

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THRESHOLDS

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Abstract

This volume opens a collection devoted to the anthropology of the thresholds of human existence, beginning with the experience that precedes all others: being born. Rather than reducing this event to a mere biological fact, the volume asks what it reveals about a deeper structure of existence — that of a being who enters the world without being the author of that entry.

The guiding hypothesis of this inquiry may be stated as follows: birth reveals, better than any other experience, the received and relational dimension of human existence, prior to all autonomy. Seven chapters unfold this hypothesis. Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness, the volume first shows that the one who is born receives himself before being able to posit himself as a subject — that he is, in this phenomenology's own terms, an interlocutor (*interloqué*) before being able to answer. Turning next to Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt, it establishes that this reception never occurs in a vacuum, but always through and for another: the face that welcomes institutes a responsibility that precedes the child, while the plurality of an already-peopled world transforms its mere biological appearance into a genuinely new beginning. With Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the volume then explores how this welcome is first inscribed in a body before being inscribed in any lasting institutional world, and how the radical immaturity of the human newborn — its constitutive vulnerability — conditions the very plasticity that makes all learning possible. With Paul Ricœur and Hans Jonas, the inquiry turns to filiation, understood as the structure by which a received narrative precedes all self-narration, and an unreciprocated responsibility grounds the very model of all responsibility toward what cannot yet respond. A final chapter confronts this structure with the contemporary transformations of birth — medicalisation, assisted reproduction, the weakening of filiation's symbolic frameworks described by Marcel Gauchet — to show that these transformations

alter the social and technical conditions of birth without ever touching its most fundamental anthropological structure.

This volume thus opens the collection on an observation that discreetly orients all that follows: before being a subject capable of choosing, the human being is first a being who receives.

Keywords (specific)

birth ; natality ; givenness ; phenomenology of givenness ; Jean-Luc Marion ; Emmanuel Levinas ; face ; Hannah Arendt ; plurality ; Maurice Merleau-Ponty ; flesh ; vulnerability ; Paul Ricœur ; narrative identity ; Hans Jonas ; the imperative of responsibility ; filiation ; Marcel Gauchet ; assisted reproductive technology

Keywords (cross-collection)

philosophical anthropology ; anthropology of thresholds ; phenomenology ; philosophy of relation ; Collection Oramellon ; Christian Mahoukou

Volume I

BEING BORN

Entering Life

Collection Preface — At the Threshold of Thresholds

Every human existence is traversed by thresholds.

We are born, we grow, we learn to speak, to love, to believe, to belong, to hand things on. We encounter authority and freedom, hospitality and exclusion, memory and forgetting, wounding and reconstruction. Some of these passages are visible and acknowledged; others remain discreet, almost silent. Yet each of them marks a passage in which something of ourselves is called to become other without ceasing to be itself.

This collection was born of a simple conviction: human beings are not first understood from states, but from passages.

The human sciences often describe situations. They analyse structures, behaviours, institutions, mechanisms. Such analyses are necessary. But they sometimes leave in shadow

what constitutes the most ordinary and the most profound experience of human existence: the fact of being continually called to cross thresholds.

A threshold is not merely a boundary. It is the space in which a transformation becomes possible.

Across the volumes that make up this series, the aim has never been to build a closed philosophical system. The ambition was more modest, and perhaps more fundamental: to interrogate the moments in which humanity reveals itself to itself in what is most fragile and most decisive about it.

Why does birth amount to more than a biological beginning? What does it mean to inhabit a common world? How does one become a legitimate member of a human group? What happens when a person is excluded, denied recognition, or subjected to the hold of a single voice? How is freedom formed, lost, and then reconquered?

For each of these questions, a privileged interlocutor has been summoned: philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, theologians, or witnesses of human experience. None was called upon to supply a definitive answer. All were called to illuminate one particular dimension of the threshold under study.

Gradually, a shared intuition emerged.

