

## Leonardo and Maternal Inclination

Children magically oblige us to incline our heads.

Ramòn Eder, *La vida ondulante*

**LEONARDO DA VINCI'S** oil painting *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (1503–19), which is preserved at the Louvre, is remarkable for Mary's posture (see Figure 6). She is at the center of the canvas, leaning forward, bent over her son, seated on the lap of her own mother, Anne. Anne, in turn, inclines her head slightly toward Mary, and also, following the axis of oblique gazes traversing the portrait, toward baby Jesus. Jesus, meanwhile, leans against his mother's leg, holding a lamb, a symbol of the passion and sacrifice that awaits him. The picture's invocation of the *vulnus*-to-come underlines the condition of vulnerability that Christ shares with humanity, capturing him in his infancy, that moment so exemplary of vulnerable defenselessness more generally. Leaning over baby Jesus, as if to spare him from his fate, the Virgin Mary holds his hand and body with an ordinary gesture of maternal care. Unbalanced along her own axis, she noticeably inclines herself.

Among the most admired of Leonardo's masterpieces, this picture has the merit of putting into particular relief Mary's inclined posture, if not inclination itself, as the geometrical matrix for the whole



**Figure 6.** Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (1503–19). Oil on poplar wood. Louvre, Paris. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

composition, while a straight tree in the background accentuates the effect. Confirming a subversive gesture originally performed in the *Virgin of the Rocks* (1483), Leonardo places the child beside the mother, and not in her arms, as in the traditional representations. In canonical paintings until Leonardo, the Christ child is not only held by Mary, but seated in her lap with his back turned to her, facing outward: according to the traditional canon, Mother and Child should not look at one another. According to these same standards, St. Anne's presence would have required the composition to have been structured as a vertical pyramid, with the three figures lined up, one over the other. Leonardo, by contrast, breaks with this system of symmetrical verticality, presenting a mother who is face to face with her child; a child whose head is twisted back to face the one who visibly tilts and stretches out to support him; and an Anne who observes them both with a smile. The asymmetry of this portrait, modulated as it is by inclination, translates nicely into the movement of a relationality that reflects the everyday experience of the maternal rather than the monumentality of the sacred. With Leonardo, the artistic process of humanizing the mother reaches its peak: his Virgin Mary has nothing of the hieratic immobility of Madonna Theotokos on her throne—nothing, in other words, of the Queen of Christianity who offers her son for the adoration of the faithful.<sup>1</sup> The mother here is inclined over her child who, as an emblem of dependent and vulnerable creature, attracts her in a forward motion, in a protrusion beside herself that endangers her balance.

If it is true, as Arendt thinks, that “every inclination turns outwards, it leans out of the self,”<sup>2</sup> bending us over objects or people, then Leonardo's painting gives the meaning of maternal inclination a special ethical density and a neat geometric linearity. Not only does it foreground the child's vulnerability and his dependence on others, but it also accentuates the relationship between Mary and her son, redoubling it through the relationship between Anne and Mary. The oblique line that traverses the painting is a matrilineal line; it gives expression to maternity's geometrical dimension, which is simultaneously temporal, projected onto a potentially infinite past. To prevent

Arendt's remark from causing misunderstanding, however, here a philological clarification is again necessary. Arendt's words appear in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in the context of a reflection on Kant, in which she makes no specific mention of the problem of motherhood, much less that of maternal inclination. What is more, Arendt treats the category of inclination only occasionally, and in a way that doesn't really influence the analysis that follows. In search of a conceptual horizon whereby "the self and the intercourse between me and myself are no longer the ultimate criteria of conduct," her analysis recuperates certain features of Kant's aesthetic judgment, inscribing them, unexpectedly, in the field of ethics (on account of the fact that only in the context of aesthetics did Kant consider "men in the plural").<sup>3</sup> Even though the issue of the *other* is thus invoked by the Arendtian conception of plurality, the other—much less, again, maternal inclination—does not play a central role in the inquiry that Arendt develops. The question, as Judith Butler would say, is how to "dislodge the subject as the ground of ethics, only to recast the subject as a problem *for* ethics."<sup>4</sup> But Arendt's solution, however focused it may be on relational ontology in an anti-selfish key, nevertheless does not consider the figure of the mother.

