

“Love, Rage and Sacrifice: Levinas and the Problem of Purposeful Maternal Filicide”

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In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas portrays the mother as absolute passivity, the prototypical ethical subject; and *pregnancy*—“the gestation of the other in the same”—is his archetype for responsibility.<sup>i</sup> In this view, to be a mother means to be “devoted to the others, without being able to resign,” “incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give.”<sup>ii</sup> The maternal metaphor helps Levinas to make clear how subjectivity, properly understood, is “an irreplaceable hostage”; how as ethical beings we are *all* victimized, held captive, and persecuted.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, mothers frequently describe their child(ren) as a monstrous *Other* who keeps her captive, threatens her body, eats away at her vitality, and upsets her sense of self. In many respects, the birth of the child is the death of the mother as she has known herself.

In this paper I will consider whether Levinas considers the full complexity of maternal experience, especially purposeful maternal filicide—when a mother deliberately kills her child(ren). While Levinas does acknowledge some of the inherent tensions of the ethical call,<sup>iv</sup> he also declares that the impulse to harmonious coexistence is most fundamental. Furthermore, the maternal is never described as including the impulses to murder, abuse, abandon or neglect. Given that in the United States a mother kills a child once every three days, the conflicted feelings and impulses of (even “good enough”) mothers cannot be overlooked.<sup>v</sup> It is urgent that psychologist, social workers, and others in helping professions better understand the experiences of these women.

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<sup>i</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, 105.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>iv</sup> He notes that the face is both a temptation to kill and a call to peace. “Peace and Proximity,” 167.

<sup>v</sup> As estimated by Cheryl Meyer, co-author of *Mothers Who Kill Their Children*, as quoted in [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110416/ap\\_on\\_he\\_me/us\\_when\\_mothers\\_kill](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110416/ap_on_he_me/us_when_mothers_kill)