Human beings are never built alone.

They become themselves through mediations: faces, words, institutions, narratives, traditions, communities. True autonomy is born not of their absence, but of their right presence. The great human wounds then appear in a new light: they are often assaults upon the very mediations that allow a person to inhabit the world, to be recognised within it, and to exercise judgment there.

Understood in this way, the anthropology of thresholds is not one theory among others. It is an attentiveness to those places of passage where the very possibility of a fully human existence is at stake.

The pages that follow make no claim to exhaust these questions. They wish only to accompany the reader to the threshold of certain essential passages, to the point where ready-made answers cease to suffice and the more demanding work of reflection begins.

For thresholds do not exist to be contemplated.

They exist to be crossed.

Prologue to the Volume

Philosophy, it seems, always begins too late.

It often begins with an already-constituted being, already speaking, already settled in the world, already capable of saying "I." It then takes as its object a finished subject, as though this went without saying.

But there exists a threshold older than thought itself. A threshold thought cannot observe from outside without missing what is essential to it.

This threshold is the moment when a human being enters the world without yet knowing what it means to be there.

I. The Paradox of Origin

Being born is not one event among others. It is an event with no possible witness for the one who lives it. The one who is born does not know that they are being born. And yet everything they will become depends on this entry.

Birth is thus a strange threshold: it is absolutely decisive, and yet absolutely unmastered; it is entirely lived, yet never fully a matter for the subject.

To be born is to be introduced into a world one does not choose, through an experience one does not understand.

II. Entry Without Knowing

The whole of human existence will afterward bear the trace of this initial entry. For to be born is not merely to begin living. It is to begin being exposed to a world already there: faces before words, voices before concepts, gestures before meanings, dependence before any autonomy.

The first human relation is not freedom. It is dependence.

III. The Originary Threshold

One might think birth is a point. But it is rather a structure. It already contains, in seed, all the other thresholds of human existence: being welcomed or not, being recognised or ignored, being protected or exposed, being named or left anonymous.

Thus every later threshold will replay something of birth. To learn is to be introduced anew. To be recognised is to be welcomed anew. To be excluded is to be cast out of a first world. To die is to leave definitively this world of original welcome.

IV. Welcome as the Origin of the Human World

Human beings are not born merely biologically. They are born into a fabric of relations. Before even understanding, they are looked at, touched, carried, named.

It is this welcome that makes a living being a human being. There is no human existence without a world that precedes the individual and awaits them — one thinks here, almost in spite of oneself, of Victor Hugo's poem "Lorsque l'enfant paraît," in *Les Feuilles d'automne* (1831).

V. Fragility as First Condition

Birth reveals a fundamental anthropological truth: human beings begin their lives in extreme vulnerability. This vulnerability is not accidental. It is constitutive.

It means that survival depends on others, that growth depends on an environment, that continuity depends on a presence. Before being a being of freedom, the human being is a being of reception.

VI. The First Threshold Is Never Alone

Birth is not merely biological. It is immediately followed by other passages: being named, being registered, being recognised, being inscribed within a filiation.

In other words: birth opens a series of thresholds that will gradually transform a living being into a person.

VII. What This Volume Attempts to Think

This first volume does not seek to explain birth. It seeks to suspend our familiarity with it. For we too readily believe we already know what "being born" means. We reduce it to a medical event, a date, an administrative entry into the world.

But anthropologically, birth is something else: it is the entry into a world that precedes any possibility of situating oneself within it.

VIII. An Anthropology of Thresholds Begins Here

The whole collection that follows rests on this simple intuition: human existence is made of passages. But no passage is more originary than this one: the one by which a being is introduced into a world without having chosen the world, the entry, or even the fact of entering.

IX. Opening

The volumes that follow will describe other thresholds: those by which one learns to inhabit the world, those by which one becomes someone, those by which one enters institutions, those by which one is excluded from them, those by which the world is transformed into a technical environment, those by which life comes to an end.

