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NATALITY.
PHILOSOPHICAL RUDIMENTS CONCERNING
A GENERATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

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The 20th century, with its two world wars, was a century of dying. In the aftermath of the Second World War, for many people, a sense of departure set in and the activity of beginning anew was central. Hannah Arendt thought that the capacity to begin means to be able to initiate political action. She turned the historical focus on mortality to a focus on natality. People are born not to die but to act in the world. The theme of natality is key to the 21st century. Several philosophers have written books or articles on this issue, but more than that, the ideas that the subject is bodily situated in the world, that human beings are relational and temporal beings, have reached post-structuralism, phenomenology and ethical theory. Those who believe that human existence is bodily, relational, temporal and worldly, have to believe in the idea of natal existence as well. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness, the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, and the body phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, all referred in some (insufficient) way to the question of birth and natality.

The notion of natality is well known through the work of Hannah Arendt, who used it as an anthropological category as well as a political one. She determines birth as having been begun as a beginner, and as the condition of possibility of beginning in the world. She posits that

birth means a “beginning of the beginning” and this is called natality, which itself gives, so she argues, the capacity to begin, and hence to act. The term “natality” means that human beings are born from someone into the world. And it points to the idea that the fact of being born stands for our relationality in the world and leads to the capacity to begin. Thus, if birth is the singular event which posits the condition of the possibility to begin, then natality is the essential characteristic of each born human, and hence an anthropological category.

Arendt posits – and here, I think, lies the problem – her birth thesis without articulating its structure. She simply assumes that we are all born from nowhere, that natality is based on the primary relation between birth and existence, and that it is the foundation of initiatives, of political actions, and furthermore demands responsibility as a response to being born. The philosopher Adriana Cavarero unfolds Arendt’s notion of natality as relationality and proclaims that the «beginning [...] is the relation» [Cavarero 1997, 212]. By following up these initiatives, I argue that the concept of birth confirms the idea that people live in a generative context of relations and plurality. This insight about their beginning in relationships of dependency and in a generative context influences how we understand our relations to ourselves, to others, to the world and to history. The philosophical exploration of natality, thus, has consequences for politics and for ethics. Before I enter the overall discussion, I shall define some basic concepts.

1. Basic concepts: birth, natality and generativity

The concepts of birth, natality and generativity can be briefly sketched as follows. The concept of *birth* has three meanings, which are practically interwoven but refer to different, even separate perspectives: birth-giving, the birth process, and being-born. Birth-giving is the action of birth from the viewpoint of the woman who is bringing a child into the world. The birth process denotes the coming-into-the-world of a person from either the perspective of the observer, the woman giving birth, or the child being brought into the world, that is, the person who is being-born. The focus in this text will be primarily on the question of the *meaning* of being-born. Being-born is one characteristic that applies to all human

beings who live on earth, and is thus universal; even if the woman who has given birth to the one who has been born disappears or dies directly after birth, the new-born is still born. Birth places us in relation to our past, to our origin, in a human relation within the present, and into a relation with the unknown future towards which we are directed. Hence, the concept of *natality* is a temporal concept that implies a beginning that is grounded on the facticity of being conceived and being-born, and refers to a generative relationship out of which someone's beginning has been begun. How a particular birth is experienced and understood and whether this primary relationship will continue and develop depends on personal, social, cultural, medical and other factors, and so varies greatly. People are born and so are natal (just as they are also mortal). The recognition of natality opens up a perspective of thinking and acting from birth as the starting point of having been begun. It recognises as fundamental the generative context of relationships and the plurality among human beings arising from natality.

The concept of *generativity* indicates a particular intersubjective, worldly, historical and cultural relational structure that unfolds among different generations. Generativity represents historical and social developments across generations and the structure of relations that each birth remakes and reorders. Both the aspect of development and that of a structure of relationships are based on the conjunction of mental and bodily generativity. Generativity means that we come into a world that other people have construed and constructed before us, and that we now form with and for others. We are always living in-between others who were there before us and who will be there after us; therefore, we also live *in* and *through* the others. These dimensions of origin and future, coming from and going to, are in part personally known and at the same time anonymous and inaccessible. Thus, birth and death, generation and language, human relationships and histories are generative phenomena that thwart and hinder every attempt to construe a monocentric or ego-centric position of the subject. Hence, the philosophical question is not how a subject gets into a relation; rather, the critical question is how it could have been that for centuries the point of origin for philosophical reasoning had been the human being and the ego as an isolated, non-relational being. This type of thinking presupposes that it destroys

the original relations between human beings and thereby abstracts from them. Abstraction might mean a conceptual process of generalising. However, the general concept of human being, individual or the Ego is derived by abstraction that works through a hidden destruction of human relations and social and generative contexts. Furthermore, it focuses on men and loses women and children by declaring them to be others. Traditionally, the other is the woman or the stranger; that is, someone who is inferior and does not count as a subject.

