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Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity* (New York, London: Routledge, 2012), ISBN: Ebk 978-0-203-18293-2, Hbk 978-0-415-88542-3, £80.00 hardback.

Alison Stone, a philosopher of some repute, begins *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* with a syllogism:

The (Western) self is understood in opposition to the maternal body (or, to be a subject is to separate from the maternal body);

To mother is to re-enter the field of maternal body relations;

Therefore: it is 'relatively difficult for us to recognise mothers as subjects, and [...] relatively difficult for mothers to regard themselves as subjects or to exercise their capacities for subjectivity'. (p.1)

Whereas the major premiss here (concerning the modern, Western understanding of subjectivity) is a cultural assumption that influences how we experience ourselves, the minor premiss is, for Stone, something like a natural fact. The argument of *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* is that were the cultural assumption to be changed, the natural fact could be experienced differently such that maternal subjectivity would be, if not exactly unproblematic, at least more easily achieved (sometimes, Stone even seems to suggest, *possible* for the first time). Moreover, this maternal subjectivity would not be subjectivity-as-usual but, as specifically maternal, a subjectivity of a new kind, one that generates meaning and agency from within early maternal body relations. Maternal subjectivity is 'a specific form of subjectivity that is continuous with the maternal body', both the body of the one who mothers now and, in memory and fantasy, the one who mothered her, the mother's mother (p.3).

In fact, Stone's thesis is broader than this: given the dominant cultural understanding of subjectivity in terms of separation from the mother, and given that, according to Stone, 'girls must in some sense also remain identified with their mothers and the maternal body to assume a female identity' (p.10), it is 'female selfhood' or 'female subjectivity' itself that is rendered problematic, maternal subjectivity being a variant of this problematic female subjectivity (p.4). Maternal subjectivity is the *intensified* experience of the general problem of

subjectivity for females, given prevailing cultural assumptions; it is, as it were, the breaking point of female subjectivity. As Stone puts it:

in becoming a mother, one ceases to be readily able to identify oneself as a single, unified agent, because one has returned in fantasy to the relational context of one's early childhood, before one achieved subjectivity by breaking from this context. To re-enter this context is to disturb the conditions under which one's subjectivity up until now has become been possible. (p.15)

Stone argues that certain forms of psychoanalytic theory (primarily the object-relations theory which regards the mother as only the necessary background for the development of the child) and the ideology of intensive parenting based – albeit implicitly – on that theory (the almost total subordination of the mother's needs and desires to those of her highness the baby) exacerbate this problem. In common with, for example, Lisa Baraitser's attempt to map maternal subjectivity, Stone insists on the need to understand maternal subjectivity from the standpoint of the mother *qua* mother, in opposition to the tendency to see mothers only in relation to the needs and development of their children or as the more or less Oedipal daughters of their own mothers. But all commonality ends there. Stone, I think, has taken the idea of maternal subjectivity from Baraitser's work but what she makes of it is something entirely different.

Drawing on, amongst others, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Donald Winnicott, Melanie Klein and Daniel Stern, Stone's book attempts to describe what she sees as the necessarily sexually differentiated emergence of male and female selves under the conditions dictated by current assumptions concerning the nature of subjectivity (as separation from/repudiation of the mother) and current social practices, principally that of assigning responsibility for child care primarily to women. The assumptions concerning subjectivity are described in terms of both the dominant 'social imaginary' and the (contingent) social necessity for a symbolic matricide in accession to subjectivity. Against this Stone proposes a rereading (or reimagining, or reinterpretation?) of Winnicott's idea of potential space as maternal space. Maternal space, for Stone, is the domain of relation-differentiation within which the infant becomes a self through a complex identification with the mother as different, where 'differentiation' is thought as the becoming-different through continued relation, rather than the sharp distinction of 'separation'. Embracing the rhythmic, sensual pre-symbolic aspects of the semiotic chora of Kristeva's work, Stone suggests that the infant's sense of self emerges within a maternal space which is not finally other than the symbolic order of language but, perhaps, the kernel of it. Rejecting the idea that a third term must intervene from outside of

the mother-infant relation to ensure the infant's sense of self as distinct from that of the mother (indeed rejecting the idea that there was ever a fusion of the two), Stone argues that the increasing differentiation between mother and infant *within* maternal space (within connectedness, therefore) is sufficient for emergent subjectivity. This space and the possibilities for a non-matricidal subjectivity already exist, according to Stone, but our capacities for relational subjectivity are stifled or are only incompletely and partially developed because 'our culture misrecognises the nature of this space' (p.80).

This misrecognition, according to Stone, deforms female and maternal subjectivities in particular. As, for Stone, girls must necessarily identify with their mother to achieve their (again, necessary, it seems) female subjectivity, their efforts at separating from their mothers tend, under current conditions, to oscillate between over-identification and wounding repudiation. It also means, Stone argues, that granted that ambivalence may be a feature of all mothering, mothers tend to experience a peculiarly intense ambivalence in being the mothers of daughters, as daughters bring the mother back all the more forcefully (albeit in fantasy) to the domain of early maternal bodily relations with her own mother, separation from which society deems necessary for the achievement of subjectivity. In all of this, the setting out of the problem and the proposals for its overcoming, Stone draws on social and cultural evidence (broadly understood): from literature, poetry, film, testimony, psychoanalytic case studies and art. And certainly the end result is in a sense impressive to the extent that Stone – betraying perhaps her philosophical grounding in German idealism – has constructed an intellectual melting-pot system of maternal subjectivity, selecting, rejecting and synthesising aspects of her source texts driven by the thought of that prize.

