

Nativity or Birth? Arendt and Cavarero on the Human Condition of Being Born

FANNY SÖDERBÄCK

This essay offers a critical analysis of Hannah Arendt's notion of natality through the lens of Adriana Cavarero's feminist philosophy of birth. First, I argue that the strength of Arendtian natality is its rootedness in an ontology of uniqueness, and a commitment to human plurality and relationality. Next, I trace with Cavarero three critical concerns regarding Arendtian natality, namely that it is curiously abstract; problematically disembodied and sexually neutral; and dependent on a model of vulnerability that assumes equality rather than asymmetry. This last issue is further developed in the final section of the essay, where I examine the idea that birth, for Cavarero, becomes the very concept by which we can distinguish and normatively differentiate acts of care and love from acts of wounding and violence. Upholding the normative distinction here depends on a conceptual distinction between vulnerability and helplessness. To maintain the ethical potential of the scene of birth, I argue that we have to insist on the very characteristics Cavarero attributes to it—ones, as this essay aims to show, that are ultimately missing in the Arendtian account thereof.

Few thinkers are as consistently Arendtian as Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Although she has yet to write a book that focuses solely on Hannah Arendt's writing, each of the seven books she has published to date engages deeply with her thought, and draws from it so as to establish the ontological framework of uniqueness so characteristic of her own philosophical project. As Julian Honkasalo puts it: "Adriana Cavarero is an unusual Arendt commentator in the sense that she rarely explicitly refers to Arendt's texts. . . . Rather than engaging in Arendt exegesis, Cavarero uses certain Arendtian themes as stepping-stones for the articulation of her own, unique feminist project" (Honkasalo 2016, 77). In what follows, I argue that the most important such theme—and stepping-stone—is that of *natality*. As Cavarero herself puts it, "natality is perhaps the most original category of thought that Arendt bestowed to the twentieth century" (Cavarero 2014, 17).

Arendt herself famously claimed that natality—the human capacity to begin anew—is the central category of political thought, and this claim reverberates through

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Cavarero's entire corpus. In the introduction to her very first book, *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero identifies her critical engagement with Plato as having sprung from Arendt's attention to natality (Cavarero 1990/1995). And yet she acknowledges that the Arendtian concept is limited. In her most recent book, *Inclinations*, Cavarero maintains both her proximity to Arendt and her critique of the particular way in which the concept of natality was developed by Arendt (Cavarero 2014/2016). This article examines Cavarero's engagement with the Arendtian notion of natality, and explains both why she sees in it such a fecund resource for her own philosophical project, and why she ultimately, and as a feminist, also raises concerns in her discussion of it.¹

I argue, on the one hand, that the strength of Arendtian natality is its rootedness in an ontology of uniqueness and a commitment to human plurality and relationality. On the other hand, I trace with Cavarero three critical concerns regarding Arendtian natality, namely that it is curiously abstract; problematically disembodied and sexually neutral; and dependent on a model of vulnerability that assumes equality rather than asymmetry. While examining—and for the most part agreeing with—these three lines of critique against Arendt, I simultaneously suggest that Cavarero herself falls short of some of the critical potential of her own work, insofar as she too relies on a model of birth that runs the risk of abstraction and that does not attend sufficiently to the power dynamics that mark the lived experience of birth. Finally, I put Cavarero's model of birth to work in an attempt to flesh out the normative distinction between acts of care and love, on the one hand, and acts of wounding and violence, on the other.

THE PROMISE OF NATALITY: TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF UNIQUENESS

Arendt says notoriously little of the concept of natality in her work. Cavarero describes it as an “innovative, decisive, and surprising concept, as well as a concept that remains substantially underinvestigated” in that it is “never clarified or explained in detail” (Cavarero 2014, 17).² The fragmentary references to natality appear throughout the Arendtian corpus. In the opening chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt defines human life in terms of natality, and notes that all three of the activities that make up the *vita activa*—labor, work, and action—are rooted in natality, although the latter most prominently so, since it is concerned in essence with initiative and new beginnings (Arendt 1958/1998, 9). In a 1971 lecture at The New School for Social Research, she defines the human being in terms of natality: “If the Greeks defined man as the ‘mortal,’ men are now defined by their natality, as the ‘nats’” (quoted in Bowen-Moore 1989, 22). What this means is that humans first and foremost get identified as having a supreme capacity for beginning—the fact of birth conditions us to break out of predictable patterns, to institute change, to take initiative, and to bring about novelty. The human capacity to revolt, as Arendt points out in *On Revolution*, is a result of our natality: “men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings. . . the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth” (Arendt 1963/1990, 211).

