Bodily Alienation, Natality and Transhumanism

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**Abstract:** Transhumanism proposes human enhancement while regarding the human body as unfit for the future. This fulfills age- old aspirations for a perfect and durable body. We use “alienation” as a concept to analyze this mismatch between human aspirations and our current condition. For Hannah Arendt alienation may be accounted for in terms of earth- and world-alienation, as well as alienation from human nature, and especially from the given (“re- sentment of the given”). In transhumanism, the biological body is an impediment to human accomplishment. At most, this movement accepts “clean” bodies, not bodies with excretions. We argue that real human bodies are valued in the event of giving birth, so a mod- ified concept that Arendt proposed, natality, seems a suitable way to explore the dialectic alienation-reconciliation involving the body (Arendt’s “A child has been born unto us”), when re-read by some feminist scholars.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism; Hannah Arendt; Alienation; embodi- ment; natality; salvation

Fear of death and inadequacy of life are the springs of desire

—Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 52

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me

from this body of death?

—St. Paul, Rm 7:24

# Introduction

The transhumanist movement (see https://humanityplus.org/) has grown out of the perception that the best efforts (including religion) to remedy the human lot (felt as estrangement) have by and large failed, so the effort to rescue humanity from our ailments should be taken up by science and technology. The movement has seen in the convergence of recent advances in AI, nanoscience, cognitive science and neurosciences an opportunity to transcend the human, leaving behind our ills and establishing an age of joy (Bostrom 2003). The greatest dreams of Francis Bacon, the *Philosophes*, and the humanists of the ninenteenth century, as well as writers of science-fic- tion, can at last be accomplished. More important, however, is that the very proposal of altering human nature has led many scholars to rethink what it means to be human. As a pioneer and radical proponent of transhuman- ism used to say, “The primary political and philosophical issue of the next century [21st] will be the definition of who we are” (Kurzweil 1999, 2). And, on the critical side, others have said that we should take “transhumanism seriously not because it is a significant social movement, which it is not, but because the transhumanist vision compels us to think about ourselves in light of current technological and scientific advances and to reflect on the society in which we wish to live” (Tirosh-Samuelson and Mossman 2012, 35–36). This paper is but a modest contribution to this discussion, focusing on embodiment.

Transhumanists face head-on the most daunting predicament that af-

fects humans, namely, the condition and awareness of mortality. In their view, the proper way to cope with this predicament is through science and technology, which can overcome the alienation that distances ourselves from what we wish for, namely, a radically extended lifespan. In order to take account of the dialectic alienation—reconciliation (or salvation) in this discourse, we refer to the ideas of Hannah Arendt. In her assessment of mo- dernity, she steers away from scientific-technological might, allowing us to focus on the humble experience of birth, through her concept of natality. Arendt’s thought has a theological influence (as has transhumanism) and, in our reading, one interesting theological motif that can be drawn from her work is the irony that what is lowest in this world is the bearer of salvation (Durst 2004, 782). As will be argued, the key moment in the event of sal- vation is natality, both the birth of a child from a woman,1 and the birth of novelty in the public sphere.

1To be clear from the inception, scholars now include also transgendered and non-binary people among those who can bear a child. Nevertheless, most of the lit- erature still highlights women, so for the sake of simplicity, that is what we have in mind in this paper.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address four issues: First, what is the picture of human alienation/estrangement that transhumanists have in mind, even though they do not use these words? Second, how do they propose to overcome this alienation—through some transhuman salva- tion? Third, how does this picture match the current understanding of this concept in the thought of Hannah Arendt and her commentators? Fourth, how does this discussion bear on the issue of bodily alienation? In order to answer these questions, we first discuss some preliminary thoughts on alienation and estrangement.

# The Concept of Alienation

The modern understanding of alienation has its putative starting point in the early writings of Hegel, published posthumously, where he establishes a dialectical approach to alienation and reconciliation (see, e.g., Hegel [1809] 1971, 328). The same dialectic may be found throughout later writings of his. As is well-known, Hegel used two words to signify alienation: *Entfremdung* (“estrangement”) and *Entäusserung* (“self-externalization” or “renuncia- tion”). Due to different appropriations of these words in the literature, we will take “estrangement” and “alienation” as synonyms. In a few words, Michael Inwood’s *Hegel Dictionary* states that “Alienation for Hegel is the stage of disunion which emerges from a simple unity and is subsequently reconciled in a higher, differentiated unity” (Inwood 1992, 36).

Hegel’s views were incorporated and altered by his followers, including Feuerbach (alienation as projection) and Marx. In his first writings Marx brings philosophy from pure thought into the realm of concrete history. As is well known, he was mainly concerned with modes of production and la- bor issues, as, for example, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844. There alienation derives from nature, from the product of labor, from other human beings and especially from one’s self (Petrović 1991, 11; cf. Musto 2010, 87–88).

It is this philosophical inclination that became more relevant to some thinkers after Marx, especially in the existentialist tradition. He “stressed historical conditions of alienation and the circumstances under which these may be overcome, [but] existentialists tend to see alienation as a condition endemic to existence itself” (Michelman 2008, 32; see also Kaufmann 1970, xvi–xvii). Other thinkers within the German tradition, such as Nietzsche, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Karl Jaspers also made contributions to the concept of alienation. However, instead of a focus on la- bor and a critique of capitalism, they turned to modernity, industrialization and rationalization. Simmel, for example, directed his attention to the indi- vidual in modern society. Expressing the feeling of helplessness, of “being strange” in modern society, of the alienation of labor in a system marked by

calculation and growing objectification of culture, Simmel anticipated some of the main motifs of existentialism (see Frisby 2013, 72).

Erich Fromm, responsible for making palatable Marx’s *Manuscripts* for the American public, shared many of the ideas of existentialism. His criti- cism of modern society identifies the young Marx as a proto-existentialist. He also draws on Feuerbach and Marx to highlight the role of projection in giving a face to alienation. As he says, “man is alienated in the sense that his actions and his own forces have become estranged from him; they stand above him and against him, and rule him rather than being ruled by him” (Fromm 2003, 85; cf. Svanaeus 2018, 38).

Heidegger’s rendering of alienation (*Entfremdung*) is associated with be- ing foreign to authenticity. In *Being and Time*, it is related to the fallen prey of *Dasein*, in terms of idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity, that is, its “thrown- ness” into the world. Perhaps Heidegger’s understanding of alienation is too nihilistic, abstract and apolitical, so let us instead look to one of his main disciples, Hannah Arendt, in the effort to describe alienation and to posit natality as an effective healer. Both authors share a deep distrust in the place of humans in a technical society. But whereas Heidegger thinks of alienation in terms of the pair authenticity- inauthenticity and being-toward-death, Ar- endt, influenced by Augustine, works with the concepts of resentment and gratitude. Being thrown into the world, for Heidegger, has an ontological meaning. For Arendt, it represents more of a historical and political trait, as we will now see.