And yet the maternal figure implies an immediate ethical tonality that a large part of feminist thought, with all manner of differences and hesitations, has never failed to emphasize. According to the most well-known literature on this theme, the maternal is understood as a primary instance of *care* for the *other*. The other in question, however, is not the other in general; still less is it the indefinite Other, looming with its enigmatic capital letter, that populates certain twentieth-century philosophies. It is instead the other who is held in the warm embrace—the son who is still a vulnerable and tender infant. And I do mean son, not daughter, because of the iconographic power, within western culture, of the Madonna and Child in the Nativity scene. Like all crucial figures in the symbolic order, the maternal lives in the intensity of its images and representations, which condense the concept in an exemplary way. It is certainly true that the stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman—a thorny problem for feminist critique—can count

on the broad conspiracy of art and religion, which Leonardo inherits. In spite of its misogyny, the patriarchal tradition does not deny the feminine virtue of caring for others—to the contrary, it notoriously exalts it, especially when, as in this case, the interference of eros is out of the picture. The Virgin who appears as an icon of maternity is, in this sense, a very eloquent example. The woman who is called upon to express her “true” nature, or her authentic inclination, in the act of nurturing her child finds in the Virgin a reference that is at once unequivocal and paradoxical. A virgin, Mary also expresses the feminine as pure maternity. Because of a presumed congenital rationality (as tradition does not tire of repeating), the human male has a less paradoxical and above all less restricted range of expression. According to a schema that already is at work in Aristotle, man is meant *for himself* and for the political community, whereas woman, confined to the laborious domestic sphere, is meant *for the other*—which is to say, in the last analysis, for him.

From the very beginning, our inquiry has grappled methodologically with this repeatedly signaled and geometricized schema. Insistence on gender stereotypes is part of this method. Stereotypes—one could call them “frames of meaning,” or, according to a certain feminist lexicon, “culturally constructed sexual identities”—are obviously difficult to dismantle. This is especially so with the stereotype of maternal inclination, particularly in its self-sacrificing role. And yet, among the aspects that recommend the maternal as an ethical paradigm, there is one that is often overlooked but that deserves attention: the scene of birth and, in particular, the ontological framework it offers to a philosophical tradition that is usually more preoccupied with death. The exception, of course, is precisely Hannah Arendt, who, commenting on natality as the fundamental condition for human existence, makes it coincide with the “the naked fact of our physical appearance.”<sup>5</sup> The theoretical context in which this phrase appears—and this merits special attention—is a critique of metaphysics that rejects both the modern and ancient categories of “nature” in order to focus on the far less common category of “condition.” The human being is in the world, observes Arendt: beginning with the

crucial moment of our initial appearance, and lasting throughout our entire existence, the human being is constitutively exposed to others—which is also to say, above all, exposed to the mother, despite Arendt's reticence on this topic. Despite the richness of Arendt's discovery of the category of natality, it is especially necessary to include the mother in any scene of birth if we are to take full advantage of that category, particularly if the task is to liquidate the leading role of auto-referential self. Embodying the other in relation to the newborn over whom she leans, the mother not only confirms that scene's relational and antivertical character, but also, by predisposing it to an altruistic ethics, requires that it be understood in terms of dependence. It is worth repeating that the main problem is how to persuade the self, proudly encapsulated in its verticality, to renounce its claim to autonomy and independence. The newborn—the infant, the little child—thus becomes an ideal figure: when confronted with the primary roots of existence—with its natal condition—the transparent and self-referential subject typical of modernity falters and reveals all of its vanity. It is not by chance, after all, that this subject is the traditional subject of ethics. Wrapped in his narcissism—both morally and, prior to that, ontologically—the subject who is favored by philosophical tradition neither exposes itself nor leans out of itself. It instead aims at becoming immune to the other through an act of self-foundation and by pretending not to need the inclination of others. Disputing the immunitary paradigm of the self,<sup>6</sup> however, the infant not only exposes itself in a complete and irremediable manner; it also exhibits a congenital vulnerability as its fundamental constitution and condition. Already indebted to the *other*—the mother—for his arrival in and persistence within the world, the newborn depends, precisely by virtue of his vulnerability, on the one who, inclined and thus bent forward outside herself, leans over him. All the more so when it is emphasized, the posture of self-sacrificing maternity thus becomes a figure that can keep in check the vertical system in general and the verticalized subject in particular.

