Motherhood and Ethics with Sarah LaChance Adams

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: This episode contains brief descriptions of parental abuse and neglect.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

Christiane: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

We're discussing motherhood with philosopher and director of the Florida Blue Center for Ethics Sarah LaChance Adams. She argues that we romanticize mothers, and in so doing ignore the pain and failure that come with caregiving. In her work, she explores the ambivalence of motherhood and what it can teach us about ethics.

Sarah LaChance Adams: We don't have ethics because we can be perfect. We have ethics because we need them. They provide us with our models to strive toward. And this is so appropriate, given what we've been saying about motherhood. Mothers don't need ethics because they're naturally good at being mothers. They need ethics because they are just as bad at being ethical as anyone else.

Christiane: We'll discuss the ethics of parenting, Simone de Beauvoir, and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show, Sarah LaChance Adams. We're here to discuss your book, *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do*. So what is your project in this book?

Sarah LaChance Adams: So, in this book, I am looking at the ethics of mothering. This project has a broader implication for ethics in general, and what got me interested in it in particular was the romanticizing of motherhood as a paradigm example for ethics. The reason I found this interesting was because I had come from some training in child therapy. And I had worked at, well, really more of an internship, at a school in Seattle for homeless children where a lot of the children had had multiple traumas and some abuse and neglect in the family. And so to see motherhood used as an example where it was very idealized. So to say that the mother's love for the child was a paragon example of how we could all be ethical toward each other in a kind of uncomplicated manner seemed very problematic to me.

So when I looked at examples where mothers felt very conflicted toward their children, but actually behaved ethically, I thought that this was a much more dynamic and interesting example for ethics. And so the theme of the book is maternal ambivalence. So this is a phenomenon that I take to be, maybe, I wouldn't say universal, but incredibly common and perhaps existentially profound and common. So when mothers feel conflicted feelings of love and hate towards their children, when they feel both that they want to take care of their children, and they want to be free from their children. And yet they also take really excellent care of their children, I find this to be a much more compelling example for ethics and perhaps more paradigmatic for how we feel toward those we're intimately related to, than say an example where it's always easy and it's always natural to take care of one another.

This project came out of that kind of an insight where I thought, really, our most intimate ethical relationships *are* conflicted, *are* ambivalent. And so let's consider that and think about what can we learn from the maternal child relationship, looking at it in that light as opposed to looking at it as something that happens easily. What can we learn from the most conflicted mother-child relationships, including those where a mother even kills her child, when she really profoundly loves that child? Or in cases where a mother doesn't kill her child or doesn't abuse and doesn't neglect her child when she's in extremely difficult circumstances. What does that teach us philosophically? What does that teach us ethically about how human beings live together and what it means existentially to overlap with one another in terms of our subjectivity and inter-subjectivity?

Christiane: So let's talk about Nel Noddings who writes a lot about the ethics of care and motherhood, and she has this idea that women are naturally or biologically inclined to care for their children. And so she draws a lot out of that idea that it's natural. So you've mentioned before that that's not true, but is this maybe how a lot of philosophers think about ethics and caring for children?

Sarah LaChance Adams: Yeah, a lot of philosophers definitely think that when it comes to mothers in particular, it's easy and natural to take care of children if you're a woman, and particularly if you're a biological mother. And this is true, obviously outside of philosophy as well. I'm working with some literature written in scholarly journals by midwives right now, for example, that makes this claim that it's easy and natural for women to take care of children, biological mothers, that this is very easy for them. And empirically and experientially we just know that this is not true. So this is the kind of literature that really got my dander up and got this kind of project going and really kept me going.

Christiane: So you open your book with a really provocative example of motherhood. You write about LaShanda Armstrong who was a 25-year-old mother of three who deliberately killed her children and then herself. And you write that it was ambivalence about motherhood, rather than evil or insanity that led Armstrong to kill her children. Can you flesh this out for us? How is ambivalence related to ethics and motherhood?

