**Anne O’Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2010)**

Looking at the title of this book, one would expect another study of Hannah Arendt. “Natality” (associated with finitude) is a signed concept; natality “belongs” to the Arendtien corpus. And no doubt, O’Byrne’s book contains a substantial engagement with Arendt. Yet, her project is much more ambitious on two counts: first, O’Byrne does not limit her study to Arendt but pursues natality through investigations of Heidegger, Dilthey, and Nancy. Second, her project is not simply exegetic. Eventually, O’Byrne is developing her own reflection by pursuing natality in areas where the above-mentioned authors might not have thought of inquiring.

The notion of natality operates in a plurality of discourses: biological, existential, political, metaphysical, and ethical. This semantic plurality is constitutive of the very concept of natality. Thus, it is crucial not to separate and isolate these senses but to consider them all at once; natality is political *and* existential, biological *and* ethical. The basic questions the notion of natality raises, in their naïve and inescapable form, are often contained in interrogative laments: “Why was I born?” “Where do I come from?” These have no more answer than the question: “why will I die?” Just as mortality is a feature of our *present* existence (even though death is necessarily futural), natality is also a feature of our present (even though our birth belongs to an immemorial past). If being-toward-death entails understanding the limited nature of existence, natality entails realizing that one might never have existed at all.

It is an essential dimension of finitude that we cannot coincide with the two events that comprise us. For Dilthey, the fact that we never simply coincide with ourselves, that we exist at a distance from ourselves, makes asking the question of meaning both necessary and impossible. “Specifically, any attempt I make to discover the meaning of all the events in my life will fail because the whole in relation to which those events have meaning will never be available to me” (54). For this reason, in a metabolic as well as a generational sense, our existence can only be unachieved: “we are neither finite nor infinite but rather we have in-finitude or living finitude as our way of being” (8). O’Byrne draws a parallel argument about “syncopated temporality,” i.e., the mode of being in time whereby we grasp ourselves only belatedly, a delayed understanding whereby we (individual or society) comprehend ourselves only as we have been. The event of our birth is a prime instance of syncopated time: it is an event for others (mother, family, whoever else was present); in a sense, we were not present at our own birth and only later does it become “ours.” While O’Byrne resolutely sets up to investigate natality in terms of embodiment, this doesn’t mean that birth is a purely “natural phenomena.” At best, biology can only address *how* we were born. Rather, birth is the event that joins the biological and the historical. To be born means that we arrive into a world that is already older than us, which means that we are faced with the task of appropriating this past. What’s more, “being born is an occurrence that cannot be expressed using an active verb. I was born. Birth happened to me and those around knew it as my birth long before it became possible for me to appropriate it as mine” (42). Thus, the reappropriation of our own birth is necessarily mediated by others, in particular, by a prior generation.

Using “metaphysics” in the common and pejorative sense of something ethereal and abstruse, O’Byrne reproaches Heidegger’s metaphysics for a “highly abstract discussion of Dasein as thrown into the world” (19) that does not correlate thrownness to natality. In its haste to analyze being-toward-death and futurity, the analytic of Dasein would have missed natality, even though birth constitutes the threshold between not yet and being there. This leads O’Byrne to re-interpret thrownness and even *Befindlichkeit* in terms of natality. Heidegger’s dismissal of natality, according to O’Byrne, is rooted in his rejection of biology (as well as psychology and anthropology) in favor of an ontologico-existential analysis. If, however, we are to take the question of birth seriously, we must reintroduce the body and with it, the whole biological sphere into the existential analysis.

O’Byrne finds in Dilthey’s thought of “life” (admittedly an unstable category) a way of thinking natality in its corporeal (material) *and* historical dimension. To generate means to reproduce in the most basic biological sense, but at the same time a generation, i.e., a group of contemporaries whose experiences have unified them despites their diversity, constitutes the fundamental unit of history. Rather than years or centuries, the generation is, for Dilthey, the proper historical measure because it is internal to the movement of our lives and is relational: a generation has the task of inheriting a past from its forebears and of differentiating itself from it, thereby opening a space to welcome yet another generation. “As natal, we always arrive late, in the wake of generations of others, but precisely because we are natal we have a capacity for newness” (65). To be thrown into the world is to be thrown into a world that is generational and peopled. In this sense the generational temporality of historicity is fundamentally plural (a trait that is conspicuously absent in Heidegger’s analysis of historicity).

Reading Arendt as a historical phenomenologist, O’Byrne rebuffs critics (e.g., Martin Jay) who have argued that birth, for Arendt, is primarily a natural phenomenon and therefore that natality is a failed attempt to set politics on non-political foundations. For one thing, a crucial point of Arendt’s thought is that these divisions (nature/nurture, biological/historical) are fading in the modern world. Of course, the, gap between nature and history has not totally closed, but insofar as scientists in the contemporary world have become actors, insofar as they intervene in the fabric of the natural world, the distinction between nature and history wears thin: we are now acting into nature, we initiate processes capable of enduring even beyond the span of mankind and by doing so, we insert unpredictability in what previous ages conceived of as an order regulated by necessary laws.

Likewise, the condition of natality, which is immediately also a condition of plurality, introduces unpredictability in human affairs and consequently, our actions too operate according to a syncopated temporality. “The syncopated temporality of our birth means that we are always running to catch up with ourselves, always struggling to make sense of the fact that we already are” (137). This gap between coming to be and coming to know (or more specifically coming to know ourselves) is crammed with an experience that is not quite “ours,” not even quite an “experience” and which, as such, falls into the immemorial.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s “post-Heideggerian natal ontology” (118) allows to conceptualize coming-into-being in terms of birthing and creation , thus in terms of plurality, since before we can relate to ourselves we are in relation to another being, and first of all, with the wombs of our mother. Against the Platonic attempt to conceive of generation in terms of imitation and re-production of an ideal model, O’Byrne affirms that “there is no form according to which we were made, no Idea of which we are the shadow, no other source of meaning that the world itself” (121). O’Byrne concludes that if what makes us who we are is our *natal material existence as it occurs in relation*, then even recent technologies of reproduction such as cloning do not constitute a challenge to this analysis: the clone will never be strictly identical to its origin; thus, it will never form a wholeness and unity that excludes plurality. Contingency is ineliminable and the idea that technology will allow us to turn natality into the production of an ideal type is an illusion; clone or not, the newness of the new born is inevitable.

O’Byrne’s work raises some difficulties; for instance, she seems to identify the difference between the social and the biological with Heidegger’s “ontological difference” even though this is a distinction of ontic regions. Likewise, she interprets being’s withdrawal in terms of our irretrievable birth (118). No doubt this is probably intentional for two reasons: first, because, following Dilthey, she seems to take “life,” rather than “being,” as the ultimate category; second, because she appeals to Nancy in order to replace the ontological difference by a relational plurality. But by focusing on the obstetrics and embryology of Dasein she also retains the privilege of ontic plurality. Later Heidegger, on the contrary, displaced Dasein as the existential locus out of which the question of being must be raised and approached the question of provenance -- the “whence” of beings in general (and not just those that can reproduce) -- in terms of poiesis and clearing. Ultimately, the question this excellent book raises is whether we truly gain something by abandoning ontology in favor of a pluralistic socio-biology.