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Being-from-others: Reading Heidegger after Cavarero

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Drawing on Adriana Cavarero's account of natality, Guenther argues that Martin Heidegger overlooks the distinct ontological and ethical significance of birth as a limit that orients one toward an other who resists appropriation, even while handing down a heritage of possibilities that one can—and must—make one's own. Guenther calls this structure of natality Being-from-others, modifying Heidegger's language of inheritance to suggest an ethical understanding of existence as the gift of the other.

One always inherits from a secret—
which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so?”

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

For too long, philosophers have neglected birth as a topic for careful reflection. There are few canonical philosophical texts that make more than a passing reference to birth, and even when it is mentioned, it is often transformed into a metaphorical process of artistic or intellectual creation which is implicitly or explicitly coded as masculine.¹ Feminist philosophers such as Adrienne Rich, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Adriana Cavarero have contributed in different ways to bringing the topic of birth into philosophical discourse, and altering that discourse in the process.² As Mary O'Brien declared in *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981), “We are labouring to give birth to a new philosophy of birth. . . . Feminist philosophy will be a philosophy of birth and regeneration” (13, 200). In this article, I seek to build on the work of other feminists by reflecting on the significance of birth in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962), and the insignificance to which this work consigns the mother's gift of birth.

I am by no means the first feminist to read Heidegger along these lines. In *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, Irigaray argues that there is a repressed element in Heidegger's work, traces of which inscribe themselves in concepts such as dwelling and the event of Being (1999). While Heidegger reflects at length on the significance of earth and world, Irigaray argues that he neglects the element of air. Like birth, the philosophical (in)significance of air has been largely taken for granted; it is as if the pervasiveness and necessity of air contributed to its theoretical invisibility. Irigaray's reflections on the element of air suggest a nonexclusive, nonoppositional way of thinking through difference and relationality. The air that I breathe moves through my body without belonging to me; I share this air with others in a continual exchange that both connects us and maintains our distinction.³ Irigaray reminds us that long before the newborn takes a first breath of air on its own, the pregnant woman has already been breathing for the fetus through the mediation of a placenta that both connects them and keeps them distinct.⁴ Thus, even in the womb, there is no fusion between woman and fetus, nor is there an empty interval between them, but rather a semipermeable membrane of connection and distinction. To be born is to start breathing on my own, expanding both my connection with and distinction from others beyond the mother-child dyad toward a sharing of air with anyone who happens to be in my proximity. Birth involves a certain measure of autonomy, then, since I no longer depend on another to breathe for me, but this autonomy is neither an alienating solitude nor a masterful self-enclosure. Rather, it effects an ongoing elemental exchange among embodied selves who have not chosen one another in advance, but whose animate lives are complexly intertwined, whether or not they pay attention to the air they breathe together.

Whatever I think and whoever I become, my existence presupposes both an initial gift of breath and a continuous supply of air. For the time being at least, I receive air for free without having to pay for it or ration it, but also without being able to reserve it for myself without sharing with others. To borrow a phrase from Heidegger, "there is" (*es gibt*) air. The unreserved plenitude of air is matched only by Being itself—or, as Irigaray suggests, by the mother's gift of birth. Playing on Heidegger's phrase, in which a neutral "it" (*es*) gives forth beings while hiding or withdrawing itself, Irigaray coins a new phrase: *she gives*. "She gives—first—air, and does so irrecoverably, with the exception of the unfolding, from and within her, of whoever takes air from her. . . . She gives the possibility of that beginning from which the whole of man will be constituted" (1999, 28; see also 13–14, 93, 125, and the translator's comment in 183n5). Irigaray argues that in the beginning at least, the maternal gift of air is not an exchange but an asymmetrical donation: "This gift is received with no possibility of a return. He cannot pay her back in kind" (28). This is not to say that no obligation is given along with the first breath of life, but only that

the debt cannot be repaid through a simple reciprocal exchange; I cannot give birth to the mother who gives birth to me.⁵

Ironically, perhaps, the denial of this maternal gift and the assertion of oneself as radically separate or self-made tend to maintain the subject in an infantile state of unacknowledged dependence on the generosity of others. Mature forms of autonomy arise when I breathe on my own, but also acknowledge both the mother's life-giving gift of breath and the continual sharing of air with other living beings. To the extent that I deny or forget this gift, I stake my own individual existence on the mother's disappearance and silence. *She* must remain in the dark so that *I* may emerge into the clearing; *she* must remain mute so that *I* may dwell in language, the house of Being. This approach maintains the maternal gift at the root of masculine subjectivity—and, arguably, at the root of philosophical discourse—without recognizing this gift as such, but also without letting the mother emerge as anything other than a selfless gift giver.⁶ Irigaray resists offering a neat formula for how to respond well to the gift of birth, but she does make it clear that one condition for a good response is to acknowledge and remember the mother's gift, not consigning it to the status of a dark, impersonal, and sexually neutral ground. In Heidegger's work, however, she argues that Dasein is "constituted on the basis of a forgetting: of the gift of this *from which* of which he is" (Irigaray 1999, 30). In what follows, I seek to elaborate this forgotten *from which* into a fundamental structure of Dasein, which I will call *Being-from-others*.

