

Vaccination and Its Discontents: Review of “On Immunity” by Eula Biss

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Powerful cultural metaphors shape the public understanding of science and medicine, a theme explored by Eula Biss in her latest book *On Immunity: An Inoculation*. The book is a meditation on vaccination, motherhood, and citizenship, which unfolds through a series of personal reflections that emerged from Biss’ conversations with friends and colleagues. It draws on a diverse range of sources, from current events and popular culture to literature and philosophy. Although Biss is a supporter of vaccination, her narrative captures the fears and uncertainties that vaccines evoke from the perspective of a mother, and provides valuable insight into the strong beliefs in our culture that inform vaccine hesitancy.

In vaccination, Biss writes, “the metaphors we find in this gesture are overwhelmingly fearful, and almost always suggest violation, corruption, and pollution.”¹ These metaphors resonate with popular beliefs that associate the “natural” with what is “pure and safe and benign.” Ironically, Biss observes, “the use of the *natural* as a synonym for good is almost certainly a product of our profound alienation from the natural world.” Vaccination’s threat to bodily purity conjures up fears of environmental destruction, from Minamata to *Silent Spring*.² Assurances from vaccine proponents, such as Paul Offit’s statement that babies can safely respond to “a hundred thousand different vaccines,” do little to alleviate these fears, and only reinforce the violent imagery evoked by vaccination.³ *On Immunity* reveals the pitfalls of vaccination campaigns that operate on the assumption that vaccine hesitancy among parents results from public ignorance or misunderstanding of science best remedied by proper dissemination of scientific facts. Biss’ conversations with mothers paint a very different picture, showing how parents are conscientiously informed and make decisions based on what they believe to be in the best interests of their children. Biss’ description of vaccine hesitancy finds empirical support through research in the social sciences.^{4,5} “Risk perception may not be about quantifiable risk so much as it is about immeasurable fear,” Biss writes, “and as with other strongly held beliefs, our fears are dear to us.”¹

Biss empathizes with these fears and the mistrust of scientific experts and institutions they engender. Indeed, trust is something that must be earned, and the history of medicine provides plenty of reasons to be sceptical of the medical pro-

fession—especially from a feminist perspective. Nonetheless, Biss is troubled by how this attitude manages to warp maternal love and protection into a worldview in which “nobody can be trusted.” She is critical of the “stale metaphors” that underwrite popular opinion against vaccination, which conceive of the child’s body as a distinct entity—pure and uncorrupted—in need of protection from a hostile world. As Biss highlights, the notion of ‘what is best for *my* child’ represents an individualism that derives from this atomistic conception of the self. This view fails to appreciate how our bodies are constitutive of a larger, collective body. Within this context, vaccination becomes a duty of citizenship to protect all mem-

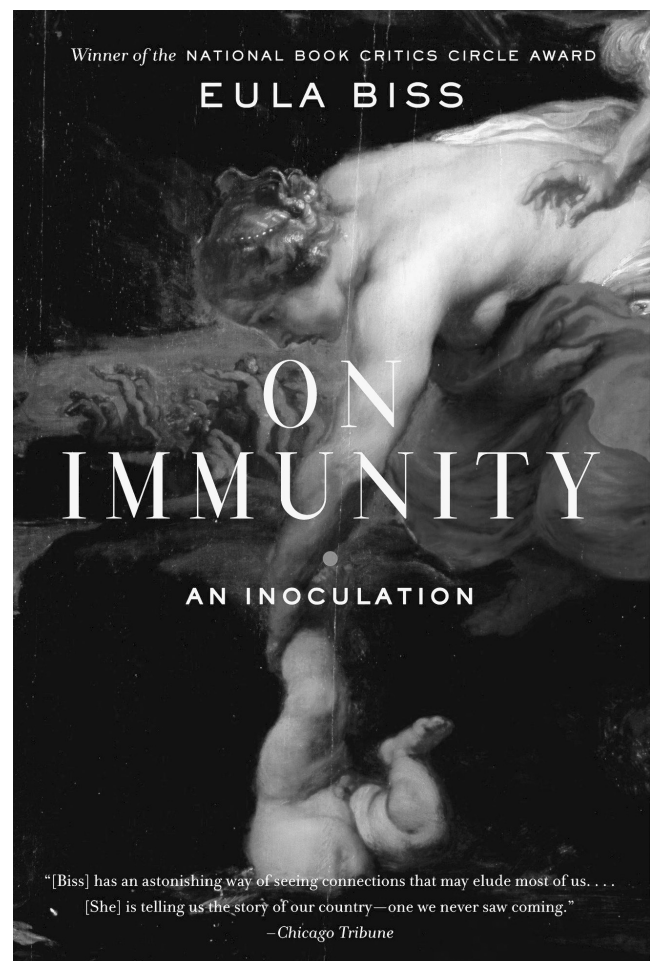


Figure 1. *On Immunity: An Inoculation*
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bers of society, whom our existence depends upon—indeed, as Biss points out, the Latin root of the word immunity, *munis*, means “service or duty.” However, Biss’ argument for vaccination is not simply a matter of placing the good of the collective above that of the individual. Such arguments, which pit the individual against the collective lead to insoluble paradoxes and fail to recognize that individuals are part of the public—that public health is *our* health. Biss’s criticism extends deeper, emphasizing that the “illusion of independence” which we inherit from the Enlightenment, does not account for how the “health of our bodies always depends on choices other people are making.” *On Immunity* works to break down this illusion, and emphasizes our obligate existence as interdependent, social beings.

Biss’ book fosters a richer understanding of the cultural significance of vaccination and immunity, which also happens to align more closely with current scientific views. In immunology, the distinction between self and non-self continues to erode as we reckon with the fact that the human body consists mostly of non-human microorganisms—bacteria, fungi, and archaea—“The Human Microbiome,” the theme of our current issue. “We have more microorganisms in our guts than we have cells in our bodies,” Biss writes, “we are crawling with bacteria and we are full of chemicals. We are, in other words, continuous with everything here on earth. Including, and especially, each other.” We no longer view our bodies as closed systems, but rather understand our interconnectedness with our surroundings and dependence on our environment for health. This destabilization of the body—the representation

of bodies in a state of flux—would seem unsurprising to pre-modern practitioners, but represents a shift in consciousness for modern medicine, which in large part inherits the post-Enlightenment individualism of our culture.

On Immunity goes beyond simply elucidating cultural views of vaccination to offer new metaphors which transcend the fearful individualism that underwrites vaccine hesitancy. Biss empathizes with conscientious vaccine-hesitant parents—and at times counted herself among them—but recognizes that our discourse surrounding vaccination requires updating to contend with our social existence. George Eliot once wrote: “we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.”⁶ As Biss observes, “stale metaphors reproduce stale thinking. Mixed metaphors confuse. And metaphors flow in two directions—thinking about one thing in terms of another can illuminate or obscure both.” Readers of *On Immunity* will agree that Biss’ metaphors succeed in illuminating the importance of vaccination while giving expression to the tension inherent in our individual and social embodied existences.

References

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