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NEITHER BEGINNING, NOR END -

THE ANARCHO-ATELIC EVENT OF NATALITY

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> *Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other*. (Arendt, 1977: 150)

Abstract

Hannah Arendt calls "natality," the fact that human beings enter the world through birth, the central category of political thought. But how can she assert that being born conditions one to act freely if she also seems to maintain that is through labor, not action, that human beings deal with biologically conditioned processes? Expanding on Arendt's largely neglected footnote to Arnold Gehlen in *The Human Condition*, this paper will argue that the concept of natality precisely undoes any strict division between freedom and necessity because it names the radical co-implication of biological and politico-linguistic births, the conditioned and the spontaneous.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, natality, freedom, temporality, biologism.

I

Reflecting on Marx's clearly incompatible statements that labor is the most human of man's activities and that the abolishment of labor will inaugurate the realm of freedom, Hannah 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. (Arendt, 1977: 24)

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 unless the meaning of the concept of natality has been made completely clear. Natality, as Arendt explains, names the fact that "[b]ecause they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action." (1998: 177) But how can Arendt argue that natality constitutes the "central category of political thought" (1998: 9) if she also maintains that it is through the activity of labor, not action, that man deals with the biological processes which are forced upon him by necessity? In other words, how can Arendt both assert that political freedom is rooted in such a plain biological phenomenon as birth *and* that everything related to "the life of the individual and the survival of the species" is a "non-political, household affair by definition"? (1998: 29) To formulate the problem as succinct as possible: How is it possible that the mere physical fact of being born predisposes one to act freely?

In the standard interpretations of Arendt's thought, this paradox is usually removed by making a strict distinction between a "first" (biological) birth and a "second" (politico-linguistic) birth. The latter is then supposed to be the supreme actualization of the potentiality for beginning something new that the former only expresses symbolically.[1] Most recently, however, it has been suggested that such neo-Aristotelian attempts to untie the knot of natality actually deprive the concept of its critical value, which is precisely to deconstruct any blunt opposition between *zoe* and *bios*.[2] In this paper, it will be argued that even these latter readings of Arendt still fail to think the paradoxical co-implication of "first" and "second" births through to its logical end. By expanding on a largely neglected footnote of *The Human Condition* to the work of the German

[1] See for example: (Canovan, 1974), (Bowen-Moore, 1989), (Benhabib, 2003), (Durst, 2003) and (Beiner, 1984).
[2] See for example : (Birmingham, 2006) and (O'Byrne, 2010).

anthropologist Arnold Gehlen, it will be suggested that the peculiar human condition of natality expresses the freedom of biological life.

II

Natality, Arendt argues, conditions human beings to live freely. But what does freedom mean in this context? In Arendt's view, the question of freedom is a tenacious one, leading to problems that are not any less insurmountable than those pertaining to the concept of natality itself:

> To raise the question, what is freedom? seems to be a hopeless enterprise. It is as though age-old contradictions and antinomies were lying in wait to force the mind into dilemmas of logical impossibility so that (…) it becomes as impossible to conceive of freedom or its opposite as it is to realize the notion of a square circle. (1977, 142)

The conundrum, in Kant's formulation, is that man has the freedom to determine his own actions, but that as soon as these actions leave the inward sphere of subjectivity, they fall under the causality of nature and therefore lose their character of freedom. For Arendt, however, the difficulty is not so much that this problem has not yet been solved or that it may even remain unsolvable, but rather that it has been raised in the first place. By this she does not mean that freedom is not a problem at all, but rather that the problem only became an enigma when the experience of freedom was removed from its original context: "[I]t seems safe to say that man would know nothing of inner freedom if he not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality." (1977, 147) Before it could become a phenomenon of thought, as in the philosophical tradition, a phenomenon of the will, as in the Christian tradition, or the right to be left alone, as in modern liberal thought, freedom was experienced in the political realm as the self-evident ability to speak and act in a context of plurality. Hence, freedom cannot be an attribute of the mind because it needs to appear in public through words and deeds for it

to be experienced at all. Freedom as it is encountered in the inner depths of the self has no revelatory character and remains therefore deprived of any worldly significance.

However, the fact that freedom needs to be displayed in public to become a tangible reality does not seem to tell us much about its antecedent conditions. Arendt agrees with Kant that freedom is spontaneity in the sense that it sets something in motion, that it seizes the initiative, but she disagrees with him insofar as he meant by this "both the capacity to start a new line of thought and the ability to form synthetic judgments." (2005: 59-60) Again, freedom is not a mental phenomenon, but pertains to a worldly performance. Moreover, freedom can indeed be identified with spontaneity, but that does not mean that it is an unconditioned condition in the sense that it is not determined by any empirical event, as Kant suggested. With Kant, against Augustine, Arendt argues that freedom is not the *liberum arbitrium*, a deliberation between two given possibilities, but the "faculty of spontaneously beginning a series in time." (1978: 110) But with Augustine, against Kant, she maintains that this "freedom of a *relatively* absolute spontaneity is no more embarrassing to human reason than the fact that men are born—newcomers again and again in a world that preceded them in time." (1978: 110)

