

Michael Eskin

# Childhood

An Essay on the Human Condition



Königshausen & Neumann

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*For Kathrin  
&  
my sons*



Toutes les grandes personnes ont d'abord été des enfants.  
(Mais peu d'entre elles s'en souviennent.)

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Almost every paragraph in this book, as in other works of philosophy, requires qualification; but to supply it on every occasion would be to make my main contentions difficult to grasp. I have therefore tried to adopt throughout as definite a standpoint as possible, in the belief that it is more important that there should be discussion of the points herein raised, than that I should survive it unscathed [...] but in a work of this character it is necessary to be bold.

R. M. Hare





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I first began philosophically articulating some of the topics here discussed in *The Wisdom of Parenthood* (2013). The conceptual and methodological insights pertaining to the very *craft* of philosophy gained in the process of composing this essay have been distilled into the more recent *On Writing Philosophy: A Manifesto* (2023). The finishing touches were put on the manuscript during a Visiting Fellowship at New College, Oxford, in the spring of 2023, for the once-in-a-lifetime gift of which I am in Karen Leeder's, her Oxford colleagues', and the entire College's profound debt. Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Frederick A. Lubich for his unwavering support and good humor, as well as Jasmin Stollberger and the entire team at K&N publishers for giving this book a most wonderful home and for deftly shepherding it through publication.





## A Note on Language

In order to be able to disclose and capture the human condition, as I understand it – or, rather, as I have *experienced* and *felt* it – *in words* as comprehensively and truthfully as possible, I found myself compelled gently to stretch the semantic, grammatical, and stylistic fabric of our language when necessary and, at times, to add new terms to our philosophical-anthropological vocabulary. (My technical use of such terms as ‘dream’, ‘relation,’ ‘relationship’, ‘problem’, ‘future’, and ‘departure’ as uncountable nouns is a case in point). Concerning these – necessary – liberties, I cannot but rely on the reader’s forbearance.

When it comes to using the third person singular pronoun in reference to general, grammatically singular nouns in non-gender-specific contexts, conversely, I have opted for the route of simplicity, verbal economy, and grammatical elegance: Thus, I employ – with no gender determination, preference, or value judgment whatsoever intended – ‘he’, ‘his’, ‘him’, or ‘himself’ throughout where the somewhat cumbersome and inelegant (to my ear, anyway) ‘he or she’, ‘his or her’, ‘him or her’, ‘him- or herself’, ‘they’, ‘them’, or ‘themselves’ might also be used.

All unidentified translations from languages other than English are my own unless otherwise indicated.



## Preface

The following exploration of the human condition is not an academic or secondary work of philosophical scholarship but an original, primary work of philosophy. The difference between the two genres being (broadly and, for the sake of contrast, somewhat polemically speaking): the former's tendency critically to engage with or elaborate on the output of original philosophers (with notable exceptions, to be sure), thereby incrementally adding to the scholarship that has gone before and, ideally, pushing the boundaries of its academic niche or nudging it in new directions, as opposed to the latter's proposing unprecedented, novel ways of conceiving of ourselves, the conduct of life, and the world and the universe at large.

Contemporary academic philosophy, as I understand it, tends to be thinking about the original philosophical thinking of others, whereas original philosophy is the philosophical thinking itself, as it were (and irrespective of whether the original philosopher does or does not also teach at an educational institution and considers himself a "professorial and professional philosopher"<sup>1</sup>): Thus, there is Plato, and there is scholarship on Plato; there is Descartes, and there is scholarship on Descartes; there is life and there is suffering, and there are those who think through and philosophize about life and suffering, followed by those who critically discuss the work of those who philosophize about life and suffering, without proposing anything substantial about life and suffering as such in their own name.

Of an original philosopher we can ask: What is his philosophy? What does he say about how we should live, or what the universe is like, or what it means to be human, or what truth or justice is. Of the academic, philosophical scholar we can ask: What is his specialty within the historical field of philosophy? Which philosopher(s) has he worked on? In what way has he changed our understanding of Descartes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, or Sartre, or of a particular problem in the work of any number of philosophers? But we will be hard-pressed to say that he has a unique, properly philosophical approach to life, existence, and so on; that he has developed an original philosophy. (The above notwithstanding, however, it goes without saying that philosophical scholarship can be highly original, innovative, and inspired in its own right, and at times tips into what I call *original* philosophy.)

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (tr. D. Wills; Chicago, 1995), 69.

Given the nature of this essay, whose main goal is neither scholarship as such nor persuading a community of academics of its author's scholarly credibility or his being abreast of the most recent scholarship in his field, I have completely abstained from quoting, referencing, or explicitly engaging with any of the secondary literature I may have consulted while writing this book, limiting my overt conceptual geography to primary, original works only.

Because this is an essay in original philosophy, I feel it necessary to offer a brief statement of philosophical method in order to ensure, to the best of my abilities, that the reader not expect something I do not deliver and that we all be on the same page as far as the nature and character of this essay are concerned. Unlike my inimitable role model's *Discourse on Method*, though, which in its philosophical-historical significance by far exceeds the topical essays on dioptrics, meteors, and geometry that follow it in its first edition, my own 'Discourse on Method' is strictly ancillary to my essay on the human condition as whole, which can be fully perused and understood without it. In other words, if you do not wish to spend time reflecting on the nature and task of philosophy and its distinction from science, or on the impossibility of ultimate philosophical proof beyond the power of subjective evidence, before delving into the question of childhood proper, then simply skip my methodological observations and go straight to Part One.

I should also note that throughout the following reflections, *lived* truth was my sole guide and gauge. Nothing that did not ring true to life, nothing that I felt was "but games," to quote Camus, nothing that sounded good or rhetorically enticing but was not actually true, that is, not the way I, for one, had actually and truly experienced or intuited it in my own life, was allowed to remain on the page. Philosophy, too, can become untrue and wobble just like a bicycle wheel. And when we see that the rim is untrue, we need to tighten or loosen the affected spokes by adjusting the nipples with a spoke wrench until it has been trued again.

# I

## A Discourse on Method

When a Schoolman tells me *Aristotle hath said it*, all I conceive he means by it, is to dispose me to embrace his Opinion with the Deference and Submission which Custom has annexed to that Name. And this effect may be so instantly produced in the Minds of those who are accustomed to resign their Judgment to the Authority of that Philosopher [...] I know no readier or fairer way, than to intreat they would calmly attend to their own Thoughts.

