



## Between Private and Public: Rethinking Hannah Arendt's Notion of 'Nativity' Through Contemporary Feminist Thought

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This article re-examines Arendt's notion of 'nativity' through a reinterpretation of her public-private distinction as dynamic, and engaging specifically with feminist reflections on 'the maternal' as provided by Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler.

As the human capacity of beginning something new, Arendt's concept of 'nativity' implies that human beings come into the world not as self-generated, but as related to others. Nonetheless, this notion has been criticized for abstracting from the concrete experience and generative process of birth. More generally, it has often been argued that Arendt separates human beings' first appearance in the world through birth from their capacity to appear in the shared scene of political life.

Building on feminist reflections on maternity and suggesting an interpretation of Arendt's public/private distinction as dynamic, this article shows that the private sphere exhibits its plurality and embodiment through intimate relations that inform the political space. This way, it argues that the interplay between what Arendt calls 'first and second birth' can be rethought as non-exclusive but connected, reconsidering the 'first birth' as a political and existentially significant event already staged within a network of relations.

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‘Plurality is the law of the earth’  
Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

## I. Introduction

This article re-examines Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘natality’ through a dynamic reinterpretation of her public-private distinction as outlined in *The Human Condition*, and engaging specifically with feminist scholars like Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler.<sup>1</sup> In particular, this article argues that Arendt’s perspective on ‘natality’ should be complemented by reflection on ‘the maternal’ and the relations that mark the beginning of each human being’s life.<sup>2</sup> This further highlights the intrinsic plurality of the human condition, as well as the limits of mortality in reframing human finitude.

As the human capacity to begin something new, Arendt’s concept of ‘natality’ implies that human beings come into the world not as self-generated, but as related to others. Nonetheless, this notion has been criticized for abstracting from the concrete experience and generative process of birth, drawing on the contrary on the model of the Creation (from nothing). More generally, it has often been argued that Arendt separates human beings’ first appearance in the world through birth from their capacity to appear again in the shared scene of political life. In her doctoral dissertation Arendt writes:

All that is created is seen in the image of human life, *coming out of nothingness and rushing into nothingness*. To the extent that even this precarious mode of existence is

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018. Further references to this edition are incorporated in the main text (HC) after quotations.

I presented earlier versions of this article at the Society for European Philosophy Annual Conference 2022 (Newcastle University, UK), the Visceral Bodies Symposium (Kingston University London, 2023) and the International Conference Rethinking the Sexed Body (Complutense University, Madrid, 2024).

I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for meticulously reading my piece and providing insightful comments. This article is also based on my doctoral thesis ‘Rethinking Birth and Maternity as Philosophical Categories: Hannah Arendt’s Notion of Natality and Contemporary Feminist Thought’ that I developed at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University London.

I have partially addressed the topics included in this article in Anna Argirò, ‘Arendt and Natality: Including Maternity in the Discourse around Birth’, in *HA: The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College* 11, 2023, pp. 95–110 and Anna Argirò, ‘Maternità, relazione, vulnerabilità: Una prospettiva filosofica.’ In *gender/sexuality/italy*, 6, 2019, pp. 159–173, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15781/r5dr-ra64>

<sup>2</sup> As Lisa Baraitser points out, the term ‘the maternal’ can have multiple meanings that include motherhood as an embodied and embedded relational and material practice (the very literal labour of birthing and raising children), as well as a figural, symbolic meaning. As the meaning of the maternal widens, it comes to signify a structural and generative dimension in human relations, politics and ethics. Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2017.

not nothing, it exists relating back to its origin. It is the hallmark of human life that it can explicitly adopt this reference and consciously hold on it in *caritas*.<sup>3</sup>

Arendt goes on to say that human beings are constitutively prompted to imitate God's creative power by recalling their own origin (*redire ad creatorem*). She also specifies that 'for the person who turns back to its absolute past, the Creator who made him, the Whence-he-came reveals itself as identical to the Whither-he-goes.'<sup>4</sup> Arendt speaks in this sense of a 'twofold before' of human existence that corresponds to the nothing before birth and the nothing that awaits after death.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I argue that this equation is Arendt's error. By conceiving human beings' birth as a coming from nothing that corresponds to and is interchangeable with the nothing that, in her view, will occur after death, Arendt obscures a fundamental question: From whom did we come? Who gave us life? In other words, Arendt obliterates the obvious but still philosophically underexplored fact that human beings have been generated (and not Created) by another human being.

Can a philosophical reflection on the significance of birth for the human capacity to begin legitimately disregard the newborn's relationship with whom gave them life? Why is it difficult to reflect on and to narrate human beings' 'origin' starting from birth and the primary relation with another human being? What about the maternal capacity of beginning? As Stella Villarmea points out

Philosophical reflections on the question of origin have a long history of identifying 'origin' with key concepts such as 'beginning', 'logos', or 'foundation', as developed by the great exponents of the history of philosophy. But what happens when we take the expression 'rethink the origin' literally? In philosophy we are not used to associating 'origin' — *logos*, *arché*, *Ur-* — with 'birth', *our* birth.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, Villarmea argues that it is necessary to explore new genealogies – understood in the literal, Greek sense of new *logoi* or studies of *genos*, generation – that acknowledge the importance of birth and who is giving birth.

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Love and St Augustine*, edited by Joanna V. Scott and Judith C. Stark, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p.55, emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.

<sup>6</sup> Stella Villarmea, 'A Philosophy of Birth: If you Want to Change the World, Change the Conversation', *Open Research Europe*, 1, 2021, 1.65, not paginated. See also Stella Villarmea, 'Rethinking the origin: Birth and Human Value', in *Creating a Global on Value Inquiry*, ed. by Jinfen Yan and David Schrader, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, NY, 2009, pp. 311–329.

In this article I argue, furthermore, that a perspective that underlines the importance of the initial relations that accompany the birth process can highlight the intrinsic plurality of each natal moment even more strongly.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as Christina Schües reminds us

birth is not just the start of a person, but simultaneously the start of a relationship  
[...] Birth means to be born from someone (the m-other) [sic] and to be born with  
the m-other<sup>8</sup>

The reasons for Arendt's neglecting of the question of maternity in her discourse around natality may be multiple, not least the fact that reflections on women's labour, motherhood and the public/private distinction in relation to women's struggles started in Marxist feminist debates and consciousness raising groups in the 70s, only a few years before Arendt's death in 1975.<sup>9</sup>

We may say that it was already quite exceptional, in the context of twentieth century European philosophy, that Arendt set birth, rather than death, at the centre of her political thought. Also, as it is known, Arendt was not sympathetic to feminist movements of her time as she saw in them the same risk that she detects in other political movements, namely the risk of annihilating differences and treating 'woman' as a constructed, monolithic subject. Indeed, as Julian Honkasalo points out, none of her major works deal with women's liberation or women's struggles. The only published text where Arendt explicitly reflects on the women's movement of her time is a book review of Alice Rühle-Gerstel's *Das Frauenproblem in der Gegenwart* (1932).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Human Condition* Arendt defines human plurality as the 'paradoxical plurality of unique beings' (HC, p. 176). For Arendt, plurality and uniqueness stand in a paradoxical relationship since, in order not to be perceived as contradictory, they cannot be understood separately. In order for a multitude of humans to manifest itself as a plurality – and not as something monolithic or a mere multiplication of copies –, each human being must be seen as unique. Reciprocally, this uniqueness depends on the possibility of distinguishing oneself from and appearing to others, who are therefore critical to attest the very uniqueness of each individual.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Schües, 'Nativity. Philosophical Rudiments Concerning a Generative Phenomenology.' In *Filosofia della nascita. Thaumazein – Rivista di Filosofia* IV/V, 2017. (9–35), p.20. It is worth underlining that the relationship that starts even before birth is not always or not only with the birthing mother. On the contrary, multiple 'maternal subjects' accompany human beings' birth. The crucial point is that human beings' birth is marked by a relationality that is critical to the unfolding of human existence and of a political and plural sphere as intended by Arendt.

