

ENHANCING THE NATAL CONDITION: HANNAH ARENDT AND THE QUESTION OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

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This paper turns to Hannah Arendt's brief, poignant remarks about the advent of a biotechnological revolution as a starting point for a renewed reflection on her concept of natality. By expanding on Arendt's significant, but often overlooked, reference to the work of the German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen, it will be argued that that natality is a concept that subverts any rigid opposition between zoē and bios, biological birth and politico-linguistic birth. Consequently, it will be shown that Jürgen Habermas and Michael Sandel are mistaken to appeal to the concept of natality in their arguments against genetic enhancement.

History and nature have become equally alien to us, namely, in the sense that the essence of man can no longer be comprehended in terms of either category.
— Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Introduction

In what are practically the opening lines of her *magnum opus*, Hannah Arendt makes a bold, yet apt, prediction about the future of the human condition:

For some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also “artificial,” toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. It is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire...to produce superior human beings and to alter their size, shape and function.”¹

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HC.

Given the current interest in such contentious bioethical issues as reproductive cloning and genetic enhancement, one would have expected that Arendt's prescience about the advent of a biotechnological revolution would have attracted substantial attention. However, few have taken serious interest in this intriguing remark. This is regrettable, not only because Arendt's thought could shed light on a prominent question in many current bioethical and politico-philosophical debates, but also because further reflection on the question of biotechnology could, in turn, offer new insight into her celebrated concept of natality. "Natality," Arendt explains at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, "may be the central category of political thought" because "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possess the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting." (HC, 9) Thus, if the human capacity to act is ontologically rooted in the biological fact of being born, then it seems that prenatal technological intervention in the genetic endowment of a human being entails consequences for the newborn's capability to become a free acting agent. It is hardly surprising, then, that the few authors who do invoke Arendt's thought in the context of an ethical discussion of biotechnology do so with specific reference to the concept of natality.²

Yet, despite Arendt's clear concern about the possible effects of such technological developments on the human capacity to initiate new beginnings, it is far from obvious that her concept of natality lends itself so readily to arguments that oppose genetic intervention as, for example, Jürgen Habermas and Michael Sandel seem to believe. While she indeed sees in the desire to redesign our biogenetic base a "wish to escape the human condition" and a "rebellion against human existence as it has been given" (HC, 2), that does not necessarily mean that she also considers it a threat to the human's natal condition. In fact, it may even be surmised that the opposite is true, and that she develops the concept of natality precisely in response to this looming possibility. Moreover, Habermas invokes the condition of natality to argue that, for human freedom to be retained, it is

² See Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FHN. See also Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007); Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Cybernetics is Antihumanism: Advanced Technologies and the Rebellion Against the Human Condition," in *Transhumanism and its Critics*, (ed.) G. R. Hansell and W. Grassie (Philadelphia: Metanexus, 2011), 227-48.

essential that our biogenetic properties must remain outside the reach of planned technological intervention. But is it not paradoxical to argue that human freedom is grounded in something that is given by necessity? Indeed, readers of Arendt have always been puzzled by the fact that, while she assumes a sharp opposition between the realms of necessity and freedom, she argues that the capacity to act freely is rooted in the biological fact of birth. In the following, it will be argued that this apparent contradiction can only be removed if we recognize that natality is a concept that undermines the blunt opposition between *zoē* and *bios*, biological birth and politico-linguistic birth. Expanding on Arendt's largely neglected footnote on the German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen in *The Human Condition*, it will be suggested that the key to this enigma can be found in what is known in evolutionary biology as the phenomenon of neoteny or fetalization. As a result, it will be argued that Habermas and Sandel are mistaken to base their arguments against genetic intervention in human beings in Arendt's concept of natality.