George Berkeley

### 1. The Task of Philosophy

It is the task of philosophy to help us to understand and know ourselves as denizens and agents in a world that is also inhabited and acted in by others (including other species); to suggest ways in which we might conceive of, shape, and determine ourselves, our actions, beliefs, and obligations in a shared world; and to think through, define, or question and displace any number of master concepts – such as ‘justice’, ‘good’, ‘evil’, ‘nature’, ‘life’, ‘death’, ‘equality’, ‘truth’, ‘identity’, ‘man’, ‘happiness’, and ‘responsibility’ – that have a direct bearing on the ethical and political dimensions of our existence. What and who we are; what constitutes our world; what we should believe; how we should act, why, and to what end – these are the basic, most general questions of philosophy, which contain, in a nutshell, the seeds of all others: physical, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, aesthetic, and theological. But the most fundamental question of all, the implicit core and substrate of all philosophical reflection, is, as already Kant suggested, the first: *What and who are we?* It is the bedrock of all other questions we may possibly ask about the universe and our place in it, insofar as these questions will always be human questions, rooted in and articulated from a squarely human position and viewpoint.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Logik: Ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen* (Königsberg, 1800), 25 (“The remit of philosophy in the common sense encompasses the following questions: What can I know? How should I act? What can I hope? What is Man? [...] Metaphysics answers the first question, ethics the second, religion the third, and anthropology the fourth. In fact, however, all of it may be considered part of anthropology insofar as the

## 2. The Human Nature of Philosophy

Two important things follow from the essentially human nature of philosophical inquiry: (1) its species dependence and (2) its individual-questioner dependence. The first consequence means that philosophy is by definition anthropomorphic and anthropocentric. There is nothing cosmically objective or true about its insights and claims outside the human framework. Its propositions and truths are only true for *us*. In other words, if lions or birds were to wonder about the universe and their place in it (if, that is, they were to ‘think’ in these categories at all), presumably theirs would be a very different story from ours.<sup>3</sup> The second consequence means that we can only philosophize from the singular place and position each of us occupies at any given point in time. In other words, philosophy is irreducibly subjective and *perspectival*.<sup>4</sup> It only exists in the myriad singular articulations of the questing and questioning minds and intellectual perturbations of each philosophizing human being: “The thinker can only think as the one who he is.”<sup>5</sup> Which in turn means that the truths of philosophy are not only true for our species alone, but that they are also only true, primarily, for the one who advances *his* particular philosophical truth, and, possibly, for all those who happen to find this truth appealing or otherwise convincing. When it comes to philosophy, then, Protagoras’ *homo mensura* doctrine – “man is the measure of all things” – doubly applies: in terms of our species as a whole and in terms of its philosophizing exemplars.<sup>6</sup>

This twofold character of philosophy manifests itself most saliently in its genre-specific rhetoric and in the way we think and talk about it. While philosophy adopts the *apophantic*, that is, propositional, exposito-

first three questions all relate to the fourth”); Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen, 1988), 61 (“Philosophy [...] thinks all that is, in its entirety – the world, man, god”); Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; London, 1959), 155-157 (“Has the universe any unity of plan or purpose [...]? Is consciousness a permanent part of the universe [...]? Are good and evil of importance to the universe or only to man? Such questions are asked by philosophy”).

<sup>3</sup> Kathrin Stengel and Michael Eskin, *Yoga for the Mind: A New Ethic for Thinking and Being & Meridians Thought* (New York, 2013), 70; Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 25 (“To perceive like us [...] you must have a body like ours”).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift* (1887), III, §12.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, 1945), xiv; Bernard Stiegler, *Passer à l’acte* (Paris, 2003), 18 (“philosophy is always the philosophy of *one* philosopher”); Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (tr. P. Hallward; London, 2002), 124 (“A philosophy is [...] personal experience”).

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1062b; *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Diels/Kranz edn.), DK80b3.

ry, assertive discourse of general or universal truth ('this is how things are'), we typically don't fall for this rhetorical legerdemain, recognizing it for what it is: a given philosopher's expression and assertion of *his* opinion and worldview in terms of general truth, in line with the genre conventions of philosophical prose. Thus, when we encounter a particular philosophical doctrine – such as Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," Kant's "what things are in themselves, we do not know," Nietzsche's "God is dead," Scheler's "being human means hurling an adamant 'no!' at reality," Heidegger's "existence precedes essence," Sartre's "nothingness haunts being," or Lévinas' "responsibility precedes essence" – we don't simply treat it as a natural given or an impersonal, objective truth, but attribute it to and associate it with the philosopher who advanced it, and pick and choose as to which doctrine we wish or do not wish to adopt.<sup>7</sup> So much so, in fact, that when we don't know the author or originator of what we take to be an important-enough philosophical proposition, we tend to inquire about it. Just like Parmenides 2,500 years ago, who, when first presented with the hitherto unfamiliar doctrine of "ideas" by a twenty-year-old Socrates, is reported as asking the latter: "Socrates, did you yourself invent this distinction between abstract ideas and things that partake of them?" To which Socrates in turn is said to have tersely replied: "Yes!"<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Philosophy and Science

Herein also lies the fundamental difference between philosophy and the discourses of modern science. While the latter are certainly equally anthropomorphic and, thus, species-dependent as philosophy (or any other human endeavor, for that matter), they are essentially individual-questioner-independent. Their hypotheses and propositions always lay claim to actual – as opposed to merely rhetorical – objectivity, to objective truth about the world, nature, society, and so on; and even if this objectivity turns out to be "relational," that is, observer-dependent, science still aims at "the true nature of things."<sup>9</sup> This truth will be more or less general or

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Adam & Tannery edn., VI), 32; Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft II* (1781; Frankfurt a.M., 1988), 297; Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), III, §108, §125; Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (1928; Bonn, 2005), 58; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927; Tübingen, 1986), 43; Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris, 1943), 46, 51; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974; Dordrecht, 1990), 180.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Parmenides*, 129a-130b.

<sup>9</sup> Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (tr. S. Carnell & E. Segre; New York, 2017), 9; "Relational Quantum Mechanics" (Feb. 24,



universal depending on the given science and must, in principle (if not always immediately or directly), be ascertainable, provable, or demonstrable through certain agreed-upon “confirmation or falsification procedures” involving observation, experimental replication, and verification, in order to be recognized and accepted as true or correct.<sup>10</sup> The original questioner becomes scientifically (if not necessarily historically, politically, economically, and morally) irrelevant as far as the correctness or incorrectness of his discovery is concerned: Knowing who discovered the laws of motion, electricity, the curvature of spacetime, or the expansion of the universe may certainly be of historical, political, economic, and moral significance, but it has no essential bearing on our understanding and acceptance or rejection of the scientific truths or facts themselves, irrespective of the particular theory of truth to which we may subscribe.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the world or parts of it – depending on the science and the particular question scientifically pursued in any given case – must either be demonstrated and proved, or be in principle demonstrable or provable (absent direct confirmation), actually to work according to the given scientific claims for the latter to be accepted as true or correct. All of which doesn’t mean that science can’t be wrong – it often is – in which case previous claims and truths need to be discarded, emended, or revised, to the point of entire new scientific paradigms replacing old ones. But the fallibility and falsifiability of science don’t change anything about its essential claim to objective, general truth about the world, the universe, nature, society, and so on.

