

The Capacity to Begin: Arendt's Concept of 'Nativity' (A humble tribute on the 40th anniversary of her death)

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In August of 1955, Hannah Arendt sent a letter to Karl Jaspers where she expressively stated that she wants to name her magnum opus *Amor Mundi* (Love of the World). Eventually, the book was published in 1958 under the title *The Human Condition*. The book undeniably lives up to both titles. Arendt's work mainly deals with the philosophy of human action, heavily drawing her influence from Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world. She argues that action is not something which is preprogrammed with a set of calculable, fixed consequences. Action, for her, forms part of a wide, complex network of relations which make it highly impossible to predict or anticipate them a priori. Thus, according to Arendt, acting precisely entails the event of beginning something new and unique. She coins the word 'nativity' to emphasize this capacity for new beginnings which human beings possess. Arendt believes that this is a central feature of the human condition since through the event of our natural birth we already possess within us this notion of 'nativity'; which is in turn shared with all humanity. Thus, as she argues, each birth is marked with this profoundly new beginning and radical novelty, as "each newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting," (Arendt, 1998, p. 9).

In this short essay I intend to refer to Arendt's concept of 'nativity', which she expounds in her book *The Human Condition*, to argue against the distinction which Peter Singer makes between

a human person and human non-person; with reference to his book *Practical Ethics* (1993) as being representative of preference-utilitarianism and consequentialism. Singer basically argues that the life of a person is more valuable than that of a non-person, claiming that we should not have the same moral obligations towards 'non-persons' as we do to 'persons'. Recalling Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Singer defines a 'person' in terms of being self-conscious and rational. However, Singer maintains a non-speciesist view, claiming that ethical decisions must not be taken on kinds of species but instead on the value of personhood. He advances four basic features of what constitutes a person: 1) being rational and self-conscious, 2) having the ability of making plans for the near future, 3) the desire to live and 4) being autonomous. Evidently, this excludes human beings who have some severe form of mental disability, as well as all newborn infants (including of course fetuses), and others who in some way or another do not satisfy these conditions. Singer implies that 'non-persons' could be subjugated or, at worse, exterminated without any remorse or moral obligation, since the subject is not a person but 'only' a human being. What Singer has in mind is that basically human beings do not come into the world by default as 'persons'. Of course, this follows that they might not even become a person at all if we can annihilate them prior this 'transformation'. This same reasoning of course is implied for all other cases, as long as this distinction prevails.

Arendt's theory of 'natality' goes beyond this utilitarian distinction, as human beings, for Arendt, are always active agents, whereby their actions entail a new beginning. In 1961, Arendt

published a book featuring a collection of her essays, in which the revised edition contains work written between 1954 and 1968. This book goes by the name *Between Past and Future* and it is evident that all essays partake in a central theme; that being how humans live between a past and an unpredictable future. In one of these essays, titled *The Concept of History*, Arendt argues that “unpredictability is not lack of foresight, and no engineering management of human affairs will ever be able to eliminate it,” (Arendt, 1968, p. 60). She goes on saying that if there is no unpredictability then there is no action at all. Totalitarianism precisely tries to deal with this unpredictability by in turn diminishing human action. Arendt argues that human action is contained within the notion of plurality as the most basic condition of human life, which in turn rests on her concept of ‘natality’. In an almost poetical way she writes in this same essay how the world is constantly being refilled by strangers, outsiders and newcomers who act and react in an unforeseeable manner, in ways that cannot be calculated or predicated by those already familiar and stationed there, who will eventually leave and be replaced by others. The very fact that we come into the world through natural birth shows that the world is continuously being transformed and renewed through birth. Thus, ‘natality’ highlights this emphasis on the capacity of new beginnings with each and every birth.