Taking into account that mortality and death have played a dominant role in the history of philosophy, I will first indicate a few historical examples of the appropriation of metaphors, disregard and forgottenness of natality from Antiquity through the Enlightenment to the present day. With the view of the history of philosophy it will become evident that the disregard of natality has something to do with the individual who has no relationships. Separating body and mind, isolating the individual, or having a static concept of the human leads to a misguided anthropology that is guided by a conception of the human being as an abstract entity whose birth is construed as accident or as thrownness, or neglected or forgotten all together. From a criticism of this conception, I will put forward a thinking that thematises birth and natality. This thematisation is inherent in the belief in the plurality of human beings; it means that our existence is understood as being bodily, as living in relationship with other people (regardless of whether we know them or not), as being situated in the world and temporally structured. Thus, in the second part of this paper I will discuss the transition from the prenatal to the natal existence and I will delineate how certain features of human existence, such as intentionality, corporeality, relationality, situatedness, temporality, and worldliness, are based in the structure of being born. And third, because our own birth is – by the simple fact that we live – certain to ourselves, yet withdrawn from our memory, it remains anonymous. This has consequences for our personal identity as well as our dependency on the (m)other for answers to the basic questions, “From whom am I born?” and “With whom am I born?” Our natal existence should be understood as standing out towards (reaching out, intentionality) the other, social, time, and the world. Hence, unfolding human existence as being born says that we are not just thrown into

the world but can form our life and world in acknowledging and by responding to our natal existence (relationships, body, situation, time and world). I will argue for the thesis that natality is not only a human condition but also a worldly condition. Birth can be seen as a constituent of the world, the world between us.

2. *Birth in the history of philosophy*

Mortality and death were central themes in the history of occidental philosophy.¹ The birth of human beings was often reinterpreted, virtually *perversed*. The word “perversion” sounds rather shocking, but for male thinking it was equally shocking to be born from a woman. Therefore, the notion of birth was reinterpreted, reversed in such a way that birth has nothing to do with a woman or with a concrete relationship.

I would like to clarify this claim by way of three citations. In Antiquity, birth was seen as an accident, and the way of giving birth was appropriated by the philosopher; later, in the 17th and 18th century, birth was located in between recognition and disregard (*Beachtung und Missachtung*), the latter strengthened by the idea of self-birthing; and in the 20th century, Heidegger claimed that the being-there (*Dasein*) is thrown into the world.

2.1. *About unfeathered birds and an appropriation*

The first citation is chosen from Plato, who describes how «through some mischance [the soul] is filled with forgetfulness and evil and grows heavy, and when it has grown heavy, loses its wings and falls to the earth [...]» [Plato 1925, 248c]. Here, birth is an anthropological mischance, an accident. Plato characterises this tragic event in the dialogues of the *Phaedrus* as well as the *Phaedo* in the context of the life of the soul that encounters a misfortune. In consequence, it is filled with oblivion and inertia, it loses its plumage and falls to the ground. Later

¹ See for a more extended version about the history of philosophy Schües 2016, ch. 1-3.

in the history of philosophy, this image of a bird whose feathers are lost can be found in some philosophical approaches, for instance that of Friedrich Nietzsche.² Plato presents the idea that the body is a nuisance, even a heavy burden and an obstacle to the epistemic relation to the world. Thus, because birth means to be bound to a body, the birth is seen as an incident that is problematic for the human being who strives for truth.

The other way of dealing with the mischance or the accident of being born is by way of an epistemological appropriation (*Vereinnahmung*) of the birth. Plato invents quite a complex metaphorical thinking for the path of knowledge by using the notions of pregnancy, birth, giving birth, and midwifery. Clearly, this path of knowledge is reserved for men. Women are not mentioned in this context, except for Diotima, who is not personally present in the dialogue but about whom Socrates writes. He describes how she teaches him in the *Symposium*

“when [...] he feels himself in a sore flutter for the beautiful, because its possessor can relieve him of his heavy pangs. For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful”. “What then is it?”. “It is of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful”. “Be it so”, I said. “To be sure it is”, she went on; “and how of engendering? Because this is something ever-existent and immortal in our mortal life” [Plato 1925a, 206e].

«When a person is *swelling* and *teeming-ripe* he feels himself in a sore flutter for the beautiful, because its possessor can relieve him of his *heavy pangs*» [206 d-e]. These metaphors address the idea that there’s something on the tip of my tongue; I am pregnant with a thought. Even though «thus beauty presides over birth» [206 d] love is not directed towards beauty itself but towards creation and birth in the beautiful. The beautiful is the beautiful womb of Aphrodite, which means that men bear brainchildren, as we know from the myth of Zeus. But real

² «Hütet euch auch vor den Gelehrten! Die hassen euch: denn sie sind unfruchtbar! Sie haben kalte vertrocknete Augen, vor ihnen liegt jeder Vogel enfedert [sic]». [Nietzsche 2016, 361]. «Be on your guard against the learned too! They hate you, because they are unproductive! They have cold, withered eyes before which every bird is unplumed» [Nietzsche 2016, IV. 9].

births – that is, scenes of women who give birth – are not mentioned in these philosophical texts.

The roots of our thinking lie in the concept of an immortal soul, which has no beginning. But when a beginning is forced upon it and when it is born, then it is bound to the body, and thus, it forgets everything and loses its knowledge. Hence, it is condemned and unknowing; yet the philosopher needs to do something. That is, he has to repeat this birth process of the soul and give it a chance to remember (*anamnesis*) what it forgot. Anamnesis is the term for the path to knowledge by way of remembering, of disclosing what had been forgotten. (The Greek term *aletheia* means unclosedness). This process of formation (*paideia*) to knowledge is understood as like the way of pregnancy and giving birth.

