

Book Review

# Birth, Death and Femininity Philosophies of Embodiment

Robin May Schott (Ed.)

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*Birth, Death and Femininity – Philosophies of Embodiment* is an anthology written by four Nordic feminist philosophers: Sara Heinämaa (University of Helsinki), Vigdis Songe-Moller (University of Bergen), Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (University of Iceland) and Robin May Schott (Aarhus University). The book, edited by May Schott, is the result of many years of collaboration and dialogue between the four.

Western philosophy has always been engaged with the topic of death. By contrast, it has rarely offered valuable contributions to understanding the issue of birth. This has something to do with gender, of course: it is women who give birth to children, and childbirth is thus a female experience. That is, *giving birth* is a female experience, while *being born* is something we have universally experienced, in the same sense that none of us, regardless of gender, can avoid death.

During the past decades feminist philosophers have criticized philosophy based on a false universalizing of men's experiences and a corresponding marginalization of women's experiences. But as philosophy aims to speak from a common human ground, women's experiences, such as pregnancy and childbirth, must be taken seriously and be included in philosophical reflection. As feminist philosophers Linda Alcoff and Eva Kittay asked in 2007:

If women had originally been the world's philosophers rather than men, might we not expect a great deal of theorizing about pregnancy? (Alcoff & Kittay, 2007, p. 7).

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There is not much theorizing on birth and pregnancy in philosophy, that is, the *concrete* (and painful) birth of children that women experience. On the other hand, birth is intermittently used as a concept, but then usually as a metaphor for something else, for example in Nietzsche's work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), a book that might just as well be titled "the origin/beginning of tragedy", or in Plato's *Symposium*, where giving birth to ideas is given priority over physical birth. The intellect, and the male way of "giving birth", is hierarchically posited above the body and female childbirth.

May Schott writes in the introduction that, given the expansive philosophical literature on death and the limited philosophical interest in birth, one might expect that such a book would favour feminist philosophical analyses that re-thought philosophical concepts through death and birth, a kind of "philosophy of birth". But that is not the intention of this publication. Rather, as Mary Schott precises:

our project shows how both the concept of natality and the concept of mortality contribute to reflections on fundamental questions in philosophy, including questions about identity, temporality, and community (p. 2).

Thus, Schott, Heinämaa, Thorgeirsdottir and Songe-Moller aim to analyse *both* birth *and* death from their respective disciplinary and feminist perspectives.

In the informative and clear introduction, Robin May Schott shows the prominent role the death plays in Western philosophy: the pre-Socratic view of death as part of the cycle between birth and death; death as the soul's liberation from the body in Plato; death as caused by human sin in Christianity, along with Christianity's belief in eternal life through Christ. Moreover, Descartes interpreted death as the breakdown of the body's machinery, and Simone de Beauvoir begins her *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by citing Montaigne, who claimed that we build our lives by preparing for death. Existentialist philosophy holds that death is always present in human life; we are born dying, so to speak, and death is the framework for human existence. The significant role played by death in the history of philosophy makes it possible almost to describe our Western culture as *necrophilic*. Western necrophilia is reflected, Schott highlights, in images invoked by concentration camps, genocide, the weapon industry, the medicalization of death and the general fascination with violence and death prevalent in film and literature. Schott refers to Grace Jantzen, who claims that this obsession with death is gendered; within this symbolical

system, women are associated with death, in the same manner that Christianity blames Eve for having brought sin and death into Paradise. According to de Beauvoir, the association between femininity and death is grounded in a masculine fear of otherness as well as finitude. The enormous fascination with death makes birth and natality practically invisible, but as Schott points out, we are all born and, in addition, born by a woman.

The ambition of the authors in this essay collection is therefore not to develop a philosophy based on birth and death. Rather, their aim is to analyse what these concepts might bring with them to philosophy. Concepts of birth and death do not only provide a new way of systematizing philosophy, they claim; new concepts also add a gender perspective. As we read in the Introduction:

The book contributes to a reorientation of philosophical questions around themes of morality and natality; it widens the lens of analysis so that birth and death are not treated in isolation from each other or from the broad family of concepts to which they belong; and it explores the significance of ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox for philosophical framing of these matters (p. 17).

The volume consists of nine thorough and in-depth chapters in which each of the authors offers analyses, concepts and methods from their respective fields. The book joins a new trend in feminist philosophy where one is no longer primarily concerned with criticizing the canon and canonical male thinkers, but rather attempts to see the history of philosophy as a reservoir or a source from which to derive concepts to be used for feminist purposes as well. It must also be said that it is a pleasure to read a philosophical book in which there are ample references to other female thinkers. The chapters are presented in a reverse chronological order reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's backwards route through history in *Speculum* (1974). But whereas Irigaray's intention was to deconstruct a phallic logic, the purpose here is of a more pedagogical nature. From a pedagogical perspective, it can be useful to begin with the familiar and temporally non-distant, and thereafter approach things from a more distanced perspective.