My argument turns on the figure of inheritance, which arises in Heidegger's account of authentic relation to the past as a heritage (or inheritance: *Erbe*) that Dasein repeats (or takes back: *wiederholt*) by interpreting past possibilities in light of its projects for the future. In Heidegger's own words, the heritage of the past is authentically grasped by "handing down to oneself . . . the possibilities that have come down to one, but not necessarily as having thus come down" (*BT* 435; *SZ* 383)⁷—as if I had not merely received these possibilities, but taken them for myself. In everyday terms, an inheritance is a legacy passed down to me by another generation; this legacy is occasioned by the death of the other from whom I inherit, but it is also conditioned by birth both in the sense that new generations arise through birth and in the more specific sense that my place in the family lineage largely determines my inheritance. To understand the past, with Heidegger, as an inheritance that I hand down *to myself*, but "not necessarily" in the passivity and loss of inheriting from an other, is to put an interesting spin on the everyday understanding of inheritance, transforming the apparent passivity of an unchosen and perhaps undeserved legacy into a choice whereby I not only receive but actively grasp the possibilities handed down to me, interpreting them in relation to my own projects. Later in this article, I will return to the "everyday" understanding of inheritance to look for clues to a different account of the past, and especially the deep past of birth. I

will also look to the work of Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero for a different understanding of the relation between birth and death, which emphasizes the maternal root of intergenerational giving rather than the paternal lineage of inheritance. But first I would like to explore more closely Heidegger's account of the heritage that one claims by grasping "the possibilities that have come down to one, but not necessarily as having thus come down" (BT 435; SZ 383).

HEIDEGGER'S FORGETTING

The word *birth* appears seldom in *Being and Time*. Heidegger only begins to address birth explicitly in the penultimate chapter of the book, entitled "Temporality and Historicity."⁸ He introduces the subject through a possible objection to his analysis of Dasein thus far, which has centered around Being-toward-death. Heidegger asks whether this analysis of death is enough to disclose the totality of Dasein as a whole:

Have we indeed brought the whole of Dasein, as regards its authentically *Being-a-whole*, into the fore-having of our existential analysis? . . . Death is only the "end" of Dasein; and, taken formally, it is just *one* of the ends by which Dasein's totality is closed round. The other "end," however, is the "beginning," the "birth." Only that entity which is "between" birth and death presents the whole which we have been seeking. (BT 425; SZ 373)

In this passage, Heidegger raises the possibility that his analysis of Dasein has remained one-sided by focusing exclusively on Being-toward-death and neglecting the "other end" of existence, its "beginning" in birth. He elaborates this possible objection: "Dasein has been our theme only in the way in which it exists 'facing forward,' as it were, leaving 'behind it' all that has been. Not only has Being-toward-the-beginning remained unnoticed; but so too, and above all, has the way in which Dasein *stretches along between* birth and death" (BT 425; SZ 373). Perhaps something important has been left behind in this failure to provide a sustained account of birth.

But as soon as Heidegger raises this possible objection, he rejects it with an interpretation of Dasein's historicity in which resolute Being-toward-death already accounts for Dasein as a whole in its stretching between birth and death, past and future, thrownness and projection. For Heidegger, resoluteness is already "in itself a steadiness which has been stretched along—the steadiness with which Dasein as fate 'incorporates' into its existence birth and death and their 'between,' and holds them as thus 'incorporated'" (BT 442; SZ 390–1). If this is the case, then Heidegger's analysis of Being-toward-death does not merely refer to a one-sided temporality of "facing forward," but already discloses

the temporality of Dasein as a whole. The interpretation of death need not be supplemented by an equally rigorous interpretation of birth; for Being-toward-death already provides the philosophical apparatus by which to understand Dasein as a whole, even as it is stretched “between” birth and death. But what if this is not the case? What remains forgotten in Heidegger’s account of Dasein, and how might we begin to remember it, as heirs to the intellectual legacy of *Being and Time*?

To engage this question, we need to look more closely at Heidegger’s articulation of the tension between natality and mortality. In *Being and Time*, birth and death do not merely represent the starting point and end point of a lifetime. Rather, they form the limits between which Dasein stretches itself along as care, as the being who “is” its birth and its death as long as it exists. Dasein is “stretched along and stretches itself along [*erstreckten Sicherstreckens*]” as an ecstatic unity (BT 427; SZ 375).

Factual Dasein exists as born [*gebürtig*]; and, as born, it is already dying, in the sense of Being-towards-death. As long as Dasein factually exists, both the ‘ends’ and their ‘between’ *are*, and they *are* in the only way which is possible on the basis of Dasein’s Being as care. Thrownness and that Being towards death in which one flees it or anticipates it, form a unity; and in this unity birth and death are ‘connected’ in a manner characteristic of Dasein. As care, Dasein is the ‘between.’ (BT 426–27; SZ 374)

With the word *gebürtig*, Heidegger suggests that birth is not merely a discrete event that initiates the lifetime of Dasein, but rather a modality of existence, an adverbial relation to being and to time. It’s not just that I *was born* on a certain date; rather, I exist *as born* (*gebürtig*) for my entire life, and this born-ness has important implications for temporality. As a being who finds itself always already thrown into a world that it did not choose or construct for itself, Dasein is not in control of its existence from the ground up; rather it must come to terms with its birth as an emergence that was not initially chosen, at a time that has always already sunk into the past. As one who is both natal and mortal, Dasein exists as a finite being in the tension of the “between,” which Heidegger calls *care*. But contrary to what one might expect, the authentic significance of care is not disclosed in relation to birth and death equally, but only by resolute Being-toward-death.