Arendt makes a point of distinguishing our first appearance in the world through the event of birth from our capacity to appear again, through action and speech, on the shared scene of political life. With action, “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” (Arendt 1958/1998, 176–77). This “second birth”—our ability precisely to begin anew through action—ultimately takes center stage in the Arendtian corpus. The capacity for beginning is announced by the birth of a child, but it is only actualized as freedom once we put it to work in a shared space of equals. Action understood in terms of natality is inherently unpredictable and irreversible—features so essential to the Arendtian conception of political life. Moreover, the human condition of plurality is a direct result of our being born: “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live,” Arendt remarks (8).

This emphasis on human plurality and singularity—and their rootedness in the fact of birth—is crucial for Cavarero. Throughout her work, she reiterates philosophy’s failure to account for the uniqueness—corporeal and singular—that marks each human life, and emphasizes time and again Arendt’s careful attention to the crucial fact that the human being is “an irremediably unique being” (Cavarero 2014/2016, 104). In *Relating Narratives*, she identifies a paradigmatic example of this philosophical failure to account for uniqueness in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (Cavarero 1997/2000). Borrowing again from the Arendtian conceptual toolbox, she notes that Oedipus, paradoxically, knows *what* man is while remaining ignorant of *who* he himself is.³ Oedipus famously solved the riddle of the Sphinx—one that consists in a definition of the universal form of “Man,” and as such, Cavarero reminds us, speaks in “the very form of philosophy” that is most recognizable in the Platonic discourse on “the just,” “the beautiful,” and “the good” (Cavarero 1997/2000, 7). But this legacy of the Sphinx—the legacy of universality—is a burdensome one on Cavarero’s account: “there is something constitutively monstrous about the knowledge of Man,” she asserts, and continues: “It is almost as though it is the attribution of universality itself that makes a monster of Man” (8). Why is Man monstrous? “‘Man’ is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one,” Cavarero explains (9). And it is precisely *because* Oedipus lacks knowledge of his own identity that he can recognize himself in this universal “Man.” Universality serves the disembodied, the sexually neutral, that which lacks a history or life-world of its own. Knowledge of the universal “excludes embodied uniqueness from its epistemology,” and “attains its maximum perfection by presupposing the absence of such a uniqueness” (9).

If philosophy has been concerned with naming the “*what*” of universal abstract Man, Cavarero turns to narration as a kind of discourse that holds the promise of teasing out the “*who*” of singular embodied individuals. She views *Oedipus the King* as a story about the confrontation between these two discursive registers—philosophy and narration (13). To know our story—to know *who* we are rather than *what* we are—Cavarero insists that we need to know our birth. Every life-story begins—and must begin—there. The uniqueness of Oedipus’s identity “has its origin in the event of his birth” (11), although, as we know, this is an event of which Oedipus is tragically

ignorant. It is *because* he lacks knowledge of his own birth, of who his parents are, and *because* he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, exhibiting philosophical knowledge of universal abstract Man, that he seals his fate and commits first parricide and then incest. Cavarero thus seems to suggest that there is a link between Oedipus's blind philosophical attention to universality, his ignorance of his own birth, and his ethical wrongdoings—his monstrosity. The failure of philosophy to account for uniqueness is thus ultimately a failure to recognize the fact of birth, and this failure has dangerous consequences. Her own ontology of uniqueness—her systematic challenge to the Western metaphysical tradition—is therefore constitutively grounded in the category of birth, and wrestles critically with the inherent violence of a cultural order founded on the erasure of woman and women's reproductive capacities.

Arendt, too, recognizes the absence of the event of birth in philosophical discourse. Human life, she notes, has been framed first and foremost as being marked by mortality. But in framing the question of our finitude this way, we obscure and overlook equally important questions: What does it mean to be born? What does it mean to think the human condition as marked not only by death (and a meaningful relation to our death-to-come) but also by birth (and the capacity to reflect on our having-been-born)? These are indeed questions that are curiously absent from traditional philosophical accounts, and Arendt tries to remedy this disavowal. Cavarero celebrates this dimension of Arendt's thinking, insofar as it opens a path to thinking singularity and uniqueness without subsuming them under universal-abstract categories.

