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Beyond Anti-natalism and Hannah Arendt's Metaphysics of Natality: Towards a Metahuman *vita contemplativa*

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Abstract

Anti-natalism has drawn the attention of Meta- and Posthumanism. Given the latter's non-anthropocentric approach and the devastating human impact on the world's ecosystem, the cessation of the human species seems to be a plausible option. I will therefore outline some ecological, utilitarian, and existentialist arguments, which are indicative of the assumption that humans present a misrouted development of evolution. To account, however, for the ongoing attraction of having children, I will turn to a representant of natality, Hannah Arendt, whose approach is far from ideological or reactionary. Yet, from a metahumanist viewpoint, I have objections against either attitude. Anti-natalism would mean a theoretical surrender, which could forego many of the premises posthumanism/metahumanism is founded on, namely human plasticity, the wisdom of the body (Nietzsche), and other-relationality, the idea of becoming and a fruitful coexistence with the other. Arendt's humanist combination of natality and a vita activa comes down not only to a metaphysical idealization of birth but also to a furthering of liberal-capitalist growth. Alternatively, I will offer an aesthetic ethics of (active) inactivity and resonant relationality, which may well be compatible with metahumanism.

Keywords: *Antinatalism; Natality; Metahumanism; Vita contemplativa*

Introduction

Given their devastating impact on the world's ecosystem and the disquieting social relations, the cessation of human beings has also become an issue among posthumanist, or more-than-human movements (MacCormack 2020, 139-170). Current and ongoing damages and losses in both the animate and inanimate world of the Anthropocene are owing to a basic rationalist-instrumental and ego-centered constitution which appears to be inscribed epigenetically into the neural structure of Homo sapiens.² Thus, the only way to stop extinction on a global scale is, one might think, the elimination of the human species.

This, however, would also come down to a theoretical surrender which would forego many of the premises posthumanism/metahumanism is founded on, namely human plasticity, the wisdom of the body (Nietzsche, 1969 II, 300-301; Wolf, 1993, 58-76), other-relationality, the idea of becoming and a fruitful coexistence with the inspiring other (metahumanism).³ I do not consider here the (science fiction) possibilities of ecologically minded, benign, and self-replicating cyborg hybrids, bionic women, and the digital superhuman (as in varieties of posthumanism and transhumanism).

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² This has been promoted, of course, by capitalist consumerism, which seems to be without alternative now.

³ For economic reasons I lump here together posthumanism and metahumanism. Ecologically and pragmatically, though, I am more inclined to the latter.



Posthumanism is motivated, after all, by a future, even teleological, orientation (without an ultimate goal, though); the cause of shifting away from a subject-centered anthropology to a metahuman, other-than-human ethics of relationality would then be pointless. In general, we would abandon a pedagogical image of humanity, which believes, against all odds, in judiciousness and reform.

Nevertheless, there remains, on the one hand, the post- in *posthuman*, along with the rejection of an eccentric, object-directed, and instrumental subjectivity, and, on the other, the positive and non-anthropocentric focus on auto-referential and self-sustaining life (including its (inanimate) environment), which does not reach beyond itself. This is still very suggestive of a *discontinuation* of homo sapiens who, by virtue of their self-consciousness, cannot help going beyond themselves in exploitative ways. Anti-natalism naturally presents an anthropocentric approach, but its ecological arguments are especially pertinent, as are its existentialist, in principle negative, conceptions of human beings, at least in their present state. It is obvious to distinguish between a restricted and an all-encompassing or rigorous anti-natalism. Both options, the latter more than the first, are, of course, politically questionable. Who would voluntarily decide against procreation? The decision not to have a child or children could only be based on gratuitousness, a biopolitical dictatorship is out of question. For reasons of argumentative simplification, I will nevertheless assume a total end of procreation, although I think post-humanist movements might well convince a large part of humanity to renounce more and, most likely unhappy and suffering, children. A continuing population of, say two billion people, might be reconcilable with the rest of life.