Dasein is individualized—it becomes authentically itself—in grasping death as its “ownmost” possibility (BT 294; SZ 250). No one can die for me or accompany me in the utter solitude of death; this possibility alone belongs to me exclusively, whether I like it or not. And so, the task of coming to terms with my own existence centers on the resolute projection of Being-toward-death, in light of which all possibilities (even the presumably “first” possibility of Being-born)

become meaningful as *my own* possibilities. Heidegger cites the old adage, “As soon as a man comes into life, he is at once old enough to die” (BT 289; SZ 245). This phrase anticipates his claim that birth can already—and perhaps only—be understood in terms of one’s Being-toward-death. I will argue that this approach unfortunately limits the ontological significance of birth within the interpretive framework of *Being and Time*, and that it leads to problems with other aspects of this work, most notably its unsatisfying account of *Mitsein* or Being-with others, and its failure to address questions of sexual difference. In a sense, then, this article is my attempt to “choose” what I inherit from Heidegger, precisely by contesting his account of birth as a chosen inheritance.

For Heidegger, Dasein acquires an authentic relation to the past only insofar as it repeats or “takes back” its past possibilities in terms of a future that is yet to come. This becomes clear in the moment of anxiety, which “brings one back to one’s thrownness as something *possible* which *can be repeated*. And in this way it *also* reveals the possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being—a potentiality which must, in repeating, come back to its thrown ‘there,’ but come back as something futural which comes towards [zukunftiges]” (BT 394; SZ 343). The moment of anxiety discloses the authentic significance of birth as a thrownness that returns as a future of possible repetition: a future that arises from the resolute anticipation of my own death. As such, birth is no longer lost, inaccessible, or anterior to choice simply by virtue of being past. Through repetition, this past is incorporated into the time of the present perfect; it “is as having-been [*ist gewesen*]” (BT 390; SZ 340). Thrownness would thus be “perfected” by the resolute anticipation that interprets birth in light of a death yet to come, converting the unchosen passivity of birth into a possibility that is *mine*, and that still comes toward me.

For Heidegger, an authentic relation to the past (including the deep past of birth) relies upon this capacity for repetition: “Only so far as it is futural can Dasein *be* authentically as having been. The character of ‘having been’ arises, in a certain way, from the future” (BT 373; SZ 326). While past and future are equiprimordial modes of temporality, the future (like projection, and like death itself) nevertheless enjoys a certain priority over the past.⁹ This priority is significant for Heidegger’s account of the past in terms of a heritage (or inheritance) which Dasein hands down *to itself* in resolute projection:

If everything “good” is a heritage, and the character of “goodness” lies in making authentic existence possible, then the handing down of a heritage constitutes itself in resoluteness. The more authentically Dasein resolves—and this means that in anticipating death it understands itself unambiguously in terms of its ownmost distinctive possibility—the more unequivocally does it choose and find the possibility of its existence, and the

less it does so by accident. Only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and “provisional” possibility driven out. (BT 435; SZ 384)

Dasein becomes authentically itself when it repeats its past and takes over its thrown possibilities as its own heritage. But precisely in taking over these possibilities, Dasein transforms their significance from an unchosen legacy that is contingent upon the particular circumstances of one’s birth, into a chosen or even self-granted estate. By resolutely taking over its possibilities, Dasein comes back to its thrownness as if it were no longer an accidental and undeserved gift, but rather an inheritance handed down to itself by itself. This self-inheritance makes Dasein what it is and—“if everything ‘good’ is a heritage”—also makes it “good.” An important tension between active choice and passive reception is maintained by the sense in which Dasein “hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has *inherited and yet has chosen*” (BT 435; SZ 384, emphasis added). Dasein can only “choose” among the possibilities that have been granted in the thrownness and contingency of birth. In this sense, Dasein is free; but it is only “free for the struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated” (BT 437; SZ 385). This tension between the necessity of choosing or actively grasping inherited possibilities, and the impossibility of choosing what has already been passed down to me by others, characterizes the productive tension of the care structure as such.¹⁰ However, to the extent that Dasein hands down its inheritance “unambiguously” and “unequivocally”—to the extent that it “drives out” every “accidental” possibility—Heidegger risks collapsing the very tension between thrownness and projection upon which the care structure rests. Without a strong enough sense of Dasein’s birth as an inheritance that is handed down prior to *and in resistance to* my own choosing, the repetition of this inheritance as an “unequivocal” choice threatens to obscure what is distinctive about Dasein in its stretching along between birth and death.

The priority of death over birth in *Being and Time* culminates in the following passage:

In the fateful repetition of possibilities that have been, Dasein brings itself back “immediately”—that is to say, in a way that is temporally ecstatical—to what already has been before it. But when its heritage is thus handed down to itself, its “birth” is *caught up [eingeholt] into its existence* in coming back from the possibility of death (the possibility which is not to be outstripped [*nicht überholt*]), if only so that this existence may accept the thrownness of its own “there” in a way which is more free from illusion. (BT 442–43; SZ 391)

While death remains “not to be outstripped” (*nicht überholt*), Dasein “catches up with” (*einholt*) its birth through repetition (*wiederholen*); in other words, Dasein appropriates birth as its own repeatable possibility, which it has chosen or handed down to itself along with the heritage of other past possibilities. In so doing, Dasein frees itself, not only for its own potentiality-for-Being but also from “Illusion,” from chance, from the radical contingency of a birth that it did not initially choose. It is not difficult to see how the tension with which Dasein stretches itself “between” birth and death might be threatened here by the sense in which Dasein’s Being-toward-death already claims to disclose the full significance of its Being-born. If birth could be repeated, “caught up” with, and even “handed down” to oneself in an unambiguous manner, then Dasein would no longer exist in the tension of care and resoluteness that Heidegger so meticulously describes.

