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# ARENDRT'S NOTION OF NATALITY AN ATTEMPT AT CLARIFICATION

## LA NOCIÓN DE NATALIDAD DE ARENDRT UN INTENTO DE ACLARACIÓN

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**ABSTRACT**

Arendt claims that our natality (*i.e.*, our condition of being born) is the “source” or “root” of our capacity to begin (*i.e.*, of our capacity to initiate something new). But she does not fully explain this claim. How does the capacity to begin derive from the condition of birth? That Arendt does not immediately and unambiguously provide an answer to this question can be seen in the fact that her notion of natality has received very different interpretations. In the present paper, I seek to clarify the notion. I bring together and examine Arendt’s scattered remarks about natality and propose a new interpretation that responds to the stated question. Along the way, I show how the various existing interpretations have arisen and argue that, in view of that question, they are inadequate.

*Keywords:* H. Arendt, capacity to begin, natality, plurality

**RESUMEN**

Arendt afirma que nuestra natalidad (es decir, la condición de haber nacido) es la “fuente” o “raíz” de nuestra capacidad para comenzar (a saber, de nuestra capacidad para iniciar algo nuevo). Sin embargo, ella no explica esta afirmación a cabalidad. ¿Cómo es que la capacidad para comenzar deriva de la condición de nacimiento? Debido a que Arendt no proporciona una respuesta inmediata y clara a esta pregunta, su noción de natalidad ha sido interpretada de maneras muy diferentes. Este trabajo busca aclarar la noción. Se reúnen y se examinan los comentarios dispersos de Arendt acerca de la natalidad y se propone una nueva interpretación que responde a dicha pregunta. En el proceso, se demuestra cómo surgieron las diversas interpretaciones existentes y se argumenta que son inadecuadas.

*Palabras clave:* H. Arendt, capacidad para comenzar, natalidad, pluralidad.

“Natality” is one of Arendt’s most prominent notions. Alongside “action in concert”, “the plurality of human beings”, and “the banality of evil”, it is one of the notions with which her thought is most often and most readily associated. Some commentators even consider it her most important notion, her most defining contribution.<sup>1</sup>

The starting point of the present paper is the observation that it is not clear how the notion of natality is to be understood, despite the fact that Arendt employs it frequently. There is a puzzle at the core of the notion, a question that Arendt’s remarks about natality provoke but do not readily resolve. The puzzle, in a nutshell, is this: Arendt defines “natality” as the condition of having been born (cf. 1958 8; 1965 211; 1996 51; 2006 174, 196). And she asserts that our natality is the “source” or “root” of our “capacity to begin” (cf. 1958 247; 1965 211; 1966 466, 479; 1972 179; 1981 II 6). (By “capacity to begin”, she means the capacity to break with the status quo and initiate something new. Only human beings possess this capacity, according to her.) So Arendt is claiming that our capacity to begin springs from our condition of having been born. But this claim is not evident, and Arendt does not fully explain it. What is the connection between the capacity to begin and the condition of birth? How does this capacity derive from the way in which we come into the world?

That Arendt’s remarks about natality do not immediately and unambiguously provide an answer to this question can be seen in the fact that the notion has received very different interpretations. Some see it as establishing a link between nature and politics and, hence, as in tension with the opposition of nature and politics that Arendt posits elsewhere (cf. Jay 1985; Birmingham 2003, 2006; Vatter 2006; Quintana 2009). Others treat “natality” as a synonym for the capacity to begin and thus, implicitly, take the notion to be metaphorical in nature

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- 1 To cite a few examples: Hauke Brunkhorst called the notion of natality “the essential innovation of Arendt’s political anthropology in *The Human Condition*” (188), Fernando Bárcena saw in it “el concepto central y la piedra angular de todo el edificio del pensamiento arendtiano” (111), and Pablo Bagedelli presented it as “el elemento fundamental para entender la manera en que [Arendt] se posiciona frente a la filosofía occidental” (38). Patricia Bowen-Moore (1989) dedicated an entire book to it, which she entitled *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natalty*. And Peg Birmingham found that “without exaggeration, Arendt’s thinking can be characterized as a ‘thinking of natality’” (2003 54).

(cf. Beiner 1984; Bowen-Moore 1989; Brunkhorst 2000; Dietz 2002; Tassin 2003; Lenis Castaño 2009; Biss 2012). And there are further interpretations which do not fall into either of these groups (cf. Markell 2016; Van Camp 2014).

In this paper, I seek to clarify the situation. I will bring together and examine Arendt's scattered remarks about natality and propose a new interpretation that addresses the puzzle I have highlighted. Along the way, I will show how the various existing interpretations have arisen, and why, in the light of that puzzle, they are inadequate.

