

Karen L.F. Houle. *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought*. Lexington Books 2013. 272 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780739136713); \$39.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780739136720).

The cover of Karen Houle's *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion* in many ways illustrates the complexity of the central theme and conceptual terrain of the book: Dr. Henry Morgentaler in a wool coat, making the 'peace' sign with both hands, flanked by other activists, one of whom carries a placard reading 'PRAY TO END ABORTION'. Many Canadians, at least, will know Morgentaler's image, and will know, even inchoately, his role in the current terrain of abortion practice, law, and general opinion in Canada. It is a terrain that is, in the legal sense, vastly more open than in the United States and many countries in the European Union.

Like the strongest feminist work, Houle's book is rooted in experience, and in this case, very personal experience: this book includes the author's own medical documents. Like the strongest feminist *philosophical* work, personal experience is drawn into and up to the level of philosophical analysis, here, by Houle's methodology of what she calls, in chapter one, discourse analysis, a way to 'get the maximum number and variety of elements that constitute a phenomenon in view, including what gave rise to it and what it gives rise to' (27). This is a descriptive method that seeks to chart what there is of a phenomenon, in the broadest sense.

Chapter two engages in, and thus demonstrates, the phenomenal description, or discourse analysis, Houle develops, by way of a 'dossier': a curated collection from a personal archive of newspaper articles and headlines; letters from student groups; personal anecdotes; statistics; legal decisions; public statements from celebrities; medical records; and reason-giving from people who have killed abortion providers. One of the important features of this approach is that it illustrates the experiential terrain of abortion as a wide phenomenal-cultural presence, curated by a person involved in the community in which 'the debate' occurs; the discourse of abortion is at once an objective presence, variously experienced. Another is the high degree of 'reactivity' that is currently part of the phenomenal-cultural terrain (106). Houle argues that by forming a dossier as an answer to the question 'what or how do we take abortion to be?' one is led to a space where the dominant question—pro-choice or pro-life?—can be recognized but set aside. Rather, through discourse analysis, we can better understand the 'view of reality that underlies and is expressed by a phenomenon (an ontology) and the view about values condoned by those ontological *truths* (an ethics)' (106).

In chapter three, Houle 'shift[s] the axis' of her analysis from discourse description toward normativity. The experience and phenomenon of unwanted pregnancy is unique. Yet, she shows it can act as a 'cipher' for other ethical debates. Discussions about abortion—even or especially in places like ethics classes, where we hope to encourage open minds for critical thought—are often highly reactive, in keeping with the larger cultural tendencies of aligning oneself with a 'side' of the debate and justifying oneself by reasoning accordingly. Houle suggests, though, that trying to settle into the uniqueness of the phenomenon gives us resources for *responding* (as opposed to reacting) in thoughtful, more ethical ways. Houle's normative suggestion, then, is about where and how to start, position ourselves, and orient our attention. It is a way of setting ourselves up to think, not in the binary 'truths' of the abortion discourse, which 'make[s] us averse to *actually thinking*', but by 'responding in the mode of thought, thoughtfully, to what provokes us to think, rather than

just reactively spouting out habitual responses' (110). As opposed to encountering various ethical debates with what is too-often affective 'flatness', punctuated only by the excited sense that one has found a good argument for one's position, Houle attends to the ways we can take up such discussions as sites of hope. The normative suggestion, then, flows from her ontological analysis, toward a dispositional accountability—taking up a disposition toward activity and affecting things, and toward a dispositional passivity—the knowledge that one is affected and affectable by things. To engage ethically, Houle shows, we must take ourselves up as ontologically *engagable*.

