

## Book Reviews

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### Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering

Sheila Lintott and Maureen Sander-Staudt, eds.  
New York: Routledge, 2012.

REVIEWED BY ANNA HENNESSEY

The past two years mark an impressive moment in the history of philosophical scholarship on childbirth, pregnancy, and mothering. The almost simultaneous publication of *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, part of Routledge's series on Contemporary Philosophy, and Fordham University Press' 2013 volume, *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering* (edited by Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist) demonstrates the growing academic interest in the philosophical import of maternal subjects. The University of Oregon's 2009 conference, *Philosophical Inquiry into Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering Conference* catalyzed the compilation and publication of both works. These works help fill the longstanding intellectual void that revolves around topics of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering within the field of philosophy and the humanities. In this review, I examine the material of Routledge's publication alone.

In their introduction, editors Sheila Lintott and Maureen Sander-Staudt join with the volume's authors to question canonical male understandings of pregnancy, birth and mothering in philosophy, as found for example in works by Plato, who categorizes pregnancy and childbirth as mere bodily functions and motherhood as a sub-rational activity; Aristotle, who diminishes and ignores motherhood's import beyond its connection to biology; and Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who naturalize motherhood and describe it as a romantic or naturalistic endeavor as opposed to a philosophical one (3). The editors explain that although philosophers have historically focused

on universals in the human experience, such as death, they have given little attention to the biological maternal relation (2). As the chapters show, pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering often involve complex queries that branch into all areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy.

Lintott, Sander-Staudt, and the contributors pay special attention to the subjective maternal point of view, which has traditionally been marginalized in philosophy. The fifteen essays collected in this volume span a wide range of topics such as the phenomenology of pregnant embodiment, the ethics of breastfeeding, and the sublime in gestation and birth, yet are still not limited to normative understandings of pregnancy childbirth, or mothering.

Section One, “Maternal Norms, Practices, and Insights”, opens with Jean Keller’s discussion of transracial adoptive maternal practice. Referring to the goals constitutive of maternal practice as found in Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* (1989), Keller maps out how these practices are inadequate in the case of actual adoptive maternal practice, which involves an ethical dimension of parenting that lies beyond that required of normative parenting. “Kinning,” or the work of creating family, and true integration across racial-ethnic lines, comprise the two goals of Keller’s model of parenting for transracially adoptive parents. Jennifer Benson and Allison Wolf’s chapter on the postpartum period next looks at how the postpartum body is often ignored in lay literature and culture. The “fourth trimester” of a pregnancy is a critical time for the woman, and the lack of societal focus on the postpartum experience contributes to a psychological oppression of the postpartum woman. Benson and Wolf call for increased societal affirmation of the postpartum woman’s existence, an affirmation that should make its presence clear through literature and culture. Two chapters on breastfeeding follow the work of Benson and Wolf, providing the reader with two opposing yet complementary arguments on the ethical and political dimensions of breastfeeding. First, Christine Overall and Tabitha Bernard argue for the moral responsibility to breastfeed. Lissa Skitolsky’s essay then offers a woman’s suffering in the course of breastfeeding as a moral objection to the act. All three authors agree, however, that an overarching ethical and political problem exists in assessing the dilemma of whether to breastfeed or not: society does not acknowledge the work it takes for a woman to breastfeed. Bernard and Overall emphasize society’s responsibility in supporting breastfeeding, and Skitolsky ultimately argues that all children deserve breast milk, but that maternal cross-nursing and milk banking should be developed so as to remove the lactational suffering that some women experience. In the last essay in this section, Sherri Irvin quite effectively merges a discussion of the phenomenology of disgust with the ethics of raising babies and small children.

Section Two, “Maternal Roles and Relations,” begins with Maeve O’Donovan’s thesis that the employment of feminist standpoint theory methodology when researching mothering with disabilities will lead to an increase in research conducted by mothers with disabilities. Such research may actually produce results that indicate advantages of mothering with disability, including the normalization of disability for children who may or may not be disabled themselves. Christine A. James then takes a close look at how Catholic mothers of children with disabilities provide potent narratives that act doubly: they reframe traditionally passive virtues of motherhood by demonstrating the sacred and the profane as equally constitutive components in the formation of successful parenting, and they offer a female empowered postmodern model for contemporary church leadership. Alison Stone’s essay studies the psychoanalytic connection between mothers and daughters, while focusing on mothers’ lived experiences of their relations with their daughters. Looking at Freudian approaches to mother–daughter relations, as well as those of numerous feminist thinkers, Stone addresses the topic of psychical mergence. Influenced by the work of Daniel Stern (1985), she finds that an infant’s world is better described as one of relationality than of mergence, and that infants live with their mothers as real others, as opposed to as fused existential counterparts (134). Stone agrees there is a difficulty in mother–daughter relations not present in mother–son relations, but that this difficulty can be creative, as opposed to paralyzing. In his essay, Joshua Shaw responds to claims that the void in philosophical literature on childbirth, pregnancy, and motherhood relates to the fact that these issues do not revolve around the interests of men (140). Shaw thinks that a man’s interests may actually relate closely to these issues but that the social institutions in which topics are discussed are highly gendered and mostly inaccessible to men. Shaw desires a change in the structuring of these social institutions such that male philosophers might have access not only to the stories mothers have to tell, but also to the contexts in which they tell them. Beckey Sukovaty rounds out Section Two with a discussion of developing feminist care ethics through an analysis of stepmothering. The stepmother, contends Sukovaty, acts both as mother and “other,” embracing a dual nature that allows her to penetrate the Good Mother–Bad Mother dichotomy and provide for a new feminist model of ethical caring.