## 1.1 Alienation in Hannah Arendt

Many authors have criticized the use and abuse of the concept of alienation and estrangement in the two decades after WWII (e.g., Wrong 1988; Musto 2010), therefore I have chosen to follow one author, Hannah Arendt, and discuss the shape of her understanding. She engages in, as do some of the authors mentioned above, a philosophy of history with political and existen- tial concerns. According to her, the passage of the Christian outlook to the modern represented one form of alienation:

[m]odern man [*sic*] at any rate did not gain this world when he [*sic*] lost the other world [Christian], and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; *he was thrust back upon it*, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself. The only con- tents left were appetites and desires, the senseless urges of his body which he mistook for passion and which he deemed to be “unreason- able” because he found he could not “reason,” that is, not reckon with them. (Arendt 1998, 320–21; italics mine)

This mention of the “senseless urges” of the body reminds one of a low es- teem for embodiment, as many of Arendt’s commentators have pointed out

(“Mute and shrouded in secrecy, the Arendtian body exhibits the curious mixture of uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and sacred attributes that Freud associates with the fundamentally ambivalent structure of taboo” [Zerilli 1995, 171]). For example, Mara Willard claims that physical birth in Arendt looks too disembodied. According to her, Arendt’s concept of natality (to be explored in the next sections) effaces the mother. The mother is reduced to an object in service to the realization of the public sphere (Willard 2013, 236). But because Arendt’s account of embodiment is somewhat ambiguous,

it is open to insightful interpretations (see Zerilli 1995, 175; Gudmarsdottir 2012, 98). According to Margaret Hull (2002, 165), “Arendt proposes that the body becomes a vehicle through which the individual reveals herself and formulates her whoness, her personality.” This ambiguity happens because there is in Arendt a tension between two births, the first being the biological process (which happens in the private sphere) and the second, the entrance into the human world of action and speech (the public realm). According to Arendt, this tension becomes a dichotomy in a state of “world-alienation,” a standpoint which requires a more detailed description of alienation in her thought. We will come back to matters of embodiment in section 2.1.

Inspired now by Arendt’s quotation above, let us reflect on this being “thrust back upon [life],” in terms of several forms of alienation that can be devised in Arendt’s thought, starting from her concepts of “earth alien- ation” and “world alienation.” The first concept is more akin to science, related to “the astounding human capacity to think in terms of the universe while remaining on the earth, and . . . to use cosmic laws as guiding princi- ples for terrestrial action” (Arendt 1998, 264). Thus, earth alienation became the hallmark of modern science, epitomized by the exploration of space and also by modern science’s adoption of the universe, rather than the earth, as its standpoint and frame of reference (Chapman 2007, 444). It is possible to infer that this kind of alienation has two sides, one positive, as just men- tioned, and the other negative, the “refusal to recognize ourselves as earthly creatures” (ibid*.*), which we can also find in transhumanism.

The other concept, “world alienation,” is more akin to technology, re- lated to the “increase in power of man over the things of this world . . . from the distance which man puts between himself and the world” (Arendt 1998, 252 n.2). That is the positive side. The negative side appears first when she engages with Marx’s concept of self-alienation, criticizing more specifically “the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their na- ked exposure to the exigencies of life” (ibid*.*, 254–255). Moreover, Jean Pierre Dupuy associates this form of alienation with cybernetics. According to him, “mechanist materialism, . . . fail[s] to see that it invalidates itself by placing the human subject outside of the very world to which he is said to belong” (2018, 146).

According to Dennis Wrong, Arendt “is one recent thinker who under- stood that alienation as estrangement may, for modern man, result from his very awareness of living in an almost entirely man-made world rather than from the lack of such awareness” (Wrong 1988, 470). In other words, world-alienation means that “man, wherever he goes, encounters only him- self” (Arendt 1961, 89; see also Arendt 1998, 320), suggesting that whatever progress humans undertake will eventually just reiterate the human condi- tion. According to Alice MacLachlan,

[Arendt’s] view of the human condition is ultimately tragic. The frailty—the irony, even—of human existence consists in this: the very conditions which make human existence valuable and give it meaning

. . . simultaneously introduce an element of arbitrariness to our actions

. . . and prevent us from ever having control over what we do and suf- fer. (MacLachlan 2006, 15)

This simultaneity of “not having control” and “value and meaning” indi- cates that alienation and reconciliation come together.2

Let us now expand on this negative side of world-alienation. Citing Ar- endt once again, “for every person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger” ([1954] 1994, 308). It is a world that threatens even if it is, to a great extent, of our own making. A comment made in her “Crisis in Education” elucidates this point: “. . . the basic human situation, in which the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home. To preserve the world against the mortality of

its creators and inhabitants it must be constantly set right anew” (Arendt [1954] 1961, 192). Someone might say that a solution to this predicament would be to turn humans into immortals. However, this move misses the point that, in the context of Arendt’s thought, even immortals are mortal, for there is no human life without natality.3 As Paul Ricoeur (1983, 72) argues,

2This dialectic, however, is not the same as Hegel’s and Marx’s. Whereas rec- onciliation here is somewhat deterministic, in Arendt natality and action point to unpredictability and spontaneity.

3The theme of immortality is very common in several of Arendt’s writings, in- cluding *The Human Condition*. For example, she asserts that “Imbedded in a cosmos where everything was immortal, mortality became the hallmark of human existence. Men are ‘the mortals,’ the only mortal thing in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation” HC (18–19). Immortal life here refers not to the individual but, through action, to the world, which needs to endure. The connection with birth and natality is explicit in her often-quoted reference to the “miracle that saves the world” (HC 247). Whereas procreation refers to animals, birth and natality refer to humans (an assertion that may be contested in this ecological-minded time, but that is beside the point here).

“Only natality—perhaps—escapes the illusion of immortality on the part of mortals who think eternity.” Perhaps exclusively technology-based forms of reconciliation (which will be discussed in the next section) remind one of the Baron Munchausen, who pulls himself and the horse he is sitting on out of a swamp by his own hair.

However, there seem to be additional ways to classify Arendt’s un- derstanding of alienation, as we will see in what follows. The first form of alienation to be highlighted here is estrangement from “human nature.” It is important to speak about “human nature,” even if Arendt is wary of it, as this concept is present everywhere in discussions about transhumanists’ proposals. As she says: “It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, deter- mine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows” (Arendt 1998, 10. See also Arendt 2005, 106–107).

Interpreting this same passage, Dana Villa (1996, 174) comments that “Arendt refused to reify the capacities and conditions of human existence into a transhistorical human ‘nature’” (see also Peg Birmingham 2006, 79). But Arendt is somewhat ambiguous regarding this issue, as she also says that “God created man, but men are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature” (Arendt 2005, 93). Villa says that, for both Arendt and Heidegger, it is because the *conditions* of human existence might change so radically, as a result of technology, that capacities which were previously viewed as part of human nature disappear (Villa 1996, 123—we are re- minded of transhumanism at this point).4 That does not mean, however, that we are in full control of our own making. Again, at the end of the road we find just ourselves, in all our grandeur and misery. So, differently from animals, we are simultaneously conditioned by and detached from our bio- logical selves.5 The unpredictability and spontaneity of our action has a dark side, so we long for a new firm basis on which to stand.

