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## All human beings are natal: reconsidering human existence through birth

**Being born: birth and philosophy**, by Alison Stone, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 288 pp., €37 (hardback), ISBN 9780198845782

‘All human beings begin life by being born, and all human beings die’ – with this seemingly trivial statement Alison Stone begins her book *Being born: Birth and philosophy*. Birth and death, natality and mortality – these are the universalities of our lives, markers of our finitude, and, as Hannah Arendt claims in *The human condition*, ‘the most general condition of human existence’ (1998, p. 8). However, even though birth and death are equally universal for our existence, they have never received equal attention from philosophers. Death has been philosophically reflected on since Epicurus and Plato, and later mortality has been one of the significant categories of the philosophy of existence, for example, in Sartre’s or Heidegger’s work. The topic of birth, on the other hand, is relatively new to philosophy. The development of this topic has only started in recent feminist philosophy. The inquiry of feminist authors primarily focuses on practical aspects, such as the ethics or politics of birth, and mainly concentrates on the mother’s experience and maternal body. Very little has been said so far about what it means to be born from a mother and how natality shapes our existence. *Being born* is an excellent contribution to overcoming the philosophical neglect around being born. Stone aims at re-balancing the asymmetrical attention towards birth and death by, firstly, focusing on birth and, later, tracing the intertwined connections between natality and mortality.

This book is a rare gem because Stone examines being born within the framework of existential philosophy. She is interested in how our views on human existence can be transformed if we consider being born; how the structure of meaningful existence is conditioned by being born, and which features of our existence are caused or influenced by being born. Reciprocally, these questions also bring into light what being born consists of. Comprising an introduction and seven chapters, the first chapter of *Being born* offers an overview of the topic of birth and natality in feminist philosophy. The second complements the first by focusing on history, inheritance, and vulnerability. Chapter three unfolds features of our existence rooted in natality: dependency, relationality, embeddedness in social power, and situatedness. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the radical contingency of being born, and the fifth looks to birth anxieties. Chapter six reveals the connection between natality and mortality. In the final chapter, Stone addresses temporality and the gift of birth, and concludes by reflecting on how natality structures our existence.

Stone defines ‘to be born’ as ‘to begin to exist at a certain point in time by coming into the world with and as a specific body, and in a given place, set of relationships, and the situation in society, culture, and history, while doing so by way of being conceived in and then exiting from the womb’ (p. 1). She distinguishes three senses in which ‘being born’ are used: narrow – ‘to be born is just to exit the womb of the person who gestated me’ (p. 2); broad – ‘to be born is to be conceived and gestated in that person’s womb and finally exit it’ (p. 2); broader – ‘the process of birth as continuing into psychological birth during the infant’s earliest years’ (p. 2).

In this book, Stone uses the broad sense of being conceived, gestated, and leaving the womb. She finds it essential to include the intra-uterine life into the existential analysis of being born because it is a substantial part of the process. On the other hand, she considers that including 'psychological birth' would 'over-extend the concept' (p. 2)

We exist as natals because we are born – Stone uses the notion of 'natality' as a synonym for 'being born' in the broad sense. Initially, the concept 'natality' has been introduced to philosophy by Hannah Arendt, who defines it as a condition for the appearance of new, unique individuals who appear in the shared world, into a plurality of others, and their capacity for new beginnings and political action (1998). Stone is influenced by Adriana Cavarero (2014) and her feminist critique of Arendt. For her, to be natal is not just to appear out of nowhere, for we are gestated and come into the world from the womb. This bodily aspect of the beginning of our existence, while neglected by Arendt, is essential for Stone and Cavarero.