This is not just a problem for one or two aspects of Dasein, but for *the whole* of Dasein as it is stretched and stretches itself along between birth and death. As a being whose existence is both thrown and projecting, Dasein not only receives an inheritance but *exists* as this inheritance, which is both passively granted and actively grasped. The German word *Erbe* means not only “heritage” and “inheritance” but also “heir” or “issue.”¹¹ Given the term’s wider significance, I suggest that Dasein not only hands down its own possibilities as a “heritage,” but also (if only figuratively) hands *itself* down as its own “heir” or “issue.” Insofar as Dasein is its possibilities, it is also the *Erbe* that it hands down to itself, in a self-inheritance that might also be read as a figurative self-birth. The repetition of inheritance as the self-bestowal of a heritage that includes the ordinary possibility of birth threatens to collapse the accidental, contingent character of birth into a chosen fate, driving out everything accidental. This is the case even if we admit Heidegger’s point that one can only choose one’s fate by “following loyally” in the footsteps of the given; for the problem is not solved simply by restoring the tension between the impossibility and the necessity of choosing one’s heritage. Rather, I suggest that a rigorous distinction must be made between the originating possibility of birth and all the other possibilities granted to me at birth, in order to mark the ontological distinction between the unrepeatable, deeply passive, and irreducibly past possibility of birth, and the heritage of repeatable possibilities given to me *at* birth.

What is at stake in this distinction? On one hand, understood strictly as an ontological limit, birth grants me the sheer possibility of existence; on the other hand, and at the same time, birth grants all the traditions, practices, languages, and other possibilities that together form a heritage that is received but must also be chosen. Either way, birth is (at least initially) a matter of unchosen passivity; and yet two very different senses of passivity are involved here. However I may respond to my heritage (authentically or inauthentically), there remains something incontestable, nonnegotiable, and radically beyond the scope of

personal choice in the sheer facticity of birth to an other—a mother—who grants me an existence of “my own.” This originating gift of birth resists integration into the economy of inheritance, so long as the latter is understood in terms of a heritage that one must choose or claim as one’s own—even if this “necessary” task is also “impossible.” But I argue that it is ethically imperative *not to claim* the originating possibility of birth as something I grant to myself, even retrospectively or figuratively. For the gift of birth does not merely give me a range of possibilities; it *gives me*, brings me forth as an existent. To repeat this originating possibility as my own choice may be authentic; but this “authenticity” requires the profoundly unethical erasure of the other who grants the sheer possibility of existence by giving birth to me: my mother.

There are no mothers or fathers in *Being and Time*, no caretakers to whom Dasein is delivered prior to finding itself lost in the crowd. Dasein, it seems, is always already an orphan. As one who is initially abandoned to an alienating, public world, Dasein requires a shock or interruption that “weans one from the conventionalities of the “they” (BT 444; SZ 391). To be weaned is to be torn away, cast out, denied; etymologically, weaning (*Entwöhnung*) suggests a kind of homelessness, the loss of a proper dwelling place (*Wohnung*). For Heidegger, this weaning from the “they” is necessary if Dasein is to wrest itself out of inauthenticity and grasp hold of its own distinct possibilities as such. But this picture of Dasein’s initial relation to others is both unfortunate and unnecessary. Arguably, Heidegger’s account of Dasein’s Being-a-whole would be enriched rather than compromised by a serious consideration of birth as an ontological limit that is as important as death, but which has very different implications for our interpretation of existence and of time.¹²

While Heidegger may grasp the sense in which I am always already “with” others (*Mitsein*), he does not yet consider the sense in which I *come from* others without whom I would not exist, let alone take up an authentic relation to Being. The heritage of possibilities inherited at birth would not survive unless someone implicitly or explicitly chose to repeat them in some way; but the possibility of birth as such is different. It refers to a chance happening that occurs within historical time, but also inaugurates an unrepeatably new existent with her own distinct temporality. My mother and father happened to meet, the condom happened to break, I happened to be born. All this is very ordinary, and it already involves a whole range of implicit and explicit choices. But at the same time, it also inaugurates an entirely new Being-in-the-world whose chance emergence is not first of all open to choice or repetition, even if it also forms the basic condition for all choices within the world.

The gift of birth is different from the inheritance of a tradition in that it gives nothing in particular to be accepted, rejected, chosen, appropriated, or even interpreted. This “nothing” is none other than the sheer possibility of existence granted by an other; it is the possibility of having possibilities to

interpret, the gift that conditions inheritance even while remaining an exception to it.¹³ I could not be myself without the concrete possibilities opened up by cultural and personal inheritances, but birth to a mother is not merely one among many different aspects of my facticity; rather, birth grants the facticity of existence as such. An ontological account of birth would have to think through the implications of being born *to an other*, such that Dasein is not only Being-with but also Being-*from*-others. It would have to take seriously the sexual specificity of each natal existent, since no one is born as a neutral, unmarked Dasein.¹⁴ And it would have to rethink the relation between past and future, thrownness and projection, natality and mortality, in a way that does not privilege the latter over the former, but maintains the aporetic tension between a past that ultimately resists choice (at least with respect to the fact of birth) and a future that requires choice with respect to the specific possibilities inherited from the past.