THE LIMITS OF NATALITY: FROM HUMAN ACTION TO SEXED EMBODIMENT

In her first book, *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero argues that the central position of natality within Arendt's work "brings about a subversive shift in perspective with respect to the patriarchal tradition that has always thrived on the category of death" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 6–7). She maintains this positive view of Arendt throughout her work. But as much as Arendt offers the tools to broach seriously the notion of birth as a philosophically viable concept, challenging the hegemony of death in the Western philosophical tradition, Cavarero nevertheless raises some concerns about the nature of her treatment of birth.

Cavarero's first concern has to do with Arendt's strangely *abstract* use of birth. Although Cavarero herself is careful to recognize, throughout her work, that "life, and the birth from which it springs, are not mere concepts of a vocabulary weakened by abstraction, but the reality of flesh, which beats with impulses, yearnings, suffering, and beauty" (Cavarero 1995/2002, 194), she disapprovingly notes that "Arendt's is a *highly* abstract representation of natality... almost a tribute to the old philosophical vice of sacrificing the complexity of the real world to the purity of the conceptual one" (Cavarero 2014, 18). We are by now familiar with the feminist critique of Arendt's distinction between the private and public realms, and her subsequent relegation of women and women's bodies to a prepolitical—even antipolitical—sphere of household matters. The space of appearance in which the "second birth" of action

could translate into a principle of freedom was, in the ancient Greek context so celebrated by Arendt, a space inhabited by free men alone. Natality, for Arendt, is thus a political category that may be *rooted* in the event of birth, but it is nevertheless quite far *removed* from this event, since birth ultimately belongs in the private sphere of reproduction and bodily necessities—all of which she associates with *animal laborans* rather than with political action and speech.

Although early feminist thinkers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sara Ruddick saw in Arendt's concept of natality the promise of a feminist theory of motherhood (Elshtain 1986; Ruddick 1989)—her attention to natality was seen as providing a context for “a maternal history of human flesh” that celebrates “a birthing woman's labor” (Ruddick quoted in Dietz 1995, 27)—it is quite obvious that Arendt herself had little interest in placing the maternal body center stage on the scene of political action. As Lisa Guenther puts it, “the opposition between a laborious, private, and feminine labor of reproduction and an active, public, political, and apparently sexually undifferentiated ‘second birth’ conspires to reduce the maternal body to a biological or animal condition for a human existence from which she herself is excluded” (Guenther 2006, 40). In this sense, Arendt's claim that natality is the political category par excellence makes little sense if we actually try to think natality in terms of (bodily) birth. As Cavarero points out in *Stately Bodies*, the Greek distinction between the private and the public realms—and the concomitant association of the former with female labor and the latter with male action—ultimately depends on the expulsion of birth from the scene of politics: “It comes as no surprise, then, that the female is expelled from an idea of politics created to keep at bay *birth*, which instead assumes death as its training ground. Such a politics of course risks a definitive estrangement from birth, which may return only in the form of an enigma” (Cavarero 1995/2002, 159). As Arendt herself puts it, the household realm of birth “must be hidden from the public realm because it harbors the things hidden from human eyes and impenetrable to human knowledge” (Arendt 1958/1998, 62–63). For Arendt, birth is an enigma indeed—a riddle at the heart of the human condition as she conceives it, a trace of a bodily sphere that both *is* and *is not* present on the scene of politics.

It is noteworthy that in the Arendtian corpus, the gestating body is not only, as we might expect, absent in the context of our “second birth” in the properly political space of appearance. It is in fact curiously absent in her discussion of our first appearance through the actual event of birth as well, and this is the second concern Cavarero raises in response to Arendt. It is indeed symptomatic, Cavarero notes, that Arendt's example of the original scene of birth as a locus for plurality is the creation of Adam and Eve—two individuals who, notoriously, were not really *born* at all, but rather were *created* by a paternal-disembodied God (Arendt 1958/1998, 8; Cavarero 2014, 20). Or, as Cavarero puts it: “Arendt does not highlight the concept of birth as coming from a mother's womb, but accepts the Greek meaning of birth as coming from nothing” (Cavarero 1990/1995, 6).⁴ As Arendt herself explains, birth and death are hidden away in the private sphere “because man does not know where he comes from when he is born and where he goes when he dies” (Arendt 1958/1998, 63).

Although it might be true that we do not know where we go when we die, it is striking that Arendt claims that we do not know from where we are born, as if the gestating body were as enigmatic as Hades or Heaven.