The Techno-Human Condition

An entry in Arendt's *Denktagebuch* (*Thought Diary*), dated early 1958, suggests that one of the main reasons why she abandoned the project of writing a book on the totalitarian elements in Marxism and instead began to focus on the basic components of the *vita activa*, was that she became increasingly occupied with the question of the impact of impending technological developments on the human condition:

Ad Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog": The greatest and most horrible danger for human thought is that what we once believed to be true could be shattered by the discovery of a fact that was previously unknown. For example, if one day we would succeed in making humans immortal, then everything we had ever thought concerning death and its profundity would become simply laughable.... One can surely maintain that this is simply too high a price to pay for the removal of death.³

Such thought experiments may seem totally harmless, were it not be for the astonishing fact that a growing number of researchers in

³ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, (ed.) U. Ludz and I. Nordmann (München/Zürich: Piper, 2003), 591; my translation.

artificial intelligence now think that it is possible, at least in principle, to download consciousness onto a hard drive, granting virtual immortality to the individual mind.⁴ Hence, when Arendt says of science-fiction literature that “unfortunately nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves” (HC, 2), this means that she had, by then, already decided to no longer take for granted the commonly accepted dividing line between reality and fiction, and that she was prepared to follow even the most speculative of paths. In what follows, it will be suggested that we ought to read *The Human Condition* as an attempt to describe, in rigorous phenomenological fashion, the three most fundamental human capacities, which Arendt thought were on the verge of being swept away by technological change. From this perspective, the book may be read as an analysis of the historico-intellectual genesis of technoscience and its possible impact on “those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed.” (HC, 6)

The three fundamental human capacities (labour, work, and action) correspond to the most general human conditions, “birth and death, natality and mortality.” (HC, 8) And, although the question of a technologically induced “removal of death” still features prominently in the prologue—as can be gauged from her poignant remark that man’s “wish to escape the human condition...also underlies the hope to expand man’s life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit” (HC, 2)—the remainder of the book contains an extensive reflection on the fate of the condition of natality in an increasingly technologically driven society. In this context, Arendt’s remark that natality constitutes “the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical thought” (HC, 9) is usually interpreted as a response to Heidegger’s prioritization of the event of death in his existential analytic of *Dasein*.⁵ And while this rather negative explanation of why the event of birth holds such a prominent place in her thought is certainly not wrong, it also misses the sense of historical urgency that prompted Arendt to write a phenomenology of the active life. If action, the most political of human capacities, is rooted in the fact of natality, which currently stands exposed to the threat of technologi-

⁴ See Hans Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ See Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natality* (Basingstoke/London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 2–5; See also Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1982), 76.

cal usurpation, then the question of biotechnology “is a political question of the first order.” (HC, 3) That is to say, it is not just a practical question that professional politicians need to address by enacting legislative measures. It is also a question in which the essence of the political itself is at stake. If human beings are no longer born, but “made,” then their capacity to act may undergo a metamorphosis so great as to become unrecognizable; the capacity, let us not forget, that enables them to make political decisions about such issues as technological development in the first place.

There is no question that this kind of threat to the essence of the political is unprecedented. Nevertheless, Arendt submits that, when viewed from a broader perspective, the age of biotechnology actually represents but one episode in a much longer history of the decline of the political. Indeed, another important thread that runs through *The Human Condition* is the eclipse of the political, as the phenomenological structure informing the capacity to act is perpetually misunderstood from the times of the ancient Greek *polis* to the present day world. Arendt concludes the book by arguing that everything is not lost, however, because, as she suggests in the very last section, “the capacity for action...is still with us, although it has become the exclusive prerogative of the scientists.” (HC, 323) Scientific experimentation is itself an expression of our capacity to introduce unpredictability in the world whose results are not yet knowable. Hence, while writing “at the very moment when [the nature of society] was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age” (HC, 6), she does not venture to make a prediction about how the human capacity to act will fare in the dawning age of pervasive biotechnology.

Although the biotechnological threshold had already been crossed with the introduction of *in vitro* fertilization in 1978, something which Arendt predicted as early as 1958 by writing about “creating life in the test tube” (HC, 2), the pertinence of her thought for reflecting on biotechnological issues has only recently received the attention it deserves. In *The Future of Human Nature*, Habermas strongly opposes non-therapeutic genetic intervention. He even goes as far as to suggest that it should be legally banned on the basis of a “right to a genetic inheritance immune from artificial intervention” (FHN, 27) because it would radically infringe on the genetically programmed person’s capacity to act freely.⁶ For a person to know