In chapter four, Houle thus articulates a post-normal ethics, positing that the moral terrain involves situations, experiences, knowledge, and truths that are not addressable in responsible ways by the usual ethical approaches, assumptions, and ontologies. Finding oneself unwantedly pregnant, or mourning an unwanted pregnancy, or trying to understand disability, for instance, are not well-addressed by an ethics of 'calculation' and justification. In the first instance, such reasoning assumes or expects that human individuals are responsible in particular ways, many of which are empirically unfounded. Secondly, making lived situations into issues to be solved, instead of problems—or even *lives*—to be lived responsibly, has a deeply detrimental effect on/in philosophy. Philosophy done this way becomes an instrument for getting rid of problems of conceptual order and clarity, as opposed to enacting a way to employ and to shift concepts (which are always already both intellectual and material), as a way to make life livable or to develop new 'thinking tools'. The distinction she is making is between the use of lived experience as the necessary and transformable terrain of moral thinking and the attempt to escape a fixed, neatly delineated, lived experience. Houle notices that the former is required, especially in cases where we are responsible for things we are not equipped to think about, things for which we did not plan or intend—that is, much of our ethical lives.

In this vein, in chapter five, Houle begins with the ways we have open to us to respond to moral questions, '*the ethical infinite into which thought plunges*' (181), in order to take up the ethical stance of responsibly she builds in earlier chapters. When faced with moral questions, one can respond by thinking *about* the question as a kind of problem and then put on one's problem-solving tool belt to solve it; or, one can 'respond *differently*'. Thinking with Derrida's work on the gift and Irigaray's work on listening, Houle revisits both the event(s) and the continuity of living with the events of her own 'uncoerced-yet-unwanted' pregnancies. This is both an intimate and important chapter in the book, where Houle shows what an instance of ethical responsibility that points to ways of responding differently looks like. Primarily, as she puts it, we can take responsibility as a *question* to which we can be hospitable, as opposed to seeing responsibility as a problem, and that is itself a different way of responding.

Many people who read this book might find it, intriguingly, not 'really' about abortion. It is a book about responsibility, and about the real need for a different way of thinking about and doing ethics, one more attentive to the ontologies that underlie ethical discourses and debates. Houle asks us to ask what is at work in the background, making it *intelligible* to take particular stands or make particular arguments. For this reason alone, the book is an important work.

It is also important, though, to continue to notice when philosophers are brave, and I judge this book to be an instance of bravery. Like so much feminist, queer, trans*, post-colonial, and critical race and disability work in philosophy, the intellectual virtue of courage—sensitive, gritty, feisty, *personal* courage,

not (only) of one's convictions, but of a willingness to share one's *life*—strikes me as central to Houle's book. Indeed, there are parts of the book that I find both deeply moving and helpful—some of the best reasons for doing philosophy—which even today I have left out of this review; it is her courage, not mine. Yet, as I think she might ask us to notice, that courage has a particular context; it is relational with larger phenomenal fields and forces.

Like me, Houle is Canadian, and like me, she has had relatively easy access to abortions during her adult life (whether or not we access them). She is also situated as able-bodied, university-educated, and white, which in Canada means that women's encounters with the (publicly-funded) medical system are inflected by the assumed potential tied to those features of their lives (e.g., it might be easily intelligible that when such women are 'in school' we are not yet ready or able to parent; it makes sense to 'wait'). Those same features also carry over to the larger societal desirability of their real and potential children (e.g., this is the group of women who are systematically *encouraged* to have children). Moreover, a 'pro-choice' position is, in Canada, the *de jure* terrain of debate. At the moment, even conservative political leaders are for the most part uninterested in reopening talk on the legal status of abortion. It seems inescapable that Houle's book is, in part, an interesting product of that situation, predominantly because it is, in many ways, about *unwanted pregnancy*, both *because of* and *under* the conditions of accessible abortion. The basic assumptions of the book, the extent to which we can have the sorts of discussions she proposes, may be predicated on certain political, legal, and practical realities. At the same time, what Houle clearly shows is how thinking about legal and even practical problems to be solved does not—perhaps cannot and should not be expected to—get at many of the most important features of our ethical lives.

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