Stone's philosophical reflection on the existential aspects of being born builds on the previous work of feminist philosophers. She provides a profound critical overview of the main ideas of Luce Irigaray, Adriana Cavarero, and Grace Jantzen – the authors from whom she draws her significant premises. Irigaray (1991) reveals that birth is a painful separation from the mother, and the primary way of dealing with it in Western culture has been to forget our maternal origins by putting aside the fact that we are born from the maternal body. It creates a patriarchal and matricidal culture, a culture of war and violence, which leaves the maternal realm in a private sphere, and lacks a positive image of maternity and femininity. Cavarero (2000) brings to light that this culture is preoccupied with death and mortality. In turn, she argues that birth and natality are essential, as 'birth is central to each person's unique identity as the particular individual they are' (p. 40). This identity is relational; moreover, the relation is prior to individuality, and the key relationships are with one's gestational mother. Jantzen (2005) unites Irigaray's and Cavarero's cultural critique and suggests that we should 'make the transition to a culture that focuses on birth and natality instead' (p. 48). Stone's aim in this book is similar. However, she prefers re-balancing our attention to birth and death rather than merely re-orienting it towards birth.

Stone also challenges Irigaray, Cavarero, and Jantzen's portrayal of the figure of the mother and the idea of sexual differentiation consequential to reproduction. For them, a 'mother' is a female who gestates, bears, and looks after a child. Moreover, as a consequence of reproduction, we are sexually differentiated, as we are born either the same-sexed as our mother or differently. Stone appraises these views as rather simplistic and points out three major complications. Firstly, it is not the case that only women can be 'mothers,' as there are also trans-fathers who can be pregnant and give birth. Secondly, there are different ways to be a 'mother' – biological, legal, and social. Each of these ways can be carried out by different people. For example, if one's mother dies in labour or in cases of surrogacy and adoption, the gestation is separated from bearing and care. Once again, these roles are not exclusively women's, as a father can also provide childcare. Thirdly, the view on sexual differentiation ignores the fact that some people are born intersex. Well aware of these complications, Stone makes herself clear about the language she uses. For example, she deliberately refuses to use the term 'maternal womb' and uses the neutral descriptor of 'the womb' instead. Stone finds it essential to mention these aspects of childbirth, as silencing them contributes to normalizing childcare as exclusively women's work. At the same time, we should still acknowledge that historically women and mothers have been the central birth-givers and child carers. Stone does not analyse how these complications may influence our views on being born, which leaves room for further development of this topic.

One of the main contributions of this book is that Stone synthesizes Irigaray, Cavarero, and Jantzen's main insights about birth and puts together the features of our existence that are conditioned or influenced by being born. She highlights four features that 'either flow down from birth into the rest of our lives or they take the shape they do within our lives because we are born' (p. 85). These are dependency, relationality, embeddedness in social power, and situatedness.

Stone defines the first feature – our natal dependency – as follows. We come to this world acutely dependent on care. As infants, we depend on adults for survival and later, as children, for development and education. Stone refers to the biological fact that humans are secondarily altricial, that is, we 'at first are helpless and dependent on parental care' (p. 86), and at the same time, like our precocial ancestors 'whose offspring very soon after birth begin to move and fend for themselves' (p. 86), we 'develop complex mental skills by learning them' (p. 87). This makes us open to culture and receptive to the world. Severely dependent on adults in our early years, we intensely attach ourselves to our initial caregivers, and through our relationships with them, acquire culture. Despite this natal dependency, Stone outlines how we remain dependent on each other throughout our lives. She mentions Eva Kittay's (1999) view on dependency: we are dependent on others when we are young or old, when we are ill or injured, and when we have impairments or disabilities. Stone takes this train of thought even further by pointing out how we are dependent even without these conditions: in language, division of labour, personal relationships, even routine interactions. Stone's concept of dependency is a well-argued attack on the praised independent rational subject. Considering that we are born, and our natal dependency shapes our existence, we can only temporarily and partially be independent. She claims that dependency is our 'ultimate condition' (p. 92).

The second feature is relationality. According to Stone, 'our selves are constituted by our relationships with others, beginning with our first caregivers' (p. 92). Our relationships with our caregivers are unique, as they are constitutive and formative for our selves. They come first in time for us. We are undeveloped and plastic when we experience them. Due to our natal dependency, we are deeply attached to them. They mediate our reception of and interaction with the social and cultural world.