I certainly do not want to pretend that there was no knowledge about the birth practice. It was not unknown that children are born of women. Pictures and reliefs from early centuries show this clearly. But in philosophical thinking, this knowledge was not acknowledged; indeed, it was actively perverted.

2.2. Recognition and self-constitution

In the Age of Enlightenment, the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, 1789) contains the phrase «Men are born and remain free and equal in rights».³ This formulation is, in a sense, revolutionary, because the recognition of the birth of people is taken to be important. On the one hand, this implies the demand for equality as well as freedom: all people are born equal. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thinkers were also concerned with the emergence of the concept of nations and with the formation of a state. The Latin word “nasci” means to be born; the term is connected with the Latin “natio”. There is a linguistic similarity and a meaning that is not unknown to us: the concept of the nation means equality of citizens who are born and who live inside the

³ The *Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) that is based on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) formulates: «All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights».

state; philosophers and politicians were concerned with an equalisation of birth, origin, and nationality, which, however, was set aside socially and legally because of the unequal rights of men and women at that time. Birth was thought of as a form of self-constituting (*Selbstsetzung*) through which men could escape the dependency on the (m)other and on nature.⁴ In this thinking man begins himself, he is a self-made man, a man who is a product of himself.

The idea that we are all born means that we also depend on those who gave birth to us. That is, the recognition of birth is important in order to demand equality from birth onwards, and thus to maintain a political sphere. In the social contract, Jean-Jacques Rousseau quite clearly demanded attention to the fact of birth, and at the same time criticised the social disgrace of slavery: «Every man is born free and his own master, so no-one on any pretext – any pretext – can make any man a subject without his consent. To rule that the son of a slave is born a slave is to rule that he isn't born a man» [Rousseau 2010, 55f.]. Thus, Rousseau makes it very clear: men are born free; birth means being born into freedom. On the other hand, some philosophers have put forward a form of self-constitution as a way of proclaiming independence from birth and any belonging to a class or particular group, just in order to guarantee the appearance of the citizen as an independent individual. If one had to acknowledge the fact of birth, then one would have reached the conclusion that people are born differently according to their class, gender, group or nation. But the male citizen did not want this belonging on the basis of being born from a woman.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was quite influential at the time even though he belonged to an early phase of the circle of enlightenment. In his work *Leviathan* he described the hypothetical condition of society. As such a condition, he assumes a fictitious state of nature as the basis for equality among men. His further assumption is that every human being thinks only egocentrically about his own wellbeing. In order to clarify the anthropological basis for the state, Hobbes uses the famous

⁴Historically, birth was simply classified as part of nature, physiology and mechanics, and was therefore uninteresting. In eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the observation of birth and the self-employment of man seem to merge, the idea arises that “man” defined himself as “self made”, as a product of himself.

mushroom metaphor: «Let us return again to the state of nature, and consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other» [Hobbes 1966, 108-109]. This discourse of individualism, that is, of autonomy and independence has survived until today. We still live in an age where individuality, individual decision, or the question “What do I want?” are paramount.

2.3. *Being thrown into the world*

A philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, introduces the concept of «thrownness» to the philosophical tradition.

We shall call this character of being of *Da-sein* which is veiled in its whence and whither, but in itself all the more openly disclosed, this “that it is”, the *thrownness* of this being into its there; it is thrown in such a way that it is the there as being-in-the-world. The expression thrownness is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over* [Heidegger, 1996, 127, § 29].

He determines the thrownness as being the character (*Seinscharakter*) of being-there (*Dasein*), whose there is always already presupposed.

But thrownness is the mode of being of a being which always *is* itself its possibilities in such a way that it understands itself in them and from them (projects itself upon them). [...] But the self is initially and for the most part inauthentic, the they-self. Being-in-the-world is always already entangled. *The average everydayness of Da-sein can thus be determined as entangled-disclosed, thrown-projecting being-in-the-world which is concerned with its ownmost potentiality in its being together with the ‘world’ and in being-with the others* [Heidegger 1996, 169 § 39].

According to this quote *Dasein* means thrown-projecting. But how can we understand a thrown projection? Heidegger insists in *Being and Time* that *Dasein* is not just thrown into the world. His argument is that we are actually capable of understanding our own condition of being

thrown and we can even throw off our thrown condition. Hence, understanding, for Heidegger, and in some sense also for Hannah Arendt, is a form of *activity*. For Heidegger, unlike Arendt, understanding means always how to do something by having the possession of an ability (*etwas können*) and by the ability or potential to be (*Seinkönnen*) as an authentic human. Because thrownness is tied to projection it is not just a stable concept, yet it prioritises the one, the *Dasein* that is not related to, or fallen to, the other.

