

Nativity and Western Philosophy. On Origin, Descent and their Connection

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Western philosophy as well as Jewish and Christian theology have been dealing with the phenomenon of being born from their beginning on, even if this subject hasn't been named exactly or been reflected upon systematically. Besides Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament, one can point to Plato's *Symposion* and *Politeia*, to Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, Augustine's *Confessiones*, Rousseau's paradigm of language and education, Herder's philosophy of language, Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Derrida's concept of *différance* and recent feminist approaches to philosophy.

The works of Hannah Arendt, especially „The Human Condition“ and „The Life of the Mind“, can be regarded as the first systematic reflection on the meaning of natality for human life and society. In her writings, Arendt explicitly refers to the history and tradition of Western philosophical thought. Ever since Arendt developed the paradigm of natality, feminist philosophers have taken up this concept and have worked on its further development (Muraro, Kristeva, Cavarero).

The concept of natality evokes the problem of causality, it raises the question of the relation between origin, effect and result in the setting of diversity in relatedness – a setting which already Plato has sketched. The way the notion of natality is interpreted has a substantial impact on philosophy as a whole: it is

relevant for the concept of reason, of human relatedness, of the transcendental as well as sexual difference. The interpretation of natality is decisive for the question if there exists a „primary philosophy“, the central problem being the relation between body and mind/language. Is there a dualism of body and mind? Can we regard body and language as originary qualities, are they of independent origin, or are they to be seen as per se determined? How can we conceive of a connection between body and mind/language that is neither immediate nor monocausal?

In post-modern philosophy, together with the notion of natality the significance of the mother tongue is emphasized (Derrida, Kristeva, Cixous, Muraro). At this point, it is decisive in which ways the mother –being the origin and mediator of spoken language - is understood. Feminist solutions to these questions consist in a genealogical concept of subject. The generation difference marks two different positions in the genealogical structure and qualifies the relation between two subjects, who act differently with regard to the same situation. One of these subjects - the “older” one - represents the word already coined and spoken, the other subject – the “younger” one – represents the challenge to find new words in the sense of Hannah Arendt’s notion of “beginning”. According to the writings of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, both subjects enter into communication to empower each other in the face of the world.

In search of a concept that goes beyond the mono-causality of origin and result, one can refer to the Christian dogma of Maria and the birth of God’s Son, Jesus. In contrast to Greek logic, the Christian dogma opens up the possibility to combine the concepts of “Ursprung” (i.e. non determined origin) and “Herkunft” (being determined by descent) with each other instead of regarding them as mutually exclusive notions. Genealogy/descent and natality/origin/beginning are to be understood as simultaneously effective elements. Together they create a “force”, as Derrida put it with regard to his concept of *différance*.

Within Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, there exists a concept of an effect, whose causality is not clear, because it is not linear. Hegel himself uses features of natality in order to describe this form of causality. Here it becomes clear that the genealogical structure must not be regarded in a horizontal way as chronological succession, but genealogy implies – as Derrida explicitly states – a vertical motion, which – like the Latin *altitudo* – gains height as well as depth. In other words: The birth of a child doesn't eliminate the mother and the parental generation. Instead, the child enters the web of human relationships and enriches it. The logic of natality therefore is not the dualistic logic of "either – or", where one element is replaced by another, but rather the logic of extension, enhancement and enrichment. Language itself substantiates the human dimension of *altitudo* (height-depth), by making it possible for uniqueness to be articulated, which renders human experience stronger and deeper. This connexion is to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the relation of body and mind/language – as Hannah Arendt made clear in her works „*The Human Condition*“ and „*The Life of the Mind*“ with obvious reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology*.