This leads to the third feature – embeddedness in social power. According to Stone, we are born into power relations, and we inhabit them immediately upon being born. She defines power relations as follows: 'members of group A have power over or relative to members of group B when those in A are more able than those in B (i) to steer the course of their own actions, desires, and lives; (ii) to affect how the other group's members act, desire, and live; and (iii) to shape arrangements that embody and prolong this state of affairs' (p. 100). Also, she claims that power relations constitute our selves, traits, and abilities. Even when criticizing certain power relations, we remain under their influence. In seeing power as productive, Stone agrees with Foucault and his idea that power shapes our capacities and enables us to acquire habits. Following Foucault, she does not distinguish between power-to and power-over. Stone follows Christine Battersby (1998) in seeing power relations as normal rather than aberrant. For Battersby, it is normal that the position of the female subject is located within power relations as someone who can, or is assumed to be able to, give birth. Stone takes this line of thought further by claiming that such a view on power relations can be applied to the newborn. At the moment of birth, we are situated in asymmetrical power relations with our caregivers. Stone shares this view with Cavarero (2016), Lisa Guenther (2006), and Fanny Söderbäck (2018). Not only do we depend on our caregivers physically, but also, we are influenced by their surrounding culture and society. Moreover, we are embedded in social power relations long before we obtain the ability to reflect upon them or criticize them when

we are dependent, vulnerable, and deeply open to the formation of the world around us. This makes the power relations that surround us from birth and early childhood crucial for our development. As adults, we obtain the capacity to criticize the power relations that formed us; however, Stone argues, power relations also influence this very capacity. For her, this capacity emerges out of lower level, more emotionally rooted dispositions of self-regulation and self-care. Before criticizing power relations, we first have to internalize them. We can criticize one power relations system in terms of another. We can also develop our own powers in a way that influences the conditions out of which they arose.

The fourth feature of being born is situatedness. Stone develops her account of situatedness by examining the use of this concept in existential (in particular, Sartre's) and feminist frameworks. She concludes that existential and feminist traditions similarly interpret situatedness, recognizing that 'we are situated in that we navigate through life within horizons of meaning which we have imbibed over time from our contexts, contexts that also account for our being in those corners of the world of which we are presently making sense from within these horizons' (p. 107), and that we are situated as bodily beings. However, feminist authors are more focused on political contexts, such as race, gender, class, neo-colonialism, etc. Stone values both approaches in her view of situatedness as intertwined with natality. Birth is our first initial situation, and all the subsequent situations flow from it. Stone points out five factors that condition our natal situation: geographical place (including cultural and political consequences), time (location within history), culture (practiced by those closely surrounding us), place in power distribution (intersection of gender, race, class, etc.), and set of relationships (with primary caregivers, their sets of relationships, lines of biological or socially recognized kinship).

In addition to these four features of human existence that are caused and deeply conditioned by natality, Stone also examines the radical contingency of being born. My birth is contingent causally (as I might as well never been conceived) and radically (as it is an unexplainable fact that I am first-personally the individual I am). According to Stone, 'for each of us, there is a radical contingency to one's being born into one's particular life as it unfolds from one's birth onwards' (p. 118). Stone points out that there are no answers to questions such as 'Why am I this particular individual?' (p. 119); 'Why is this the life I am leading?' (p. 119), 'Why is this particular body and none other the one that I have, and am?' (p. 119), after all, 'Why was I born me in the first place?' (p. 120). Stone rejects the explanations from physical and genetic perspectives as well as religious views because none provides an exhaustive account. She concludes that there is no explanation, 'that I am born the individual I am is just a fact – an ultimate fact for which no grounds can be supplied' (p. 123). This leads her to look more closely at Sartre's notions of contingency and facticity, nausea and groundlessness, situatedness and freedom. Stone recognizes the potential of Sartre's thought to contribute to the feminist reflection on birth. She interprets his views as follows. Facticity, one of the major categories of his philosophy, is rooted in being born. We never choose the circumstances to which we are born, even though we can choose how to respond to them. Thus, the freedom of our choice is also situated. Stone also argues that, because of these correlations between being born and Sartre's central concepts, for him, birth is more important than death even though she acknowledges that he never addresses being born directly.