Anti-natalism: ecological, anthropological, other philosophical arguments

In what follows, I will first quote some news that may ecologically and anthropologically back up antinatalist positions. Apart from this, I will also critically focus on some existentialist and utilitarian anti-natalist arguments. To account, however, for the ongoing existential attraction of having children, or, for that matter, the lack of appeal of anti-natalism, I will turn to a philosophical representant of natality, Hannah Arendt. Although Arendt draws (idiosyncratically) on religious notions, her approach is far from ideological in a dogmatic, discriminatory, or politically conservative and reactionary sense. As I find either attitude unsatisfactory, I will conclude with an ethics of active contemplation – which should be compatible with metahumanism.

Earth is experiencing the largest loss of life since the dinosaurs, and humans are to blame. The way we mine, pollute, hunt, farm, build and travel is putting at least one million species at risk of extinction, according to scientists. The sixth mass extinction in geological history has already begun, some scientists assert, with billions of individual populations being lost. Unlike changes to the climate, which could be reversible even if it takes thousands of years, extinctions and the eradication of ecosystems are permanent.⁴

Of the targets agreed upon in the last UN Convention on biological diversity in Japan in 2010, not even one has been met.⁵ Commendably, the recent COP15 in December 2022 in Montreal has arrived at an agreement on a reservation of 30% of global land for other-than-humans, yet the decision is by no means obligatory; it included even the possibility of certificate trade as with CO₂. The outcome of the COP27 climate conference in Sharm el-Sheikh “was widely judged a failure on efforts to cut carbon dioxide, after oil-producing countries and high emitters weakened and

⁴ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/30/what-is-cop15-and-why-does-it-matter-for-all-life-on-earth-aoe> (See also www.cbd.int)

⁵ See, for example, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00110-w>



removed key commitments on greenhouse gases and phasing out fossil fuels.”⁶ The outcomes of the other UN summits on desertification are similarly distressing. Climate Change and desertification seem to be ineluctable. All damages are essentially anthropogenous.

Indeed, this year the Earth Overshoot Day was on the 28th of July and around the 1st of May in countries such as Germany. On November 15, the global population reached the number of 8 billion. With each new child born into this world, the overshoot increases. Each subject uses up more resources than can be compensated for, and a further increase in the world population will accelerate not only the extinction of all species, but it will also increase suffering, starvation, and natural disaster. Both the extinction of other-than-human species, as well as a delay or stoppage of climate change, appears only possible now if human procreation is slowed down. This is, to be sure, the most evident argument against births.

With the advancing scarcity of resources (the tipping point is supposed to be with a population of 10 billion) and global increase of demand, geopolitics, and (pre-) fascist policies along with a negative anthropology have come back. After the liberal optimism in the 90s, a Hobbesian *homo homini lupus* has asserted itself again. Putin, adhering to 19th-century imperialist ideologies, does not care about international law and sends his own youth to slaughter.

Another negative anthropological point is our deficient capability for empathy and sense of ethics, which extends only to our proximity. It is our evolutionary heritage that we do not care for distal harm, far away from our immediate life-world, say, in the Mediterranean, where thousands of fugitives have drowned in recent years.

Apart from the ecological and (in a narrower sense) anthropological, there is a wide range of (overlapping) philosophical, moral, and more subjective arguments against having children. Here only three: Humans are thrown against their will into an existence of pure facticity and contingency, which, in all likelihood, means a fearful life-towards-death. Martin Heidegger, rather a thanatologist than a natalist, asserts that a child, as soon as conceived of, and a “being-in-the-world,” dies in terms of being-towards-death (Heidegger, 1962, 50-51). People are, for a relatively minute span of time, suspended between immeasurable lapses of time, which come down to nothingness. Biologically speaking, human cells senesce or grow old with childbirth (Lütkehaus, 2006, 32-33). The will to life engenders what it does not want, namely death. The genetic and existential inscription of death into life, the interdependency of “green fuse” and “wintry fever” of “womb,” “worldwrecked” and “tomb” has led numerous poets such as Sylvia Plath or Dylan Thomas to write melancholic poems.⁷

The newly born have no say in the prior decision of their conception, they find themselves, their being, always already there: birth is imposed, a dictate. Forced to accept what is essentially alien to them, they are manipulated or raised into a world whose cycles they ecologically interfere with. By virtue of their consciousness or reflexivity, their coming-to-the-world leads, at the same time, to a melancholic estrangement: We are always outside of ourselves and others, untransparent and strangers to ourselves. The biological process of birth is already torture. We are fundamentally eccentric and thus, according to Jacques Lacan, fragmented beings.⁸ The German Romantic Schelling called that the “infinite lack of being.”⁹

⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/20/world-still-on-brink-of-climate-catastrophe-after-cop27-deal>

⁷ Dylan Thomas, ‘The force that through the green fuse,’ reprinted e.g., in <https://poets.org/poem/force-through-green-fuse-drives-flower>; Sylvia Plath, ‘The dead,’ reprinted e.g., in <https://allpoetry.com/The-Dead>.