Sarah LaChance Adams: So in the case of LaShanda Armstrong, there are a lot of people who testified, described what the situation was with her and her children. She lived in extreme poverty and had really no help in taking care of her children. A lot of people describe how she struggled to take care of them and really seemed to do her best in trying to take care of them. In a case like that, we see where a mother is really left alone to do the impossible. When a person has firsthand experience of how much labor there is involved in taking care of other vulnerable people, those who are unable really to do the work of taking care of themselves, how much it really takes to do that. So we see that it's not really a matter of the desire. It becomes a matter of the ability and having the resources.

So when a person not only doesn't have the social support, but they also don't have the financial resources to, say, hire someone to deliver them groceries or hire a babysitter to take care of the children while they take care of errands or do other things that they need. So not only do they lack the social support, they lack the financial capabilities. She was trying to work. She was trying to get an education to make her life better, and she eventually came to such a level of despair that she felt like the only option left was that she didn't have any other options, that she simply could not take care of her children and herself. And so it led her to killing herself and her children. So that's the kind of extreme example we see of ambivalence when a mother wants to take care of her children and comes to the point where she feels like she really can't because she doesn't have the capabilities.

And so the problem, the ethical problem, then becomes who do we place responsibility on for the caregiving of children? In our society we tend to think of it as an individual responsibility. And so the problem of romanticizing the mother-child relationship really comes to the forefront there. If it's natural for a mother to take care of her children, then why isn't she able to do it no matter what the circumstances are? That's where we really have to question that assumption.

Christiane Wisehart: You mentioned that this ambivalence can be stretched out to other types of relationships. So how does that happen? What other types of relationships sort of function like this?

Sarah LaChance Adams: We can think about the mother-child relationship and we can look at some markers that it has. There's extreme vulnerability and need. So the younger the child, for example, a newborn baby or a child with disabilities, there is a lot of care required in those cases, depending on the disabilities of course. And then we look at how much responsibility is placed on that caregiver, or how widely shared is the responsibility? How much resource does that person have? And then how much does that caregiver and the people around them imagine that one person is supposed to take care of on their own? So all of those factors play a role.

This can happen too in the case of a caregiver of a spouse who has dementia or has developed a disability later in life, the same kind of situation can occur. In that case, however, it's less likely that the people surrounding that person thinks that it's solely their responsibility to do it. Of course, when people become elderly in our society, there's again not as much support for taking

care of that person. The same goes for people with disabilities. We have a culture that tends to want to think that we are all ideally independent, self-sufficient individuals, and that's simply not the case. Most of us are temporarily able-bodied individuals, but it's very inconvenient for a capitalist society that wants everyone to be a worker, to acknowledge the fact that for most of our lives, most of us are not capable of working 40-plus hours a week. And, in fact, for those who aren't working, there are others who also need to take care of those who are not able to work. And then that subtracts other people from the labor pool.

Christiane Wisehart: What implications does this have for ethics generally when we introduce this idea of ambivalence and when we introduce this idea of interconnectedness?

Sarah LaChance Adams: Well, it has a lot of different implications. One, of course, is who is the ethical unit when we think about responsibility? For example, is it the individual mother's responsibility who harms her child? Is it the surrounding community? One of the examples in the book is a woman who severely abused her daughter in Eugene, Oregon. And this was occurring during the time that I was writing my dissertation in the community where I was writing my dissertation. And the prosecutor of this woman said that she was the only person who could have helped her child. This was just factually untrue. There were people who had an idea of what was going on. This child had a father somewhere in California. He didn't do anything about it. This child had a stepfather who lived in that house. She had gone to school before. There were people who had seen bruises on this child's body. The mother was the least capable person of helping this child, and yet it was believed that the mother was the person who was supposed to be responsible for her. That was simply not the case.

