Illuminating Darkness: Rethinking Human Origin in Philosophy

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Master Thesis Philosophy
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University of Leiden, June 2024

Why am I trapped in the belief that writing about motherhood is shameful when I know that creating life where once there was none, creating flesh where once there was no flesh, is one of the most radical and outrageous things a person can do?

- My Work, Olga Ravn

Introduction: from ‘birth as origin’ to the origin of birth

It was on a hot Sunday morning, when I gave birth to my first child. With blood and tears and rips and bruises, a new life wriggled its way out of the first and only home it ever had: my body. The midwife looked at her watch during my final push. ‘11:15’, she stated proudly, while I panted, sighed, cried, and laughed as my hands helped this new, slippery body up into the world, onto my chest. ‘11:15’. Those numbers that decorated her birth certificate and medical records were meaningless to me. While my eyes looked at this stranger in my arms with a bewildered confusion, my body knew it was her all along. Birth was just the reversal of a connection that had been nine months in the making. The embodied perception I had moments after giving birth, taught me that my daughter’s time and location of birth failed to capture the story of her ‘beginning’. Upon reflection, I started to wonder: why would the ‘I’ that philosophy so eagerly aims to analyse, study and capture into words, be strictly limited to the visible – whereas I experienced the ‘beginning’ of my daughter even before I saw a blotchy image on an ultra-sound, or could lay eyes on her dimpled face? Why does the history of philosophy believe that the labyrinth of human existence could be attributed such a stagnant outset – whereas I witnessed that life’s ‘beginning’ was as fluid and ambiguous as water?

1. Life’s beginning: a fluid experience or a strict concept?

Philosophy, a realm of thought that studies the human condition into its most hidden corners, has spent surprisingly little time exploring the origin of this very condition. Or, at least, according to a group of feminist writers publishing in the early 2000’s. (Schott, 2010), (Lachance Adams & Lundquist, 2013), (Stone A. , 2019), (Villarmea, 2021), (Banks, 2023), (Villarmea, 2024). They claim that the phenomenon of birth has been neglected and overlooked as a philosophically relevant topic of interest, echoing a larger undervaluation of women’s experiences in the Western philosophical canon. And this is not an overstatement: a quick search through the university library combining the keywords ‘philosophy’ and ‘birth’, produces a surprisingly meagre yield. It turns out that traditional philosophy showcases a great interest in life’s ending, compared to a remarkable indifference to its beginning. Death is emphasized as the defining characteristic of human existence: the possibility of an afterlife and notions of eternal life (Plato’s immortality of the soul or Augustine’s belief in bodily resurrection e.g.), or death taken as a concept to better understand human existence (Heidegger’s *being-towards-death,* or Cicero’s approach to philosophy as a preparation for death e.g.). These notions stand in sharp contrast to the undervaluation of birth as a biologically and mentally transformative phenomenon. Whereas Socrates’ famous dying words from the *Phaedo* – as life faded out of his body – are ingrained into Western culture, the philosophical canon did not seem to care for the thoughts and experiences of a person who *gives* life – as life passes through the body – into a new existence.

Even though an explicit thematization of birth is hard to find, this does not mean that birth as a phenomenon has not been studied at all. While I agree with the earlier mentioned

group of writers that the concept of birth in traditional philosophy remains largely oblivious to any female engagement, this thesis departs from a conviction that birth understood conceptually in fact is everything but absent in the philosophical landscape. It is my belief that birth – taken as *the* beginning of our human individuation process – constitutes an important conceptual pilar on which philosophy as we know it is built. Political philosophies such as those of Hobbes and Rousseau that study human society by inquiring our free and equal status at birth; existential philosophies by famous thinkers like Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Nietzsche who aim to grapple with the ramifications of having been born (or 'thrown') into the world and all the existential angst that comes with it; and finally, feminist- race- or disability theories which discuss whether the bodies that we are born in can explain the structural injustice they face, and to what extent this is imposed on us by social practices after birth. What these conceptual understandings of birth in various philosophical movements have in common, is a clearly delineated before ('nothing') that is separated by an after ('something'), bridged by a zero-point we could call 'birth'. This harsh distinction between nothing and something summons the idea that we enter the world by appearing out of nowhere: a wholly spontaneous beginning. In this sense, the traditional philosophical interpretation of human origin – in this thesis referred to as 'birth as origin' – is a formal occurrence, merely the obvious requisite that kicks-off the realm of the philosophically interesting: human existence. This reduction of birth as just the gateway to the 'there-is', brings it back to a mere ceremonial capacity: the materialization of a beginning.

2. A good diagnosis, an incomplete outcome

The group of writers mentioned above who insisted on a philosophical turn towards the phenomenon of birth in its fleshy and spiritual capacity, must be accredited for its intention. Canonical philosophy would gain in richness, insight, and accuracy if this transformational female experience is brought to the forefront, not as something private but as a universal, philosophically relevant occurrence. And it goes without saying that the traditional concept of 'birth as origin' as laid out above, is not a solution to their objection. The glaring neglect by the canonical philosophy of their assumption of birth, together with its highly abstract interpretation, only proves their point. By taking birth as too self-evident to even address (most theories go straight to the more 'relevant' questions that are instigated by birth: how do we continue living our lives after having been born?) a fundamental underestimation is laid bare of this transformational phenomenon. Yet, despite the importance of diagnosing the shortfalls of philosophy's understanding of life's beginning, I argue that they fail to follow their objective through to the very end. In fact, their strict insistence to focus on birth alone unintentionally mimics that of traditional philosophy: it takes birth as only *one* identifiable moment in time to inaugurate human existence. No matter how real or embodied this conception may get, I believe that if we truly want to give birth the crucial position it deserves within philosophy, we ought to transcend this fixation on the 'there-ness' of life.

3. Towards a philosophy of pregnancy

It is no surprise that experience informs the direction of our interests, and, when a tradition of thinking has long been reserved for a small niche of human beings, naturally many parts of the human experience and subjectivity will be omitted. In other words, the way we organize our society has a large impact on who gets to be in the position to extend their thought, often with the (unintentional) result of leaving many perspectives discounted. It is therefore only natural that the traditional conception of 'birth as origin' has failed to recognize a crucial philosophical insight which has laid hidden even deeper than the phenomenon of birth. It has laid hidden, for the people that *create* and *instigate* this origin have – for exactly that reason – long not entered the realm of the academic: the idea of a physical birth annulling the possibility of an intellectual birth is a deep-rooted conviction in philosophy that we're only

recently trying to overturn. (Mullin, p. 15) And while running the risk of instigating another variety of 'gatekeeping'[1], this thesis claims that there are certain areas of experience that cannot be reduced to anything else.

This brings us to the outset of this thesis, which departs from two problems inherent in the traditional understanding of 'birth as origin'. The first being the inability of western philosophical thought to recognize the active and often strenuous bodily and mental participation of women to bring this beginning about. Stating that human beings 'appear' into the world, are 'thrown' into this world, or simply exist by virtue of birth alone, is to ignore the existence of someone having *given* that birth: the mother. Secondly, a body of work central to this thesis – comprising the experiences of women giving birth – indicates that this abstract representation of the start of new life is not only subversive towards the female perspective, but moreover hides the truth of our origin. It suggests that we have structurally overlooked a crucial lesson when it comes to human origination: human beings are not created in a moment that separates nothing from something, but instead emerge gradually in a world that was always already theirs, marked by an ambiguous relationality. Considering the general ambition of the philosophical realm to expose the structures of life leaves me confident in the relevance of this thesis' ambition: if we are left in the dark about the *true* origin of human existence, we ought to know that and try to illuminate it.

I suggest that these two problems are connected, and that a more radical shift in perspective must be sought in order to kill these two birds in one stone. We must alter the attention to life's origin by looking *beyond* the moment the baby leaves the womb. Consequently, this thesis will reflect the thoughts of a new philosophical discourse, studying the process leading up to birth: pregnancy. (Young, 1990), (Mullin, 2005), (Bornemark & Smith, 2016), (Kingma, 2018), (Bornemark, 2023), (Dehue, 2023). This group of writers aims to uncover a part of life that is not experienced by everyone, and certainly not by the people who have modelled the realm of philosophy that I as a student was educated in. It is a realm of thought that touches upon the very limits of human life by studying the lost and forgotten source of existential and philosophical reflection in pregnancy. Encouraged and inspired by their premise – taking the phenomenon of pregnancy to better understand the structures of life itself – this thesis takes a stance against the traditional conception of 'birth as origin', and works towards a true apprehension of birth, in its full capacity, power and magnitude, covering both the bodily as well as the mental experiences of the people that enjoyed or endured it.

4. Research question and scope of this thesis.

The argument of this thesis is twofold. First, it claims that the traditional conception of 'birth as origin' – informed by a primacy of illuminated visibility – reduces life's beginning to a clearly determinable *moment.* This translates to a conception of the human subject in relation to its lifeworld as radically *separated* in nature, from start to finish. On the basis of this, the central claim of this thesis is that this traditional understanding obscures the true nature of human origin. By taking the embodied perspective of pregnant women serious as a direct access to life's beginning, we arrive at a notion of origin as a continuum – informed by a primacy of illuminating darkness – which automatically renders the conception of origin as a clearly determinable moment (the traditional 'birth as origin') absurd. This establishes an interpretation of the human subject in relation to its lifeworld as radically *relational* in nature. By doing so, this thesis answers the question as to *what* and *in which way* the traditional, canonical philosophical realm benefits in accuracy and richness from a serious consideration of the phenomenological experience of pregnancy.

Chapter 1 presents an outline of the traditional notion of 'birth as origin' by tracing it back to a dominant historic primacy of illuminated visibility. It shows that, from three different perspectives, the notion of origin presupposes a strict *separation* between the 'source' of

human origin (the mother) and the newly originated subject. Chapter 2 investigates a possible counter argument against the traditional 'birth as origin' by visiting two perspectives on intra-uterine life. Ultimately, the argumentation of 'birth as origin' must be slightly altered to fit the conception of life *prior* to birth but can otherwise be maintained. However, this brings to light a fundamental supposition on human nature that seems to underpin the argument of 'birth as origin' at large. Chapter 3 will look at this traditional assumption on human nature by focussing on one more perspective that embodies prenatal life: the phenomenology of pregnancy. By zooming in on one important element (alienation), we will arrive at a revision of the traditional assumption on human nature. Chapter 4, finally, will apply this revised traditional assumption to the argument of 'birth as origin', which successively challenges both premises as well as the conclusion of the argument 'birth as origin'. The conclusion will try to grasp how these revised lessons on human origin can be understood in the larger context of the philosophical canon.

A preliminary statement is necessary before starting this study. For, the discourse on pregnancy opens a realm of difficult terminology. Difficult, because this thesis is written at a time in which the simple division of people in the categories of 'men' and 'women' is called into question by the growing realization that masculinity and femininity know much more nuance than that these terms can accommodate. Language is never neutral, nor innocent. Even though, when using certain concepts, it may seem to reveal an objectifiable fact, language is the outcome of a classification-process based on historical and cultural assumptions. Political scientist Deborah Stone has put it beautifully in the introduction of her work *'Counting: How we Use Numbers to Decide What Matters'*: in order to count, one must first decide *what* counts. In other words, the choice to speak of 'mothers' and 'women', instead of 'pregnant people' and 'people with a womb' expresses a judgement and value. It lays bare what I, the writer, assume to be essential to a pregnant body. However, this thesis does not, as Stone puts it, 'count' pregnant people. Instead, it studies the largely overlooked *experience* of pregnancy in academia. This absolves me of a claim to any exhaustive account of pregnancy: it is a very specific and limited group of people that have a) access to the academic world, b) a body that can produce offspring, and c) the social/financial means to continue writing after starting a family. Therefore, while realising the limitations, I choose to speak of 'women' and 'the female body' during this research. For, my topic is not just about a body pregnant with another body: it is also largely about the way our traditional understanding of 'women' – whether we agree with this characterisation or not – has shaped and continues to shape our idea of pregnancy and childbearing. Moreover, the term 'pregnant person' seems mismatched in a discussion that partly covers the historicity of pregnancy, a time at which this phenomenon was – even more than now – strictly seen as a 'woman's business'.

