SIMULTANEOUS PURSUIT OF WISDOM AND MOTHERHOOD

My daughter Olivia turned 2 years old on November 12, 2015. During her lifetime, I was pursuing my career as a philosopher while mostly “staying at home” with her, on maternity leave. Actually, we often didn’t stay home: I was taking her to conferences, visits to various universities—cities, countries many of them new to me as well as to her. As soon as Olivia was 5 months old, my husband, András and I decided to set out for North America. We were told to watch out for ear pressure issues for Olivia during take-off and landing; she slept through, like a pro. For those first talks I gave after Olivia was born (at the University of Toronto, Northwestern and Yale), I still had to do considerable calculating to schedule her feedings around my presentation, so she wouldn’t miss me while I was away. (I didn’t get in the habit of pumping breast milk: there was no need as during her fully breast fed first 6 months, Olivia had maybe 3 feedings when I wasn’t around. But that didn’t mean I was being stationary: it meant I was mobile and so was she.)

In all, I have given 23 philosophy talks over the past 2 years, and Olivia accompanied me to all but one of them. She has flown 25 times. She has visited 12 countries (13 if you count flight transfers). She learned to clap at a 5-day conference in Dubrovnik that she sat (and crawled) through at 10 months of age. 3 times, conference organizers arranged for childcare on the premises. 4 times, Olivia stayed with me in the room where I was giving my talk with colleagues helping to watch her. With András (also a university professor) we tried to coordinate our talk and conference schedules, so we could travel together whenever possible; even so, Olivia and I flew as a twosome 10 times, and attended 11 conferences/colloquia without András accompanying us (twice we drove, to Łódź and to Belgrade; we also took the train from Budapest to Bratislava, Brno and Prague).

Just a bit of a background on the Hungarian maternity leave system (which is bizarrely generous by European standards even): Hungary accommodates 3 years of paid maternity (or paternity) leave, which entitles one parent to a maximum of 3 years with a decreasing payment scale. Roughly: the parent on leave receives max. 70% of his/her regular salary for the first 6 months, a maximum of about 65% of the current Hungarian average salary for another 18 months, and for the last year, a maximum of about 15% of the current Hungarian average salary. This is supposed to give an incentive for people to have more kids; in fact, as far as I can tell, it’s a significant source of imbalance-perpetuation in families. On the one hand, 99% of the time, it is mothers who go on leave, so many who have 2 or more children stay home for 6 or more years, after which they find it impossible to get reemployed in a position remotely comparable to what they left when going on leave. On the other hand, men tend to help at home far less as they take the division of labor to be such that the man works full time while the woman is paid (a considerably lesser amount) by the state to be the homemaker.

Paperwork for applying for and receiving conference funds in Hungary has, unfortunately, become extremely time-consuming and complicated over recent years. I often felt like I was caught in a juggling act to work out seemingly simple details. Some of the financial support promised for conferences where my presentation was accepted took 30 follow-up email messages and 5 months to receive. But I remained undeterred: the period before Olivia turned 2 (and was still allowed to fly in my lap, not requiring her own seat) seemed like an ideal time to fit more travelling in. Also, that was a time when I didn’t yet have to return to teaching my 4 courses per semester. (I began teaching again in September 2015.) There were conferences that would have been too expensive to secure funds for, but I was still allowed to contribute my accepted paper to the conference proceedings volume. At another conference
at the University of Kent, organizers arranged for me to give my talk over Skype (not the same as being there, but still, I got some great comments from across the Channel, while sitting in my study, and got to contribute my paper to the proceedings volume). For conferences that were within a drivable distance, I coordinated with friends who were also attending, so we would drive together and in one case, even rent an apartment together, which meant I got a lot of help with keeping up with the conference and Olivia through that week.