### **Preliminary: The human capacity to begin**

Before I can discuss the notion of natality, I need to set out Arendt's conception of the capacity to begin, since this conception is essential for an understanding of natality.

Arendt holds that what is special about human beings, what distinguishes us from other animals, is the "capacity to begin", by which she means the capacity to leave behind the status quo and create something new, the capacity to go against and beyond the usual course of affairs. She expresses this view most explicitly when, at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, she remarks that "action", which for her is synonymous with beginning, is "the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it" (1958 22-23).<sup>2</sup> At the very end of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she similarly asserts that "beginning [...] is the supreme capacity of man" (1966 479). And in "Understanding and Politics", she even employs the term "essence" in this respect, characterizing the human being as "a being whose essence is beginning" (1994 321).

As a consequence of this conception of the human being, Arendt distinguishes between two modes of human activity. As I just noted, she reserves the term "action" for the exercise of the capacity to begin. To act, for her, is to take initiative, to intervene in a situation or process that would otherwise unfold according to usual practices. By contrast, to comport oneself according to custom, to follow the social rules and norms of the day, does not qualify as action but is mere "behavior" (1958 40-43). So, even though the capacity to act is what defines the human being, the exercise of this capacity is in fact something exceptional. In other words, action is inherently rare, as our doings mostly follow well-established practices.<sup>3</sup>

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2 For Arendt's identification of action with beginning, see 1958 177-178, 1972 179, 1994 320-321.

3 Here I leave aside the question of how this dualistic distinction between action and behavior relates to Arendt's better-known triadic distinction between action, work, and labor.

The prime manifestation, for Arendt, of the human capacity to begin is a political revolution. She devoted a book-length study, *On Revolution*, to the grand revolutions of the modern age – the American, French, Russian, and Hungarian revolutions.<sup>4</sup> In these events, the human capacity to break with the past and make a new beginning has been most conspicuous. However, her notion of beginning also applies on a smaller scale. The site of engagement need not be national or world politics. It may be your neighborhood, or your workplace, or your university. For example, at a meeting, to speak up and take a stand against the predominant opinion rather than to let the meeting run its predictable course, or, when witnessing an instance of police abuse, to stop and intervene rather than to move along as you are supposed to, or, at its smallest, to engage with a person living on the street whom everyone else ignores – such deeds are no less exercises of the capacity to begin, and hence instances of action as opposed to behavior.<sup>5</sup> They may at first be individual, isolated acts, but they may then inspire others to join in and thus give rise to a larger, concerted endeavor.

### **The puzzle: The capacity to begin is rooted in natality**

Having presented Arendt's conception of the capacity to begin, I can now turn to her notion of natality.

If we go by the etymology of the word, “natality” – from the Latin *natus*, “born” – simply means the fact that we human beings come into the world through birth, just as “mortality” means the fact that we leave the world through death. And indeed, Arendt defines natality as “the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth” (1965 211; cf. 1958 8, 1996 51, 2006 174, 196).

This is a very clear and unambiguous definition. So where does the problem lie?

The problem arises from what Arendt says about the *significance* of natality. The attributed significance does not seem to fit the stated definition. In other words, there is an apparent mismatch between what natality is said to *be* (the definition) and what it is said to *entail* (the significance). What I am referring to is Arendt's claim that our capacity to begin is, as she puts it in *The Human Condition*, “ontologically rooted” in natality, that we “are capable of [action] by virtue of being born” (1958 247). Arendt thus maintains that our capacity to begin *derives from* the fact that we come into the world through birth. We find this claim not only in *The Human Condition*, but in all of her major works, albeit each

4 Notably absent from the book is any mention of the Haitian Revolution.

5 The examples given here are my own, not Arendt's.

time worded differently.<sup>6</sup> Let me cite the most important passages in this respect, as they will serve as points of reference in what follows:

[The freedom of man] is identical with the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them is a new beginning, begins, in a sense, the world anew. [...] [T]he very source of freedom is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make a new beginning. (Arendt 1966 466)

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 1966 479)

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. (Arendt 1958 247)

The very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth. (Arendt 1965 211)

Philosophically speaking, to act is the human answer to the condition of natality. Since we all come into the world by virtue of birth, as newcomers and beginnings, we are able to start something new; without the fact of birth we would not even know what novelty is, all "action" would be either mere behavior or preservation. (Arendt 1972 179)

No doubt every man, by virtue of birth, is a new beginning, and his power of beginning may well correspond to this fact of the human condition. (Arendt 1981 II 6)

In these passages, Arendt discusses the connection between natality and the capacity to begin as if her remarks were obvious, as if they did not require further explanation. Yet in fact they are not obvious but rather puzzling.<sup>7</sup> What exactly is the connection between the capacity to

6 Pablo Bagedelli has pointed out that the notion of natality had a peculiar trajectory within Arendt's oeuvre. After having been developed in *The Human Condition*, the notion spread to her past works, in the sense that Arendt incorporated it in revisions of two earlier writings, namely in the second edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism* and in the reworking of her doctoral dissertation on Augustine's conception of love (cf. Bagedelli 38-39).