So there are social implications there. There are implications for how we think about who is the primary ethical unit of responsibility. That's not to say this woman shouldn't be held responsible. Of course she should, but what do we do about this when it fails? Is it really appropriate for us to just say, "Well, it was her fault." We may say that, but it really doesn't fix the problem. The other question is the more deeply philosophical one. This is the sociopolitical implication. From my point of view, the existential philosophical question is, what is the nature of the way that human beings relate to one another? Not just in terms of how do we interact with one another, but what are the boundaries between individuals?

One of the perspectives of this that I discuss in the book is that human beings are really not these atomistic individuals who sometimes interact in certain ways, but we are very intimately interrelated. We overlap in ways that we don't really acknowledge in Western society. This goes into another aspect of the book that is not just about ambivalence, but is also about our inter-subjective ambiguity, meaning that the boundaries between individuals are not always so clear. And we see this in particular in the mother-child relationship, say, if we look at pregnancy or we look at the way our physiologies interact during pregnancy, during breastfeeding, during birth, but also in relationships with older children, in relationships with our intimate partners. Our bodies are deeply affected by one another's. Our emotions are deeply affected by one another's. And all of this has bearing for ethics, of course.

Christiane Wisehart: I guess I'm wondering, is there a way to be better in relationship with each other, even though we live in this world where we're all atomistic individuals responsible for ourselves or only responsible for our children and not really responsible for anyone else in the world?

Sarah LaChance Adams: Ethics operates on so many levels. There's the legal. There's the political. There's the social, but there's also the intimate level that we have to function in most of the time. So, much of the kind of ethics that I teach and think about has to do with, how do we function as people with integrity? What kind of person do I want to be? The world as it is, in some ways I can affect that, but in some ways it's something that I have to deal with in trying to be a person that I can live with. And so I feel like that's the kind of question that you're asking. It's like I can be involved, and I am involved in trying to make society a better place, but I also just have to function in the face of the society that I live in.

The philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir is so much about that, it's really trying to gain a very in-depth insight into what is the world that we live in, in detail, and how does that affect us as individual human beings? What are we trying to face here? Because that constrains us profoundly, but it also provides exactly the context in which we can become as free as we can actually become. And so I think that all starts from gaining the most intimate knowledge possible of what kind of human beings we are and what kind of context we live in. Does that help to address at least in the direction of what you're thinking about?

Christiane Wisehart: Totally, yeah, because I think–and I'm glad you brought up Simone de Beauvoir because I love your explanation of her idea of the ethics of failure and how failure is absolutely enmeshed with just ethics in general. So I wondered if you could talk about that. What is the ethics of failure and what does that have to do with motherhood?

Sarah LaChance Adams: One of my favorite lines from her writing is, "Without failure, no ethics." So she says if humans weren't... I don't want to say destined, but if we weren't inevitably going to fail, we wouldn't need ethics in the first place. So we don't have ethics because we can be perfect. We have ethics because we need them. They provide us with our models to strive toward. And this is so appropriate, given what we've been saying about motherhood. Mothers don't need ethics because they're naturally good at being mothers. They need ethics because they are just as bad at being ethical as anyone else.

To me, failure is one of the most interesting parts of ethics. For Beauvoir, she has a really wonderful book. It's about her mother's death, and it's called *A Very Easy Death*. And the title is in some ways very sincere and also very tragic because her mother, she's talking about how her mother has actually a very privileged death. And so it's very much situated in the fact that her family is bourgeois and she has medical care, but it's also really painful and really tragic because her mother's dying, and she's suffering and in great pain, and she's a human being who's suffering her own death and so it can't be easy. And I think that that speaks to…so much

to what it's like to be human. And when she's describing her relationship to her mother, she says how it's as though no matter how much we do for someone else, no matter how much we strive to always be there for them, it's impossible to do all that we hope to do for someone else.

And, to me, that really captures a lot of people's and my own feelings about being a mother. And I think that that also speaks to why so many of us feel ambivalence, especially if we deeply love our children because there's no end to their needs. But also the world is such a difficult place, it's such a scary place. And we want to be there for them and protect them from everything and let them have every possible opportunity, but also every possible freedom. And it's just impossible. It's an impossible task to protect them, to give them freedom, to always be there for them, and yet to remain human beings ourselves. So failure is absolutely inevitable.

