

SARAH LACHANCE ADAMS AND  
CAROLINE R. LUNDQUIST

## Coming to Life

*Philosophies of Pregnancy,  
Childbirth, and Mothering*



PERSPECTIVES IN  
CONTINENTAL  
PHILOSOPHY

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## Coming to Life

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Edited by  
SARAH LACHANCE ADAMS  
and CAROLINE R. LUNDQUIST

**Coming to Life**  
*Philosophies of Pregnancy,  
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This volume is dedicated to the University of Oregon Philosophy Department for its ongoing support of feminist scholarship, and to Bonnie Mann for helping two young scholars come to life.





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## Foreword

EVA KITTA Y

What a joy to see a collection such as this. In it, Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline Lundquist realize one of the hopes of the earlier generation of feminist philosophers of which I am a part: that philosophy takes seriously the experience and lives of women. Every woman, whether she has embarked on the path of motherhood and whether she has gotten there via pregnancy and childbirth, is faced with the default social expectation that maternity is her destiny and her principle source of accomplishment and joy. A concomitant ideology, found not only in Western society but also more globally, is that not only the social but even the ontological status of woman is tied to her capacity to bear children, give birth to them, and rear them. Therefore, *every* woman is touched by the topics covered here, whether they are part of her actual experience or the imaginary through which women's subjectivity is constructed. Hence, these concerns are central to any philosophical project that takes the lives of women seriously.

The essays here place the nurturance, physicality, and situatedness of mothering in dialogue with the abstraction and putative universality of philosophy's canonical works. They explore the profound shaping of a woman's identity and subjectivity through the process of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering both when there is and when—through miscarriage, abortion, or adoption—there is no child to nurture and raise. The essays are explored through the works of traditional male philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, as well as the groundbreaking works of feminist philosophers such as Sara Ruddick, Iris

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Young, Virginia Held, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, among many others. In some chapters, we are invited to see features of the pregnant and maternal body through the lens of contemporary culture. In many, the philosophy proceeds by means of the writers' experiences.

The personal voice in the essays is not incidental to the philosophical project. It reveals vividly how the disembodied impersonal voice of philosophy is, as a matter of fact, already deeply gendered, reflecting the perspective of a dominant voice that has the luxury and privilege of taking itself as definitive of human experience. If men got pregnant, and were expected to get pregnant, bear children, and feed them from their own bodies, would a philosophical discourse created by men fail to feature the generative capacity of their bodies? Would they blithely ignore the doubling of bodies in pregnancy, the indeterminacy of the pregnant person as one or two? Would they so easily relegate the body functions by which humans reproduce to our animal and abjected nature—regarding them to be of little importance to the distinctiveness of humans? Today we have women engaging in philosophy—and doing so *as women*, that is, as people who come equipped to the task with the distinctive capacities of the female body, the socially constructed subjectivity of a gendered self, and a set of life experiences that vie with those pictures of the human that our male philosophers have handed us. For these women philosophers, the sense of wonder does not stop at the doorstep the sexually differentiated body. At that threshold a new wonder takes hold.

While the labor of mothering has received a good airing by both proponents and critics of an “ethic of care,” many aspects of mothering beg for a continued exploration. In this collection a number of different aspects of mothering come into focus. When a birth mother who chooses (if that is an appropriate term given the social stigma that can attach to pregnancy of an unwed woman) to give up her child for adoption, how is she to understand her motherhood, and does she take up a maternal identity? When a mother adopts a child whose history of sexual abuse skews the sexual desire of the abused child, how does one take up the project of mothering? The essays that address these questions show us a side of motherhood that has not yet found its way into ethical discussions of care and mothering. They also make us see that the specificity and complexity of maternal identity is far greater than what we have thus far attempted to comprehend.

Most of the essays, however, are phenomenological and ethical investigations of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. The visceral, bodily aspects of maternity are at play. This is what makes this collection unique and pushes the dialogue forward. It challenges many settled views. As humans, we are foremost of woman born. What is the moral significance of being

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born and giving birth? How and when is it appropriate to speak of childbirth as an act of courage? Do we really want to give over to abortion foes the moniker “pro-life”? Can we not claim to be pro-life and still honor a woman’s right to decide? Should we not take the intrinsic interdependence of human life as firstly expressed in the relationship between a pregnant woman and the additional life she fosters? Shouldn’t we take the fact that pregnancy does not always result in a child, but sometimes ends in an abortion or miscarriage, as *fundamental* to our understanding of pregnancy? Is pregnancy a passive experience in contrast to the creative process of the artist or is the receptiveness of the artist to the world she inhabits analogous to the “waiting” of the pregnant woman? How do we confront the affront that the exposed breast of the breastfeeding woman gives to the conceit of humans as separate from and above nature and the animal?

