for and train their young this is a sort of friendship (see *EN* VIII.1.1155a17-21).¹¹ Loving is the virtue of friends, which is best exemplified in a mother's feeling (see *EN* VIII.8.1159a28-35). The natural feelings of affection for a child are not enough to count as proper friendship; there also has to be an intelligent choice to engage in the friendship relation. Added to this, the friendship that a carer has for the person he or she cares for also requires a sophisticated practical intelligence as detailed above. For Aristotle, friendship is like virtue (see *EN* VIII.1.1155a1-6, cf. *EN* IX.9.1169b16-19, VIII.5.1157b21-3) and so must involve practical wisdom. His more intricate account of the friendship between parents and children reveal why this is the case.

The friendship between parent and child is an unequal one which means that one party is more virtuous than the other—in case of parent/child is such since the parent is more virtuous because virtue requires maturity. In *EN* VIII.7 Aristotle seems to say that unequal friendships must be evened up by the less good party loving the better party more.

In all friendships corresponding to superiority, the loving must also be proportional, e.g. the better person, and the more beneficial...must be more loved than he loves; for when the loving reflects the comparative worth of the friends, equality is achieved in a way, and this seems to be proper to friendship (*EN* VIII.7.1158b24).¹²

In *EN* VIII he nuances this initial thought; although “most people...wish to be loved rather than to love” this is based on ambition and is wrong as he goes on to explain with reference to mothering.

[F]riendship seems to consist more in loving rather than in being loved. A sign of this is the enjoyment a mother finds in loving. For sometimes she gives her child away to be brought up, and loves him as long as she knows about him; but she does not seek

¹⁰ “A man's [sic] reflection on a new situation which confronts him may disrupt such order and fixity as had previously existed, and bring a change in his evolving conception of the goal of living and acting” [David Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reasoning,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 29/1 (1976): 29-51, 43].

¹¹ We are naturally a social or gregarious type of animal, which is part of the reason why nobody can be happy without friends. Aristotle is insistent that friendship is fundamental to the good life; even if one had all the good things in the world, one would not be happy alone. It is also important to keep in mind that friends are loved for their own sake, not in an instrumental manner, for the sake of one's own pleasure or satisfaction. Friendship, for Aristotle, must include a disinterested concern for another (see *EN* VIII.2.1155b31-2, VIII.3.1156a8-10).

¹² Trans. Terence Irwin, Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985).

the child's love, if she cannot both [love and be loved]. She would seem to be satisfied if she sees the child doing well, and she loves the child even if ignorance prevents him from according to her what befits a mother. Friendship, then, consists more in loving (*EN* VIII.8.1159a27-34).

Aristotle here abandons the crude view that friendship is like justice—in which if you give more, you must be paid back more in return. Instead, it is an intrinsic good; loving more is actually better than being loved. This is further evidenced by the intelligent decisions that have led this particular mother to send her child away. As with all practical reasoning, this person has to understand the situation extremely well—both in terms of the social setting, the child's personality and her own situation. She will take all these circumstances into consideration, along with weighing up her feelings in choosing to send the child away to be cared for by others (a decision that many mothers have intelligently made for millennia). Using her reasoning capacities, she thereby supersedes her own merely natural virtue of desiring to personally nurture her own child in favour of what is best.

For Aristotle, this individual promotes her own well-being by loving in this thoughtful manner. In more general terms, the friendship of an older person for a younger, immature person is a component of *εὐδαιμονία*. He characterises younger friends as “external goods” (see *EN* I.8.1099a31-b6, VIII.12.1161b18-29, 1162a27-8) which are necessary for happiness.

Deprivation of certain [external goods]—e.g. good birth, good children, beauty—mars our blessedness; for we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary or childless, and have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died (*EN* I.8.1099b2-6).

A second passage notes that if our children and descendants do badly after our death, this might also affect our happiness.

[A] dead person also, it seems, has good or evil when, e.g., he receives honours or dishonours, and his children, and descendants in general, do well or suffer misfortune (*EN* I.10.1100a19-23).

As Scott explains, the key to understanding how children can contribute to your goodness or success, even after your death, is to understand that they are your product.¹³

III. Aristotle on Children as Beneficiaries and Products

The type of friendship that exists between the younger and the older is that which exists between benefactor and beneficiary (see *EN* IX.7.1167b33-1168a5; IX.8.1168b5-7). Benefactors love more than they are loved, and we can recall that loving is more virtuous. Loving is like production, while being loved is like being acted on (see *EN* IX.7.1168a20).

¹³ See Dominic Scott, “Aristotle on Posthumous Fortune,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (2000): 211-29.

Each person loves their own product—and beneficiaries are their product. A paradigm case is again a mother.

There is the same relation between the effect and the activity, the benefited being as it were an effect or production of the benefactor. Hence in animals their strong feelings for their offspring both in begetting them and in preserving them afterwards. And so fathers love the children—and still more mothers—more than they are loved by them...mothers love more than fathers because they think the children to be more their own production; for the amount of work is measured by the difficulty, and the mother suffers more in birth (*EE* VII.8.1241b1-9).¹⁴

As detailed in *Metaphysics*, only when the product reaches complete development is the actuality of the producer's activity complete (see VIII.8.1050a4-b3). Thus, it is only when one's beneficiary is complete/mature that one's activity as a benefactor is achieved. This explains why whether the younger members of our kind we care for¹⁵ become self-sufficient affects our ongoing well-being and the assessment of how well our lives go after our death.¹⁶

Apart from elucidating how the fate of our young friends affects our happiness, the passage is also about the ethical import of maternal feelings. One might understand the comment about the mother's situation as dismissive of her feelings. Aristotle says that the mother "thinks" that the child is more her product, and this is perhaps false because she thinks it is all about the physical labour of giving birth (see *EE* VII.8.1241b9).¹⁷ However, the feelings that the mother experiences are not suspect. As he makes clear in the case of the mother who sends her child away, her labour is not just physical, but also emotional and intellectual. Furthermore, her feelings are not merely given by nature. Instead, she is making an intelligent choice to endorse these efforts, and so displays virtue. Since he begins the sentence referring only to male parents (see *EE* VII.8.1241b3), one could think that Aristotle would encourage fathers to be more like mothers currently are—when they endorse their efforts and regard their children as products of these efforts, they love them more and gain more virtue for themselves.

