Imagery, Ritual, and Birth: 
Ontology Between the Sacred and the Secular
By A. Hennessey, foreword by R. E. Davis-Floyd (2019)
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Reviewed by Beatrice Kobow

In Imagery, Ritual, and Birth: Ontology between the Sacred and the Secular, Anna Hennessey explores how objects shift in their ontology according to how we view them. They can shift from being sacred objects to being pragmatic objects used in a secular context, and then be restored to a sacred status, according to the existential meaning they acquired as objects used in a rite of passage. Hennessey approaches this topic by analyzing images and objects used to assist childbirth. Thus, the book contributes to different discourses, advancing aspects of feminism, art history, and philosophy of religion. Much of my engagement with the book and the special place it will take up on my shelf results from the critique that can be formulated using the book’s arguments and the reorientation of social ontology as a discipline that this affords.

Reading Hennessey’s Imagery, Ritual, and Birth, a treatise on ontology between the sacred and the secular, is thrilling in different ways. First, there is the shock of recognizing the near total absence of birth as subject matter, both from our day-to-day interactions and from our academic discourses, paradoxically juxtaposed with the omnipresence of death as a topic. Hennessey does not dwell on or psychologize too much the reasons for this absence. Anyone who has witnessed the way in which birth and the birthing mother are treated in American hospitals and silenced in our culture, in general, will already have experienced what Hennessey draws on. The shock

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results from understanding that birth existentially binds us to each other, is shared by us all quite literally as children (and sometimes as mothers), but that mainstream culture is in denial of this fact. Hennessey devotes a first chapter to this discrepancy, describing it quite matter of factly. This is the hook.

Then, there is the thrill of illumination. The author’s exciting exegesis of material objects illuminates them for us, as we trace and understand their transformation from sacred objects of ritual to secular tools, and then back to the sacred representations of the existential passage of birth which they accompany. Who could resist the thrill of contemplating the different origins and meanings of a Sheela-na-gig, a medieval stone figure identifiable by the figure’s exposed vulva? In Chapter 2, on religious objects, Hennessey introduces varying and contradicting readings of the sheela. She brings this chapter on material culture, for which the Sheela-na-gig serves as the main example, to a surprising yet satisfying close by concluding, ‘we see that in the case of the sheela figures, even when interpreted differently, they still share a basic commonality whereby groups of people have collectively developed beliefs and practices connected in some way to a superhuman reality. In other words, the objects are in all cases understood as “religious.” ’ (p. 43). A reader might find Hennessey’s definition of religion, given earlier in the chapter, too loose or too non-committal. As she shows, the field of philosophy of religion is divided over the definition. The strange fact of the matter is that she needs only refer to a most minimal consensus on what counts as religious, in order to question the most basic assumptions of our (academic) discourse on the human condition. The point might just be too obvious. How is it even conceivable that birth is not central to our reflections, given that it is an event that all humans experience in their life, and that is of the utmost existential importance to each of us, not just individually, but as members of a contingent, diachronic, and synchronic cultural community reaching back into the past and forward into the future? Aggravating this lack further is the fact that our evolution is cultural. In other words, our continued existence depends on our handing down to others a coherent and convincing understanding of ourselves.

Hennessey is motivated by her own experiential access to birth as a mother, and in this she reveals a feminist philosopher’s stance. There is a fine tradition in feminist and other emancipatory philosophies (e.g., Cavarero 1976, 2021; Raichō 2010; Songe-Møller 2002) that takes as its point of departure the peculiar falling apart of intellectual tradition and lived experience (in this case, that of giving birth). But Hennessey goes further. The book is much more compelling for all readers (be they mothers or not), because the real pull is the one that takes the foundational premises out
from under traditional ontology’s construction of social reality. Hennessey is concerned with the shortcomings of our cultural understanding of birth as it relates to practices such as assisting births in hospitals. But, again, this is not her central focus. She speaks to us mainly as a philosopher of religion working toward her points through contemplation of artworks, and this marks her out as belonging to another tradition, namely, that of contemporary Zen Buddhist philosophy (see Tsujimura 2011). Analyzing her own practice of visualization allows Hennessey to bring home the central point: social ontology is about how we regard the world in our common practices.