<sup>9</sup> This debate was particularly developed by feminists writing on the issues related to biological and social reproduction, family, and sexuality. In the 70s and 80s, many feminists argued that women suffer from a triple burden of work: domestic work, reproductive work and work in the productive labour market. As Stella Sandford remarks, these feminist thinkers struggled to explain the specificity of women's oppression with gender-blind Marxist categories, and argued that the category of labour itself had to be expanded to include traditional women's tasks such as bearing and rearing children, caring for the sick, cleaning, cooking etc. Stella Sandford, 'What is maternal labour?', *Studies in the Maternal*, 3(2), 2011, pp. 2–6.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'On the Emancipation of Women,' in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*, edited and with an introduction by Jerome Kohn, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1994, pp. 67–68. See Julian Honkasalo, 'Cavarero

As a consequence, in the years between 1990–2000, feminist interpreters of Arendt such as Seyla Benhabib, Mary Dietz and Elizabeth Young-Bruehl charged her with re-proposing a masculine image of the public space, while uncritically accepting the ancient relegation of ‘reproductive labour’ (in Arendt’s words, the ‘labor of women in giving birth’) to the private sphere of bodily necessities (*HC*, p.30).<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, feminist scholars like Adriana Cavarero and Julia Kristeva have critically used Arendt’s categories to explore embodiment, intimacy, maternity, and relationality from a radically feminist perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Following this second interpretative line, this article argues that the interplay between what Arendt calls ‘first and second birth’ (*HC*, pp. 176–177) can be rethought as non-exclusive but connected, reconsidering the ‘first birth’ as a political and existentially significant event already staged within a complex network of relations.

Suggesting an interpretation of Arendt’s public/private distinction as dynamic through a focus on some passages of her *Denktagebuch* as well as on the temporality inherent to these spheres that are not given once and for all, this article shows that the private sphere exhibits its plurality and embodiment through intimate relations—particularly those between friends and lovers—that inform the political space, rather than being sharply distinct. I argue that the maternal relation too should be included amongst these intimate relations.<sup>13</sup>

In the second section, I offer an account of Arendt’s notion of ‘natality’ and of the conceptual distinctions – such as those between private and public; labour, work and action– she makes in *The Human Condition*. In the third section, I discuss the feminist critique of Arendt specifically in relation to her distinction between the public and the private. In the fourth section, I critically examine Cavarero and Butler’s reflections on maternity. In the final section, I set up a dialogue between Arendt and the feminist reflections discussed in this paper in order to connect the maternal power to generate someone absolutely new with the Arendtian ‘capacity of beginning’ (*HC*, p. 9). I also argue that the intimate relations that accompany each human being’s birth can be

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as an Arendtian Feminist,’ In P. Landrecche Cardillo, & R. Silverbloom (Eds.), *Political Bodies: Writings on Adriana Cavarero’s Political Thought*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Italian Philosophy, SUNY Press, 2024, pp. 37–55, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438497105-004>, p.38.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Mary Dietz, *Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, and Politics*, Routledge, New York/London, 2002 and Elizabeth Young-Bruehl ‘Hannah Arendt among Feminists’ in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, edited by Jerome Khon and Larry May, MIT Press, UK, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Honkasalo offers a reconstruction of the European/American debate on Arendt in ‘Cavarero as an Arendtian Feminist,’ and in ‘Arendt and Feminism,’ in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari, Bloomsbury, London, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> When I speak of ‘maternal relation,’ ‘mother’ or ‘maternal power,’ I do not narrowly refer to cis women giving birth. I more broadly refer to people giving birth and people caring of the newborn regardless of gender.

related to the political space that, for Arendt, unfolds through the interactions among human beings.

## II. Hannah Arendt's notion of 'natality' and the distinctions in the *vita activa*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt investigates human beings' activities in the world. Arendt points out three kinds of activity, 'labour,' 'work,' and 'action.' This distinction is related to the distinction among the social, private and public spheres. The standpoint Arendt takes on to make these distinctions is that of the common world, or of the place that human beings have in common, and which receives their words, actions and products. As I will discuss later, it is important that we understand, as I propose, that these identifications and differentiations are not static, but joined together, and that they mostly present different configurations throughout history.

Coming back to the distinction between 'labour,' 'work' and 'action,' the first I want to consider is 'labour,' which is the activity performed by the *animal laborans*. We can link labour to some aspects of modern society. In Arendt's view, labour corresponds to the biological process of the human body and biological life is for Arendt a metabolism feeding on things by devouring them. In a similar vein, society's life process literally consumes objects. Labour, for Arendt, (cor)responds and is informed by the logic and the circular/cyclic movement/time of consumption, according to which as soon as something is 'produced,' it is immediately consumed (*HC*, pp.79–126).

On the contrary 'work', performed by the *homo faber*, provides an 'artificial' world of things, different from natural surroundings. As Arendt remarks, *homo faber*, the builder of the world and the producer of things, can find their proper relationship with other people by exchanging the products of their work. Products themselves are often produced in isolation and their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes. The activity of the *homo faber* is for Arendt teleologically oriented by the idea or model of the final product, and it is informed by the category of means – ends. When the product is finished, the activity reaches its fulfilment/achievement in a separated object (*Ibid.*, pp. 136–167).

Finally, Arendt frames 'action' as the typical activity of the *zoon politikon* (political animal). For her, the capacity to act corresponds to the 'capacity of beginning' (*HC*, p. 9). In Arendt's view, each individual holds this capacity by virtue of their birth, which, in turn, introduces an element of innovation in the cyclic process of natural time. As Arendt remarks, '[...] individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the *rectilinear* course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular

movement of biological life' (HC, p. 19, emphasis mine. See also p. 97). This interruption is recalled and occurs again every time human beings decide to act and, thus, to start a new series of events. In this sense, it outlines and unfolds in a non-progressive and non-teleological temporality set out by the re-petition of the beginning that came into the world when we were born.

For Arendt, the capacity to act depends on the plurality of human beings. Indeed, actions need to be actualized, to be performed in a plural context. This plurality is specifically the condition of all political life and of the public. Under many aspects, the public for Arendt coincides with the world itself, intended as a space that receives products and human affairs. This means that the public, as conceived by Arendt, precedes the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. In *On Revolution* (1963) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1958) Arendt does discuss the institutional and legal conditions under which action takes place and can be extended. However, I argue that for Arendt politics does not have primarily to do with institutions or organizations (as for example the nation-state) *already given*, but with the 'in-between': the interactions among human beings. In Arendt's thought, this 'in-between' corresponds to the 'web of human relationships,' (HC, p.183) which constitutes the intangible part of the world that human beings have in common (Ibid., p.52). For Arendt, the common world is not simply a background to changeable organic life in general, and to human life in particular, but this world itself also changes and is shaped by them. From the standpoint of human life, the world has the double function of relating and separating people at the same time, so that they are free to speak and interact without hindering each other. Human beings can access and modify this sphere by revealing themselves with words, with deeds, or by producing objects.<sup>14</sup>