For this reason, the contraposition suggested by Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*—between a feminine ethics of care and the mascu-

line predisposition to formulate abstract moral judgments—is only a premise.<sup>7</sup> The same goes for the generic contrast between a relational ontology and an ontology that continues to be based on the individualist paradigm. Because it calls into question a relationality which is originally dual, and because it is characterized by a relation that is unequal and even unbalanced, the scene of natality is indeed more complex. First of all, there are two personas on stage in this scene: mother and child. If the former must protect against the well-known risk of sinking into the stereotype of self-sacrificing woman, the latter seems to call for precisely that self-sacrifice because of his position of extreme vulnerability. For the infant, in essence, this is a relation of dependency that is as crucial as it is unconscious and unidirectional; it is a complete passivity in the face of the acts, whether benign or malignant, performed by the one who inclines over him. In this respect, the infant—especially the newborn—embodies, in an exemplary way, the other as defenseless.<sup>8</sup> It does not matter here whether the infant is a boy or a girl: because it is an embodied singularity and not some fictitious entity contrived by metaphysics, the newborn always has a sex; but the vulnerability of the human condition it announces and incorporates in the extreme form of its defenselessness does not depend on sexual difference. The infant's vulnerability is independent from gender; it appears to be so imperative that one could extract a representation of universality from it, thus turning the infant into the plausible champion of the hyper-represented theater of maternity. It would be a mistake, however, if not also the effect of an old metaphysical vice, to suppose that the scene of natality can claim a total noninterference from sex. In the dual relationship that is under examination here, the *other*—rigorously gendered as woman—is always a part of the picture: even if she should happen to be replaced by another, the name of the imaginary mother remains in play. Generated by an infinite chain of she-others who are lost to humanity, she in turn generates vulnerable beings. Above all, and well beyond any act of procreation, she performs a role that can never be symbolically supplanted: she is the one who responds to *others*.

Following Arendt—who, in this, unexpectedly follows Hobbes<sup>9</sup>—we need to try to observe the scene of natality as distinct from the

(likewise fundamental) event of childbirth. There are at least two reasons for a strategic move of this sort. The first derives from a justifiable suspicion of a tradition that, even in today's discourses on bioethics, tends to systematically conflate the maternal with gestation and procreation. The second, as explained above, pertains to Arendt's suggestion of an ontology that defines the human condition in terms of appearance. Warning us, among other things, that "there is always more at stake in life than the sustenance and procreation of individual living organisms,"<sup>10</sup> Arendt also seems to push us in precisely this direction. In Arendt's words, the human being is in fact an irremediably unique being, in that its belonging to the world entails its appearing to the world. In other words: not only is the one who appears *already there*, but there is also no preceding stage—let alone some embryonic state—that can influence the significance of its actual being-there, which is ontologically contextual, intraworldly, and material. In this sense, the newborn represents the most effective paradigm of the inseparable coincidence between existing and appearing. And, in the same way, even if in spite of Arendt, the mother is necessarily in the frame of this picture, but not by virtue of the title that is conferred upon her by the act of childbirth. Instead, she plays the role—as Leonardo's exemplary portrayal, as well as daily experience, attest—of the one who responds quintessentially to the infant's vulnerability, by leaning over him within the relational context. "Mother," it is worth repeating, is thus above all the *name* for an inclination toward the other—or, if you will, for a function that summons the requisite responsibility in the inaugural scene of a human condition in which the absolutely vulnerable—the defenseless—becomes an essential figure, first for ontology and politics, and then for ethics.<sup>11</sup> The infant, meanwhile, is a creature who is completely in the care of the other: infancy is an almost singular form of existence destined to turn itself into an unaware but peremptory solicitation. As such, the infant highlights the originary paradigm of human vulnerability: being defenseless, the infant is archetypal in a double sense, both because everybody's life begins with infancy, and because the principle of infancy returns whenever, in the course of life, one happens to find oneself defenseless.



