

Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline Lundquist
Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering
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Pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity have been only sporadically discussed within the philosophical canon. Although these phenomena are central to the creation of life itself, their role in philosophy has been limited to occasional mentions in the work of feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young. However, a growing number of scholars have begun to remedy this problem by examining female reproductive and maternal experience through a philosophical lens. *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering* is an important contribution to this growing body of work. This volume was co-edited by Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline Lundquist after the 2009 Philosophical Inquiry into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering Conference, a conference that brought together scholars working on the intersection between philosophy and reproduction. As the editors argue, the traditional separation between philosophy and pregnancy reflects both women's absence from the history of the discipline as well as the mistaken belief that the personal has nothing to do with the philosophical. The book attempts to rectify the absence of philosophical thought on these experiences by collecting essays on the intersections between philosophy and childbirth, pregnancy, and maternity.

The book's fourteen essays are divided into five thematic sections: "The Philosophical Canon," "Ethics," "Politics," "Popular Culture," and "Feminist Phenomenology." Throughout each of these sections, contributors grapple with the phenomena of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering in relation to philosophers such as Young, Beauvoir, Plato, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Julia Kristeva. The opening sections of the book are notably well organized, compelling both as a complete text and as a series of engaging essays. The book's second section, "Ethics," is particularly clear in its focus, as essays by Gail Weiss, Dorothy Rogers, and Melissa Burchard examine the ethical imperatives surrounding birth mothers and adoptive mothers. Although the book's later sections lack some of the organizational clarity of the focused opening sections, the connections between essays in and across the book's sections contribute to a rich, persuasive dialogue. "The Philosophical Canon" and "Popular Culture," which I discuss in detail below, exemplify the book's admirable ability to move across theoretical and cultural ground with equal depth and interest.

The first section of the book provides one of the collection's highlights, with essays concerning the relationship between foundations of philosophical thought and the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. In the collection's opening essay, "Plato, Maternity, and Power," Cynthia Coe explores the negative impacts of the making-metaphorical of pregnancy. Coe argues that Plato's vision of the male philosopher giving birth to ideas functions to push aside the act of physical birth; as she writes, "one may be pregnant *either* in body or in mind, but not both" (34). Indeed, she argues, Plato's rejection of embodied maternity implies that childbirth ties women's bodies to the corruption of the flesh. This rejection leaves little room for women's lived experiences of pregnancy. In order to create a definition of selfhood that can account for these experiences, Coe argues that the self must be reimagined as an emerging, relational subject.

In two other essays in the first section of the book, Kayley Varnallis and Frances Gray argue that the active role of women in gestation and childbirth has been underestimated by previous philosophical work. Varnallis, in "Of Courage Born: Reflections on Childbirth and Manly Courage," argues that masculine definitions of courage---specifically, physical, pro-social (PPS) courage---actively eliminate women's actions in gestation and childbearing from definitions of courage. PPS courage excludes courageous acts that involve relatives; therefore, the term does not allow us to view the acts of women in childbirth as morally and politically courageous, contributing to the common vision of women's bodies as shameful. A definition of PPS courage that accounts for gestation and childbirth would therefore contribute to a new, less negative vision of the female body. Elsewhere, Frances Gray's essay "Original Habitation: Pregnant Flesh as Absolute Hospitality" uses Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh to trace the relationship between hospitality and pregnancy. Flesh, as Gray understands the term, "is an incarnate principle that brings style of being;" pregnant flesh "anticipates the possibility of all mutual intersubjective understanding" (72). Gray persuasively argues that the familiar model of hospitality presented by Derrida cannot fully account for pregnant flesh. The relationship between pregnant flesh and embryo predates the existence of two separate beings, and thus cannot be seen as a guest-host relationship. She argues that a model that takes pregnant flesh as the absolute form of hospitality would allow for a richer view of hospitality itself. Importantly, Gray's argument contributes to a widening body of scholarship, including works such as Irina Aristarkhova's *The Hospitality of the Matrix*, that reconsiders hospitality through the lens of pregnancy and gestation. Gray also notes that the hospitality of pregnant flesh does not mean that pregnancies cannot be ended by choice; she argues that hospitality is itself "coterminous with the making of the fetus," and thus that the hospitable relationship can either be chosen or willingly ended (87).

Another standout essay in the first section, Lisa Guenther's "The Birth of Sexual Difference: A Feminist Response to Merleau-Ponty," further examines Merleau-Ponty's concept of the flesh. Guenther notes that Merleau-Ponty's failure to consider the lived experiences of women who give birth represents a notable oversight in his work. Despite this oversight, she argues that Merleau-Ponty's sense of flesh as possibility allows for a revised reading of the embryological development of gender, a reading that is less dualistic and more open to epigenetic and other developmental possibilities. Both Guenther and Gray usefully reincorporate the lived experience of pregnancy into Merleau-Ponty's use of embryological models to illustrate the concept of flesh, demonstrating the productive rereadings of the philosophical canon that feminist philosophy makes possible. These productive rereadings represent a true strength of the essays within the

book, as the authors attempt not just to point out oversights within the canon, but to illustrate why they matter and how they can be productively used to reinterpret the texts.