⁶ Michael Sandel has expressed a similar concern about the corrosive effect of biogenetic engineering on one’s ethical freedom to be the undivided author of one’s own life. In his argument against genetic enhancement, he also uses Arendt’s concept of natality and argues that biotechnological intervention

herself as the irreducible origin of her own free actions, Habermas explains, it seems necessary that she experiences her actions with reference to an origin that exceeds her control as well as the control of others. Such a condition, he argues, is what Arendt attempted to articulate through the concept of natality: "In acting, human beings feel free to begin something new because birth itself, as a divide between nature and culture, marks a new beginning." (FHN, 59) In order to experience oneself as the unique origin of authentic actions, the distinction between "what is manufactured and what has come by nature" (FHN, 46), between what has been brought into being by *tekhnē* and what has come into being by *physis*, seems categorical. It is only because we are aware that an essential aspect of our identity was already fixed at the time of our birth that we are capable of experiencing ourselves as the initiators of actions for which we are uniquely responsible:

What is suggested by [the concept of natality] is, I believe, the onset, with birth, of a differentiation between the socialization fate of a person and the natural fate of her organism. It is only by referring to this difference between nature and culture, between beginnings not at our own disposal, and the plasticity of historical practices that the acting subject may proceed to the self-ascriptions without which he could not perceive himself as the initiator of his actions and aspirations.... The fact that this natural fate, this past before our past, so to speak, is not at our human disposal seems to be essential for our awareness of freedom. (FHN, 59–60)

Habermas acknowledges that it does not necessarily follow from Arendt's description of the condition of natality that a genetically programmed person will no longer be able to experience her actions as constitutive of new beginnings, but he gives an additional reason why, nonetheless, this will likely be the case. Unlike someone who finds herself confronted with the expectations and stimulations of her parents to act upon her natural talents given at birth, a programmed person can only interpret, but not revise or undo, her parents' choice to purposefully intervene in her genetic makeup. According to Habermas, genetic intervention will establish a paternalistic, asymmetrical relationship that—as he had already argued in

exhibits "a stance of mastery and domination that fails to appreciate the gifted character of human powers and achievements, and misses the part of freedom that consists in a persisting negotiation with the given" (Sandel, *The Case Against*, 83).

an earlier essay⁷—even surpasses slavery in cruelty, for it will never be possible to emancipate oneself from this inferior, programmed position.

However, as compelling as these arguments against the ethical permissibility of biotechnological intervention may be, there nevertheless appears to be something counterintuitive in the contention that genetic intervention will reduce, or even annul, human freedom because it would turn a hitherto chance event into a matter of deliberate choice. Slavoj Žižek, for example, points out that it is strikingly paradoxical for Habermas to argue that human beings can only retain their freedom and autonomy by leaving the distribution of their genetic dispositions to the contingent processes of nature: “[According to Habermas] autonomy can only be maintained by prohibiting access to the blind natural contingency that determines us, that is, ultimately, by limiting our autonomy and freedom of scientific invention.”⁸ Moreover, the argument that human beings can only experience their freedom with reference to an origin that is not at their disposal is persuasive only if this gifted aspect of human ability is *truly* out of their reach. If this is not the case, then Habermas is actually arguing that the only way for human beings to maintain their sense of dignity and autonomy is by committing themselves to an illusion.

Natality Between Necessity and Freedom

Reflecting on Marx’s seemingly incompatible statements that labour is the most human of man’s activities, and that the abolition of labour will inaugurate the realm of freedom, Arendt writes:

Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers, in whom they can be discounted. In the work of great authors they lead into the very center of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights.⁹

⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, “An Argument against Human Cloning: Three Replies,” in *The Postnational Constellation. Political Essays*, (tr.) and (ed.) M. Pinsky (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 163–72. Originally published in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17–18 January 1998.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies* (New York/London: Routledge, 2004), 126.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 24.