7 The puzzle has been highlighted by Patchen Markell. Markell notes that Arendt uses the notion of natality to connect the capacity to begin to the fact of birth, but that "the precise nature of this connection is uncertain". He then goes on to propose an answer to the puzzle, yet his proposal does not, in my eyes, clarify the issue. He asserts that, on his reading, "to call natality in the sense of birth a 'condition' of beginning would be to

begin and the condition of birth?<sup>8</sup> How does this special human capacity derive from the particular process by which we come into the world?<sup>9</sup>

### Every (human) birth is a new beginning

Arendt suggests in her remarks an answer to this question. She says that we are, each of us, through birth, a new beginning (cf. 1966 466, 1972 179, 1981 11 6). Apparently it is this claim that is meant to establish the connection between the fact of birth and the capacity to begin. So Arendt's argument seems to be the following: *We possess the capacity to make a new beginning because we are, each of us, through birth, a new beginning.*

But this first answer provokes a further question: In which sense is each of us, through birth, a new beginning? What makes this question particularly acute is that the claim about birth being a new beginning seems to be in contradiction with a fundamental element of Arendt's thought, namely her opposition between life and action. Arendt sees a stark contrast and tension between the circularity and repetition of the life process and the linearity and innovation of action (cf. 1958 70, 119, 1965 60-61, 112, 2005 116-117, 148-149, 2006 147). Understood as the biological process of parturition, birth is hence *not* a new beginning in Arendt's sense. It is not something extraordinary, not a disruption or transcendence of the status quo. To the contrary, it is a necessary part of the cycle of life, a recurring moment in the endless cycle of generation and destruction. It is therefore *the very opposite* of a beginning in her sense.

The solution of the apparent contradiction is that, when Arendt says that every birth is a new beginning, she is referring to human birth, not birth *per se*. In other words, not the mere biological process of parturition but *the advent of another human being* is a new beginning for

say that birth is the fundamental phenomenon on the basis of which [the irreducible difference introduced by a happening] becomes meaningful: it is that in virtue of which the actuality of events acquires its weight" (Markell 7). I find this statement completely obscure. In what way does the fact of birth constitute the basis on which events acquire meaning and weight?

- 8 Bhikhu Parekh has criticized Arendt for the lack of clarity on this question. He finds the notion of natality "rather confused", noting that "it is difficult to see why the fact that men are born should 'prompt' them into any kind of action" (104).
- 9 Tellingly, Arendt admits at the very end of *The Life of the Mind*, on the last page she wrote in her life, that she is "quite aware" that the argument about natality is "somehow opaque" (1981 11 217). This statement is very surprising. Why does she acknowledge that the argument is opaque only at such a late stage, after having adduced it so many times, in every major work? Whatever the answer to this question may be, I want to show in the present paper that the argument is not *entirely* opaque, that a coherent line of reasoning can be reconstructed from her remarks.

her. In *The Human Condition*, we find a passage where she makes that explicit, a passage where she indicates that she uses the word “birth” in a specific sense that only applies to human beings:

Nature and the cyclical movement into which she forces all living things know neither birth nor death as we understand them. The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart. Birth and death presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability and relative permanence makes appearance and disappearance possible. (Arendt 1958 96-97)

This passage is easily overlooked because it is located in the chapter on labor, not in the parts of the book where Arendt talks about natality. And it has indeed often been overlooked, namely by those of her readers who think that, with the notion of natality, Arendt asserts a connection between life and action, or nature and politics. Martin Jay, for instance, claims that “[Arendt’s] frequent insistence on birth, or ‘natality’ as she insisted on calling it, as the prototype of [new beginnings] ties action to the rhythms of the natural world, which she usually denigrated as the sphere of the *animal laborans*” (Jay 252). Similarly, albeit in an approving rather than critical mode, Miguel Vatter (2006) and Laura Quintana (2009) propose that, with the notion of natality, Arendt moves away from and sets a counterpoint to the stark opposition of life and action which she assumes in other contexts. They argue against those commentators who, because of that opposition, see Arendt as a proponent of “negative biopolitics”, *i.e.* of a politics that “seeks to dominate or exclude [mere life]”. They contend that the notion of natality shows that Arendt calls for –or at least allows for– a “positive biopolitics”, *i.e.* a politics that “recognizes” and “frees” the individuals’ mere life such that this life can “express itself” in the public sphere (Quintana 186-187, 194-198).<sup>10</sup> Also to be mentioned in this context is Peg Birmingham’s interpretation. While Birmingham does not use the term “biopolitics” with reference to Arendt’s position, she, too, argues that the notion of natality calls into question Arendt’s own opposition between life and action (*cf.* Birmingham 2006 92-93). Jay, Vatter, Quintana, and Birmingham arrive at this conclusion because they see the term “natality” as referring to birth in the biological sense, to birth as an aspect of natural (or “mere”) life. The above passage proves this view wrong. For Arendt, natality/birth pertains only to human existence; (mere)

