

Esther Lightcap Meek

The Mother's Smile: Philosophical Formation in the Welcome of Mothers and Friends

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Reading the newest book by Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Geneva College, Dr. Esther Lightcap Meek, has made me wonder if this is a book on philosophy, motherhood, or God. The almost seamless way she shifts her attention from one subject to the other, while at the same time connecting them masterfully, makes you realize that the book was written to correspond to reality, where motherhood, philosophy, God, and indeed all the other things, exist interrelatedly even when we are not aware of this. Indeed, in the first chapter, the author notices how hard it was for her to be a mother and a philosopher at first, only later to understand that these two professions go hand in hand and how mothers, but also other significant people, are “carrying out formative philosophical ministrations” (p. 2).

The author grounds her philosophical approach in the epistemology of Michael Polanyi (p. 3), who fought against the modernist epistemology that reduces knowing to a mere collection of information that is useful for humankind by detached and, in modernist thinking, objective interpreters (pp. 5–7). Building upon Polanyi, Esther advocates for “covenant epistemology,” where knowledge comes from “mutually transformative interpersonal encounter” in which reality is “person-like,” and she argues that we first meet this person-like knowledge in the mother’s smile – that is, in relationships that form and condition us to become the kind of knower we truly are – personal and therefore in relation to the reality we seek to know.

According to Meek, the mother’s smile is an encounter that forms children by opening the world to them, giving them an anchor for reality (p. 13). There is something indispensable in seeing your mother’s gaze and in being seen by her that establishes grounds for further maturity. Indeed, the mother’s smile is only the first and existentially crucial step toward philosophical maturity that is interpersonal through and through. It prefigures many other formative gazes: of a father, of friends, and even of “nonhuman things we come to know in encounter-esque acts of discovery and insight” (p. 15). And then, all these points point toward and invite us to seek the face of God. Meek writes: “Over one’s life, one comes to see that God was the face there from the beginning, somehow in all the key faces along the way. It is God whose face matters above all, redeeming us and all else” (p. 15).

When a child and its mother meet face to face, an existential change ensues in both (p. 18). Employing insights from philosopher Martin Buber, she shows what happens in this encounter. When we encounter others, we become who we are supposed to be, which then propels even our understanding of our relation to God. We realize that “I-Am of God,” which Buber calls “I-You” encounter. On the other hand, we are to bring this personal, relational experience into all our attempts to understand the world. Who we are as beings that stand in relationship to others and to God influences our knowing of the world because we no longer perceive the world as something devoid of meaning and personality, but it becomes to us a “thou,” a conversational partner of sorts (pp. 18–19).

Meek then brings another philosopher into conversation, Drew Leder, who proposed “four developing dimensions of humanness,” that is, the self, the world, the void, and the Holy (p. 19). Although modernism has primarily focused itself upon the self as the quintessential knower and the world as an arena of objects to be known, we know from our own existential reality that this is not the entirety of reality. We all encounter the void, a death-like experience that can be anything traumatic or even nonexistent as boredom, from which we are not able to escape without the help from Above. Only when we encounter all four dimensions can we mature “to being able to give love” and thus also to be a mature lover (p. 20). Meek sees this happening already at our birth: a baby-self is taken from the womb into the void, and is being welcomed by its mother, thus bringing about the dimension of Holy: “the eruption of new being, the transformational undoing of nothingness” (p. 21). And in some sense, she concludes, the Holy actually comes first both in time and in primacy, therefore forming us by “paradigmatically shaping our sense of ourselves and all our involvements with the world.” And if so, then limiting ourselves – as modernism taught us – to only two dimensions of self and the world means cutting ourselves from exactly that which can transform us into our best selves (p. 22).

Descartes has taught us that our thinking is the evidence of our existence, but the author ponders if this has not reduced our world and impoverished our experience of it (p. 30). She posits that we sense our existence through being seen by others, because we really know that we exist prior to doubting it and then taking the Cartesian medicine to placate our adolescent fear. Being seen by others is “paradigmatic and formative of our knowing, and of our sense of reality” (p. 28). But what does it mean to know? It means to make “sense of the world” (p. 33), Meek answers. She compares her epistemology to that of modernism, where knowledge is a mere collection of useful information (pp. 34–35). Yet she believes that knowledge is “*not information but rather encounter*” (p. 38), an embodied event of grasping reality. Also, reality is “*not object but other*” (p. 38). It is not something we master and objectify, but something we reach into and get involved with as we would with a person. This means that knowing is “empathetic” and

“nonpossessive” in the sense that we acknowledge the other in an attempt to love that which we want to know (pp. 41–42). She also describes knowing as “community not correctness,” which means that knowing is enwrapped with delight (p. 43). Finally, knowing is about seeing the whole, which she calls “a Gestalt,” in the sense that the aim of knowing is to gain this fullness of understanding (p. 44). For example, when she encounters her garden, she does not want to dissect it into a million parts in a quest for information, but to experience it as a beautiful whole throughout the seasons and years of her caring for it (p. 45).

Indeed, Meek’s garden helps us imagine how we want to engage with reality in general as something we truly want to know and grasp (p. 47). It is the mother who “inaugurates Baby’s grasp of reality itself” (p. 48), because she *is* to her baby “the face of reality itself” (p. 50). And the child responds to this reality with a resounding “Yes,” only later learning to refuse to acknowledge reality or at least to suspect it, and be indifferent to it (pp. 51–52). The modernist project turns us into “anti-realists” (p. 53) by moving us away from reality in the way it turns us inward and detached from it. Nevertheless, when we saw the face of our mother, we became realists because we encountered the other, and in the other we recognized that we are also *another* to others, thus confirming that there is a reality outside ourselves (p. 53). Not only that, but it has shown us that these other things are like ourselves, a view that is anthropomorphic in the sense that we are conditioned to grasp reality in the way that it is unfolding itself to humans (p. 55). These other things do not just exist for our utility, but they “share in reality with us.” And therefore, we are united to what Meek calls “a metaphysics of childhood” (p. 56). In a way that resembles our joy upon seeing mother’s gaze, we are to acknowledge reality with thankfulness and love for the other, as we desire to commune with reality (p. 61).