To think the maternal merely as care, however, not only risks repeating the stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman; it also, and above all, obscures the ethical valence of inclination, which consists in the alternative between care and wound. And yet, even though it traces a relational structure that frees the moral from the self's verticality to focus on the other's vulnerability, the scene of the mother inclined over the infant does not constitute a response either—only a disposition to provide one. It is, indeed, just the act of leaning over the defenseless creature and its unilateral exposure, which calls for it. In this sense, the act of not inclining oneself—the act of remaining straight, of turning around to leave—corresponds to an avoidance of the question, which is to say, a refusal of a human condition that singularly interpellates us insofar as we partake in the human condition. Avoidance of this sort corresponds, in other words, to evil as an expression of irresponsibility, which is structurally distinct from evil understood instead as a violent act. The immense and moving literature on infant abandonment feeds on the drama of such irresponsibility. It testifies to a prejudicial form of violence, which can be deemed atrocious, but which is conducted under the rubric of the inflexible and self-referential “I”—the one who erects himself as if a vertical bar. The alternative between care and wound, as well as that between love and violence, is by contrast entirely inscribed in inclination as a predisposition to respond. Extroverted, stooped, responsive—this posture is typical of a self that bends itself over the other, conspicuously abandoning its own balance.

As if the history of the imaginary knew what moral philosophy ignores, each pole of the alternative between care and wound can rely upon a powerful iconographic gallery. Alongside Leonardo's Madonna lovingly bent over baby Jesus, consider Euripides's Medea, the infanticide. A scandalous figure, Medea reminds us that care is not an automatic or obvious response of maternal inclination; it is instead the ordinary and indeed desirable side of a violence that is rare and therefore scandalous, but that nevertheless remains equally plausible, since the defenseless creature is by definition “vulnerable.” The “vulnerable creature” carries the *vulnus*, the wound, in its very name, which seems to destabilize the ethical alternative, tilting toward the

side of the wound—or, if you like, toward a response that is afraid of evil because it recognizes its enormous power of attraction. This does not of course imply that maternal inclination leans toward infanticide instead of care, only that infanticide can be perceived over centuries as the most scandalous crime precisely because, by negating care in a contextual and direct way, it comes to confront care as the other side—indeed, the ordinary side—of ethical response. To lean over the infant is to lean over an other who is absolutely exposed to being wounded but who cannot wound in return. This relation is without reciprocity; it is structurally asymmetrical. Maternal inclination does not decide for good or evil; it simply bends over the infant, outlining a scene in which good and evil, care and wound, enacted with full and unilateral power, cannot contemplate any retaliation.

“In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,” Luisa Accati writes, “the image of Anne holding Mary on her lap was especially successful in Italy, where they were joined by the Christ child. The three characters become even more popular during the fifteenth century.”<sup>12</sup> The image of Anne with the young Mary on her lap blends with that of Mary holding the Christ child. In this way maternity is redoubled by the exclusion of fathers. In Leonardo’s painting, which confirms the general system, the Virgin Mary sits on her mother’s lap: Anne supports Mary, almost anchoring her, as if helping her to lean outside herself in her inclination for her child. Rather than holding Mary back, so that Christ would not be spared his sacrifice (in which case Mary would represent the Church), Anne instead allows her to bend. The image, in a sense, suggests that every mother has had a mother, following a potentially infinite series of unilateral inclinations that are first received and then given. Of this image, of course, we can see only a small portion: Jesus represents a part of it that is ideally its end but genealogically its limit. Perhaps by giving further meaning to the absence of Joachim and Joseph, the Leonardian version of the fatherless Holy Family lets the vulnerable one—precisely as a being destined to the *vulnus*—turn his eyes back to the theory of mothers.