⁸ *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je* (1949) republished in *Écrits* (Seuil, 1966), 93-100.

⁹ Thus, the title of Manfred Frank’s pioneering study (1993) on Schelling.

There is yet, as always, a dialectics to this. The very tragic Schopenhauerian or Nietzschean basic condition of our life prompts us not only to reflect upon it, it also urges us – precisely because it is a facticity—to make a decision, take a stance, and care of this very short life, or, for that matter, write poetry.

In utilitarian terms, procreation comes down to an arbitrary act that causes individually and generally more suffering than happiness. Yet I am not quite convinced by matrices which basically pivot on a quantitative or economic calculation first devised by Jeremy Bentham (2007, 1-69). They basically argue that the avoidance of pain, suffering, or displeasure is preferable to pleasure or happiness, as the absence of the latter is less incisive or derogatory (Benatar, 2006, 18-59). Pleasure or happiness, utilitarianists also argue, are dependent or even predicated on suffering. The argument is problematic because it relies on something individual and subjective, pleasure or displeasure can mean very different experiences in different cultures or persons. In the tradition of Hume, utilitarians bring thereby to bear emotions upon ethical values. Pain or pity surely involve some cognitive significance, they inform us about the quality of life. But is this information sufficient or adequate? Emotions, as Immanuel Kant has made quite clear, prove rather unreliable in terms of their ethical significance and may cognitively suggest inadequate prejudices.¹⁰ It is not without justification that people who have voiced the strong desire to call on the services of assisted suicide organizations are advised by the German Government to gather psychological help before they actually make use of suicidal help. After a phase of suffering and depression, people might want to live all the more, they might even return strengthened out of this phase. Thanatologists tell us that many people prefer the ‘value’ of simple sensuous ‘being’ to the prospect of non-being. There are plenty of unhappy people, and I do not mean masochists, who would rather feel something than nothing, even if this something involves something negative (Rosati, 2013, 367-373, Nagel, 2012). To be sure, things look certainly different when suffering becomes unbearable. Another principal thanatologist argument against the positivity of death holds equally against antinatalism: there are always more possibilities, chances, and responsibilities in the world than both individuals and communities can take. Death or the prevention of births diminishes the horizon of possibilities.

Let us assume, nevertheless, that humans realize they are a misrouted consequence of evolution interfering with life fatally. Let us also suppose that they understand that the prenatal and postmortem non-state of nothingness are the same in principle, with only a short and miserable phase of conscious being in between. Why do not more unhappy and suffering humans strive for an early return to the state of nothingness prior to birth? And why do so many people, both in poor and rich countries, prefer to give birth or life rather than not—even if this fuels overpopulation and overconsumption?

Hannah Arendt's *Vita Activa*

Arendt provides a contemporary, if not altogether satisfactory, answer. Her philosophical statements on birth can be found in most of her publications and centrally in a book called *The Human Condition* which came out in 1958. The German title of her seminal book on natality is *Vita Activa*. As the English title already suggests, Arendt must be placed within the humanist paradigm; her philosophy is closely related to existentialism.¹¹ But if we want to understand the deep structural,

¹⁰ For the question of ethics and emotions, see Wolf, 2006.