The second form of alienation to be highlighted is that of resentment—

some speak about “existential resentment” (Villa 1996, 172–173), while others mention the “resentment of the given” (Birmingham 2006, 113). For this reason, totalitarianism, in its thirst for control, makes no room for plu- rality and novelty. According to Stephan Kampowski, “Modern man has come of age and as a result, he ‘has come to resent everything given, even his

4I am not sure that Villa got it right at this point. As Arendt says, “The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms. children of nature” (Arendt [1958] 1998, 2).

5Hjelm (2020, 5) criticizes transhumanists for regarding our biology as deficient.

Behind their standpoint there is a conception of human nature.

own existence—to resent the very fact that he is not the creator of the uni- verse and himself. In this fundamental resentment, he refuses to see rhyme or reason in the given world’” (Kampowski 2008, 220). Here he quotes Ar- endt’s first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, 438).

In the same vein, Villa indicates the risk contained in technological progress: “The paradoxical logic of modern existential resentment is that an age that ‘began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of hu- man activity’ may in fact end ‘in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known’” (Villa 1996, 173).6 Furthermore, Villa (1996, 172) reads in Arendt a critique of voluntarism in the modern world, the will to overcome finitude, to gain mastery over the world. This attitude contrasts with frailty and vulnerability, as we will see below. Arendt also criticizes the utilitarian outlook of modernity, and in the end, says that if humans are the measure of all things, things become mere means, losing their intrinsic value (Arendt 1998, 155). We will see something more about the idea of “value,” but it is easy to see, e.g., the burden of human mastery on the natural environment. Bronislaw Szerszynski (2003, 204–206) reads this same dynamic in a more dialectical fashion. He makes clear that in Arendt we find a double alienation: the first, in the regular and perennial dialectic labor-work-action. The second, which is more contingent, is related to a specific mode of pro- duction (capitalist) and is found in a society where technology rules. Here we are further alienated from the previous dialectic, typical of the human condition, which for the subject matter of this paper, means the “practical technological desire to escape the bonds of earth, the limits of our organic nature. Against such angelic pretensions—which if realized would end

our humanness—Arendt reminds us of our interest in the maintenance of

the life process, and of our bonds with it” (ibid*.,* 209).

In sum, in this form of alienation (resentment), Arendt and other authors depict an estrangement from the past (the given, human nature or condi- tion) and from the future (the potentialities recognized in what is given). It is true that some of the authors above may have a dim view of the future in a technical society. However, this approach does not mean an anti-progres- sivist attitude, since they point to ways in which estrangement is overcome, while paradoxically remaining what it is, estrangement.

Moreover, the reference to “angelic pretensions” suggests that all these forms of alienation betray mind-body dualism,7 boiling them down to the

6Here he quotes Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958, 322). Nature and nurture should not be separated.

7Brent Waters associates this critique of dualism to bodily alienation in the mod- ern technological project. Greater control reduces “humans to being little more than a will confined within a body. The body is thereby effectively perceived to be an impediment to the will that should be overcome” (Waters 2017a, 1).

alienation from the embodied self. Before moving to this concern, we will discuss the ways through which transhumanism presents alienation.

# The picture of human alienation in TH

Such a bold movement as transhumanism would not gain momentum with- out a forceful description of our lot on earth, matched by a description of how to remedy our ordeal. We may find such a description in the much- quoted “Transhumanism FAQ” (https://humanityplus.org/philosophy/ transhumanist-faq/):

Transhumanism can be understood as “[t]he intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psycho- logical capacities.” (Bostrom 2003, 4)

Alienation from both the past and the future can be detected here. From the past we inherit frailties that mark the human condition, especially aging. The future is indicated by reference to human capacities, something that we have *in nuce* and for which we still wait for further development. Let us expand on both time directions.

In his “Letter to Mother Nature,” leading transhumanist Max More says, “With all due respect, we must say that you [Mother Nature] have in many ways done a poor job with the human constitution. We have decided

that it is time to amend [it]” (More [1999] 2013, 449). Our current condition presupposes that our past constitution does not represent our “true” self. Transhumanism has in its purview the fact that human nature (or the hu- man condition, these expressions are used interchangeably in transhumanist literature) is in a state of permanent change. For analyst of transhumanism Patrick D. Hopkins (2008, 5), physical facts that in part generate our condi- tion are changed. The “human” part of the equation is at stake. Despite the reference to the human condition, in the end it is human nature itself, down to the genetic level, which must be altered.

Transhumanists first suggest that evolution is a piece of “bad engi- neering,” (“The ubiquity of suboptimal design demonstrates that natural selection is a bricoleur, not an engineer, much less a master engineer” [Pow- ell and Buchanan 2011, 10].) And that we, with a better knowledge of the processes of natural selection, may improve on nature’s work. They ac- knowledge that perhaps our biological makeup was optimal in an ancestral environment, but that several traits are now detrimental to our modern way of life. Indeed, evolutionary psychologists speak about the mismatch be- tween “the environment of evolutionary adaptedness” in the Pleistocene and the present Western industrial society. Transhumanists do not mince

words in describing the haphazard nature of evolution as a source of un- imaginable suffering (Powell and Buchanan 2011, 18). The reaction against this state of affairs is equally strong: “I find it impossible to blindly accept the suffering imposed upon us by our biological condition” (Young 2006, position 91).

Second, we are estranged from “what we value”—that is, what we deem most precious, the good aspects of our nature—to the extent that we are challenged by the simultaneous presence of what we do not value. These values usually arise from two sources: first, from the Enlightenment, in- cluding values such as, freedom of the individual, progressivism, the free market, reproductive rights, as well as economic equality. The second source of values is contemporary wishes in a consumeristic society, as we can see in medical advancements. If people want to improve their condi- tion through plastic surgery, for a widely known example, why not try out other improvements as well? Likewise, the possibilities of genetic interven- tion and synthetic biology, now available for fixing health problems, may soon be used for improvement. Estrangement in this respect comes from the persistent presence of “what we do *not* value” (including the shortcomings of our own biological heritage), obstacles that should be overcome for ful- fillment: “We may try to overcome fears and phobias that we recognize as irrational, or we may wrestle with appetites that threaten to distract us from what we value more” (Bostrom 2008, 119).

Besides the estrangement linked to biological evolution transhumanists

also consider the human condition received from the past—the vagaries of history, economic and political woes, strained relationships, immorality, etc. At the social level, they simply follow mainstream analyses in the academy. The uniqueness of transhumanism lies in the idea of genetic interventions addressing higher-level problems—much is said, for example, of moral en- hancement, since the usual methods of creating good behavior fall short of their goal (e.g., Persson and Savulescu 2012). As Alexander Hjelm puts it, “Because of the unreliability of political action and the fickle motivations of individuals, the potential for human engineering are [*sic*] especially worth exploring, if not necessary” (Hjelm 2020, 16–17). Again, the present state of affairs is in a way impossible to fix, unless we change human nature it- self. As a consequence, unalienated humans are in the future, in the form of trans-(or post-)humans. So, we may add one more layer of estrangement: estrangement in relation to the future.