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10 The translations are my own. Vatter uses similar formulations.



nature does not “know” birth.<sup>11</sup> The notion of natality hence does not contradict but, to the contrary, confirms the opposition between (mere) life and (human) action.<sup>12</sup>

Besides being belied by the above passage, the readings of Jay, Vatter, Quintana, and Birmingham are also *inherently* problematic because they make Arendt's thought seem inconsistent. All four readers indeed acknowledge that their interpretation of the notion of natality is –or at least appears to be– incompatible with the opposition of life and action that Arendt posits in several of her writings.<sup>13</sup> Now, the principle of charity demands that a thinker not be charged with inconsistency unless it is unavoidable to do so, that is, unless no consistent interpretation can be found. And, as I have begun to show, there is an interpretation of Arendt's notion of natality that is consistent with her opposition of life and action. Hence, the inconsistent interpretation of the four readers must be rejected.<sup>14</sup>

We see now one of the reasons why Arendt's remarks about natality are perplexing: She does not specify in these remarks that she employs “birth” in a specific sense that only applies to human beings. Why did she omit this important specification? She seems to have thought that her understanding of “birth” is the common understanding of the word. The fact that she uses the phrase “as we understand them” in the above passage gives that impression.

That Arendt uses the word “birth” in a peculiar manner is a crucial piece of information, but it does not by itself resolve the puzzle. For the question now becomes: What is the specific, human-only sense of “birth” that Arendt has in mind? And in which way is birth in this sense –*i.e.* the birth of a human being– a new beginning?

11 To put the point in the Aristotelian terms in which Vatter, Quintana, and Birmingham discuss the issue: “Natality” refers to birth as the beginning of a *bios*, not to birth as an aspect of *zoe*. The notion is hence based on –rather than calling into question– the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*.

12 The interpretations of Vatter, Birmingham, and Quintana have been criticized along similar lines by Juan José Fuentes (2011).

13 Jay notes the incompatibility in the quotation I have given. Vatter deems Arendt's opposition of life and action to be a “lapse” on her part (*cf.* 148). And Birmingham explicitly characterizes Arendt's thought as inconsistent (2006 23-24). Quintana, by contrast, argues that, *despite appearances*, her interpretation does not make Arendt's position inconsistent (198-199). But Quintana's argument for consistency is untenable, I think. She presents life (*zoe*) as having two facets, necessity and spontaneity. But these are contradictory attributes and hence cannot be facets of the same thing. Rather, they are, as Arendt says, facets of two distinct and opposite things –life (*zoe*) and action (*bios*).

14 To make the point with specific reference to Vatter and Quintana: Whatever the intrinsic merits of “positive biopolitics” may be, there are no good grounds for associating Arendt with this endeavor.

### Every human being is unique

The first place to look for an answer is the passage where Arendt makes explicit that “birth” for her applies only to human beings. There she says (I repeat):

Nature and the cyclical movement into which she forces all living things know neither birth nor death as we understand them. The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart. (Arendt 1958 96-97)

We can gather from these two sentences that, for Arendt, human birth differs from the reproduction of other species in the following way: The birth of a human being is the appearance of a *unique, inimitable* individual, whereas in other species the offspring is just another exemplar of its kind, comparable and replaceable.

But, again, the answer we find is not self-evident but requires explanation. In which sense are human beings unique whereas other animals are not? Are not human beings, too, in certain respects comparable and exchangeable? And, conversely, are not all animals, and even all things, in a certain sense unique?

In the passage from which I quoted, the claim of human uniqueness is not further explained. We find an explanation in a later part of *The Human Condition*, namely when Arendt talks about human plurality. I therefore need to touch briefly on that topic.

“The plurality of human beings” is one of the expressions for which Arendt is best known. As she famously puts the point at the very beginning of *The Human Condition*, “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1958 7). Though often cited, this claim is seldom properly spelled out. It needs spelling out because the term “plurality” is potentially misleading. In everyday language, this term is generally used as a synonym for multiplicity, for the condition of being more than one. But that cannot be all that Arendt means by it, as her claim of human plurality would then be a mere triviality. The fact that there are many of us is certainly implied, but she must intend something more.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Margaret Canovan has characterized Arendt’s claim of human plurality as “platitudinous but philosophically revolutionary” (110-111). This formulation is a striking oxymoron and as such manifests the gap between the common understanding of “plurality” and Arendt’s own. To remove the semblance of contradiction, Canovan’s formulation needs to be supplemented thus: Arendt’s claim seems platitudinous if “plurality” is understood in the common way but is *in fact* philosophically revolutionary once it is properly spelled out.