¹¹ As existentialism revolves around a basic question about the meaning of life in a secular world of godlessness, it may well be placed between humanism and posthumanism. I think even transhumanists should ask themselves what life, existence, could mean in a world with no negativity or contingency.



existential, and social pressure or even *dispositif* to having children, her theories of natality are still much more instructive than the moralist, fundamentalist, and conservative ideologies of family and natalism. Her natality tells us, if also read against the grain, something about the tenacity of those socio-psychological, constituents which have written themselves into human bodies and human self-understanding and which make them believe that bearing a child is fundamental to their humanity. Birth is still, one should remember, an anthropological fact, which functions as a mysterious metaphor for life and origin *per se*. And “Not-to-be-a-Mother” is still a stigma, as the German author Nadine Pungs (2022, 10-13) has recently shown, referencing official statistics. It hardly needs mentioning here that gender theory or, for that matter, feminist posthumans have done away with those clearly gendered biologisms. Yet, in many global societies, we can see converse or even adverse developments (Georgia Meloni in Italy, Pis in Poland, the new sexual politics in Indonesia, and the US Supreme Court’s revocation of the right of women to their bodies). Hollywood (*Children of Men*) and Netflix (*The Walking Dead*) mystify (the only left) pregnant woman or the remaining child (*The Road*) as saviors and ‘bringers of light’ in an otherwise apocalyptic world.

Much of Arendt’s philosophy was set against Heidegger, who considers life from (and sees it determined by) its end, while she considers it from its beginning.¹² She tries to compensate for interpretations of being-as-nothingness, as well as ‘Dasein’ as thrownness and initial forlornness, by insisting on the categories of relationality, responsivity or responsibility, freedom, temporality (i.e., an open future), hope and salvation, and, crucially, action or work. Her celebration of natality is also, as one should emphasize, an answer to the totalitarianism of the Nazis, who in fact denied the category of beginning, defining every individual according to contrived racist features.¹³ Natality means, first of all, an insistence on immanence, as she makes clear in her *Thought Diary*:

It is as if men since Plato have not been able to take the fact of having-been-born seriously, but rather only that of dying. In having-been-born the human establishes itself as an earthly kingdom, toward which one connects, in that it searches for and finds its place, without any thought that he will one day go away again (Arendt, 2002, 1, 549-560; quoted in Champlin, 2017, 156, Champlin’s translation).

In this earthly kingdom, a human being is an *initium*. That is, with their birth something comes into the world that was previously not there. To be born is materially or genetically predetermined. Yet it marks at the same time an unheard-of novelty. Since humans are also born independently by themselves and, to a degree, not plannable, “with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.” (Arendt, 1974, 178, in the following abbr. as HC) The newborn child is something singular, thereby plurality and difference are continuously reaffirmed. The baby, on the other hand, is utterly reliant on others, mother, father, and nurse; that is, a relationality which calls for a socially binding responsivity and responsibility— to take care. Small children are therefore emblematic of human vulnerability and uncertainty (these changes, of course, with genetic engineering and family planning). Indeed, we do not remember our own birth and the incipient years of our life for which we need the testimonials of others. And yet, open possibilities not only include the possibility of contingency, that is, failure and suffering, there is always also attached a certain strangeness to the

¹² To be sure, Arendt followed her teacher by maintaining an archeological eye for classical antiquity, by applying phenomenological methodology, and a focus on language (and perhaps the existential of care). However, Heidegger (notwithstanding his idea of *Mitsein* - of being with someone) conceives of speech as an individual and even *völkisch* way of unconcealing or accessing ‘Dasein.’ For him it amounts to *poiesis* (with Hölderlin as the singular proponent). ‘Man,’ on the other hand, indulges largely in idle talk. For Arendt language means in principle political deliberation and plurality, that is, a communicative and democratic *praxis*.

¹³ For a historical and critical treatment of Arendt’s natality see Lütkehaus (2006, 26).

newborn. Apart from the care and finding a place in this world, each neonate's otherness is no less a condition for change and productivity in this world (Champlin, 2017, 156).

