

Article

Family Genealogy's Contributions to the Philosophical Problem of Birth

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Abstract: The central philosophical problem of birth concerns the fact that it is an event necessary for all events. As such, it is the nihilated a priori of itself—in short, it is lost in an abyss of consciousness. The article engages with the thoughts of Sartre, Ricoeur, Henry, Romano, Marion, and Husserl to explain some facets of abyssal birth. It argues that family genealogy may contribute to the philosophical dialogue about birth. Family genealogy is usually practiced with a methodology oriented to epistemology. At times, however, genealogical research may bring the historical ancestral past to presence as a lived experience, thus grounding birth in transgenerational intersubjectivity. To explain this more fully, the article compares this presence affect with similar affects in history, art, and psychoanalysis. The article does not make the birth-as-abyssal problem—as framed by philosophers—vanish, but it questions considering one's birth exclusively as epistemological. Presence, though closer to ontology than epistemology, is more accurately classified as phenomenological, being as event rather than event as being.

Keywords: abyss of birth; philosophical problem of birth; family genealogy; historical presence; intersubjectivity; transgenerational

1. Introduction

One's birth is abyssal. It is the event that makes possible (one's experience of) events, and thus serves a deeply puzzling self-foundational role. To use Claude Romano's terminology, it is an event that does not “eventually” happen to one (Romano 2009) (“Evential” [événemential], for Romano, designates that nothing takes place in an event except the “taking-place” itself, that is, there is no determinate ontic aspect to an event). It is unremembered and lost in an abyss of consciousness, and is the nihilated a priori of itself. In these senses and others, one's own birth is a philosophical problem.

Throughout most of Western philosophy's history, birth has been largely ignored, though it has received passing comments from philosophers such as René Descartes (Descartes 1969, p. 170), G. W. F. Hegel (Hegel 1977, p. 6), and Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 1969, p. 275). This began to change with the advent of phenomenology, as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger considered intersubjectivity (*Intersubjektivität*) and thrown-ness (*Ge-worfenheit*), respectively (Husserl 1973; Heidegger 1962). The philosophical problem of birth is reflected on by French phenomenologists Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Henry, Claude Romano, Jean-Luc Marion, and others, with whose thinking on the subject this article will engage. Feminist philosophers Cavarero (1995, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2014), Schües (1997), Oksala (2003, 2004), Guenther (2006, 2008), Stone (2010), O'Byrne (2010, 2013), Jones (2012), Staehler (2016), and Irigaray (2017) have explored many philosophical aspects of birth. These philosophers will be cited throughout and with occasional brief discussions in this article, but merit a separate sustained interdisciplinary engagement with family history.

This article will present how family genealogy is able to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the philosophical problem of birth. Philosophy has ignored family genealogy, primarily because it is practiced as a τέχνη ([*technē*]; “skill” or “craft”), seemingly not of interest to philosophy. Similarly,

family genealogy has thus far been largely uninterested in philosophy ([Hatton 2016](#)). What follows, however, will argue that genealogical findings may themselves be eventual and phenomenological, and enable bringing the historical to presence. This article will engage in an interdisciplinary reflection at the intersection of family genealogy, phenomenology, history, art, and psychoanalysis, and will focus on a spatialized and supra-spatiotemporal presence affect. Although the main emphasis of philosophers regarding birth is its abyssal aspect, another topic of interest is the uniqueness of each person's birth.

2. Uniqueness of an Individual's Birth

Each person is unique, even discounting events experienced during one's life. Jean Rostand, writing of the condescension some express about those of low birth, makes the point that those prejudiced people could just as well have been someone they despise, based on the contingency of a person ([Rostand 1939](#), p. 17). Alphonso Lingis makes the same point: "With the slightest alteration of any turn of the path, made up of a million chance encounters, it would have been someone else, not you, who was born" ([Lingis 2000](#), p. 103; [Lingis 2007](#), p. 5). Given a specific father, the chance of one chromosomal combination in a sperm that fertilizes an egg is 1 in 8.3 million. The same probability applies to a specific chromosomal combination of an egg of a given woman, so the two together have a probability of 1 in approximately 70 million. Ali Binazir estimates that when one factors in a specific man and woman meeting, having sex, etc., the probability is 1 in 70 trillion ([Binazir 2011](#)). However, that is an estimate made without factoring in each of the respective probabilities of the preceding generations' ancestral matings. Adriana Cavarero emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals ([Cavarero 1995](#), p. 82; [2002](#), p. 95; [2003, 2014](#), p. 14; see also [Arendt 1958](#), pp. 8, 159).

Geneticists have long known that many physical traits are inherited. These include facial attributes (for example, eye color and spacing, ear shape, lips, nose), height, and body shape, as well as teeth spacing, hearing sensitivity, vision acuity, longevity, and certain diseases. Psychologists who have studied twins reared apart have concluded that there is a genetic influence on allergies, body language, how one holds and moves one's head, one's gait, hand gestures, and many behaviors, such as those associated with schizophrenia and mood swings. Furthermore, intelligence, mannerisms, interests, and some habits are others ([Farber 1981](#); [Segal 2012](#)).

Some deep-seated emotional roles and practices related to how one acts in a family and society are transmitted behaviorally and culturally from generation to generation ([Freud 1950](#), pp. 157–58; [Abraham 1994](#); [Schützenberger 1998](#), pp. 171–76). Guilt, anger, masochism, sadism, and a number of other behaviors and emotions are transgenerationally passed in a fundamental psychology of relatedness, but perhaps also in the epigenetically altered encoded biological code ([Carey 2012](#); [Jablonka and Lamb 2014](#); [Moore 2015](#)). According to Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark, there is an unwritten multigeneration balance sheet of credits and debits, of posing and discharging obligations. These reciprocal merits and demerits may be passed through succeeding generations by means of a revolving slate mechanism ([Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973](#)).