Arendt expounds her notion of human plurality at the beginning of the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, the chapter on action. There she makes clear that, indeed, by “plurality” she means more than multiplicity. A plurality, for her, is not merely a collection of many elements but a collection of *unique* elements: “Human plurality”, she declares, “is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (1958 176; cf. 1958 8).

In this context, then, she explains in which sense she considers human beings, but not other animals, to be unique. She emphasizes that the uniqueness of human beings is to be distinguished from mere “otherness –the curious quality of *alteritas* possessed by everything that is” (1958 176). She thus clarifies that, when she says that each of us is unique, she does not merely mean that we are all somehow different, by our fingerprints, say, or the number of hairs on our heads. So what does she mean? She continues:

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness [of human beings]. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. (1958 176)

Arendt here refers the notion of uniqueness, and hence the notion of plurality, to our capacity to act, to take initiative, to set a new beginning. This means that we are unique to the extent that *we make ourselves unique*, to the extent that we do not, like other animals, merely reproduce existing forms and ways of life but change them through our initiative.<sup>16</sup> We, the multiplicity of human beings, are a plurality and not merely a multiplicity to the extent that we do not necessarily fall into fixed patterns and categories but have the capacity to depart from the patterns and categories of our day and thereby become unique.<sup>17</sup>

We now have an answer to the question raised in the previous section. The birth of a human being is a new beginning insofar as it is the beginning of a new human life, whereby the word “new” in “new human life” is to be understood as meaning not only “distinct” but also “unique”. The birth of a human being is the beginning of a unique life

16 As Richard Bernstein rightly puts it, human uniqueness and plurality is for Arendt “not a state of being [but] an achievement, [...] a potentiality which is to be actualized” (223). This point is also made by Natasha Levinson (cf. 440) and Linda Zerilli (cf. 145).

17 Hence Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves puts it the wrong way when, in his book on Arendt’s political philosophy, he states that “by virtue of plurality, each of us is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive” (71). The connection goes the other way. It is by virtue of the capacity to act, by virtue of making ourselves unique, that we constitute a plurality.

story, a story made unique by the individual's capacity for initiative, by her capacity to begin.

We also now have an answer to the other, related question raised in the previous section, the question about Arendt's peculiar understanding of the term "birth". Apparently, for her, this term is inextricably linked to the idea that something new (in the sense of unique) begins, and so she finds that it only applies to human beings. It seems as if, for her, the original meaning of "birth" –birth as the biological process of parturition– has been completely replaced by the metaphorical meaning: birth as the beginning of something new and special, as in "the birth of philosophy" or "the birth of our nation". In this metaphorical sense, indeed, only human beings, not other animals, can be said to be born.

### Circular reasoning?

At this point, Arendt's notion of natality might seem to be clear. Natality means the fact of being born. And (human) birth is a new beginning insofar as it is the beginning of something unique, of a unique life story. Thus our capacity to begin is rooted in our natality.

But, in fact, the real puzzle only begins here, because Arendt's argument now appears to be circular. Recall that, in the above-quoted passage from the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt grounds human uniqueness in the capacity for speech and action, which is the capacity to begin. It is through the initiative of our words and deeds, she says, that we distinguish ourselves, that we make ourselves unique. Now, if our uniqueness thus depends on our capacity to begin, so does the claim that (human) birth is a new beginning, since that claim is, as I have shown, based on our uniqueness. That is to say, the birth of a human being is a new beginning *insofar as every human being has the capacity to make her life a new beginning*, the capacity to lead a life that does not merely reproduce established forms and ways but goes its own way. Arendt in fact says so explicitly in the first chapter of *The Human Condition*: "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" (1958 9).

Arendt thus acknowledges that the new beginning of birth hinges on the capacity to begin. But in the passages cited in the second section, on page 332, things are said to be the other way around. Arendt there asserts that the capacity to begin is rooted in the new beginning of birth.

So we are faced with the following situation: We started with the question of how the claim of rootedness is to be understood, *i.e.* of how the capacity to begin is supposed to derive from the new beginning of birth. And after pursuing this question through several steps of analysis, we arrived at the *converse* claim that the new beginning of birth

derives from the capacity to begin. Arendt's remarks about natality thus seem to go in a circle.