Thus, if it is true that the real originality of great authors reveals itself especially in the contradictions in their work, then one cannot claim to have really understood the thought of Arendt, or claim that it contains an argument against biogenetic intervention, unless the meaning and sense of the concept of natality has been completely unraveled. Natality, Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, names the fact that “[b]ecause they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.” (HC, 177) But is it not paradoxical for Arendt to argue that natality constitutes the “central category of political thought” (HC, 9) if she also maintains that it is through the activity of labour, not action, that men deal with the biological processes forced upon them by necessity? In other words, how can Arendt claim both that political freedom is rooted in such a plain biological phenomenon as parturition *and* that everything related to “the life of the individual and the survival of the species” is a “non-political, household affair by definition”? (HC, 29)

It is indeed striking that Arendt is not always consistent in her description of the nature of and the relation between the activities pertaining to the realms of necessity and freedom respectively. In the first part of *The Human Condition*, she adheres to the ancient Greek view of separating the private and the public realm, *oikos* and *polis*, even to the point of endorsing the Greek idea that it is legitimate to use violence in the private sphere, provided that it serves the purpose of liberating “oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world.” (HC, 31) Arendt’s “phenomenological essentialism”¹⁰, as Seyla Benhabib has called her one-to-one coupling of human activities and worldly locations, seems to lead her to accept the Attic view that we are all born as unequal, needy creatures, irredeemably tied to the necessities of the life process, but that we are nevertheless intermittently capable of raising ourselves out of this slavish condition by erecting an artificial public realm in which our biological wants and needs can be temporarily suppressed. As Arendt notes:

The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs.... The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the neces-

¹⁰ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 123.

sities of life in the household was the condition for the freedom in the *polis*. (HC, 30–31)

From remarks like these, it has often been concluded that Arendt suffered from an ardent “polis envy,” in the sense that she would have posited the socio-political structure of the Greek *polis* as a normative ideal against which modern society, with its conspicuous “unnatural growth of the natural” (HC, 47), can be critically measured.¹¹ In other words, her virulent hostility toward what she calls “the rise of the social,” the encroachment of the activities having to do with life, labour, and reproduction on the political realm, is seen by some as the result of the fact that she made her idiosyncratic understanding of the Greek *polis* life the standard against which modern society is assessed and, obviously, found wanting.

However, there are also passages in which she seems to endorse the opposite view, namely, that there is nothing that more clearly reveals the anti-political thrust of the Western tradition than its deep-seated drive to violate biological life. For example, such is the case at the end of the chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* entitled, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man.” Describing the fate of the millions of displaced and stateless persons in interbellum Europe, Arendt argues that these people found themselves deprived of their human rights at the very moment they most needed them. Both the French and the American proclamations of the Rights of Man presuppose that each human being is endowed with a set of fundamental rights that are “self-evident” or “given with birth.” But the very moment one lost one’s political status as a citizen of the nation-state, it turned out that one could not appeal to these so-called “inalienable rights.” Quite the reverse, more often than not these stateless people found themselves reduced to “the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.”¹² The extreme instance of this nakedness was the camp inmate, who was reduced to nothing more than “a specimen of the animal-species

¹¹ See Bernard Flynn, *Political Philosophy at the Closure of Metaphysics* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1992); Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2003); Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); Sheldon Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” *Salmagundi*, vol. 60 (1983): 3–19; Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children. Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 377. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OT.

man.” (OT, 589) Totalitarianism can be said to have brought this violent, anti-political drive to its most extreme conclusion, but it has determined Western politics since its inception. “Ever since the Greeks,” Arendt explains at the very end of the chapter, “we have known that highly developed political life breeds...a deep resentment against the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is—single, unique, individual.” (OT, 382) The dark background formed by what is biologically given to us at birth “breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity” (OT, 382) and “indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy.” (OT, 383) Contrary to what she will argue ten years later in *The Human Condition*, Arendt concludes that such a suppression of biological life has to be avoided at all costs:

The human being who has lost his place in a community...is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life and must remain unqualified, mere existence in all matters of public concern. This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, “*Volo ut sis* [I want you to be],” without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation. (HC, 382)

It should be clear that such a “basic gratitude for everything that is as it is,” for “things that are *physei* and not *nomōs*”¹³, is diametrically opposed to what Arendt, apparently approvingly, described as the ancient Greek hierarchy between the biological and politico-linguistic dimensions of man.