One other remark is necessary at the outset of this thesis. Speaking of *the* history of philosophy or *the* philosophical tradition, launches many sweeping claims that brings this thesis into dangerous territory, since – in its entirety – this comprises a field of study that would take more than one lifetime to research exhaustively. Therefore, a first important note on the scope of this thesis, is that it will speak only of that part of philosophy that is *canonized*. This already leaves out many scriptures, notes, theories, and imaginations by those who were excluded to contribute academically by the straitjacket of the western, intellectual canon. Nonetheless, that still leaves us to consider a body of work that is complex and diverse throughout different periods, geographical locations, and schools of thought. The main impetus of this thesis, however, is not a research in the history of philosophy. On the contrary, it studies a new philosophical discourse that aims to break with certain elements of that very tradition. In embarking on this study, I therefore choose to speak of those elements in the philosophical tradition I deem to be important for the larger claim of this thesis. Whilst

humble in the face of all features this account leaves out, I proceed by accepting ‘birth as origin’ as a conceptual category central to the philosophical tradition. This premise, with its potential shortcomings, is a necessary steppingstone towards the central argument of this thesis.[2]

1 – From darkness to light: ‘birth as origin’ through philosophy, mythology, and art

As the introduction already outlined, in contemporary philosophy we find a call for a greater focus on the physiological, mental, and intellectual aspects of birth in the philosophical canon. (Schott, 2010), (Lachance Adams & Lundquist, 2013), (Stone A. , 2019), (Villarmea, 2021), (Banks, 2023), (Villarmea, 2024). This aim feels appropriate, for I too believe that the perspective of women in this regard is deeply underexposed in classic philosophy. However, the introduction already hypothesized that a stronger focus on birth *and birth alone* may not satisfy the ambition to truly give voice to the underrepresented experience of women. In fact, it may hamper it. To present support for this thesis, this first chapter will start by mapping out the traditional notion of ‘birth as origin’ as found in the philosophical tradition. This provides the background from which the remaining chapter’s critical evaluation departs.

Although pregnancy or birth may be barely discussed explicitly in philosophy, these topics touch upon many aspects of life that *are* philosophized in detail. This first chapter sets out to delineate a crucial philosophical concept that elucidates the traditional conception of ‘birth as origin’: the concept of *light.* To keep this rich concept within the limits of this study, I will analyse it from three perspectives: 1) foundational philosophical theories from the ancient and modern times, 2) myths and ancient religion and 3) art. Following these three foci consecutively will provide us with the historical framework to better understand what this new discourse on pregnancy is working both from and against.

1.1. First perspective: traditional philosophy

The introduction already drafted the blueprint of my conception of ‘birth as origin’: the idea of birth as *the* point of departure of human existence, recorded in dates, sometimes even in numbers on a clock. This is where it all started, we commemorate on our birthdays: here, at this hospital, in this room, on a rainy Monday, I saw the light of day. The history of me, traceable to one clear zero-point from which my life embarked.

Despite my foreshadowed criticism to this approach, this understanding of birth is everything but incidental. In fact, it aligns with a much larger, fundamental disposition that lies at the heart of traditional philosophy. This disposition marks an association of reason, knowledge, and wisdom with *the light,* contrasted to the association of ignorance and oblivion with *the dark.* These connections can be traced back to philosophy’s earliest days. Parmenides already established light and darkness as a fundamental, primordial opposition, corresponding respectively to being and non-being or truth and appearance. (Blumenberg, p. 71) Plato’s work elaborates on this principle. Here, we find the metaphor of light to translate the naturalness of the relation between being and truth. Light – showing things in their intelligible form, whilst itself being devoid of sensible qualities – represents the absolute certainty of this reality. (Vasseleu, p. 3) An example can be found in Plato’s theory of Forms, in which he uses the metaphor of light to illuminate the nature of these special ‘Ideas’. The human capacity to recollect the truth of the Forms – once exposed to our soul but lost when this soul came to the world incarnated – is akin to a finding of the light. This theory is amplified by another example of Plato’s use of the metaphor of light. His famous allegory of the cave, as found in his *Republic,* is meant to illustrate the ignorance and blindness that is reserved for the people that choose to stay in the dark. This is contrasted to the people who crave real knowledge, truth, and originality: they choose the dazzling, disillusioning path into

the light of the sun, which is, as Vasseleu puts it, marked as 'the origin of what can be known'. (Vasseleu, p. 3) Note that 'darkness' here is used as a metaphor as well: despite the cave not being pitch-black dark, this metaphor does translate a blindness for reality and truth. So, whilst there is vision in the cave (through the artificial lighting of the fire and the deceitful shadows it creates), this can still be deemed 'dark', in the sense of the absence of the original illumination of the sun of the Good.

Since Greek thought makes up an important pilar of western thought in general, this assumption of light as an indispensable requirement for truth may not seem all that conspicuous. The 'natural' relation between light and truth, in fact, is inherited by many other philosophical theories after Plato. Probably the most pronounced example can be found in the period of the Enlightenment, an era that propelled a sweeping desire to uncover a real and original truth that had laid buried under seemingly impenetrable layers of religion, dogma, and authority. As the name already suggests, the traditional doctrinaire ways of 'thinking' (if it could even be called that from the perspective of Enlightenment thought) were associated with the darkness of superstition, ignorance, and imposed belief. In contrast to that darkness stands the light of reason, knowledge, wisdom, and truth. In this sense, light can be attributed to the knowledgeable subject as he is aspired in the Enlightenment period. Everything that falls outside of his reason or logos*,* equals the borderless darkness that his critical 'illuminating' thinking must overcome. (Vasseleu, p. 6)

Despite some differences between these two metaphors of light, the common denominator of the Platonist-Enlightenment use of light in their philosophies is prominent: light stands in a crucial relation to knowledge and truth. Considering the scope of this thesis, this compact reading suffices.[3]

1.2. Second perspective: mythology

This deep-rooted metaphor of light and darkness can also be found in other realms of sensemaking, beyond the academic-philosophical domain. A similar way of thinking stands out in countless myths, rites, and cultural symbolisms – a tradition of thinking which functions as an important anchor of human's collective subconscious. The 'sacred' – whether that be explicitly enforced or resisted, or more implicitly assumed – shapes our reality in more ways that we can imagine. (Eliade, pp. 459-461) A further study shows how, without an extensive theoretical lock-in, we arrive at surprisingly comparable findings to that of the first paragraph.

Roughly, a structural analysis of the archetypes of light and darkness in mythology brings about two systems: first there is the *sun* connected to male, patriarchal consciousness and then there is the *moon*, connected to female, matriarchal unconsciousness. (Neumann, p. 54) Apart from a striking similarity between the Platonian-Enlightenment conviction that light and *consciousness* stand in opposition to darkness and *unconsciousness,* we find a dominant gendered element in countless mythologies. Women are often associated with the moon, the nocturnal, the deep sea or the dark ground, whereas man finds himself united with the original luminosity of day, the sun, or the ethereal. These associations are not incidental, but part of a longstanding tradition of placing men and women along two strict binary lines, associating the former with reason, logos, language, culture, and linear growth – whereas the latter is brought into relation with matter, nature, passivity, immanence, and ultimately, an eternal cyclical return. (Lucassen, 2023) This conventional attitude in western academia can be further explained and emphasized by the archetype of the moon and the sun as found in mythology. Roughly, the attribution of the metaphorical moon to the female sphere discloses three important elements. First, there is the moon's *cyclicality*. Whereas the sun always 'is' – always the same and always itself, never in the process of becoming – the moon, in Mircea

Eliade's words, 'waxes, wanes, and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming'. (Eliade, p. 154) In other words, the moon is the heavenly body that is concerned with the rhythms of life. This cycle of the moon around the sun of approximately 28 days, is often put in relation with the comparable average time it takes a female body to complete a menstrual cycle. Moreover, the gravitational pull of the moon on the earth is the cause of the sea's tides: an endless repetition of ebb and flow. Both natural instances echo a cyclical movement that has traditionally been attributed to the female capacity to grow new life.[4] We call it 'reproduction', the 're'- signifying the rhythm of repetition, as reality manifested in a recurring creation - akin to the ever-reappearing turnover of the seasons.[5] (Eliade, p. 9) Secondly, there is the moon's *position*. The relative proportions of the sun and the moon as celestial bodies discloses another saliant, traditional sexist postulation. Not only is it the moon that circles around the sun in yet another infinite cycle – and not vice versa – but additionally, the sources of light of the sun and the moon reflect a relation of hierarchy. The light of the sun is an 'original' source of light, produced by the immeasurable heat this star carries. In contrast to this, stands the softer 'light' of the moon, which is merely derivative, for this celestial body does not produce light of its own but only reflects that of the sun. This mirrors Simone de Beauvoir's words in *The Second Sex*, stating that western tradition has defined man, and only man, as the norm of what it means to be a human being. Woman on the other hand, is only defined by her sex: she is a female, the 'Other' of the norm, and therefore – even if behaving according to that norm – can only be said to imitate it. Man finds himself secured in a static and stable definition that coincides with himself, whereas a woman always stands at a distance of her characterisation, in a perpetual state of becoming dependent on her positioning as female moon in relation to the dominant male sun. Taken together, this brings us back to the earlier mentioned philosophical views on the light as a pure place of truth and knowledge ('being)', and darkness at the mediated place of oblivion and ignorance ('appearance'). Lastly, we have the moon's *darkness*. Throughout history, birth has consistently been associated with darkness, whether that be the deep trenches of the ocean, the buried inner Earth, a cave or the underworld: all are offspring of the symbolic 'nocturnal mother'. (Neumann, p. 212) [6]

We thus arrive at the following. The philosophical perspective has demonstrated a relation between light and knowledge in opposition to darkness and ignorance. The mythological perspective added a gendered element to that: light, understood as the sun, is assigned to the male sex, whereas darkness, understood as the 'Other' of the sun in the symbol of the moon, is relegated to the female sex. Now it is time to take this metaphorical light out of its symbolic shadow and accentuate what these notions teach us about the traditional conception of 'birth as origin'. Ultimately, light seems to be valorised for its quality to *disclose* something to us. For Plato, the light was meant to disclose the true realm of the Forms, in the Enlightenment light was meant to disclose the truth of the world we live in. Either way: light unveils the darkness by opening up a direct and unadulterated route to the truth of Being. Two implicit and unthematized assumptions are important to point out. Firstly, Being as truth is privileged over non-Being as appearance. Then, secondly, a direct access to truth is established as bringing us to Being in its 'original' form, whereas any deviation from that (mediated, indirect) brings us to non-Being, or appearance. In short, we learn that *only* Being is truth, and *only* a direct relation to this truth will get us there. Following this traditional reasoning, suggests that something can only be revealed to us as part of Being once it is 'in the light'. Only then it is there, in contrast to something not-being-there, or only seemingly-being-there (a mere image or appearance of Being).