Section Three, “Maternal Phenomena, Phenomenology, and Aesthetics” introduces Brooke Schueneman’s theories on how a woman’s experience of the phenomenology of pregnancy involves significant social, psychological, and physical metamorphosis, and has the capacity to transform her fears of death. Importantly, Schueneman addresses the distinction that Sara Ruddick makes between “birth-giver” and mother, in which Ruddick explains how a

mother need be neither the birth-giver nor a woman (167). While Schuene-man agrees with this point, she also wants to carve out space for philosophical discussion of what it is to experience embodiment as a birth-giver, or what she terms the *becoming-mother*. In the next essay, Julie Piering discusses the spatial interrelationship of the public and the private that meet at the place of the pregnant body. This body contains a corporeal collective, embodying the interests of the woman, the unborn child, and the society. Sally Fischer's study on "Becoming Bovine" acts in a twofold manner. The essay's first half presents a woman's pregnant and birthing self as having an intercorporeal significance through which the woman realizes that her lived body is actually related to others from the inside (193). Fischer explains how the nature of this intercorporeal significance puts into question Cartesian ontology and epistemology, especially Cartesian dichotomies of subject/object, mind/body, human/animal, etc. (192). The second half extends this discussion to explain that a phenomenology of pregnant embodiment cannot be reduced to a cultural or discursive construct (194); she asserts that real social, legal, and political support of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood begins with a recognition of sexual difference and a better understanding of the phenomenology of early motherhood. In the volume's penultimate chapter, Peg Brand and Paula Granger explore the aesthetics of childbirth, grappling in part with the question of why representations of actual childbirth are so hard to find in our visual culture. They provide a brief history of the taboo of birth in art and then examine cultural trends that are challenging this taboo. While some view images of birth as too gruesome or explicit, Brand and Granger point to how images of pain, blood, and body are acceptable in the case of war reporting and war movies (233). Brand and Granger find that public childbirth videos are breaking new ground in countering this taboo, providing women and people within the birth community with footage of birth and crowning. However, these images are still lacking in the visual arts more broadly. In the final essay of the book, Sheila Lintott lays the groundwork for a feminist conception of the sublime as based on gestation and the giving of birth. She references masculinist conceptions of the sublime, which are typically described in terms of mental, emotional, and psychological strength resulting in a merging of negative and positive emotions. These conceptions are found in the works of male philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. Lintott explains how in the case of the birthing woman, the feminist conception of the sublime is embodied, located in an experience that is visceral, and involves bodily strength and physical sensations, as well as psychological fears.

Dedicated to feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, the book highlights Ruddick's analysis of motherhood as a gender-free enterprise, sensitive in its

attempts at covering a wide range of maternal experiences, and not married to any all-encompassing or essential understanding of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. The editors are successful in these attempts at representing the diversity of maternal experience, yet they also acknowledge the volume's inability at representing the experiences of all women (5). Inclusive of normative and non-normative aspects of maternal subjectivity, the work of this important volume should not be underestimated and will open up new avenues of research in philosophy, as well as in the humanities.

## **Pregnancy in Practice: Expectation and Experience in the Contemporary U.S.**

Sallie Han.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

REVIEWED BY RACHEL EPP BULLER

Sallie Han examines “ordinary” pregnancy in the United States. While at first a bit off-putting, the terminology of “ordinary” here means medically unremarkable, and is opposed to the much more frequent popular and scholarly focus on “extraordinary” pregnancies that includes surrogacy, multiples, and IVF treatment. Avoiding these relative extremes of pregnancy, Han seeks insights into more common, if less publicized, experiences. In a voice that alternates between scholarly and narrative, drawing vignettes not only from the lives of her research subjects but from her own experiences as well, Han suggests that “pregnancy, like birth, ought to be recognized as both biological and social... [P]regnancy is a period of social gestation during which both babies and mothers become constructed through everyday experience” (5).

Making clear her background of cultural anthropology, Han first surveys existing literature surrounding expectations of pregnancy and motherhood in a range of related fields. She draws from the work of not only other anthropologists but also philosophers, medical historians, and a variety of other feminist scholars, including Sharon Hays’ sociological work on advice literature for expectant mothers as well research by historians Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky on the labeling of “good” and “bad” mothers. In building on this diversity of sources during her 15 months of ethnographic research, Han seeks to move past American discourses on reproduction that have become increasingly contentious in recent years.