For Arendt, this exposure to others has an essential disclosing power. From time to time, it renews our coming-into-the-world. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt calls this phenomenon the 'disclosure of "who" ', as opposed to showing 'what' every human being is (Ibid., p. 179). The 'what' mostly corresponds to social identities; it

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<sup>14</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt suggests that words and deeds are closely related, and distinct from the disclosure through production which only reveals very little of its maker. However, in her discussion of the work of the genius, as well as in the essay 'The Crisis in Culture' she introduces an ambiguity in this respect. Indeed, Arendt speaks of the work of the genius in the part of *The Human Condition* dedicated to action. Producing artworks, the genius appears as absorbing those elements of distinction and uniqueness immediately expressed in action and speech. In their production the genius transcends their own skill and workmanship as well as each person's uniqueness transcends the sum of their qualities. In this sense, 'the superiority of man to his own work seems indeed inverted, so that he, the living creator, finds himself in competition with his creations.' As Arendt remarks, this phenomenon makes the genius feel as 'the son of his work, 'and he is condemned to see himself 'as in a mirror, limited, such and such.' See HC, pp. 207-212 and Hannah Arendt 'The Crisis in Culture' in *Between Past and Future*, Viking Press, New York, 1968/1971, p. 218.

has to do with those labels that are socially imposed in order to classify individuals. By contrast, the 'who' is something intangible and therefore uncontrollable. As conceived by Arendt, this dimension of identity is neither a property already given, nor something that can be appropriated. The Arendtian 'who' needs to be welcomed. The 'who' that we are constitutively entails exposure to others. This is why, for Arendt, the retrospective examination of our first radical appearance in the world becomes central as it is recalled in the moment in which we decide to act. Plurality is intrinsic to the event of birth in that the birth scene always implies the presence of someone else who is immediately able to confirm the uniqueness of the newcomer. This beginning is renewed every time we show ourselves in public. In such moments, individuals can experience the 'nakedness' that inaugurates the appearance of every human being.

The Arendtian 'who' is therefore something intangible. Although exhibited through the concreteness and uniqueness of the body, the 'who' is always shown by something more than mere physical presence. It appears every time human beings actively show themselves to others. When individuals decide to act or to speak in public in front of others, a natal scene opens up. For Arendt, this phenomenon is like a 'second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance' (HC, pp.176–177).

The freedom to show oneself to others has for Arendt ontological relevance. If one could not show oneself in the world in any way, then this would be tantamount to the damnation of not existing in the world. In this sense, as Arendt remarks, in ancient Greece, the notion of 'privacy' literally meant a condition of being deprived of something. From this perspective, privacy, intended as the private household where the urgencies of life were satisfied, was opposed to the public realm in which *men* freely faced each other through words and actions.

As Arendt remarks, today privacy is not understood as deprivation. In her formulation, this is due to the spread of mass society in the modern world. When the multitude stiffens, it becomes a mass. When this occurs, human plurality is destroyed. The many merge into a unity so compact as to eliminate any distinction. In this way, the spaces of action are demolished. The perspectival multiplicity that guarantees mutual recognition and the reality of the world, is erased. The phenomena occurring in the world are seen from a single point of view. They are flattened into a single interpretation. Reality loses its complexity. It is the end of the common world. In this case, for Arendt, the multitude does not give life to a political community, but becomes a mass society. In this sense, Arendt speaks of 'no-man rule,' 'bureaucracy,' 'mathematical treatment



of reality,' 'normalization,' 'equalization,' 'laws of statistic,' 'conformism' (Ibid., pp.38–49).

This forces human beings to find refuge within the private, if not the intimate sphere. As a consequence, modern privacy is for Arendt to be understood as the opposite not of the political sphere, but of the social one.

### III. Feminist critiques of Arendt: the public and the private

With her effort to draw distinctions among the spheres and activities outlined above, Arendt is generally recognized as the thinker who re-evaluated action, the public, the plurality of human beings and the importance of acting together in the Western philosophical and political tradition, setting at the centre of her political thought the category of 'natality' rather than that of 'mortality.'

However, when it comes to addressing topics such as that of maternity, many feminist philosophers look with suspicion at the framework she provides, arguing that Arendt seems to uncritically accept the ancient relegation of reproductive labour (in her words, the 'labor of women in giving birth') to the private sphere of bodily necessities (HC, p.30). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt highlights affinities between labour and reproduction, stressing the 'deformation of the human body' which is entailed by both activities and the need to conceal them from the public sphere (Ibid., p. 48). In a passage from this text Arendt claims:

it is striking that from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy[...] Hidden away were the laborers who 'with their body minister the [bodily] needs of life' (Aristotle, *Politics*), and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species (Ibid., p.72).

The equation between labouring and begetting is also supported by the fact that, etymologically, 'most European words for labor, the Latin and English *labor*, the Greek *ponos*, the French *travail*, the German *Arbeit*, signify pain and effort, and are also used for the pangs of birth' (Ibid., note 39 p. 48). The Italian word *travaglio* derives from the same etymology as the French *travail*.

These reflections lead many interpreters to detect a devaluation of the body itself in Arendt's thought as intrinsically antipolitical. For example, Bonnie Honig remarks that 'the human body is, for Hannah Arendt, a master signifier of necessity, irresistibility, imitability, and the determination of pure process. The body is a univocal instance

of complete closure.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, Arendt's theory of action and the related concept of 'natality' appear to be detached from actual births and rather modelled on the masculine context of the Greek polis. Indeed, one of the main critiques addressed to Arendt is that of having proposed an image of 'natality' rooted in the concrete experience of birth, but also significantly detached from it and from the whole generative process. As already remarked, symptomatic in this sense is the model Arendt draws on to speak of her idea of natality and, more generally, of the condition of 'being-born,' namely that of the Creation (from nothing). As Adriana Cavarero points out, the Arendtian category of natality does not highlight the fact that individuals come from a mother, since Arendt still relies upon the Greek idea that being born means coming from nothing.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, Arendt seems to distinguish human beings' first appearance in the world through the event of birth from their capacity to appear again, through action and speech, in the shared scene of political life. It is precisely this 'second birth' – our capacity to begin anew through action – that ultimately takes a central position in the Arendtian perspective. As Fanny Söderbäck points out: 'the capacity for beginning is announced by the birth of a child, but it is only actualized as freedom once we put it to work in a shared space of equals.'<sup>17</sup> 'Natality,' for Arendt, is thus a political category that is grounded in the event of birth. However, Arendt seems to regard the event of 'birth' in itself—namely our first appearance in the world, the maternal relation and maternal labour—as ultimately belonging to the private sphere of reproduction and bodily necessity. On the one hand, the Arendtian category of 'natality' highlights the intrinsic plurality of each natal event; on the other hand, Arendt seems to be exclusively interested in those who are born, in their initial act, in their first appearance—not in those giving them life.<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me that, although these feminist critiques underline problematic aspects of Arendt's thought that to some extent seems to retrace traditional tropes and distinctions, they do, however, ground their criticism on questionable assumptions.

First, following Seyla Benhabib, I think that it would be 'misleading to read Hannah Arendt only or even primarily as a nostalgic thinker,' nostalgic namely of the Greek polis as a political organization or even as a political model based on the exclusion of

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<sup>15</sup> Bonnie Honig, 'Towards an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,' in Judith Butler, & Scott, J.W. (Eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (1st ed.), Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203723999>, 1992, p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, Cambridge Polity Press, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Fanny Söderbäck, 'Natality or Birth? Arendt and Cavarero on the Human Condition of Being Born,' *Hypatia* 33 (2): 273–288, 2018, p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> See Francesca Rigotti, *Partorire con il corpo e con la mente. Creatività, filosofia, maternità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2010, p. 14 and 128.

slaves and women from political life.<sup>19</sup> Rather, I think that Arendt's theoretical strategy is to find out when and where specific concepts came from before becoming abstract generalizations.