Travelling with a baby is about logistics galore. You often need, besides a plan B, a plan C and a plan D also. For every one of our 25 flights, I bought insurance for my own plane ticket in case Olivia got suddenly ill and I needed to leave open the option of postponing the trip by a day or two; that was a safeguard we never ended up using. Also, imagine the task of preparing a week-long trip with a 10-month-old in a stair-filled city like Dubrovnik: locating a modestly priced yet baby-compatible studio apartment and a sufficiently accessible shop from which to obtain 30+ jars of baby food whose labels were in German, a language I could read. I ended up walking up and down 140 steep steps several times a day to get to and from our apartment while I was carrying Olivia strapped to my chest in a carrier plus an extra backpack filled with her baby gear as well as my stuff, including rain covers, given that we caught a very shower-heavy time. I could not have made it through that week if it weren’t for colleagues (honorary aunts and uncles to Olivia, as I looked at them) helping me at many junctures: carrying the bags of baby food purchased, taking over carrying my heavy backpack whenever we went sightseeing together. I kept planning ahead to try to optimize things as much as possible: leaving baby food and supplies (diapers, toys) at the conference venue (which was in the part of Dubrovnik that was “downstairs”, near the sea), keeping a stroller in a nearby “downstairs” café so I could sleep Olivia in it during the day and do some (largely) stairs-free sightseeing with her after our conference day was over.

A friend told me about an impressive policy at the University of Konstanz: for talks as well as conferences, there is a separate budget allocated that can be used for childcare purposes only. That I thought was wonderful because with that policy mothers with babies don’t get blamed (consciously or unconsciously) for imposing a financial burden on the organizing department by requesting childcare; they (or others) don’t have to feel as though because of the mothers, the conference registration fees of other participants go up or the cookies served during coffee breaks will be less fancy. In an academic world that remains man-dominated as much as philosophy still is, especially at higher ranks and at more prestigious venues, it takes time to get the community to adjust and acknowledge the idea that a mother can reasonably request childcare help and other modes of accommodating her so she can participate with a baby. Having that sort of budget as in Konstanz is a great, blame-free way to speed up the adjustment process for men (and women) previously unaccustomed to such requests being regarded as legitimate. (I’ve heard that such designated funds are being introduced in North America also, at Yale, for example.)

Actually, I myself would have been uncertain what I could expect from conference organizers if it weren’t for our first-ever joint conference, at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. Olivia was less than 4 months old when I got word that my paper was accepted. I was thrilled but could not really imagine what Olivia would be like during the conference, at 7 months old (sleeping way less, teething, eating solid foods). When I told about my situation to the chief organizers (two graduating Ph.D. students) they were enthusiastic to help me, obtaining an additional grant intended specifically for babysitting expenses, helping to find a reliable babysitter (our 2nd babysitter ever) and reserving an adjacent space at the conference venue for Olivia and her babysitter to hang out so I could, during breaks, breastfeed Olivia and spend a bit of time with her. That was the first time since Olivia’s birth that an entire day went by without my seeing a dirty diaper, which was a nice change of pace. More importantly, it was also the first time since her birth that I could sit through and focus on conference talks others were giving and engage in discussion (it wasn’t easy, I felt the rust and the sleep deprivation, but I was determined to forge on). For me, this was the perfect counterpoint to the daily routine of caring for a
baby, bringing a thrill akin to that of a vacation. That experience taught me that in the second decade of the 21st century, I can walk the conference trail because I won’t have to walk it alone—I can have Olivia and the academic community as my helping companions.

These two years have been an exhilarating journey – for both Olivia and I. We got to spend indispensable time together while requiring limited outside help from family members accompanying us on our trips (which would have been quite costly). I called it sustainable conferencing for a mother with a baby (and hopefully, a couple of years down the line, we can call it sustainable conferencing for a parent with a baby). To make our joint conferencing work, Olivia and I minimally needed no more than flexibility on the part of the organizers and participants, to allow her to come in with me: for Olivia was pretty well behaved pretty much all the time, making noise that wasn’t louder than that of a colleague dozing off and snoring away at a talk (which is not infrequent!).

That is not to say Olivia was noise-free. But I (and almost all my colleagues) considered her noise level within the bounds of acceptability given the payoff: that this way, women in academia with babies get to participate when otherwise they wouldn’t be able to. (Of course, I did take Olivia out of the conference room if she got louder than her base level.) And for most colleagues of mine, in Hungary as well as abroad, Olivia was the first baby conference participant they encountered; surprisingly, that included Swedish and Norwegian philosophers. Interestingly, 2 of the total of 3 times that I got disapproving glances and remarks over Olivia’s noise level at talks were at western universities and not Eastern European ones. Of course, not having a babysitter meant my ability to focus on other conference participants’ talks was considerably reduced as it took intricate logistics to keep Olivia relatively noise-free; still, I managed to maintain a 60–70% attention-level, and I figured that was still well worth it as 60–70% participation is a whole lot higher than the alternative of 0% if I didn’t attend.