Another feature of our existence influenced by natality is vulnerability. With reference to Judith Butler (2004) and Robin May Schott (2010), Stone concludes three main ways of this influence: embodiment, relationality, and social power. As we are embodied, we are vulnerable to physical harm and unmet material needs. As relational beings, we are vulnerable to suffering from the actions of others. As we are embedded in social power relations, we are vulnerable to social inequality. These vulnerabilities are especially acute in infancy and childhood, when we are helpless and dependent on our caregivers. As natal beings, we are

vulnerable to being born in disadvantageous locations in terms of embodiment, relationality, and social power. These vulnerabilities intersect and ‘affect how we remain vulnerable across our lives’ (p. 76). Despite these negative effects of natal vulnerability, Stone points out that it also entails openness to positive things: to be born is to ‘become able to enter into enriching, empowering, and rewarding relationships and endeavours of many kinds’ (p. 81).

By placing birth within the framework of existential philosophy, Stone traces the connection between natality and existential categories of anxiety and temporality. She points out several factors of our natality that provoke anxiety. Among them, the fact that we remember neither being born nor infancy (we have ‘infantile amnesia,’ according to Freud (1959)). Nevertheless, the early years are formative and thus can provide us with some explanations of why we live and feel a certain way. It leaves us ‘strangers to ourselves’ (p. 158). Stone refers to psychoanalysts (Otto Rank, Freud), for whom it is not simply that we do not have access to the memories of being born, but we suppress them as traumatic experiences. For Rank, birth (in a narrow sense, as leaving the womb) is traumatic because, firstly, it is associated with extreme sensory overload, and, secondly, it is a separation from the mother (1973). Stone considers these factors to ‘counteract the view that only death and not birth arouses anxiety’ (p. 177). Natality is also connected with temporality. Stone draws on three ways in which our birth is linked to our past: beginning as birth is the first event in time of our lives, syncopation (infantile amnesia creates a gap in our memories), and transference because our first years are formative, so ‘we continually carry forwards our pasts without knowing we are doing so’ (p. 212). While my birth is associated with the past, the births of others are associated with the future and hope that newcomers bring.

Stone accomplishes her project of re-balancing philosophical attention towards birth and death by acknowledging that both natality and mortality are essential for human existence and revisiting mortality in the light of her findings of natality. We die as natal beings; thus, our death is influenced by the features of our existence conditioned by birth. One of them is relationality. According to Stone, death is always relational, that is, we do not die alone, but together, as ‘deaths of distinct individuals are intertwined, and shade into one another’ (p. 187), and “‘my’ death is always ‘ours’” (p. 187) Stone explicitly disagrees with Heidegger here, for whom one’s death is non-relational and own-most, radically different from the deaths of others, and is never shared. Heidegger and other existential thinkers concentrate on one dimension of death: ceasing to have the first-person experience. When taking into account natality and relationality, Stone adds other dimensions: ceasing ‘to be with others, to participate in a shared horizon of meaning, and to inhabit the shared world, especially as shared with those whom I care about’ (p. 188). As we are natal beings, our personalities consist of the web of relationships with others. I never die alone because, with my death, all my relationships interrupt others as well. Relationships with me were a part of others’ personalities, as well as mine. When I die, a part of others dies with me, and vice versa. To illustrate this connection with others in death, Stone refers to Beauvoir’s reflections of her mother’s death in *A very easy death* (1966). In her overview of these reflections, Stone underscores how Beauvoir experiences deep attachment to her mother, and how she resists ‘both her mother’s death and the death of the part of her self that will be lost with her mother’ (p. 192)

*Being born: Birth and philosophy* is an excellent resource for anyone who is interested in philosophical reflections on birth. While not much has been said on this topic so far, this book synthesizes the rare exceptions, mostly in feminist philosophy, and examines the topic of natality within the framework of existential philosophy. Alison Stone provides valuable insights into how the meaningful structure of our existence is conditioned by being born. She also offers a fresh perspective on the philosophical concept of mortality as related to natality.

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