Another question to Heidegger is also from where is the *Dasein* thrown into the world? This question highlights the edge of the Heideggerian structure because the being-there is thrown out of the nothingness and it is directed towards the nothing. Structurally speaking, a human has at least one other human being, a woman, who has conceived and given birth to a child, but Heidegger's "being-there" is a there without parents and it will not generate any relations after its death. As Günter Anders criticises Heidegger's analysis of being-there: essential needs, the bodiliness and its origin are all denied from being-there. The ontic where from and how remains disclosed with the term of thrownness [Anders 2001, 92].⁵ The throw is done in anonymity, there are no parents, no others, hence, the being-there has not been born. Yet Heidegger's approach is an answer to the homelessness of the rational and autonomous subject of the Cartesian-modern metaphysics that I illustrated through the image of the mushrooms by Hobbes. As a countermodel to the rationality of the Enlightenment and as a continuation of Nietzsche's reconsideration of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*), Heidegger is searching for the existential situation and the sense of being-there.

This introduction to some themes in the history of philosophy basically summarises that the denial of the first relation between a woman and a child has been important. Privileging thinking along these lines – and here I mention only very few aspects – entails particular anthropological, epistemological and ethical consequences. The aspects that I drew out were the mischance of being born, the epistemological appropriation of birth by male philosophers, self-constitution by men

⁵ Yet his vocabulary is that which we use to describe the reproduction and bodily order of farm animals. A cow calves, a pig farrows, a sheep lambs ...

themselves, the individual popping up or being thrown into the world out of nothingness. The denial of being born of a woman liberates the male ego from the most natural and fundamental bond of dependence. And the male subject struggles for independence from nature, body and body. Unsociability in the form of self-interest and competition becomes the basis for the equality of male individuals. Certainly, birth is neither just a metaphor nor a simple fact of nature; it is an existential event that is culturally and socially framed.

3. Birth as a transition from the prenatal to the natal existence

Birth means a transition in the sense of a continuation, and it means a disruption from one mode of existence to another. This disruption – remembered as the time before and after the birth – is realised and experienced by everyone who is affected by the being-born of someone. The person who has been born – at least in Western culture – takes her birthday as one indicator of her identity. And the mother, family, or other persons who have experienced this event often talk about their life with reference to a son, daughter, grandchild, or their own parents or relatives.

The concept of transition, in the sense of a continuation, includes the idea that each person who is born is preceded by its prenatal existence, which is understood as an existence oriented towards being-there on the world (*Dasein auf der Welt*). The process of prenatal existence and the birth take place within a familial historicity and a social and medical praxis. The prenatal being consists of a relatedness (*Bezug*) within the development of pregnancy and it is already directed towards the “being born” and the birth itself as a beginning in this world; therefore, being born means realising a generative localisation in the world. Birth disrupts both the continuing development of the child being born and the continuation of the life of those with whom a child is born and with whom the child is entering into this world as well. Therefore, we can say that a birth is a transition from an intrauterine situation to an extra-uterine existence in the world. And furthermore, being born is the condition of possibility of intentionality.

3.1. *Birth and Intentionality*

Intentionality, as described by Edmund Husserl, is responsible for the constitution of sense; it designates the structure of consciousness insofar as every experience, say a perception or thought, means that someone is being-directed-*toward-something-as-something*. Hence, the term «intentionality» stands for the directedness of consciousness. It objectifies (*vergegenständlicht*) sensations and it directs consciousness, for instance, in remembering, perceiving, or anticipating, towards the past, present and future [see Husserl 1983, 1991]. Below, I argue that birth is a condition for intentionality. In order to understand the thesis that birth is a condition for the possibility of intentionality, the concept of birth must be delineated in a particular way.

Taking the *perspective of natality* in the context of phenomenology, I understand birth as a *basic leap* (*Grund-Satz*), i.e. as a qualitative leap, which crosses the border between prenatal life in the womb of the mother and postnatal life in the world of intentional objects. The notion of the basic leap characterises the movement of the newborn within the transformation of birth and it gives him or her their own status of subjectivity. Only if this subjectivity is recognised can the Arendtian idea, of being born as grounding feature of natality and natality as a condition of the capacity for beginning, make sense. My argument for the idea that birth is the condition of possibility of intentionality is the following: I take as a main premise that intentionality is the basic structure of human consciousness. It is a tension (conscious or preconscious) between myself and an intended object that is presented to me as something that contrasts the background of the life world. Intentionality contains a threefold difference in the structure of being-directed-*toward-something-as-something*. The first difference lies in the directedness towards the world insofar as I am differentiated *from* the world. More strongly put, and tangible for people who are conscious of themselves and the surrounding world: I differentiate myself from the world. But even if people are not paying attention, or are newborns who do not yet have a sense of themselves, the difference between the movement, appearance, disappearance of things or people is there and supports the development of the consciousness of difference. The second difference lies in the *as-something*, insofar as there is an object, a situation or “something”

of which I have an experience as such and such and in particular perspective [Schües 1997, 244]. Even an aspect that is not directed towards me is part of the overall perception. The third difference is based on the temporal structure of experiences. Every experience contains a three-fold horizontal structure of past (the just perceived), present (the presented), and future (the anticipated). For instance, when we read a text, the letters just seen and those anticipated are already part of perceiving the meaning of a sentence.

Only a person who is born is led to differences that are specific for human consciousness [Schües 2016, 293]. And therefore, human beings should be recognised as intentional subjects from birth on. The idea that the newborn is already an intentional subject is also grounded in the observation that a newborn immediately interacts with the mother, and even with the surrounding world. For example, s/he screams, s/he looks back, s/he starts to suckle. The newborn shows the embodiment that is characteristic for intentionality. In the prenatal situation, hearing was *mediated* through the womb of the mother. Thus, birth means a transformation of a mediated bodily experience to an unmediated one. The mother or the pregnant woman mediates to the unborn the immediacy of her own bodily experience and intentionality; this *mediated immediacy* is characteristic for the prenatal being and takes place through the mother carrying the unborn in the womb. The unborn is borne and will be born, the etymology shows the link. To be a subject means to be borne and born by someone else, the (m)other.