But all of them presuppose this one. To be born is already to have been caught up in a history before being able to understand it.

X. First Threshold

This publication therefore does not begin a theory: it attempts to return to the point where any theory becomes possible. The point where a human being, not yet knowing what a world is, already enters one.

And where this simple fact — entering — already contains the whole anthropology to come.

This book begins here the exploration of this enigma.

Chapter I — The Enigma of Birth

1. *An Event Without Equal*

Any philosophy that takes as its starting point an already-constituted subject, already speaking, already settled in the world, already capable of saying "I," begins too late. It takes for granted what should instead call for the greatest astonishment: that this being first had to enter the world, without having chosen to, with no possible witness for itself.

Birth is indeed not an event like others. Everything a human being will become depends on this entry — and yet this entry radically escapes all appropriation: one receives one's entire future existence from an act in which, at the moment it takes place, one has strictly no part. No other human experience presents this structure: being, at once, so decisive and so inaccessible to oneself.

2. *An Unthought of Contemporary Anthropology*

Why does so decisive an event remain so little thought as such? The answer no doubt lies in how easily we believe we already know what birth is. We reduce it to a medical fact, recorded in a file; to a date, inscribed on a civil register; to a biological beginning that physiology alone would suffice to describe. Each of these reductions is legitimate in its own order. None touches what, anthropologically, makes birth an enigma rather than a mere fact: the passage from an un-lived non-world to an inhabited world — by the very one who cannot yet understand any of it.

This theoretical discretion has a practical consequence that must be named at the very opening of this book: by treating birth as a neutral beginning, we risk building an entire anthropology upon an already-formed subject, already autonomous, already capable of choosing — forgetting that this subject was first, without exception, a being received before being a being who acts.

3. *Reformulating the Question*

The question itself must therefore be shifted. To ask "what is birth?" almost irresistibly invites a biological or administrative answer. To ask instead what it means for a human being to be born, or what birth teaches us about the human condition, opens a properly anthropological space, in which dependence, filiation, gift, vulnerability, and inscription within a history one did not begin oneself can finally be heard.

4. The Guiding Hypothesis

The hypothesis governing this volume may be stated thus: birth reveals, better than any other experience, the received and relational dimension of human existence, prior to all autonomy. Most modern anthropologies are built around choice, freedom, decision — as though man entered the world as the author of himself. Birth says exactly the opposite: I did not give myself existence, I did not choose myself, I did not engender myself; I am preceded.

The human being does not enter the world as the author of himself, but as a received being. In other words: he is an heir before being an agent.

5. Four Paradoxes

This hypothesis may be approached through four paradoxes, which the following chapters will each unfold in turn.

The first is that we are the most dependent of all living beings: the human being is born unfinished. This biological weakness paradoxically constitutes the very condition of education, of culture, of learning, and ultimately of the freedom that is not given at the outset. The second is that we are unique yet begotten: each person is irreplaceable, and yet no one is self-founded. The third is that we are new yet heirs: each birth introduces into the world a radical novelty, yet this novelty is from the outset inscribed within a continuity it did not choose. The fourth, finally, is that we are vulnerable yet bearers of promise: the newborn is the most fragile of beings, and yet it is precisely the newborn who concentrates, for those who welcome it, the hope of a future.

6. The Course of This Book

The chapters that follow will each take up one thread of this enigma. Chapter II will dwell on birth as originary passivity, and on what it means to be given to oneself before being able to give oneself anything at all. Chapters III and IV will show that this passivity is never solitary: to be born is to be born of another, and to enter a world that precedes, and will survive, the one who appears in it. Chapter V will deepen the founding vulnerability that this volume has just posited as a condition rather than an accident. Chapter VI will unfold what birth entails of filiation and transmission. Chapter VII, finally, will confront this anthropology with the contemporary metamorphoses of birth — medicalisation, assisted reproduction, claims of self-determination — which never cease to test, without ever quite abolishing, the structure this chapter has just sketched.