We hear echoes here of the critique Cavarero aimed so sharply against Plato in her first book. In it, she explores the very tendency of Western thought—emblemized by the Platonic philosophical project—either to erase birth completely or to appropriate it to a masculinist framework that fails to recognize the embodied reality of the event of birth, and the role that women play in the birthing process. She traces the ways in which the birth of (universal) “Man” in ancient philosophy coincides with a crime that goes unmentioned in the story of Oedipus, namely *matricide*. Nancy Tuana has convincingly argued that women, paradoxically, have been simultaneously *reduced* to the role of mothers and *robbed* of their role in procreation (Tuana 1993, 111–52). From ancient Babylonian and Greek creation myths, via the biblical Genesis to modern science, the female power to give birth has been both overemphasized (as a way of establishing women’s inferiority to men) and underemphasized (as a way of denying such female power and appropriating it onto an all-powerful masculine divinity or medical-scientific establishment).

In Spite of Plato is a sustained attempt to reappropriate—to steal back—that which has been appropriated by masculine discourse, and to challenge the now common view of woman as a passive maternal receptacle as well as the symptomatic emphasis on death over birth that results from it. For Cavarero, birth is essentially an embodied category, and as such it is one marked by sexual difference. “Far from being a ‘coming from nothing,’ birth is a coming from a mother,” she reminds us (Cavarero 1990/1995, 61), and although we have good reasons to complicate the account of birth as always coming from a mother, I would nevertheless insist that the gestating body is marked by sex, even when the birth-parent does not identify as a woman or a mother. The erasure of birth is therefore simultaneously an erasure of singularity and sexual difference, and the paradigm of death is a guarantor for abstract-neutral universality: “Man, with a masculine—universal—neutral valence, is a term from a language that has turned its gaze away from the place of birth, measuring existence on an end point that bears no memory of its beginning,” Cavarero notes (69). Her own work is aimed at unraveling the delusion that founds this metaphysical-patriarchal desire for universality. She reminds us that “universal ‘Man’ is never born and never lives. Instead, individual persons are born and live their lives gendered in difference as either man or woman” (59–60). Of course, we need not limit ourselves here to men and women, as Cavarero does. The crucial point for me is that all individuals are sexed, not that there are or should be only two sexes.

As much as Cavarero views Arendtian natality as a fruitful category to challenge and complement the age-old exclusive emphasis on death, she thus finds it to be overly abstract (disembodied) and problematically neutral (failing to account for the ways in which gestation is marked by sex). It is worth noting, however, that while Cavarero’s own account of birth certainly is grounded in a commitment to bring to light gestational embodiment, it too runs the risk of abstraction, and she actually rarely grapples *concretely* with the gestating body in all of its complexity. Her work

does not offer a robust account of pregnant embodiment, such as the ones we see in much feminist phenomenological work on these issues.⁵ Nowhere in her work does she speak at any great length of the lived, embodied experience of motherhood, as expressed by actual mothers rather than as an aesthetic expression in myths or works of art.⁶ She says notoriously little about the ambivalence, complexity, and even disgust examined by several feminist thinkers writing on the topic of motherhood.⁷ She assumes that the gestating body is maternal, thus ignoring those experiences that do not fit cis-normative accounts of procreation and parenting.⁸ And she tends to treat motherhood as a racially “neutral” category, failing to account both for the implicit norm of whiteness that underpins her own discourse on birth, and for the ways in which racial identity inevitably marks the very experience of motherhood both as a lived reality and as a political phenomenon.⁹

Cavarero thus fine-tunes the Arendtian conceptual toolbox so as to make birth more rooted in lived reality, but her concept of birth nevertheless remains precisely a *concept*, and as such it inadvertently inherits some of the monstrosity of abstract universality. It seems to me that if we are going to challenge the masculine-abstract focus on death (as both Arendt and Cavarero seek to do), we have to not only insist that birth—and being-born-of—are lived, embodied experiences (as Cavarero does), but we would also have to attend more carefully to the complexity and diversity of those experiences. The challenge, in other words, is not only to flesh out a different concept of birth, but to bring flesh itself to bear on both birth and death, and the life that spans them.