Intentionality is the prerequisite for a moral subject. In order to exercise morality, it is necessary to have intentionality. Furthermore, it might be that how a prenatal being is, how birth is experienced, and how relationships after birth are lived – that all these features are important and supportive for becoming a moral subject who may act in a caring way towards other human beings and for the human relationships themselves [see Schües, 2016a]. «Thus, maternity is a non-substitutable basis for the emergence of an ethical subjectivity» [Schües 2016, 304; see also Gürtler 2001, 269]. Maternity is the basis not only of the emergence of subjectivity but even of an ethical subjectivity. The source of subjectivity and even of an ethical subjectivity is based on a gift, namely «the non-reciprocal giving» of the pregnant woman and of a mother

(the parent or others) to the child [Schües 2016, 304]. Thus, it matters how pregnancy, birth, and the time thereafter is lived and experienced by the child, the mother, and other people involved. In regard to the relationships it is clear that when a child is born the life of the (m)other will change. How birth disrupts the life of others is always very different. But that it *does* disrupt the process of life for others should not remain unnoticed.

3.2. *Perspective of others*

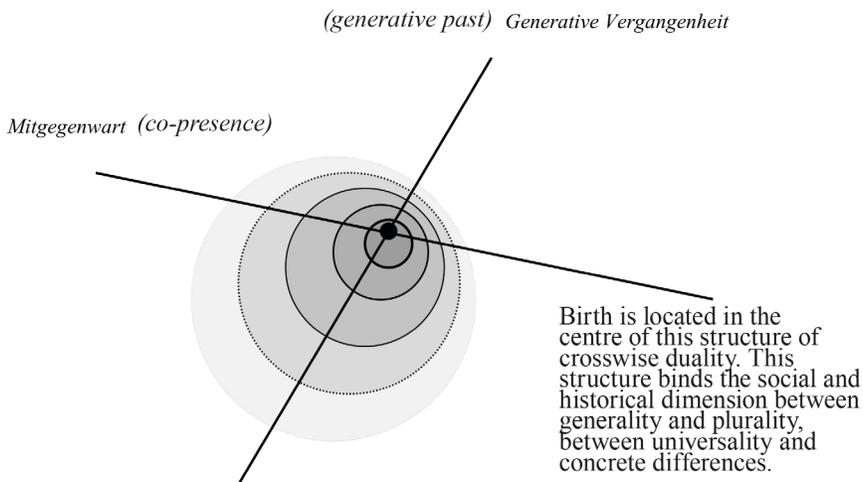
Procreation and birth always include a transition as continuation as well as a disruption, often for several people. Childbirth is not only a transition from the inside out, and the birth is not just the start of a person, but simultaneously the start of a relationship and a change for all of those involved in the beginning in-the-world of that particular person. Birth means to be born from someone (the m-other) and to be born with the m-other. This means: human beings are always born in a context of fellow human beings. The beginning is a relation. This basic thesis implies the following aspects: the birth is the beginning of a human being in the world and it means the beginning of a relationship with those people who are present at the beginning. Thus, birth disrupts the life of all those who are involved and to whom a child is born. A pregnant woman becomes a mother (but might not want to be one, and might renounce her motherhood), a man becomes a father (but might not even know it), a mother becomes a grandmother, a child a sibling, and so on. Depending on the concrete context, motherhood, fatherhood, a couple becoming parents, different roles of kinship can be lived very differently. Each of them, though, is affected somehow by the fact that someone is born. How someone is affected emotionally is not the issue here; rather, my focus is directed towards the relationships that are found and changed, and, therefore, need to be taken into consideration.

3.3. *Relationality and Generativity*

If birth is relational, then three questions may emerge for those who

are being born: Where do I come from? From whom do I come? With whom am I born? These three fundamental questions, which lie at the site of origin of existence, are quite fundamental; sometimes they worry or trouble people. Often, we can observe that the less people know about their origin, the more they are driven to find out where and from whom they come from. People who are brought up in a small, close-knit village may say: “My relatives are there every day and I feel just annoyance with them!”. But those whose origin is unclear, the mother or father or the place of birth unknown, for example, are often very interested in the questions: Where do I come from? From whom am I born? With whom am I born?

These questions can be framed by a structure of a crosswise duality, in which birth is located at the centre [Schües 2016, 359].



This general structure shows that birth is understood as a generative phenomenon that may demonstrate the concrete questions “From whom am I born?” and “With whom am I born?”. And generative phenomena require a *generative phenomenology*: as Husserl understands it,

this works with phenomena that are intersubjective, worldly, historical, cultural or generative. Expressed more concretely, generativity means «that I not merely come into contact with others in the world and live in the world with them but also that I come *from* them and live *in* them» [Waldenfels 1971, 346].