According to the Transhumanist FAQ (https://humanityplus.org/phi-

losophy/transhumanist-faq/), transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways: “The conservative projection, which assumes only that progress continues in the same gradual way it has since the seventeenth century, would imply that we should expect to see dramatic developments

over the coming decades.” At present, our human condition limits our fu- ture potentialities, so we should overcome it: “Everyone with access to the appropriate technology might also be extraordinary, and a much-extended lifespan would be required to fulfill one’s potential” (Katz 2008, 366). This sense of expecting a future redemption reminds one of St. Paul’s message in his Letter to the Romans, chapter 8: 22–23: ‘We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (NRSV) As many have recognized, transhumanism carries a truly eschatological import (Tiro- sh-Samuelson 2012, 716).

Returning now to human alienation from the past, it is marked by the presence of a long list of “bad things.” For example, the authors in Healey and Rayner (2009) classify human problems into six categories: our life is too short; we are weak, subject to all sorts of illnesses; our cognition is poor; we are not as happy as we could be; individuals and societies are unfair; nations display a mismatch between rulers and subjects, and democracy is not effec- tive. Other typologies are easily found among proponents of enhancement. There is one trait of the human condition where estrangement from the past is particularly unwelcome: the natural cycle of birth and death. As we are discussing the role of women and children, let us take first the issue of gender. Besides re-visions of heterosexuality (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994), there are also nowadays proposals of post-genderism which attract some followers of transhumanism. As Dvorski and Hughes (2008, 44) postulate, “gender is an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation on human po- tential.” Is there implied here a suspicion of embodiment? We will discuss

the matter later on.

A second issue refers to overpopulation. Transhumanists share modern ideals of reproductive rights and population control, and at the same time they propose radical life extension: “Leaving people to die is an unaccept- able solution.” (FAQ) However, there is a price for life extension: “The only long-term method of assuring continued growth of average income is some form of population control, whether spontaneous or imposed, limiting the number of new persons created per year” (ibid.). Moreover, natural concep- tion is seen as too haphazard, and a burden to parents, especially if we have as a goal equal opportunity in the job market for women. In the end, this attitude calls for artificial procreation, if any.

In the past, the resolution of the problems of need and desire would in- clude having children, so that new generations could acquire the goods that are out of reach for their parents. But, if adults live long enough to acquire

these goods themselves, what is the point of having children?8 Or, as Brent Waters puts it: “If the overriding goal is personal survival, then there is no compelling reason to procreate” (Waters 2017b, 108).

## 2.1 Transhumanism and Bodily Alienation

In close contact with the forms of alienation described above, we should now reiterate distaste for the body, which follows a long trend in Western thought. For example, Hans Moravec, one of the pioneers in the interpre- tation of AI favored by transhumanists, understands our organism and cognition as patterns of information. As he says,

Body-identity assumes that a person is defined by the stuff of which a human body is made. Pattern-identity, conversely, defines the es-

sence of a person, say myself, as the *pattern* and the *process* going on in my head and body, not the machinery supporting that process. If the process is preserved, I am preserved. The rest [the bodily flesh] is mere jelly. (Moravec 1990, 117—emphasis his)

Still, according to Moravec, the body-identity position is based on a mistaken intuition about the nature of living things, namely, that we are cognitively alienated from our actual self. The lived body is of secondary concern: “As we humans eat and excrete, old cells within our bodies die, break up, and are expelled and replaced by copies made of fresh materials” (ibid.). If pat- terns are the real thing, then the body can be dispensed with altogether, and be replaced by algorithms using different embodiments.

Transhumanist Nick Bostrom, on the other hand, does have room for embodiment in his proposals for the future, but he says that “A first pri- ority is to abandon the unquestioning assumption that human nature and the human condition will remain fundamentally unchanged throughout the current century” (Bostrom 2006, 48). What is this nature and condition constituted of? As he says about our basic biological capacities, which have remained more or less constant throughout history: “We still eat, sleep, def- ecate, fornicate, see, hear, feel, think and age in pretty much the same ways as the contemporaries of Sophocles did. But we may now be approaching a time when this will no longer be so” (ibid., 40). In other words, “dirty things” such as to defecate and to fornicate are apparently bound to disap- pear.9

8However, defense of giving birth does not mean procreating wildly, it is rather the recognition of its central role in defining the human. It is not necessary that every woman should bear children in any number, but it is certainly the case that every birth should mark the beginning of new social relationships. Birth is as much a sym- bol as it is a concrete experience.

9See also reference to “appetites” in Bostrom (2008, 119).

Fornication may still be around, but with clean bodies that have no oth- erness, no challenge to our wishes: “Sexbots will electrocute our flesh with climaxes *twice* as gigantic because they’ll be more desirable, patient, eager, and altruistic than their meat-bag competition” (Pellissier 2009; emphasis author’s). At any rate, sex will not be related to procreation anymore—it will be something more akin to a sophisticated masturbation. More re- cently, Robert Manzocco speaks about the “Flesh of the Future” (or absence thereof). Again, sex is uncoupled from reproduction (Manzocco 2019, 183), leading to a postgender society where embodiment is strictly under our con- trol10 (ibid., 241). The final destination is a real “telepathic civilization” (ibid., 179), where flesh can be eventually dispensed with: “We have eliminated the heart, lungs, red and white blood cells, platelets, pancreas, thyroid and all of the organs that produce hormones, kidneys, bladder, liver, the lower part of the esophagus, stomach and intestines” (ibid., 184). The remainder will follow suit.

Regarding mind uploading and other proposals for surrogate embodi-

ments, there are many responses from theologians. Victoria Lorrimar has a more favorable analysis. Her intent is to probe “the ways in which roboticists are attending to our embodiment” (Lorrimar 2019, 193). She concedes that “Often the theological discourse on transhumanism has focused on what a theological perspective can offer—usually a critique, or at the very least a caution” (ibid., 202), but that is not her proposal. She is very optimistic that we are “creative, ingenious, and adaptive beings, and can surely develop new ways of knowing, believing, communicating, and worshipping as em- bodiment changes” (ibid., 203). She does not challenge advancements that come with a “clean body” approach. For example, she agrees with the con- tention that “an uploaded mind will at least retain the memory of the body it once possessed, and these metaphors will continue to make sense as a result” (ibid., 199). However, we may question whether a lived, messy body does *possess* a memory, as if it were immediately available to our consciousness. A fleshy body is more likely to continue ignoring and rearranging memories! One theologian who offers a word of caution toward future embodi- ments is Noreen Herzfeld. In her opinion, somewhat opposed to Lorrimar, present embodiment is still essential in order to capture more unconscious emotional reactions: “This physical response precedes conscious recogni- tion of the emotion. It comes unbidden. Consider . . . how our heart speeds up long before our consciousness tells us that we are afraid” (Herzfeld 2016, 90). Otherness is surely implied in her view. However, this body filled with emotions is still “clean.” Let us now consider another critic who pays more

attention to the less sublime aspects of embodiment.