How, then, should we conceive the relation between birth and the freedom to act that grounds Arendt’s concept of natality? And how will this condition fare in the dawning age of biotechnology? Does biological birth really condition the capacity to act, in which case Habermas seems to be fully justified in invoking the concept of natality to oppose the use of biotechnology, which brings qualities that are given by birth within the reach of planned technical intervention? Or are biological birth and freedom to act antithetical to

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 246.

each other, as Arendt also seems to argue, in which case the concept of natality would rather turn into a weapon in the hands of those who believe that our present physical and psychical constitution is an obstacle that impedes the realization of our full potentialities?¹⁴

The Symbolic Reduction of the Event of Parturition

Some recent commentators have circumvented the above-mentioned contradiction in her description of the relation between birth and action by assuming a sharp distinction between *biological* birth and *politico-linguistic* birth, *zoe* and *bios*. On this view, only the latter kind of birth genuinely expresses the fact of natality.¹⁵ According to Ronald Beiner, for example, Arendt “conforms to a strict dualism of Nature and Freedom.”¹⁶ Beiner even claims that Arendt’s concept of natality forms the core of what he calls her “anti-naturalistic philosophy.”¹⁷ To be sure, such an understanding of natality fits nicely into the standard interpretation of *The Human Condition*, which holds that it obviously could not have been Arendt’s intention to root political freedom in the biological event of parturition since she apparently bemoaned the victory of the *animal laborans* by unfavorably comparing its mode of existence to what the Greeks understood as a genuine *bios politikos*. Moreover, on this view, the capacity to begin anew presupposes a form of temporality that is fundamentally at odds with the temporality that men experience in their biological processes, which are, as Arendt explains, “part of the cyclical movement of nature and therefore endlessly repetitive.” (HC, 98) Contrary to the eternal circularity of natural processes, the processes that man sets into motion through action have a definite beginning in time.

¹⁴ This is the position of the current advocates of a so-called “liberal eugenics.” For example, see Nicolas Agar, *Liberal Eugenics: In Defence of Human Enhancement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Nick Bostrom, “Human Enhancement: A Transhumanist Perspective,” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2003): 493–506; Ronald Dworkin, “Playing God: Genes, Clones, and Luck,” in *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ See Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (London: Methuen, 1974); Ronald Beiner, “Action, Natality and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Freedom,” in *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy*, (ed.) Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray (London: Athlone Press, 1984); Margarete Durst, “Birth and Natality in Hannah Arendt,” *Analecta Husserliana*, vol. 79 (2003): 777–97.

¹⁶ Beiner, “Action, Natality,” 361.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 358.

The fact that Arendt invokes the event of the birth of a child to characterize the emergence of the new inherent in political action should, according to them, be understood from the perspective of the strategic value that it possesses. On this reading, the birth of a child provides an age dominated by the worldless *animal laborans* with an example of the one natural event that discloses the same mode of temporality that structures worldly action. Thus understood, politico-linguistic birth should be seen as the supreme actualization of the potentiality for beginning something new that biological birth only expresses *symbolically*.

The position that biological birth stands merely for man's capacity to initiate new beginnings appears to find further support in Arendt's 1929 doctoral dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, in which she explores the close connection between human creatureliness and freedom. The central aim of this early study was to question the possibility of grounding the precept "Love thy neighbour as thyself" in the Christian notion of love of God. In the first chapter of the book, Arendt shows that Augustine's notion of love as craving is not suitable for this purpose. Since it presupposes that the "highest good" (i.e. the "happy life") can only be attained in an absolute future which lies beyond worldly life and death, this kind of love demands complete self-denial and forsakenness of the human world. Thus, Arendt "makes the central Christian demand to love one's neighbor as oneself well nigh impossible."¹⁸ In the chapter entitled 'Creator and Creature,' Arendt shows, however, that Augustine's writings contain yet another notion of love which is not primarily oriented toward an absolute future, but toward an absolute past: "When happiness is projected into the absolute future, it is guaranteed by a kind of absolute past, since the knowledge of it, which is present in us, cannot possibly be explained by any experience in this world." (LSA, 47) In order to love happiness, one must already know what happiness is, and this knowledge "is given in pure consciousness prior to all experience." (LSA, 47) Hence, Arendt concludes that the only way to reach the idea of happiness is through remembrance: "[S]ince recollection presents a knowledge that necessarily lies before every specific past, it is also truly directed toward a transcendent and transmundane past—that is, toward the origin of human existence as such." (LSA, 48) This other notion of love, then, is a love of God that can only be actualized through a return, in recollection, to the One who created man:

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 30. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LSA.