Arendt idealizes birth both metaphysically and religiously as a "miracle," which in its unpredictability interrupts the causal course of life. Her secularity notwithstanding, there is a religious (Christian-salvific) ring to her idea, not least when she quotes Augustine: "[Initium] ergo uteset, creatusest homo, ante quem nullus fuit" (HC 177). It marks an event, an "évènement marquant de la vie" with the potential to disrupt the process of history. The temporal dimension which breaks in upon the metonymic, spatial, and vacuous dimensions should not be underestimated. It may come as an unheard-of surprise: "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability [...]; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (HC 178).¹⁴ A child, once upon and in the world, cannot help acting and reacting precisely by virtue of their natal uniqueness in a diverse or plural world—in concordance *and discordance* with his or her fellow human beings. Human plurality presupposes a specific distinctiveness of each human being.¹⁵ Hence, they alter the ways of others in an unexpected way, which are then experienced as miracles. "Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action" (HC 177). Action, meaning mostly speech and communication, is the agency or practice which permits human beings to spontaneously take the initiative for an alternative to the given. Any action is dependent on others but does, to a degree, also differ from the action of others. Humans are born into a given world, there is no action *ex nihilo*.¹⁶ That is, any human being must always relate to the material and social environment which come to his or her help. Yet their action is also unpredictable, opens up unforeseen (and miraculous) possibilities even though, or precisely because of, their inevitable involvement and enmeshment into the pluralistic-diverse socio-material and political world. This establishes freedom – Arendt's central political purpose. Freedom is made up, accordingly, of the reflected ability to make up one's mind, and, more importantly, the indeterminability of the outcome of decision and action (and not in the "sovereignty" in their control, see HC 233-5). It is therefore realistic "to expect in politics the unforeseeable, event-miracles (*Ereignis-Wunder*) in this world" (Marchart, 2011, 299).

The power to begin something new is tantamount to human's *second* birth (as socio-political agents) and structurally compatible to, and existentially contingent on, his or her *first* birth: "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (HC 176-7). Action ("word and deed") is politics; birth consequently also means a political event, as it is the condition of the possibility of an overarching change. Arendt's point, then, is that natality represents the ontic fact and ontological condition for a political evolution and revolution in terms of democracy and freedom.

Arendt's earthly socio-political categories are labor, work, and action. As the toil of endless re-production labor draws on and interferes with nature to feed and produce "vital necessities" (HC 7). Work "corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence," and is characterized by the

¹⁴ See also the comment by Jürgen Habermas, 1977, 8: "The temporal dimension of the life-world is determined by the 'fact of human natality': the birth of every individual means the possibility of a new beginning; to act means to be able to seize the initiative and to do the unanticipated."

¹⁵ "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, becomes uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings." (HC 176)

¹⁶ For the dialectic ambiguity of Arendt's natal notion of action and its political interpretation see also Oliver Marchart, 2011, 299-300, here: 299.



purposeful production of a lasting thing with a “definite beginning and a definite, predictable end” (HC 143). Action takes place “without the intermediary of things or matter” (HC 7). It “may have a definite beginning, [but] never [...] has a predictable end” (HC 144). Only the latter is tantamount to birth. Birth, then, marks the inception and initial condition for the surmounting of material necessity, and thus the foundation and upholding of (human) history.

I do sympathize with Arendt’s rather abstract concept of politics which consists in the dialectics of relational plurality and individual singularity, as I do with her resistance to a closed society which rules out any substantial change along with her insistence on indeterminacy. Arendt derives from the fact of natality the possibility of political revolution (which interrupts or, respectively, propels history) and, on the other hand, and more plausibly, a negative tendency to biopolitics in totalitarian states. Totalitarian regimes are always suspicious of new and uncontrollable beginnings and spontaneity. Birth control, the taking away of children and the encampment of humans are means to prevent spontaneity and difference. There, education aims at bringing children *entirely* into line.

But reading Arendt makes us also see why childbirth is still so attractive in an advanced and leveled-out society, notwithstanding antinatalism and the often-repeated notion that there are ‘enough children out there.’ The messianic undertone and the prospect of redemption is still a latent socio-psychological motivation for conceiving a child. In fact, Arendt strikes a chord with her (in terms of logic, problematic) metaphysical idealization of an ontic or physiological process, from which she infers the “ontological structure” of natality to furthermore “force a metaphor upon it,” namely “the second birth as political action” (Saner, 1997, 109). This aggrandizement of birth goes together with an existential self-empowerment and self-affirmation. One receives a gift and is at the same time (at least partly and subjectively) the causative agent of that gift (Lütkehaus, 2006, 85). Something different interrupts the continuum of time, the eternal recurrence of the same, and promises a new life. Rather than the continuation of one’s genetic heritage, it is the spell of novelty which encourages procreation, along with the life event which forces you to take action. In a homogenized mass society, begetting a child offers a chance to take the initiative of one’s own. And indeed, children will force you to change your course of life. They keep you busy and ease past the *taedium vitae*. They expedite your *vita activa* and seemingly open up a horizon of new possibilities – even to the point of expenditure. There is surely something to this, new generations develop a new spirit of resistance, question the status quo, they decouple and demand a livable future in contradistinction to fossilized structures. There are, after all, youth movements, such as *Fridays for Future* or *Extinction Rebellion*, who seriously mean it. And, one might also mention, even an antinatalist owes his anti-natalism to his natality.