The third quite visceral joy is the encounter with the archival project Hennessey has undertaken, first in an online archive (Visualizingbirth.org), and now in this printed volume. Reprinted here is a wealth of artistic material about birth created by many different people from different perspectives. This art is not necessarily canonized, but it constitutes a living practice of making visible a sacred dimension of human existence in many voices. This, I believe, makes the book especially relevant to readers seeking to engage with embodied religious practice. But Hennessey takes us further still. In the introduction, she states that her focus is on the ontology of imagery in rituals of birth. Her purpose is to show the ontological transformation these images undergo. The upshot of her writing is a transformation of social ontology itself, leading to a rebirth of social ontology as a discipline concerned with relationality and process. We might even say that this is a rewriting of philosophy proper. Philosophy has had a long stint concerned with the eternal, unchanging oneness, for which it has been ridiculed since its inception by those in the know, for example, the Thracian maiden (Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a).

Not only does Hennessey introduce art from different cultures and by lay people and professional artists alike, but her work also takes interdisciplinarity to a different level. It blends levels of discourse and locations of argument in a way that opens a window into the new. Hers is a multifarious but argument-driven text, a compilation of ideas that restructure the old discourse, allowing for the invisible to crown and come into the reader’s world. The fourth thrill is the exhilaration of seeing the book as the birth of a new kind of academic discourse.

Both third and fourth thrills are thus connected to the making of meaning, which the book facilitates. And this finally brings us to the fifth, and last, the most radical thrill of the book: the transformation of understanding social ontology. *Imagery, Ritual, and Birth* presents a critique on the academic discussion of mental representation underlying analytic social ontology. The most arresting aspect for me as a social ontologist is the interpretation of what social ontology is and what it can and should
do as a discipline. It is in this sense that the subtitle of the book, *Ontology between the Sacred and the Secular*, is appropriate. The book is as much about images in rituals of birth as it is about ontology itself. Indeed, understanding the sacred dimension of birth is transforming social ontology, in an ontological sense. Hennessey’s earlier work on Chinese art, for example, already talked of such ontological likenings (humans as mountains, mountains as humans), but here she places a focus on the processual. The initiation story which she relates is of giving birth to her son. That day, after many hours of labor, Hennessey recalled a Daoist body chart, a religious image depicting a landscape that is a ‘diagram of internal pathways’ (*Neijing tu*), ‘historically used to help Daoist adepts in their processes of biocultivation,’ explains Hennessey (p. 7). She stresses in the text the non-directedness of this encounter. Hennessey was then and is here a reflecting academic, not a practicing adept. But perhaps transformation works both ways. In the case of the *Neijing tu*, the images become mental representations, which in turn aid physiological transformations of the body. This is exactly what happened to Hennessey and forms part of her argument. Meditating on the chart, in an affirmative act of appropriation, she visualized her body as one through which a large river flows, with a baby riding its waters and emerging from the river’s mouth. Shortly afterwards, her son was born.