The creature in its createdness derives its sense of meaning from a source that precedes its creation, that is, from the Maker who made it.... The fact that man has not made himself but was created implies that the meaningfulness of human existence both lies outside itself and antedates it. (LSA, 50)

Arendt confirmed the assumption that her early work on Augustine was the zero-point of her “philosophy of natality” by adding a passage in the 1964–65 revised English edition in which she explicitly calls the relation between human creatureliness and meaningfulness an expression of the fact of natality. (LSA, 52–53) But the mere fact that it was also possible for her to develop a theological understanding of natality would also seem to indicate that the biological understanding of natality developed in *The Human Condition* is but one historico-paradigmatic figure of the capacity to initiate new beginnings that finds its most basic experience in politico-linguistic action.

Yet, if Arendt really intended to say that there is merely a structural, or symbolic analogy between the unexpected arrival of a new human being through birth and the emergence of the new through worldly action, just as there is an analogy between divine creation *ex nihilo* or the unexpected birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the “miracle of action,”¹⁹ then why does she, nonetheless, claim that in this politico-linguistic birth “we confirm and take upon ourselves *the naked fact of our original physical appearance*”? (HC, 176) Moreover, it is also highly questionable that the ancient Greek separation between the realms of necessity and freedom, *oikos* and *polis*, and between the modes of existence appropriate to each, *zoe* and *bios*, underpins Arendt’s concept of natality, if only because she repeatedly insists that natality names a concept that “Greek antiquity ignored altogether.” (HC, 247)

In a number of recent publications on Arendt’s concept of natality, it has been forcefully argued that the reference to biological birth is not merely a metaphorical gesture, but that she really intends to say that the human capacity to act is conditioned by the bare biological fact of being born. Neither, however, is it an attempt to ground political action in an immutable human nature, as also has been suggested.²⁰ Peg Birmingham, for example, has argued that

¹⁹ “It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us.’” (HC, 247)

²⁰ See Martin Jay, “The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, Vol. 3, (ed.) G. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2006), 191–213.

Heidegger's notion of solicitude (*Fürsorge*) could help us understand that the newborn's entrance into the world is never simply a physical event, but is always already also a politico-linguistic event: "Linguistic natality cannot be laid over physical natality, and this suggests that both births are inseparable and always found together."²¹ It is thus not the case, she explains, that the newborn is simply a specimen of the animal-species man who only actualizes her potentiality to become a unique self when she inserts herself into the public world through words and deeds. "Naked facticity," Birmingham writes, "is always already the site of language."²² In other words, according to Birmingham, the newborn is always immediately exposed to the welcoming address of the other.

Anne O'Byrne agrees with Birmingham that biological birth and politico-linguistic birth are so deeply implicated as to be inseparable, but she retorts that Birmingham still sets too great a distance between the biological and the linguistic components of the event of natality by identifying their moment of convergence with the naming of the newborn. The problem with this understanding of natality, O'Byrne explains, is that it confines the intimate relationship between the maternal body and the fetus to the pre-social, pre-linguistic sphere, thus privileging the paternal moment in the event of natality. By contrast, O'Byrne's notion of natality's syncopated temporality offers a way out of this impasse. This syncopated temporality refers to "a mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly."²³ For instance, the moment of my physical birth constitutes a past that was never present to me because I was not "there" to experience it, but this still turns out to have been my birth at a later point in time. In much the same way, this syncopated temporal structure also determines our politico-linguistic birth. The outcome or meaning of one's actions only reveals itself to the backward glance of the storyteller or the historian, never to the actor himself—that is to say, the meaning of one's deed only reveals itself after the event. Following O'Byrne, then, it can be argued that the intimate connection between both kinds of births shows itself by the fact that our politico-linguistic birth always arrives *too late*, in the sense that our biological birth has always already "happened" to us. This event constitutes an absolute past which necessarily remains outside our field of experience.

²¹ Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 25.

²² *Ibid.* 29.

²³ O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, 95.