1.3. Third perspective: art

An oil painting by Marc Chagall sheds the final light over the concept of 'birth as origin' on the one hand, while also bringing us closer to the subject matter of this thesis: a philosophy of pregnancy. Apart from the vibrant, colourful impression that *'La Femme Enceinte'* (1913)[7] leaves on its spectators, this picture is particularly interesting for the way it chose to illustrate the pregnant body. It is clear that the woman depicted is bearing a child, but this is not due to Chagall's careful strokes of a romantic, round bump. Instead of a pregnant belly, Chagall portrayed the woman with a large oval section cut out from her lower body. The baby inside is wholly visible for the public to see. Arguably, the spectators looking at the picture from a distance even get a fuller image of the child than does the woman herself, whose gaze – if she were to look down at the child inside here – only extends to the crown of his head.

This picture rounds up all elements of this first chapter. Portraying 'pregnancy' by leaving out the mother's skin as barrier between the child and the outside world, only underlines the historically assumed mysterious 'darkness' of the womb, as it is depicted in mythology and ancient symbolism. Chagall's painting brings across a message that runs through both philosophy's as well as mythology's historical lines: the inside of a womb is 'sealed off' from any direct and unmediated access of light to disclose the truth of Being, since the existence *in uterus* is only noticeable in a derivative way. Similar to the unattainability to observe a phenomenon like the wind in plain sight (it is only by noticing its effects – a flag that waves, a tree that has grown crooked, a roof that flies off – that we can detect the phenomenon wind), pregnancy is only *visible* through a woman's swelling belly, her enlarged breasts and a different gait, and only *experienceable* by listening to the personal record and embodied knowledge of the pregnant woman herself.

Keeping in mind the traditionally assumed natural and direct relation between light as knowledge, this automatically translates to the womb being a place *devoid of potential knowledge.* This teaches us two things. First, it becomes clear that the perspective of women is not seen as – at least anywhere close to – a means to attain that direct 'light' that brings us to knowledge of the unborn. On the contrary, the womb seems to have been interpreted as a definitive obstruction to any direct or 'pure' means of knowledge. It is telling that Chagall's painting bears the title 'Pregnant Woman', whilst having portrayed this phenomenon by omitting this very pregnant belly itself. In other words: we get a very concrete example of history's undervaluation of women's perspectives as a doorway to life's beginning, through a case of the traditional primacy of light*,* which brings us to the second point. For, the only possibility to attain the direct and unmediated access of light we deem indispensable for knowledge, is therefore by the baby leaving the dark, veiled, hidden world of the womb. Only in art, we can harmlessly remove the impermeable layer of skin that obstructs the light to illuminate this hitherto mysterious new life. In real life, we must wait for the baby to be born.

In conclusion, 'birth as origin' – understanding birth as the *moment* in which we come to being – mirrors both the traditional philosophical notion of light as the benchmark for true Being, as well as the mythological conception of birth as an appearance from the dark, female abyss. Together, they reflect birth as a step from the dark into the light, from not-being-there, to being-there. Ultimately, this can be condensed to two premises and one conclusion that encapsulate the conception of 'birth as origin'.

a) birth is a step from darkness into light
b) the womb is a place devoid of light
Therefore,
c) birth is a moment of *separation.*

2. Physical separation or metaphorical estrangement: pre-natal perspectives on human origin

The previous chapter analysed the traditional conception of birth, informed by three different perspectives. Ultimately, this translated to a traditional understanding of 'birth as origin' as an *instant* of origination which separates the dark maternal life source from the illuminated path of being. In the following, the argumentation of 'birth as origin' will be challenged by juxtaposing it with two interpretations of human origination that predate birth, questioning whether birth is really a moment of separation or if the history of philosophy has perhaps overlooked valuable alternatives. What happens if we look at intra-uterine human life? What about life *prior* to birth?

2.1. Prenatal baptism and prenatal murder– a new light on origin

An interesting take on the discourse of human origination can be found in religious and ethical debates around reproductive rights. A ferocious aim to pinpoint the moment of origination is seen as essential to protect new, vulnerable human lives. At first glance, this seems to counter the traditional 'birth as origin' as described before. We had just established that the dominant philosophical tradition points at birth – the moment this new life enters the light – as our definitive point of origin. Now, we are dealing with a discourse that aims to draw the line of origination long before the moment the foetus leaves the womb. This chapter will start by outlining the earliest advocates aimed at protecting new, yet *prenatal* lives, before continuing with the more recent advancements in this discourse. Following this, a case will be made that, although these perceptions of life's beginning vastly precede the moment of birth, this does not contradict the notion of 'birth as origin' understood from the primacy of light.

The first example of the insistence on intra-uterine life, is an examination of the history of Catholicism. In the book *Ei, Foetus, Baby* (2021), Trudy Dehue outlines the religious debate dating as far back as 1620, on *when* the foetus could be called 'ensouled'. (Dehue, p. Chapter 3) Despite the different opinions on the specific moment that the developing clump of cells is entered by a 'spirit', the overall agreement that life starts prior to birth is made painfully clear by the practice of 'intra-uterine baptism'. If during a pre-term or otherwise challenging labour the doctor or midwife suspected a life-threatening situation for the baby, the pastor had to be summoned. It was part of his education in the seminary – instigated by a Papal brief in 1615 – that in these cases, the soul of the unborn had to be rescued from the 'maternal cage' it was trapped in. (Dehue, pp. 119-122) Sometimes the pastor would use his 'baptismal syringe', a piece of equipment brought deep into the cervix, injecting holy water into the womb onto the baby's head. Other doctrines deemed this method insufficient due to the risk that the water would not adequately reach this new, divine life. In those cases, a caesarean-section was deemed necessary – a medical procedure that, back then, almost always cost both the mother, as well as the child, their lives. (Dehue, p. 103)

It may be clear that we are dealing here with an interpretation of human origin that clearly precedes birth. This new 'child of God' already has an existence in the womb that must be protected from the original sin. The basic assumption of this line of reasoning, albeit outdated for its rather gruesome and bloody consequences, is still prevalent today. This brings us to the second example asserting an intra-uterine human origin, found in the current

resurgence of discussions on abortion rights. Most famous being the historic decision in 2022 by the American Supreme Court to overturn *'Roe v Wade'* (1973), thereby undoing the constitutional right to abortion. Following this ruling, 40 out of the 52 American states have implemented more restricted abortion rights. (Nieuwenhuizen, p. 16) But also in Europe, a conservative wind has stirred up many convictions on abortion that hitherto were deemed invulnerable. The Constitutional Court in Poland has forbidden almost all cases of abortion in 2020, and even in the so-called 'liberal' Netherlands, political parties that are explicitly critical of abortion have gained in popularity. (Nieuwenhuizen, p. 16) Despite the differences in argumentation, the anti-abortion lobby generally appeals to the claim that abortion ought to be ruled out once the foetus is a 'person'. Following this line of reasoning, an abortion after this moment should be considered murder – the only thing that is up for discussion, is *when* this 'personhood' takes hold of the foetus. (Nieuwenhuizen, p. 28) Some accounts point at the foetus's first detectable heartbeat as a measure for origin, while others place the benchmark at the moment when the foetus would be able to survive outside of the womb, in the safe hands of doctors and nurses. Still others, place the start of the foetus's life all the way back to the moment of conception: once the 'ingredients' have merged, we can speak of the beginning of a life.[8] (Dehue, pp. 262, 248) This echoes a similar sentiment as that of the Catholic church: these prenatal lives are valuable *and* stand vulnerable against the unpredictable wants of the mothers who carry them. This conveys an important message: the mother is not just seen as the life-source, but further as a barrier that must be overcome between the child and the safe hands of the pastor or doctor.

2.2. Metaphorical separation: 'birth as origin' revised

Despite the focus having shifted from human origin through *birth* to human origin *during pregnancy,* interestingly, this is still wholly in line with our traditional conception of 'birth as origin'. Both instances hold on to a certain benchmark that measures whether a life has started or not. In the case of the Catholic church, we find that that the pastor – with his special position in between the transcendent all-seeing God and the earthly world – can open up the foetus to the ultimate divine light in an otherwise dark, impious womb. In the case of the more modern advocates against abortion, we find a similar position. Now, the sanctity of the religious soul is replaced by other benchmarks, most often the first detectable heartbeat or 'foetal viability'. (Dehue, p. 626) These reference points are solely enabled by the grand medical advancements of the 20th century that facilitate sensitive monitoring of prenatal life: detecting a heartbeat of a foetus of only 7 weeks old or determining the state of severely premature organs.[9] In line with Marc Chagall's painting of the pregnant woman – omitting the cover of her abdomen to let light touch the otherwise dark womb – we can say that modern medicine has found a way to 'light up' the hidden world of the uterus. With a rapidly increasing arsenal of medical checks during pregnancy (for reference, while my mother only had one ultrasound when she was pregnant of me, I was urged to have nine only 25 years later, 'just to be sure'), one can say that the traditionally hidden and sealed off maternal world has been pierced by 'the light' of medicine.

Interestingly, we are faced with two justifications that aim to prove that life has already started prior to birth, while these nonetheless demonstrate a very similar logic to the one found in the traditional notion of 'birth as origin'. The benchmark for the origin of human life is still taken to be a movement from darkness to light – light, again interpreted in its quality to disclose Being. This can easily be identified with both the pastor's transmission of God's incandescent light, or the illuminating effects of an ultrasound revealing an otherwise inaudible heartbeat or deciding on the ripeness of organs that normally would remain utterly

invisible. In other words: they still adhere to the traditional notion of light to reveal Being in the form of knowledge, however only now our realm of the visible (the *radius* of light) is extended through either religious doctrines or artificial apparatuses. This leaves intact that, without external interventions that open up the womb to the light, this organ itself is still thought to be a place of darkness.

The conception of 'birth as origin' must be slightly altered, since the ability for light to touch the foetus is no longer restricted to a physical removal from the uterus but can be done during pregnancy. Therefore, we no longer speak of 'birth' as the standard for life's beginning seen as the process of labour. However, 'birth' is a broad term, not only representing the physical human extraction from a pregnant body. 'Birth' is also understood as a 'coming into existence', an 'origin', or 'beginning'[10] This interpretation of birth incorporates both the premises of the traditional 'birth as origin', as well as a conception of human origination prior to birth. Given the traditional interpretation of human origin *as instigated by birth*, the first premise can be altered without delivering a critical blow to the argument. The second premise remains untouched.

a*) *origin* is a step from darkness into light
b) the womb is place devoid of light

That still leaves us with the conclusion of 'birth as origin': **c)** birth is a moment of *separation.* How does this notion of intra-uterine origin affect to the issue of separation, since the clear case of detachment instigated by birth (the baby physically leaving the womb) is annulled?