This is a collection that shows both how far feminist philosophy has come and how it is a spur to moving us onward. The collection has a strong phenomenological cast, one that is very appropriate, since the phenomenological tradition has explicitly addressed our embodied nature. However, it should motivate feminist philosophers from other traditions to raise similar questions and utilize the resources of differing traditions to search for satisfactory answers.

My last remarks bring me to my concluding point, namely, that the essays here illustrate what feminist philosophy has been so successful in doing: to ask new questions that at once both plumb and challenge the rich reservoir of method and wisdom philosophy offers in the hope of finding richer, truer, and most useful understandings of our lives.



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## Acknowledgments

Some four years ago, in the process of planning an international conference on pregnancy, childbirth and mothering, we awakened to the tremendous need for quality scholarship on these themes. It was then that we determined to begin assembling the present volume. We were well aware of the many obstacles with which we would have to contend—including and especially the very personal challenge of balancing our responsibilities to our children with the demands of editing a manuscript of this length. From the beginning, our work was a labor of love. Our steady conviction regarding the value of this project coupled with our increasing awareness of its uniqueness, drove us to continue. But personal conviction could only have taken us so far; without the help and support of our colleagues, contributors, family and friends—and even a bit of luck—this volume would never have come to life. We therefore ask our readers to join us in acknowledging the many people who have helped us along the way.

Amrita Banerjee and Elena Cuffari joined us in organizing the conference which inspired this volume. The conference itself and the project of assembling an edited volume on the conference theme were fully supported by the University of Oregon Philosophy Department, and especially by its former Department Head, John Lysaker, and Bonnie Mann. Others who helped to make the conference a success include: Kara Barnette, Paul Burcher, Carolyn Culbertson, Jazmine Gabriel, David Goodman, Lisa Guenther, Aurora Hudson, Emma Jones, T.K. Landázuri, Jennifer Lang, Johanna Luttrell, Nikki McClure, José Mendoza, Andrea O'Reilly, Kimberly



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As junior scholars the advice and assistance of our more experienced colleagues at various stages the publication process was invaluable. We would especially like to thank Lisa Guenther, Bonnie Mann, Kelly Oliver, and Gail Weiss.

Throughout the process of editing this volume, the tireless efforts of our contributors have made our work easier. We cannot thank them enough, and share their joy in seeing their excellent work published here at last.

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at Fordham University Press whose comments indubitably improved this volume, Erin Blood and Aurora Laybourn-Candlish, whose work on the most tedious parts of the final manuscript were completed with characteristic efficiency.

Last but not least, we would also like to acknowledge the incredible family members who supported us in innumerable ways throughout the editing process: Joan Adams, Robert Adams, Nancy Bird LaChance, Linda Petersen and David Whalley. A very special thanks to our children—to Bella and Atticus Whalley, for reminding their mother that balance is the key to a philosophical life worth living, and to Geneva LaChance Adams, for demonstrating to her mother what it really means to be a philosopher: to have an ongoing sense of wonder about that which we usually take for granted.

We can never fully express our gratitude to all.

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## **Coming to Life**



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# Introduction: The Philosophical Significance of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering

SARAH LACHANCE ADAMS  
AND CAROLINE LUNDQUIST

Philosophy has often been described as preparation for death. Cicero wrote that to philosophize is to learn how to die, and Heidegger claims that being-toward-death constitutes the authentic attitude toward life. These ideas are not intended to be morbid. Rather, they propose that we should not be enslaved by death, not be driven by our evasions of it through forgetfulness or the striving toward immortality. In doing so, we would miss much of what is worth living for. To run away from death is to run away from life. Thus, in *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, Simon Critchley writes, “The denial of death is self-hatred.”<sup>1</sup>

While many philosophers have embraced life by way of death, they have typically evaded another fundamental truth of our existence, the book-end at the other end of life—birth. It is sometimes said that you cannot be there at your own origin. Nevertheless, it is true that one can be present at the origin of another human being—conception, pregnancy, childbirth, the child’s first word, the first steps, and so on. These are the experiences that women are usually more involved in than men. Yet, since women have largely been excluded from the practice of academic philosophy, their experiences have rarely found just representation in the canon. As a result, philosophy has a long history of ignoring, misunderstanding, reappropriating, and denigrating pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. This volume is part of a growing movement to correct these problems.