THE RELATIONALITY OF NATALITY: FROM EQUALITY TO ASYMMETRY

Cavarero’s work is situated at the intersection between Arendtian political philosophy and a feminist philosophy of sexual difference—one that takes the category of birth to be fundamentally and necessarily embodied. But why, we must ask, does Cavarero see in Arendt’s “appropriation” of birth a promise for philosophy, even as that same appropriation in Plato is seen as the ultimate act of patriarchal violence? I think the key to this question lies, again, in Arendt’s thoroughgoing emphasis on uniqueness, and her characterization of our “second birth” as necessarily *relational* in that action depends on plurality. Action, Arendt remarks, “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men [sic!], not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1958/1998, 7). Although the *mother* might be missing from the Arendtian scene of birth, certainly an *other* is always present when she talks about our capacity to begin anew. This is an extremely important feature of Arendt’s thought, and one that Cavarero holds in great regard. But here too Arendt is ultimately limited, and we have arrived at the third concern Cavarero raises in her discussion of Arendtian natality.

Political space, for Arendt, is created by our coming together to act and speak in concert: “action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in

the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (Arendt 1958/1998, 198). Reflecting on the interactive context of Arendtian political life, Cavarero notes that “reciprocity and interdependency” are essential elements of it (Cavarero 2014, 18), and she highlights the importance of *equality* for Arendt’s conception of political life as the realization of freedom through action and speech in public. We might recall that if the private sphere, for Arendt, was marked by structural inequality and even violence, the *polis* is a space where free men act and speak in concert, and where concepts such as “ruler” and “ruled” are as foreign as necessity and survival. Action as natality “is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being *among equals*,” Arendt claims (Arendt 1958/1998, 178; emphasis mine). Although the Arendtian web of relationships is inevitably marked by frailty and unpredictability, it is nevertheless constitutively dependent on a model of freedom understood in reciprocal terms.

But if natality for Arendt depends on mutuality and reciprocity, it is worth noting that factual birth, while being constitutively relational, nevertheless fundamentally lacks such qualities: “Tellingly enough,” Cavarero writes, “these are exactly the elements that are missing in the first and inaugural theater of appearance, in which the newborn is the sole protagonist. The situation of the newborn, with all evidence, is not a state of mutual appearance and of reciprocal revelation, but—even if Arendt omits it—of univocal exposure and originary dependency” (Cavarero 2014, 19). Put differently, we might find it strange that Arendt would choose to model her concept for political life *par excellence*—namely natality as our capacity to begin anew precisely by appearing to others in a state of reciprocal revelation—on the event of birth, which so fundamentally *defies* the logic of reciprocity understood in symmetrical terms.

Guenther raises a similar concern in her discussion of Arendtian natality. She worries that Arendt “stops short of thinking through natality in its most radical, embodied passivity before a woman who *gives* birth to me” (Guenther 2006, 30), and goes on to suggest that Cavarero might be a thinker to turn to in order to correct this imbalance: “At the moment of birth, my mother is not my peer; we do not meet for the first time as free and equal actors, but rather in a *radical asymmetry* within which I am completely dependent on her immediate care. . . . What Arendt misses and Cavarero emphasizes is that. . . the asymmetry between mother and child is not a barrier to [the] recognition of uniqueness, but rather a condition of our natality” (45; emphasis mine).

This issue is taken up at length in Cavarero’s most recent book, *Inclinations*, which locates the political-philosophical fantasy of autonomous rationality in the figure of uprightness, suggesting that an alternative ethics of care—one that recognizes that ethics must be grounded in the acknowledgment of the constitutively *asymmetrical* nature of human relations—should take as its point of departure not vertical uprightness (which she associates with paternal authority), nor horizontality (which she associates with fraternal equality), but rather inclination (which she associates with maternal care). Not surprisingly, it is Arendt who provides her with the postural

schema that organizes the central argument of the book—namely inclination—insofar as she had discussed it briefly in a lecture course on Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, which she gave at The New School for Social Research in 1965–66. Here, Arendt notes: "Every inclination turns outward, it leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world. It is precisely through inclination, through leaning out of myself as I may lean out of the window to look into the street, that I establish contact with the world" (Arendt 2003, 81). Cavarero finds in Arendt's engagement with Kant a resource for articulating a thoroughgoing critique of the self as "an I whose position is straight and vertical" (which is to say independent), and for thinking the geometry of the subject instead in terms of inclination (which is to say that we lean or depend on others) (Cavarero 2014/2016, 6).