2.3. Pregnancy: accommodating a hermit

Separation is not only obtained by a physical removal. Or, at least, so claims Trudy Dehue. She observes a relation between the intensified medicalisation of pregnancy[11], and our understanding of the connection between the maternal and the foetal. This paints an interesting picture of a *symbolic pre-natal separation.* Dehue states that both the urge of intra-uterine baptism, as well as the normalised intervention by medicine during pregnancy effect a symbolic extraction of this new life from the mother. (Dehue, pp. 122, 243) While the influence of the church in the western world has gravely diminished since the Papal brief of 1615 urging on the practice of 'intra-uterine baptism', this view of the foetus already being a person with its own sacred rights has partly been replaced by an enlarged focus on the health of the child, propelled forward by the technological means that enable it. It must be noted that the value of modern medicine's advancements in foetal and maternal health stand on their own: pregnancy and labour can be precarious moments in both the mother's life, as well as that of the baby, and the improvement in knowledge in this field has made childbearing a much lower risk to one's life than it used to be. However, this progress notwithstanding, a large body of feminist literature points at the alienating and objectifying effects that come with the increased medical involvement in the lives of pregnant woman.[12] The hitherto mysterious creature in the womb, obstructed from direct perception of the outside world by the mother's skin, can now be singled out and targeted as an *individual*. Especially the ultrasound has strengthened the idea that unborn foetuses can be seen as standalone entities. The picture of a clearly defined baby, framed by an otherwise dark and undefined backdrop symbolizes the obstructed 'privileged relationship' of the mother to her child, as described by Iris Marion Young. (Young, p. 163) In this sense, pregnancy is not understood as a developmental process taking place inside someone's body, but as the act of the body accommodating an already established human being. This aligns with the earlier

mentioned philosophy of modern pro-life activists, for these medical opportunities to 'enter' the womb provides a new authority on which to establish their arguments in the face of a generally declining religious power. (Dehue, p. 244) It seems as though the traditional notion of the 'holy' foetal soul as it was established by the church, is now *materialized* in the modern image of the 'holy' foetal beating heart. Both signal a similar message: this new person is already alive and worthy of our protection, regardless of the mother who carries it.

This is perfectly illustrated by the words of a famous pioneer on foetal surgery, Michael Harrison. He claimed in 1986 that the ultrasound 'finally made the opaque uterus transparent to the piercing eye of scientific observation'. He followed that only now, the foetus can be a patient, an individual, which allows the medical world to take this 'previous hermit' serious for the first time.[13] (Dehue, p. 292) Apparently, in the slipstream of advanced modern healthcare we have acquired an image of the foetus as a recluse, *choosing* to live secluded from other people. It is only through the helping hand of medicine that the foetus can engage in a web of relations. In other words, in its original state, the womb is still conceived of as a concealed and isolating place from which we need to be separated in order to initiate our connection to the world. Therefore, our origin is still a moment of separation.

We arrive at the following:

a*) *origin* is a step from darkness into light
b) the womb is place devoid of light
therefore,
c*) *origin* is a moment of separation

2.4. An implicit premise on the nature of human existence

Having modified premise **a*** and conclusion **c*** of the traditional conception of 'birth as origin', we can see that this notion of life's beginning has been maintained. However, by visiting two viewpoints on human origin preceding birth and the alteration that this perspective has brought about to the traditional 'birth as origin', an important insight has come to the forefront. Whereas the separation in conclusion **c)** logically followed from the literal extraction of the baby from the womb, now this notion of separation is revealed as equally prevalent in an account that approaches new life *still* existing within the borders of the maternal body. This highlights a premise in the conception of 'birth of origin' that remained cloaked until the analysis of prenatal origin. Conclusion **c*)** shows us that, even when dealing with intra-uterine life, utterly dependent on the intimate confines of the womb to provide the successful completion of this developing foetus, we nevertheless hold on to a notion of separation. In other words: the separation inherent to birth ostensibly lies inherent in origin too. Seemingly, once we have decided that the foetus has become a *person* – that it has crossed the irreversible line that cuts a life-not-yet-started apart from a life-indisputably-begun – we instantly invoke certain language that teaches us an interesting conviction on the nature of human beings. When discussions on abortion legislation speak of a clash of 'interests' between the mother and the child, this communicates that there are already two distinct creatures who can engage in a disagreement. When speaking of 'a new child of God', considered as part of the earthly original sin despite its mother already being 'saved', this communicates that the mother's christening does not extend to the unborn child inside her: the child is, albeit unborn, a new branch of the family tree of worldly life. To look at human origin as the moment of becoming an individual, regardless of whether this moment takes

place prenatally or postnatally, teaches us an important element contained in our traditional conception of birth. We conventionally adhere to the assumption that human beings are understood as *coherent* (identical with themselves) and *separated* (un-identical with anyone else) in nature.[14] The argument of 'birth as origin', supplemented by this traditional assumption (hereafter, **t.a.**), would look like this:

t.a.) human beings are *coherent* and *separate* in nature

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a*) *origin* is a step from darkness into light
b) the womb is place devoid of light
therefore,
c*) *origin* is a moment of separation

The following will further investigate this **t.a.)**, and moreover studies what remains of this fundamental hypothesis on human nature if we change our perspective on birth and human origin in a more radical manner.

3. Mushrooms and mothers: towards a phenomenology of pregnancy

3.1. Mushrooms or maternal source: an independent or indebted life.

All previous interpretations of birth and origin have one thing in common: they contradict or ignore the inherently relational character of life's beginning. And this conviction, that human beings originate somewhere during pregnancy in separation from their dark maternal source, does not stand on its own. Seyla Benhabib, in studying the metaphor of the state of nature in the history of philosophy, brings forth a very similar claim on human origin. Her work claims that this traditional metaphor communicates the same fundamental assumption on human nature as portrayed in the previous chapter: in the beginning, man is alone. Benhabib illustrates this by bringing forth Tomas Hobbes's conception of human origin. Instead of deliberating the relational elements of pregnancy, Hobbes expresses origin as a place of ideal autonomy, stating that man had 'sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other'. (Benhabib, p. 156) According to Benhabib, this belief in human origin as independent and isolated reflects and informs a larger ideal of the liberal, self-possessed, autonomous individual, prevalent in the history of philosophy. And this conviction is not innocent, she follows, for the denial of being born from a woman – a person to which one is 'indebted' for their existence to at least a certain extent – frees the human ego from the most natural and basic bond of dependence. (Benhabib, p. 156)

The ethical questions on human obligation in relation to interpersonal dependence is beyond the scope of this essay, yet an important takeaway from Benhabib's critique is this: the pervasive dream of human autonomy fundamentally affects our place in the world with others.[15] In other words, our thoughts on human origin go hand in hand with our ideas of human nature after birth. One informs the other, and therefore, it matters how we think of birth. To understand life's beginning as the moment when bodies become *divided* instead of when bodies are *joined*, renders a view on intersubjectivity in which there is an 'I' and a 'you', and no matter how close we get, either in physical proximity or spiritual connection, we will never fully 'touch'. To think about the source of our existence as a capsule that kept us warm while we created ourselves, provides a fundamentally different orientation in the world after birth, than if we take our life-source to be a human being with whom we were once bodily merged; someone who has both sacrificed and given freely; someone who has permanently changed in the face of this new life yet who is still the same; a woman *with* a life, *creating* a life.

3.2 Hannah Arendt's natality: a recognition of birth?

An interesting step towards a more relational conception of origin can be found in Hannah Arendt's work. First expounded in her book *The Human Condition* (1958), but central to her entire oeuvre is her conception of 'natality'. The choice to formulate her philosophy around this vital concept, marks an interesting turn in light of traditional philosophy's failure to explicitly thematize birth, which as we have now learned, can be seen in relation to a systemic misreckoning of the maternal component in human origin. Arendt's primary concern, particularly in *The Human Condition,* is to consider human life in accordance with its *activity.* (Arendt, pp. 8-9) By doing this, she turns away from her teacher Martin Heidegger, who put the possibility of death and man's attitude towards it central to his philosophy. Arendt challenges this analysis by detecting a question that is even more primary than man's anticipation of the end. It is the realization of our beginning, a focus on our birth, that enables us to consider death in the first place. In short: Arendt displaces mortality from its central position in our thought with a focus on *contemplation,* and instead formulates natality as a

condition for *action.* (Martin, p. 38) For Arendt, who is a political philosopher first and foremost, the fact of birth marks the supreme capacity for human beings to *begin*, to inaugurate change, initiative and novelty – which are all indispensable qualities for a political life. The possibility for free and spontaneous action, that which ensures the unexpected in a human life, or the 'infinitely improbable' in Arendt's terms, is rooted in 'natality' – birth understood as something radically new and unique. (Arendt, p. 178) Therefore, this account of natality does not take us back to a literal account of birth, understood as the physical extraction from the maternal body. Arendt's conception of birth or natality, rather, is a tribute to 'beginning' at large, leaving in the middle whether that be prenatally or postnatally. And, especially interesting in light of the previous account of birth as purported by Hobbes, is that this reformulation of birth must be understood as a commitment to human plurality and relationality. By being born, we are introduced to the public sphere where individuals can come together to engage in dialogue, debate, and action. Action, in turn, depends on plurality, in the sense that it does not happen in an abstract vacuum, but in a lively, communal political sphere. In other words: Arendt's philosophy fundamentally juxtaposes that of Hobbes', for an *other* is always inherently present in our capacity to begin anew.

The explicit esteem for birth as a philosophical category is an interesting step in the direction of this thesis' aim. We have arrived at an estimation of birth as something that possesses an essential philosophical value, something on which our entire thought on the human condition can be based. The first component of the dual problem as laid out in the introduction hereby seems salvaged: the female capacity to grow new life is no longer neglected in our thought, nor hastily moved past into other more 'philosophically relevant' components of human life. This revaluation for natality is taken by early feminist thinkers such as Sara Ruddick as a glaring hope for constructing a 'maternal history of the human flesh', celebrating the mental and physical effort of birth-giving by women. (Söderbäck, p. 277) However, more recently this promise has been unveiled. This is partly due to the sharp distinction Arendt makes between public and private life, placing the physical act of labour on the side of the latter realm. (Schott, p. 197) This questioning of Arendt's contribution to a larger female/maternal estimation remains, despite its argumentative appeal, outside of the scope of this thesis. However, rather than a political argument, another more elementary aspect of Arendt's natality attracts this thesis' attention. The notion of birth as we find it in Arendt's work can be seen as wholly in line with the concept of 'birth as origin' informed by the primacy of light. Arendt's understanding of birth as the human capacity to commence and begin anew, renders a conception of birth which is rooted in, as Fanny Söderbäck calls it, an 'ontology of uniqueness'. (Söderbäck, p. 273) We are dealing with birth as a radically new start, echoing the earlier-mentioned focus on the 'thereness' of life. The capacity to begin, for Arendt, is identical with man's freedom. She states that with each birth, something uniquely new comes into the world. The writes that, with respect to this unique somebody, it can be said that 'nobody was there before'. (Arendt, p. 178) This reflects the idea that birth comprises a *moment of appearing,* which again confronts us with the restricted visual realm of light. Despite Arendt's insistence on the fundamental relational qualities of birth, this relationality is only a result of birth, but is not inherent to it. Birth is not marked by relationality; it only introduces us to it. The image of the foetus as a hermit, invoked by Michael Harrison, has been emphasised once again: it is the *moment of separation* that frees a new life from the dark and impenetrable maternal womb. It seems as though exactly the thing that attracts Arendt to the concept of natality, is what puts the pregnant experience as lived by women at a distance. Feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero criticises Arendt for accepting the Greek meaning of birth as coming from a nothingness, instead of highlighting our emergence from the maternal womb. (Martin, p. 41)

3.3. From outside to inside: embodied birth

Arendt's philosophy on natality puts us at an interesting intersection. We have moved from a systemic disinterest in the philosophical relevance of birth to an explicit acknowledgement and valorisation of it. Despite this move being an important one, is it far from perfect. Even though Arendt has paved the way for an understanding of childbearing as a significant topic for academic reflection, her notion of birth remains curiously disembodied and highly abstract. The fleshy reality of birth, occurring in a living, breathing embodied subject, is once again overlooked. Going back to the twofold problem as expounded in the introduction – the structural underestimation of the female contribution to bring birth about, together with a misconception of the true nature of human origin – Arendt's perception of natality leaves us with nothing. In fact, the **t.a.)** of human beings as *coherent* and *separate* in nature is maintained: Arendt's political view on human beings is secured by a certain 'groundlessness' that safeguards our freedom of action, but in the same stroke upholds the idea of people as self-standing identities from start to finish.