The circle is most evident when we juxtapose the following two affirmations (already quoted):

The very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth. (1965 211)

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. (1958 9)

On the one hand, Arendt says that our capacity to begin springs from birth, yet on the other hand, she says that birth is a beginning only because we possess that capacity. Note that the circle is not confined to these two affirmations, and as such we cannot explain it away as a mere slip of the pen, since, as we have seen, both of them are repeated in other places and other words. So what is going on here? Is Arendt's reasoning confused and contradictory?

One way to avoid this conclusion is the following: Basic logic tells us that if two notions or propositions are derivable from each other, then they are in fact the same thing or, more precisely, equivalent descriptions of the same thing. If we apply this logical principle to the present situation, it follows that "natality" and "capacity to begin" are equivalent descriptions of the same thing. Put the other way around, if "natality" and "capacity to begin" are meant as synonyms, then Arendt's circular propositions are logically consistent.

Many readers of Arendt indeed treat "natality" and "capacity to begin" as synonyms, that is, they take "natality" to be just another word for the capacity to begin (cf. Beiner 362; Bowen-Moore 23; Brunkhorst 188; Dietz 102, 127; Tassin 90, 139; Lenis Castaño 37; Biss 762).<sup>18</sup> Oddly, though, none of them explains why they understand "natality" in this

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18 Here are the corresponding quotations: Ronald Beiner: "What Arendt terms natality [is] the capacity to bring something entirely new into the world." (362) Patricia Bowen-Moore: "The fact that man can begin something new at all is conditioned by and dependent upon the possession of a principle for beginning. This is his natality, his *supreme* capacity for beginning." (23) Hauke Brunkhorst: "Natality signifies the new beginning inherent in human life and human action." (188) Mary Dietz: "In Arendt's phenomenology, natality [...] marks the human capacity for 'beginning something anew.'" (127) Étienne Tassin: "Le principe même du commencement [est] cette dimension de la liberté qu'Arendt nomme la 'natalité.'" (90) John Lenis Castaño: "La posibilidad de comenzar algo nuevo –la natalidad, la libertad o la espontaneidad humana– [resulta] como la única esperanza [contra la amenaza del totalitarismo]." (37) Mavis Biss: "In *The Human Condition*, Arendt points to the potential of human action to initiate new beginnings, a capacity she calls natality." (762)

way<sup>19</sup>. This lack of explanation is odd because, as far as I know, Arendt never explicitly equates “natality” and “capacity to begin” and because, as we will see, there are important reasons for *not* treating the two expressions as synonyms.<sup>20</sup> It looks as if these readers have been led by the appearance of circularity to draw the logical inference I suggested, but do not recognize that this understanding of “natality” is not unproblematic and not generally accepted.<sup>21</sup>

Let us examine what this understanding entails. What does it mean to consider “natality” to be a synonym for “the capacity to begin”? Taken literally, “natality” signifies the condition of being born, and as such it is *not* the same as “the capacity to begin”. To say that “natality” signifies the capacity to begin therefore means that the term should not be taken literally but *as a metaphor*. That the aforementioned readers treat the two expressions as synonyms hence appears to be based on the following view: In Arendt’s remarks about natality, birth as the starting point of a human life operates as a metaphor for the new beginning of which the individual is capable. In other words, birth as the starting point of a human life represents symbolically the new beginning that the individual, through her words and deeds, may eventually make.

That Arendt uses the terms “natality” and “birth” metaphorically has already been suggested at the end of the previous section, when I discussed why, for her, “birth” applies only to human beings. There I noted that, apparently, this word is for her inextricably linked to the

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19 Also to be mentioned in this context are the readers –cited at the very beginning of the paper– who consider the notion of natality to be Arendt’s most defining contribution. That these readers attach such significance to this notion suggests –even if they do not say so explicitly– that they are taking “natality” to be synonymous with “capacity to begin”, for it is the idea of that capacity, and not so much natality in the literal sense, that is central to Arendt’s thought. The case of Bowen-Moore’s book illustrates this point very well. Bowen-Moore does explicitly equate “natality” and “capacity to begin” (see the preceding footnote), and it is clearly for this reason that she considers the notion of natality so important to devote an entire book to it. She sees “natality” present in a great many facets of Arendt’s thought: childhood, education, politics, promising, forgiving, totalitarianism, love, thinking, willing, judging... This profusion of “natality” in Bowen-Moore’s book is the result of her equation of “natality” and “capacity to begin”. Arendt herself does not use the term “natality” in most of these contexts, but she does, in all of them, draw a connection to the capacity to begin.

20 It is especially odd in Bowen-Moore’s case that she does not explain why she takes “natality” to be a synonym for “capacity to begin”, considering that her whole book is based on this supposition.