To bring out the implications of this reevaluation of birth, and to support my argument that the unchosen gift of birth is even more fundamental than the aporetic tension of inheritance described by Heidegger, I would like to reflect on the ontic and ontological conditions for inheritance, moving rather freely back and forth between these two levels of analysis with the intuition that when it comes to our Being-from-others, the ontic and ontological levels are difficult to keep neatly separated. Inheritance not only presupposes the birth of a new generation; it also presupposes that something is left over at the end of a life, that death does not annihilate everything about a person, but only their individual life (as if this “only” could be somehow comforting to the one who knows she will die!). Heidegger is not very interested in what happens to Dasein after death, whether in this world or in any sort of afterworld; for Dasein, death is a limit toward which it exists in ecstatic being-outside-oneself. But there is another, more mundane but perhaps even more radical being-outside-oneself implied by the material conditions of inheritance: namely, that even when I no longer exist as Being-in-the-world, bits and pieces of my world (not to mention my body) still remain, and are parceled out to another generation, which I have likely played some part in reproducing. My granddaughter gets the ring I used to wear. My ungrateful niece gets the cane that used to form an essential part of my equipmental relation to the world; she hangs it up by the fireplace like a work of art, and points to it at dinner parties. On one hand, a specific and nonsubstitutable relation to the world will be extinguished when I die; but on the other hand, given the complex entanglement of relations to the world expressed by Being-with others, death is not just an end for me but also a transformation and partial continuation of my particular relation to the world, at least in those respects that touch upon the Dasein of others. This mutual entanglement of practical and social worlds forms an important aspect of *Mitsein* that Heidegger does not explore fully enough in *Being and Time*, and

which is even further downplayed by his interpretation of death as the limit in relation to which I am individualized, rather than as an *end* of my individual life, through which my being is disindividualized or dispersed. By making an ontological distinction between the gift of birth and the heritage of possibilities handed down at birth, we arrive at a different understanding of inheritance, not just as the tension between the impossibility and necessity of appropriation, but as the improper and non-appropriable condition for that tension.

Inheritance implies a complex set of social, historical, and economic relations that span the generations. Considered as the contingent effect of one's birth to another, an inheritance is not primarily chosen but *given*. The significance of inheritance as a gift from the other refers both to the birth that connects me to other generations whose legacy I inherit and to the death that intervenes to pass this legacy down to me. Thus inheritance involves a certain dispossession, both for the other and for me. The other loses her life and passes her estate down to me—in spite of herself, without the possibility of reversing this gift or taking it back. And while I may inherit the estate of the other—again, in spite of myself, without choosing what I inherit—I cannot take possession of these things without losing the other herself, irreversibly. Inheritance is a gift that both requires loss and, in a certain sense, compounds it; its narrative of appropriation presupposes a double expropriation.¹⁵ The neglected image of an inheritance handed down not by myself to myself, but by another whom I did not choose, suggests that birth is not merely an accident to be repeated and so purified of its accidental character, but rather the gift of another generation. A lapse of time, indicated not by my own death but by the death of the other, intervenes between the one who gives and the one who inherits. This inheritance does not ask to be returned, for that is impossible; instead, it asks to be passed down to another, in a new generation of giving.

The figure of inheritance points a way beyond the “choice” of what cannot be chosen toward an ethical understanding of birth as the gift of the other. While we can point to the place of birth in Heidegger's work, we cannot speak to the ethical significance of birth until we learn a different vocabulary: the language of ethics, of others, and of *mothers*. This is a language that Cavarero speaks fluently.

CAVARERO'S REMINDER

Adriana Cavarero's work draws on sources such as Luce Irigaray (whom Cavarero acknowledges as “a thinker to whom my research, and any philosophical research on the theme of sexual difference, owes a lot” [1993, 220]) and Hannah Arendt (whose emphasis on the political significance of natality, plurality, uniqueness, and narrative provides the theoretical framework of Cavarero's book, *Relating Narratives* [2000]). Cavarero's account of natality puts flesh on

the bones of Hannah Arendt's claim in *The Human Condition* that while death may be the central category of metaphysics or ontology, birth is the central category of political—and, I would add, ethical—philosophy.¹⁶ Thanks to the everyday miracle of birth, a multiplicity of new and unique human beings come into the world, and this influx of the new keeps the public sphere open to new actions, new ways of narrating the world, and new ways of inheriting traditions. While Arendt downplays the contribution of women, and especially mothers, by making a distinction between the labor of reproduction and the act of natality, Cavarero's reading of Arendt emphasizes the maternal root of natality, the sense in which all life on earth, including political and philosophical life, presupposes the mother's gift of birth. In this sense, Cavarero is also choosing what she inherits from Arendt, and taking up her work in a new way, giving it new life.