Having considered the traditional notion of birth, followed by different viewpoints on birth and human origin from the standpoint of religion, medicine and politics, we have learned many interesting aspects in relation to life's beginning. However, the dominant understanding of 'birth as origin', together with its ingrained assumption on the coherent and separated nature of human beings, remains intact. Moreover, up until now, this study has made clear that the *maternal, embodied subject* has substantially been ignored as a vital part of life's beginning. This may be explained by the fact that the previous perspectives have one thing in common: they all embodied the position of the outsider 'looking in', trying to identify human origin strictly from a remote position to the body in which this takes place. If we truly want to test the stability of the argument of 'birth as origin', we ought to shift our perspective in a more radical manner. Subsequently, this chapter will investigate the place of the insider*,* encountering pregnancy not as a phenomenon worth studying from a distance, but as a *lived experience.* This outlook will grant us two things. First, it will give further substance to the implicit traditional assumption on human nature. By looking into the systemic underinvestigation of the embodied experience of pregnancy in the philosophical domain, it will become clear that the **t.a.)** is more than a mere educated guess on my part based on three accounts of human origin, but rather, that exactly this notion of human beings as coherent and separate underpins our traditional notion of birth at large. And secondly, it is by visiting exactly *that* perspective which long has been taken as a dark, indirect and unprecise source of knowledge, that puts us in the position to bring to the forefront the true nature of our human origin.

3.4. Alienation in the pregnant experience: an ambiguous connection

First, it is important to get a clearer view on what it is exactly that the phenomenology of pregnancy brings to bear that stands in such sharp contrast to the **t.a.)** that binds together our traditional 'birth as origin'. At last, it is time to take a closer look at the central discourse of this thesis: the phenomenology of pregnancy.

This discourse touches upon a myriad of concepts that challenge our ordinary ways of thinking. Questions on bodily autonomy, identity and subjectivity; boundaries between what counts as a 'life' or 'alive' and what doesn't; dichotomous categories as passive versus active, subject versus object, alone versus together, inner versus outer; all crack and squeak under the weight of this transformational bodily phenomenon. This wide range of topics related to pregnancy notwithstanding, the following will expound on *one* element within this discourse that will prove to critically challenge 'birth as origin': the theme of alienation*.*

This term in relation to the experience of pregnancy finds its root in Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical framework. Kristeva deems the experience of pregnancy to be loaded with philosophical significance for it seriously threatens to disconcert a woman's identity.

Suddenly, the body that was hitherto just ‘one’, is faced with a puzzling ‘other’ in the midst of its intimate self. In *Stabat Mater* (1985), Kristeva aims to express the experiences of women during pregnancy in the light of this ’splitting of the subject’. For her, pregnancy causes an ‘institutionalized, socialized, and natural psychosis’, by opening up the question of whether I am still myself, or an ‘other’ to myself during the nine months of gestation. (Bornemark & Smith, p. 47) This account of alienation in the face of pregnancy is rather extreme: Kristeva seems to suggest that women can either lucidly face this dissolution of the self – causing her to experience pregnancy as a type of delirium – or instead choose to close off her consciousness for this derailment of subjectivity, in order to protect herself ‘from the borderline that severs her body’. (Mullin, p. 18) Other phenomenological accounts exhibit a similar thematic observation of alienation, but with a more neutral or even positive tone. Iris Marion Young, in her famous *Pregnant Embodiment* (1984), accounts for these ‘rumbling borders’ between the self and her unborn child as something which interests her, sometimes even gives her pleasure. Jonna Bornemark, in her book *Ik ben Zee en Hemel* (2021) writes how pregnancy has brought about both a terrifying loss of self, as well as an affirmation of that very self: a self that is reminded that its ‘I’ may not be invulnerably stable.[16] (Bornemark, 2023, p. 35) Despite the different values that these accounts attribute to this alienation, what stands out is a remarkable similarity in their description of it. ‘My body is no longer mine’, Kristeva writes. ‘My body is both myself, and not myself’, Young records, followed by: ‘I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body’. Jonna Bornemark adds that ‘you, who is not even a real ‘you’, are the same as me and yet something totally foreign to me’, making it seem as though ‘the landscape I call ‘me’ is equally filled with nooks and crannies full of different lives’. Carol Bigwood epitomises the grimness of her alienated self: ‘I have been infiltrated’.[17]

These accounts – and there are many more – signify the puzzling paradox that is the pregnant body. Are there two beings, or only one? Is the maternal body still identical with itself now that there is another present in it? The crux of the alienation lies in the duality of this experience: this ‘alien’ other is neither wholly foreign to the mother, nor entirely familiar. Her life is no longer just individual, nor completely duplicated. The inner movements of her abdomen cannot be said to belong solely to her, nor exclusively to her unborn baby. It goes without saying that this complex, interwoven bodily image accessed through the experience of pregnancy is diametrically opposed to the **t.a.)** inherent to our traditional notion of human nature. Rather than coherent and separated, we are now faced with a bodily experience that does not adhere to both descriptions. The body is neither wholly identical with itself (coherent), not completely un-identical with anyone else (separated), but hovers somewhere in between. And, so says Jonna Bornemark, this brings into view the main reason for the systemic undervaluation of pregnancy as a philosophically relevant topic. It is not only due to a larger tendency in the history of philosophy to dismiss the female perspective *in general* as the Other of the norm, as a mere irregularity in a so called ‘neutral’ perspective (in line with the derivative symbol of the feminine moon), but pregnancy is primarily discounted for what it brings to bear: a complete reversal of what we deemed ‘natural’ about human existence. (Bornemark, 2023, pp. 41, 74, 69-90) Therefore, these phenomenological statements of pregnant women have long been taken as a metaphor. Pregnancy only instigates the alienating feeling *as if* the body is both infiltrated by an other whilst still being largely the same. The choice to dismiss pregnancy as an anomaly to our ordinary ways of thinking – not a possible correction of it, but merely an outlier – leaves the legitimacy of the **t.a.)** intact. However, this thesis joins in a contemporary philosophical discourse that breaks with this denial of the pregnant experience. What if we gave weight to these accounts of alienation? What if we were to counter the **t.a.)** with a revised assumption (**r.a.**) on human beings, fitting to the pregnant narrative?

t.a.) Human beings are coherent and separate
r.a.) Human beings are ambiguous and connected

3.5. Challenging the coherent and separate body: parthood vs containment
The critical evaluation of this classical understanding of human beings (**t.a.**) by means of phenomenological accounts of pregnancy (**r.a.**), depends on the justification of three claims: 1) the unborn is already a person, 2) this unborn person is identical to the person after birth, and 3) the unborn person not only *resides* in the pregnant body but is *merged* with it. The first claim is already reflected in the earlier mentioned religious- and pro-life perspective. Moreover, it is anchored in our judicial system: a 'late' abortion, after the point that the foetus is legally considered to be a person with the corresponding rights to live (this varies from country to country but is always some moment during pregnancy) is forbidden by law. The second claim is relatively easy to defend on intuitive terms. It would be irrational to argue that the new mother holds a different baby in her arms after birth than the one she was just pregnant with. Especially since medical advancements have given us the opportunity to visually 'enter' the womb and 'see' the developing foetus, we have gained an intensified awareness of the numerically identical relation between the baby *in uterus,* and the baby after birth.

The last claim requires more attention, for this one does not follow a commonsensical understanding of the relation between the body of the foetus and the maternal body, but instead goes against it. Elselijn Kingma, in her articles *'Lady Parts: The Metaphysics of Pregnancy'* (2018) and *'Were You a Part of Your Mother'* (2019), studies the metaphysical relation between the maternal and the foetal, grouping them into two categories. First, there is the *containment view*, which holds that the foetus is only inside the gestating body, 'the way a tub of yoghurt is inside your refrigerator'. (Kingma, 2019, p. 613) This interpretation marks the dominant view on human pregnancy that pervades our contemporary western culture according to Kingma, and which is only aggravated by the medicalisation of pregnancy. (Kingma, 2019, p. 613) However, Kingma warns us to be wary of uncritically assuming this metaphysical picture, whose plausibility is only traceable to a 'highly contingent cultural representation'. (Kingma, 2019, p. 613) By visiting a purely biological perspective herself, Kingma states that there is very little evidence that points to this metaphysical picture. Instead, her findings bring her to the *parthood view.* By means of four criteria, she establishes that there is a strong case for the foetus being part of its mother's body. (Kingma, 2019, p. 622) She concludes: 'the intermingling of foetal and maternal tissue at the placenta, the lack of clear boundaries between foster and the rest of the gravida, the sharing of the placental organ, and the evidence of the foster being firmly knitted into the gravida's physical body and metabolic systems, all give evidence that speak in favour of the part–whole claim directly'.[1819] The parthood view, however, does not allude to a complete connection of maternal and foetal. Kingma writes that here is still organismic individuality in the context of mutualistic interdependence. (Kingma, 2019, p. 639) Surely, the baby's direct radius extends to the mother's belly, ribcage, bladder, pelvis and ultimately, the birth canal. This is what allowed Iris Marion Young to posit that her 'inner movements belonged to another being'. (Young, p. 160) Added to that direct radius, a complex interplay of hormones is initiated once the clump of cells nests in the womb, launching an enigmatic causal process that changes both the mother's bodily and mental constitution, as well as that of the baby. However, it goes without saying that there are also parts of the female body and psyche that remain identical to her pre-pregnant constitution. Similarly, there are parts of the foetus that are wholly 'his': not only does it have a unique DNA, but it also most likely has a different blood type. Even more: in terms of immunology, all mammals are actively set up to have some sort of immunological separation in order to shield the 'foreign' foetus from an intervention by the maternal body's immune system. (Kingma, 2019, p. 629) The parthood-

view, therefore, perfectly fits the alienating experiences as recounted by pregnant women: pregnancy is *both* a continuation of our identity, *as well as* a sharing of that identity. This means that, according to Kingma, the biological facts of pregnancy conform to the phenomenological experiences as recounted by pregnant women: during pregnancy we can speak of *a certain integration* of the foetus into the maternal body.

Kingma's distinction between the containment view and the parthood view mirrors exactly the opposing perspectives of the **t.a.)** and the **r.a.)**. If we hold on to the idea that human beings are coherent and separate in nature, the only metaphysical interpretation of the relation between the maternal and the foetal is that of the containment view: pregnancy being the special bodily phenomenon of housing two separate and coherent individuals in one body. On the other hand, the parthood perspective breaks with this traditional understanding by moving towards a bodily composition that is partly coherent and partly not, as well as partly separated and partly not.