10Contrasting control and vulnerability will be our subject later on.

Michael Hauskeller, a well-known analyst of TH, takes issue with Pel- lissier and others around their view of sex, with their desire “to replace real human lovers with artificial ones” (Hauskeller 2016, 181). He stresses the dimension of otherness in human relationships. As opposed to a real per- son, in a consumeristic society we want robots to do what we want them to and nothing else (ibid., 182), especially when it comes to sex. He mentions Pellissier’s essay in this way: “Sexbots will never have headaches, fatigue, impotence, premature ejaculation, pubic lice, disinterest, menstrual blood, jock strap itch, yeast infections, genital warts, AIDS/HIV, herpes, silly expec- tations, or inhibiting phobias” (ibid., 195), precisely what human partners often have. Again, a clean body is what is favored by transhumanists.

Hauskeller sees a paradox in transhumanist thought: “in order to in- crease my own autonomy I need to find ways to *decrease* the autonomy of others, or, if that is not feasible, to create a world for myself that allows me to do what I want to without requiring the collaboration of others” (ibid., 197; his emphasis). This safe world, therefore, demands a double alienation: from others, since their will and behavior are often stubborn and annoying; and from their bodies, usually filled with impurity. As Hauskeller concludes, “To engage with someone, a real human person, is, after all, always risky” (ibid., 195). We will see later on Arendt’s emphasis on relationality.

Regarding the “dirtiness” of our bodies, Allison Muri has analyzed the obsolescence of the body in post-modern literature (e.g., Braudillard).11 Even though her examples are taken from cultural studies, her arguments could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to transhumanist thinkers. According to her, in this literature cyborgs are related to the human spirit, and they are displayed in theories of the loss of selfhood and elimination of the “real” or “natural” body. Having in mind the “spirit” of Moravec and many others, she says that in this literature “both bodies and machines might be theoret- ically defined or programmed as information or pattern” (Muri 2003, 73). So there is “neither birth nor decay in this marriage of calculation and an- gelic spirit: no offspring, no ageing bodies, no organs or secretions” (ibid., 75). Bodies here are as clean as they could ever be. Visionary virtual world builders present us images of bodies freed from the constraints that flesh imposes (ibid., 76). As for sex and procreation, in the “post-human cyborg, metaphorically, semen is reduced to data; materially it is mere excrement, as base as shit” (ibid., 89).

But in fact, bodies do have orifices and produce excretal matter. Ac-

cording to Muri, “human consciousness is inalienably enmeshed with its corporeality, with the everyday actualities of its flesh, its giving-birth, its growths and excrescences, the regularities or indignities of its secretions.”

11Jean-Pierre Dupuy also criticizes post-structuralists for the devaluation of the body—see Dupuy (2018, 143–144)

(ibid., 77). In other words, the body is smelly and oozy. Ironically, for Muri, it is precisely the most debased stuff in our bodies that gives them existential depth and protection against utopias.

So far, we have presented an argument showing the alienation from the lived body seen by transhumanism and its critics. Much of what has been said is shared by both men and women in their “normal” shapes and functioning. There are two situations where such alienation is duplicated: in relation to the female body, as discussed in feminist literature, and in rela- tion to the disabled body. Females, in particular, have some body traits that further debased them in Western thought:

Western metaphysics has postulated the idea of an autonomous individ- ual subject, a self-enclosed ego that inhabits but is distinct from a body. Reflection on the existential qualities of female bodies, [Christine] Bat- tersby suggests, upsets most of the assumptions of this ontology—that selves are independent of one another, that their rational core stands at a distance from the pains and sufferings of vulnerable bodies12 The

subject lives as flesh. (Young 2005, 5)

The same could be applied to LGBTQ+ people. The perception of this fleshi- ness vis-à-vis traditional ways of thinking leads to “feelings of ambivalence, pleasure, power, shame, objectification, and solidarity that girls and women have about bodies, their shape, flows, and capacities” (ibid., 9). Transhu- manism, as we have seen, postulates a postgender body, in the laudable effort to liberate women from current constraints. But perhaps the price is too high.

For Iris Young, in line with an existentialist frame of thought, embodi- ment is a mode of being in the world (ibid., 7). She analyzes in some depth traits such breasts, menses (traditionally associated with impurity), preg- nancy and giving birth, all traits which are left behind in transhumanist thought. In the end she asks, “What happens when we think of being preg- nant as an intrinsic value, and describe it less as a process of producing a baby and more as a way of being-in-the-world with uniquely interesting characteristics?” (ibid., 10). Linking giving birth and being-in-the-world seems entirely congruent with Arendt’s thought.

The second situation referred to above is the alienation that affects dis- abled persons. Transhumanists envision bodies for enhancement at their

12Vulnerability and pain, of course, are found in the experience of birth: labor, delivery and breastfeeding. Many have negative experiences at this point, but despite the large number of sufferers, evolution is not that mean—there are plenty of trade- offs which make joy possible. As Orli Dahan says: “However, what is interesting in relation to the intense pain of natural birth is that, although women have consis- tently rated it as an extreme pain, the experience is not necessarily negative. It was

found that labor pain is paradoxical and, thus, difficult to explain” (Dahan, 2021, 4).

most perfect (see Vita-More’s *primo posthuman*), casting a shadow on those who are far from corresponding to this perfection. This attitude corresponds to the more general attitude of “ableism,” namely, judging disability to be a defect rather than a dimension of difference. While criticizing such an atti- tude, Tom Koch speaks about the “disability paradox,” that is, “the apparent life satisfaction expressed by persons with cognitive, physical, or sensory differences that most ethicists and the transhumanists assume should be eliminated for the suffering and discontent eugenicists assume they must promote” (Koch 2010, 693–694; see also Hjelm 2020, 8).

Thus, the ghost of eugenics hovers above transhumanist proposals, de- spite protests to the contrary. As Melinda Hall suggests, “transhumanists operate with a thick sense of what counts as normal and recommend strate- gies for enhancement which are largely synonymous with refusing to create persons with disabilities, a eugenic goal directly in opposition to the goals of disability rights” (Hall 2017, 135). In the same manner as Iris Young and others, she criticizes transhumanism for being (in practice) against natural pregnancy—which would be seen as too risky since the offspring had in this way may be defective (ibid., 138).

The price paid for this double alienation (bodily alienation plus devi- ation from male standards), therefore, is to give up potentially fulfilling modes of being in the world for the promise of hassle-free embodiment, subject to one’s own control and whim. As was suggested in the preceding sections, being conscious of one’s own alienation (i.e., feeling the body as alien to one’s true self—“the uncanny character of being controlled by some- thing foreign that is nevertheless a part of oneself” [Svenaeus 2018, 38]) does not imply that bringing our bodies closer to our mind’s rational standards would result in reconciliation.