¹⁴ Trans. J. Solomon, in *Aristotle. The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol.2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Cf. "[M]others love their children more [than fathers do], since giving birth is more effort for them" (*EN* 1168b24-25).

¹⁵ In this passage Aristotle says that we cannot be fully happy if we are childless. However, he does not thereby imply that it is necessary to have genetic children of one's own. In any human community, there are numerous younger people who require our assistance; Aristotle himself adopted a son. The point is that it would be unfortunate to have nobody that one could ever benefit in the way that a parent benefits a child. Eric Brown, in contrast, thinks that Aristotle has an aristocratic conception of virtuous activity and so good looks and good children are necessary in order to be recognized as superior. Eric Brown, "Wishing for Fortune, Choosing Activity: Aristotle on External Goods and Happiness," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2006): 38.

¹⁶ See Scott, op.cit.

¹⁷ Aristotle viewed female parents as productive of offspring and as true parents, even though they contribute "matter" as opposed to male "form." See Sophia Connell, *Aristotle on Female Animals: A Study of the Generation of Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 179-80.

This account may be further elucidated through Aristotle's craft metaphor. It is difficult to craft a well-functioning chair.¹⁸ Making a good chair is an achievement. Similarly raising a child is an achievement. In addition, when the child is fully grown and able to make her own decisions, a parent can legitimately take pride in their good choices. A parent might even feel that these choices are, at least partially, due to herself—a parent can take credit.¹⁹

For Aristotle the fact that a child is one's product explains the affection one feels for it. If we go back to animals, we can see how human affection differs. A natural affection for offspring exists in mostly female animals and this serves to protect their lives. The core affection in humans is not this but the result of responding correctly to their own efforts—giving birth to children is hard work but raising them is much harder. The effort is for the production of something difficult to create and so is comparable to the intelligent choices of the carpenter. Thus, the affection is not a natural urge but due to a choice—a choice to endorse this serious undertaking—and since in doing so, they make this enterprise their own project, they feel affection for the enterprise, as well as the person. The carpenter in parallel will love his action and his artistic achievement. An individual chair is the product of a particular series of actions expressive of the carpenter's skill, which will make it unique. Thus we can see how the personal input that one makes towards a young person's development, as parent or mentor, can be individual—the chair must end up functional, so there will be certain parameters, but within these there is room for different ways to do this. The carpenter will have pride in having produced a functioning chair but also with having produced something from their own efforts which they can point to and say "that's the one I made."²⁰

One might now worry that the parent here depicted is selfish. Although she would rather that her child do well than that she has the pleasure of its affection, ultimately by coming to that decision, she is making her own life go better. In ensuring that the child fares well, that he grows up properly, she is achieving an important part of her own life's work. I would like to suggest that this renders the Aristotelian model of parenting superior to the self-sacrificing one.²¹ There is room in the product/producer model for self-expression, self-authorship and authenticity, which can be considered crucial to moral character.²²

¹⁸ The model is bespoke craft making, not industrial production, and so is unlike modern metaphors since the Industrial Revolution which depict the female body in line with factory production [see Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), ch.4]. The fact that each chair is unique and will have unique features makes it equivalent in this respect with each individual offspring. See Connell, op.cit., ch.9.

¹⁹ This is explained well by another point Aristotle makes concerning friendship that since a friend is like another self, one's friend's excellent choices are, in a way, one's own. "For what our friends achieve is, in a way, achieved through our own agency" (*EN* III.3.1112b27). What he means by this is contested but one legitimate interpretation is that because friendship (and particularly the unequal kind of older to younger) requires deliberating together, the choices of our friend reflect on our own deliberative abilities, which are then praiseworthy.

²⁰ Cf. "A parent knows better what has come from them than the children know that they are from the parent; and the parent regards their children as their own more than the product regards the maker as its own" (*EN* VIII.11.1161b20-24).

²¹ We might be reminded of Jean Hampton's example of the extreme self-sacrificing mother called Terry who puts her and her unborn children's (twins) health at risk by doing too much. See Jean Hampton "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10/1 (1993): 135-65. This is a person who is "so other-regarding that she would literally make herself sick rather than take time out to care for herself" (143). Hampton suggests that this person is not properly moral since morality actually "requires us to ensure that we have the

Human drives to nurture and develop younger members of our kind have their roots in our shared natural setting—as animals that live in groups and as living being that are mortal and must reproduce. But there are also important ways in which our efforts differ—in raising children, parents are benefiting themselves by identifying with their role as producer of another’s successful realisation. The patterns of desire, thought and behaviour Aristotle details are found most obviously in mothers—but there is nothing to stop fathers and others joining in. Furthermore, all care for the young and vulnerable in human communities is not driven by affection as blind natural impulse but by the pride that people take in one of the most difficult of the achievements of practical intelligence.²³

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time, the resources, and the capacity to develop the characteristics, skills, plans, and projects that make us unique individual selves” (144).

²² See *ibid.*

²³ Aristotle’s model avoids the unhelpful dichotomy between public and private. The friendships that we all have for those younger than ourselves in our communities are not only part of our projects, for which we feel pride and a sense of achievement, but are also essential for the continuation of the human way of life into the future, a clear public good.

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