The articles by Kingma are thought-provoking in their aim to overturn a longstanding supposition on human nature. However, they do not yet conclusively dethrone this idea, for the legitimacy of these articles is largely based upon a mereological argument, which detracts in its persuasiveness. In both pieces, Kingma assumes parthood to be a perfectly determinate relation. And even though this may be the case in more simpler forms of relationality, say, the relation between the wheel of a bicycle and the bicycle as a whole, the mereological boundaries of more ambiguous and complex nature are less easy to define. Take for example a cloud. What can be determined as 'part' of a cloud, in relation to the cloud as a whole? Or can we even speak of 'a cloud as a whole'? Certainly, pregnancy is not as transient as clouds are, but neither is this phenomenon wholly self-evident. Despite the rapid increase in modern medical knowledge, large parts of pregnancy and especially the maternal-foetal interaction through the placenta remain enigmatic to modern biology.[20] Making definitive statements purely based on biology on the metaphysical relation between the foetal and the maternal body, therefore remains rather thin.

Nevertheless, one element expounded in these articles is unmistakably strong: the dominant containment view is the product of cultural perception, more than it is grounded in biological facts. And what is distinctive about cultural perception, is that it is contingent. It is determined by the thoughts and theories that reflect the dominant narrative of a time and place. In the following, we will explore what happens with our traditional assumption **t.a.)** and subsequently the traditional 'birth as origin' in the face of the rapidly growing volume of the phenomenology of pregnancy discourse, in which these traditional conceptions are put under increasing pressure. Now that not only *women* are in the position to contribute to the academic realm, but *mothers* as well, it becomes harder and harder to maintain the picture of the coherent and separated individual. Rather, a much more fluid understanding of the metaphysical borders of human organisms is forcing itself upon us, suggesting that there is not always a clear sense what is 'mine' and what is 'yours' or where 'I' end and 'you' begin.

4. Philosophical implications: the loss of a 'point' of origin

4.1. From separation to connection: a loss?

As stated in the introduction of this thesis: the way we organize our society impacts who is granted the power and position to expand and spread its thought. Now, the advancing discourse on the phenomenology of pregnancy seems to reflect a change in that very society. Women's perspectives are taken up as valuable additions, perhaps even alternatives, to the more traditional ways of thinking.[21] One of those initiated transformations constitutes the topic of this thesis: a reinterpretation of the **t.a.)** on human nature as coherent and separate. The theme of alienation, a common denominator in the recounted experiences of pregnant women, questioned this deep-rooted assumption. I use the prudent term 'questioning' with a reason, for talking about this ambiguous embodied experience of no longer being at one with oneself in terms of 'alienation', teaches us that the pregnant woman herself, at least partly, still holds on to the **t.a.)** of her body as coherent and separate. It is alienating to share the intimate confines of one's body, for we are taught that this intimacy is a space that is ours alone. This thesis has shown that the idea of the composed, self-controlled, integrated individual – merely *engaging* in intersubjective contact, without *losing* oneself in it – has been taken as a highly acclaimed characteristic of man in western society. We won't let the intimate fortress of our self be penetrated by the unpredictable other who might touch us or change our individuality for good. In this sense, the pregnant body, understood as both a merger with an other as well as a continued identity as it is expounded by the perspective of women who experienced it, stands for everything that man in its upright position aims to dispose himself of: a fragile, uncontrolled sharing of our innermost privacy.[22]

Therefore pregnancy, and then specifically the *alienating* experience of finding one's habitual understanding of the uprooted body, is especially interesting. It shows that this bodily phenomenon tarnishes a belief that is otherwise fundamental to people, pregnant or not. It shows that the change from **t.a.)** to **r.a.)** does not happen without loss or disturbance. The idea of the body as ambiguous and connected is not something we can effortlessly accept, without consequences for other parts of our thinking. First of all, establishing the moment when someone becomes an individual is important on a juridical level, for that is the same moment that the law extends to this new life as well: a life that ought to be protected against harm just like that of everyone else. Moreover, the criminal law system relies on the necessity to ascribe singular accountability to a person's actions, meaning that the charge is exhaustively attributable to this person (the person is coherent) and the blame moreover extends to this person alone (the person is separated). To think of bodies as ambiguous and connected, hampers both courses of justice. Firstly, in the case of pregnancy, this assumption entails that we are not dealing with two separate people with their own personal rights and interests, but that this bodily predicament involves a dual, interwoven juridical actor that cannot be simply divided. Therefore, abortion legislation becomes infinitely more complicated: for the period of pregnancy, the law needs to find a way to speak of dual-yet-single juridical actors. Moreover, the revised assumption on human nature changes our legal processes besides pregnancy. If we accept that humans during pregnancy can be ambiguous and connected, this opens up the way for a reworked judicial outlook in general. Without the clean outer limits between people – the inability to determine where a person ends, and where another person begins – it is increasingly difficult to determine who, and who alone, committed the offence. Lastly, the realm of ethics would need serious revising. Speaking of bodily autonomy, privacy or personal identity in terms of non-interference from other people, is made difficult by the alienated pregnant experience. If we accept that the foetus and the mother are in part fundamentally connected during the nine months of gestation, these hitherto highly acclaimed personal rights seem superfluous. Rather, we

would need to find new accounts that can hold up bodily autonomy whilst accommodating more fluid spatial and temporal borders between human beings.

4.2. Complying to or transcending beyond the logic of life.

The urge to arrange and order a world that otherwise perpetually borders on chaos, is a common practice in philosophy. In fact, it makes up a large part of our philosophical canon. We call it abstraction or theorizing: transcending the marshland of everyday particularities into the neatly paved road of a system. We set out language ('me' and 'you', 'I' against the 'other', 'mine' in opposition to 'yours'), and practices that follow from that language (laws, medical protocols, intersubjective conventions) as useful, possibly even necessary ways of sense- and meaning making. We mold an overwhelmingly ambiguous world to be a bit more 'ours' by making it fit into the categories we impose on it. But then there is the pregnant experience. Jonna Bornemark writes how the laws of logic, which hitherto had always fulfilled their role as being 'logical', are now forcing her pregnant body into a corner of 'either-or' with brute force. Everything must always be *at* one place at one time and must only *be* one thing at one time. However, she follows, 'I don't want to comply. I cannot comply'. (Bornemark, 2023, p. 70) Iris Marion Young adds that reflection on her pregnant experience provides a serious challenge to the dualist subject-object distinction that is tacitly at work in the history of philosophy on the body. (Young, p. 162). Moreover, she writes how Julia Kristeva makes a similar point, by stating that the pregnant woman overturns the subject of the paternal symbolic order, which proceeds from a *unified* ego. The pregnant subject, instead, has reconnected with the repressed, pre-symbolic aspects of our existence, by 'straddling the spheres of language and instinct'. (Young, p. 166) The pregnant woman for Kristeva is nowhere near the traditional unified subject. She falls outside of it or may even be said to transcend it altogether: she is radically split.

In their own ways, these different writers convey an identical message: pregnancy introduces the woman that undergoes this experience to a world that leaves these traditional categories behind. Even more: it renders these categories useless in their capacity to elucidate our everyday life, simplifying it by means of order. Instead, **t.a.)** and the language that follows from it, puts one at a distance from both the embodied maternal experience, as well as from the true nature of human origin. For to perceive the basis of every single human beginning as an exception (or worse, an obstacle) to our ordinary ways of thinking about origin, lays bare a grave undervaluation of the female perspective, as well as an ostrich-like tactic to make human origin fit the categories we established for human nature. Origin is something that happens *in* someone, *to* someone, and – most importantly – *with* someone. If we were to focus less on the 'intuition' of the history of philosophy – predominantly written by men for men, who generally have not had the experience of a new beginning unfolding in the intimacy of their selves – and instead pay due attention to what *women* have intuited about their own pregnancies, then the assumption **t.a.)** on human existence can only be seen as reductive and inadequate. Following Jonna Bornemark's words: the 'alive' can only be explored from the alive itself. (Bornemark, 2023, p. 22)

4.3. Coherent and connected, revising the argument of 'birth as origin'.

Where does this leave the traditional conception of 'birth as origin'? Chapter three made the claim that the **t.a.)** on human bodies as coherent and separate in fact underpins the entire reasoning of 'birth as origin'. However, it was not able to show exactly how this traditional assumption is connected to the argument at large. Now, the presentation of **r.a.)** as a more reasonable intuitive assumption on human nature, will allow this thesis to take this last argumentative step: changing **t.a.)** for its revised version, will cause the argumentation of 'birth as origin' to collapse.

To oppose the belief that humans are coherent and separate by the image of man as

ambiguous and connected, touches the first premise of 'birth as origin' as laid out in the first two chapters: **a*)** 'origin is a step from darkness into light'. The previous has established that **r.a)** is not an exception to the human experience as coherent and separated, but rather, that the period of gestation teaches us that it is part of the human lifecycle that humans can be part of other humans. This knife cuts both ways: first, it means that the carrier of the pregnancy – at least during this nine-month period – does not adhere to the **t.a.)**. As exhibited in this thesis, her borders have extended to house an other in the midst of her same. Now, a passionate advocate of the traditional way of understanding human origin might object that we could simply move towards a correction. Accepting a **t.a.*)** that humans are coherent and separate, *except for the nine months of gestation* allows us to maintain our habitual way of understanding human beings, whilst taking seriously the female, pregnant experience. However, then there is the other side of the knife: not only the pregnant mother contradicts the coherent and separate borders between bodies, but the foetus that is carried by this body does too. Possibly even more than the mother – who has had several years to form an identity 'of her own' before stepping into the extraordinary bodily relation that is pregnancy – the entire world of the foetus, at least up until birth, is marked by this ambiguous connection. We do not originate out of separation, but rather, our beginning seems to be marked by an enigmatic interplay of porous borders that connect the maternal with the foetal on some parts and splits them on other parts. Jonna Bornemark's words capture this duplicity: 'If the sun warms my belly, you feel it too […] the light of the LED tubes makes your world orange and the apples I ate yesterday flavours the amniotic fluid. […] But even though I hear what you hear, you *also* hear something else. You hear what I hear, but I *also* hear something else. I can feel your movements, *but not all of them*. You feel that I am changing position, but you do not feel *all* of my movements. We are like two sides of a coin, but with secret corners.' (Bornemark, 2023, p. 61) It shows that the very symptom of human origin is exactly this ambiguous exchange of 'mine' and 'yours', in such a way that these disjoining terms lose their logical meaning. Jonna Bornemark sees no other way but to invent new language that might capture what traverses her body. Not a 'you' next to a 'me', but a *'youem':* an inversed me that is initiated by you.[23]

Back to the first premise. To let go of the idea of people as coherent and separate from start to finish, with no clear 'front' and 'back', or distinct 'inside' and 'outside', renders the notion of an unambiguous 'thereness' absurd. The idea, illustrated in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis, that human origin comprises the moment we step from the dark, unintelligible 'not-there-ness', to the illuminated, clearly defined 'there-ness', is turned upside down by a more ambiguous and relational understanding of human existence. Pointing at birth, the 25-week mark, the first heartbeat or conception as the moment of origin, becomes absurd from the standpoint of *'youem':* we emerge from a place of relationality, an ambiguous continuum that defies harsh delineations and limits. This is concretized in an article by Tessa Roseboom, a Dutch professor in early foetal development, stating that the egg from which we are born was already made in our grandmother's womb. (Roseboom, 2024) If we held on to the traditional wish of identifying a strict starting of life, this information would bring us to an infinite regress following the maternal line: an egg in a womb in an egg in a womb in an egg, all the way back to Adam and Eve. In other words, however we twist and turn it, the first premise of the traditional conception of 'birth as origin' **a*)** stating that human origination is a clearly distinguishable step from darkness into light, is irreparably weakened.