For Cavarero, Arendt's dislocation "of the topic of birth from a position of irrelevance," and her insistence on placing it "at the heart of political thought," prepares the ground for fundamentally challenging a long-reaching philosophical tradition that has celebrated autonomous subjectivity, one that does not tolerate "bonds, debts, dependencies" (Cavarero 2014, 22).¹⁰ But, she argues, Arendt ultimately compromises her own critical challenge, by projecting the concept of birth onto the creation of Adam, who, insofar as he was *created* (by God the Father) rather than *born* (of a mother), has virtually nothing in common with the newborn infant marked by radical dependency. "In spite of Arendt," she writes, "relational ontology—in its radical version, devoid of any residue of individualist ontology—does not call for symmetry, but rather for a continuous interweaving of multiple and singular dependencies" (22–23). Put differently, "before being a citizen, everyone is a human born of a mother" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 84), and as such we are radically exposed, vulnerable, and dependent, in asymmetrical fashion. Arendt, through her emphasis on natality as a second birth in action and speech, framed the frailty of human affairs in terms of equality; Cavarero, by emphasizing instead a notion of birth necessarily tied to the gestating body, frames that same vulnerability in terms of asymmetrical exposure.

Cavarero thus joins fellow feminist thinkers who in recent years have turned to the category of vulnerability in an attempt to think the human condition in relational and interdependent terms (see Butler 2004; Murphy 2012; Gilson 2014). What sets Cavarero apart from these thinkers is precisely her emphasis on birth as a condition for vulnerability. At its most extreme, she suggests, the relational model of subjectivity must be "exemplified by scenarios in which the protagonists are altogether unbalanced" (Cavarero 2014/2016, 13), and she views as exemplary among such scenarios "the 'primary scene,' in which the infant finds itself in a condition of absolute and unilateral dependence on others, or more obviously, on the mother" (13). The relational model evoked by a primary caregiver and their infant is, in other words, the most "asymmetrical and unbalanced" of human relations (27), and as such it could serve as an interesting model for the ethics of vulnerability espoused by Judith Butler and others. It relies on a revised notion of natality, grounded not so much in the "second birth" of human action (marked, for Arendt, by frailty and relationality but nevertheless framed in terms of *equality*), but in that first birth that we all share

in common as ultimately dependent and exposed beings (marked, for Cavarero, by radical *asymmetry*).

As much as I think Cavarero's emphasis on asymmetry and vulnerability is crucial in terms of correcting the all-too abstract notion of natality that we find in the Arendtian corpus, I nevertheless want again to push her in terms of her own blind spots. It is worth noting that Cavarero's account takes a certain horizon for granted—one in which we have come to count on birth as an experience that first and foremost exposes the *newborn* to dependence and vulnerability, while the caregiver, securely, can lean in and offer support. This is a horizon premised on access to quality maternal and prenatal care, as well as the time and resources necessary for caregivers to provide quality care for their newborns. If we were to speak of birth and parenting in a different context—say, the context of the Global South, or that of less privileged communities in the Global North—the story about vulnerability and care gets more complicated. If every day approximately 830 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, and if 99 percent of these occur in so-called “developing countries” (WHO 2016), then asymmetry works in reverse, and the birth of a child may not mark a new beginning as much as a life-threatening event for the gestating parent.¹¹

If Arendt's attention to natality presented us with a much needed corrective to philosophical analyses fixated on mortality as the central marker of the human condition, and if Cavarero's insistence that we speak of actual birth rather than abstract-disembodied natality in turn helps us address the masculinist tenet of Arendt's thinking, I want to suggest that we should take Cavarero's work one step further so as to give life to birth in all its complexity, and that this would entail more careful attention to diverse kinds of lived experience, as well as the dynamics of power and the power differentials that orient such experiences, as my brief mention of maternal health inequities above shows. A more careful analysis of how such experiences and conditions would shape a philosophical account of the human condition of being born will need to be conducted elsewhere, however. For now, I want to examine more closely the normative implications of Cavarero's insistence that the scene of birth be understood as asymmetrical rather than as marked by equality and reciprocity.

THE DESTRUCTION OF NATALITY: FROM VULNERABILITY TO HELPLESSNESS

If the parent–infant relation, as Cavarero insists, is marked by fundamental asymmetry and unbalance, it is nevertheless—at least ideally and under the right circumstances—one defined by love. This is why Cavarero can treat it as an ethical paradigm in her work, and why birth on her account can serve as an opening toward ethical relations marked by vulnerability and care simultaneously. But what, we must ask, happens when we instead examine the asymmetry and imbalance that mark relationships of violence or abuse? To be sure, asymmetry and imbalance do not always or necessarily serve us well as a foundation for ethics, but can just as easily be used to justify and perpetuate acts of violence and domination. As Cavarero herself points

out, “the ethical valence of inclination... consists in the alternative between care and wound” (Cavarero 2014/2016, 105), which is to say that inclination is no ethical response per se, but only the disposition to provide one: “The alternative between care and wound, as well as that between love and violence, is... entirely inscribed in inclination as a predisposition to respond” (105). In this closing section, I want to examine the idea that Arendtian natality, as taken up by Cavarero, becomes the very concept by which we can distinguish and normatively differentiate acts of care and love from acts of wounding and violence.