Furthermore, although Arendt highlights a changing hierarchy in human activities, I do not believe that she proposes a qualitative judgment on the distinctions and specificities she points out. It is of course possible to detect a privilege towards action and the public realm throughout her work, for example, she explicitly frames the rise of mass society in the modern world as a problem.<sup>20</sup> However, this might be the result of the overlooking of the specificity of action and the public in the Western philosophical and political tradition, as well as of the historical context in which Arendt writes, namely the context of twentieth century totalitarianisms that foreclosed spaces for spontaneous and collective action.

As Roger Berkowitz points out, 'Arendt's defence of political action requires attention not only to the public but to the private as well.'<sup>21</sup> This is due to the peculiar and intimate relationship between these two spheres, which, I argue, do not stand in a binary and rigid opposition. As Arendt remarks, 'A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective sense' (HC, p. 71).

This brings us to the second point. Arendt claims that 'each human activity points to its location in the world' (Ibid., p.73). However, I argue that her categories cannot be conceived as static and given once and for all, we might say in a sort of *metaphysical presence*. According to this view, certain kinds of activity and the corresponding 'human type' (for example reproduction- women) would find their proper and definitive place in one or the other sphere. In this sense, Benhabib warns against what she calls Arendt's 'phenomenological essentialism' that, in her view, runs the risk of becoming paralysing and exclusive, imprisoning agents and activities in fixed roles and locations.<sup>22</sup>

When approaching Arendt's framework, what is often missed is the dialectic and dynamic relationship between the spheres and the activities she outlines. Arendt's interpreters usually focus on the content of each sphere, the criteria used to place

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<sup>19</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of the public space' in *History of the Human Sciences* 6 (2): 97-114, 1993, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> For a phenomenological reinterpretation of Arendt's three basic activities of labour, work, and action as the activities that actualize the conditions of life, worldliness and plurality see Sophie Loidolt, *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (1st ed.), Routledge, London/New York, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Berkowitz, 'Solitude and the Activity of Thinking' in Roger Berkowitz, Thomas Keenan and Jeffrey Katz (eds.), *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2009, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Benhabib, 'Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space,' p. 104.

certain kind of activities in one or the other, or suggest ways to challenge these very distinctions. What is often overlooked is *how* these spheres take shape, are modified and temporarily articulated. As Dana Villa points out

Unlike many of her critics, Arendt refused to reify the capacities and conditions of human existence into a transhistorical human ‘nature’[...] It is not [...] simply a question of the relative status an activity has in the hierarchy of the *vita activa*; it is also a matter of the peculiar historical reality the activity inhabits. Hence the possibility not only of a change in rank (the ‘reversal’ within the *vita activa* that helps define the entry into modernity), but of a dis-essencing or transformation of the capacities themselves.<sup>23</sup>

If, on the one hand, Villa stresses Arendt’s need to keep the private and the public as separate, although not fixed spheres, Benhabib, on the other, suggests a more fluid reading of Arendt’s distinctions, focusing not primarily on the space that circumscribes and identifies each human activity, but on the activities’ complexity and on how agents can take on and make sense of it.<sup>24</sup> As Benhabib puts it, ‘When human activities are considered as complex social relations, and contextualized properly, what appears to be one type of activity may turn out to be another; or the same activity may instantiate more than one action type.’<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, I argue that another risk of hypostatizing Arendt’s categories and of embracing a rigid reading of her distinctions is to interpret her emphasis on the public sphere as a mere reversal of the metaphysical privilege for the private/hidden substratum that underlies mere appearances – a reversal of what, in *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Arendt calls the ‘two-world theory,’ namely the metaphysical dichotomy of (true) Being and (mere) appearance that, in different configurations, crosses most of Western philosophy.<sup>26</sup> In other words, I believe that the risk would be to interpret Arendt’s distinction between private and public as simply an overturn of the surface-darkness hierarchy that has informed the Western metaphysical tradition. In the first pages of *The Life of the Mind* Arendt argues that only what appears in public really is from the standpoint of the common world. What does not reach this visibility is doomed to obscurity and oblivion.<sup>27</sup> However, again, this visibility is not given once and for all, so

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<sup>23</sup> Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, p.174.

<sup>24</sup> Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger* and Benhabib ‘Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt’s concept of the public space.’ See also Katy Fulfer, ‘Hannah Arendt and Pregnancy in the Public Sphere,’ In H. Fielding, & D. Olkowski (Eds.), *Feminist phenomenology futures*, Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. 257–274, p. 264.

<sup>25</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 1996, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, pp. 23–30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–22.

that certain activities would be *essentially* visible/real and object of political discourse, while others would be necessarily relegated out of our sight and, consequently, outside the realm of politics. Any activity can potentially become public and be born in the space of appearance. What is of crucial importance is that, when appearing as public, private or social, words and deeds take on different configurations. They are not merely transferred from one sphere to the other, but they are transformed and, at the same time, they transform/reshape the context in which they appear (See *HC*, p. 50).

In her *Natality and Finitude* (2010) Anne O'Byrne compellingly suggests a reinterpretation of Arendt's concept of 'natality' as a *threshold concept* through which to rethink Arendt's distinction between private and public.<sup>28</sup> Emphasizing how this distinction is informed by Heidegger's ontological difference (the distinction Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* (1927/1962) between the being of Being and the *Seiendheit* of entities), O'Byrne reframes natality as a 'struggle with absence and presence,' and with the 'gap at the origin of our being.'<sup>29</sup> In other words, Arendt's dynamic concept of politics and of human existence seems to recall the dialectic of darkness and 'un-concealment' that characterizes Heidegger's disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*). However, by shifting the focus from the solitary relationship of *Dasein* with its own death to the relationship that every human being has with their birth Arendt emphasizes that this movement does not entail the exclusion of others. Rather, it can occur only in relation.

O'Byrne does not develop her intuition further, and eventually aligns with those embracing a reading of Arendt's framework as static.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, I argue that an interpretation of Arendt's categories as dynamic, evolving distinctions— and in particular her distinction between private and public – would set the framework to rethink the interplay between the 'first and second birth' mentioned earlier as non-exclusive but connected, reconsidering the 'first birth' as a political and existentially significant event already staged within a complex network of relations.

In this respect, I argue that it is possible to detect two notions of the 'private' in Arendt's thought that are to some extent connected to each other. The first notion is more immediately traceable in Arendt's works such as *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* (1963), and it is connected to the space and management of the household. Here, human relationships are conceived on the model of the family. This concept of the private lends itself to an antagonistic reading of Arendt's distinction between private and public as mutually exclusive spheres. Furthermore, this first notion of the private

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<sup>28</sup> Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 8–12.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford UK, 1962.