3. Genealogy

Family genealogy, though not theoretically well-founded, unengaged with philosophy, and having few standards, has built some good guidelines and best practices ([Board for Certification of Genealogists 2000](#)). When followed, they lead to probable proofs and conclusions regarding ancestral identity and pedigrees. While in a great majority of cases, practicing genealogists discover only facts and historical data, at times, some experienced and sensitive practitioners may discover past events, traits, attributes, and behaviors that result in a unique sensed relatedness to an ancestor, based not just on a position on a pedigree chart, but on a discovery or experience that brings the past to presence. Such a discovery may be a significant event in the life of a genealogist—one that, at least for a time, changes one's view of oneself and forebears. These can alter the life of the researcher, as when one discovers that he or she possesses the same trait, has made the same choice, has the same interest,

the same lips, or has followed the same career as an ancestor. These examples are instances of both repetition and recognition. Suddenly, one's choice is understood in light of an ancestor's choice, pointing to a donated ancestral fund. It is not a matter of predestination, but of choice within the limits of the possibilities available to one given one's inheritance.

Philosophers grapple with the complexities of the problem of birth, attempting to understand its meaning in relation to all other events that one experiences. A brief consideration of six twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophers will show the kinds of issues that arise in their thinking.

4. Sartre

For Jean-Paul Sartre, being in-itself (*en-soi*) refers to non-conscious objects in the world. Being for-itself (*pour-soi*) is conscious of objects and of its consciousness. For Sartre, for-itself consciousness comes to pass in being born, yet birth is not only unremembered, but an abyss, a "total night of identity" (Sartre 1956, p. 139). One is lost in an obscurity that is oneself. Consciousness can appear to itself only by annihilating the in-itself. Thus, birth is an ekstatic relationship of a person to an in-itself that it is not, yet is (Sartre 1956, p. 140). It is through the for-itself that a past, including its own, can exist, yet one's own past birth is lost in an abyss. One cannot have arisen in the world without having been born, yet one's past cannot be established unless from the perspective of the for-itself. Birth is original and an a priori of being for-itself. It is the moment in which the for-itself was not yet, but also the moment in which it appears in the world. Birth is the upsurge of the absolute relatedness of pastness and one's own pastness. Through birth, a pastness appears. Birth is a nihilation that causes one to arise from the in-itself. It is the factual condition for all possible action, yet one's birth never appears as a fact, but is always reconstructed for-itself from a conscious backward projection (Sartre 1956, pp. 327, 556).

Two points about Sartre's thinking about birth call for further reflection. First, while birth is unrecapturable and directly inapprehensible through first-hand memory, it leaves traces that may make it possible for a person to recreate the event in some manner. A birth certificate, newspaper announcement, and pages from a baby book are traces that make the occurrence of birth appear factually. A mother's account may make one's birth an event that, although not a personally remembered occurrence, may become felt and apprehended. This may also occur through genealogical research, as when one discovers a document created at the time of—or shortly after—one's birth that pertains to it.

Second, Sartre raises a trenchant point regarding solidarity with the fetus one was before birth. One's inheritance begins at conception, not at birth. Birth is the point at which one appears to others as a differentiated being-in-the-world. One may appear to one's mother and a few others in pre-birth movements and kicking, and indirectly in her enlarging abdomen. One's shape and position may appear in an ultrasound prior to birth. One's genetic makeup is encoded at conception when constraints, limits, and parameters of traits, behaviors, and choices are established. As Sartre states, the fetus is the factual limit for one's memory. Not many philosophers dwell on the fetus. However, Jean-Luc Nancy alludes to it when he writes "it is hardly possible to know the extent to which the child preceded itself in the womb" (Nancy 1993, p. 13). Feminist philosophers have contributed much to philosophical consideration of prenatal being (Cavarero 1995, p. 82; Schües 1997, pp. 243, 246). Key points to carry forward from Sartre are the abyssal aspect of birth (Guenther 2006, p. 1) and the recognition that inheritance begins at conception.

5. Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur also notes that one's birth is hidden from one's consciousness, and adds that birth is the beginning of one's life (Ricoeur 1966, p. 434). Though Ricoeur does not explicitly discuss it, one's voluntariness is limited by inheritance that, in some respects, preceded one's birth (at conception), and in other respects, is limited by transgenerational obligations. While one's birth is the starting benchmark against which one dates all other events in one's life, it itself is dated in the series of ancestral events,

including the birth of one's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. In that series, it is not the beginning.

The memory of one's birth is in the minds and lived experiences of others (events for them, in Claude Romano's sense), and is also inscribed in documents. Those memories of that event can become part of one's subjectivity. Thus, one can pass from being a spectator of an objective happening to a subject with absorbed memories and traces from others.

One's intended research, and one's will to know, reveal linkages to others who preceded one and limited one's possibilities. One seeks to understand those limits and relations because they add to the meaning of past events and oneself. Ricoeur explains that one has received a capital of heredity—a nature, structure, principle, and personality type (Ricoeur 1966, p. 434). An ancestor is a donor. One searches for one's ancestral beginnings not just on biological grounds, but also on philosophical (and especially phenomenological) grounds with the methodology and discovery of genealogy.

If one further extends Ricoeur's thought, one can attribute an objective meaning to the idea of beginning when evidence of it is discovered during genealogical research. This beginning becomes subjective as one assimilates the (sublime) historical evidence into one's subjectivity. Frank Ankersmit argues that sublime historical experience is more ontological than epistemological, closer to feeling than to knowledge; it is an elucidation of existence (Ankersmit 2005, pp. 225–26). One is subjectively and objectively unique, an unrepeatable being, separate and distinct from all others. Thus, the subjectivity can gain/regain its beginning. It finds what was lost in the abyss of memory.

Yet each person receives traits, behaviors, a cultural heritage, and family resemblances from ancestors. It is not just that one leaves oneself to place oneself in the being of an ancestor, but that one experiences the traits and characteristics of the being of an ancestor in oneself. The chain of effects carries from them to oneself, but this is enabled by tracing backwards, through a chain, from one's characteristic to the ancestor who had that characteristic. It is true that one's filiation is an ancestor's posterity, but in another sense, ancestral backtracking alienates an ancestor's being into one's own being.