For Cavarero, the sexual specificity of the mother is not merely incidental, but points to sexual differentiation as an ontological condition of human existence, and one which is most clearly disclosed in relation to natality. While death may happen regardless of sexual difference, and may even seem to make this difference irrelevant, birth necessarily implies sexual markings. No "man" in the sense of "mankind"—not even an *anthropos* or a *Mensch*—is ever born.¹⁷ Only men and women, girls and boys (or, as in up to 4 percent of cases, a mixture of the two sexes¹⁸) are born and live and die in this world. Like Arendt, Cavarero argues that each human being is singular or unique in a way that undercuts the sedimentation of social categories but also allows our lives to be woven together in the complex web of actions and narratives that constitute public life.¹⁹ This singularity is distinct from individuality; it does not refer to my particular qualities or accomplishments, nor even to my solitude in Being-toward-death. Rather, it arises simply by virtue of being born as *this* one, with my own beginning in time and my total self-exposure at this initial moment. As Cavarero puts it in *Relating Narratives*,

The baby who is born is always *unique* and *one*. Within the scene of birth, the unity of the newborn is materially visible and incontrovertible through its glaring [*plateale*] appearance. . . . The newborn—unique and immediately expressive in the fragile totality of her exposure—has her unity precisely in this totally nude self-exposure. This unity is already a physical identity, visibly sexed, and even more perfect in so far as she is not yet qualifiable. (2000, 38)

It is important not to romanticize this uniqueness or conflate it with a particular quality that belongs to me like the mark of genius or heroic destiny. *Everyone* is unique in *exactly the same way*, for exactly the same reasons, without being able to lay claim to the source of this uniqueness.²⁰ The moment of my first

exposure to appearance is not mine to remember or even to experience at first hand; rather, it is a gift handed down to me by another, my mother, whether or not she wanted to see “me” in particular. This gift is the condition for the possibility of my existence, and as such, it is the condition for every particular inheritance of concrete possibilities. For Cavarero, the great challenge of human existence is not to wrest one’s individuality from the generic sociality of the “they” through resolute Being-toward-death; rather, the challenge is to manifest the unique singularity already granted to me at birth in a way that acknowledges the mother’s gift of natality but also carries it forward, reproducing it for others by making new beginnings, new branches to the maternal root of life-giving life. In other words, the unique singularity of the natal self is not a barrier to its connection with others, but rather the initiation of a connection. The radical self-exposure of the newborn is an exposure to *someone* who was born to someone else, each of whom have their own unique moment of emergence. The natal self is a new thread in a fabric that was already in the process of weaving and unraveling; or, as Cavarero writes, “in its singularity the newborn is a ‘beginning’ found already ‘started’ inside the mother: it is generated by the female who has already been generated by a m/other, and so on *ad infinitum* in a sequence (*theoria*) of past mothers” (1995, 82).

This approach to natality opens a new perspective on the roots of *theoria*: not as the abstraction of a distanced spectator, but as the mutual exposure of natal, sexuate beings who arise within a maternal sequence. But more importantly for our purposes here, it also implies new possibilities for thinking about mortality. Like Arendt and in resistance to Heidegger, Cavarero understands death in terms of natality, building on the intuition that “men [and women], although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (Arendt 1958, 246; also cited in Cavarero 2000, 82).²¹ When approached in this way, from the perspective of a continuum between natal and maternal bodies, death appears as a moment in the cyclical reproduction of life rather than as the intensely personal and exclusive limit of Dasein. For Cavarero, death does not individualize the existent in her or his relation to time, but rather brings about a *disindividualization* and general dispersion of the embodied self that makes room for the plurality of new selves coming into the world.²² “Indeed, if the nothingness of death, this sinking into nothingness through death, makes any sense, it does so for the dying person. At the moment of death, one’s singularity ceases to consist of the form of life organized in a unified way that constitutes the self” (1995, 114). Through death, and perhaps even before death, the unity of my body begins to dissolve, releasing different material possibilities for decomposition and recomposition, which no longer involve me as an individual but which do not necessarily compromise the singularity of my life as it was lived and as it continues to be narrated in the living histories of other people.²³ What remains of my body after death is fed back into the cyclical process of

decay and regeneration (or what I will call living/dying) in a way that suggests a different, unintended heritage passed down to beings that I would probably not name in my will: the countless worms, maggots, and microbes that are the illegitimate heirs of my material life.

We may live as human beings—women and men, scientists, philosophers, all aware of our mortality in varying degrees—but in the end, we die the death of an animal. Heidegger's genius is to transform this animal death into the very hallmark of the human, the ever-future event of our individual existence; but in doing so, he risks fetishizing the nothingness of death and at the same time stripping death of its messiness, its foul stench, its fearfulness (in distinction from the pure, bare anxiety it provokes). Cavarero's genius is to shift the focus back to our animal death: not merely in order to clip the wings of a proud, heroic Dasein but more profoundly to reconnect death with birth, and birth with the maternal body. From Cavarero's "dehumanized" perspective, "death is but an event experienced by the living individual in his or her passage toward infinite, impersonal life" (1995, 115). But even this impersonal flux of life, death, and regeneration is not sexless; she interprets the neutrality of death as a generalization or neutralization of the "sexed maternal root that links every 'I' to impersonal life itself, every living being to his or her beginning in an origin that has innocently generated every beginning for all time" (117).²⁴ Looking back to the endless chain of mothers and mothers of mothers, we begin to see that our "being there already does not originate from the self, does not find its substance there. It comes from her who has decided to bring this child into the world, so that the child can find for itself a place in this world. Finitude, contingency and irreducibility are the signs of this new perspective that looks toward the origin of the living individual to find its own measure, and not toward its fateful end" (1995, 82).

