

ISSUE 16
THE KIRBY
LAING
CENTRE

CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES
THE BIG PICTURE

THIRD PLACES



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INTRODUCING

The Mother's Smile

PHILOSOPHICAL FORMATION IN THE WELCOME OF MOTHERS AND FRIENDS

ESTHER LIGHTCAP MEEK

At first glance at its lovely cover, you may be inclined to dismiss *The Mother's Smile* as not a book for you. For mothers and babies, you think; about mothering and baby care, you surmise. Surely not a *philosophy book!* Surely not *about my philosophy!* Surely not *germane to public theology!*

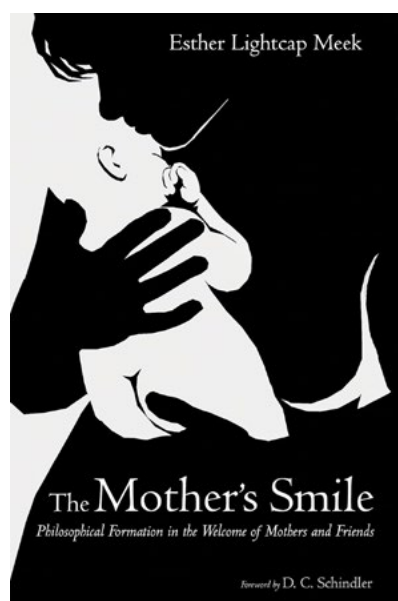
I hope you give it a second glance. You *are* in the cover's picture! You are *the baby!* – that is, you *were* the baby. There's not one of you who wasn't. If you are capable of reading this essay now, your mother or some other caregiver caught and cradled and welcomed you into their smile and world, from the first moment of your life through many months thereafter. You entered the world into the richest and most intimate face-to-face encounter imaginable. All of us entering the world are caught up into this profound philosophical act.

The book's subtitle suggests its thesis: at birth we begin to be formed philosophically in a natural, "natal" philosophy. This philosophical formation is sustained and matured over our lives in the delighted noticing regard of certain friends.

And as I claim in the book: "The mother's smile – our primal face-to-face welcome to the world – is the very

philosophical vision necessary to disarm and dispel the skewed spirit of our time, and to restore us philosophically to ourselves and to reality. And we don't need to adopt a new alternative so much as to return to what was originally ours."

Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote: "The little child awakens to self-consciousness through being addressed by the love of his mother." Philosopher and Balthasar scholar D. C. Schindler affirms that the event of *the mother's smile* forms the foundation of Balthasar's entire epistemology, giving his philosophy its distinctive quality.



In writing this book, I am simply "going to the bank" on these astounding claims. What is this philosophy which childbirth begins to shape? What is involved in our most fundamental sense of our own existence? How is Mother's welcome the shaping paradigm of our best acts of knowing? How does it shape our most fundamental philosophical act of saying yes to the real? Our understanding of reality's presence, there, beyond my thought of it? Our confidence in things' lively oneness, self-showing (beauty), self-giving (goodness), and self-saying (truth)? How does my encounter and communion with Mother – my first "other" – shape me in due regard for

all others, shaping me to be, philosophically, a friend? How does this natal encounter point on toward the face of God? – As Balthasar writes: “The promise of *the mother’s smile* is fulfilled only in Christianity.” Thus: philosophical anthropology, epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, and theology, public and otherwise.

In addition to mothers, there must be friends. I argue that as we see ourselves being seen in the delighted gaze of certain of our friends over our lives, this natal philosophy is sustained, matured, and sometimes (as in my own story) even restored.

You may well ask: how can a person reflect on one’s own birth event and experience? You can’t even remember it! It turns out that we access it, as I have done in writing the book, by being mothers and fathers ourselves (and aunts and uncles and...), and by having friends who see us with delighted regard, in whose gaze we see ourselves being seen. Actually, a key experience for me has been being a grandmamá: seeing my grandson Laurie in the welcoming smile of my daughter, his mother.



But *I ask you* – How could this fundamental primal philosophy have been overlooked? Of course, philosophically aware people know very well that our modern age eschews philosophy. And even without that, doing philosophy is a lot like trying to see your elbow: philosophy is more something you wear than something you stare at. It’s always difficult to put words on it. However, philosophically aware and adept people also seem generally to discount, not even to notice, this most fundamental arena of the tiny child being formed philosophically in *the mother’s smile*.

Nor did !! Until only in recent years – as a grandmamá, actually! My plunge into philosophy, so I used to think, began with an inward crisis of skepticism at age thirteen: How do I know...! How do I know that God exists? How do I know, for that matter, that anything exists outside of my mind?? This set me on a lifelong philosophical quest. For decades I felt that the quest could only be about knowing, because I couldn’t have the arrogance to presume to talk about reality! In my philosophical study I came to realize that the picture I had found in my head, which as a product

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of modernity I thought was obvious, was Descartes' epoch-forming paradigm. Yet over my career, especially thanks to the metaphysical confidence of scientist-turned-philosopher Michael Polanyi, I have continued to take baby steps (in hope!) toward the real and toward interpersoned encounter as epistemically paradigmatic.

For decades I called myself a baby skeptic. Humbly I confess that only in the last five years did I realize: I wasn't a *baby* skeptic! My skepticism was "adolescent onset"! This freed me to look back and remember, in my tiny childhood, my exuberant love of the real – to recognize and accredit my natural natal philosophy. Humbly I confess that it is only late and last that I have come to see what was first and fundamental. Now it is glaringly obvious that my implicit, adolescent, modern Cartesian picture discredited, disavowed, disrespected and jettisoned an earlier, more fundamental and natural vision, a philosophically superior one, forged in the arms of my mother.

"This changes everything!" excitedly shouted a personal friend who is widely known as a cultural analyst (who is also a mother), when she heard my presentation on the mother's welcome. In this diminutive book's masterful Foreword, D. C. Schindler writes of the real reward for anyone reading it: for those who have been philosophical all along without realizing

it – (the ones I think of as my own primary audience), as well as for those "who have already studied philosophy at some depth [who] will discover a new dimension of experience that they have probably not explored much before, and can look forward to seeing things that could very well bring about a shift in their perspective."

"She shows us that the most basic philosophical act – a great Yes to being as such – is not a grand achievement reserved only for the heroes of the mind, but has always already been ours. We simply have to retrieve this original experience."

I commend to you this retrieval. Together may we explore its wider implications for our lives and for our time.

Learn more at www.estherlightcapmeek.com.

Read an excerpt and D. C. Schindler's "Foreword" at www.estherlightcapmeek.com/the-mothers-smile-ms.html.

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