Ricoeur writes that one is an effect produced by heredity (Ricoeur 1966, p. 436). Genealogy can be a way of enabling more meaningful consideration of oneself. One experiences one's origin through the lives of ancestors. Ricoeur writes that one must philosophically convert genetics into an index of birth (Ricoeur 1966, p. 437). Genealogy may be such a converter if it moves from an objective historical method to a subjective assimilation of the data. One's having been born is a horizon that opens up into a prior generational horizon—a horizon that gets pushed in uneven probes into the past, yet becomes absorbed into the subjective present. As Ricoeur writes, the cogito implies an anteriority of its beginning set apart for its own perception (Ricoeur 1966, p. 437; Guenther 2008, p. 107). Yet, genealogy allows an expansion into the past of a perception of prior beginnings, and of events pertaining to oneself. One may engender one's sense of beginning as a limit by removing the limit (or pushing it backwards in time) by following genealogical research. Thus, genealogy may assume a role of constituting one's birth, enabling an interiorization of it through exploration of one's ancestors.

One's ancestors' lives, or components of them, are given to oneself. Ricoeur writes that one's heredity is in oneself, and is the idea of one's character and unconscious, as well as a representation of one's ancestor (Ricoeur 1966, p. 438). To be born is to be engendered. A pre-birth origin opens up and sheds light on one's birth. Ricoeur calls this an umbilical consciousness (Ricoeur 1966, p. 439). "Heredity adds to the sense of *my-life-in-me*, the unease of *the-life-behind-me-clinging-to-me*" (Ricoeur 1966, p. 440).

One's birth participates in a lineage. The beginning of one's existence is one's ancestry (Ricoeur 1966, p. 441; Oksala 2004, p. 20; Guenther 2008, pp. 101, 106). This beginning enables reaching a limit beyond memory. It is a flight/path back from one's birth to ancestors to bring birth into subjectivity—an unremembered, but captured beginning. One's pre-life began in one's ancestry before one's life began—before one acted, chose, or experienced. One's birth, which is not an event for one, was an event for others, and becomes apprehensible for one through seeing it as an event in a series of

events that preceded and shaped one. The lower limit of one's cogito moves to a point before one's birth. As the discussion progresses, points to keep in mind are linkages to one's lineage (umbilical consciousness), the possibility of using genealogy as an index of birth, and the capital of heredity.

6. Henry

Michel Henry observes that although to be born is to come into existence, the same applies to non-living objects, such as stones (Henry 2003, p. 124). It is only a living being that is born. To be born is not just to come into the world, but also to appear to oneself and to be a being to which other things appear. In birth, the living being comes into the world, and the world shows itself to the born one (Henry 2003, p. 125). That is, being born depends on the phenomenality of the coming to the world (Henry 2003, p. 127). To be born is to enter life in such a way that one becomes alive—lives and enjoys (Levinas 1969, pp. 120–51). Living implies feeling oneself and experiencing other things (Henry 2003, p. 128). This is an ekstastic appearing that unfolds in the difference between world and things (Henry 2003, p. 129).

Henry traces his thinking about birth and time. Birth is both an absolute beginning and presupposes a before-birth, thus making birth a limit experience (Henry 2003, p. 130). Alluding to Martin Heidegger, coming to the world presupposes coming into Dasein ("being-there", which refers to human existence, or being-in-the-world), but if one comes to Dasein only in life, the question of birth becomes a matter of knowing how one comes into life—this leads to an Ur-birth, an original birth (Henry 2003, p. 131; Heidegger 1962).

Genealogically, one may understand birth as a coming to life from parents' lives—ancestral lives. To come into life is to come from life, as Henry writes. Therefore, life is not the point of arrival, but the starting point of birth (Henry 2003, p. 132). One's birth occurs and only occurs in the "context" of previous lives.

To live is to continually live, experience, and enjoy, and to regain the sense of absolute beginning through discovery of the lives that preceded one's life. This is the specific temporalization of one's singular self as immanent—the temporalization of birth (Henry 2003, p. 132). No self is possible except as singular, as Henry writes. Henry expresses this philosophically as the generation of the singular self (me) in a self-begetting of absolute life—a transcendental birth. I am given to myself without this gift coming from me—it comes from my ancestors. For Henry, birth is not an event but a condition (Henry 2003, p. 134). One is continually engendered through the self-begetting of life. Thus, Henry views the problem of birth as the relationship of self/ego to life, the relation of ego to itself, the singular self in relation to oneself, a *pathétique* relation to a before of life (pre-birth).

But the before of life is precisely the after-birth and living of my predecessors—my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on. Thus, the problem of birth is situated in two directions: (1) the continual affirmation in living, experiencing, and enjoying; and (2) the recognition that my before-birth existed in the lives of my ancestors. Part of the living, experiencing, and enjoying of life is the discovery and recapture of my birth and before-birth in the community of ancestors, and of their lives and births, etc. Ideas to keep in mind for the following discussion are the twofold way of conceiving birth, and birth as a condition. Christina Schües argues that it is by virtue of birth that humans constitute sense, and that birth is the condition of the possibility of intentionality (Schües 1997, pp. 243, 245).

7. Romano

Claude Romano views the problem of birth in a similar manner (Romano 2009). Birth sets up a gaping fissure that will never be closed (Romano 2009, pp. 69–70). It is the first event—the original event—in the light of which all other events can be characterized. It opens the advenant's world for the first time, originally but not originarily (an advenant is a non-Cartesian subject who self-configures, responding to events that happen to him during the continual process of coming about (Romano 2009, pp. xii, 29)). "Original disparity between originary and original characterizes the primary evential

meaning of birth” (Romano 2009, p. 70). The origin is deferred in that it is discovered and declared after the fact, as the advenant regards the abyss of his own birth. Birth is an opening to a past, though that birth has never been present to one. Birth is assigned to one prior to selfhood. Birth is the event that makes experience possible.