The key bit was that (while I was taking on the bulk of the burden of figuring out how to swing a conference or talk with Olivia accompanying me, and was delighted to do so) conference organizers and participants were willing to help and accommodate us: to figure out funding for babysitting options if possible, or to allow me to bring Olivia in with me and to spread out (and then pick up) her toys in the back of the room. I got by with a little (sometimes a lot of) help from my friends and colleagues. That made me feel included and welcome in the philosophical community in a way I couldn’t have been if I had had to figure out Olivia-watching all on my own.

Once I was asked: “Can’t you leave Olivia with your husband to watch her?” To which I responded by explaining sustainable conferencing for a mother with a baby (the question came from another heterosexual woman): “Traditionally, family men can rely on their spouse watching their young child—but you and I don’t have wives, you see.” To be sure, my husband has been sharing many aspects of baby-related duties, but (i) I didn’t think any spouse (whether that’s a man or a woman) should automatically be expected to fill the role of a homemaker wife from the 1960s and 1970s, (ii) András was working full time while I was on maternity leave, so for us to arrange for and cover his time away from work plus his added travel expenses would have made my attending conferences and talks the kind of luxury expense it isn’t supposed to be, and (iii) while Olivia and I were pretty self-sufficient on our trips, I found it far more helpful that András helped while we were at home (sharing feeding-related tasks, play time, night duty), so I could sit down at my computer and write the talks I was planning to give and the papers I was planning to publish.

It was on this last point, about finding time to do research (read and write), that I needed the most outside help from early on, once Olivia passed the 6 months mark. Before that, I could easily put in full work days at my computer in between feedings while Olivia was asleep in her crib or in her pram in our balcony, right next to my computer station. She was, at the time, sleeping 16–20 hours per day, which means a night’s worth of sleep (sort of) plus a full workday! I do realize and appreciate how lucky I was
that Olivia was such a flexible, easy baby (and I know many aren’t this fortunate); but I did think her being so easy was an opportunity to seize, given that my mind so much appreciated and craved the intellectual engagement of doing philosophy. That sort of cerebral activity, for me, seemed to complement motherhood.

When Olivia turned 9 months, we began relying on babysitters and when she turned 1 year old, Olivia started state-run daycare, which she loves. This way, I got enough time at my computer to boost my publication record with 15 new articles over the span of 2 years (which is about 4 times the speed I had before Olivia arrived in our lives). But all this required serious teamwork with András and our babysitters. Our team also included one close relative who has been a very helpful Dr. Jekyll for several months, but occasionally let out her inner Mr. Hyde, subjecting me to intense verbal abuse, chastising me for being a bad, selfish mother who is putting her career first. (Given the specifics of climbing the academic ranks within the humanities in Hungary, I have had to focus on quantity rather than spending a longer time to place fewer papers in some of the top international journals in philosophy. Now that the requisite quantity of 50 published items is completed, quality placement of papers will be my next endeavor. And that goal seems within reach in the light of some breathtaking news I just received: in 2016, I’ll be starting a Marie Curie Fellowship at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, just a 2-hour drive from Budapest.)

I do realize my desire for intellectual engagement may not be typical among mothers with babies. And there are many women who are amazing at being full-time mothers for 5+ years, with 2+ kids. Mine isn’t the only true path, but nor is theirs. (Indeed, there is no such thing as the true path, here or elsewhere in life.) And—in a time when Hungarian women are pressured by society and well-meaning friends and relatives to just be mothers for three years, because that’s the only way to really, truly be there as a mother—it bears stressing why (besides intellectual engagement and seeing Olivia thriving through all our travels and being one of the happiest children I know) I spent my first two years of motherhood the way I did. I did it

• because women vary in their lifestyle and intellectual preferences and they should be given options, choices (especially if they are in a fortunate situation like mine in having a career that is easily pursued from home);
• because a path like mine is doable and can be highly enjoyable and fulfilling, for both mother and baby (and, perhaps, in upcoming decades, for father and baby also); it has been for me and Olivia;
• because enrolling a child in daycare (state-run or private) can be a great choice, not a sign of negligent motherhood, as it is often portrayed, in Hungary especially;
• because often, it’s a key example for a small child to be seeing her mother pursuing a career and to be witnessing the (frequently better) power balance in the family compared to a situation in which the man is the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker;
• because potentially, a little girl seeing her mom engaged in a career can contribute to her growing up to be the kind of woman who believes she can follow her dreams, with respect to both career and family (potentially, such an experience can benefit a little boy also, opening his mind to a broader spectrum of paths that women may choose to pursue);
• because I felt I could contribute to making the world a better place for female academics with babies by exposing philosophers to my own baby companion: next time they organize a conference, they’ll be more willing, determined and open to accommodating a baby, by offering childcare help or allowing that the baby be brought in for the conference (as long as that causes manageable disruption, of course);
• because upon seeing me with Olivia, younger colleagues, typically women (but also men) might realize that bringing their babies along for talks and conferences is doable, it’s not a given that mothers have to miss out on or radically reduce conference participation in the early months of a baby’s life;
because I also felt I could contribute to making the world a better place for generations of women growing up today, including Olivia’s;