How does this perspective on living and dying affect our understanding of inheritance? Earlier, I referred to the everyday understanding of inheritance as the event by which "she" handed her estate down to "me" through the irreversible intervention of death. But this is not quite how matters have been understood in the everyday discourse of most cultures. While the mother's body may give life to a new generation, it is the father's law that passes down his name and his estate to those recognized as legitimate heirs within that generation. My reading of Heidegger after Cavarero suggests that his ontological account of inheritance draws its basic structure from the ontic tradition of paternal inheritance, in which the son must claim the father's legacy as his own in order to receive it properly. This ontic-ontological inheritance overlooks the mother's gift of birth, which forms the fundamental condition for all other forms of inheritance or even existence. Cavarero's concept of a maternal sequence or continuum revives the undercurrent of life-giving generosity that both underlies the paternal line of inheritance and threatens to subvert it.

It is undoubtedly true that I must die alone, since no one can die for me in the sense of taking my place in death; but it is also true that no one can die without leaving something behind—if only their naked and lifeless body—that is exposed to the response of others who may mourn me, celebrate me, hoard my jewels, desecrate me, forget me, refuse to go on without me, or sigh with relief that I am finally gone. This remainder left behind after death helps constitute the intersubjective meaning of my own death in ways that I cannot control or choose, but which nevertheless form an important aspect of my Being-with-others, not merely in its deficient form as the inauthentic gossip of *das Man*, but also (more importantly) in its participation in a community which that inherits and interprets its collective heritage. I have called the ontological structure suggested by the fact of birth Being-from-others (though it might be more precise to call it Being-from-a-mother) to highlight the sense in which no one exists without initially coming from someone, from a woman in particular, in a way that is ontologically distinct from the way I inherit a tradition or a set of possibilities.

In concluding this article, I would like to reconsider the objection with which Heidegger first introduced the topic of birth in *Being and Time*. Heidegger dismissed this objection quickly, claiming that the significance of birth is already disclosed in the structures illuminated by Being-toward-death. He suggested that nothing essential was lost in our failure to interpret existence starting from birth; and indeed, that something might even be gained by such a strategy insofar as it avoids the pitfall of imagining birth as the mere starting point of a timeline. But something important is lost in our neglect of birth as a topic of philosophical importance. We get a better sense of this loss by considering that aspect of birth which is not already disclosed in Heidegger's interpretation of authentic Being-toward-death: namely, our Being-from-others, our reception of existence as a gift that can never be reclaimed as a possession or choice but that precisely as such demands a response and perhaps even responsibility. Heidegger's brief interpretation of birth fails to account for the sense in which one is always born *to an other*, with all the pastness and passivity that this given birth implies. In the end, Dasein risks "catching up with" its own birth only at the expense of the rich facticity that Heidegger himself finds particular to birth. But more importantly, Dasein risks repeating its own birth at the expense of the other who *gave* birth to it, and whose daily care antecedes the ontological care that Heidegger describes.

NOTES

1. Some notable exceptions include Plato's celebration of love as "giving birth in beauty" (1961, *Symposium* 206e)—a discourse which is ascribed, perhaps significantly, to a woman, Diotima—and Aristotle's notorious reflections on reproduction, which some feminists have dubbed "the flowerpot theory of reproduction" for its representation of women's bodies as passive containers for the reception of male seed (see Laqueur 1990, 28–55). DuBois gives an engaging account of ancient Greek views on birth and reproduction in *Sowing the Body* (1988). In addition to representing Socrates as a "midwife" (1961, *Theaetetus* 148e–151e), Plato claims the superiority of men's intellectual fecundity to women's physical capacity to reproduce—again, by putting this argument into the mouth of Diotima (*Symposium* 209c). See also Derrida's analysis of fatherhood and filiality in "Plato's Pharmacy" (1981). Nietzsche both vilifies women and appropriates figures of pregnancy in his work (see Oliver 1995). Sartre declares in *Being and Nothingness* (1965) that, in effect, I choose my own birth by deciding the significance it will have for my existence (531–32; see also my analysis of this as a gesture of self-authorship in Guenther 2006, 22–23).

2. See, for example, Rich 1986; Kristeva 1984; Irigaray 1985; and Cavarero 1995, 2000. Other notable contributions include Young 1990; Willett 1995; Boulos Walker 1998; Johnson 2003; O'Byrne 2004; Held 1989; and Ferrell 2006.

3. One of the most moving demonstrations of this exchange that I can think of is the *hongi*, a traditional Maori greeting in which two people press their noses together and breathe in deeply, sharing the air between them.

4. See Irigaray's account of the placenta in *Je, tu, nous* (1993, 38–42), as well as Purvis 2004.

5. For further reflections on the logic of the gift involved in birth (in other words, an asymmetrical gift, and in that sense not enclosed in a circular economy of debt and reciprocation, but nevertheless generative of life and of ethical relation), see Irigaray 1999, 93–94, 136. See also Guenther 2006, especially 1–5, 49–58.

6. "He must not build everything starting from her; he must not sense, look at, gather together, say everything starting from himself. Each one must build, feel, speak. And what she is will never be his own. He will never assimilate her, will never appropriate her without renouncing her and, moreover, himself" (Irigaray 2001, 313).

7. Throughout the article, I use the abbreviation BT to refer to Heidegger 1962, and SZ to refer to Heidegger 1953.

8. There is one previous reference to birth, but it is almost too brief to be noteworthy. In the Introduction to Division Two ("Dasein and Temporality") Heidegger writes: "Everydayness is precisely that Being which is 'between' birth and death. And if existence is definitive for Dasein's Being and if its essence is constituted in past by potentiality-for-Being, then, as long as Dasein exists, it must in each case, as such a potentiality, *not yet be something*" (BT 276; SZ 233). Already in this passage, Heidegger throws greater emphasis on the "not yet" of Being-toward-death, in spite of his acknowledgment that Dasein exists "between" birth and death, past and future.