Nonetheless, procreation comes down to nothing but an endless variation of a phenotype. It appears as a kind of mimetic serial story (Lütkehaus, 2006, 57) with a history marked by technological but no anthropological progress (which accounts for the will of transhumanists and some posthumanists to create a new entity independent of physiological processes of birth). Arendt underestimates the fact that birth could well be understood as a parental dictate and subsequently as a hierarchical form of rule (Lütkehaus, 2006, 32). Children, in contrast to her emphatic idea of freedom, are made, they have no say in their procreation. Children are no beginners, they are always already begun, predetermined, and other-directed. (The argument that turns on ‘beginning’ is, therefore, circular.) There is no going back to a prenatal state (*ibid.* 58-60, 107), no freedom to decide. Children do not initiate history anew, often enough they drag along a historical and ecological heritage which impedes their actions significantly. And all this holds the more, of course, if we consider new possibilities of prenatal screening, genetic engineering, and, in the future, germline manipulation. If

a child realizes that certain abilities and powers are merely the intentional results of genetic manipulation (and not a matter of coincidence and its own will), his or her sense of freedom and indeterminacy will be thwarted.

What I find problematic, and incompatible with posthumanism, is her existential privileging of action as word and deed. In fact, in a lecture in 1957 she claimed, while a sole *vita contemplativa* was impossible, one might well spend one's entire life without contemplation. No one, however, could escape a *vita activa* (Arendt, 1957, 1; HC 14-15, 289-294). The latter, i.e., action, is equated with birth or, ontologically speaking, with natality. Here, human singularity, freedom, and novelty are supposed to come to pass. While her conceptions of work and labor are already meant as means of emancipation from nature, action as a manifestation of freedom is conceived of as political liberation and overcoming of earth and animality. A child, as soon as it has seen the light of the world, is supposed to act. It is always already a kind of pre-political citizen. Arendt is under the influence of the humanist enlightenment, the Christian imperative, Hegel, or Marx (who surely values work higher, though). But her ontological interpretation of birth goes further. Birth, a biological process we share not only with other mammals, is turned into a humanist-anthropological and normative category, which is to raise 'man' above any other species—as *homo politicus*. Her approach is therefore decidedly anthropocentric.¹⁷ In associating action with politics and placing it normatively above labor and work, she takes nostalgically recourse to and draws on the political (Aristotelian and Platonic) idea of the Greek polis – an idealistic realm which is above and relieved from creaturely necessity and the depths of social life: “[B]y overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it [‘the good life’] was no longer bound to the biological life process” (HC 37).

The political realm becomes a free-floating realm beyond the social which cares for economics, our metabolism, and the reproduction of lasting things. Yet while the ancient Greeks were not interested in novelty or progress, Arendt's *vita activa* clearly is. Her conflation of birth and politics subjects' natality at the service of a (modern) society which is mesmerized by activity and growth at the cost of material and biological life. The production of something new, to make a difference and to be singular, is then associated with a messianic promise, i.e., salvation and freedom. But in a neoliberal consumer society, redemption occurs only virtually and temporarily. The next new iPhone or Tesla is already conceived of.¹⁸

Novelty as freedom and singularity is the illusionary and compulsory engines which—together with the emotional emphasis of childbirth—encourage a system obsessed with economic surplus production, increases of supply and demand, and which will thereby accelerate its own collapse along with the breakdown of the entire ecosystem. (An extreme form of biopolitics, contrary to Arendt's intention, is, of course, the ongoing subordination of bodies to production.) Our ecosystem is yet based on evolution, that is, a circle of repetitions with only those gradual adaptations which are absolutely necessary: auto-poetic systems only assimilate as much as they need in order to sustain.