However, there are some regrettably serious problems with the book. Chief amongst these, in my view, is perhaps the result of Stone's movement across disciplines. For while the critical textual analysis of psychoanalytical theory – which Stone undertakes with the sharpened mind of a seasoned philosopher – is important and insightful, the reinterpretation of psychoanalytic texts without clinical experience or empirical evidence of another kind cannot justifiably lead to the kind of claims about child development that Stone makes here. Speculation is a wholly legitimate part of philosophy, but here speculation is too often presented as empirical, developmental fact. Stone describes the aim of her central, third chapter on maternal space in terms of 'want[ing] to move away more completely from the traditional psychoanalytic view that subject-formation requires a paternal third term. I will propose an alternative, non-matricidal conception of how we become selves in relations of

difference from and continuity with our mothers and the maternal body' (p.62). A laudable aim, but what is the basis for the alternative proposal, and what status can such a proposal have?

A little later the aim is 'to reconceive and revalue maternal body relations and then, on this basis, to reinterpret paternity, in terms of participation in the field of intimate body relations so revalued' (p.64). As the terms here show, this is an ethical and/or speculative – even metaphysical – project. In itself this is not a problem. But when it is presented as claims about what actually happens in early infant life it inevitably fails for want of warrant. Stone goes some way to acknowledging this with various qualifying phrases attached to claims ('in my view...'; 'my suggestions is...'; 'plausibly...'), but the slippage between speculation and putative descriptive psychology remains. This also affects the central claim about the emergence of a specifically maternal subjectivity. Stone claims that in mothering the mother returns to the 'early context of being with [her] own mother ... a condition of intense and complete entwining with the mother on a bodily level, in which the mother is experienced only partially as a distinct self but also as an overarching regulatory context and body space' (p.12). Stone's aim is to revalue this experience and again, in itself this is not a problem. But if this ideal (for it is an ideal) is a condition for maternal subjectivity – or even a condition for mothering – it is difficult to see how the many mothers who did not experience it as infants can be maternal subjects in Stone's sense. Stone writes that 'to become a mother is to re-inhabit and become re-immersed in the field of maternal body relations' (p.11) and that 'in early childhood we exist with our mothers constantly; interaction between mother and child is relentless, intense and bodily' (p.133). But this is simply not true of every infant's experience. Indeed many of the examples from the clinical literature that Stone chooses to illustrate what she means by a mother's memories of her own maternal past show just the opposite: women unconsciously recalling, in some sense, 'feeling punished, deprived or restricted' by their own mothers in the past (p.136). How, then, to theorise maternal subjectivity without the presumption of an ideal, enabling maternal context? This is a challenge that Stone's book does not acknowledge.

If Stone's claims often lack an empirical basis, they do, however, have a fundamental theoretical ground: a form of biological sex essentialism that is likely to raise a few hackles amongst both psychoanalytic theorists and feminists. Stone is a realist about sex difference, arguing that even neonates are able to perceive the difference between the sexuate bodily forms of the male and the female. Further, she suggests, infants have innate tendencies to

gravitate towards female carers because they are ‘of woman born’, female carers being perceived by the neonate and infant as ‘beings whose bodies continue the pre-natal, uterine environment, which was a female and maternal one’ (p.81). For Stone there are also seemingly biologically determined male and female psyches: ‘On my view, our psyches have inherent tendencies towards certain forms of organisation and fantasy configuration; for instance, males develop an inherent tendency to try to break away from the maternal figure with reference to a paternal ideal’ (p.29). This is because, according to Stone, males must assume a masculine identity (which requires identification with a paternal figure) and female must assume a feminine identity (identification with the mother) (p.26). Although Stone is aware of the dangers of over-generalisation, often tempering her claims with various qualifications (inherent tendencies need not necessarily be realised; sexual difference may be less clear cut than a strict male/female duality; culture mediates the neonate’s experience), the nature of the claims and their theoretical basis is such that generalisation, and its attendant normative prescriptions, cannot be avoided. For example, I doubt very much that Stone would want the implication of *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* to delegitimise same sex parenting, but the logic of her argument leads inexorably that way: ‘we can and should have parenting that is fully shared but which, instead of being gender neutral, revolves around two sexually distinct parental figures’ (p.87). For how else, on this model, are males to assume their masculine and females their feminine identities?

It is good to see the problem of maternal subjectivity emerging precisely as a problem to be taken seriously, and Stone’s foray into this as yet small field is a welcome sign of its growth. Furthermore, Stone’s book is an important acknowledgment of the fact that the very idea of maternal subjectivity is one that can only be adequately addressed from outside the confines of any one intellectual discipline. It also shows, however, that the passage from philosophy to psychoanalytic theory is not a simple one, and raises the question of how philosophical speculation can be related to the empirical social sciences and their own theoretical discourses.