Indeed, we are inevitably prone to self-deception. As in the old saying “be careful what you wish for”—we may be fooled by our needs, wishes and desires, that transhumanism seeks to fulfill. Existentialism brought to our attention alienation as inherent to the human condition, which displays a paradox: we have to act so as to alleviate our lot on earth, e.g., through medicine and technology, but our efforts both succeed and fail, so we need to cope with the effects of alienation in our life and make the best of them.

Bioethicist Frederik Svenaeus criticizes enhancement enthusiasts by

suggesting that

Suffering, especially the sufferings brought on us by illness, is a bodily experience, but the alienating powers of suffering cover a territory that includes many kinds of life-world and self- interpretation issues . . . Such sufferings may in many cases be transformed or at least mitigated by a person’s identifying and changing core life values, and in such a manner reinterpreting her life story to become an easier and more

rewarding one to live under the present circumstances (Svenaeus 2018, 36).13

In an important sense, I not only have a body, but I am this body as well. It is “my fundamental way of existing and making myself at home in the world” (ibid., 39). As the author further says, inspired by Merleau-Ponty: “. . . the lived body is our fundamental way of feeling alive. We suffer due to our

vulnerable bodies and the vulnerable relations we form with other vulnera- ble persons through our being in-the-world” (ibid., 144).

We will return to vulnerability later on. Bodily alienation has a plus side, it is also an opportunity to change our ways of being in the world, and to ex- ercise solidarity toward others. There is no true love without the embodied “neighbor,” as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. From a very differ- ent perspective, but still within the bounds of existentialism, philosopher Jeff Noonan (2018) argues in favor of our nature as finite embodied human beings, stressing that “The technotopians claimed to serve that which is highest in humanity. Yet here again it becomes apparent that what is best in our humanity depends upon the limits our flesh defines and the challenges that follow from confronting those limits” (ibid., 136). The reference to the disabled body comes to our minds at this point.

After reflecting on transhumanism and embodiment, we will resume with Arendt’s proposals for the dialectic alienation-reconciliation.

# On attempting Reconciliation

While attempting to suggest that transhumanist proposals overcome human alienation at a price, embodiment, we have also shown several ideas about embodied reconciliation, which we will now discuss with reference to the thought of Hannah Arendt. As these proposals have been the subject of crit- icisms from different sides, too many to be accounted for, we will focus on one aspect favored by Arendt’ scholarship: birth and natality, while express- ing embodiment.

Indeed, transhumanist proposals may in the end result in what they opposed in the first place, bodily alienation, and the strongest sign of this alienation is disregard for births, at least when accompanied by sweat, blood, sticky vernix and tears. Hannah Arendt had already anticipated that: “The desire for earthly immortality is blasphemous, not because it wants to overcome death, but because it negates birth” (as quoted in O’Byrne 2012). Transhumanists decry this body of death and seek immortality, but in doing this they are thrust back into alienation, in all the senses described above. In trying to solve one problem, they end up by creating new ones. Despite

13Cf. preceding footnote.

their utopian wishes, there is no “remedy for the frailty of human affairs” (Arendt 1998, 195).

Let us now use Arendt’s insights on alienation, described in section 1.1, to analyze this predicament and indicate ways toward reconciliation.

As for “earth alienation,” transhumanists would certainly agree with the Western detachment caused by the advancement of science and technol- ogy. But they would not consider it “alienation,” since this trend represents for them the unfolding of human potentialities, following a telos intrinsic to our nature. Arendt, on the other hand, keeps this detachment in check, criticizing the abandonment of earthly rootedness, the refusal to recognize ourselves as earthly creatures.

When it comes to world alienation, the main difference would be that transhumanism proposes technological solutions, whereas Arendt points to the crucial role of politics (not disregarding technology—see Simbirski 2016), understood as the engagement of people in the public sphere. Two forms of reconciliation can be recognized at this point: first, the overcoming of world-alienation associated with something contingent in the modern world, expressed in mass society and the capitalist mode of production. These two are the main obstacles to plurality and novelty: “Alienation from the world leads to the rejection of everything that is shared in common—the plurality of languages, traditions, cultures and worldviews” (Kattago 2014, 58).

The second form of reconciliation recognizes that alienation is always

there. It is not possible to eradicate alienation, only to cope with it. Coping with alienation (reconciliation) is achieved through human relationships in the public sphere, and through plurality, in a broad sense of the word. The world is comprised by human-made products, such as buildings, bridges, houses and art (Arendt 1998: 7–11), but these things themselves are not the world as such; rather “it is what happens *in-between* people that constitutes the world” (Kattago 2014, 59-emphasis author’s).

In other words, every person is born as a stranger in this world, and reconciliation is needed. However, as each one of us is unique, estrange- ment, again, will be always with us. At the root of the transhumanist project there is the idea of humans being rulers, having mastery of the world and themselves.14 But for Arendt, this mastery is challenged by “the most gen- eral condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality.” (ibid., 8) It is vulnerability which shines through this condition.

Mastery should have as its premise love for the world, which involves some degree of abnegation: “In the last analysis, the human world is always the product of man’s *amor mundi*, a human artifice whose potential immor- tality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality

14See a discussion about mastery and its paradoxes in Dupuy (2018, 145–149).

of those who come to live in it” (Arendt 2005, 203; see Ricoeur’s assertion above). Again, Arendt is deeply critical of utopian blueprints for a better society, as Siobhan Kattago has shown. Time and again, she returns to the fact that human beings, not an (ideal) person, live in the world. Plurality and new beginnings, spontaneity and action are all founded on a deep respect for each actual person. “The world is held together by the continual birth of new people” (Kattago 2014, 60).

Let us now move to the two other forms of alienation we have found in Arendt, as analyzed above. First, there is the case of human nature. Trans- humanists agree with Arendt that there is no fixed human nature, and therefore they use this concept as a springboard to their proposals for alter- ing it (Buchanan 2009, 144).

However, the differences are even more striking. Arendt has challenged, not the biological body, as in transhumanism, but rather the metaphysi- cal concept of the human in the onto-theological tradition, where “is” and “ought” are mixed up in an unhistorical manner. For her, human beings are marked by their historicity, something that is not acknowledged in transhu- manism.15 As we saw above, Arendt was suspicious about any traditional talk about human nature. As Peg Birmingham states about Arendt, “The ‘who’ does not possess an enduring fixed nature but is instead inherently marked by contingency and unpredictability” (Birmingham 2006, 12). Na- than Van Camp also highlights this lack of a fixed nature and gives room for biotechnology (Van Camp 2014). However, as already mentioned, Ar- endt was suspicious of technological means to overcome the present human condition, giving space instead to politics, through the notion of action. The connection with human nature occurs here: people are born with a body, a body that was first handed down to us in the unending series of generations. Reconciliation has to be achieved again and again for each new gen- eration. Arendt’s concept of natality is brought about precisely in order to break the vicious circle of labor, work and action. According to her, “Action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality . . . since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphys- ical thought” (Arendt 1998, 9). Birth is rooted in the nature that we share with animals but, through the lens of natality, it is much more than a bio- logical happenstance. Birth through natality constitutes the opportunity of newness, introducing uncertainty and unpredictability in a world driven by instrumental rationality. “The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences but are related to a world into which single in- dividuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart” (ibid., 96–97; see also Durst 2004, 782). But birth

15We have tackled matters of historicity in Cruz (2021).

and death are also natural occurrences, parts of what is given to us, and it is on this givenness that we now focus our attention.