This means that phenomenology can think the relation between my own I and that of the Other from the standpoint of its first beginning in the world, and not from the standpoint of an isolated Ego. This approach to being born, that is, this way of thinking about one's own birth, makes available a thinking that is not primarily directed towards a unity but, instead, focuses upon an intersecting duality (*kreuzweise Dualität*). One axis of this intersecting duality stands for the relation between past and future, in the sense of the being born *of someone*, while the other axis deals with the *relation with* and *release from* (*Verbindung und Entbindung*) the Other into the world. The threshold of birth marks the dual aspect of this reflectively generative approach, constitutive *both* for the relation between oneself and another human being *and also* for the link between the concrete and the universal.

Universality is given through the generality of the intersecting structure of duality; concreteness is brought to expression through the different ways in which this structure is experienced and lived out as such. Even if everyone is born of a woman, the way in which his or her birth takes place, and the type of relationship that is instated with her and with her fellows in the world, is variable, depending on the individuals in question and on their social and cultural norms.⁶ In this way the structure of an intersecting duality, at the centre of which lies birth in all its various aspects, becomes connected with the relation between generality and plurality as well as between universality and concrete differences. At the centre of this description we find the generality of the coordinates linking the temporal-historical axis with the worldly-interpersonal axis. Thus, this description encompasses both a highly concrete and personal and an anonymous and general approach.

⁶ As Landweer sums up the matter: «Mortality, natality and so also generativity constitute specific challenges for every culture, to which each culture responds with decisions and practises which may vary in endlessly different ways» [Landweer 1993, 36; Kitzinger 1980; Schlumbohm *et al.* 1998].

This basic structure, this crosswise duality, does not romanticise the relational structure in the beginning as necessarily harmonic and loving. It represents quite simply a basic relational structure that may help to locate the concrete questions that I have already mentioned. The idea that the beginning is a relation has been also put forward by the Italian author Adriana Cavarero. We are always born from someone, the (m)other. «This other person has [guaranteed] this constitutive aspect of the emergence on the scene of the birth, of which existence in its phenomenal condition is defined by a relationship in the first place» [Cavarero 1997, 211, my transl.]. «The beginning [...] is the relationship» [Cavarero 1997, 212, my transl.]. The structure of being born from and with somebody has become more complex due to current reproductive technologies.

The structural insight is: the relation is the beginning, no matter how it continues afterwards. The relation may be disrupted or be formed by indifference. A child can be given away, be neglected or abandoned. In these cases, a relation is disrupted. The question of how this relation continues, how it is formed or whether it was disrupted is fundamental to finding one's personal sense and history. I would like to emphasise that the disruption of a relationship does not necessarily imply something bad. Acknowledging the basic relational structure should only shed light on the thesis that we are always already relational beings. Each person who is born lives in her generative context, in her familial historicity and worldly existence, and is influenced by their cultural, social past and biological dispositions. But whether the generative context is particularly good or bad is not the issue here. However, it seems to me that relations always matter to us because our experiences of feeling happy or unhappy, being self-assured or insecure always have to do with the relations in which we live(d). Even though relations seem to matter to us we do not know all about them; and in particular, we cannot remember where we came from.

4. Relation between certainty and withdrawal – I cannot remember my birth ...

Each person knows this about herself: I was born. At the same time, this apparently clear immediate evidence of one's own existence forms

a join with the inability, even impossibility, of remembering one's own birth. This creates a tension between the certainty that I exist, on the one hand, and the fact that I cannot remember my own birth, on the other. In our memory of ourselves, it seems as if we had a past that has existed all the time; but we cannot remember all of it. Consequently, for instance, the character *Momo*, invented by Michael Ende [1975], answers the question of when were you born: as far as I can remember, I have always been here. Hence, we can emphasise: the existence, the self-remembering of one's own existence is stuck in between the certainty of "I exist" and the withdrawal (deprivation) of "I cannot remember". There is a tension: my own birth is certain and not remembered, inaccessible to me, withdrawn from my consciousness.

4.1. *Co-constitution*

In unpublished manuscripts, Husserl frequently challenged himself with the question of one's own birth and death, which are not accessible to consciousness. This question of one's own birth challenges the Husserlian concept of the transcendental subject and the limits of transcendental phenomenology. The term 'transcendental' refers to the aspect of phenomenology that is particularly concerned with sense constitution. Can a transcendental subject constitute itself as existing in the world by acknowledging birth and death as beginning and ending? It is at this point that a paradoxical situation emerges. The birth of others can be phenomenologically attested, at least from the outside, even though the experience of the other, that is, its own experience of being born, lived out from within, remains as the «verifiable accessibility of what is originally inaccessible» [Husserl 1973b, § 52]. So when I am asked what evidence I have of my own birth, I find myself thrown back on a self-awareness (*Selbstbesinnung*) that remains questionable; for all that can be communicated to me in narrative form is this *external* perspective on my birth.

