

Review of Cristina L. H. Traina, *Erotic Attunement (Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals)*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2011, xi + 363 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-226-81138-3

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Although during the past decades a lot of work has been published on female sexuality, only few authors have discussed the moral meaning of maternal eroticism. This niche is filled by Cristina L. H. Traina's book *Erotic Attunement. Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals*. Traina, an associate professor of religious studies at North-Western University argues that in contemporary Western society, motherhood and sexuality are often considered as mutually exclusive, because of 'the moral conviction that relationships between persons of unequal power (...) must be free from even the slightest taint of sexual eroticism' (p. 3). Traina however, maintains that sensual pleasure between mothers and children cannot be avoided and that avoidance would harm both mothers and children. Therefore, the project she elaborates on throughout her book is 'to acknowledge, embrace, and deal justly with the erotic dimension of all human relations, especially those with unequals' (p. 6). Eventually her aim is to create an ethics of touch in which mothers are erotic attuned to the needs of their children.

Throughout the book, Traina questions how erotic desire can coexist with just and healthy parenting. In order to answer this question, she starts the introductory chapter with elaborating on recent and contemporary accounts of maternal erotic experience. She starts from the example of breastfeeding newborns, an activity which can arouse mothers. Eroticism of maternity is widespread and inevitable. Acknowledging this will lead to altering cultural norms and ideas about sexuality, which will give us the opportunity to draw clearer lines between eroticism between unequals that is appropriate and that is condemnable.

After the first chapter, the book is divided in blocks. The first block consists of Chapters 2–4, in which cultural histories with regard to maternal eroticism are

discussed. They are followed by Chapters 5 and 6, which discuss concrete parent-child relationships. Then, Chapters 7 and 8 consider the theological background of the argument, before the practical aspects of an ethics of sensuality are elaborated on in Chapter 9.

More specifically, in Chapter 2 women's desires are configured. Traina defines women's sexuality as something that is constructed by using ingredients that are supplied by society. Women are determined by what they are supplied with, but still every person makes use of the ingredients differently. As a result, women's sexuality is fluid and various. Departing from this idea, the chapter explores different discourses on maternity and sexuality, and thereby 'creates intellectual space for ambiguity and alternative interpretations' (p. 48). An awareness is created of the fact that ideas about maternity and sexuality are not static but are influenced by time and place.

This becomes even more clear in Chapter 3, where Traina states that the Western ideal of sex between equals is a modern phenomenon. Until a recent past, inequality was a major prerequisite for sexual relationships. In creating an ideal in which only sexuality between equals is approved of, all other possibilities in the area of sexuality have been condemned with great power. As a result, our image of erotic relations between unequals is poisoned; this creates problematic interpretations of any sensual relationship between mothers and infants. Simultaneous to the shift to equality as prerequisite for sex, sexuality was reduced to genital sexuality, 'making serious discussion of broadly passionate sensuality impossible' (p. 93).

In discussing Freud's effect on the cultural understanding of sexuality in Chapter 4, Traina demonstrates that seeing everything as sexual has resulted in the idea that both mothers and children are sexual beings, as is the relationship between them. Mothers are in power and therefore responsible for not misusing their children, a task that was suddenly regulated by authorities. Hereby Traina complicates the problem of maternal eroticism even further.

The next block of chapters discusses actual relationships between parents and children. In Chapter 5 Traina elaborates on empirical research which has been conducted on touch and attunement. Children have the right to be touched, since every human being needs touch in order to flourish. In Chapter 6 situations in which touch is used wrongly are dealt with, with a focus on abusers. The question asked is what the real consequences of abusive touch entail. Traina maintains that mothers are required to touch their children and forbidden to do so in ways that might cause harm. Elaborating on this point is significant for Traina, as she argues that abuse by mothers is more widespread than assumed. In current society mothering is considered something that comes naturally. This assumption results in underestimating female abuse, while both the problem and the consequences for the abused children are significant. Poor attunement and inability to respond sensitively to their children's needs causes mothers to abuse their children. This practice has various and multiple results, among which physical and psychological damage combined with social harm. Abused children often have difficulties developing healthy attachment relationships.

In Chapter 7 concupiscence and temperance are discussed from a theological perspective. Sin is elaborated on, including the idea that only being aware of sins does not cure them. A mother must actively decide how to respond to a child, in a way that does no harm. A child cannot be sinned against, as this means it is harmed. Instead love must be attuned, touch must be provided in

such a way that it promotes flourishing. In constructing an ethics of touch, temperance and concupiscence, justice and the community in which all relationships and violations are framed, must be included. Chapter 8 is used to move to the core of the argument. A theological perspective is used to draw a distinction between supporting a child to flourish and doing it harm, by calling on Agape and Eros. Eventually this block of chapters is concluded by arguing that 'proper Eros towards the less powerful is a matter of virtue (...) and of upholding standards of justice' (p. 15).

Before concluding the book, Traina explores in Chapter 9 what a practical guide concerning ethics of touch would entail. She does so by exploring the ethics of psychiatrists in their relation to patients, although in this case touch should always be avoided. Therefore she moves to massage therapists in order to grasp how to deal with touch. The welfare of the child and its particular needs should be in clear focus, a focus that can be maintained through self-care, self-examination and consultation. How to attune to a child is a process of trial and error. The emphasis must be put on the mutuality of the relationship, although this mutuality does not entail mutual self-revelatory intimacy. Most important is the conclusion that there are few absolute rules. Rather, practicing to attune to the needs of others is the most important guideline towards an ethics of sensuality.

The conclusion of the book is mostly focused on stressing the important role society as a whole has. 'Children deserve to be raised well, and parents deserve the support they need to raise their children well' (p. 245). Parents need support in distinguishing right from wrong behaviour, even though the line between them is dangerously thin. A moral discussion has to start about sensual relationships, 'to balance rights to protection from harm with insistence on the goodness and even necessity of sensual enjoyment' (p. 248).

Traina provides us with an elaborate exploration of the field of erotic maternity. Thereby an area is explored that was often unnoticed in the past. Her contribution to the debate in the interdisciplinary field of religious and gender studies is relevant and useful, first of all because of the different disciplines that are integrated; gender, ethics, Freudian psychoanalysis and theology are drawn upon in order to produce an ethics of touch. The theoretical perspectives that are elaborated on are combined with results from social scientific research. This combination of disciplines and research methods enabled Traina to proceed in a very clear way from a defined problem to the construction of a solution, an ethics of touch as clear and practical as possible.

Despite the valuable contribution this book provides to the field of gender and religious studies, the book does have an important drawback. One could question why the focus of the book is entirely on women. The subtitle of the book 'Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals' can be considered as implying the book will focus on the erotic attunement of both mothers and fathers. Yet this is not the case, even though Traina aspires to create an ethics of touch relevant for all unequal relationships. One could question whether eroticism and attunement in fathers works particularly different from the working in mothers. Elaborating on this question can be considered as a relevant next step in discussing an ethics of touch more inclusively.