It is no surprise that Arendt seems to have derived both the idea that a spontaneous beginning is not tantamount to an *absolute* beginning, and that there is an intimate connection between birth and action, from Augustine. Arendt nearly always explains the concept of natality in close connection to the famous Augustine citation about man being created by God for the sake of the capacity to begin: "*Initium ergo ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nullus fuit*."[3] Moreover, the connection between freedom and createdness already occupied Arendt in her 1929 doctoral dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine*.[4] The aim of this early study was to question the possibility of

[3] See for example: (Arendt, 1973: 108-110), (Arendt, 1977: 165-166), (Arendt, 1978: 217), (Arendt, 1990: 215) and (Arendt, 1998: 177).

[4] Although this seems to imply that her 1929 dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine* is the zero-point of her philosophy of natality, we have to be careful not to read too much into this early work. The term "natality" indeed appears to make its 'official' entrance in the second chapter of the dissertation, but

grounding the precept "Love thy neighbor as thyself" in the love of God. In the first chapter, Arendt shows that Augustine's notion of love as craving is not suitable for this purpose. Since it implies that "the highest good" (i.e. the "happy life") can only be reached in an absolute future, this kind of love demands complete self-denial and forsakenness of the human world and hence "makes the central Christian demand to love one's neighbor as oneself well nigh impossible." (1996: 30) In the chapter, 'Creator and Creature,' however, Arendt shows that Augustine's writings also contain another notion of love that 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." (1996: 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." (1996: 47) Therefore, 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." (1996: 48) This other notion of love, then, is a love of God as it can be actualized through a return, in recollection, to the One who created man. This return, Arendt explains, "is actualized in imitation" (1996: 53) and "in this quest [i.e. the return to God], which takes place in memory, the past comes back into the present and the yearning for a return to the past origin turns into the anticipating desire of a future that will make the origin available again." (1996: 57)

Two conclusions could be drawn from Arendt's theological reflections on the Creator-creature relation. First, contrary to what some have argued,[5] Arendt's insistent focus on the priority of the temporal dimension of the past suggests that Heidegger's brief discussion of Dasein's relation to its birth as "Being-towards-the-beginning" in division two of *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962: 424-427) was not of decisive importance for

actually she only inserted the passage in question in 1964-5 when she was revising her original manuscript for an English translation. See: (Arendt, 1996). Compare: (Arendt, 1929).

[5] See for example: (Birmingham, 2006: 28) and (Bowen-Moore, 1989: 2).

her concept of natality. On the contrary, insofar as Heidegger does not discuss this other "end" of Dasein's totality in any significant detail, but quickly goes on asserting the priority of Being-towards-death in the constitution of Dasein's ecstatic temporality, Arendt is in fundamental disagreement with Heidegger: "Since our expectations and desires are prompted by what we remember and guided by a previous knowledge, it is memory and not expectation (for instance, the expectation of death as is Heidegger's approach) that gives unity and wholeness to human existence." (1996: 56) Second, it seems reasonable to assume that Augustine's idea that man's love of God is actualized through imitating His creative act offered Arendt a template for the structure of the relation between natality and action, between an unconditioned beginning and a *relatively* unconditioned beginning:

> With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance (…); its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. (1998: 176-177)

With birth a new unique human being enters the world to which the newcomer responds by initiating actions of her own. But since the initial beginning occurred in an absolute past over which she had no control whatsoever, this response can never be more than an imperfect imitation. And yet, Arendt insists, this belated response seem to constitute man's only chance to be free.

However, it is one thing to point out that there is a structural similarity between the emergence of the new inherent in worldly action and the miracle of divine creation *ex nihilo* or the miraculous, unexpected birth of Jesus of Nazareth,[6] another to claim that it is conditioned by the bare physical fact of being born. Many critics have, however,

[6] "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.'" (1998: 247)

pointed out that it could not have been Arendt's intention to set politics on a natural foundation because it is evident that the overarching purpose of *The Human Condition* is precisely to criticize the rise of the social in modernity, with its reversal of the hierarchy between action and labor, by negatively comparing it to the Greek *bios politikos*. The standard solution for what they nevertheless consider to be a lingering biologism in Arendt's thought is the installation of a firm boundary between a "first" birth, tied to the activity of labor and the life process, and a "second" birth, tied to action and the political life. However, the ancient Greek separation between the realms of necessity and freedom, *oikos* and *polis*, cannot be the model for Arendt's concept of natality if only because she clearly says that it names a capacity "which Greek antiquity ignored altogether." (1998, 247) Moreover, in *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt openly criticizes the Aristotelian distinction between *zoe* and *bios* because it erroneously suggests that man has a political "nature" or "essence" that sets him apart from the animal and nature at large.[7]

In a number of recent publications on Arendt's concept of natality it has, therefore, been forcefully argued that the reference to biological birth was not merely a metaphorical gesture, but that she really wanted to say that the human capacity to act is literally conditioned by the bare biological fact of being born. Neither, however, was it an attempt to ground political action in an immutable human nature, as also has been suggested.[8] Peg Birmingham, for example, has argued that Heidegger's notion of solicitude (*Fürsorge*) could help us to understand that the newborn's entrance into the world is never simply a physical event, but always 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." (2006: 25) It is thus not the case, she explains, that for Arendt 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,

[7] "The first is the assumption that there is something political in man that belongs to his essence. This is simply not so; *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside* of *man*." (2005: 95)
[8] See for example: (Jay, 2006).