As we can already sense, the other is very important to Meek’s epistemology, and therefore we should not be surprised when she writes that the “whole reason for existence is communion with the other” (p. 62). We are again in our mother’s embrace, becoming aware both of this motherly *other* and of ourselves “as the other of Mother” (p. 63). Indeed, the mother’s gaze taught us to be invested in knowing this other, whether these are people or other things, and this involves our love for the other (p. 64). Counter to the modernist ideal of mastering and objectifying things, we need to acknowledge the personhood of other things because only then can we “honor the thing as it really is, delighting in knowing it entirely for its own sake” (p. 67).

As we grow, and even in our childhood, there are significant others who play a crucial role in sustaining the mother’s smile, namely, our friends. Dad is also such a face, one that is both “a second mother [and] a second friend.” It is in those faces, Meek suggests, that “we see ourselves being seen” (pp. 70–71). And as our friends see us, this enables us to grow into our real selves, which are, as Meek uses Rowan Williams’ ideas here, more than we are, and are able to see ourselves. She

then quotes Caroline Simon, who said that “love is ‘imagining the other’s destiny truly’” (pp. 72–73), which means that we give our friends a certain authority, and therefore this authority should be given with caution (p. 77). It also means that we should be careful both *that* we see and *how* we project this vision of others (pp. 77–78). Climactically, all these faces gazing and smiling at us, imagining our destiny, point us further to the face of God. This is the Face the Israelites called upon for bringing blessing and peace (Num 6:22-29), the face of a God that sees us even when we are invisible to others (Gen 16:13), of God seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who manifested himself to many like he did to Paul on the road to Damascus (pp. 80–81). This encounter with God’s face starts at conversion and continues as we live our lives before the face of God (p. 82–83). Therefore, it is very important to properly imagine this face of God, considering the face of a mother, gazing upon us with her welcoming smile (p. 87).

In her final chapter, Meek brings us to her teleological goal: to delight. We delight in seeing the face of our mother, dad, friends, and many others who have blessed us with their “noticing regard.” We should reciprocate this gift by looking with delight at others. This is especially important for our children, as Meek believes that “parents’ most important task with their children is to delight in them” (p. 91). But we should also look with delight at our friends and even at nonhuman things, making sure that the screens we are constantly looking at are not taking away our gaze from them. And this naturally takes us to Meek’s implications of her ideas. She first invites us to thank and honor our mother as our “first philosophy professor” (p. 92). Second, she invites us to start on a journey of healing (p. 93). And we do this, thirdly, by identifying those “select few faces of friends and family who see us with steady, noticing regard” (p. 94). Fourthly, we should also thank those friends that see us “with delight and welcome,” and even if there are no such faces (which, as we have seen, naturally point us beyond themselves) then fifthly, Meek invites us to seek the face of God (Ps 27:10). Finally, the author calls us to cultivate our philosophical life as we return to our natural philosophical mode of gaze and wonder at reality. She invites us to love reality to know it (pp. 95–96).

Reading Esther Lightcap Meek’s book was an existential experience: smart, emotional, at times hard, always heart and mind-opening. Reading it brought memories of my late mother, who had imperfectly but lovingly delighted in my sister and me with a gaze that was taken away from us too soon. It reiterated for me the importance of friends, especially those older, more mature, totally confident friends who were therefore perfectly able to commend me when I excelled and to lovingly correct me when I needed it. As a theologian, I found that reality is sacramental. It points us to God while also remaining important for our well-being that we engage with it personally. Life is about living in the world and

delighting in God through his gifts, mother, friends, flowers, sea, food, and every other “other” we encounter.

Reading *The Mother’s Smile* has also brought some questions. First, how does this challenge theological education and even Bible exposition, which is often focused on amassing theological and practical knowledge and on dissecting the Bible through inductive study, devoid of embodied encounter with the world? Second, how much reality and delight could we lose if we delegate a lot of our cognitive-based work to AI, for example, if we stop reading books and articles and focus on their AI summaries, or if we let AI translate these works effortlessly, but also physically unengaged with outside reality? Third, I believe that Meek’s post-critical epistemology offers a great way to avoid both the modernist infatuation with the factual confirmation of the Bible in apologetics and the postmodern relativization of all truth.

In conclusion, I heartily recommend you read this book. Reading this review without delving into the work itself would be a very modernist approach. You get all the information, but you lack the formative experience the book gives. You lack the “Gestalt,” the beautiful whole, the garden of insights and stirred up memories, even regrets, that only reading and imbibing can give you. You will not regret it; on the contrary, you will be delighted with it.

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Kelly M. Kapic

Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen

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If someone were to mention John Owen, few Christians from Southeast Europe would recognize his name. Maybe only those who took a deep dive into the 17th and 18th-century church history. We rarely hear about Puritans nowadays. However, here in front of you is a book review about the theology of one of the best Puritan theologians of its time. His books and treatises are still published (Crossway has a new series of his completed works), and he is read by laypeople and theologians in the West (especially among Reformed scholars). You can find many editions of his individual works. Yet none has been translated into Croatian (not even abridged versions published by The Banner of Truth Trust). My goal is to provide local readers of Kairos with a review of the book that actually addresses John Owen’s theology. The title speaks for itself: *Communion with God: the Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* - Kapic dives deep into the works of