<sup>30</sup> O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, 12–13.

is connected to the social and the so-called ‘social question,’ which in Arendt’s view regards matters that should not be of public concern.<sup>31</sup>

The second concept of the private needs to be retraced specifically in *The Life of the Mind* and in Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* (2002). In some passages of these works, the private is described as the space opened from time to time by the activity of thinking intended as understanding. In Arendt’s view, understanding does not produce meaning but *depth*, intended as what gives profoundness, rootedness and, I argue, time to human existence and human actions that can emerge from a darker ground which in turn is not fixed and given once and for all. In Arendt’s view, understanding is what helps human beings make themselves at home in the world and is interrelated to a dimension of the past intended not as a linear and rigid chain of events.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in *The Human Condition* Arendt reminds us how, in ancient Greece and Rome, the ‘realms of birth and death’ were considered sacred and, as such, they had to be preserved in a concealed sphere:

The sacredness of this privacy was like the sacredness of the hidden, namely, of birth and death, the beginning and end of the mortals who, like all living creatures, grow out of and return to the darkness of an underworld. (*HC*, p.62)

This sacred dark sphere does not seem to correspond to the private space of labour, as much as to the ‘finitude’ of human existence. I argue that this second notion of the private can be conceived of as a dimension of intimacy that has its own kind of relationality and plurality. However, this sphere is not sharply separated from the public, but it is rather continuous with it. For Arendt, this is a space for intimacy we can share with friends and lovers (see for example *HC*, pp.70–72).

Maria Tamboukou and Liesbeth Schoonheim highlight that it is possible to detect multiple and sometimes contradictory concepts of love in Arendt’s published works and in her *Denktagebuch*.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, as Berkowitz points out, we can trace multiple

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<sup>31</sup> As Arendt puts it in *On Revolution*: ‘[T]he social question [is] what we may better and more simply call the existence of poverty. Poverty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity as all men know it from their most intimate experience and outside all speculations’. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963), Penguin, London, 1990, p.60.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*. Bd. 1: 1950–1973. Bd 2: 1973–1975, Ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingrid Nordmann, Piper, München Zürich, 2002, XII, 28, 31, pp. 290–291; XIII, 6, 11, pp. 299 and 301.

<sup>33</sup> See Maria Tamboukou, *Epistolary Narratives of Love, Gender and Agonistic Politics: An Arendtian Approach*, Routledge, London, 2023 and Liesbeth Schoonheim, ‘Among Lovers: Love and Personhood in Hannah Arendt.’ *Arendt Studies*, vol. 2, 2018, pp. 99–124. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48511484>.

We can think for example of Arendt’s ‘love for the world’ (*Amor Mundi*) which has a political connotation and was indeed a prospective title for *The Human Condition*, her discussion of the concept of love in St. Augustine in her doctoral thesis

meanings of friendship throughout Arendt's work.<sup>34</sup> Friendship has an intimate aspect as it goes on between two human beings who give birth to a secret world. In this sense, it seems to be intertwined with and to recall a kind of love. At the same time, however, friendship presents political traits in that this kind of relation is framed as a dialogue between two *about a world*, or about something which appears when the friends talk together.<sup>35</sup> By sharing words and deeds, friends and lovers create a micro-world.

Building on these remarks, I suggest that the world, into which it is possible to enter as single entities, is formed starting from the in-between that grows between two or more people. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt points to both the 'world-destroying' and 'world-creating' elements of love, with the latter being distinct from fertility (see *HC*, note 82 p. 242).<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, love and friendship can be seen not as anti-political, but as pre-political experiences, in the sense that they prepare and inform the political space.

Going back to problematic feminist assumptions regarding Arendt's conceptual distinctions and, in particular, the claim that Arendt devaluates the human body as antipolitical, on the contrary, I agree with Linda Zerilli that it is possible to detect multiple concepts of the human body throughout Arendt's work.<sup>37</sup> In many passages of *The Human Condition* and of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt stresses the *ontological* importance of 'appearing' intended as being seen, heard, and touched by others, as well as the problematic rejection of the bodily dimension of human life throughout the Western philosophical tradition which can be traced back to the Platonic liberation from the burden of the body to ascend to the realm of Ideas.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than rejecting the topic of the body as a whole, Arendt seems indeed to reinterpret the dual ancient Greek understanding of it, on the one hand biological/private and subject to the necessities of life, on the other hand political/exposed to others through which 'beautiful' actions can be performed in public (*HC* note 15 p. 16). We may read Arendt's embracing of this distinction as a reiteration of the exclusion and obscuration of certain bodies and experiences from the public sphere. For example, Judith

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(and the distinctions she makes in this text between love as *cupiditas*, the love between Creator and creature and neighbourly love), or her idea of love as alienation from the world (*HC*).

<sup>34</sup> Roger Berkowitz, 'Friendship and Politics,' lecture presented in the *Exile and Utopia* International Symposium, Trento University, 13–14 April 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Philosophy and Politics,' *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970579>, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> See Schoonheim 'Among Lovers: Love and Personhood in Hannah Arendt,' p. 118 and Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, XVI, 3, pp. 372–374.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Zerilli, 'The Arendtian body,' In Bonnie Honig (Ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, Pennsylvania University Press, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance Plato, *Plato's Phaedo*, Clarendon press, Oxford, 1911.

Butler maintains that Arendt's distinction between a body 'that appears publicly to speak and act and another one, sexual, laboring, feminine, foreign, and mute, that generally is relegated to the private and pre-political sphere' is connected to her separation between the political and social spheres, and, ultimately, to her rejection of the 'social question' as a political problem.<sup>39</sup> However, I would suggest that, rather than reading this distinction as rigid, essentializing and exclusive, we may ask how these two ideas of the body and, more broadly, these two spheres take shape, intersect and depend on each other when it comes to reflect on topics such as those of birth and maternity.

From this position, we may also notice that if many feminist thinkers have underlined the rejection of the material aspects of maternity in Western philosophy, which at best has recovered this topic in an abstract/Platonic fashion, on the other hand, they seem to have accepted the assumption that maternity has first do with the biological aspects of the (female) body.<sup>40</sup> How to rethink maternity beyond these aspects without reiterating the gesture of repression of the bodily dimension of human life in order to merely fit into and access a public sphere that aligns to patriarchal standards and norms?

Following Söderbäck, it seems to me that while some feminist thinkers have attempted to recuperate and valorise materiality, immanence and cyclical time, and others have sought access to 'linear time' and to a public/political sphere already given, a fruitful theoretical strategy is to investigate how a focus on birth and maternity can disrupt these (metaphysical) binarisms and help construct new concepts of the public, of the relations to others, and of time.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV. Cavarero and Butler on birth and maternity

Many notable works discuss Arendt's notion of 'natality' through a feminist lens, examining women's role in giving life, highlighting the materiality of the process of pregnancy, and refusing metaphorical discussion of the birthing experience.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 2015, p. 86. I agree with Rahel Jaeggi's claim that, although the social remains under-theorized in Arendt's account, Arendt does not dismiss the social (question) in itself, but its depoliticization.

See Rahel Jaeggi, 'Arendt on Revolution', talk presented at the panel i of the conference *The Politics of Beginnings*, ICI Berlin, 15–16 February 2023, video recording, mp4, 19:05 [https://doi.org/10.25620/e230215\\_03](https://doi.org/10.25620/e230215_03).

<sup>40</sup> In her book *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo. Icone dell'ipermaterno* (Castelvecchi Editore, Rome, 2023), not yet translated into English, Cavarero too proposes a material and 'visceral' understanding of maternity.

<sup>41</sup> Fanny Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time. On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray*, State University of New York Press, 2019. Here Söderbäck proposes a compelling theory of 'temporal return' that disrupts the alternative between linear and cyclic interpretations of time. This rethinking also challenges metaphysical dualisms such as nature/culture, body/mind etc. by underlining the dynamic relation that binds them.

<sup>42</sup> See for example Söderbäck, 'Natality or Birth?' and Katy Fulfer, 'Hannah Arendt and Pregnancy in the Public Sphere,' along with the texts by Cavarero and Butler I discuss in this section.