Although this anthology is not a proceedings volume, it was inspired by conversations that took place at a conference entitled Philosophical Inquiry

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into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering at the University of Oregon in May 2009, which we organized with Amrita Banerjee and Elena Cuffari.<sup>2</sup> The year before, we had discovered that the four of us were simultaneously working on research projects on the topics of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. We had each found ourselves primarily working from resources outside of philosophy. Indeed, there is a wealth of creative nonfiction on motherhood and anthologies about motherhood and politics, lesbian mothering, mothering and race, mothering in poverty, teenage mothers, breastfeeding, and many other topics. There are thought-provoking memoirs that discuss adoption, postpartum depression, caring for a child with disabilities, and more. There are sociological, anthropological, and psychological studies. There is also the Motherhood Institute for Research and Community Involvement (formerly the Association for Research on Mothering), which houses the *Journal of the Motherhood Institute* (formerly the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*). As compared to scholars in other disciplines, philosophers seem either willfully or unwittingly ignorant of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the tremendous interest in the 2009 conference made it clear that in spite of this lacuna in the literature, there is widespread (international as well as interdisciplinary) interest in philosophical approaches to these topics.<sup>4</sup>

As Aristotle famously said, all philosophy begins in wonder. To be sure, the contributors to this anthology have found that a renewed sense of wonder before such “ordinary” (yet extraordinarily irreducible) experiences as pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering opens up dynamic avenues for philosophical inquiry and discourse. For more than three decades, feminist theorists have pointed to the exclusion of women and women’s experience from the history of philosophy and from the philosophical canon. Feminist critiques have emphasized the devastating consequences of this exclusion for women, as well as its negative impact on philosophy. As can be seen in the works of such groundbreaking figures as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, the inclusion of women and of women’s experience renews and enriches philosophy beyond measure. The authors in this anthology further demonstrate that considerations of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering provide an invaluable perspective from which to explore philosophical texts, themes, and questions.

We offer this volume to scholars and advanced students from varied disciplines. Since some readers may be unfamiliar with the history of feminist philosophy and extant philosophical considerations of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, the present introduction provides an overview of some of the foundational work in this area. Although we cannot presume to summarize the history of feminist philosophy, or all philosophical

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treatments of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, we hope that a brief overview will provide readers a sufficient ground for understanding and assessing the pieces that follow. We begin by indicating that in spite of the overwhelming value of women's experiences, philosophers have often treated them dismissively or used them opportunistically as metaphors for metaphysical concepts. Reflecting on the historical relationship between philosophy and feminist theory, we call for a reexamination of some deep philosophical prejudices that so often bar conventional philosophers from taking feminist philosophy, or women's experiences, seriously. We address these prejudices in the section concerning our approach. First, we consider the view that the personal is *opposed to* the philosophical. Next we address the perennial problem of essentialism in the light of Iris Young's notion of gender as seriality; we offer Young's approach as a way to navigate the personal and the theoretical while avoiding the sweeping claims that characterize essentialist philosophical theory. We maintain that contemporary feminist phenomenology is one successful illustration of Young's methodology at work and serves as an example of the significance of philosophical inquiries into pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. Nevertheless, the authors in this anthology utilize several valuable philosophical approaches. We go on to consider the broader philosophical significance of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering through explorations of gendered metaphysics, ethical theory, and social/political philosophy. Individual chapter summaries appear at the end of this introduction.

### **Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering in Philosophy**

To say that philosophy has historically been unkind to women would be an understatement. Not only have women been largely excluded from the practice of academic philosophy, but their experiences have also rarely found just representation in the canon. The philosophical canon is characterized in no small way as one that ignores, minimizes, and misappropriates the experiences of women. Philosophers who do consider the mother-child relationship often foreclose the question of its significance by considering pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering as mere obstacles to women's participation in public life and to their financial independence. In constructing a vision of a more egalitarian society, the problem becomes how to care for children if women are not primarily engaged with this task. In these utopian visions, women's individual responsibility for children and childrearing is reduced in favor of a more communal approach.