¹⁷ One should concede, though, that such interpretations are always ahistoric; especially the 1950s marked a (European) heyday of anthropology, trying to identify the unique features of 'man.' It is certainly not quite fair to reproach modern philosophers for not being posthumanist.

¹⁸ One should also make the point here that technocracy and neoliberalism were certainly beyond all her intentions. (And one should note that her constitutional idea of politics is fundamentally opposed to sovereignty in the totalitarian or authoritarian sense of, e.g., Carl Schmitt.) Yet her elitist idea of politics, her narrow interleaving of plurality, action and action openness, new beginnings and freedom, foregoes an analysis of the mechanisms of power. Who gets his or her way? The normative separation of politics and society and the liberal disinterest in socio-economic regulating principles seems inadequate to a post-capitalist society dominated by high-tech companies.



A metahuman *Vita contemplativa*

Against this background neither Arendt's natality nor anti-natalism can be a theoretical option for posthumanism/metahumanism. I cannot imagine a posthumanist wishing to terminate humanity. Liberty, self-regulation, intertwining of life processes, and evolution (presupposing temporality) are at the core of their theories. Urging or forcing people to renounce children would simply be wrong. Instead, one might point out that a fulfilled or resonant life, which expresses itself sustainably, could be possible without having children of one's own. I could think of a theoretical and practical commitment to an equanimity which conceives of freedom, not in terms of natal activism, a *vita activa*, but as the essential bearing of a *vita contemplativa*.¹⁹ A *vita contemplativa* does not rule out an abandonment of and relationality or resonance with otherness or 'nature,' while renouncing, at the same time, violent interference. It furthermore does not exclude technology. It is an attitude which "simultaneously" says "Yes and No to the technical world" (Heidegger, 2015, 23). The attitude shares a lot with what Heidegger calls 'releasement' or 'Gelassenheit.' Its essence is a "releasement to things," (ibid.) while releasement is not "effected" but "allowed" from "somewhere else." (Heidegger, 2010, 70) The abandonment presupposes a reflective receptivity which evades "willing," (ibid.) propositional and calculative thinking. This active passivity includes an "openness to the mystery," (Heidegger, 2015, 24) through which the thing in its thingness may reveal itself, without giving itself away, though.

What I have in mind is a metahuman attitude which transcends a self, enmeshed in functional and instrumental action or production. The problem, rather than the dichotomy between subject and object, is alienation from and objectivation of our environment.²⁰ Hartmut Rosa has developed the pertinent concept of 'resonance' which might also be fruitfully applied to posthumanism.²¹ Rosa distinguishes four elements of a resonant relationality (2019, 38-44). The first element consists of a moment of an inward touch by a natural object in a landscape of which one feels called upon. We develop an intrinsic and mutual interest in the other. Upon that, we respond bodily (our skin resistance, heartbeat, etc. alter) rather than rationally. We thereby feel spoken to, and we feel our immediate response. We are emotionally moved (Rosa calls this "self-efficacy," 39-40). The third moment involves a "transformation" (ibid., 41). That is, we are being transformed whenever we get into an inner contact with the other, the object, a flower, tree, animal, or human. But the same is true for the other. Weeds, trees, and wildlife come into their own right, and we no longer see them as functional objects. But this also implies that we cannot – instrumentally – force resonance. The response is always also other-dependent and thus not at our disposal, it is (in a technical and economic sense) uncontrollable.²² Rosa's perspective and starting point is still the human subject, but as his approach is relational and bodily, and since it implies an ecologically transformative process, he also offers a more- and other-than-human stance in and towards our world.

The German-Korean philosopher Han points, in contradistinction to Arendt, to a wealth of Western and Eastern spaces of contemplative inactivity (from ritual to a dreamy laziness to poetic modes such as the haiku). He sees this as a condition of the possibility for an agent- or subjectless,

¹⁹ I refer here to Byung-Chul Han's recent book *Vita Contemplativa* (2022). Han rigorously criticizes not only Hannah Arendt's *Vita Activa* or *Human Condition*, but also delineates an alternative.