Hennessey uses her academic and now experiential knowledge of Daoist visualization techniques to challenge the traditional account of perception, which has been accepted as part of the framework of a contemporary social ontology. Hennessey discusses the account of Searle (1992) and its reception by Wallace (2007) in some detail. For Hennessey, neither of these authors address how mental imagery relates to physiological transformation; nor do they think that mental content could be an intentional object. Both aspects are sought after by the Daoist practitioner, who aims to intentionally hold mental content as the object of mental representation, and by doing so aims to change the body. Here, contemporary analytic philosophy of mind meets its match. Indeed, the implications are even more striking for social ontology. Visualization as a birthing tool offers a perfect example of how the mind engages causally with the body and bodies around it. Social ontology, as developed by Searle (1995), affirms (1) that social reality depends on what we think of it, and (2) that institutional facts can be created by just this means. Hennessey works with this account, while inserting an ontological dynamism into this picture. If the ontology of objects is shifting because we are imposing a status on these objects, then this ontology is entirely up to us. It is constantly transforming. And if we think that reality is mind-dependent, then what we take these objects to be will transform them and, along with Hennessey, us. Typically, social
ontologists – and I write this while prying myself away from my own previous narrow-mindedness – have clung to the concepts of atomistic intentional agency and strict billiard ball causation. The mind-dependence story was always meta. In Hennessey’s version, we see it working causally in different directions. This concerns not only the area of meditation, which might be seen as a somewhat esoteric or niche aspect of ontology, perception, and/or intentional agency. It also concerns the way in which we socially attribute functions and status to objects and reattribute this status freely. This is demonstrated in Hennessey’s example of the sheela figures. An object can become a sacred ritualistic object, then a secular tool, and finally re-sacralized as a representation of the transformation process. It also concerns the way in which mental representation really does causally shape who we are and can be. This is something we ought to already know, but Hennessey’s book brings it across in surprising ways.

Hennessey’s discussion of philosophy of mind is refreshingly forward – it quickly cuts to the chase of challenging analytical philosophy on its own assumptions. Yet the tone of her book is always respectful; it is a pleasant read. The author respects us as having minds of our own. She carefully argues points, accepting disagreement among positions, giving us space, never pushing a point, always just leading us up to the brink of our own conclusions. The tone is extremely readable; she is a reporter at large telling the story of the estranged culture of birth she experiences as a mother and as an academic. At times, it is sparse, given the wide range of materials covered. This, again, could be attributed to a Buddhist leaning of the author which favors minimalism over redundancy and tolerance over contention.

Today, the focus of debates in social ontology is evolving toward a non-ideal social ontology. Let’s make the non-ideal cases, the messy every day, the real world count, philosophers tell themselves. Hennessey’s contribution is timely and on point with these developments, but instead of talking about case studies and engaging in a pretense of the scientific, she employs the point of view of the writer who reflects on experience and cultural testimony. Importantly, the processual here is not the eternal presentness of an always repeating cycle, but rather marks the recycling of objects from the material world as we see fit for our individual processes of becoming. Ritual objects, for example, can be borrowed for secular purposes, used in the process of birth, then returned to their status as sacred objects. The picture Hennessey paints of ontological transformation is non-hierarchical, matter-of-fact, pragmatic, and empathetic to the needs to others. In this approach, we can see her as a quintessentially American pragmatist philosopher. Things that previously excluded one another are here seen together and advanced further. With ease, she employs the systematic and
the historical approaches alongside one another. She brings together the philosophical, the religious, and the art-theoretical aspects of an academic discourse to make her case. And she does so by writing accessibly and clearly.

Hennessey also contributes to and shifts the feminist discourse, readdressing a conception of femininity of which birth is a vital part. We can see how this fosters solidarity, empowers women in marginalized groups, and engages a genuinely positive and non-essentialist view of maternity. The acceptance of birth, the transformation of our discourse away from death and toward birth, opens up our view toward the relational, the becoming.

This is undertaken in the last two chapters and the conclusion, which play out the consequences of the suggested reconsideration of social ontology through presenting new images of birth, in the form of both literal images and conceptualizations.

Birth (and rebirth) has always been a trope for religion and the philosophy of religion. Sometimes, the idea of birth (as a spiritual state) has been forcibly separated from the act of natural birth. It has been reconceptualized as a birth not from the body, but from the mind, and then attributed to men rather than women (consider just two examples from the Greek tradition: Athena literally breaking open Zeus’ skull, and the birth of beautiful ideas, reserved for men, in Plato’s *Symposium*). Allowing us to see the sacred in the actual biological process of birth makes us aware of ourselves as processual, relational beings. Our life is defined as much by its finitude as by its process, but mostly by its being through others. Transforming the culture of birth through a new image, a project to which Hennessey’s important book contributes, is transforming our entire collective being.

References


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