It is worth noting that natality first appears, explicitly, in Arendt’s 1953 essay “Ideology and Terror,” which later would be included as the last chapter of the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1951/1973). Reflecting on the evils of totalitarianism as essentially making individual men—or human beings—superfluous, by eliminating all unpredictability, or spontaneity, in human action, Arendt concludes her analysis of this “entirely new form of government” with a reflection on the human capacity to begin anew: “Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—‘that a beginning be made man was created’ said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man” (Arendt 1951/1973, 479). The fundamental principle for Arendt’s own, counter-totalitarian politics was precisely this capacity to begin, which Arendt, as we have seen, identifies with natality and freedom. Natality becomes an antidote to totalitarianism. If totalitarianism rendered humans superfluous by killing their individuality (454), philosophical attention to natality enables us to frame human life as irreducibly marked by singularity and irreplaceability.

Like Arendt, Cavarero is also interested in the destruction and disfiguring of human uniqueness in the context of extreme horror—in Auschwitz, in Abu Ghraib, or on the scene of suicide bombings. That the philosophical concept of “Man” is “a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one” (Cavarero 1997/2000, 9) indeed foreshadows the reduction of “men in flesh and blood—necessarily unique, particular, and finite,” to superfluous victims under totalitarian rule (Cavarero 2007/2011, 44). As she puts it in her book *Horrorism*: “The attack on the ontological dignity of the singular being... in fact pertains to the speculative method of philosophy as a discipline,” insofar as it has concerned itself with fictitious entities such as “*anthropos*,” “the individual,” and “the subject,” rather than singular human beings (44). We can now begin to make full sense of the idea that there is something monstrous about “Man” understood in abstract terms.

In her discussion of the Nazi death camps, and the ontological crime that was committed there, Cavarero again relies heavily on Arendt’s analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for fleshing out the process by which the SS turned dehumanization into an end in itself: the ultimate perversion of the philosophical dream of a totalizing universality. But if Arendt’s response to this danger was grounded in a concept of natality rooted in equality and freedom, Cavarero, as we have seen, wants to preserve the asymmetrical nature of birth. How, we must ask, can she maintain that the asymmetry of the parent–infant relation has normative value without collapsing the

distinction between the two kinds of asymmetry: the one involved at the scene of birth, on the one hand (for her a model for the ethics of inclination and care she espouses), and, on the other hand, the kind present at the scene of horrorist violence (one that ultimately and inevitably results in dehumanization)?

For Cavarero, upholding the normative distinction here depends on a conceptual distinction that she makes between *vulnerability* and *helplessness*, or rather, between infancy as that period in which “vulnerability and helplessness are completely conjoined” (Cavarero 2007/2011, 31) and those very specific circumstances where, in adult life, the two have been separated such that we are robbed of our vulnerability and reduced to a “degenerated” form of helplessness (39).¹²

Cavarero’s discussion of the Lager takes an unexpected turn when she introduces the idea that, with the destruction of natality as human uniqueness, what was ultimately destroyed was nothing less than the human condition of vulnerability itself: “Not only is horror confirmed as a peculiar form of violence that exceeds simple homicide; it reveals itself, in the case of the Lagers, as a violence deliberately intended to *produce helpless beings paradoxically no longer vulnerable*. . . Invulnerability does not occur in nature; it has to be produced artificially. . . . Totally engaged in its own destructive passion, violence ends, in the horrorist laboratory of the Lager, by producing victims who can no longer suffer from it” (34–35; my emphasis). In contrast to the phenomenon of helplessness, Cavarero reminds us that “the human condition of *vulnerability* entails a constitutive *relation* to the other: an exposure to wounding but also to the care that the other can supply” (38; my emphasis).