One thing alone must be understood from now on, and the rest of the volume will do no more than unfold it: to be born is to be preceded by a call to which one cannot yet respond — and it is this very impossibility that later makes any response possible.

Chapter II — Given to Oneself

1. *A Passivity That Is Not a Mere Lack*

The previous chapter posited passivity as a constitutive trait of birth. It must now be specified more precisely, lest it be confused with what it is not. A stone is passive: it does nothing, it undergoes what happens to it without any internal structure being thereby involved. The newborn's passivity is not of this order. It is not the absence of activity, but an exposure — a way of already being turned toward what is coming, already reached by it, before even being able to constitute or understand it. The infant does not receive the world as a stone receives the rain. It is already affected by it, already solicited, already engaged in a relation it did not institute.

This distinction is decisive for everything that follows. If originary passivity were mere inertia, it would only be a provisional defect, destined to resolve itself with maturation. But it is rather a positive structure, one that will never entirely disappear: even the most autonomous subject remains, with respect to its own beginning, a being who first received before being able to act.

2. *Givenness as the Structure of Origin*

To think this reception without reducing it to a lack, one must leave behind the vocabulary of mere privation and turn to what contemporary phenomenology has called givenness. Jean-Luc Marion has shown, in *Being Given*, that no phenomenon is first constituted by the activity of a subject who would intend it, but gives itself of itself, prior to any intending — and that the subject who receives it is never, in this primary sense, the author of what appears to it, but the one to whom it is given.

Birth carries this structure to its most radical point. The newborn intends nothing, constitutes nothing, institutes no intentional relation to the world that surrounds it. And yet this world already gives itself to it — faces, voices, light, warmth, presence — before any constituting consciousness could claim the initiative for it. If there exists a case in which givenness absolutely precedes all constitution, it is this one.

3. The Gifted: Receiving One's Own Being

But birth does not only give a world to the one who is born. It gives that one to themselves. It is here that the phenomenology of givenness meets its most singular point, which Marion designates by the term the gifted (*l'adonné*): one who receives not only the phenomena that appear to them, but who receives themselves as the very condition of their appearing.

Before the cogito that affirms "I think," there is the more originary experience of a being who discovers itself already there. The subject does not first encounter itself as the author of its existence, but as the beneficiary of a received existence. This is the structure Marion names the gifted: a being already constituted as a point of reception, without having itself instituted that point.

I did not give myself to myself; I found myself given, before being able to say I.

This formula does not yet say from whom, or from what, the human being receives existence. It indicates only that the human being receives it.

4. The Interlocuted Before the Subject

Marion goes further still, in pages that touch directly on what this book seeks to think. It is here, more than in givenness itself, that the most decisive discovery of this chapter is lodged — the one that distinguishes this anthropology from so many others: before being a subject capable of intending and knowing, the gifted is first an interlocuted being (*interloqué*) — one who discovers itself already called before having itself taken up speech. The human being is called before being able to answer.

The interlocuted being does not hold the initiative of the speech that constitutes it; it is first its addressee.

To be born, in this vocabulary, is to become interlocuted before being able to become anything else. The first word never comes from the child. It always comes from a world that awaited it before it arrived. It takes the form of a face that leans down, a voice that names, a hand that carries. The child does not yet properly respond; but it is from the outset placed in the position of one to whom something is addressed, and it is this position that will later make any true response possible.

5. *A Fruitful Passivity*

It would nonetheless be mistaken to conclude from all this that originary passivity confines the born being within a pure receptivity, condemned to remain such. The opposite is true: this passivity is the very condition of all future activity, exactly as received earth is the condition of everything that may be sown in it. Without this first reception — without this ground of being given on which nothing has yet been decided — no freedom would have any matter on which to exercise itself, no response would have any situation to respond to.