After the world’s advent, others can appear for an advenant, including parents. Others do not open a world for one, but the event of birth makes it possible that others can enter one’s horizon (Romano 2009, p. 80).

Romano argues that each advenant does not possess a horizon of determinate possibilities by being born. Romano is correct in that the pre-birth past does not project possibilities for the advenant that hamper the burstedness of events one encounters and in which one participates. However, pre-birth inheritance and the post-birth transgenerational horizon limit what events can and will occur. While on the one hand, the experience of a disease is an event that is unsubstitutable, unique, and potentially life-changing for the advenant, on the other hand, if that disease is genetically inherited, that inheritance is a limit on the possibility of health for a person. Romano makes a related point when he says that “this history, which precedes me, and is first the history of others, is bestowed on me by the event of birth, as the source of possibility in general for the human adventure” (Romano 2009, p. 77). It is not just possibility in general that is bestowed, but also the particular parameters inherited from the past that shape the realm of possibilities applicable to each unique individual.

Events may be prompted by, and have their content or impact flavored by, genealogical research. The discovery that one’s great-grandmother had the same reaction to an experience as one has opens up a new world for one, a world of meaning and understanding, a reshaping of one’s world, a connection to a past that precedes one’s birth and that helps to close the abyss that is one’s birth. The key point to take forward is viewing birth as an event (Dastur 2000; Oksala 2004, p. 18).

8. Marion

For Jean-Luc Marion, birth is an event that involved one but did not happen to one (Marion 2002). That is because one began there and then, and one’s doings, thoughts, and feelings presuppose the birth event.

As the other philosophers discussed, Marion writes that one does not remember one’s birth (Marion 2002, p. 42). However, he neglects to discuss that one also does not remember many other occurrences in infancy or toddlerhood (Dilthey 1989, p. 363). For example, one does not remember his psychological birth, his separation from his mother (Mahler et al. 1975; Bowlby 1973). Nor does one remember anything experienced as a fetus. To fill in information about who one is, one’s birth is an important intentional target that one can reach through intuitions, observations about who one is now and has been, and about what one has inherited from parents whom one may have known, and grandparents whom one may have known. This directly irrecoverable self-event that underlies all of one’s other experiences comes from an abyss of the unrecollectible, an aporia of necessity. Yet that origin, and one’s traits and characteristics, can be fragmentarily filled in by discovering one’s ancestral past—the self-explanation may include physical traits, interests, proclivities, characteristics, psychological urges, and transgenerational psychic makeup. The more fragments that are discovered and connected, the less are oneself and one’s background lost. Discovery leads to recovery. Having to rely on direct and indirect evidence traces is the path through which and by which one may recover knowledge and being of one’s origins, to better understand oneself and give more meaning and freedom to one’s choices. This allows one’s origin to show itself, to appear from traces of evidence. Yet it is not just evidence traces that are epistemologically known, but also a past that appears and is sensed as a presence.

One’s birth may have happened before one could experientially receive it (eventually), but by carefully researching one’s ancestry, one can begin to appreciate it as the effect of the past on the present. While there is power in the excess of intuition that may bring an epiphany of insight, the more effective way to receive, recover, and uncover the non-event event of one’s birth may begin with

genealogical research, perhaps with the aid of transgenerational psychoanalytic exploration. One's origin can become present to one in this way, making possible a filling in or bridging of the aporia.

The indefinite series of events and chain of generational connections begin to become more definite. The phenomenon that initially does not show itself begins to show itself, as well as affect one. The post-showing affects one, but also brings clarity concerning the affects by shedding light on the fragmentary aporia. Birth, which defines and produces one's ego, is itself better understood and filled in by ancestral research. One becomes more grounded through this understanding, beyond just the fact of having been born. Birth gave one one's entire future, but genealogical research gives one one's past, that which grounds and preconditions one's original birth, and which, because it was preceded by many ancestors' births (a chain of generations), is truly non-original. This research may also forewarn about the future, and enable a more embraceable, effective, and appreciable outlook on life. Thus, the always past becomes an ever-present.

Birth may be the first (non-remembered) phenomenon, making possible all other phenomena, but each generation prior to a person also made possible one's birth event and the person one is. One's ancestry is a free, but necessary background from which one's ego arises (Oksala 2004, p. 20; Guenther 2008, p. 107). One is born into relations with others, and those relations constitute one (O'Byrne 2004, p. 369). One's birth, while privileged, follows many other prior privileged events and lives into the series of which one's subjective and intersubjective being was born. Ancestry opens up one's life with its innumerable impressions, decisions, acts, and thoughts. One seeks not only those future intuitions and intentions, but the acts that preceded the "me", to better understand who "I" am.

Thus, genealogy contributes to the intuition that arises in the face of one's birth. Genealogical intention colors more and more of one's intuitions to give them context, fill in the aporia, and yield non-intuitive understanding of the abyss. The genealogical findings give themselves to one as one unearths them and struggles with their uncovering, which leads to a showing of oneself to oneself. Birth shows itself to one because one intends its discovery, and yet gives itself when one makes, connects, or removes the intention—a self-erasing intentionality. It is often a surprising unintended experience.

The "I" then to be, and now is/am, was then in ancestors. Thus, part of who one is, and then was to become, existed. The I that is me shows itself to me, and is given to me through genealogical research of information from before my birth. One's destiny existed before one's birth. Thus, birth becomes a truly non-origin of oneself. One learns about oneself by learning about ancestors, just as one does when one thinks of one's actions, decisions, moves, hopes, mistakes, accomplishments, and interests—one's will. One's will is partly one's necessity—one's freedom is partly one's nature, for one repeats those who preceded one in one's ancestral intersubjectivity.

Alfred Schutz is thus mistaken when he writes that our predecessors' world "has no horizon toward the future" (Schutz 1967, p. 208). While it is true that one's deceased ancestors have left nothing undecided, they did leave some things awaiting fulfillment. As Schutz writes, if an ancestor bequeathed property to someone, one's conduct may be oriented to the ancestor's past act (Schutz 1967, p. 208). But an ancestor's behavior may also have been transmitted to one genetically, or psycho-transgenerationally.