As pointed out before, it is possible to detect two main interpretative lines of Arendt's thought, one that spread specifically in the US second-wave feminist context and has criticised Arendt for re-proposing a masculine/metaphysical account of the public/private, labour/action distinctions, and one developed in particular by continental feminist interpreters such as Cavarero and Kristeva who, in different ways, have used Arendt's categories to open up a space for theorizing embodiment, otherness, intimacy, maternity, relationality and plurality in the context of twentieth century critiques of the 'subject' and from a radically feminist perspective and from the perspective of theories of sexual difference.<sup>43</sup>

While Kristeva focuses on the relation between the newborn and the birthing mother to rethink the interplay between the symbolic/paternal order and the semiotic/maternal one,<sup>44</sup> Cavarero uses Arendt's original rethinking of politics to develop her own account of uniqueness, embodiment, relationality and birth. Building on Arendt's concept of human plurality as a 'paradoxical plurality of unique beings' (*HC*, p. 176), Cavarero stresses that '[each] relation carries with it the act of distinguishing oneself, constituting the uniqueness of each one through this distinction.'<sup>45</sup> For example, in *For More than One Voice* (2005) the uniqueness of each human being is manifested through the uniqueness of the voice as distinguished from the devocalised philosophical *logos*.<sup>46</sup>

Cavarero understands the Arendtian issue of plurality from the viewpoint of an *embodied*, which for her always means *sexed* (*sessuata*), uniqueness.<sup>47</sup> This uniqueness is primarily entrusted to the relational dimension between an 'I' and a 'you' that simultaneously form and recognize each other. This way, the Arendtian in-between that, at the same time, binds and separates those who interact, is preserved.

<sup>43</sup> Honkasalo, 'Cavarero as an Arendtian Feminist,' p.38.

<sup>44</sup> See for example Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans by Margaret Waller, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984.

<sup>45</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Stanford University Press, 2005, p.171.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>47</sup> The translators of *In Spite of Plato* point out that "'sessuazione' [sexedness] is a central category of Italian feminist discourse that historically has a similar function to the English category of gender. However, *sessuazione* encompasses the biological concept of sex within the larger category of cultural gender, rather than functioning as its binary opposite." Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, p. XX. The deconstructive potential of the thought of sexual difference lies in claiming human beings' *sexedness* to mark a positive female specificity as distinct from the masculine but not framed and controlled by a patriarchal discourse.

In their latest work *Donna si nasce (e qualche volta lo si diventa)* (Mondadori, Milano, 2024), Cavarero and Olivia Guaraldo re-think key concepts of Italian feminism and the thought of sexual difference in relation to current issues such as surrogacy, reproductive freedom, gender theories and male violence against women. The book has not yet been translated into English.

Rather than speaking of a general or absolute ‘other’ (as it often happens in the twentieth century’s continental debate on the question of ‘otherness’), Cavarero sets at the centre of her reflections the ‘you’ who is invoked and addressed in the Arendtian question ‘who are you?’. For Cavarero, the response to this question starts not from the philosophical inquiry ‘*where did you come from?*’, but from the interrogative ‘*who gave you life?*’, *from whom* you came from. Since the beginning of life, there is always at least one human being who generated and interacted with us. Amending Arendt’s account of birth as a coming from nothing, Cavarero highlights that we are all born from another (female) human being.<sup>48</sup>

In *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero emphasizes that ‘besides being she from whom the existent comes, the mother is also the other to whom the existent first appears.’<sup>49</sup> Every human being who comes into the world is already emplaced in the relational web which then extends to human plurality. For Cavarero, the primary relationship with who gives us birth confers an expressive, relational, and contextual status to our identity.<sup>50</sup> Far from being always ‘identical’ to itself, this identity reveals and reconfigures itself as something unique within a relational context.

Conceived as a dynamic relationship between past and present, Cavarero configures the process of individualisation as intrinsically narrative, entrusted to the practice of reciprocal storytelling. In *Relating Narratives*, the model of this narrative practice informs specifically the intimate relations of friendship and love. In this work, Cavarero reports the story of two friends, Emilia and Amalia who, in the 70s, attended ‘La scuola delle 150 ore’ in Milan.<sup>51</sup> Emilia often narrated her story, the story of her life, to her friend Amalia who eventually decided to write it down for her. This initiative deeply moved Emilia who always preserved the paper on which the friend had written her story for her in her handbag.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Routledge, London, 2000, p.21. The Italian title *Tu che mi guardi tu che mi racconti* explicitly refers to a ‘you’ who ‘sees’ and ‘narrates’ me.

Contra Cavarero’s formulation, it is worth remarking that it is not always the mother and not always a ‘she’ – for instance when persons who give birth identify as another gender, or when they do not also mother/parent the newborn they give birth to (as in surrogacy or adoption after birth) who first cares, interacts and acknowledges the uniqueness of the newborn.

<sup>50</sup> Again, although Cavarero narrowly focuses on what she conceives as an exclusive relation between the birthing mother and child at the expenses of other relations that accompany the beginning of each of our lives for example with fathers, other care givers and siblings, I believe that her insistence on the building of uniqueness in relation to others at the early stages of life remains of crucial importance.

<sup>51</sup> This story is reported by Amalia in the book *Non credere di avere diritti* [*Don’t Think You Have Any Rights*] after the premature death of her friend Emilia. This text has been published in English under the title *Sexual Difference: the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990.

As happened with many women of that time, Cavarero underlines, the setting of the reciprocal narration between Emilia and Amalia was the domestic, private space of intimate relations. Although not yet a proper political and plural scene, the narrative exchange between Emilia and Amalia already opens up a relational space where they can appear to each other in their uniqueness. In this respect, Cavarero refers to the phenomenon of ‘consciousness-raising groups,’ which characterized Italian feminism in the 1970s. For Cavarero, in the practice of ‘consciousness raising,’ self-narration as well as the practice of ‘starting from oneself’ [partire da sè] found a political scene – that is, in the Arendtian sense, a shared and interactive one.<sup>52</sup>

In this respect, I suggest that for Cavarero too as it happened with Arendt, the private sphere can present a peculiar kind of relationality that is not merely opposed to the plurality of the public space but is rather continuous to it. It is in these intimate relations that the web of politics starts to be woven and can be done and undone.

In *Inclinations*, Cavarero reconfigures the dual I–You relationship in terms of asymmetry. As Olivia Guaraldo points out, in this text Cavarero proposes the figure of the ‘inclined subject’ – paradigmatically represented by the mother who leans towards the infant – as an ethical posture that is unbalanced, yet essentially relational insofar as it is exposed toward an ‘outside’ of the self.<sup>53</sup> In this way, Cavarero sketches a relational ontology based on a ‘postural ethics’ that is spatially imagined as a diagonal. For Cavarero, the focus on the scene of birth reveals the intrinsic vulnerability of the human being. Since the very beginning, our first appearance in the world in an unequal relation with someone who gives us life, inaugurates this shared condition of vulnerability. In this case, however, the ‘relational space of reciprocal appearance’ is not characterized by equality and symmetry.<sup>54</sup>

While, for Cavarero, ‘the feminine’ is not exhausted in the maternal experience, she nevertheless claims the capacity to bring someone into life, the ‘maternal power to generate,’ as a specific female power which, as such, constitutes an element of significant distinction compared to ‘the masculine.’<sup>55</sup> It is important to remark that,

<sup>52</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p.59.