The Prematurity of Natal Life

One might wonder whether even Anne O'Byrne's articulation of the co-implication of biological birth and politico-linguistic birth leaves too great a gap between both events. After all, the ability to reflect on one's moment of birth as well as the ability to understand the stories that others tell about this event develop only gradually over time, while Arendt suggests that both events always arrive together. In particular, Arendt is quite clear about the fact that the mere event of being born already predisposes one to act freely.²⁴ Therefore, the task remains to think the co-implication of biological birth and politico-linguistic birth in still more radical fashion.

In a crucial, yet largely neglected, footnote in *The Human Condition*, Arendt states emphatically that her description of the condition of natality is "supported by recent findings in psychology and biology." (HC, 178) In particular, she refers to the German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen's book, *Der Mensch (Man)*, as her main source of inspiration, apparently referring to what in the field of evolutionary biology is called the phenomenon of *neoteny* or *fetalization*. In the first chapter of his book, Gehlen discusses the Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk's essay, *Das Problem der Menschwerdung (The Problem of the Origin of Man, 1926)*.²⁵ Bolk wrote this essay as a challenge to Ernst Haeckel's then still widely supported theory of "recapitulation," the idea that in ontogenetic development humans go through the distinct stages that determined the phylogenetic evolution of their direct ancestors. He argues that Haeckel's theory of evolution can indeed explain the mechanisms that determine the ontogenetic development of animal species, but that it cannot provide an answer to the much more pressing riddle of human ontogenetic development. Bolk departs from the often quoted, but never quite satisfactorily explained, observation that adult humans strongly resemble juvenile pongids—a phenotypic likeness that gradually disappears during the pongid's ontogenetic maturation. Moreover, in contrast to humans, in pongids there is a strong negative allometry of the brain and a strong positive allometry of the jaws. According to Bolk, these phenomena cannot be explained by Haeckel's thesis. His alternative

²⁴ "[T]he new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting." (HC, 9); "[I]t is, in other words, the birth of new men and the beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born." (HC, 247)

²⁵ Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, (tr.) C. McMillan and K. Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 93–109.

theory holds that, in contrast to animals, humans evolved by *retaining* a number of juvenile and even fetal features of their direct ancestors throughout ontogenesis. Whereas in the ontogenetic development of non-human primates bodily traits such as a flat face, a reduction of body hair, and high relative brain weight represent only temporary features, in humans they have evolved to become permanent features of their physical constitution.

There is no direct evidence that Arendt ever engaged in a thorough study of Bolk's theory of fetalization. Nonetheless, it is quite plausible that one implication in particular could have drawn her attention while reading Gehlen's concise rendering of it. Bolk specified that the retention of fetal characteristics in humans can be explained by the occurrence of a general *retardation* of human ontogenetic development, itself caused by an alteration of the endocrine system. In other words, it is because maturation is delayed in humans that fetal growth rates are prolonged and fetal features stabilized. Retardation explains, for example, why humans live much longer than other primates and mammals of comparable body size. A more interesting implication, however, is that if humans were to attain the same level of ontogenetic development as other primates at their time of birth, they would actually need a gestation period of twenty-one months instead of nine months. In a sense, as the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann noted, one could say that humans spend their first year as "extrauterine embryos."²⁶ The main reason for this acceleration of time of birth is that the human brain continues to grow at fetal rates even at this stage of ontogenetic development. Humans achieve only twenty-three per cent of their full brain capacity at term, whereas the brains of other mammals are at that time already fully formed. But if this brain development were to take place *in utero*, then it would be physically impossible for a woman to give birth.

Gehlen believed he had found in Bolk's theory of fetalization hard scientific evidence for his conception of man as a "deficient being" (*Mängelwesen*) and it seems that Arendt's reading of the former inspired her to develop the concept of natality on the basis of a similar anthropological theory. Unlike animals, Gehlen argues, humans are born without any well-developed instincts and specialized organs. Humans are thus singularly unfit for survival. Therefore,

²⁶ Adolf Portmann, "Die Tragzeiten der Primaten und die Dauer der Schwangerschaft beim Menschen: ein Problem der verglichen Biologie," *Revue Suisse de Zoologie*, vol. 48 (1941): 511-18. Gehlen refers to this article in the first chapter of *Man*.