The second additional alienation refers to the “resentment of the given.” Right at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, Arendt states that

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by *a rebellion against human existence as it has been given*, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. (Arendt 1998, 3, emphasis mine)16

This new product of human craft may have a dark side; that is, not only are benefits reaped, but dangers also show up in an unpredictable man- ner. Transhumanists themselves have questioned an unrestrained notion of progress at the basis of the movement. For example, already in 2002, Nick Bostrom had called attention to this point: “the prospects of radically transforming technologies like nanotech systems and machine intelligence present us with unprecedented opportunities and risks” (Bostrom 2002, 1). The same point was made more forcefully by Phillipe Verdoux in 2009, whose “pessimistic view of the future,” suggested many possibilities of something going wrong: “dual use property of technical artifacts; *unintended consequences*; post-invention manufacture of previously non-existent prob- lems; increasingly complex ‘support systems’ that enable the functionality of a target artifact” (Verdoux 2009, 53; emphasis mine; Hughes 2010), while endorsing Verdoux’s critique of progressivism, thinks Verdoux’s sober ways of administering future risks do not “stir men’s souls.” He proposes instead that “Without optimism that humans *can* collectively exercise fore- sight and invention, and peacefully deliberate our way to a better future, we too easily fall into the traps of utopian or apocalyptic fatalism, or fixation on techno-fixes and *dei ex machinae*.” Is this “peaceful deliberation” enough? Hannah Arendt would view with much caution the success of such a de- marche: “It is as though they [Greeks] had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs,” as already cited above. But “this remedy can destroy the very substance of hu- man relationships” (Arendt 1998, 195). Even though peaceful deliberation is something to be expected, it does happen ambiguously, in the midst of controversy and violence.

Let us now go back to the positive side of the “gift from nowhere.”

While commenting on her Jewishness, Arendt opposes resentment to grat- itude, which is the proper attitude in face of the given: “There is such a

16Dupuy also takes this very same quotation to affirm transhumanist’s revolt against the given: “they quarrel with the very fact that we are born” (Dupuy 2018, 149).

thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and not *made*; for what is *physei* [brought about naturally] and not *nomo* [brought about conventionally]” (Arendt 2007, 466, emphasis hers)*.*17 Grati- tude as a vaccine for resentment is also explored by another commentator of Arendt’s, Serena Parekh. She first recognizes that we can change ourselves only to a limited extent, which generates resentment, in practice a resent- ment of difference and novelty (see also Hjelm 2020, 16). Then she says that “In opposition to this, she [Arendt] holds that *gratitude* [reconciliation] is the most appropriate attitude with which to approach the world” (2008, 9; italics in the original).

If “novelty” appeals to transhumanism, “difference” betrays a criticism of its advocates, since patterns of proposed enhancement are very similar (see above comments on disability). Following scientific and technological developments, uniformity is to be expected, despite protestations to the con- trary. More radical transhumanists see no limit to the extent to which we will change ourselves. *Gratitude* for the given, on the other hand, seems to be far from their concern, partly because it has theological overtones18 (a response to grace), and gratitude does not seem to be a virtue contributing to the progress of autonomous science. The primal act of gratitude is the recognition that we were born in the first place. This gratitude overrides any complaints about the misgivings of Mother Nature (see Max More above) or of the world we are born into. The difference in attitude was summarized by Peg Birmingham, first by suggesting “our mortality is accompanied by fear and inadequacy, which are the springs of desire.” It is against this state of affairs that the transhumanist movement emerged in the first place, offering a pathway to the fulfillment of this desire. But “Natality, on the other hand, is accompanied by gratitude, which is the source of memory” (Birmingham 2006, 79).

## 3.1. “The Glad Tidings”

An often-quoted passage from Arendt indicates that the first step to over- coming alienation is to recognize it, in the form of, as indicated above, “the frailty of human affairs”:

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 fac- ulty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of

17Dupuy expands on this point: “’Human beings are ashamed to have been born instead of made.’ Thus the German philosopher Günther Anders (Arendt’s first hus- band and himself a student of Heidegger) characterized the essence of the revolt against the given” (Dupuy 2018, 149).

18For a discussion around the religious subtext in the secular approach of Ar- endt’s, see Biss (2012).

new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by vir- tue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope [. . .] It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct ex- pression in the few words with which the Gospels announced the “glad tidings”: “A child has been born unto us.” (Arendt 1998, 247)

Julia Kristeva, in her biography of Hannah Arendt, expands on the mean- ing of this “miracle,” by stating that “A full experience of natality would inevitably include birth, life, an affirmation of the uniqueness of each birth, and continual rebirth in the life of the mind” (Kristeva 2001, 239). Patricia Bowen-Moore adds to this understanding by suggesting that “The birth of a child is a miracle and a mystery: we are greeted by a new creation, an indis- putably unprecedented presence, and desire nothing more than to remain in the presence of this fragile mystery of beginning” (Bowen-Moore 1989, 31). Thus, without denying the importance of science and technology, in the end these represent an adult world, bound to ruin. The most basic way to overcome alienation is through birth, both as a contingent biological da- tum and as symbol of a breach in the vicious circle of modernity. Born of women19 in the first place, human beings can introduce newness (the “mir- acle”) in historical processes, a second birth, by action and speech. In other words, the point is not so much to enhance the body as a means of overcom- ing alienation, but rather to put everyone’s body at the service of natality. As we have seen above, Jeff Noonan indicates that the best in our humanity is dependent on the limits of what our flesh defines, assuming that we should confront those limits. Again, Arendt has reservations about embodiment, usually restricted to the private sphere, but the important point is that this body, which we acquire by being born, is not only something that we should

be grateful for,20 but also the precondition of newness in the public sphere.

As has been suggested by many commentators, we should acknowledge the soteriological association with this kind of argument (e.g., Dolan 2004). Therefore, it is fitting to refer to the insightful essay by Patrick Hopkins about a main predicament of transhumanism, “A Salvation Paradox for Transhu- manism: *Saving* You versus Saving *You*” (Hopkins 2015). His argument is simple: if we acknowledge that the human condition “produces a recurring

19There is a host of opinions about this expression, in which we will not take part—see footnote #1 above and Stone (2019, 57, 81). The key point is not that a woman is involved in birth, but that we are born in the first place from another hu- man being, and second that we are born in flesh and blood.

