

Some Thoughts on Birth and The Human Condition

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"Action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the 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."¹

Hannah Arendt

It begins with birth. Each of us is thrown into the world at any single given point of our species' history. It so happens to be that the moment of our birth is our point of entry into this world. Although we are conceived, carried and thought of before our birth, this is the moment of our first appearance in the world itself. We declare ourselves alive in this moment, in body and subject; by our first cry, we assert 'I am here'. We enter the world as the extra enters the space of performance; the greatest performance that ever has been or will be – the performance of over seven billion actors and counting. It is on this stage that our small, short role will be forever remembered by those closest to us. At least until we all fade into the dust of pure temporality.

The same can be said for the mental categories that we use to mediate this stage with, especially as the script remains perennially unwritten. Between a certain number of performers, improvising scenes across the stage, the way we grasp the overall performance makes itself manifest. As with all organic life on the planet, with the passage of time and the overlap of generations these categories come to slowly rot and yet equally become the fertiliser for categories anew. Thus, the way in which we exist in the world - how we act and how we judge - is directly connected to the manner in which we exist within it, and how we – our actions and our judgements – become the fertiliser for the future of the performance.

The fact of birth is the first quality of the human condition. To exist in the world somehow, we must be thrown into it. This is the inception of life – to wail with one's first breath, to have being thrust upon

us, and us onto being. To play a part in the performance or at very least dip our toes in the pond of its narrative through a fleeting 'appearance', we must always enter it; we must become alive. From our first moments in the world we are something as yet unseen, a unique singularity of being. We become instantly the only ones to be, have been, or will be ourselves. This fact of singular unique being colours the heterogeneity of our human collective existence; the fact of our individuality, of our subjectivity, is in tern given breath from this feature of reality.

With every first breath however comes the second. From here, the path of every one of us who has ever resided in our world has, and always will, diverge. Some, sadly, never see this second breath. For them, especially, we must remember that they too made an appearance, no matter how temporally slight – their being was made as resolutely manifest as our own. With every breath we take, our process of subjectivation ploughs on at an increasingly extensive magnitude. With every passing moment, the divergence of being vested in our capacity to differ by simply coming into being extends the fact of both our unique individuality, with every new baby born, and as such, so too increases the potentiality for human propensity to possibility. This potentiality is a movement towards fresh existence, of a life between us which is as of yet unimaginable.

So what happens with the birth of every child? Simply put, the very world through which we are given expression and meaning is recreated in and by us. The world itself is both actualised and realised in a single moment - through a single ripe gasp for air. The world is thus the milieu through which we award meaning, and equally, it presents us a space, a stage, within which we can become its very defining constituent – its very fabric. This is what to be alive par excellence as one of the human race equates to – the reforging of the very meaning of the world through ones bare existence alone, to hold the potential to recast the performance with every moment we draw breath.

Some might argue that the fact of our total individuality is a fact of only imperfection, that our plurality makes us a divided and fallen species. This, however, is only to cast heterogeneity as a curse, and to

ignore the capacity for the potential which breaks open from such a condition of plurality. Reason thus follows that the curse must be erased, steering our performance to the necessary quelling of difference itself as the antidote. In our times, mass-production and automation characterise the bulk of objects we interact with as props of performance. In this vein, it is no surprise that such reasoning of unadulterated homogeneity in production became internalised as a social rationality. To be all the same would annihilate the spontaneity synonymous with human life itself.

Yes, imperfection means that anything becomes possible, and this is an order of relational anarchy. Nevertheless, this is to neglect the fact that: Yes, indeed, anything is possible if it can be humanly conceived. Nothing straight may ever be made from the crooked timber of humanity, but in this style of crookedness, we are the most visionary of master carpenters.² Our timber may be crooked, but it has sailed us across oceans, connected continents, scaled mountain ranges and projected our being into the stars.

The unknown rules all, but the unknown is not a deep expanse of void alone, but a void of both ending and new beginning; of all that is imaginable and all that is yet to be imagined. It is in our being human that our being unique rests resolute; and within this is the seed of that which we call 'creativity'. Birth is the first fact of life, but it is the consequence of this fact which presents us with its meaning, for us all, for the performance which has been and has yet to be seen. So, if birth is the grounding foundation of our collective human existence, what else colours the qualities of its character, of this phenomenon?

Notes

¹ Hannah Arendt (1998) *The Human Condition*, Second Edition, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, p.9.

²“One cannot fashion something absolutely straight from wood which is as crooked as that of which man is made” [‘Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent’ 6th principle]; Immanuel Kant (1949) *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant’s Moral and Political Writings*, Carl J. Friedrich (Ed.), New York: The Modern Library, p. 123.