Gehlen rejects the standard interpretation of the evolutionary theory of the origin of man. According to him, humans are not so much superior to other animal species, but are, on the contrary, vastly inferior to them: "One envisions man fictitiously as animal only to discover that he makes an imperfect and indeed impossible animal."²⁷ Thus, when Arendt states in the mentioned footnote to Gehlen that the scientific theories he discusses allow for the conclusion that action and speech are a "'biological necessity,' that is, necessary for a *biologically weak and ill-fitted organism* such as man" (HC, 177), she clearly inscribes herself in a peculiarly German tradition—initiated by Herder and brought into prominence by Nietzsche—that understands humans as "indeterminate" or "deprived" animals. Whereas newborn animals are almost immediately capable of generating appropriate reactions to the stimuli that emerge out of their environment, humans are extremely ill-adapted to the environment into which they are thrown. Born prematurely, no spontaneous attunement between the human organism and the environment takes place. For this reason, humans enter the world in desperate need of protection and care by the social group. According to Portmann, one can even argue that the social group assumes the task of an "external uterus." It is in this sense that the theory of fetalization allows us to understand more clearly why Arendt can argue that natality is an inextricable biological and politico-linguistic event: as premature creatures, humans are biologically conditioned to engage in politico-linguistic action. As Gehlen puts it, "a being with such a physical constitution is viable only as an acting being."²⁸ Thus, when Arendt writes that "a life without speech and without action...has ceased to be a human life" (HC, 176), she clearly remains within the confines of Gehlen's anthropological theory.

This makes it understandable why Arendt can argue that the concept of natality articulates the idea that human freedom is conditioned by the biological fact of being born without necessarily contradicting herself. Natality not only articulates the fact that our politico-linguistic birth always arrives *too late*, in Anne O'Byrne's sense that our biological birth constitutes a past that was never present to us. The concept of natality also articulates the fact that our biological birth always arrives *too early*, in the sense that our premature birth releases us from the fate of being compelled to follow a biogenetically predetermined course of life. This is also one of the reasons why Arendt rejects the notion of human nature and opts to

²⁷ Gehlen, *Man*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

speak about human conditions instead.²⁹ Natality, as a condition of human existence, does not determine human beings absolutely because the biological traits they are born with never solidify into a set of fixed properties, but remain in a deficient state. From a biological perspective, we were never ready to enter the world in the first place. However, it is precisely this “unpreparedness” or “prematurity” that gives us to the possibility of initiating radically new beginnings. Accordingly, natality, is neither a purely biological concept, nor a purely politico-linguistic one. It names an event which breaks out of the eternal circle of nature, “where no beginning and no end exist” (HC, 96), but which nonetheless remains ineluctably tied to the biological condition from which it emerged.

As Michael Sandel notes, the freedom of natal beings consists in a “persisting negotiation with the given.”³⁰ However, the foregoing suggests that very little has been given to such beings at birth. Deprived of an immutable “natural essence” and not tailored to any particular environment, humans are biologically conditioned to actively create their own conditions of existence. Arendt writes:

In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. (HC, 9)

Furthermore, Arendt makes it utterly clear that the condition of natality not only prompts human beings to engage in politico-linguistic action. Natality also prompts them to engage in technological innovation:

[I]f the human condition consists in man’s being a conditioned being for whom everything, given or man-made, immediately becomes a condition of his further existence, then man “adjusted” himself to an environment of machines the moment he designed them. They certainly have become as inalienable a condition of our existence as tools and implements were in all previous ages. (HC, 147)

²⁹ “[T]he human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature.” (HC, 9–10)

³⁰ Sandel, *The Case Against*, 83.

Contrary to what Habermas and Sandel believe then, Arendt does not hold that biotechnological intervention will irrevocably infringe on the human capacity to act freely. For her, technology is not an external force that threatens to violate a pure, natural origin; on the contrary, technology constitutes an irreducible condition of human existence. Technology could even be said to constitute natality's necessary "other," in the sense that it is the originary supplement of the human's faulty biological constitution. If humans are born deprived of any fixed set of biological characteristics, if they are born "unfinished," as it were, then simply opposing genetic intervention becomes an impossible position to sustain. Of course, this does not mean that genetic intervention is entirely unproblematic and thus exempted from critical examination. But it does mean that one should not determine in advance what is "natural" and what is "unnatural" to the existence of natal beings.

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