20See above for how gratitude is present in Arendt. Experiences of being born and embodiment vary a lot both in objective and subjective terms. Following Augus- tine, and taking it in its greater form of generality, to exist is better than to not exist. While there is life there is hope, and it is everybody’s duty to stimulate others to make the best of their finite lives.

and persistent sense of unsettledness and longing” (ibid., 71), something that can be called “alienation,” (my rendering) transhumanism satisfies an age-long drive for transcending it. As we have seen above, the movement does so in two ways: by enhancement, which preserves embodiment (albeit a clean version), and by mind-uploading procedures, which transcend the body altogether. In the first case, improvement may happen, but reconcili- ation is irrevocably conditioned by the body: if the good is improved, evil can be “improved” as well. In more adequate terms: “superhumans would experience the same recurrent discontent and desire for more” (ibid., 77), far stronger than ordinary humans do. It is also notable that the word ‘de- sire’ appears twenty times in the text, pointing to a strong connection to embodiment.

Mind-uploading may offer a way out of this predicament, but the likely price to be paid is the loss of identity: “Radical changes will leave us behind. That poses no problem for the beings that will result, but it also provides no reason for humans to anticipate posthumanity as *our* future” (ibid., 80; emphasis added). In other words, the transition for the posthuman may be a Pyrrhic victory since the likely price to be paid is the loss of identity (Elkins 2011).

Let us now return to the passage that speaks about “the miracle that saves the world,” highlighting that “A child has been born unto us.” From its biblical context, we know that it refers to the King of the world being born in most humble conditions; the lowest and despised will change the course of the world, which is bound to ruin. Although we bear the first mark of natality, being born, we are vulnerable, yet ironically, we are also strong. Many feminists who have criticized Arendt for her disembodied view of birth have also acknowledged that Arendt is nonetheless a starting point to a deeper understanding of birth. As Adriana Cavarero and her colleagues say,

The postulated integrity of the free and rational subject . . . gives way to an originary and structural vulnerability, which emblematically dis- plays itself when, in the crucial moment of beginning, the new creature appears to the world giving him/herself over totally to the other . . . to the mother. Vulnerability and relationality intertwine, here, in an in- extricable ontological knot. (Cavarero et al. 2014, 24; see also Cavarero 2016, 122)

I would only make explicit that in childbirth both the one who gives birth and the child are vulnerable, perhaps the strongest symbol of frailty, and in need of help from others.21 On the other hand, Cavarero claims that, because

21Important as generalizations are, there must be room for variation. Scholars who study giving birth from an evolutionary perspective, such as Sarah Hrdy and Wenda Trevathan, explain universals (the peculiarly human way of giving birth) and variations (both among individuals and cultures), but they agree on the centrality of

of her excessive focus on the occasion of birth, Arendt “effaces the mother,” as was said above: “If the newborn’s emblematic function is consumed entirely in the act of its appearance, then the maternal figure becomes su- perfluous” (Cavarero 2016, 116–117). For the new beginnings, infancy is as important as being born. Nevertheless, the originary event is still the latter. To sum up, in this paper we have presented, first, several forms of alien- ation (earth alienation, world alienation, alienation from human nature, and resentment of the given) in Arendt. Then we discussed two ways of tackling human alienation, which we have boiled down to the estrangement of what we imagine to be our true self. The first way is by enhancing human strength until overcoming the last enemy, death. That is the way of transhumanism, the way of an adult world, including both the resentment of the given and the goal of an angelic spirit, and the likely price is the end of the experience of birth. Moreover, as was said above, a safe world is created demanding a double alienation: from others, since their will and behavior are often stub- born and annoying; and from their bodies, usually filled with impurity. At the end of the line, transhumanism creates as much alienation as the amount

of salvation it can offer.

Another way to proceed is to start from human frailty reflected in the embodiment and the helplessness of childbirth and of the child herself (vul- nerability) and look in it for the dialectical movement toward a new strength and new beginnings—natality. In a more poignant way, we quote Julia Kristeva once again, “A full experience of natality would inevitably include birth, life, an affirmation of the uniqueness of each birth, and continual re- birth in the life of the mind” (Kristeva 2001, 239).

The opinion shared by some readers of Arendt and some critics of trans- humanism is that embodiment, which indicates finitude and unsettledness, is the very condition by which reconciliation becomes possible within his- tory. The emphasis on being born of a person as a pre-condition of natality makes the overcoming of alienation open to some marks of embodiment toward which we are ambivalent. One mark that is deep and meaningful is giving birth to a new being. All the steps from having sex, being pregnant, delivering the baby and nursing her require for the person a strong attach- ment to both bodies, even amidst blood, sweat and tears. At these moments, both vulnerability and hope for a new beginning take place. As was said above, birth, and as a consequence, natality, are much more than biologi- cal happenstances. They constitute the opportunity of newness, introducing uncertainty and unpredictability in a world driven by instrumental ratio- nality.

birth for shaping who we are, especially through the presence of cooperative breed- ing (Hrdy 2009, 25).

# Conclusion

Transhumanists highlight the age-old alienation of our bodies vis-a-vis our ideals and wishes, due to the limitations and contradictions of embodiment. Their originality is in the offering of a resolution to our needs and desires through the latest advancements in science and technology. However, alien- ation is reinforced because their project requires a capitalist economy and a consumeristic society. Moreover, contrary to their arguments, we sug- gest that any possibility of reconciliation happens through this body, frail and dirty as it may be. It is precisely the most debased stuff in our bodies (highlighted in female and disabled ones) that gives them existential depth and protection against utopias. No new post-humans are strictly neces- sary—current humans have in themselves the key to reconcile (with all the provisos seen above) dichotomies that lead to human predicaments, and natality (which implies being born) is the name given by Hannah Arendt to breakthroughs in historical processes, the precondition for newness. This position is not against human enhancement, it is rather a warning for what is lost in terms of humanness.

We are bound to remain strangers in the world, and whatever progress

humans undertake will eventually reiterate the human condition. But it is this estrangement that gives room for plurality and natality, prerequisites for any idea of reconciliation. Voluntarism to overcome finitude and con- tingency, to remake the world, may establish the human in the position of “lord and master,” bearing angelic pretensions, but we will find at the end of the road just ourselves, in all our grandeur and misery (cf. arguments by Hopkins and Verdoux above); pulling his hair does not take Munchausen out of the swamp.

Many after Arendt stressed biological birth and the role of the caregivers, that is, embodied natality. In the act of giving birth frailty and vulnerability are at their highest, and it is precisely this frailty which is the most conspic- uous sign of reconciliation—“A child has been born unto us.” In addition, Arendt includes natality in the public sphere, which allows for solidarity. There is no true love without the embodied other, be it the newborn and the mother, or the “neighbor,” as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. By not recognizing the paradox implied in the human body, transhumanists are bound to see their best intentions both fulfilled and defeated.

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