The first contribution is by Schott, who, in addition to her introduction, reflects in her two chapters upon sexualized violence. She analyses rape in mythological accounts and finds that in strikingly many historical myths of origin, such as the founding of Rome, tales of rape and offerings appear as backdrops for the creation of states. Against this backdrop Schott discusses the conscious use of rape as a weapon in modern warfare, as revealed in accounts

from the Balkans, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo and many other countries. Schott claims:

Just as Hannah Arendt argued that twentieth-century totalitarianism and the Nazi death camps placed a demand to reflect on the fundamental problem of evil, so I argue that sexual violence in wartime puts a demand on us to reflect on the fundamental relation between the human body and the body politic (p. 49).

Still, from the Balkans came reports on how rape and resultant pregnancy was an intentional part of ethnic cleansing policy, or conversely, ethnic predominance. What makes rape a grotesque weapon of war is – Schott argues – not merely the suffering caused to victims and the obvious dimensions of gender, but that *birth*, in itself, is turned into a *lethal weapon* (p. 63). As Schott shows us, many of the raped women committed suicide, were expelled from their families or were harmed to such an extent that they were robbed of any conceivable “ordinary life”.

In this volume, Heinämaa – who is an internationally acknowledged interpreter of de Beauvoir’s work – contributes with three chapters revolving around de Beauvoir’s thinking and more precisely de Beauvoir’s thinking on death, femininity and the body. De Beauvoir claimed in *The Second Sex* (1949) that there is a close connection between death and femininity in Western culture. De Beauvoir’s contribution to dissolve this connection is particularly relevant, according to Heinämaa, because she links a discussion on mortality together with a critical analysis of the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes (p. 119). Heinämaa makes use of the thought of Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and Lévinas in order to get closer to de Beauvoir’s thinking. Heidegger’s thought that one is able to live truly authentically only after one has stared death in the eye has inspired much existentialist thinking. Heidegger thus turns death into a life-giving principle *par excellence*. Heinämaa criticizes Heidegger for committing the same crucial mistake as the one committed by many male thinkers before him. More precisely, she stresses this point as follows: « ... Heidegger repeats the most profound gesture of Western philosophy – the gesture of substituting death for birth as the meaning-giving substrate of life» (p.100).

In her contribution, Thorgeirsdottir portrays Nietzsche as a philosopher of birth, despite the fact that his concept of birth is abstracted from physical and bodily childbirth. One finds in particular in Nietzsche’s theses of the Eternal Return that birth is thematized; the Eternal Return is a cyclic interpretation of

life where everything is born again over and over again. Luce Irigaray has criticized Nietzsche for delivering a theory whereby one practically gives birth to oneself, and subsequently denies or annihilates any recognition of one's mother. According to Thorgeirsdottir, this is a simplistic interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy of birth. She chooses instead to interpret Nietzsche's concept of birth primarily as a metaphor for something that enables a creative and transformative experience (p. 164). Thorgeirsdottir argues also that Nietzsche's concept of birth constitutes the backdrop of Hannah Arendt's concept of natality. According to Arendt, Thorgeirsdottir maintains, natality is a basic concept for all political thinking. More precisely, Arendt states that: «natality exemplifies the very plurality and differences that makes life and political culture thrive» (p. 186).

Everyone interested in Arendt's concept of natality is herewith advised to consult Thorgeirsdottir's rich and detailed discussion.

The fourth contributor is by Vigdis Songe-Møller and it concerns the relationship between the tragedy literature of antiquity and the philosophy of antiquity. Strangely enough, modern philosophers, with the exceptions of Hegel and Nietzsche, have not been interested in the relationship between the two disciplines. The tragedy functions as a reminder of death, Songe-Møller notes, but with a crucial difference regarding gender: men are usually killed by others, while women usually kill themselves, which is also the case in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Songe-Møller takes *Antigone* as the starting point for a conceptual analysis of tragedy with respect to Parmenides, Empedocles and Heraclitus. According to Songe-Møller, Antigone is someone who longs for unity and for keeping the family together. In the analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Songe Møller emphasizes this aspect: «In *Antigone*, Sophocles holds up a mirror to Parmenides 'comic' dream of eternity, portraying it as a tragic illusion» (p. 226).

Antigone is a tragic heroine who no longer distinguishes between life and death. Instead of seeking to ensure the continuation of her clan and family, she seeks to be united with her dead parents and dead brother. Songe-Møller's contribution is a thorough and in-depth analysis, but is at the same time the one text in the anthology which is least feminist, in the sense that there are few references to feminist theory and literature.

Birth and death are two of the most significant experiences in human life. Some readers will perhaps question the absence of current discussions related to birth, such as surrogacy. But this book is not primarily about pregnancy and

childbirth, nor about ethical dilemmas such as abortion and surrogacy, but is rather an enquiry into birth, death, body and gender as recurrent – albeit not always visible and conspicuous – topics in philosophy. This book does, however, help make these topics at least *somewhat* more conspicuous.

#### REFERENCES

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