²⁰ Arendt, by the way, was too much of a student of both Heidegger and Marx to not realize a platonic, technological and capitalist alienation from the world. (See HC 248-256) But her (also Nietzschean) anti-platonism and 'Weltentfremdung' did not result in a Heideggerian 'bethinking pause' or an (albeit untimely) call for degrowth.

²¹ I do not have the space here to go into a possible cross-fertilization between 'resonance,' theories of contemplation and 'Gelassenheit' and a Romantic and Adornoian aesthetics of (material) abandonment. I will do this in a separate essay.

²² Rosa uses the noun 'Unverfügbarkeit.' The English (not entirely correct) version is 'Uncontrollability.' (See Rosa, 2020)

de-subjectivized experience of immanence: “Only in a state of inactivity we become aware of the ground on which we stand, and the space in which we are” (Han, 2022, 30). Han (referencing Nietzsche and Kleist's *Marionettentheater*) also points to the ability to renounce one's will to knowledge as well as a functional governance of one's body and mind (as it is prescribed, one might add, in Western modernity). Han quotes Walter Benjamin: The “will resigns in the interior space of the body [...] to the benefit of the organs” (Han, 2022, 23). The physical and mutual relationality between self (as a psycho-somatic integrity) and world may thus be tangible again.

Obviously, it is possible to adopt a devoted, sensuous and intuitive, abandonment to the creaturely nature and materiality of beings. The fundamental mood is an *aisthetics* (less so *aesthetics*) of impartiality, of carefully listening and beholding (Germ. ‘lauschen’ and ‘schauen’).²³ For Western models of such a contemplative and non-instrumental state, one may turn to an (archaic form) of mimesis as cherished by W. Benjamin or Th. W. Adorno (Wolf, 2022). The roots of this mimetic mindset are yet romantic, characterized by a benign and open readiness to assimilate into the fellow being. The animate or inanimate, rather than a “lifeless it,” becomes a “living you” (Han, 2022, 111). I quote the German poet Novalis:

Soon he became aware of the inter-relation of all things, of conjunctions, of coincidences. Ere long he saw nothing singly. The perceptions of his senses thronged together in great variegated pictures; he heard, saw, felt, and thought simultaneously. He took pleasure in bringing strangers together. Sometimes the stars became men to him, men as stars; stones were as animals, clouds as plants (Novalis, 1903, 93; Han, 117-8).

A vita contemplativa makes no taxonomic difference and does not act discriminatorily to interfere. Likewise, it does not mean passivity or even apathy. One senses, rather, a *provo-care* from the other, which asks for a response: ‘Do no wrong to me.’ *A vita contemplativa* becomes part of an environment to which it belongs amongst many others. We then might be able to endure the renunciation of new beginnings natality may promise, and, moreover, the very prospect of being one of the last human generations on earth. There are, after all, other beings.

To sum up, Arendt's liberal concept of natality, with its redeeming and optimistic undertones, appears to plausibly account for the socio-psychological, and perhaps political, attraction of childbirth. It also helps us to understand why anti-natalism will have difficulties gaining acceptance, even though it offers a plausible ecological, and perhaps existentialist, rationale. I am not on board with either attitude. Natality as an encouragement to procreation, and a political agenda to interfere and act, is no longer compatible with a posthuman world in which anthropocentric action and production growth endanger everything. Anti-natalism has proved no alternative, as it would strongly encroach upon human freedom and the fundamental desire to have a temporal perspective. I have therefore suggested an ethos of *vita contemplativa*, an (active) inactivity, contemplative relationality, and releasement *to* things. A perceptive and thoughtful pause, an *aisthetic* and resonant state, should be compatible with metahumanism.

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²³ By *aisthetics* (gr. *aisthēsis*) I mean an attitude which focuses on the sense or sensuous perception of an object prior to the intervention and categorizing through *logos*. I must and should first see, feel, hear, sense what manifoldly touches and appears to me, before I pass an aesthetic judgment. The Aristotelian concept was revived in the 18th century by Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica* (1750) or Kant (1777, 449). The term is also essential to phenomenology. For further references see my article *Ästhetik/ästhetisch*. (Wolf, 2004, 4-5).



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