

Karen Houle

Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought

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Krista Hyde is a PhD student in philosophy at Saint Louis University. Her research interests are in epistemology, especially virtue theory and feminist epistemologies. In particular, she is concerned with issues of epistemic injustice, and her dissertation work explores the potential epistemic value of marginalized social location. Previously, she earned a Masters degree in philosophy from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Karen Houle's *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion* takes a decidedly unusual approach to ethical theorizing about unwanted pregnancy. Rather than simply assuming that abortion is a straightforward moral problem and using ethical principles to defend some position on the issue, Houle excavates the "texts" of abortion--that is, discourses including personal anecdotes and narratives, media coverage on the "abortion debate," and medical documentation of surgical abortion--to reveal the problematic nature of contemporary ethical theorizing itself.

The book aims to identify the sources of apparent intractabilities in philosophical debates about abortion and to critically assess ethicists' own accountability in the obstructive dialogue. Houle maintains that these debates have stagnated because ethicists tend to work with caricatures of complex phenomena, relying on rules of reason to represent positions that cannot be expressed in logical arguments. In doing so, ethicists have ignored many ostensibly less rational viewpoints that would better reveal the complex moral character of abortion. Houle also develops her own positive normative view on abortion, which emphasizes the cultivation of the virtue of responsiveness. This involves first finding and then using points of resistance to open the possibility of alternative discussions, actions, and relations.

To reach her stated goals, Houle considers several key claims about abortion drawn from its dominant texts. Although these claims appear to be inconsistent, she believes that they make some sort of sense, provided the texts of abortion are understood as part of an ongoing discourse. She thus attempts to create a "conceptual, emotional, and political space" in which a collective dialogue on abortion can occur.

Conflicting beliefs and experiences make sense from the point of view of lived reality, so Houle aims to accept uncertainty and heterogeneity, which, she claims, allows for productive thought about abortion, capable of producing new features, novel "resonances," and better concepts. Acknowledging uncertainty reveals our role in producing knowledge about abortion, and the role of abortion in constructing our values. Conflicting conclusions, however, are rarely accepted, much less embraced, in contemporary ethical theorizing. Houle recognizes this tension, but is committed to questioning traditional philosophical methodologies, which, she insists, tend to assume that which they purport to prove.

Houle's analysis, in which she explicitly acknowledges her authorial perspective, uses discourse theory to uncover the hidden significance of abortion texts. This serves to allow the reader to better understand the nuanced domain of abortion, including hidden assumptions that are not normally visible. For those readers unfamiliar with this methodology, she provides a short, useful "workbook" on the use and implications of discourse theory and poststructuralist principles of analysis.

In the first and second chapters of the book, the author uses discourse analysis to map the contours of the abortion debate, systematizing our thought on the "moral problem" of abortion. Bracketing normativity, she provides an empirical overview that interrogates print media and use of idioms, exposing a moral language that relies on ethical binaries and abstraction. Through this, it becomes clear that certain kinds of reasons for abortion are often stated, but they are rarely the sort that actually enter into the decision-making of the woman considering abortion. Moreover, all sorts of reasons--beliefs, hunches, opinions, impulses, and feelings--are important in women's thinking about abortion, yet are rarely represented as bona fide reasons in the texts of abortion. Houle believes those kinds of reasons should be considered as valid in ethical discourse. She also attempts to expose ethical features of abortion by exploring what is not said in abortion texts and by looking at "exceptions": the experiences of individuals that are absent from discussions, both public and private, on abortion. Thus, Houle's map includes that which is seen and unseen, which together produce the meanings of abortion.

After this empirical overview, the third and fourth chapters move into the realm of value. Moral theorizing about abortion, and ethical theorizing in general, Houle maintains, assume three ontological claims. First, reality can be expressed in ranked, binary pairs; second, things are essentially stable, or fixed; and third, components of reality can be measured and balanced against one another. She argues that these claims are actually habits of thinking and valuing, rather than ontological truths. That is, they reflect our approach to ethical theorizing, but this approach is not necessary; a better way of thinking is possible. Chapter 5 discusses how different *ways* of thinking about abortion could lead to new ethical thought and theory. Houle's purpose is not so much to argue for a particular position on abortion; rather, she aims to bring the reader to openness, to rejection of reactivity and rationalism in response to ethical issues. As a result, the book is not so much about abortion itself as it is a meta-ethical reflection on abortion as an ethical phenomenon.

To enable new thought on this issue, Houle recommends the cultivation of what virtue theorists might call the intellectual virtue of openness: a disposition of critical responsiveness toward even that which seems uncontroversial. This virtue enables us to perceive the production of our values. For example, in considering a typical media account of "abortion," we can come to see how moral claims are produced through the tensions around the issue, as well as how we participate in and thus construct these claims.

Houle proposes the possibility of such openness by comparing ethics with physics. Contemporary ethical "debate," she maintains, treats the ethical realm as Newtonian physics treats the physical realm. However, Newtonian physics is but one understanding of reality. Post-Newtonian physics suggests that multiple understandings are often necessary to bring us closer to the truth of how things work. And just as both wave and particle models are needed to

best understand light, a multiplicity of ethical models is required in our approach to ethical dilemmas. One model should not be seen as the one right answer; we should use different models as they are called for by the situation.

The best model, the author argues, is the one that enables the greatest capacity to respond to reality. As such, Houle maintains that, just as in our descriptions of reality, we find in ethics "nonoverlapping domains of meaning and validity" as well as "explanatory gaps." This should not be seen as a shortcoming of our ethical theories; rather, analytic complexity should be embraced, not for its own sake, but because it provides the kind of flexible responsiveness and responsibility that make science so successful. However, this also requires us to give up our demands for "stability, unity, knowability, containability, vectors, and measure" in ethical theorizing. We will sometimes find ourselves in unknown territory, in spaces of moral exception.

The final chapter of the book applies these new modes of ethical thinking to abortion. Houle maintains that because ethical practice is a sort of knowledge-how, which occurs in the context of lived experience, ethical thought must embrace tension and ethical complexity. To illustrate these points, she uses Jacques Derrida's and Luce Irigaray's concepts of responsibility to explore the ethical dimensions of the grief and sexual difference of abortion. Drawing on these theorists, Houle proposes a new form of ethical responsibility, which she conceives as an event spurring human responsiveness. Telling the story of abortion in terms of ethical binaries (right or wrong) ignores important aspects of it. Exploring the "spaces of exception" within the domain of abortion, however, provides the possibility of expressing that which has been felt but not heard or thought. This enables us to finally think through the experience of unwanted pregnancy, putting it beyond the poles of opposition that masquerade as ethical thought.

Houle uses the texts of abortion to assess the ethics of contemporary ethical theory itself, arguing that what is currently considered philosophical investigation is actually unethical, as it falsely misrepresents the complexity of ethical issues and refuses to engage in critique and deconstruction. Rather than moving us toward more ethical practice, philosophical ethics precludes us from discovering real ethical truths. Her use of discourse method is in this sense successful, and makes a considerable contribution to feminist ethics. Unfortunately, however, Houle's reliance on deconstructionism, especially in the final chapter of the book, will not be very useful to those who are unfamiliar with the works from which she draws. Consequently, despite the interesting and important work of the first chapters, the book leaves the reader puzzled about how the author's project should be enacted.