We subtly acknowledge the fundamental difference between science and philosophy by using a specific term when talking about the knowledge generated by science: *discovery*. Scientists *discover* – the laws of nature, the laws of human behavior, the laws of genetics, the laws of economics, and so on. Philosophers, on the other hand, discover nothing in modern-day scientific terms, even though philosophers have certainly employed the language of science throughout history – think of Descartes’ “research of truth,” Hegel’s “philosophical sciences,” or Husserl’s “Phi-

1997; <https://arxiv.org/abs/quant-ph/9609002>), 7 (“I propose to reinterpret every contingent statement about nature [...] as elliptic expressions for relational assertions”).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962; Chicago, 1996), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Feigl, *The ‘Mental’ and the ‘Physical’: The Essay and a Postscript* (1958; Minneapolis, 1967), 28 (“The meaning of scientific truth statements consists [...] in their truth conditions”); Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What It Seems*, 210-211 (“Science works because [...] we can check whether [we] are correct, or not. This is the power of science [...] This is what distinguishes science from other kinds of thinking”).

losophy as a Rigorous Science.”<sup>12</sup> Which is not at all surprising, by the way: as Heidegger reminds us, the very notion of science, as well as the individual sciences, have historically “evolved from within the purview of ancient Greek philosophy,” which encompassed the domains of what would subsequently crystallize into the sciences as we know them. Aristotle, for instance, famously defined philosophy as the *epistêmê* – meaning ‘knowledge’ and often translated as ‘science’ – of “Being as Being” in the entirety of its manifestations.<sup>13</sup> As it turns out, then, it is not philosophy that has borrowed the language of science so much as science continuing to use the language of philosophy even long after becoming independent from it and completely changing the very meaning of ‘science’ in the process. From our modern-day vantage point, in any case, it would be ridiculous to say that Socrates *discovered* “ideas,” that Aristotle *discovered* the “unmoved mover,” that Descartes *discovered* the “cogito,” or that Kant *discovered* the “categorical imperative” as something that can henceforth be shown or demonstrated to be generally or universally true in the sense of an actual – observable, verifiable, provable – law, entity, event, or state of affairs.<sup>14</sup> Philosophers don’t discover; they posit, postulate, or, as Parmenides put it to the young Socrates, they *invent* – based on lived observation, experience, intuition, speculation, and a moral sense of how the world works and ought to work. Philosophy, to the extent that it is original and not merely academic – concerned, that is, mostly with commenting on what original philosophers have written or said – introduces new ways of conceiving of ourselves and our world, new ways of thinking about and administering justice, new ways of viewing history and politics, and so on. But all of these philosophical novelties and innovations can by definition not be proved or demonstrated to be true or false, correct or incorrect; they can only be intellectually apprehended, tried out, shown to have socio-political bearing and relevance, shared and adopted, or rejected, as new frameworks for thinking, acting, and being, based on existential and ethical-political considerations. This means that any actual, ‘verifiable’ truth philosophy may possess is always *prospective*, in the sense that it is its adoption by a one or more persons that will have first translated it into a sort of *lived* truth, into the *pragmatic* truth of a widely-held belief, for instance, or a common practice. Scientific truth, on the other hand, is essentially *retrospective* (even if it sometimes takes years before a given

<sup>12</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, 1; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1817); Edmund Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” *Logos* 1 (1910/11): 289-341.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1060b; Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072a; Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft & Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1781/1785; Leipzig, 1989), 41, 236-237.

scientific theory or claim can be verified by experiment or observation), in the sense that what science discovers will (in principle) have already been there before. Science gauges its truths by what is; philosophy gauges what is by its truths.

#### 4. The Power of Evidence

Which is also why philosophy, unlike science, doesn't really date. Claiming no objective scientific truth, any given philosophy cannot be proved right or wrong, or superseded by a more valid or 'correct' philosophy. (Only those parts of a given philosophy or a given philosopher's legacy date that either lay claim to scientific truth and are demonstrated to be *factually* wrong, or heavily rely on superseded or discarded scientific theory). "There is no objective metric," Heidegger writes, "that would allow us to compare levels of perfection in philosophy [...] Plato's thought is not more perfect than Parmenides'. Hegel's philosophy is not more perfect than Kant's."<sup>15</sup> Thus, we still grapple with Plato's, Aristotle's, Descartes', Kant's, and others' philosophical arguments in relation to our own lives and times, whereas we no longer believe that the sun revolves around the earth, we no longer practice medicine based on the doctrine of the four humors, we no longer think, as did Descartes, that the heart is a furnace that heats up blood rather than a muscle that pumps it, and we no longer conceive of procreation as involving tiny *homunculi* inside the ovum or sperm, as did the so-called preformationists.

Unlike science, then, philosophy – and this is the third consequence of the essentially human nature of philosophical inquiry (the first two being its species dependence and its individual-questioner dependence) – is beyond or exempt from proof. At most, philosophical insight can claim the experiential truth of *evidentiary certitude*, but not empirically verifiable, experimentally or observationally demonstrable and ascertainable truth as such. *Evidentia*, a term Cicero introduced into philosophy (as a translation of the Greek *enargeia*), implies "something that radiates from within itself," that is "felt by the mind" without requiring or being capable of further proof, something that simply bears the "mark of a true impression" beyond "true or false."<sup>16</sup> Already Aristotle noted that in philosophy

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *Academica 2 (Lucullus)*, VI, 17 ("propterea quod nihil esset clarius *enargeiai* – ut Graeci, perspicuitatem aut evidentiam nos si placet nominemus), XI, 33 ("sed propria veri, non communi veri et falsi nota"); Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 73 ("*Evidentia* is the word Cicero uses to translate the Greek *enargeia* [...] it means that which radiates from within itself"); David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature III*

“not knowing of what we should require proof, and of what we should not” bespeaks “a lack of education [...] for it is quite impossible that everything should have a proof; the process would go on *ad infinitum*.”<sup>17</sup> Whatever proof there may be when it comes to philosophy, then, can only be of an evidentiary – speculative, logical, psychological, emotional, intuitive, or moral – nature. “This is how I truly and indubitably experience and view myself, human existence, and the world at large, and this is how I urge you to view it’, is all a philosopher can ultimately offer. Take it or leave it.

