San Antonio Review •

Why Don't We Think More About Being Born?

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Published on: Sep 03, 2021

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All human beings begin life by being born – and all human beings die. In these two ways, we are finite: our lives are not endless, but they begin and they come to an end. Historically, however, philosophers have concentrated attention on only one of these two ways in which we are finite: mortality. Philosophers have said little about being born and how it shapes our existence. An exception is some recent work in feminist philosophy, for instance by [Luce Irigaray](#) and Adriana Cavarero – but even here, being born has been overshadowed by giving birth and motherhood.

So how does being born organize human existence? First, let's clarify that for human beings, to be born is to begin to exist at a certain point in time, and to do so by being conceived and gestated in and then exiting from the womb – historically the maternal womb, although transgender pregnancies are changing this. We thereby come into the world with a specific body, and in a given place, set of relationships and situation in society, culture, and history.

Because of the helplessness of human babies and infants – and children's prolonged need for nurturing and education – we begin life utterly dependent on the people who care for us physically and emotionally. Often, we become more independent over time, but never completely or permanently so. We all remain dependent on others – in respect of our means of subsistence, language, emotional well-being and basic social trust. Once we remember that we begin life as babies and infants, dependency emerges as more basic than independence – independence takes place against a background of dependence, not vice versa.

Because of our initial dependency, our early relationships with our caregivers have huge formative effects on us. They form our selves: our patterns of emotional reaction, dispositions, habits and traits – and the personalities into which they are organized. None of this is set in stone – we can, of course, be deeply affected and reformed by subsequent relationships. But we are open to new relationships in ways shaped by the previous ones. When we consider birth, then, we see that relationships with others make us the individuals we are – our individual selfhood arises within a background of relationships.

ME, MYSELF AND I

At birth, each individual comes into a unique situation in the world, made up of a unique combination of historical, social, ethnic, geographical, familial, and generational circumstances. One's initial natal situation affects every subsequent life

situation one comes to be in – including by affecting whatever choices one makes in response to these situations. All one's successive situations flow down through one's life, however indirectly, from one's birth.

We are each born into our own unique situation. Our natal situations are given to us, not chosen – and as soon as we are born we begin to imbibe the culture around us. So, first and foremost, we are inheritors and receivers of culture and history. We may develop capacities to question, criticize and change what we have received, but this happens on the prior basis of reception.

Why have I been leading the particular life I have, since birth? I may wonder: “Why am I me?” or: “Why is this the life I'm leading and none other?” Eastern and Western religious traditions offer various answers – for example, by referring to our immortal souls as in Christianity, or cycles of rebirth, as in Hinduism. But perhaps my being born me is a fact that cannot be explained, only accepted.

We can explain, at least to a point, why the particular body that I happen to be born with was conceived (my parents met, a particular sperm fertilized a particular egg on a given occasion – and the rest). But that does not explain why this body is the one whose life I happen to be leading and experiencing directly, from the inside. This is just a fact, and because it is inexplicable, a dimension of mystery pervades my existence. That mystery can generate anxiety – one of several forms of birth anxiety. Philosophers (Heidegger, for example) have said much about anxiety about death, but being born also presents anxieties and existential difficulties.

EARLY DAYS

It can seem perplexing that I ever arrived in existence having not previously been there. And it can be troubling that we cannot remember being born, or indeed remember early childhood – the phenomenon known as “[infantile amnesia](#).”

This amnesia is a consequence of the staged development of our memory and cognitive systems during childhood. As we rise to more advanced forms of memory, we lose access to earlier memories laid down in less advanced forms. In turn, our staged cognitive development is a consequence of birth: we are born very immature and unformed but develop, eventually, to reach high levels of cognitive sophistication.

Yet the early years that we forget are the most formative for us. We therefore end up with much of our own emotional lives and reactions as mysteries to us. Why do we fall in and out of love with the people we do? Why does this song move me to tears and

leave you cold? Infantile amnesia leaves us strangers to ourselves in important respects – and this is disconcerting.

These are just some features of human existence which are thrown into relief once we remember that we are not only mortal, but also natal. Being born is a fundamental, not a trivial or accidental, feature of human life – and human existence overall has the shape it does because we are born.

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