Needless to say, the conclusion **c*)** '*origin* is a moment of separation', likewise has lost its footing. This statement is a consolidation of **t.a)** and **a*)** – origin is a *step*, and origin can only be initiated by *separation.* The previous has shown that both supporting arguments have collapsed, thereby invalidating the larger traditional argument of 'birth as origin'.

4.4. A blinding light and an illuminated darkness

It is time to put this thesis' argument within its broader context, for this critique on the traditional 'birth as origin' mimics a larger philosophical movement from the 20th century. Continental philosophy in Europe – with Heidegger on the one hand, and French structuralism on the other hand – has tried to overturn the project of modernity, in which science and progress were represented as the perfect means to take control of the world and ourselves. (Groot, p. 283) These critics claim that neither our lifeworld, nor the human subject can be captured in the traditional logic that is meant to structure our world. The subverted **t.a.)**, together with the first premise **a*)** falls into this category. It turns out that the assumption of people as coherent and separate, tied to the image of birth as a moment that separates the dark from the light, is a historical construction which – as showed the pregnant experience – is continuously eroded by reality. Some examples of these critical philosophies are especially applicable to the theme of this thesis. Whether it is an assessment of the philosophy of the *immediate*, the philosophy of the *same*, the philosophy of *light* or the philosophy of *presence*, all are joined in a commentary on the historic pervasive pursuit of universality, each elaborating on a slightly different aspect.

The work of Emmanuel Levinas helps to bring together how the primacy of light (premise **a***) informs a segregated outlook on life (**t.a.** and premise **c***). In his work *Infinity and Totality* (1961), Levinas touches upon the primacy of vision as the dominant model in the philosophical canon. This model he calls 'totalitarianism' aspires, or even promises, to give an all-encompassing inclusive view of the world in a neutral, impersonal light. (Levinas, p. 51) This mirrors the traditional understanding of light as it is displayed in the first chapter of this thesis. Light is historically taken to be an intelligible form that holds all that exists together, whilst itself being devoid of sensible qualities. (Vasseleu, p. 3) Light is considered to be impartial: merely *making seen,* rather than *being seen.* However, this thesis joins in a reassessment of the universal value of this so-called neutral force. Light illuminates, but in doing so, it creates contours. Light creates a space where objects are both distinct from each other, as well as from the observer. In other words, it fixes reality in the static point of the there-is, creating a dual structure of identity and opposition: A = A (coherent), and A ≠ B (separate). Or, as Levinas puts it: light can only create a silhouette but leaves out the face. (Levinas, p. 45) Light is distinct in its quality to disclose the borders that contain what is coherent. This 'silhouette' has been the focus of the first and second chapter of this thesis. Light brightens the *separated* parts of the maternal-foetal relation: daylight representing the physical disconnection of the baby from its mother's body through birth, or the ultrasound and the 'light' of God producing a metaphorical isolation by hypostatizing the foetus' individuality. Thereby, we saw in the third chapter that the 'face' of pregnancy has been washed away: the intimate, personal and private that colours the outlines – the ambiguous connection between mother and foetus – is overlooked. In this sense, light is not the 'consumption without loss', or a means of 'conquering without force', as we historically assumed it to be. (Blumenberg, p. 71) Similarly, the quest for an all-encompassing philosophical system is not an innocent revealing of what was already there. In fact, the supposed equalizing effects of luminosity to 'disclose' or lay bare reality for everyone to see, puts an important part of reality in the shadows: people originate *gradually* from an *ambiguously relational* place.

It seems as though the cosmic universality of light, as it is assumed and utilized by philosophy's pursuit towards totality, integrity and wholeness, has eclipsed the power of the word. In the context of the primacy of the visible, Hans Blumenberg writes that the *eye* can seek, whereas the *ear* can only wait. (Blumenberg, p. 83) Hearing as a passive means of gaining knowledge stands in contrast to the historic interpretation of knowledge-seeking as an active operation. This is reflected in the philosophy of Plato and the Enlightenment, in which the subject goes out to grasp knowledge in order to break the chains of ignorance and

oblivion. In light of this, it is only natural that an *experience* like that of pregnancy remains 'unseen'. This knowledge of the intimate simply cannot be actively conquered, but instead must be calmly received. In the context of the traditional interpretation of light as the only means to *direct* and *unmediated* knowledge, this comes down to a 'waiting' in the dark. This explains the second premise of 'birth as origin': **b)** 'the womb is a place devoid of light'. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that this admiration for bright illumination can also blind us and make us ignorant for a world of knowledge that lies in amidst these lit-up contours. Taking notice of this world 'in-between', however, asks to sometimes resist the urge to turn on the bright lights ourselves (cut the belly open, enter it through ultrasound waves, or explain it by means of samples and tests); it asks to temporarily silence our need for conceptual constructions and instead encourage our readiness to listen and learn from other people's experiences; in Levinas' words, it asks to recognize the knowledge *beyond* the panoramic view of vision towards the realm of language in which there is room for the diversity of dialogue. (Levinas, p. 16) Whereas vision seems to lead us to the universal, dialogue can accommodate diversification. This proposed world of dialogue is fitting in light of this thesis, for it can incorporate both the exchange and communication that takes place between the pregnant mother and her foetus (the *content* of this discourse), as well as the phenomenological discourse that has arisen out of this pregnant experience (the *shape* of this discourse). Not only the former signifies the ambiguous place of the disparate in-between that Levinas alludes to. Also the latter, this new philosophical discourse itself, defies the clearly determined traditional understanding of knowledge. It is *not* publicly accessible through vision, *only* reserved to a certain group of people and its findings do *not* exist independently from its observer. Rather, it is a singular experience, traversed in a singular body, which cannot be replicated in a lab for everyone to see. In fact: the weight of this experience – a weight strong enough to challenge a deep-rooted assumption on human beings – lies exactly in the affect it has on the knower. In that sense, the alienated experience of pregnancy that has overturned our traditional notion of 'birth as origin' goes against the highly esteemed concept of impartiality in science.

Be that as it may, this thesis has demonstrated that the presumed 'equalizing' effects of light themselves are everything but equal. The knowledge that pregnancy brings to bear may be undemocratic in character, having an *irreducible experience* as its basis that is not broadly accessible, but may be said to be wholly democratic in another sense: even though we don't remember it (we lack the direct access to this knowledge), every human being on this earth has been created in the midst of this embodied knowledge. In that sense, the second premise is right in essence: the womb is not a place of blazing sunlight. The knowledge of the **r.a.)** is everything but the contour-creating light of the universally visible. It is an awareness of the *few,* a knowledge of the *particular*, a science of the *intimate*, which is exactly its advantage: only for this reason can we discern these private-yet-fundamental life lessons. We arrive at an ironic interplay: it is exactly the 'limited' light one might call darkness that transcends the limiting, categorising and excluding light of the sun. The experience of pregnancy shows that there is 'light' to be found in the 'darker' shades of our knowledge. Ultimately, the very last premise of the traditional argument has been set aside: the womb is not a place of light, but a place of *illuminating darkness*.

5. Conclusion: towards a new starting point

5.1. A new answer, a different straitjacket

It seems as though our research question has been satisfyingly answered. By taking a closer look at the traditional argument of 'birth as origin', an underlying, fundamental assumption on human nature was brought to light, which proved to be untenable on the account of the pregnant experience. The main premise, 'origin is a step from darkness into light', collapsed accordingly, followed by the conclusion that 'origin is a moment of separation'. Lastly, the second premise, stating that 'the womb is a place devoid of light', found its counterpart. The matter seems fixed: instead of the traditional assumption on humans as coherent and separate, we accept the revised assumption that humans are ambiguous and connected. Similarly, we exchange our traditional ideas on origin as a moment of separation for a revised notion on origin as a gradual, relational process. Nevertheless, a conclusion like this would not bring us any closer to the truth about the nature of human origin, in fact, it would only reiterate the same message in a different (straight) jacket.

For this thesis, I have been inspired by the earlier mentioned philosophers that aimed to escape the traditional domination of the world as a grid, promising control and truth, by seeking ways to lay bare everything that remained hidden in this so-called 'panoramic' view of a sweeping, flawless uniformity. However, this is by definition an unstable project: trying to get a hold of these 'hidden' and overlooked corners of the philosophical landscape, runs the risk of instigating another order that yet again annuls difference. A mere reversal of the **t.a.)** into the **r.a.)** only brings about another pole of another dualism. In light of this, this thesis' answer to the research question should resist the comfortable illusion of a philosophy that can penetrate and master the world. An attempt to exhaustively fill in this new assumption on human nature would contravene the exact meaning that the **r.a.)** brings to bear: life is ambiguous and does not always adhere to (binary) categories and conceptual frameworks. Similarly, to counter the traditional conclusion of 'birth as origin' **c*)** by stating that origin is not a moment of separation but instead a moment of radical connection, keeps this thesis in the loop of a perpetual dialectic. Taking this path would annul everything this thesis hoped to defend. Instead of drawing up a stark and static conclusion, its shape will mimic the shape of the lessons I have learned during my own pregnancy: life, already in its earliest form, is everything but straightforward. Similar to the process of writing this conclusion, there were times during pregnancy when I thought I understood what was going on. In those times I either felt secure in my old identity as Marie (when writing my bachelor thesis in the soft noise of the Leiden university library, during fiery discussions on literature with my boyfriend, when alone on the beach) or, conversely, I coincided with my new identity as a merged centaur-like figure (when I was startled by a sudden loud noise and simultaneously felt her jump in my belly, when I was floating in open water and noticed her active rejoice in the loosed-up tightness of my abdomen, when placing my hand on my belly and feeling her swim towards it). I visited the 'contours' of my pregnancy but left out the face. Luckily, to experience this transformational phenomenon means that one cannot hold this deceptively excluding logic of life for long. Most times, I had to accept that my pregnant reality was neither, or both, or something in between for which I lacked the right words.

I suggest, therefore, to take the irreducible embodied experience of alienation as found in the pregnant subject serious, but *not* in order to fundamentally counter the entire traditional human experience. For, pregnancy in its physiological shape does not comprise the entirety of human life, nor does it claim to. It is a seed of a new beginning, filled with potential and future. Therefore, its knowledge is reduced to, but extremely accurate on exactly this: our starting point, both as humans and as a philosophical domain. It urges us, not to overturn it all, but to consider a new opening move.