Nowhere does this come to the fore as vividly as in the philosophical founding documents of the modern era, Descartes’ *Discourse on Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Famously, Descartes defined the cornerstone of his research method for seeking the truth as “never accepting anything as true that I don’t recognize as such in an evidentiary [évidemment] manner, [and] that doesn’t present itself to my mind with such clarity and distinction that I couldn’t possibly doubt it.” The revolutionary, paradigm-shifting “*I think, therefore I am*” reveals itself to Descartes as precisely such a “truth” – “solid and certain” – “most certain and most evident,” in fact, as he emphatically reiterates, before moving on to specifying how this evidentiary certitude works, namely, owing to the power of the so-called *lumen naturale*, or “natural light”: “What I am able to perceive owing to the natural light – for instance that because I doubt [and, hence, think] I also must exist – can in no way be doubted, for there cannot be any other power that I trust more than this light.”<sup>18</sup> (Descartes’ certainty of evidence was certainly shored up by the fact that Aristotle had already articulated virtually the same thought about 1,500 years before him: “Whenever we perceive, we are conscious that we perceive, and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think, and to be conscious that we are perceiving and thinking is to be conscious that

(1740; Oxford, 1888), 628-629 (“an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction [...] in the *manner* of its being conceiv’d [...] An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea [...] And this different feeling I endeavor to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness* [...] in philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is something *felt* by the mind”).

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b-1006a, 1061b-1062a; Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751; Indianapolis, 1983), 43n19 (“We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general”).

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, 18, 32; *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (Adam & Tannery edn., VII), 25, 38-39; *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle* (Adam & Tannery edn., X), 495-527.

we exist – for existence, as we saw, is sense perception or thought.”<sup>19</sup>) Four centuries later, Husserl will use almost the same words to talk about the validity and truth of philosophical insight: “Not only the *I am* is evident, but countless other judgments [...] insofar as I do not merely opine them but possess the certainty of evidence [Evidenz] that what I perceive is actually given to me as that which I perceive it to be; that I myself grasp it as what it actually is.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, philosophy is never objectively right, correct, or true. But if genuine and strong – which it needs to be to appeal and endure – it is inventively metaphorical in the sense of pointing out and establishing hitherto unsuspected or unseen meanings and meaningful connections between the manifold phenomena of our lives and worlds; innovatively speculative and exploratory; surprisingly illuminating; intellectually and morally provocative, and, above all, truthful in the sense of not obfuscating and fully taking on board its ineluctable anchorage in the concrete, lived, ever-unfolding process of human experience. Its overall goal is to illuminate, enhance, and enrich our existence through intuition and reasoning, which means that the ultimate end of philosophical inquiry – be it implicit or explicit – is inherently *ethical*. Every philosophy is an ethics at heart, insofar as it bears on how we exist, think, and act, and insofar as it presents an implicit or explicit model for how we *ought* to exist, think, and act. It is in this spirit – the spirit of thought-provoking, ethical exploration – that I wish this essay on the human condition to be understood.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170a-1170b.

<sup>20</sup> Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen: Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis* II/1 (1900; Tübingen, 1993), 357.

**PART ONE**

**Where We Are:  
The Age of Childhood**



## II

### The Child Inside

We have all witnessed adults, including ourselves, behave ‘like children’. At one time or another, we have all probably thought or said out loud in reference to another adult’s behavior: “He’s acting like a child.” We have all also probably witnessed young children behave ‘like adults’ – as when they act in a particularly mature, responsible, reasonable, and self-restrained manner. After all, “part of the process of maturing into adulthood,” neuroscience tells us, consists in presumably “gaining control of our unbridled emotions and impulses [...] our more infantile and animalistic impulses.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of adults acting ‘like children’, the qualifier is clearly meant as a criticism; in the case of children acting ‘like adults’, conversely, the qualifier is a badge of honor. But how does this make sense if behaving ‘like an adult’ can also mean behaving ‘like a child’, insofar as adults can and often do act ‘like children’, while acting ‘like a child’ can also mean acting ‘like an adult’, insofar as children can and sometimes do act ‘like adults’? Which type of adult or child – ‘childish’ or ‘adult’ in either case – do the praised child and criticized adult, respectively, behave ‘like’? All ostensible casuistry aside, though, it all seems to make perfect sense to us, and we freely apply these labels to adults’ and children’s behavior without thinking twice about it.

But what do we actually mean when we use these labels? It being understood that the behavioral symmetry established between ‘like children’ and ‘like adults’ is specious: For while the three-year-old who behaves ‘like an adult’ (shares his things, is polite and helpful, listens attentively, and so on) imitates the behavior of positive – real, fictional, or ideal (in the Platonic sense) – ‘adult’ role models he may have observed or been told about, or implements lessons learned from well-meaning, positive ‘adult’ role models (older siblings, parents, teachers, or caregivers), the adult who acts ‘like a child’ neither imitates an ideal, fictional or real (pouty, whiny, obstreperous, clamoring, caterwauling) child, nor does he put into practice lessons learned from well-meaning, infantile or ‘adult’, role models.<sup>22</sup> If

<sup>21</sup> John T. Cacioppo & William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York, 2009), 169.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b (“From childhood on, humans instinctually engage in imitation – in fact, this is what distinguishes them from other animals: Humans are the most mimetic of all, and it is through imitation that humans develop their earliest understanding”).



anything, the ‘childish’ adult throws all the behavioral lessons in socialization acquired from a young age out the window and gives free rein to his limbic self.

What we implicitly and, most likely, unintentionally mean, then, when we apply these labels are several things that are far from unproblematic:

1. To begin with, when we praise a child for acting ‘like an adult’, we tacitly rely on an abstract idea of adulthood that is the distillate of the behavior of those adults only who neither act ‘like children’ nor like other adults who do act ‘like children’. Concomitantly, since the phrase ‘like an adult’ (in all of its permutations, as in ‘It’s very adult of you’) implies generality (‘like adults *in general*’) – which, however, is precisely what is lacking given that adults can behave both ‘like adults’ and ‘like children’, and there is thus no consistent adult behavior *in general* that could function as a behavioral metric for children – what we actually mean when we praise a child for behaving ‘like an adult’ is that the child’s actions adhere to certain, presumably generally accepted and consensually valued, ethical and behavioral standards that serve as paradigms for both children and adults, such as: being reasonable, self-possessed, honest, considerate, empathetic, helpful, respectful, generous, selfless, and so on. But why should certain *bona fide* ‘childish’ behaviors not be *good* (or at least not bad) in themselves or depending on the situation? For instance, being emotional or not reasonable on occasion, rather than reasonable and self-possessed? Why don’t we praise the ‘He-man’ for acting ‘like a child’ if he can’t help crying when he is justly upset?