Plato's *Republic* is a classical example of a philosophical text in which maternity is viewed primarily as an obstruction to the good life. Socrates

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argues that women of the guardian class (in spite of their relative weakness as compared to men) should be educated as men, participate in the same pursuits, and not be “incapacitated by the bearing and breeding of whelps.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Frederick Engels argues for the elimination of women’s isolation in independent households. In his critique of capitalism, he claims that the emergence of patriarchy is integral with that of capitalism, and that the injustices inherent to the two systems are parallel. Engels’s critique of patriarchy was important and clearly progressive, but his consideration of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering is limited in that he considers it only as symptomatic of the problem of patriarchy.

This negative perspective on pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering persisted into the twentieth century. Bertrand Russell, like Engels, critiques the subjection of women, especially their economic dependence. Like Plato, he advocates that children be raised in common nurseries, “the logical consequence of which would be the elimination of mother as well as father from all importance in child psychology.”<sup>6</sup> Another solution he offers is that motherhood become a professional occupation such that the “production of children” would become a “moneymaking career,” but a profession in which most women would not need to participate.<sup>7</sup>

Some contemporary feminist philosophers have also considered women’s responsibility for children as primarily a problem to be solved. Claudia Card and bell hooks advocate for “revolutionary parenting”—community-based childcare in which mothers are not the sole primary caregivers.<sup>8</sup> This suggestion may apply more specifically to white families, as Patricia Hill Collins claims that a system of “othermothering”—shared childrearing between mothers in a community—already exists in African American communities.<sup>9</sup> Card and hooks’s solution accompanies a critique of the nuclear family model in which they contend that motherhood has been compulsory and oppressive for women. While Plato, Engels, and Russell believe that the emotional bonds of family life are basically old-fashioned, Card claims they are *detrimental* to children as well as mothers. The extreme of this view can be found in “Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women” by Jeffner Allen. She argues that “motherhood is dangerous to women” and should be “rendered null and void;” she develops a “philosophy of evacuation” from motherhood.<sup>10</sup> Critiques of the patriarchal constraints on mothering are obviously essential, but they may be taken as prematurely foreclosing the question of its philosophical relevance.

Some philosophers dismiss pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood in a more backhanded manner. That is, they make metaphorical use of these phenomena while denigrating or disregarding *women’s* experiences of

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them. Once again, Plato is the first philosopher to diminish women in this respect. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates famously employs metaphors of pregnancy and childbirth to explain the process of coming to an understanding, knowledge or wisdom.<sup>11</sup> In *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Emmanuel Levinas employs maternity as a metaphor to describe subjectivity:

The evocation of maternity in this metaphor suggests to us the proper sense of oneself. The oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity. In this sense it is the victim of a persecution that paralyzes any assumption that could awaken it, so that it would posit itself for itself.<sup>12</sup>

Although for Levinas, pregnancy and motherhood are the image of all ethical relations, feminist critics note the tiresome stereotype of the self-sacrificing mother in Levinas's work. Here, as with Plato, the metaphorical use of mothering appears to denigrate real women.

The contentious relationship that sometimes exists between conventional philosophy and feminist philosophy may have to do with a vague suspicion that feminist scholars implicitly or explicitly demand the denunciation of the philosophical canon, or at least several of its constituent texts. This suspicion is understandable; after all, feminist philosophers are known for their critiques of key historical figures. But the belief that feminists would like nothing more than to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater stems from a misunderstanding of what feminist critiques of the canon aim to accomplish, coupled with a denial of the philosophical significance of that project.<sup>13</sup>

Feminist philosophers contend that a significant portion of human experience has not been properly attended to in most historical philosophy, and, as stated earlier, that canonical philosophical theory may therefore not be as rich or accurate as it ought to be. While some feminists have focused on drawing attention to overtly misogynistic statements in the work of such thinkers as Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche, the more philosophical facet of feminist critique emphasizes the role of gendered notions in canonical philosophical theory. As Cynthia Freeland argues in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, the pressing question for feminist theory is not, *did Aristotle have mistaken views of women*, but instead *did such views find their way into his philosophical theories?*<sup>14</sup> If his theoretical frameworks contain "gendered notions," or notions that are in some way equated with beliefs about a specific gender, then a second question arises, namely, *can Aristotelian theory, when stripped of its gendered notions, maintain its theoretical integrity?* Thus at the heart of feminist critique is a quintessentially



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