For no one receives their existence from an abstract world. Even before inhabiting a world, the human being is welcomed by presences. Birth never simply gives a universe to explore; it introduces one into a relation. The next chapter will extend this analysis in a direction that the phenomenology of givenness, alone, does not suffice to illuminate: for what the child receives, it never receives from an anonymous world, but always from another — from a face, a presence, an expectancy that already bears upon it a name it has not chosen. To be given to oneself, as we shall see, is always to be given by someone.

Chapter III — Born of Another

1. *A Birth Is Never Solitary*

The previous chapter stopped at the edge of a question it could not resolve alone. To describe birth as givenness, to show that the born being receives itself before being able to posit itself, is still to remain within an analysis that could, at the limit, do without another. But no birth does without another. What the child receives, it always receives from a face that leans down, a voice that awaited it before it appeared. We must now name what the phenomenology of givenness still left in shadow: birth is not only the structure of a received being, it is the structure of a being received by someone. This first relation often takes the form of parenthood, but it overflows it: what is at stake here, more broadly, is the very structure of human filiation.

2. *The Face That Precedes*

Emmanuel Levinas has shown that the face of another can never be reduced to an object of knowledge. It imposes itself before any representation, and it obliges before any choice: to look at me, for the face, is already to require something of me. This structure, which Levinas describes for the ethical relation in general, finds in birth its most radical case. For the face that welcomes the newborn does not merely look at it; it has already, before even this first

encounter, taken on responsibility for the one it looks at. The child is welcomed by a responsibility that precedes it and that it did not institute.

This reversal is considerable. Modern philosophies of the subject have responsibility arise from an act: one becomes responsible by committing oneself, by promising, by choosing to answer for another. Birth says the opposite. Before the child can promise anything, someone has already answered for it. Here, responsibility does not follow the relation: it precedes it and makes it possible.

3. Elected Before Choosing

One must go further still. For Levinas, the ethical subject is not first one who chooses to care for another, but one who discovers itself already elected by another, designated by a call from which it cannot withdraw without thereby evading itself. The newborn manifests this structure of election in its most visible form: before it can answer for anyone, someone already answers for it. It has done nothing to deserve the attention it receives, nor anything to escape it: it is simply, and already, the one for whom someone else has agreed to answer.

Before being able to choose anyone at all, the born being has already been chosen by someone.

This election does not deprive the child of its future freedom; on the contrary, it gives it the sole foundation on which that freedom will one day be able to exercise itself. One can only learn to answer if someone has, first, answered for us.

4. Arendt and the Capacity to Begin

Hannah Arendt approaches birth from another angle, one that does not contradict Levinas but completes him. For her, every birth introduces into the world an absolute capacity for beginning: with every child born, something occurs that had never existed in this form before, and that cannot be entirely explained by any prior cause. She names this capacity natality, and makes it the deepest source of what human beings later call their freedom to act. The novelty introduced by birth lies not only in the appearance of a new individual, but in the appearance of someone capable, one day, of initiating unpredictable beginnings of their own.

But Arendt adds a decisive qualification, without which this capacity for beginning would remain a mere biological potentiality: this beginning is nothing so long as it is not received by others capable of recognising it as such. A novelty that meets no one to welcome it

remains a fact without consequence. It is the plurality of a world already peopled by other human beings that transforms the mere appearance of a living being into the eruption of a truly new beginning.

5. Two Ways of Needing Another

Two distinct necessities thus emerge, and it is their conjunction that gives this chapter its full import. In Levinas, another constitutes the child ethically: it is the welcoming face that institutes, through its very responsibility, the place the child will occupy in a relation it did not choose. In Arendt, another actualises the child historically: it is the plurality of a world inhabited by others that transforms its biological novelty into a beginning that will count for the common world. The first shows why the child is, from the outset, inscribed within a responsibility that does not come from itself; the second says why its arrival changes something in the world that receives it.