2. This means that when we say an adult is acting ‘like a child’ we suggest that – since, similarly to ‘like an adult’, ‘like a child’ too implies generality – children’s behavior in general is unreasonable, inconsiderate, self-centered, and so on. Not only do we thus demean childhood both as a concept and an ontogenetic, developmental stage, but we also arbitrarily essentialize it in a negative way.

3. Whereas ‘like an adult’ is aspirational, ‘like a child’ is regressive: Since ‘like an adult’ implies resemblance based on imitation and modeled behavior, by applying this moniker we communicate to the child that it is *good* and that it *ought* to behave like the (good) adults it has observed or been told or taught about, that it should strive and aspire to become like these adults. However – and here the asymmetry between the two labels comes into play again – when we think or say to another adult that he is acting ‘like a child’, we don’t mean to say that the resemblance of the adult’s behavior to a child’s is the result or a function of the adult’s imitating any number of (unreasonable, pouty, whiny) real or fictitious children – least of all the ‘ideal’ child, who would presumably come awfully

close to the ‘ideal’ adult – nor do we mean to say that the adult ought not to strive or aspire to imitate children or become like a child (real, fictitious, or ideal). What we are saying is that the adult has regressed or reverted to a developmental stage he should have grown out of long ago, and is now behaving inappropriately. The question, then, is: Which ‘child’ are we suggesting the adult is behaving like? To which ‘child’ are we comparing the adult who acts ‘like a child’?

It can neither be the ideal (in the Platonic sense) nor the fictitious or real child, since this would imply that the resemblance of the adult’s behavior to a child’s is based on some form of imitation, after all. But we have established that when an adult acts ‘like a child’, the adult, unlike the child in the reverse scenario, is precisely *not* imitating anyone. Still, there must be somebody whom the adult acts *like* when he acts ‘like a child’. Who could it be?

The answer that seems most plausible and true-to-life to me is: the child the adult once was and still is; the child whom the adult doesn’t need to and, in fact, cannot possibly imitate and act *like*, simply because the adult always already is and coincides with that child – there being no requisite distance between the two for imitation to work in the first place. The adult, in other words, acts ‘like’ himself-as-a-child, or, rather, the adult is simply being himself. For unlike the child, who is not yet the adult it will one day become, the adult will forever retain, and thus be, the child he once was – the “modified descendant” of his own “preëxisting form.”<sup>23</sup> In Aristotelian terms, the child is merely an adult in *potentiality* but not in *actuality*, whereas the adult is the child’s *potentiality* having become reality, the child *actualized* in its own future. Childhood, in other words, is neither superseded nor supplanted by adulthood. It is, as I explore in great detail in the following pages, *sublated* into adulthood in Hegel’s precise sense of retention and preservation in and through change.

The recognition that we remain children throughout our lives – in a completely non-figurative and non-developmental sense – that human existence is coterminous and essentially bound up with childhood was the germinal idea and starting point of this essay, which outlines a *different* way of looking at and thinking about what and who we are as human beings. What this essay offers, is an unconventional approach to interpreting and understanding something very old: the human condition. I call this approach, for reasons that will become evident in the course of my reflections, *pueritism* – a convenient conceptual handle derived from *pueritia*,

<sup>23</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex I* (London, 1871), 9.

the common Latin noun for ‘childhood’, which incorporates *puer* (meaning ‘child’, both male and female) and *puera* (meaning ‘female child’ specifically), two terms we still have recourse to today in the general, gender-neutral sense of ‘child’ in such words as ‘puerile’, ‘puerpera’, ‘puerperal’, and ‘puerperium’.<sup>24</sup>

How we think about what and who we are, what being human means, determines how we view and treat ourselves, each other, and the world at large; it also determines how we think we *ought* to treat ourselves, each other, and the world. How we conceive of the human condition is thus of *ethical* significance, insofar as “human conduct is that with which the name ‘Ethics’ is most intimately associated.”<sup>25</sup> And because how we think about our condition has ethical ramifications, it is important, from time to time, to revisit the question of the human condition with a view to reframing it in light of the given state of humanity, its possibilities, and evolving horizons.

Like any philosophical work, the most this essay can hope to achieve is to offer a model for how we ought to think about what it means to be human, and how we ought to live based on how we conceive of what and who we are. It is precisely the models created by philosophy concerning what and who we are as human beings that take us out of the purely evolutionary-biological, according to which anything and everything about our species and its interaction with its environment typically gets reduced to, and explained in terms of, the stark laws of survival and species propagation. Philosophy is the true poetry of existence. It supplies us with veridical fictions about what and who we are, which first turn sheer being alive into meaningful existence.

The ‘truth’ of philosophy being by definition conditional and subjective, my own, singular attempt at understanding and describing what and who we are cannot but be precisely that: my own. However, given that the singular, as Hegel observed, is inextricably tied to and partakes of the general through the particular – each of us is both absolutely unique and a particular instance of the general class *Homo sapiens* – my approach to the human condition might strike a broader chord and be accepted by at least some others (– which, I should add, is not at all to suggest that, as the old saw has it, “if you know one, you know all”).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 27 (“a pueritia”); Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, I, 16 (“in pueritia”); Suetonius, *Caligula*, VIII, 3 (“antiqui etiam puellas pueros [...] dicitarent”).

<sup>25</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903; Mineola, 2004), 2; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *passim* (esp. 1095a, 1103a, 1142a, 1143a-1143b).

<sup>26</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II* (1812/1816), I, 1; Terentius, *Phormio*, l. 265 (“unum noris omnes”).

What I wish to argue in this essay are four main, interconnected points:

(1) Since time immemorial we have misunderstood the human condition by not considering it primarily as the condition of childhood.

(2) There is an essential, occluded, overlooked link between childhood and philosophy such that philosophy reveals itself, fundamentally, as a sustained reflection on childhood. Or, put differently: Since engaging in philosophy – any kind of philosophy – in and of itself implies probing the human condition, it also necessarily implies probing the condition of childhood. In reflecting on the condition of childhood, philosophy automatically reflects on its very own conditions. All philosophy is, at bottom, a philosophy of childhood.

(3) From the fact that the human condition is, fundamentally, the condition of childhood, certain ‘guidelines’ for how we ought to act ‘naturally’ follow.

(4) The ontological and the ethical, the *is* and the *ought*, what we *are* and what we *ought* to do are situated along one existential continuum such that the ontological always already *tips* or *converts* into the ethical, and *vice versa*.

I should also note at the outset that because I am ineluctably and inescapably implicated in what I aim to capture and describe – the human condition – my reflections necessarily oscillate between the subjective and the objective modes, looking at the human condition from within and from without (to the extent that the latter is at all possible). I trust that the reader will know the difference in any given instance and forgive this unavoidable occasional indeterminacy.