5.2. A new starting point: how to break free from the one that made you?

For long, we have accepted the view of human beings as coherent and separate, which therefore placed the burden on philosophy to designate and explain the step towards the other. If I originated as one of Thomas Hobbes' mushrooms, without any kind of engagement to someone else, how can we reach the other, know him, be sure of him? Nevertheless, what followed from this thesis, is that the lessons and insights of pregnancy put this logic upside down. No one is born wholly empty or 'anew', as Hannah Arendt had us believe. This thesis showed that we are created in a web of ambiguous relationality, cursed and gifted with history and future. In other words: the foetus always, already *has a world,* before taking its first breath of air on the earth-world. Pregnancy shows us that – at least in the *basis* – human beings emerge from a complex connection with others, rendering this search for 'the possible other' redundant. It appears that pregnancy as the starting point of new life redirects our traditional philosophical outset. Instead of commencing with the detached individual followed by the philosophical issue as to how this individual can reach the intersubjective world, a new point of departure forces itself upon us: in the beginning, in our innermost essence, man is not alone. Following in the footsteps of the phenomenological discourse on pregnancy, I suggest that we leave the question behind as to how we can reach the other given our fundamental, independent autonomy. Instead, we move to a new philosophical starting point: how can we become a 'self', given the fundamentally enigmatic connection in human's origin? Hereby, we have not only justified the embodied maternal experiences which long have been discounted; we have not only replaced a culturally contingent notion of human origin with one that is directly informed by the people that have had this process of origin unfold in their very bodies, but we have moreover managed to do so without annulling the lessons of this extra-ordinary phenomenon: the *core of our beginning is filled with ambiguity*, which – if we choose to universalise it by stretching it out further than this teaching can accommodate– only recedes further and further into the background.

To change one's starting point, automatically alters the direction of the search. Assuming an ambiguous relationality at the start of human nature, leaves the important task for philosophy to study the question how we can discern certain boundaries and individuality from this relationality. In other words: how do people gain a 'self', given their interconnectedness? How can two people follow from the unclear merger that is pregnancy? The imaginary words from a foetus, written by Sarah Sluimer for the play 'En Ze Maakte een Kind', echo this search:

> *As a squirming hairless cat, I'm pasted to her sides*
> *I feel what she feels*
> *When she's happy, little bolts of serotonin shoot through my veins*
> *How can you ever break free from the one who made you?*

5.3. Mushrooms after all?

Accepting an enigmatic connection during our lives' beginning, does not cancel out human individuality. And nor should it: naturally, life knows boundaries. This thesis does not wish to argue otherwise. We can certainly speak of identical relations as well as non-identical relations. Just like I can see the difference between night and day, to a certain extent during pregnancy there is something like *his* or *her* body and *that of mine.* But there is more. It would be absurd to think there would not be more. Just like there is dusk and there is dawn, there is a *'youem'* that needs thematising: the place where bodies converge, where we share, where borders overflow; a place full of swarming life that moves between the two poles of absolute identity and difference; a place that is absolved from the demand to always be the same, because either way, life will twist, turn and pulsate around us, through the generations, through our categories, through women's wombs. No wonder that – as an

adjective – we use pregnant to mean ‘full of meaning’: for those nine months, the maternal body becomes the place of confluence between our ancestors and their descendants, a belly being traversed by a movement that originated long before us and will stretch out far beyond us, a beginning charged with history, a new link in an age-old chain. In that sense, Hobbes was right after all in choosing the metaphor of the mushroom to indicate human origin. The colony of mycelium from which mushrooms spring can grow to span thousands of acres, forming a web-like body of branched, entangled threads that connect all fungi. And furthermore, science shows that each growing mushroom tip has *both* autonomy from, *as well as* accountability to the whole organism. (Michael Hathaway, 2023) If only Hobbes could know that he added a valuable imagery to elucidate the puzzling yet fascinating ambiguity that unfolds in the pregnant woman; the same ambiguity that overturns his own conception of birth as autonomy; the same ambiguity that has put the argument of ‘birth as origin’ upside down; the ambiguity that combines two individuals into *one and two* at the same time.

I believe that the phenomenology of pregnancy does not necessitate an entirely new system. We do not have to abolish the sun and herald the moon. We are not meant to lose the separation and triumph an all-encompassing connectedness instead. The lessons of pregnancy, taught by the women that underwent it, merely are a powerful invitation to change our starting point: from a necessary ambiguity to a potential distinctness. In this sense, this thesis mirrors the bearing of a child: it is the outline of a becoming.

Figures and images

Chapter 1:

Figure 1.1. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: an Analysis of the Archetype.* p.44-45

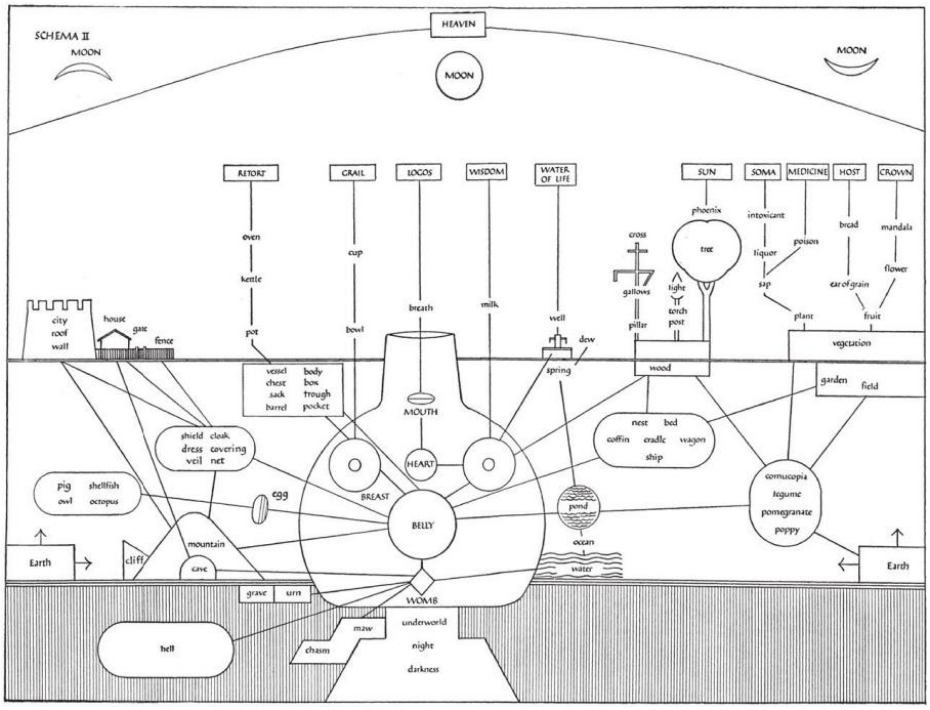

Figure 1.2. Source: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, online collection. Object nr: B 2168

Notes

[1] Setting a selected group of people apart as the 'authority' in a certain area of interest, thereby dominating who is allowed to join the conversation and who isn't.

[2] The claims made in this chapter on the history of philosophy though the lens of light and visibility, are not taken out of thin air. They have their basis in more contemporary philosophical accounts, such as those by Levinas, Derrida or Irigaray. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

[3] Pages 84-86 in Hans Blumenberg's *'Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation (1957)'* sheds more light on the respective differences: since the objective of the metaphors is different, their implications are too. This is slightly out of the scope of this thesis but might be an interesting further read.
[4] In religious mythology, the link between water and birth is often made. Immersion in water symbolizes a total regeneration, a re-birth: a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence. (Eliade, p. 188) This can be traced back to the world of water in the form of amniotic fluid that fosters the foetus's development to a fully grown baby.

[5] An elaboration of this topic can be found in previous essay of mine: *'Rethinking Reproduction: Decensoring the Body That Could Destroy or Fix It All'* (2023). Here, I analyse whether the term 'reproduction' is fitting to symbolize childbirth or must be reconsidered towards a term that portrays a more active and creative role for the birthing mother.

[6] For further reference, see figure 1.1.

[7] See figure 1.2.

[8] An elucidating example being the recent ruling by the Alabama supreme court, stating that the frozen embryos created through IVF are considered *children*. This has great consequences for the future of IVF, in which it is a common procedure to stimulate the woman's ovaries to create as many embryos as possible to create optimal chances for a successful pregnancy. If the hospital freezers appear to be filled, not with medical material, but with *children* – with therefore the legal *rights* of children – this asks for a serious reconsideration of the IVF procedure at large. (E.g. *'Alabama university pauses IVF care after frozen embryos deemed 'children'',* The Guardian, 21st February 2024).

[9] For reference, a foetus is only as big as a small pea this term of the pregnancy, so it's heart is even smaller.

[10] www.dictionary.com/browse/birth

[11] A term that refers to the systematic preference of the technological (or scientific) over the natural (unmediated) in pregnancy and birth.

[12] Much is said about the alienating effects of the domineering 'objective' authority of the (often male) doctor, in relation to the female 'subjective' experience. E.g. pages 168-172 from *Pregnant Embodiment* by Iris Marion Young; chapter seven ('Alienated Labour') from *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich; chapter ten ('Disempowered Women? The Midwifery Model and Medical Intervention') from *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childcare and Mothering* by Sonya Charles; and chapter four ('What About Birth') from *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare* by Amy Mullin. Full references can be found in the bibliography.

[13] The quotes from this book are translated from Dutch to English by me throughout this thesis, to my best ability.

[14] For this conception of human bodies as 'coherent and separate', I have been inspired by Jonna Bornemark's introduction of *Ik ben Zee en Hemel*.

[15] A comprehensive ethical account of birth as an independent act against birth as a 'gift' (resulting in a fundamental human dependency) can be found in Lisa Guenther's *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*, State University of New York Press (2006).

[16] The quotes from this book are translated from Dutch to English by me throughout this thesis, to my best ability.

[17] Quotes in correct order from Kristeva, *Stabat Mater,* p. 138; Young, *Pregnant Embodiment,* p. 160 and 163; Bornemark, *Ik ben Zee en Hemel,* p. 69 and 65; Bigwood, *Renaturalizing the Body (With the Help of Merleau-Ponty),* p.60

[18] Elselijn Kingma uses the rather neutral, biological terms of 'foster' and 'gravida', instead of 'foetus' and 'mother'. Her article is about mammals and organisms, not about *people* per se, she says on page 601. It seems as though this also keeps her argument away from the more politically laden (thereby, distracting) terms of 'mother', 'woman', or 'maternal body'.

[19] The placenta opens up another rich domain of questions on bodily ownership and the border between 'the same' and 'the different'. See e.g. Luce Irigaray's account of 'placental economy' in *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a* Culture of Difference (1993) or pages 34-37 of Jonna Bornemark's *Ik ben Zee en Hemel*.

[20] A myriad of medical articles can be found on certain particular (very specific) enigma's of the maternal-foetal interaction, but a more general statement declaring medicine's blind spots on this matter can be found in '*The Human Placenta Project: Placental structure, development, and function in real time'* by A.E. Guttmacher, Y.T. Maddox and C.Y. Spong. Published in 'Placenta', volume 35, May 2014. Or *'Placental magnetic resonance imaging Part II: placenta accreta spectrum'* by Brandon P. Brown and Mariana L. Meyers. Published in 'Paediatric Radiology', volume 50, February 2020.

[21] The fact that this is still largely done *by* women themselves – for this research, I have found very little work on the phenomenology of pregnancy written by a man – is another interesting topic for further research: is it a sign of female emancipation in academia that these 'female' topics, hitherto deemed philosophically irrelevant, are now given the recognition they deserve (a way of taking up *new space,* where before there was none)? Or is it exactly the opposite: a sign that women have still not managed to tower above the areas that are traditionally assigned to the strictly 'female' (remaining in an *old*, *restricted space)*?

[22] I took the phrase that 'pregnancy embodies everything that man in its upright position aims to dispose himself of' from Jonna Bornemark, *Ik ben Zee en Hemel,* page 41. She herself uses it to denote something slightly different about pregnancy, so a regular reference seemed out of place here.

[23] In the original book, this term is *'jijki'*: 'een binnenstebuiten gekeerd ik, dat met een jij wordt ingeleid.'

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