In the first chapter of Arendt’s book *The Human Condition* (1998), the reader is immediately introduced to the term *vita activa*, which translates as ‘active life’. Arendt proposes to analyse this *vita activa* via three basic conditions of human activity: labour, work and action. ‘Labour’ is concerned with the biological and physical

process having to do with the human conditions of life, 'work' has to do with the human being as *homo faber* (man the creator) who brings into existence, whilst 'action' is tied to the condition of plurality and freedom. Each of these three activities should be understood as operating somewhat autonomously from each other in that they have their own particular criteria and values. For example, labour can be understood as the ability of sustaining human life by catering to our biological needs, such as food and reproduction, whilst work is the aptitude to construct and preserve a world worthy of human beings. Action, on the other hand, revolves on two central features: freedom and plurality. Even though Arendt argues that all three activities are equally necessary to complete human life, she takes action as that which delineates human beings from other any other creatures. It is important to note that Arendt does not understand freedom in the liberal sense, that is, the power to choose between different options, but as the capacity to begin something new, something novel, having the ability to do the unexpected. She believes that all human beings are born with this ability and capacity. In turn, this capacity is not to be understood in isolation but is itself dependent on the plurality of others. Action thus becomes meaningful through the presence of the other (d'Entreves, 2014).

For Arendt, plurality has an important place in action. By introducing the novel and the new into the world, one is faced with the other's novelty and uniqueness. My actions are shaped in a world situated by others. It is the other which gives significance to my actions, securing my originality with respect to their own. Thus, for Arendt, the public sphere plays a crucial role in that one's actions

manifest within a context. For her, plurality entails both likeness and otherness since on the one hand all human beings belong to the same species and are sufficiently similar in that they comprehend each other but, at the same time, they can never be interchangeable, since no being has ever experienced or will ever experience life in exactly the same way. This shows the complex network of relations that exists through action, which make it impossible to predicate or forecast the future (d'Entreves, 2014).

Through action, according to Arendt, individuals simulate, or rather re-enact, the miracle inherent in birth. This is possible since all human beings are inimitable and unique, where each birth signifies that a novelty has come into the world. This uniqueness implies that everyone is indispensable to the world. In her own words, “action is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man,” (Arendt, 1998, p. 246). This beginning represented by each one of us by virtue of our own birth is actualized in each of our own actions. In other words, Arendt wants to stress that every single start, intrinsic to each birth, is itself noticed and felt in the world precisely because every newcomer owns this capacity to begin something novel, something original. In her earlier book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), first published in 1951, Arendt identifies totalitarianism as that which antagonizes ‘natality’, as it suppresses the concept of birth and its novelty. Birth has at its base a huge element of uncertainty, randomness and chance. This in turn overturns any notion of calculability and predictability (Lupton, 2006).

This new beginning is followed by the unfolding of an original and distinctive life story which does not rely solely on the experience of the newborn but by the experience of others affected by this newness. My autobiography is not entirely of my own making but it is formulated by significant others who surround me from the beginning. This in turn affects their autobiography. That is to say, my mother's autobiography and mine are not completely independent of each other; they in fact influence and fulfil each other. Clearly, Singer's views of personhood lacks this notion of 'new beginning', as for him 'non-persons' have no intrinsic value. Thus, for Singer, the killing of a 'non-person' is in itself not wrong or evil. Evidently, the distinction itself has totalitarian implications, as Singer is deliberately imposing calculations and predictions on something which itself is incalculable and unpredictable.

As I've tried to show, Arendt's reflections on the human condition go deeper than Singer's. We are born as complete strangers, newcomers, unfamiliar with the world we inhabit, where each birth is new in the radical sense that it has never happened in the past and will never reoccur in the future; thus resisting both predictability and repetition. Our identity then should be understood as the product of a wide, complex web of narratives. Arendt's concept of 'natality' marks this exceptional moment of birth which makes sense when understood in respect to the significant other. We are not born to ourselves but to someone beyond us, a community of others. Thus, the event of birth is not solely restricted to the being that is born, as Singer implies in his calculations, but marks the founding of a new self, and hence a new challenge, directed towards an unpredictable future within a world populated by others.

8 References

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