### III

## The Human Condition

### 1. The Four Perspectives: Biological, Ontological, Existential, Ethical

What and who are we? This most fundamental of philosophical questions is twofold. It contains two distinct yet inseparable aspects: ‘*what* are we?’ and ‘*who* are we?’. The first bears on the significance of what it is and means to be human, on our very essence and constitution as humans, on the condition of being human in general; it is an *ontological* question.<sup>27</sup> The second bears on the more or less contingent features that identify us as this particular person or agent; it implies, *pace* Nietzsche’s protestations, the *actual* “doer” of a “doing,” the bearer of a social identity, function or role; it is an *existential* and, as we shall see, in and of itself also an *ethical* question.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the ontological and the existential – as I employ these terms – pertain to humanity, respectively, in light of its general conditions on the one hand, and in light of the articulation of these general conditions in, and their being consciously experienced by, the individual agent on the other. Both perspectives go together, since we never simply exist as ‘human beings in general’ – which is an ontological fact – but always already as concrete persons engaged in concrete actions and relationships in concrete socio-cultural contexts and circumstances – which is an existential fact. Logically speaking, the existential is determined by the ontological; chronologically speaking, the existential precedes the ontological in the sense that we first exist as this particular person in this particular situation and only then reflect on the general conditions of what it means thus to exist or be human.

Furthermore, both the ontological and the existential, which fall within the purview of philosophy, need to be distinguished from the biological, which falls within the purview of science. Existential and ontological propositions are individual-questioner-dependent and can only claim subjective truth, which may or may not be shared by others; biological

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028a (“The word ‘being’ [*tò on*] has several senses [...] the primary sense is clearly the ‘what’ [*tí estin*], which denotes the substance [*ousía*]”).

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, I, §13 (“there is no ‘Being’ behind the doing, creating, becoming; ‘the doer’ is but an invention added to the doing – doing is all there is”).

propositions, conversely, being by definition individual-questioner-independent, must claim objective truth, whose validity is not necessarily tied to its being shared or not. The ontological perspective in particular might be confused with the biological perspective, as both seemingly pertain to what we are. But there is a fundamental difference between the biological and the ontological: The *what* of biology is organic life and its processes; whereas the *what* of ontology is Being and its significances. Biology inquires into how organisms (including the human organism) came to be and how they work or function; ontology grapples with Being insofar as it can be apprehended and experienced. The biological perspective aims to explore and understand the material aspects of life as part of an evolutionary process within an overall taxonomic framework, and it bears on the species; the ontological perspective, conversely, aims to understand being human as such, premised on “the structure of human self-givenness,” that is, on our irreducible awareness of and ability to “reflect on our psychic and physical being.”<sup>29</sup> The existential perspective, finally, aims to capture the ontological through the existential prism of concrete conscious experience or what I call, more broadly, its *feel*.

Life as such is not premised on consciousness and awareness, being human and existence are. Life as such can persist in what we call a vegetative state; Being and existence as here understood cannot. When we talk about existence in this ontological sense, we already presuppose that the one existing is conscious or aware – has a *feel* – in one way or another, of his and others’ being there. Which is not at all to suggest that, say, newborns, comatose patients, or those asleep, don’t exist. Of course, they do – in the everyday sense of sheer being there. But they do not exist in the strong and full sense of being aware of their own and others’ being there. They exist in the state of potentiality, insofar as consciousness and awareness are essential ontological features of being human. Biologically speaking, we are *Homo sapiens*. Ontologically speaking, we are *humans*. Existentially speaking, we are *persons*.

It is crucial to keep in mind the distinction between life and being human, between the biological and the ontological. In what follows, I am not interested in the biological foundations and processes of life, including human life, but only in the human condition – understood as that which we all have in common as human beings rather than as instances of *Homo sapiens*, as members of a human world and culture rather than as speci-

<sup>29</sup> Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, 48; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 12 (“Comprehension of Being is a defining feature of [the human being]”); Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, 82 ([The human being] is a being which in its very being is concerned with its own being).

mens of nature – and its articulation and experience in individual human existence. And because human existence always already transpires in concrete socio-cultural contexts and circumstances, involving concrete situations, actions, and interpersonal relationships, the existential is in and of itself also ethical, insofar as the latter is by definition concerned with how we live and conduct ourselves toward each other and the world, as well as with how we ought to live and conduct ourselves in light of certain, communally adopted (or envisioned), shared values, in light, that is, of “what, in the conduct of us, human beings, is good, and what is bad, what is right, and what is wrong.”<sup>30</sup> *Human existence is inherently ethical*. It is for this reason that I said that the ontological *tips* or *converts* into the ethical through the existential. In other words, Hume’s ‘guillotine’ – the separation between *is* and *ought*, between what and who we are and what we ought to do, or how we ought to act – does not apply in the real life of human beings, where existing in and of itself implies interacting with the world and others; it introduces a conceptual rift into the multi-faceted, unitary continuum of human existence, which always already implies an *ought*, an ethical dimension.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. The Human Condition Revisited

There are few things we all have in common beyond the purely biological, such as finitude, bilateral symmetry, endothermicity, mammality, language capacity, and other phylogenetic, species-related characteristics pertaining to *Homo sapiens*. Which is not in any way to suggest that on the biological plane differences do not exist – for plainly they do. Think, for instance, of the diversity of phenotypes, sex characteristics, or congenital ‘variations’ we typically call ‘birth defects’ (but which are, in and of themselves, simply *differences*). In other words, even though no two humans are genetically identical (not even monozygotic twins), all of us do share all those biological traits that determine our rank – *Homo sapiens* – in a particular taxonomic hierarchy.

Once we leave the realm of the biological or ‘natural’, however, and enter the realm of *culture* – the realm of the ontological and existential, the social, ethical, and political; the realm of conscious thought, awareness, and communication; the realm in and from within which we are capable of considering, reflecting on, and intentionally and purposefully creating and shaping our lives and environments; the realm, that is, in which we actually consciously experience our lives and worlds unfolding – we

<sup>30</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature III*, 469.



quickly realize that while we may have certain things in common with *some* others (individuals or groups) *some* of the time, we do not, ostensibly, all have any one thing in common with *all* others *all* of the time. Thus, while we are all biologically hard-wired to speak a language, some of us speak English, while others speak Russian, Chinese, or Hebrew, or more than one language. Some of us live sedentary lives, while others are nomads. Some of us are married, while others are not. Some of us have children, while others do not. Some of us are doctors, teachers, or oil riggers, while others are musicians, goldsmiths, or farmers. Some of us are Christian, while others are Muslim. Some of us have known romantic love, while others have not. Some of us never get sick, while others are laid up several times a year. Clearly, this catalogue could be extended *ad infinitum*, the point being: On the whole, our similarities will always be outweighed by our differences.