9. "The primary meaning of existentiality is the future" (BT 376; SZ 328).

10. Derrida picks up on this tension when he characterizes inheritance in terms of both the *impossibility* and the *necessity* of choosing the possibilities that have been

received from a tradition. See, for example, Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 3; and Haddad 2005.

11. Note the grammatical distinction between *der Erbe* (the inheritor) and *das Erbe* (the inheritance). However, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida affirms the identity between inheritor and inheritance: “That we are heirs does not mean that we have or that we receive this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not” (1994, 54).

12. Irigaray argues that the notion of abandonment is tied to Heidegger’s forgetting of the maternal gift: “Man would receive from the maternal *phuein* the abandonment that orients him toward constituting his foundation. In place of that which would have abandoned him, toward which he repeats this movement of abandonment, the matrix of every act, man gives himself nothingness. The tie that bound him, as engendered, to this maternal her [*c’elle maternelle*] breaks . . . man provides a foundation for himself on the basis of reducing to nothingness that from which the foundation proceeds” (1999, 99).

13. Irigaray also distinguishes between the possibility of appropriation and the inappropriable gift of birth that conditions this possibility: “Thus, prior to the gift of appropriation there is the gift of she who offers herself for this move. Secret offering, ever begun anew, of a setting/medium in which a gift can take place. . . . So close that it enters appropriation without being appropriated. Infinitely far away, therefore” (1999, 136).

14. As Cavarero puts it in *In Spite of Plato*: “Indeed 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” (1995, 60). This passage echoes Arendt’s remark in *The Human Condition*, that political action “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1958, 7). While Arendt introduces plurality without mentioning sexual difference, Cavarero links the two issues and brings them both into the discussion together. While Cavarero is right, in my view, to insist on the sexed specificity of the newborn, her formulation of sexual difference in terms of an either/or duality (man or woman, girl or boy) makes it difficult to take full account of intersex children, or to address the complex entanglements between sex and gender in lived experience. And so, while I agree with Cavarero and Arendt that “universal ‘Man’ is never born,” it seems less obvious to me that “individual persons are born and live their lives gendered in difference as either man or woman.” Butler’s recent work on intersex, transgender, and transsexuality (2004), is helpful for sorting through these issues, which go beyond the scope of the current article.

15. Heidegger’s later work on the impersonal event of Being, for example in *On Time and Being* (1972), does provide a rich language for articulating the relation between gift and expropriation; and Nancy 1993 develops this language beautifully. But neither emphasizes what I find most important about birth: that it is an emergence into being *from the body of an other*. While both Heidegger and Nancy can tell us much about this emergence, they neglect the sense of Being-from-others that I am developing here, and that I also find in Cavarero.

16. “Since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought”

(Arendt 1958, 9). More on Arendt's own account of natality, and on the differences between Arendt and Cavarero, in Guenther 2006, chapter 2.

17. See note 14.

18. See Fausto-Sterling's work on intersexuals, especially *Myths of Gender* (1992) and *Sexing the Body* (2000).

19. Thus, singularity is not opposed to plurality or relationality, but rather presupposes it. See Perpich's explanation of this logic in "Subjectivity and Sexual Difference" (2003, esp. 407–8). O'Byrne makes a similar point in another context: "The fact that we all have mothers is the concrete clue that we belong to a plurality; the fact that we all have mothers and fathers indicates that this is not mere numerical plurality" (2004, 360).

20. As Butler argues in her recent book, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), this emphasis on the radical exposure of the newborn problematizes her claim that the newborn is also "institutable" (Cavarero 2000, 73). See Butler 2005 (30–40) for her critique of Cavarero's formulation of institutable singularity.

21. The full quote from Arendt reads: "The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (1958, 246). Compare this with Heidegger's intuition that "As soon as a man comes into life, he is at once old enough to die" (BT 289; SZ 245). This comparison places Heidegger uncomfortably close to the so-called wisdom of Silenus conveyed by Sophocles' words in *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Not to be born is the most to be desired; but having seen the light, the next best is to go whence one came as soon as may be" (line 1225).

22. "The process of 'depersonalizing' the individual figure (while conserving its gendered foundation) thus seems to have the function of bringing life itself to the fore as a primitive and 'prelogical' phenomenon to which all those living and of woman born really belong. The result is that individual death in its dramatic, centripetal meaning is immediately relegated to the background, as something that in the larger scheme of things belongs to the primitive phenomenon of life" (Cavarero 1995, 114).

23. Given that the self is both natal and mortal, the relation between the singularity of the born self and the generality or neutrality of the dying self is a crucial problem that remains to be worked out. This task lies beyond the scope of this article, but I am in the process of developing a response through a reading of the way alterity, indifference, and sexual difference function in the work of Cavarero, Blanchot, Lispector, and others.

24. This maternal, female root of the neutral impersonality of life and death must be linked back to the indistinction of great cosmic cycles that Arendt glimpsed in the life of the *animal laborans*, and which led her to turn away from animal reproduction toward a less messy form of political (and implicitly masculine) natality. By contrast, Cavarero strengthens her own account of natality precisely by welcoming this messy animal life and using it to displace the masculinist philosophy of death that finds in nothingness the secret to human individuality.

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