"is always already the site of language," (2006: 29) namely, in the sense that 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 by identifying their moment of convergence with the naming of the newborn, Birmingham still sets too great a distance between the biological and the linguistic components of the event of natality. The problem with this understanding of natality, O'Byrne explains, is that it expels the intimate relationship between the maternal body and the fetus to the presocial and prelinguistic sphere and that it privileges the paternal moment in the event of natality. O'Byrne's notion of natality's syncopated temporality offers a way out of this impasse. By this mode of temporality she means "a mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly." (2010: 95) If the moment of my physical birth constitutes a past that was never present to me, because I was not "there" to experience it, but at a later moment in time still turns out to have been my birth, then the temporal structure of this event also determines our politico-linguistic birth. The outcome or meaning of one's actions also only reveals itself to the backward glance of the storyteller or the historian, never to the actor himself—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. No one was present at her own birth. This event constitutes an absolute past which necessarily remains outside our field of experience.

III

However, one could wonder whether even O'Byrne's articulation of the co-implication of biological birth and politico-linguistic birth does not still leave too great a gap between both events. After all, both the ability to reflect on one's moment of birth and the ability to understand the stories that others tell about this event develop only gradually over time, while Arendt clearly suggests that both events always arrive

together. Arendt is indeed quite clear about the fact that the mere event of being born predisposes one to act freely.[9] Therefore the task still remains to think the co-implication of biological birth and politico-linguistic birth in still more radical fashion.

When, 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" (1998: 178) and refers to the German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen's book *Der Mensch* as her main source of inspiration, she is most likely 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 (1988: 93-109) discusses the Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk's essay *Das Problem der Menschwerdung* [The Problem of the Origin of Man, 1926]. Bolk wrote this essay as a challenge to Ernst Haeckel's then still widely supported theory of recapitulation. 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 ontogentic development. Bolk departs from the often quoted but never quite satisfactorily explained observation that adult humans strongly resemble juvenile pongids, but that this phenotypic likeness 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 that in ontogenetic development humans go through the different stages that determined the phylogenetic evolution of their direct ancestors. His alternative 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. Hence, 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

[9] "[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." (1998: 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." (1998: 247)

represent only temporary features, in humans they have evolved to become permanent features of their physical constitution.

There is no immediate evidence that Arendt ever engaged herself 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 further 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 the nine months now. In a sense, the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann (1941) noted, one could therefore say that humans spend their first year as "extrauterine embryos." The main reason for this acceleration of time of birth is that even at this stage of ontogenetic development the human brain continues to grow at fetal rates. Humans achieve only twenty-three percent of their full brain capacity at term, whereas the brains of other mammals are at that time already fully formed. But if this growth of the brain would have to take place inside the uterus, 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 her concept of natality on the basis of a similar anthropological theory. Unlike animals, Gehelen argues, humans are born without any well-developed instincts and without specialized organs and are thus singularly unfit for survival. He therefore rejects the standard interpretation of the evolutionary theory of the origin of man. 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." (1988: 13) 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," (1998: 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 and thus deprived of any particular biological quality, no such spontaneous attunement between human organism and environment takes place. Because of their premature birth, humans enter the world helpless and needy and thus 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, for 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." (1988: 16) Thus, when Arendt writes that "a life without speech and without action (…) has ceased to be a human life," 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 O'Brien'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*, namely, in the sense that our premature birth releases us from the fate of being compelled to follow a

biogenetically predetermined course of live. This is also probably one of the reasons why Arendt rejects the notion of human nature and opts to speak about human conditions instead.[10] Natality, as a condition of human existence, does not determine human beings in an absolute sense because the biological traits they receive at birth 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. But it is precisely this "unpreparedness" or "prematurity" that gives us to the possibility of initiating radically new beginnings.

Natality, as we can see now, is not 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," (1998: 96) but which nonetheless remains ineluctably tied to the biological condition from which it emerged. Deprived of both *archē* and *telos*, beginning and end, natal beings "are born into the world as strangers," (1998: 9) but they are compensated for this lack by the gift of a mode of temporality that expresses the freedom of life. Abiding in the gap between past and future, natal beings are destined to invent, to explore, and to go where nobody has ever went before, imbued as they are with the promise of always being capable to make a fresh start.

[10] "[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." (1998: 9-10)

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