With three exceptions. There are three things, in the realm of culture, that we all share at all times: (1) the understanding that we were born, (2) the certainty that we will die, and (3) the knowledge that each of us is another's child – which three must be distinguished from the strictly biological facts we share with all living beings, namely, that our lives are a function of procreation and that they have a beginning and an end. Let me address these three exceptions one by one, beginning with mortality.

### 3. Mortality

“Death, which anonymously haunts the daily existence of the living, is the very background against which we experience our life.”<sup>32</sup> We all know that one day we will die. Across ages and cultures, mortality – humanity's punishment for disobeying God's injunction not to eat from “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” according to some, the simple and necessary consequence of the “condition of birth” according to others – has traditionally been viewed as the most general defining characteristic of the human condition *qua* embodied condition. As Roman poet and astrologer Marcus Manilius put it: “Being born we are already dying, the end is looming from the beginning.” And as Philip Larkin would echo almost 2,000 years later, “Life is slow dying.”<sup>33</sup> Cicero dubbed it *mortalis condicio vitae*

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966), 326.

<sup>33</sup> Manilius, *Astronomica*, IV, l. 16 (“Nascentes morimur, finisque ab origine pendet”); Larkin, “Nothing To Be Said” (1962), l. 6; Gen. 2:17; *Basic Teachings of the Buddha* (tr. G. Wallis; New York, 2007), 41 (“With the condition of birth, there is aging-and-death”); *Bhagavad Gita* (tr. W. Sargeant; Albany, 2009), II, 27 (“For the born death is certain”).

– the “mortal condition of life”; all other attempts at capturing or defining the essence of the human being – as a political, rational, language-endowed, or war-waging creature, for instance – have already presupposed this basic condition of mortality.<sup>34</sup> Encompassing such aspects and topoi as our being but “wayfarers” on earth “between two eternal orders,” subject to aging, decrepitude, and decay, and prone to illness, pain, and suffering, the human condition has been viewed as inexorably transpiring against the incessant background drone of *vanitas* and *memento mori*.<sup>35</sup> Whereby death itself, especially if preceded by debilitating illness or protracted agony, has often been figured – think of the image of the grim reaper – as “a subject of perpetual torment,” the “abhorred” culmination, both as climax and cessation, of the tribulations of human existence.<sup>36</sup> It is because we are but “leaves that the wind scatters earthward,” because of our finitude – and, more precisely, due to our awareness of our finitude – that we presumably understand and are capable of experiencing beauty and love, grief and joy; that we are impelled to act, create, and perpetuate ourselves beyond death (think of Hippocrates’ famous aphorism “life is short, art is long”); that we invent religions that supply us with notions of an afterlife.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, for all of our awareness of our mortality, no one has ever consciously experienced death (and lived to tell about it). As Epicurus famously notes: “While we are alive, death is not present, and when death is present we are no longer alive; it is therefore nothing either to the living or to the dead, since it is not present to the living, and the dead are no longer alive.”<sup>38</sup> Not only can we *not* experience our own death, but we are also barred from experiencing the death of another. At most, we can witness – and thus experience how it is to be witnessing – another’s ceasing to be alive, but not another’s death proper. For insofar as experience im-

<sup>34</sup> Cicero, *Philippics*, XIV (“mortali condicione vitae”); Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a (“zôon politikón,” “politikón o anthrôpos zôon,” “lôgon dè mónon anthrôpos échei tôn zôon”); *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a12 (“politikén o anthrôpos”), 1098a, 1102a-1103a (“zôon lôgon échon”); Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 96, Art. 4 (“homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis”); Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, XLI, 8 (“rationale enim animal est homo”); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), I, 13, 8 & 13; II, 19, 18 (“war of every man against every man”).

<sup>35</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob: Libri I-X* (Turnhout, 1979), 16, 24; Ecc. 1:2.

<sup>36</sup> Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807; Stuttgart, 1987), 32 (“Death, if that is what we wish to call that unreality [Unwirklichkeit], is the most abhorred and dreaded [Furchtbarste]”).

<sup>37</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, VI, l. 147; Marcus Aurelius, X, 34. (Hippocrates’ “Ho bios brakhys, hê de tekhê makrê” is more widely known in its Latin version: “vita brevis, ars longa.”)

<sup>38</sup> Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, 2.

plies conscious life, death itself can by definition never be experienced or known.

Our awareness, and, thus, experience of our mortality, then, hinges on a fundamental unknown. We dread something we don't know anything about from an experiential standpoint. We don't know what death is or feels like, what kind of state it is, or what happens when *it* happens. We only know its putative symptoms and external markers as defined and perceived by those who are alive – by us. And even here, we do not at all agree on how to define death or *when* it precisely occurs. Death, in other words, is above all a contested idea, a shifting conceptual handle for something that by definition escapes our experiential-cognitive grasp.

This means that the mortality we all have in common – and I should stress once again that I am not talking about the biological fact that our lives are finite, but about our awareness and consciousness of our finitude – is, first and foremost, a shared idea of a *certain* future, which is also the end of all individual future; it is our understanding that “no one dies but his own death.”<sup>39</sup> But it is not something that actually *is* – a *reality* – something that can be said concretely, palpably to constitute our active condition while we are alive. “Death is nothing,” Epictetus writes, “whereas it is our idea of death” that troubles us. Echoing Epictetus, Hegel calls death the most “dreaded unreality.”<sup>40</sup> I, therefore, abstain from conceiving of the human condition fundamentally in terms of an idea about something we know nothing about, something none of us has ever experienced, something that can by definition never become part of our very aliveness and, thus, our actual, *de facto* condition.

It is biologically true that “all men are mortal” – just like all other organic, living forms.<sup>41</sup> All dogs and birds and bears and fish are mortal as well. In other words, mortality in terms of biological finitude is certainly not specific to humans. It can, consequently, not function as a defining feature of the human condition in particular. What makes it specifically human is our having an idea of our finitude – something neither dogs, birds, or bears, nor any other species presumably possesses. As a mere notion or idea, however, mortality is anthropologically too weak, as it were, to claim pride of place as the hallmark of the actual human condition. For why not, then, assign this place to other, equally proprietarily human ideas of entities or states unknown (including horrible or dreaded ones), such as ‘god’, ‘zombie’, ‘infinity’, ‘hell’, and so on?

<sup>39</sup> Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, XLIX, 6 (“Nemo moritur nisi sua morte”); Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 264.

<sup>40</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 5; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (Paris, 1946).