In this intersubjective time of the world, every human being *as* human has its beginning and its end, its birth and its death. Generally speaking, in this approach birth has manifold levels of meaning, such as a bio-physical, psychological, temporal and generative meaning, not

to mention social and cultural meanings as well. In order to consider the possibility of finding an internal way to access one's own birth, Husserl goes back by phenomenological reduction to the primordial level that encompasses the sensibility that depends upon the ownness of my body. Sensibility carries with it a susceptibility to being affected by whatever is given in advance, and so is always impregnated by the world. I am constantly and from the outset affected by my own sensibility, which however remains external to me as an ongoing process. Just as the world is always already given in advance, so also is my primordial sphere. In a continually anonymous fashion the latter furnishes the basis for all specific determinations. For «even in the primordial sphere my own body as organic body has its beginning, since every organism has its beginning and is caught up in a developmental process, even a primordial process. Before this beginning I could not have initiated my worldly time. I am human only insofar as my body is constituted for me and as such is made available to me» [Husserl 1929, C8/11b, zit. in Schües 2005, 58 f.]. This being for me of my body happens after I have been born, and after being born has made the break from prenatal existence, by making intentionality possible as an outcome of the tension between world and self, self and other, self and the body [Schües 1997].

In self-awareness, phenomenologically speaking, the situation is the following: The becoming of anything can only be objectively posited, and so experienced, in the mode of its having become something. The person that I have become depends, among other aspects, upon my sexuality, genderedness, my way of being a body, my way of being in the world and having a history, as also upon my intentional “I can” or “I cannot”. Each of these modes is a way of being of my transcendental I. However, my own birth still cannot be phenomenologically attested. My own birth is unavoidably concealed in the primordial sphere of anonymity and within the horizon of what has always already been given in advance. This anonymity, making possible a form of awareness that reaches back to my birth, remains fundamental for my primordial sphere, whose sensibility may be only one aspect alongside others, such as worldliness, sexuality and historicity.

The primordial sphere plays a crucial role in understanding the constitution of birth *in* and *by* the transcendental subject. The difference and

overlapping of this “in” and “by” breaks up the sphere of transcendental subjectivity and opens it up onto a *generative dimension*. The transcendental subject cannot be like a logical pole because, as investigation of the primordial sphere has already clearly shown, it is sensible and so has to be embodied. And if the transcendental ego is already a body endowed with sensibility then it must also be regarded as gendered. The transcendental ego underlies the gender difference, ‘it’ is infused with bodiliness, worldliness and historicity. Hence, any constitution of a transcendental subject is infused by another, by the world, history, bodiliness, and as such constitution is always co-constitution, and this becomes especially clear when we talk about generative phenomena such as birth. My own birth is necessarily co-constituted by another (female) transcendental ego. Every birth, and therefore every beginning in the world, is founded in a relation that guarantees this beginning through a prior co-constitution. Co-constitution means here that only in a relation between transcendental egos, one of which is female, can birth as the birthing of another human being be constituted. This original endowment of meaning, as Husserl might call this first worldly constitution, is already phenomenologically attested *by another*. This is why access to birth can only be provided *by* the other and so can only be brought to light *from* the world. Hence, the question of the external or internal perspective becomes futile: «The interior and the exterior are inseparable» [Merleau-Ponty 2014, 430]. Hence, the primordial sphere is always already surpassed; the phenomenological approach shows that the world, relations, birth, beginnings are on the inside, while I and my experiences are on the outside of my primordial sphere.

Husserl writes that from the very beginning the child that starts its life is already «instinctively directed toward the world» out of its original institution (*Urstiftung*) as «living in the world» [Husserl 2014, 221, my transl.]. By way of her «transcendental birth» she is already equipped with «original drives, original feelings» («*Urtriebe, Uraffektionen*», Husserl 2014, 115, my transl.). The newborn brings with it capacities and inclinations which can only be developed on the basis of its having been born. Caught up, right from the start, in a process that constantly starts all over again, it begins to establish a relation to the world in and through a bodily co-constitution conferring meaning upon

its being in the world, and so also constituting itself as a being who has begun to be through birth. With regard to the question concerning the constitution “in” and “by” transcendental subjectivity, the conclusion can now be drawn that what is in question is in fact a transcendental community of two transcendental egos, both of whom are affected by worldliness and historicity. Birth, one’s own birth, is constituted *in* transcendental subjectivity, and is co-constituted with another who is female. Birth is constituted *by* transcendental subjectivity in the sense of a past birth event for me and, in principle, constituted as inaccessible and withdrawn. For this reason, birth is a «transcendental birth» because it is not just experienced by someone and so is constituted by that person, but also because, through birth, the I is set up in its difference from the world. By beginning to be in a world, both the relation and the disruption between two humans and between the generations is thereby necessarily constituted as a world event. And this world event has a meaning not just for the human being who has begun. A beginning is always a disruption of a continuum, a disturbance or a chance for other human beings. Therefore, birth is constitutive for the world and for history and histories. But, as I will discuss below, the meaning of being born can only be *constituted in retrospect*, with the help of others. The concept of generative birth includes that being born is constitutive for the subject and that it is an essential component of world constitution [Husserl 1973a, 62]. I would therefore like to readdress the problem of the withdrawal of one’s own birth through the idea of an *anonymous natality*.