And I feel like Beauvoir captures that and understands that better than any philosopher that I've ever encountered. And she says, "We just have to acknowledge that ambiguity and that ambiguity is at the heart of ethics." And she also says, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that... She might say nearly every philosophy, but I'm just going to go and say every other philosophy tries to deny that. Tries to say, "Look, if we just do it this way, we'll have it right." Or some other philosophy says, "Look, if we do it this way, we'll have it right." Another says, "No, no, no, no. If we do it this way, we'll have it right." Like, "Just follow the principle of deontology, we'll be fine." "No, no, no. Follow the principle of utilitarianism. We'll have it right."

And she says like, "Look, no, we are always going to get it wrong, and we are going to suffer for it." And also, no matter how privileged we are. No death is easy. Even if it's the easiest death that ever was, it's still going to be to suck because we love that person. There's no way for it to be easy, and there's no way for us to be 100% ethical. That to me is why motherhood is such a good example for ethics because we can't possibly do it right.

Christiane Wisehart: My best friend is a therapist, and we talk about parenting all the time. And I'm always fretting because I'm like, "The stakes are so high. The stakes are too high. They're too high for me and I can't do it." And she always reminds me that without that there's no chance for repair. And that the chances for repair is where relationships flourish and are built. And the thing I also love about the ethics of failure is that it's the realest one.

Sarah LaChance Adams: And it's true. And there's some people, like Nel Noddings, I'm going out there and I'm saying it, who want to ruin care ethics and say that it's easy. And I'm sorry, but it's the hardest ethics there is. And when I first heard about care ethics, I hated it. I was like, "This is so simple. They make it sound so simple." But over the years, the more and more I learn about it and think about it, it is the hardest thing. It is the hardest thing there is. And the more you put it in context of the world and the sociopolitical situation that we live in, and thinking about trying to be a good person, and including thinking about one's white, first world privilege, if one has those things. It feels impossible to be a good person. It really does. Probably because it is.

But with Beauvoir, she's like, "That doesn't let you off the hook. You still have to go at it. You still have to keep at it." And that's part of what I love about her. She says, "There's no good answer, and you have to suffer through it. You have to keep at it the whole time." And I just think that's glorious.

Christiane Wisehart: So you shared with me before we started recording, that you have children of your own. And it's been almost 10 years since your book was published, which means that you've got 10 more years of parenting under your belt. So have your thoughts on motherhood evolved over the last decade? Have your thoughts on this topic of ambivalence evolved since you wrote the book and since you've parented more?

Sarah LaChance Adams: I started writing this before I had children, and it was based entirely on other women's accounts of motherhood. And then I was pregnant with my daughter, had my daughter, since had a son. My ideas have not changed. The only thing that's really changed is I think my ideas about gender have gotten more sophisticated, and I'm more interested and somewhat more knowledgeable about thinking about how we want to talk about what it means to be a mother and how much I want to tie that less to being a woman. I don't think that's necessarily as relevant of a term as I used to think it was. I do think it's relevant, but I don't think it's the only relevant term. I still think it's relevant in the sense that our society makes it relevant. But I think there are new and more ways to talk about oppression and gender when it comes to parenting.

So, for instance, right now I'm writing about the exclusion of trans and non-binary people in reproductive healthcare right now. And how, particularly in midwifery, and the hypocrisy of that is really, really troubling to me. And so that's something that I'm talking about right now. And I haven't really integrated those thoughts with the work that I've done previously in *Mad Mothers*.

So I don't think that that has changed my thoughts in that work. But I'm simply thinking about new things at this point. There are additional pains, pressures when it comes to other-gendered people. That's the only real difference. But my love for my children just gets... I don't know if it can get more, but I just learn new things about them and I learn more and more about my own possibilities for failure, I suppose, as I experience them. But life just keeps getting more interesting and more complex.

[Interview ends] **[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Etude 7]**

Christiane: If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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