Whereas early essays in the collection focus on reinterpreting the philosophical canon, later essays center on cultural attitudes about the reproducing body. In the book's fourth section, "Popular Culture," Kelly Oliver and Rebecca Tuvel examine cultural representations of pregnancy and breastfeeding. In "Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Hollywood Film and Popular Culture," Oliver examines the history of representations of pregnancy in Hollywood from the 1930s to the present. She argues that film is a powerful place in which to find reflections of our ambivalent and changing relationship with pregnancy. Oliver notes that a paradoxical relationship has historically been at play within film; when women were most valued for their reproductive capacities, depictions of pregnancy were taboo, whereas contemporary films are likely to depict pregnancy even while thinking about the balance between work and life. Most important, she argues that contemporary films, even while appearing to have progressive values, suggest that women are ultimately fulfilled by becoming mothers; these films depict an ambivalence and disgust toward the actual process of giving birth while still highlighting the appeal of childbirth and pregnancy. Tuvel's essay "Exposing the Breast: The Animal and the Abject in American Attitudes toward Breastfeeding" turns specifically to cinematic and other cultural representations of breastfeeding. Tuvel argues that we must become more willing to embrace, rather than reject, the links to embodiment and animality that breastfeeding makes visible. Her discussion of the objectification of public breastfeeding offers a particularly unique perspective. Like many other scholars, she notes that backlash against public breastfeeding connects to the understanding of breasts as sexual. However, she also notes that this understanding is not applied to the woman herself. That is, although breastfeeding is considered too sexual an act to be done in public, it is also an act that should not be sexual in any way for the mother; the sexual nature of the act must be contained entirely in the viewer. She supports this claim by discussing women who lost custody of their children after they asked questions about their feelings of arousal while breastfeeding. Through this careful study, Tuvel provides an important addition to conversations about public breastfeeding and the objectification of women's bodies.

One of the collection's strongest contributions comes through the authors' steadfast refusal to treat pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity as a single process. The editors point out in their introduction that, although these three actions are often interconnected, they do not necessarily require one another. Pregnancy may or may not end in childbirth; birth mothers may or may not continue to mother their children; adoptive parents mother without necessarily experiencing their child's gestation or birth. Therefore, the collection aims to provide "a more reflective conception of the phenomena taken individually and of their interrelation" (21). This aim represents an important intervention into discussions of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity, as these categories have often been collapsed into or allowed to eclipse one another, resulting in a single narrative about what pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood look like.

Despite this strength, the collection could go further in its attention to the full range of women's experiences with pregnancy. Although the essays by Gray, Florentien Verhage, and Bertha Alvarez Manninen, through discussions of abortion, work against the implication that all pregnancies must end in live birth, the collection's essays fail to consider the possibility of

miscarriage or stillbirth except in passing. Because miscarriages occur in approximately twenty percent of clinically recognized---and fifty percent of all---pregnancies, this omission leaves out a large number of pregnancies. As Linda Layne and others have pointed out, overlooking pregnancy loss is common within feminist scholarship; however, in a collection that so carefully attempts to avoid conflating pregnancy and childbirth, this omission remains surprising. The collection misses an opportunity to further enrich its arguments about pregnancy, an opportunity that would allow the authors to grapple with the need to understand pregnancy both as a choice and as a process that does not always end in the desired product.

This shortcoming is perhaps more notable because the essays in *Coming to Life* represent such a broad array of interests in and approaches to the book's subject. For example: Sonya Charles argues that the midwifery model championed by Ina May Gaskin and others may, in fact, disempower women; Manninen looks for a way out of the pro-choice/pro-life dichotomy that would give women reproductive choices while also providing for their economic security; and Verhage uses feminist phenomenology and the unfolding experience of her own pregnancy to illuminate the "*strange* creativity" inherent in pregnancy. Although the diversity of these essays occasionally threatens to make the collection feel disjointed, the emergence and reemergence of key figures and terms, including Merleau-Ponty, Young, and the active role of women in childbirth, provide invigorating connections between the texts. As a result, the broad range of essays in *Coming to Life* will appeal to scholars from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives on pregnancy, birthing, and mothering.

Overall, *Coming to Life* provides a clear step forward for feminist philosophy, offering a collection of engaging scholarship on previously overlooked topics. The book's wide range of content makes it useful for both philosophers and scholars working on related issues in other disciplines. The collection is also admirably accessible while still grappling carefully with philosophical texts, a trait that illustrates the book's dedication to interacting with a wide range of readers and interests. There remains much more to be done within this field, but *Coming to Life* opens the door to a vital surge of scholarship within the fields of pregnancy, motherhood, and childbirth studies.