and also (to quote the newly elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s recent words) because it’s 2015.

Here then are Olivia’s and my joint academic achievements over the past two years: presentations and publications. And at the end, a long list of colleagues whose help and encouragement has been instrumental along the way.

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CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS, INVITED TALKS IN ENGLISH

(Abbreviations: peer-reviewed conference presentation PeerConfP, invited conference presentation InvConfP, invited colloquium InvColl, invited seminar InvSem, home institution talk HomeT.

2015
“Revisiting a Problem for Possible-Worlds Analyses of Modality. A Case Against the If-Direction.”
1. InvColl at Institute for Logic, Language and Computation (ILLC), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, October 2015.
2. InvConfP at 1st Belgrade Conference on Conditionals, Philosophy Department, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia, May 2015.

“Inadvertently Created Fictional Characters are Innocuous.”
3. PeerConfP at the conference Modal Metaphysics: Issues on the (Im)Possible II, Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia, September 2015. [the one event Olivia wasn’t in town for]
4. InvColl at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic, September 2015.

“Fictional Characters and Goodman’s Inadvertent Creation Challenge.”
9. “Why Think that Authors Create Fictional Characters?” InvColl at the Departmental Colloquium of the Department of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen, Great Britain, March 2015.
10. “Fictional Characters, Mythical Objects and Goodman’s Inadvertent Creation Challenge”. InvSem at the Work in Progress Seminar, Department of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen, Great Britain, March 2015.

2014
11. “Does the Name ‘Harry Potter’ Refer to Anything?” InvSem at the Department of Philosophy at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, October 2014.

“Relevance Theory: Accounting for Metaphor and Malapropism.”

13. InvColl at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic, October 2014.

14. HomeT at the MASZAT Colloquium Series (Round Table Society of Hungarian Semanticists), MTA Research Institute for Linguistics, Budapest, September 2014.

15. “Inferring Content: Metaphor and Malapropism.” InvConfP at the conference Philosophy of Linguistics and Language X. in the Special Session on Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s Philosophy of Language, Interuniversity Center Dubrovnik, Croatia, September 2014.


“Revisiting a Problem for Possible-Worlds Analyses of Modality: The Case for Entailment Rather Than Analysis.”

17. HomeT at LaPoM, Logic and Philosophy of Mathematics Student and Faculty Seminar, Department of Logic, Institute of Philosophy, ELTE, Budapest, November 2014.

18. PeerConfP at Logic, Grammar, and Meaning, a conference on philosophy, logic, and linguistics at the University of East Anglia, Institute of Philosophy, Norwich, Great Britain, June 2014.


CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS, INVITED TALKS IN HUNGARIAN

2015

1. “Relevance Theory about Metaphor and Malapropism.” HomeT Integrative Argumentation Studies OTKA Reading Group, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Department of Philosophy and History of Science, Budapest, April 2015.

2. “Understanding and Slips of the Tongue.” InvConfP at the conference Meaning and Experience, Kaposvár University, Kaposvár, January 2015.
PUBLICATIONS IN ENGLISH

ARTICLES
(Abbreviations: invited journal article InvJournal, invited journal article that was subsequently peer-reviewed InvPeerJournal, conference proceedings paper selected based on peer-review PeerConfProc.)


PUBLICATIONS IN HUNGARIAN

ARTICLES
(Abbreviations: invited journal article InvJournal, peer-reviewed journal article PeerJournal, invited journal article that was subsequently peer-reviewed InvPeerJournal, invited book chapter BookChap.)


ellen] Magyar Filozófiai Szemle 59/1 55–77. Special Issue: Monadológia [Monadology], Dániel Schmal (ed.). InvPeerJournal


EDITED VOLUME


BOOK REVIEW


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