The directly irrecoverable event of one's birth may be indirectly recoverable through genealogical discovery and assimilation of ancestors and their characteristics and behaviors. This key idea is expanded in the following discussion.

9. Husserl

Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, thought about transsubjectivity in light of one's ancestors (Husserl 1973). A person belongs to a "we" that includes known and unknown ancestors. Each ancestor had a horizon of his or her personality, as do I (Husserl 1973, p. 61). However, unknown ancestors exert a genetic biological influence on a person, not a conscious one.

Birth is an event that enables constitution of the world, not just because the world would not exist for one had he not been born, but also because one's heritage, passed from one's ancestors, helps

constitute that world for one. Generativity (*Generativität*), the generations chain (*Generationenkette*), inaugurates one's world. It is an essential part of the intersubjectively constituted world. It modifies one's primordial-original experience. One's birth, an unexperienced, unremembered event, becomes unoriginal yet unique in light of generativity.

One's birth, the border—or limit—of one's memory, that which is behind the capability of memory, is in oblivion, which is different from forgetfulness. Generativity implies facts determined by past events (Husserl 1973, p. 171). It also influences one's personhood.

To make sense of the world as unending requires thinking of an intersubjective generativity. A person shares a world outlook, a constitution of the world, with ancestors who preceded one, and without any one of which one would not be who one is (Husserl 1973, p. 200). Their existence, deeper and broader than the single event of one's birth, is the horizon of one's presumptive existence. One's ancestral horizon reveals to one that horizon, that birth, that intersubjective existence. One's ancestral horizon constitutes one's reality (Husserl 1973, p. 200).

One's individuality is produced by one's heritage and surroundings (Husserl 1973, p. 569). This is an a priori law. One is, therefore, not born into an abyss, but into a world and with a heritage. One's birth is not an aporia, but the result of an a priori ancestral heritage. Jean-Luc Nancy makes a similar point, writing that birth occurs in a community, a "being-together-among-many" (Nancy 1993, p. 33). Some feminist philosophers also stress this (Guenther 2006, p. 210; Cavarero 2014, pp. 13, 23).

Thus, there is a pre-birth connection to one's ancestors. They are part of one's intersubjectivity. Past ancestors are in a universe of the living I (me) in the historical ever-present (Husserl 1973, p. 604). Husserl writes, "the living awakens the non-living" (Husserl 1973, p. 604; my translation). I awaken my deceased ancestors, in my life (my living), and in my finding them in me (the "me" that was in them).

10. Philosophical Implications Related to Genealogy

Birth is a problem for philosophers because it is unremembered and it is the beginning of one's life. If it were remembered, it would not be a problem because it would be retained in consciousness and therefore would not be abyssal. If it were not the beginning of one's life, it would not be considered an interesting or important problem, but would be one among many other unremembered events.

There are a few different circumstances under which something may not be remembered. First, something might at one time have been remembered but then forgotten. Second, an event might have affected one in a way that it became part of one's unconscious. Third, something might have been experienced by someone but never remembered (stored in long-term memory).

In the first case, if birth had been remembered, and then later forgotten, it would imply that a pre-birth remembering subject existed, in which case birth would not be the beginning event of one's life. That would diminish the significance of the forgetting, and therefore birth would not be an important philosophical problem. One does not recall having remembered one's birth the way one does other things one once knew but then forgot.

The unconscious is a central concept of psychoanalysis, from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan. The unconscious is a knowledge that does not know itself, but this kind of knowledge might be brought forth to consciousness. Such knowledge, perhaps a repressed trauma, reveals itself symbolically in dreams and parapraxes, etc. Otto Rank believed that birth was a traumatic event, the effect of which is in one's unconscious (see Psychoanalysis section below). Sandor Ferenczi maintained that coitus was a thalassic regression expressing an urge to reestablish the prenatal aquatic milieu of life (Ferenczi 1968, pp. 52–59). Understood from the perspectives of Rank and Ferenczi, birth is a knowledge that does not know itself because it is lost in the unconscious yet, may resurface to consciousness upon psychoanalytic consideration of birth dreams and genitality. If birth is forgotten because it is in one's unconscious, then instead of being a philosophical problem related to an abyss, it is an object of a consideration of the unconscious, which has its own complexities (Zupančič 2017).

In the third case, an event may never have been remembered because the brain had not developed to the point of being capable of remembering. This reason makes the birth problem more neurological than philosophical. Other possible explanations are that an action was done or experienced while in “automatic mode” (performing a frequently repeated habit), or while one had insufficient focus or the event was of insufficient importance to register in memory. These explanations suggest a potentially pre-birth remembering subject inattentive to its own birth, which makes the problem more psychological than philosophical. They suggest that there is no significant distinction of birth from other early unremembered events. Certainly, one’s birth was an important event that would have demanded the attention of the one being born, so the “automatic mode”, lack of focus, and lack of importance explanations are not applicable.

The beginning point of a person is at conception, not birth. Conception is when DNA is inherited, and thus when many traits, skills-to-be, and psychological and physical potentialities are set. Birth is when much of the world first appears for and to the born one, and when the born one appears outside of the mother as a being-in-the-world. Clearly, however, at conception the brain was undeveloped and cannot have stored the memory of conception. Conception is lost to consciousness, never to be directly recalled.

A crucial ingredient of the birth-is-abyssal problem, as framed by the philosophers discussed earlier, is that one does not know birth for whatever reason. This is because birth is the first event in one’s life, all other events depend on it, and it is thus an impossible event, one never known. Other events not remembered are not considered abyssal. From whichever perspective one views it, the philosophical problem of birth is thus epistemological. The abyss into which my birth disappears for me is explained by my wanting to understand/remember it epistemologically. I do not know it because I do not remember it, and because it is a condition for events, it is not an event (and yet it is).