5. Birth, anonymity and the world

Our first memories start at the age of two and a half or three years. Sometimes we are not even sure whether we are remembering a photo or a story, rather than something we have really experienced by being present at the scene. We are surrounded by this ambiguity of accessibility and inaccessibility, conceivability and inconceivability. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers in this context to the notion of an «anonymous natality», which points to the fact of the withdrawal of memory and the

certainly that such birth must have taken place even though it cannot be recognised and named in the sense of my own birth. My being born, my natality generates my corporeality on various levels of meanings in the tension between myself, the world and others, even though I am only aware of it on reflection: «[...] my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world» [Merleau-Ponty 2014, 431]. We already find ourselves in relations and in the contextual structure between the self, others, and the world. If it is true that this determination of meaning is always located between certainty and deprivation, then it implies that it is only possible to ascribe meaning to the past *retroactively* (*retrospectively*, *après coup*). Hence, the fundamental questions: “Where do I come from?”, “With whom am I born?” can only be answered retrospectively and under the condition that meaning constitution and given facts, necessity and contingency, generality and concreteness coincide. On the one hand, my past and my origin are being part of me, while on the other they are also the history of others. Hence, these histories also concern the beginning and its condition of my own life. They are accessible in light of the *general* structural generativity and of the contingency of the concrete relations between the people who belong to the place of origin from conception (perhaps even before) until birth, and even after.

What people understand under their own personal identity is thus experienced on the basis first, of the histories to which we have retrospectively ascribed a meaning, second of the particularities and relationships with others, and third of their own body and its embeddedness into the world, which is always predetermined and will never be completely transparent to ourselves. I discover myself as someone who lives in a body, has a body, who lives in this world, in relationships with other people, who lives in a certain social context, to which I respond and to which I cannot not respond. Due to such predetermination, the body seems occasionally to be strange; it inheres traces (just like scars) of its history and its birth; we are dependent on those other people who are able to tell us where we actually come from and who, and how or why, was responsible for our being borne and born. Another possibility is that we are not told anything

because we cannot find the people who could tell us about ourselves and our history. Most people experience this as a deficit, because they do not know where and whom they come from.⁷

6. *Generative phenomenology and narration*

Birth should be understood as an intersubjective, generative concept. This understanding brings with it the claim that it is the relation with others (in terms of both history and personal relationships) that makes possible my perceptual, communicational and behavioural capacities in the world. This means that only if I keep on initiating relations, taken up by others and opening up a field of transaction between us, will I begin to understand my origins and so also myself. Birth constitutes me, but it is also constituted in and through the relationship with the history of the other. Hence, only in retrospect, and assuming that I have gained access to the histories of others, can they be constituted as belonging to my world. The tension between withdrawal (*Entzug*) and apodictic certainty provides a motive for phenomenological investigation. Just as Socratic wonder provided a motive for philosophy, so the tension in the process of being born between withdrawal and certainty provides a motive for the narrative dimension of a generative phenomenology. This motive is complemented by the insight that the meaning of being born can be recuperated only in a *narrative* relation *with* the other. If my entrance into the world takes place through and with the other and if, in consequence, my existence acquires its meaning through (or by way of) the other, it follows that it must be possible to clarify the meaning constitution of existence *through* and *with* the other.

The key question can no longer be how a subject gets itself into a relationship; rather the contrary, the question that now has to be raised is the question of how do we care and go about these relations in the world – and this is an ethical question. Morality is supposed to take place through the actions of actual human beings. It takes place among

⁷On the basis of the concept of the generative structure and the concrete dependency on stories of one's place of origin and personal identity, we can draw parallels between the issues of natality and migration.

human beings who are born in a generative relatedness and who live with other people (whether on good or bad terms). To be born into a generative relationship means that one is coming from somewhere (so also Arendt posits) and actually, more precisely, from *someone*, namely the mother, who generates the relation at the beginning of life in the world [Cavarero 1997, 210; Schües 2016, 323 ff.]. Thus, from the beginning there is a relation, regardless of how life continues and whether it is a happy or unhappy relation. Hence, each human being in question lives in a generative context and is gendered. She is a bodily and cultural individual who is born into the universal structure of generativity and worldliness, and who lives it in a concrete manner. Generative phenomenology combines a universal structure with a concrete determination and it takes relationality to be primary to individuality. To care for these relationships is central to ethics. The 21st century is the century of birth and natality. The huge amount of attention paid to reproductive technologies affirms this observation even more. Consequently, the ethical issues concern questions of how and in which way children are brought into the world and into what sort of relations they are born. Thus, the concern for our relation between adults and children should not be turned over to some special science, such as pedagogy; it might be rather that such relationships concerns us all and that it calls for a responsibility towards the fact of natality: as Hannah Arendt also saw it, the fact «that we all come into the world by being born and this world is renewed through birth» [Arendt 1958, 196]. Hence, understanding natality as a human and worldly condition means putting human relations at the centre of our concerns.⁸

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Keywords

Birth; Human Condition; Relationship; Constitution; Generativity; History of Philosophy; Phenomenology

Abstract

In light of the dominant role mortality and death have played in the history of philosophy, I give a few examples of the metaphorical appropriation and (dis-)regard of natality from Plato to the Enlightenment and Heidegger's phenomenology of being-there. In the second part of the paper, I unfold the meaning of birth as transition and disruption, its meaning for intentionality, and its structural importance for understanding the relationality and generativity of human existence. The three basic questions of 'Where do I come from?' 'From whom am I born?' and 'With whom am I born?' and the incapability of remembering one's own birth are fundamental to the co-constitution of personal identity and recognizing the centrality of human relations. Understanding natality as a human and worldly condition means putting human relations at the centre of our concerns.