<sup>53</sup> See Olivia Guaraldo, ‘Inclining toward Democracy: From Plato to Arendt,’ in *Political Bodies: Writings on Adriana Cavarero’s Political Thought* edited by Paula Landerreche Cardillo and Rachel Silverbloom, 1936, SUNY Press, 2024, pp.19–36, p.28.

<sup>54</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*, translated by Adam Sitze and Amanda Minervini, Stanford University Press, California, 2014, p.109. I agree with Lisa Baraitser’s concern regarding Cavarero’s emphasis on the infant’s vulnerability and dependence on the birthing mother in this text, with the effect of obscuring mothers’ or other carers’ own dependencies and vulnerabilities. Lisa Baraitser, paper presented in the roundtable on ‘Misogyny and Its Roots’ at the COWAP Europe Conference ‘Intolerance to the Feminine,’ Rome, 22–23 October 2022.

<sup>55</sup> See Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, p.60. In the same text Cavarero explicitly states that ‘[m]en are excluded from the exclusively female experience of generating life.’ *Ibid.*, p.68.

for Cavarero and other thinkers of ‘sexual difference’ such as Irigaray and Kristeva, the connection between maternity and femininity cannot be traced back to a presumed ‘natural’ function based on an uncritical differentiation of sexes as male and female. If it is true that Cavarero sees the fact of ‘being sexed’ (*sessuate/i*) as a constitutive *given* of the human condition and narrowly reduces it to the exclusive alternative male–female, however, this differentiation is not static and self-evident. Rather, it needs to be recognized by someone else from the very beginning of each human being’s life, a recognition that, in Cavarero’s account, is paradigmatically represented by the mother’s first glance at the child. Furthermore, each human being should be able to claim, represent and actively live his or her embodied and thus sexed subjectivity.

Judith Butler contests the ‘givenness’ of sex duality. With the publication of her seminal book *Gender Trouble* in 1990, in the wake of Michel Foucault, Butler begins a radical critique of sexual binarism.<sup>56</sup> In this text, Butler argues that there is neither a ‘true’ gender identity nor a form of natural ‘sexedness,’ but only discursive horizons that produce the truth about sexes and their differences. For Butler, these horizons are not neutral. Rather, taking the sexual binary for granted and considering heterosexuality as a paradigm of normality, these discursive horizons strengthen the mechanisms of exclusion and un–speakability that regulate the coexistence of human beings in society, forcing the complexity and variety of the human to fit into a pre-established grid.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the presumption of sex duality (the exclusive division between male and female) is, for Butler, not a given that needs to be rethought or claimed. Rather, this duality itself has a normative and prescriptive function in relation to human beings.<sup>58</sup>

In this sense, Butler contends that the problem of feminism is not so much, or at least not primarily, the patriarchal regime that the philosophers of sexual difference challenge by claiming a female specificity, but the heteronormative regime that, imposing a supposedly natural evidence –the distinction between male and female– sets the boundary between what is or is not (to be) considered ‘normal.’<sup>59</sup> In this way, this regime not only controls but also produces those subjects (masculine or feminine)

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<sup>56</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

<sup>57</sup> See Olivia Guaraldo, ‘Figure di una relazione. Sul pensiero di Judith Butler e Adriana Cavarero,’ in *Differenza e relazione. L’ontologia dell’umano nel pensiero di Adriana Cavarero e Judith Butler*, edited by Olivia Guaraldo and Lorenzo Bernini, ombre corte, Verona, 2009, pp. 90–121, p.104.

<sup>58</sup> In this respect, Sandford mentions the emblematic case of intersex infants who are forced to conform to one or the other of the terms, often without success. Stella Sandford, ‘Sex: a transdisciplinary concept’ in *From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)*, *Radical philosophy* (165), pp. 23–30, ISSN (print) 0300-211X, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, section one, pp. 3–33.

that it purports only to name. Given that the heteronormative regime is radically discursive and historically constructed, for Butler it is possible, from time to time, to implement strategies of subversion, parodying, playing those roles (first and foremost sexual roles) which, apparently given once and for all, are in fact established through the repetition of specific gestures. In this respect, Butler speaks of a 'performative identity,' or of a constructed, mobile identity that can unmask the fixedness of socially imposed roles. Subjugation and the concomitant possibility of destabilization do not only occur on a superficial level, but are also played out in the psychic dimension or in that presumed interiority which, in turn, reveals itself to be discursively constructed and culturally oriented.

By problematizing the very distinction between 'male' and 'female,' Butler questions the connection between maternity and femininity that the philosophers of sexual difference had taken as a starting point for their reflections. For Butler, the greatest danger is not only taking for granted the connection that links the topic of maternity to the category of femininity (socially constructed), but also and most importantly that of placing the maternal experience in an a-historical, pre-discursive horizon.

The target of Butler's reflections in the latter sense is mainly Julia Kristeva who, according to the US philosopher, by relegating motherhood and, more specifically, the maternal body outside of a linguistic elaboration, has produced a reification of it, with the consequence of ultimately submitting it to the dictates of the patriarchal and heteronormative symbolic order.<sup>60</sup> Yet, as Söderbäck and Sandford in different ways point out, at least in *Gender Trouble*, Butler seems to accept the metaphysical distinction between 'nature' and 'culture,' where nature is seen as something that temporally and logically precedes or exceeds the dominant symbolic-paternal order, rather than grasp the interrelation between the two, as well as the dynamic of the natural-semiotic-maternal itself.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly to Cavarero's revising of the 'I' – 'You' relation in terms of asymmetry in *Inclinations*, in the works after the beginning of the new Millennium and particularly after the events of 9/11 and the following escalation of violence – see for example *Frames of War* (2010) –, Butler focuses on aggressive, broken relational forms that open up an ethic based on *vulnus*, on wounding by others.

In Butler's recent work, the constitutive dependence on an outside that precedes us is no longer only influenced by society's expectations—on the basis of which we must assume a predefined gender, body, sexual role—but it also entails the possibility of a

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<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*, pp.101–118.

<sup>61</sup> See Sandford, 'Sex: a transdisciplinary concept', p.27 and Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time*, pp. 201–232.

violent offense. Gender imposition and violent offense are now intertwined. Each of us is always already exposed to others' injury. The emphasis is placed above all on the *precariousness* of the human condition, a condition in which relationality is revealed in the first place as a violent affection, as exposure to others' dominion.<sup>62</sup>

By opening a dialogue between Cavarero's theory of sexual difference and Butler's gender theory, I argue that what Cavarero calls the 'given' – the givenness of 'being sexed' – is always already mediated by the glance and the words of those who witness it. Similarly, we may say that Cavarero's 'embodied uniqueness' is mobile and in continuous reconfiguration, rather than being limited to and having to conform to a sex binary. In this way, I suggest that we can reconfigure and to some extent disentangle the connection between maternity and femininity by questioning the exclusiveness and the givenness of the connection between the two. Rather than being seen as an exploitation of a specific female capacity, maternity can become a philosophical and political category able to speak for, to represent and be claimed by each human being. Rather than being projected onto a 'neutral horizon' that erases singular differences, the category of maternity would thus be tied up with and embedded in the human uniqueness that emerges only in a relational context.

## V. Arendt and feminist thinkers in conversation

In section III, I have argued that it is possible to retrace two notions of the private in Arendt's work, one that corresponds to the space of labour and the management of the household and is opposite to the public sphere, and one that can be conceived as a dimension of intimacy that welcomes the 'finitude' of human existence and gives depth and rootedness to human life. I have argued that the latter is not sharply separated from the public, but it is rather continuous with it in that it is made by relations – with friends and lovers – that own their own kind of plurality and hold a world-creating power.