Underlying the philosophical problem of birth is not an abyss related to absence of memory or direct knowledge. If that were the issue, any event that occurred in the first two or so years of life, and any event that occurred between conception and birth would also be abyssal problematics. The crux of the abyss, the aporia, is that it arises from taking an epistemological approach to the event of birth. If one cannot possibly remember it, and if memory or holding a knowledge-generated image is crucial to relating to it, then its nihilation gap cannot be overcome.

Rather, the issue is a lack of presence. One may approach the phenomenon of birth as a matter of the presence of being. If one considers the problem of birth ontologically, then family genealogy may help recapture birth.

Genealogy, as it is usually practiced by experienced and qualified practitioners, is epistemological. Its methodologies aim for knowing (e.g., finding, understanding, and abstracting) record sources and information, and applying reasoning and rules of evidence to genealogical problems that involve knowledge. These methodologies, rigorous reasoning, and strong evidentiary bases for conclusions are necessary for confidence in correctly identifying individuals and relations, and constructing pedigrees and family structures. They are also important to enable correct narratives and communication of family stories. Without careful and thorough research, feelings of spiritual connection may be delusional or founded on inaccurate pedigrees or wishes that one is descended from some famous personage.

There are two ways in which family genealogy may contribute to the philosophical dialogue about birth. One is a recapture of the transgenerational heredity from ancestors, a path amenable to comments from Ricoeur about heredity and birth as engendered, and from Husserl about the chain of generations. The other is the lived experience (*Erleben*) of an encounter with the presence of an ancestor.

Findings made during genealogical research rarely result in genealogical presence that is emotionally or even intellectually impactful. Many who pursue genealogy as a hobby are merely collectors of names and perhaps dates, connected to neither the meaning nor the affect of their findings, and are often undeterred by the absence of evidentiary reasoning. Even experienced genealogists infrequently gain significant personal connections with ancestors from their research.

However, if one attends not only to meaning, content, and narrative of family history, but also to the opening up of emotional and phenomenological ties to connectedness, empathy, surprises, and self-understanding, genealogical research deeply and rigorously undertaken may lead to sudden insights of who one is and how one (and one's ancestors) fits in the transgenerational tree of living. There are a number of triggers for such an experience.

A document may evoke such an experience. Perhaps it is by looking at or holding a contract that an ancestor signed or marked—he or she looked at and held the same document. It might be instigated by visiting an ancestral residence, place visited, or church in which she worshipped. One's ancestor stood by the gravesite of a spouse just as one now does. He crossed a creek that one now stands by. Each evening, she lit her coal-oil lamp that now sits unused in one's electrified house. It could be recognition of a trait, etc., an ancestor had that one has or that another person who descended from that ancestor has. A person's birth may be re-experienced through the congratulatory notes written by long since deceased relatives and friends of parents or by reading a thought briefly noted in a baby book. A birth announcement and an entry inscribed in a Bible might bring the event of birth to presence.

An ancestor may have worked at an occupation that explains one's career choice, or may have pursued an interest that resembles one's hobby. An ancestor reacted to significant life events in a way that reminds one of how one of one's parents dealt with hardships. These are repetitions, which as such, are (re)presences of pasts.

This is a past become present through an evocative discovery or material object. Without those ancestors, one would not be who one is. One is endowed with their gifts. One is oneself because of them.

So it is not just content and facts, not just narrative and stories (Mink 1987), but also the insight-bearing connection to one's ancestors. This can be understood phenomenologically and historically as a spatialized presence—the past made present in space, not some mysterious temporal visitation.

One cannot ask, "what *is* presence?", because presence is not a mode of Being. An encounter with a past deceased ancestor is both an event as it is usually conceived, which has no being and therefore no ontological possibility, and a presence, which has no knowing and therefore no epistemological possibility. It is a phenomenon, and as such can be described and explored phenomenologically. It is a happening that is encountered. Put differently, the event is not ontic, and so cannot be grasped within the framework of being, but instead is an occurrence-ing. Just as one says "it is raining" (no being, no knowing, just occurrence as occurrence), one can think of encountering—pure phenomenological presencing—and in this sense, is being as event, not event as Being, and not being as mode of Being. It is truth as un-covering, following classical Greek and Heidegger. The presence of an ancestor *is* not, yet can appear, can *presence*.

In summary, ancestral presence is not epistemological. It is a felt relation to a being or an attribute of a being or a place "haunted" by the presence of an ancestor. Although genealogical research lays the groundwork for discovery of the insight's trigger, this is presence or lived experience or re-experience of one's birth as hereditary capital, and as continuity through generations to oneself. One's birth is a result of others' lives and births, and so becomes more than a condition, more than an event—it is a living substance with attributes derived from forebears.

Three disciplines may help to explain this idea of bringing an ancestral past to presence. They are history, art, and psychoanalysis.

11. Historical Presence

In a sense, history is irretrievably gone. It is lost, past. One cannot go back and relive or recapture events that occurred because they cannot be repeated. Additionally, one cannot help but view the past through the lens (cultural, technological, etc.) of the present historian (Carr 1961, pp. 28, 42; Jenkins 1991, pp. 11–13, 19; Lowenthal 2015). Yet, in some respects, the present cannot be comprehended

except by viewing it through the historical past—not because events in the past caused events in the present, but rather because the past presents itself to one here and now (Runia 2006a, p. 8). Viewed in this way, history is an ongoing process (Runia 2006a, p. 8). This connects to George Allan’s comment that “my present here-and-now arises from a previous there-and-then” (Allan 1986, p. 79).

Karl Heussi makes a similar distinction. Some modern German philosophers write of representation in the sense that things (material and theoretical) stand for other things, or call them to mind, as images (Kant 1998; Fichte 1982; Hegel 1977; Schopenhauer 1969). Some German philosophers use the word *Vorstellungen* for these kinds of sign-representations. They are ideas, or conceptions, that are formed mental pictures. Heussi uses this word to refer to the thinking that historians do in forming ideas or concepts of the past (Heussi 1932, p. 48). He also uses *Darstellungen* (also often translated to “representations”, but more with the sense of exhibitions) to refer to the uniting of selected past incidents in a holistic historical representation or interpretation (Heussi 1932, p. 46). In this use, historians write a history of *Darstellungen*. However, he also writes that some past events are present to a historian prior to being combined with the opposite (*Gegenüber*) historical thinking of *Vorstellungen*. These he calls *Vertretungen*, which may be thought of as “re-presentations”, past incidents or phenomena that become present (re-present) to the historian (Heussi 1932, p. 48). In other words, past incidents or phenomena first have presences (*Vertretungen*), then are selected and combined in the historian’s ideas and concepts as representations (*Vorstellungen*), and then are written about in a unitary historiographical interpretation in the form of *Darstellungen*.