To sum up: being mortal, the facticity of death, is nothing specifically human from a biological viewpoint and cannot function as the defining feature of the specifically human condition; having an idea of mortality, in turn, while presumably specific to the human species from an evolutionary perspective, is not sufficiently unique among other uniquely human ideas (including the very idea of ‘idea’) to be stipulated as the basic feature of the human condition. In other words, our mortality, or rather our idea of our finitude, doesn’t in any way uniquely illuminate or help us understand our actual human condition here and now in an exemplary manner, even though we all share this idea with all others all of the time. We are, as Alain Badiou puts it, “something other than mortal beings.”<sup>42</sup>

It could be argued that the centrality of mortality in our conception of the human condition is the invention of a decidedly male tradition of thought predicated on a specifically male approach to death; an approach that is arguably based on a deep-seated fear or dread in view this “unreality” in need of assuaging or channeling, and that considers the activities of philosophical reflection and contemplation above all as a meditation on and, thus, preparation for, dying: From Socrates and the Buddha, to Cicero, Seneca, and Montaigne, to Heidegger, Foucault, Stiegler, and Knausgaard, to name only a few, examining the human condition has meant – with few exceptions (notably, Spinoza) – learning to cope with our “being towards death,” creatively assuming our mortality.<sup>43</sup>

Philosopher Kathrin Stengel has suggested that it is fundamentally the total and irrevocable loss of control over our body and, thus, our very Being-as-embodied signified by death that constitutes the male object of dread. Women, on the other hand, due to their ineluctable monthly experience of loss of bodily control during their period throughout their child-

<sup>42</sup> Badiou, *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal* (Paris, 1993), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a, 67a (“those who truly practice philosophy study nothing but dying and being dead”; “true philosophers practice dying”); *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*, 41 (“With the condition of birth, there is aging-and-death”); Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I, 30 (“A philosopher’s entire life [...] is a preparation for death [commentatio mortis]”); Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae*, VII, 3-4 (“we learn all our life how to die [tota vita discendum est mori]”); Montaigne, *Essais* (1580; Pléiade edn. [1962]), 79 (“To philosophize is to learn how to die”); Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 250-264 (“being toward death”); Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 326 (see above); Stiegler, *Passer à l’acte*, 20 (“a philosopher’s philosophy only makes sense when it is reflected in his way of living – that is, of dying”), 29 (“One must always be ready to philosophize to the death, as did Socrates – and to philosophize in the dying that a life is”); Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book Six* (tr. D. Bartlett & M. Aitken; New York, 2019), 624 (“Death is the background, from which life emerges”); Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), IV, Prop. 67 (“The free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life”).

bearing years, and most saliently during childbirth, when death (both the mother's and child's) is always a real possibility, arguably have a different, far more accepting attitude toward and experience of mortality, having learned to entrust themselves to forces beyond their control from an early age (the achievements of modern medicine notwithstanding). It might, therefore, not be a coincidence that it took a female philosopher – Hannah Arendt – radically to question and displace the male emphasis on philosophy as *meditatio mortis* by introducing a new concept into our thinking about the human condition – *natality* – and shifting the philosophical focus on birth rather than death: philosophy as *meditatio nativitatitatis*.

#### 4. Natality

The “most general condition of human existence,” Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* (1958), are “birth and death, natality and mortality”; but because, Arendt further surmises, our lives unfold as a continuum of activity and action – which imply “initiative” and “beginning something anew” – the paradigmatic “new beginning” signified by “natality and not mortality, may be the central category.” And in *Love and Saint Augustine* – the heavily revised English version of her 1929 dissertation, created in the 1960s and not published until 1996 – Arendt makes the point even more explicit: “the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or ‘natality’.”<sup>44</sup>

Certainly, Arendt was not the first or only philosopher to have reflected on and used the term ‘natality’. Thus, Merleau-Ponty had already employed the noun *natalité* in his 1945 treatise *Phenomenology of Perception* in connection with his overall endeavor to probe the significance of our being both mortal beings and “beings who are born.”<sup>45</sup> But even Merleau-Ponty, who had devoted more philosophical attention to the existential import of birth than any other philosopher before him, came down on the side of mortality rather than natality in his summation of how we presumably actually experience our lives: “[...] even if I don’t think about my death, I live in the constant atmosphere of death in general; the essence of death, as it were, is always on the horizon of my thoughts [...] and my life [...] has a mortal taste.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998), 8-9; *Love and Saint Augustine* (1929/1963; tr. E. B. Ashton; Chicago, 1996), 51.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 50 (“my birth and my death belong to an anonymous natality [natalité] and mortality”); 399 (“être qui est né”).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

We all know and understand that we were born. Like death, however, birth is an event we will have never properly experienced such that it can be said ever to become part of our consciousness in and through time, our lived and living memory. Even though we all played the lead in the drama of our birth, this event will forever remain outside the purview of our experience proper. Put simply, we will never know or remember our birth. At most, we will know ‘about’ our birth from others’ stories, photos, or video footage. The fetus’ and future person’s ‘experience’ of being born, of embarking on the journey of human existence, necessarily recedes into the individual’s immemorial prehistory. Insofar as consciousness presupposes memory and mnemonic continuity and insofar as our birth will forever remain inaccessible to us as an experienced, remembered event, natality reveals itself, just like mortality, above all as an idea or awareness of something we can never properly *know*: our own birth. We can steadily expand our objective knowledge and understanding of the biochemical, neurophysiological processes and developments leading from conception and gestation through birth and beyond by observing them in others. But we will never know what being born actually *felt* like to *us* (or anyone else, for that matter), since we can never be witnesses to our own birth or share this ‘experience’ by communicating it. Like death, birth is an event where being there does not make you a witness; an event that escapes our cognitive-experiential grasp. As in the case of mortality, our awareness, and, thus, experience of our natality can only be the experience of our knowledge, our idea of having been born, rather than birth itself, which will forever remain a fundamental and essential unknown. We can only “grasp” our birth and our death, as Merleau-Ponty observes, in terms of the “pre-personal horizons” of a being “already born” and “still alive.”<sup>47</sup>

Like death, birth is a biological fact. ‘All men are natal’, to riff on Simone de Beauvoir. Birth is a “new beginning,” marking our entrance onto the stage of human existence. And like death, birth itself is not in any way unique to, or defining of, the human condition. Rather, it is characteristic of the condition of all viviparous mammals as well as some non-mammalian species. What is unique to the human species is the condition of having an idea, an awareness and understanding or knowledge of the condition of being born, that is, precisely, natality.

At which point we can also see that birth and death, as well as natality and mortality, respectively, are not at all equivalent facts or concepts that simply mirror each other in relation to the human condition. While death by definition exceeds the bounds of the human condition (or the condition of any other living species) – understood as our active, evolving state of

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 249-250.