Building on this reading of Arendt's private/public distinction as dynamic, and expanding Arendt's position through the feminist reflections addressed in the previous section, I suggest that what Arendt calls 'first and second birth' can be seen as non mutually exclusive or, at best, connected in a logical/consequential way, as her critics understand it. According to this reading, human beings' 'first birth' can be constructed as mere biological birth and relegated to the private/social spheres, while the 'second

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<sup>62</sup> See for example Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, London, 2010. In this work, Butler draws a distinction between *precariousness* as a shared human condition and *precarity* as the 'politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence.' p. 28.

birth' in which we 'confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance' can be seen as public, political, and exposed to others (*HC*, pp. 176–177). As opposed to this interpretation, I argue that what Arendt calls human beings' 'first birth' can be rethought as already a political and existentially significant event that is staged in a complex network of relations. As O'Byrne points out: 'What occurs second is the event that begins the process by which that birth turns out to have been my birth, an event that can happen only in a context provided by those who have been around longer than I have.'<sup>63</sup>

In this sense, I argue that the maternal relation (which can be established not only between the child and the birthing person, but also with other caring figures in the initial phases of life) should be included amongst those relationships that have the world-creating power that Arendt attributes to friendship and love, rather than being uncritically conceived as mere reproduction of the human species. Indeed, from the standpoint of the common world, maternity suggests the capacity to bring something or someone *absolutely new* into the world. Meanwhile, according to Arendt's account, labour performs precisely the opposite movement as it 'incorporates' and immediately consumes what it produces (See *HC*, pp. 96–109).

The world that human beings have in common is constantly reconfigured through human relations that allow one to transcend one's self-referential horizon, flowing into a continuous process of renewal of the world. Thanks to this 'original' getting-in-touch, the temporal dialectic of birth is constantly put back into motion and thus we can continue our 'natal path.' Our first birth thus becomes 'a memorial event for all the other births of our life.'<sup>64</sup> It points to a primary connectivity that is generative and is never forgotten.

Crucially, the retrospective look at our first radical appearance in the world highlights not only our neo-natal condition, but also the 'filial' one, the fact that no one is self-made. In this sense, we notice that human beings' 'natal path' is not only oriented towards future possibilities, but it is also addressed to the past. In our birth we observe the coexistence of two movements: to move away from the origin, to go back to it. This swing reminds us of another movement which appears as a relationship involving someone who gives birth and someone who comes into the world. Each new birth interrupts and puts the flow of time back into motion again. The 'ex' of existence which, in Arendt's account, corresponds to a dynamic and continuous exposure to others, is embodied by someone who gives us life.

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<sup>63</sup> O'Byrne, *Nativity and Finitude*, p.105.

<sup>64</sup> Silvano Zucal, *Filosofia della nascita*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 2017, p. 452, my translation.

Maternity as intrinsically relational suggests a configuration of time not as a rigid, linear consequentiality. By pointing to a past that preceded our birth, it gives profundity to our existence. Since her doctoral thesis on *Love and St. Augustine*, Arendt supports a concept of human life and of temporality primarily oriented by remembrance of a past that is never wiped out. As we have seen, for Arendt human beings retain a special relation to this absolute past by virtue of being-born (albeit intended by Arendt as having-been-Created). This origin, though not properly experienced, remains stored up in the human mind and prompts human beings to respond and recall it by originating/initiating something new. In Arendt's view, human beings' capacity to act is indeed an actualization of 'the human condition of natality' to the extent that it depends and responds to 'the beginning that came into the world when we were born' (HC, p. 177). For Arendt, this capacity is not metaphorically or symbolically connected to birth, but it is ontologically rooted in the fact of being born (Ibid., p. 247).

This 'return to the past' introduces a new beginning which is radically contingent and depends on the plurality of human beings that confirm and take part in it. By unfolding in a potentially infinite network of actions and reactions, the event of a new beginning keeps itself open to unpredictable consequences. This movement of return and, at the same time, of forward motion is not self-performed but rather depends on the plurality that precedes (past) and exceeds (future) the natal event in itself.

Re-elaborating Arendt's idea of natality through the feminist reflections discussed earlier, I suggest that birth and maternity become borderline experiences and concepts that point to an event of transformation. As Giacomo Pezzano points out:

The lexicon of the 'in-between,' of the border-line, grasps the dimension of the [...] 'in the meantime,' of the 'in progress' [...] which characterizes the course of a process, the event of transformation in its happening. [This lexicon] points to what, so to speak, takes place after death and before rebirth, or to that *dilated space* which, at the same time, precedes and follows birth and for which – thinking about pregnancy – one is not yet a child and not yet a mother, but they are 'jointly becoming.'<sup>65</sup>

Human beings' existence unfolds in this dilated space where birth becomes an *in itinere* or repeated event. As Lisa Baraitser suggests, this space recalls what Bracha Ettinger calls the 'matrixial,' a term that combines the notion of the *matrix* with that of 'the maternal' in order to give an image for a relation where the not-yet infant and not-yet

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<sup>65</sup> Giacomo Pezzano, 'Divenire: Piccolo lessico filosofico della trasformazione,' *Thaumàzein-Rivista di Filosofia*, no. 4-5 (2016-2017): 67-123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/thau.v4i0>, p. 94, my translation, emphasis mine.



‘mother’ are in a space of encounter, but without merger and without sharp separation.<sup>66</sup> This aspect of being-with-others that all humans carry with them is distinct from either fusion or separation, and refuses the binary logic of sexual difference. Rather, it proposes a different way of understanding sexual difference as a continuous process of differentiation in relation, that results and unfolds in a unique life story, as Cavarero would have it.

By recalling Arendt’s position, I suggest that, together with human existence, the public also unfolds as a dimension (an *in-between*) that is from time to time generated, reshaped and cared for through actions and speeches. The unfolding of the public space through what Arendt calls the “web” of human relationships’ is temporally articulated and dislocated (*HC*, p.183). Human beings’ mutual disclosure and, with it, the public realm of politics, unfold in a temporal dimension oriented by the past and by remembrance. In this respect, I argue that a focus on birth and maternity allows us to outline a world-oriented and ‘fleshed’ concept of time that unfolds as a shared temporality. The flow of time is configured as an ‘immanent transcendence’ whose fulcrum is the vivid and dynamic present where human beings are ‘epidermically given to one another,’ as Butler would have it, they can interact, hear each other’s voice, exchange words and deeds.<sup>67</sup>

The public space so generated does not call for symmetry, but rather for a continuous interweaving of multiple and singular dependencies. What we may call an ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ marks not only the temporality that informs the movement of human existence through relations that precede and exceed our coming into the world, but also the spatial unfolding of the public which, from this point of view, becomes a dimension where care and wound, power and powerlessness are joined together and are intimately related.

Bringing together Arendt’s idea of ‘natality’ and feminist reflections on the maternal as provided specifically by Cavarero and Butler, I hope to have shown that it is possible to rethink birth and maternity as philosophical concepts through which we can conceive anew the relation between public and private, the notion of the public itself, subjectivity, difference and otherness. This new conception would start from an essential relationality and capacity for beginning of the human condition.

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<sup>66</sup> Bracha Ettinger, ‘Matrix and metamorphosis,’ in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Indiana University Press. 4 (3): 176–208, 1992. See Baraitser, talk on ‘Misogyny and Its Roots.’

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, 2005.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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