Other thinkers write about the impact of the past becoming present. Hans Gumbrecht refers to moments of intensity, of lived experience (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 100). Eelco Runia writes that even a name can be a cenotaph for the person whose name it was, becoming a numinous re-visitation of history (Runia 2006b, p. 310). Family genealogy may fulfill the wish to cross the border of one’s birth, to move toward the past before one was (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 123). The past visits us in the present (Kleinberg 2017, pp. 57, 59). One way that this happens is through a physically spatially present thing that was a personal possession of an ancestor (Domanska 2006, p. 13; Kwint et al. 1999). Another is through a place that acts as a storehouse of presence (Runia 2006a, p. 13). History considered in this way is the presence of absence (Kleinberg 2017, p. 136).

A specific place may evoke feelings of presence related to an ancestor. This may be as specific as a dwelling or a lot. A village, city or countryside may also evoke such feelings. Although knowledge of the culture, local history, religion, politics, and so on, may be a factor in eliciting such connections, this is not necessary and certainly not sufficient for these kinds of connections. This is not the same as viewing a place as a badge of honor or ticket for club membership, power, or honorifics (Nash 2017). Additionally, although place attachment may have played a vital role in the lives of ancestors, the genealogist cannot hope to catch more than an inkling of this unless she has resided in the same place. Place is much more than a location on a map (Relph 1976; Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Riley 1992; Marcus 1992; Rollero and Piccoli 2010; Seamon 2014; Scannell and Gifford 2014; Lewicka 2014). Similarly, although presence may include recognition of an ancestor’s psychology’s relation to oneself, this is not a matter of gaining an identity or partial identity through becoming aware of past family behaviors (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973; Thompson 2005; Bertaux-Wiame 2005; Nicolson 2017).

As can be gathered from the brief comments interspersed in the discussion about philosophers, one’s birth was not an event to oneself, but a condition for future events. It was, however, an event to others: one’s mother, father, the doctor, nurse, or midwife who helped deliver one. One’s arrival in the world was a significant event perhaps for an older sibling, grandparent, uncle, or aunt. It was an event worthy of a birth record, newspaper announcement, and perhaps baptism. One learns of the factual data about one’s birth from these documents and others such as a diary, congratulatory cards, early snapshots, or a story told by one’s mother or father. One is strangely mystified, but intellectually understanding upon hearing the story of one’s birth—the labor that preceded one’s entry into the world, the time of day, the date of birth that will be the answer to countless questions requesting identification, and remembered during celebrations of birthdays. Perhaps the significance

of the day for one's parents will be realized more fully upon the birth of one's own child. However, to reflect upon the event of one's birth in what Husserl calls the generations chain is to reflect on one's ancestors. One's birth is constantly relived in one's life—the travails and successes, the failures and accomplishments, the losses and discoveries, and in experiencing growth and enjoyment. One comes to know one's life—who one is—in the journey through life, but one is struck by sudden insights when one experiences a sensed connection with an ancestor—perhaps through a surviving keepsake, visiting a church, or recovering lost information that brings the supposedly disappeared and irretrievably lost past to presence. Not a matter of interpretation, evidence, information, or knowledge, this presence suddenly and unexpectedly provides an opening of self-discovery, and communion with a past. However, although this past is an interwoven milieu of past and present, of continuity and discontinuity, and thus a trans-temporality, the major breakthrough is outside of time, and even outside of space. It is an experience that happens to one in time and space, but in which the presence and impact of the intergenerational communion cannot be fully expressed as spatiotemporal.

This is not genealogy of sources and information, nor is it genealogy of direct, indirect, and negative evidence. It does, however, depend on those to reliably bring the epiphany to appearance to an ego. It comes through imagination, through non-interpretive experience of a presence, a lived experience, a revelation. It may involve humor or seriousness, and recognition of an ancestor in oneself. It may be based on DNA code expressing itself in behavior, thought patterns, repeated mistakes, and a “coincidental” accomplishment. One shares oneself through ancestral fecundity, the commonality of purpose and happenstance. It is presencing of the past, not presentism; a stunning reflection of familial alterity in one—an embedded resemblance that alights, informs, forms, influences, and surprises. It is through this kind of family genealogy that one may experience the event of birth, and cross the border of birth toward the past to better ground, or provide roots for, one's life.

Rather than simply trying to determine the information and meaningful content of a source, and rather than trying to interpret the evidence provided in sources in relation or application to a (or several) question(s) of genealogical import, one tries to sense and imagine how the objects that have survived (and those that have not), or the documents that have survived, were situated in the events of which they tell. How would those events have impacted us and how do they impact us? How would we have reacted had we been there at that time and encountered them in that setting and culture? In this sense, we conjure up the past, allowing that past to be present, a difficult translation because we are in a different time, but nevertheless, that absent past thereby becomes present.