21 This criticism also applies to my former self. In my doctoral dissertation, I expressed the view that “Arendt’s notion of natality [...] is just a special term for [the capacity to begin]” (Totschnig 24). With the present paper, I mean to retract and replace this view.

idea that something new and unique begins. Thus, it seems that she uses “natality” and “birth”, respectively, as a metaphor for new beginning.

It is hence undeniable that the metaphorical interpretation possesses a certain plausibility. It is suggested by Arendt's peculiar understanding of the term “birth” and by the apparent circularity of her remarks about natality. However, it does not solve the puzzle I highlighted at the beginning, the puzzle of how to understand Arendt's claim that the capacity to begin is rooted in natality. Quite the contrary, under this interpretation the puzzle becomes even more acute. If “natality” were a metaphor for the new beginning of which the individual is capable, the claim of rootedness would become vacuous, even nonsensical. For the claim would then mean, when spelled out, that the capacity to begin is rooted in the new beginning brought about by exercising the capacity to begin, or, put more simply, that the capacity to begin is rooted in the exercise of the capacity to begin. And that is a rather empty statement, if it makes any sense at all. It is difficult to believe that this is what Arendt had in mind, especially when we recall that she reiterated the claim in every major work and so, apparently, considered it to express an important point.<sup>22</sup>

### Newcomers in the web of human relationships

In “On Violence”, Arendt glosses the term “natality” by saying that “we come into the world by virtue of birth, as newcomers and beginnings”

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22 The metaphorical interpretation of Arendt's notion of natality has been criticized along similar lines by Nathan Van Camp (cf. 181-183). In its stead, Van Camp proposes a novel interpretation of his own (cf. 185-189). Drawing on a footnote in *The Human Condition* (cf. Arendt 1958 177, n. 1), he argues that, when Arendt affirms a connection between birth and the capacity to begin, she means that, because humans are born prematurely, they are “in desperate need of protection and care by the social group” and thus “biologically conditioned to engage in politico-linguistic action” (Van Camp 187). I believe that Van Camp's interpretation, while appealing in its clarity, is questionable on several grounds. First of all, the argument he presents seems to be a *non sequitur*. Our premature birth indeed puts us in need of protection by the social group, but such need for social protection does not entail action and new beginnings in Arendt's sense. Bees or ants also rely on the social group for survival, yet they do very well without Arendtian action. Second, Van Camp's reading of the footnote on which he draws is debatable because it is not clear that the phrase “this description” at the beginning of the footnote refers, as Van Camp assumes, to Arendt's mention of natality in the corresponding passage. It may –and my sense is that it does– refer to an earlier part of that passage, namely to Arendt's claim that the “insertion into the human world” is “not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and not prompted by utility, like work”. Finally, if the argument presented by Van Camp were what Arendt had in mind, we would expect her to say so explicitly, not merely hint at it obliquely in a footnote.

(1972 179).<sup>23</sup> I would now like to propose an interpretation of the claim of rootedness that takes its bearings from this passage, and in particular from the word “newcomers”. I contend that, when Arendt says that the capacity to begin is rooted in natality, what she means by “natality” is neither the biological process of parturition nor, metaphorically, the capacity to begin itself, but the arrival of newcomers in the web of human relationships.

Let me explain. “The web of human relationships” is an expression that Arendt coins in *The Human Condition* (cf. 1958 183-184). It stands for the manifold network of interpersonal relations –relations of affection, friendship, cooperation, authority, obligation, etc.– that constitute the human world. Now, every child that is born is a newcomer to this web of relationships and consequently induces changes in it. The people close to the child must build a relationship with her, which may lead them to change their relationships with others. Conversely, the child must build relationships with those who tend to her, and soon enough she will begin to develop relationships with strangers. To put the point more concretely: When a child is born, the parents must establish a relationship with her, and the child with them. That will affect the relationship of the parents to each other, to the grandparents, to their friends, and to others.<sup>24</sup> A couple of months or years later, at the playground or in kindergarten, the child will begin to get to know other children, and through her initiative her parents will engage with other parents. This process will continue when she starts school and then, later on, when she enters the public sphere as an adult. Thus, because of the newcomer, new threads are woven and new connections tied in the web of human relationships, while some old threads may be loosened and some old connections undone. In short, the birth of every child stirs up the web of relationships and so prevents it from petrifying.

Upon a closer look, we can see that Arendt refers to this aspect of (human) birth in several of the passages about natality, albeit in a way

23 See section 2, page 332, for the whole passage. At the beginning of *The Human Condition*, Arendt similarly speaks of “the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers” (1958 9).