We must thus distinguish vulnerability, which she views as the ontological condition for ethics in that it consists of the two poles of wounding and caring (Murphy 2012, 98), from an artificially fabricated helplessness of a degenerated kind, which she views as the result of an ontological crime in that it represents the destruction of the human condition of uniqueness as such (Cavarero 2007/2011, 30). Through the severing of the very ties that make up the web of human relations, a perverted form of “independence” is produced—one where we have lost our ability both for intimacy and suffering, and that is embodied, in her reading, by the Musliman—the living corpse or bundle of flesh that was produced in the Lager. Helplessness thus marks the absolute annihilation of our human condition of being born, turning death into an all-encompassing and totalizing horizon without any hope for new beginnings. If both birth and violence have in common a fundamentally asymmetrical structure, the crucial difference between them, in other words, is that the former is rooted in vulnerability and relationality (conditions of possibility for human uniqueness), while the latter is marked by helplessness and loneliness (the destruction of human uniqueness and the rendering of singular individuals into superfluous victims).

To maintain the ethical potential of the scene of birth, therefore, we have to insist on the very characteristics Cavarero attributes to it—ones, as I have tried to show, that are ultimately missing in the Arendtian account of natality—namely birth as an *embodied* experience, birth as marked by *sexual difference*, and birth as constitutively *asymmetrical* insofar as it exposes us to the ontological condition of vulnerability. But in addition to this understanding of birth as embodied, sexuate, and

asymmetrical, I hope to have shown that we also need to examine more carefully the specific ways in which our giving birth, or our being born, is situated, contextual, and marked from the very start by normative structures and strictures that we inhabit and navigate differently depending on who we are and by whom we are born.

NOTES

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1. Feminist interpretations of Arendt's political and philosophical work span about four decades and feature harsh critiques by thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Mary O'Brien, as well as more sympathetic engagements by thinkers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain, Bonnie Honig, and Linda Zerilli (Rich 1979; O'Brien 1981; Elshtain 1986; Honig 1995; Zerilli 1995). In his recent and comprehensive study of feminist receptions of Arendt, Honkasalo notes that European feminist engagements have been largely ignored in various attempts to frame the feminist literature on Arendt historically, and suggests that this "gives the misleading picture that the discussion of Arendt's relevance for feminist theorizing is exclusive to the American academic context" (Honkasalo 2016, 169). In what follows I will offer a careful examination of Cavarero's engagement with Arendt, so as to begin to fill the lacuna identified by Honkasalo, and extend beyond the analysis he himself offers.

2. The fragmentary nature of her discussion of natality has in no way prevented scholars from writing about it and trying to make sense of it. Examples abound, from Patricia Bowen-Moore's early *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*, Peg Birmingham's work on Arendt and human rights and Anne O'Byrne's reflections on Arendt in *Natality and Finitude*, to more recent attempts to bring natality to bear on contemporary debates about reproductive technologies, such as in the work of Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek (Bowen-Moore 1989; Birmingham 2006; O'Byrne 2010; Diprose and Ziarek 2013).

3. For Arendt's distinction between the "who" and the "what," see Arendt 1958/1998, 179.

4. Keeping in mind that not all birth-givers are mothers (think, for example, of trans men who have birthed their children), I use the term “gestating body” rather than “maternal body,” but have left “maternal” when quoting authors—including Cavarero—who use that term.

5. For examples of phenomenological accounts of pregnant embodiment, see Young 2005; Welsh 2013; Heinämaa 2014; and Bornemark and Smith 2016.

6. For examples of accounts treating the lived experience of motherhood, see Rich 1986; Kristeva 1983/1987; and Fischer 2012.

7. For examples of more ambivalent accounts of motherhood, see Beauvoir 1949/2010; Kristeva 1983/1987; and LaChance Adams 2014.

8. This is an underinvestigated area of study in scholarly work on gestation. For discussions of transgender men who experience pregnancy after transitioning, see Halberstam 2010 and Light et al. 2014.

9. For examples of accounts that examine nonwhite experiences of motherhood, see Lorde 1972; Ragoné and Twine 2000; Johnson 2014; Moraga 2015; and Löfgren and Gouvêa 2016.

10. For further discussion of Kant on this topic, see also Cavarero 2013.

11. In 2015, roughly 303,000 women died during and following pregnancy and childbirth. Almost all of these deaths occurred in low-resource settings, and most could have been prevented (WHO 2016).

12. This distinction can be said to echo the one Butler makes between *precariousness* and *precarity* (Butler 2009), although in Cavarero it lacks a robust analysis of dynamics of power.

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