12. Art

Presence affects may be experienced while viewing or listening to a work of art. A painting or musical composition, created in the past, affects people in the present. Although this simple observation has not frequently been reflected upon, it has been noted by several thinkers. John Dewey noted that the material of the past individualizes the present experience (Dewey 1989, p. 128). Martin Seel explores how a work of art created in the past appears to us as a presence (in the present, but also impacts us as a presence—a present impression). An aesthetic experience can make the past present (Seel 2005, p. 35). Seel writes that “presence is an open . . . horizon of *encounter* with what is there—an encounter that senses, acts, and acquires knowledge” (Seel 2005, p. 32). Reflection about sensing presence in a work of art shows that knowledge, as it is usually conceived, is not an important ingredient or result in this encounter. Rather, presence is something that is experienced, sensed, felt, and enjoyed (Santayana 1955, p. 11; Gadamer 1986, p. 22). Something sensorial and abundant is present in a work of art (Gadamer 1986, p. 36). Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses how this is an experience of recognition, which, as such, implies knowing something more fully than when it was first encountered (Gadamer 1986, p. 47). The light dawns in a way not previously sensed. It is thus a unique encounter, a singular presentation. In art, it may be the beautiful as such even if it is not practically interesting (Derrida 1987, p. 44). One may view this not as something appearing in a different light, but as an appearance of the light itself (Nancy 1996, p. 33). A painting considered in this manner is not a

representation (of something else), but a thing that poses “the ground, the texture, and the pigment of the threshold” (Nancy 1996, p. 61). A work of art is a presence, the open of and to what is, but more so to an expanse, a zone, a plane (Nancy 1996, p. 66; Heidegger 1971). As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, the previously invisible becomes visible, a presence of an abyss or absence (Nancy 1996, p. 89). Marion develops the idea of the provisionally invisible becoming visible in painting along similar lines (Marion 2004, p. 25). Though he writes in French, he borrows German terms discussed earlier: “the visible that a gaze keeps under its view represents (*vorstellen*) less an original invisible and more of a representing (*vertreten*) in the sensible of the scope of this gaze itself” (Marion 2004, p. 81). The painting created in the past becomes present (in the non-temporal sense of presence) in its representing.

One experiences presence affects in rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, allusion, and innovative word combinations in poetry. Poetry works to bring presence through images, not necessarily of actual pasts but of imagined presences, created images that work on presence affects.

One experiences these artistic experiences as pleasant, and their strong appeal may be the result of intense feelings. These presence affects are prompted by viewing, reading, or listening to past creations of art. The experiences are so pleasant that one wants to repeat them, to re-live the happy moments one experiences when encountering these art works. In these senses, as in others, presence takes on more of a spatial dimension than a temporal dimension. The painting is before one as one visits a museum, or is in one’s home. The music is performed in the concert hall in which one hears it, or is listened to on a recording. The poem or novel is read in a library, in one’s home, or elsewhere. These are physically present objects that are experienced, though these objects are not pre-conditions for the presence of the art-past.

13. Psychoanalysis

The past comes to presence in a psychoanalytic therapy session. Past relations, emotions, and events embed themselves in one’s unconscious memory, becoming a part of one’s psyche. In the psychoanalytic setting, these hidden repressed pasts come to presence, affect one, and yet free one, enabling a recovery of fullness of the past into the present.

Sigmund Freud departed from other psychologists, such as Otto Rank, in how to approach the past. Rank thought that psychologists should directly target the past in the patient to understand how the patient is now acting or feeling based on that past. One focus of his was the birth trauma that resurfaced in a rebirth fantasy (Rank 1952, pp. xiii, 3–4). Freud took a different approach. He looked to present symptoms and transferences that are felt during the psychoanalytic encounter (Freud 1965b, pp. 318–37, 445–68, 536–56; 1960; Abraham 1959). He thought that taking that approach resulted in a more accurate view of the past (for the patient), and thus resulted in more effective treatment. The theory on which this was based was that hidden unconscious pasts were present in symptoms and transferences that manifested themselves in the present time. Freud took a similar approach to dream interpretation, using very recent dream content to understand past feelings and events that ultimately produced them (Freud 1965a). The past lives on in current buried memories, resulting in current beliefs, thinking, mannerisms, and behaviors. These may not necessarily be thought of as trace representations of the past in the sense of stored memories, but instead may be transformations, or artefacts, of a process of memory (Laplanche 1999, pp. 89–90).

14. Conclusions

I am, therefore I was born. My origin is my conception and birth. Their origin was my ancestors, each one of which was born and gave birth. Research leads to discovery of the threads of previous lives, influences and obligations, interests and passions, and destiny and open possibilities. Thus, my birth becomes a non-origin of myself. I was enworlded at conception and birth. Prior to birth were both the impossible possibility and necessary possibility. Birth was a necessary pre-condition for events to occur and yet was an event itself.

One may view family genealogy as factic, ontological (in fulfilling the coming-to-be of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world) (Heidegger 1962, pp. 26–27), and as enabling a personal aporia to come to presence. This brand of genealogy revealing birth is temporal, spatial, and perhaps self-empathetic, but also a kind of self-knowledge, and potentially an epiphany, a bringing to surprising presence. The spatialization of my corporality materializes the prior ancestral generations as a presencing—a revelation of a connection between my ancestor(s) and me—a felt non-remembrance, an intuited emplacement determined by my existence of living, experiencing, discovering, and enjoying. Genealogy gives *me*, and helps me to recapture my history/pre-history, potentially as *Erleben* (“lived experience”). It is truth (Greek ἀλήθεια [*alētheia*]; “truth,” literally “un-covering”)—bearing the horizon of the world into which I was born.

Genealogy is a τέχνη [*technē*], usually thought of as “craft” or technical art. It is based on theoretical knowledge that is exhibited in practice, is directed toward an end, and is teachable (Aristotle 1984, Bekker reference 1040a). Heidegger explains that τέχνη may more accurately be considered as a mode of thinking. He writes “to know means to have seen . . . to apprehend what is present, as such . . . a bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth present beings as such beings out of concealedness and specifically into the unconcealedness of their appearance” (Heidegger 1971, p. 59). If one conceives of genealogy as a consideration of origins, it may lead to an unconcealing (an un-covering, and therefore truth re-vealing) of the appearance of one’s birth, one’s transgenerationally donated fund, a bringing forth of presence. However, this coming to presence of one’s birth, of one’s roots, does not come to stand forth, or become manifest, if one exclusively remains in the domain of methodology, epistemology, knowledge, and techniques, but occurs only upon the recognition (often sudden) of the relation between one’s own personhood and ancestors as phenomenological presence.

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