24 As Fernando Bárcena has noted, the web of relationships begins to be stirred up even before the actual birth, namely as soon as the child is expected: “¿Cómo justificar el recurso a una noción que tiene su asiento en un fenómeno natural y biológico como es el nacimiento para explicar la naturaleza de la vida de la polis, que es un fenómeno humano que va más allá de la naturaleza? [...] Quizá un principio de respuesta a [esta interrogante] lo podemos encontrar en aquello que escribía Rahel Varnhagen, cuya vida biografía la propia Arendt: ‘Mi vida comenzó antes de mi nacimiento’. Y es que un niño, un infante, es llamado, nombrado, narrado antes de su aparición en el mundo, antes de su mismo nacer fáctico. *La infancia es anticipada antes del nacimiento*” (110).



that is not immediately evident, namely when she says that, through birth, new human beings “appear in the world”.<sup>25</sup> By “world”, Arendt does not mean the universe, or all there is, but the artificial home that we, human beings, create for ourselves within the universe (cf. 1958 2, 136-139). The web of human relationships is one essential component of the world in this sense (cf. 1958 182-183). (The other essential component is the durable things – dwellings, furniture, and clothes, but also tools and machines – which we build in order to protect ourselves from, and employ for our benefit, the forces of nature.) When Arendt says that, through birth, new human beings appear in the world, she is thus, implicitly, referring to the fact that the web of human relationships is constantly shaken up and altered by the appearance of newcomers.<sup>26</sup>

So every (human) birth spurs the creation of interpersonal relationships. And this means that it spurs action, since the creation of interpersonal relationships *is* action in Arendt’s sense. Every creation of a new relationship – a new friendship, a new cooperation, a new apprenticeship, etc. – is, in its own right, a small new beginning, and it may grow into or become part of a greater new beginning. Hence the point of the preceding paragraph can also be formulated in terms of action: The child must act in order to establish a place in the world, in the web of human relationships, and she thereby forces the people she meets to respond to her initiative, *i.e.* to act in return. Thus, every birth is a source of action. As Arendt puts it in “The Concept of History”, “through [the fact of natality] the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there” (2006 61).<sup>27</sup>

25 Besides the passage from *Crises of the Republic* cited at the beginning of this section, see the passage from *On revolution* cited on page 332, and the passage from *The Human Condition* cited on page 334.

26 I thank Claudia Hilb for making me aware of this point.

27 Lewis and Sandra Hinchman find this idea of Arendt “largely implausible” because, “although all ‘newcomers’ have the potential to develop unanticipated perspectives, they are immediately subjected to processes of socialization that transform them from pieces of nature into members of ongoing communities”. Hence, they contend, “the biological fact of natality in itself permits but hardly guarantees plurality, freedom, and innovation” (Hinchman and Hinchman 169-170). However, they themselves suggest a reply to this criticism, namely when they note, in the same passage, that “in practice, of course, complete socialization rarely succeeds”. For this remark to be a valid response on Arendt’s behalf to their objection, the word “rarely” simply needs to be replaced by “never”. That Arendt would make this replacement is shown by her claim, in “The Concept of History”, that “even the predictability of human behavior which political terror can enforce for relatively long periods of time is hardly able to change the very essence of human affairs once and for all; it can never be sure of its own future” (2006 60-61).

The insight that every (human) birth is a source of action brings us close to Arendt's claim of rootedness, but not quite all the way. For Arendt does not just say that birth is a source of action, but that it is the source of the *capacity* for action. And that is a significantly stronger claim. Not only the *exercise* of the capacity to begin, but the very capacity is supposed to derive from the condition of birth. On my interpretation, this stronger claim can be understood if we consider that birth is *necessarily* –not just possibly– a source of action. The child *must* act, she must establish a place in the existing web of relationships, and she thereby *forces* others to act too, to respond to her initiative. Every birth thus *calls for* action, both from the child and from others. And so, to the extent that a capacity is brought about –and kept alive– by that which makes the capacity necessary, the condition of birth can be said to be the source of the capacity for action. In other words, this capacity depends on that condition in the sense that, without the constant arrival of newcomers, it would probably atrophy and eventually disappear. This, then, is what Arendt means, I submit, when she says that the human capacity to begin is rooted in natality.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude the paper with a remark on the significance of the notion of natality as I have construed it. At the beginning of *The Human Condition*, Arendt asserts that natality “may be the central category of political [...] thought” (1958 9). At first glance, this claim seems strangely hyperbolic. Why should natality, of all things, be the central political notion? My interpretation allows us to understand the claim. Natality as the constant arrival of newcomers underlies the continuing existence of the realm of politics. If there were no newcomers through birth, human society would sooner or later find a stable configuration, a perpetual form of organization, and the political realm –in the narrow sense that Arendt gives to the term, *i.e.* the realm of action and new beginnings– would thus vanish. The unending arrival of newcomers, who develop their own perspectives and opinions, prevents this kind of immobilization and keeps the political realm alive. In this sense, indeed, natality is central to politics.

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