To be born of another, understood in this way, does not therefore mean merely to depend on another for survival. It means to receive from another, at once, one's place within a responsibility that exceeds it, and the possibility that its arrival should count for something greater than itself.

6. Toward a World

One last precision remains to be added, one that neither Levinas nor Arendt, taken separately, fully exhausts. The welcoming face and the recognising plurality never operate in a vacuum: they always already operate within a world — a world of language, institutions, meanings, which precedes them themselves and gives them the forms by which they can welcome and recognise. For the child is never welcomed only by someone. It is welcomed into a world. The next chapter will address this dimension: no longer only who welcomes the child, but into what already-constituted world this welcome takes place, and what it means, for a being who has just been born, to enter a world that existed before it and will continue to exist after it.

Chapter IV — Entering a World

1. A World That Precedes

Hannah Arendt carefully distinguishes the earth, the biological milieu the human species shares with every living thing, from the world, that durable artifice human beings make,

hand down, and inhabit together — institutions, language, objects, customs, narratives. To be born is not merely to come into the earth. It is to enter a world already spoken before being understood, already inhabited before being perceived, already handed down before being received.

This world does not coincide with the persons who welcome the child, though it is inseparable from them. A house has a history before the child sleeps in it. A language has a grammar before the child speaks it. A custom has a form before the child is initiated into it. To enter a world is to enter into what does not begin with oneself. To enter a world is always to enter into an inheritance — and this transmitted world is not merely a set of objects or institutions; it is also a tradition, that is, a living memory that makes continuity between generations possible.

2. The Permanence of the World Against the Fleetingness of Life

Why does this world matter so much? Because, according to Arendt, it is its relative permanence that makes it possible to welcome each mortal, fleeting life. An individual existence flows by and ends; the world, when properly tended, endures from one generation to the next, offering each newcomer a place that was not built for them in particular, but that can nonetheless receive them as though it had been. We find here, in another form, the natality of the previous chapter: its novelty would have nowhere to settle if it did not find a world stable enough to receive it without being swept away by it, and open enough not to stifle it. The world is what allows the new to take its place without everything having to begin again with every birth.

3. The Body as First Opening to the World

But this durable, institutional world, handed down from generation to generation, is not the first thing the child encounters. Before being able to understand a language or recognise a custom, there is already, in the very young child, a way of being in the world that passes through no concept. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has shown that the body is not an object among others situated within the world, but the very medium of appearing through which a world can be discovered. The infant turns its head toward a voice, seeks out a gaze, orients its mouth toward what may nourish it, well before knowing that it is doing any of this. This bodily intentionality is already an opening onto the world, without yet being a thought of the world.

The body, in this sense, does not merely receive isolated sensations that would later need to be assembled. It inhabits, from the outset, an oriented space, a rhythm, a proximity and a distance, which constitute the most archaic form of what will later be the experience of inhabiting a common world.

4. Two Worlds, One Welcome

Arendt's durable world and Merleau-Ponty's perceived world should not be opposed as though they were two separate realms, one institutional and late, the other bodily and early. They are rather two faces of one and the same welcome. The infant's body never opens onto a neutral world: the voice that reaches it already carries a particular language, the rhythm that rocks it already carries a culture of care, the space that surrounds it already bears the form of a house, a room, a home inherited from a history that is not its own. Language always arrives in a voice; culture, in gestures; institutions, in practices; the world, in short, never arrives except in bodies. And conversely, the durable world Arendt describes never reaches the child except through the mediation of a body, a voice, a gesture: no institution addresses a newborn directly without passing through the warmth of an arm that carries it. The world never welcomes directly; it welcomes through those who already inhabit it.

To enter a world is thus, from the very first instant, to enter both at once: a world already perceptible to the body, and a world that will endure well beyond this first perception.

5. Toward Vulnerability

This double entry, however, carries a cost that must now be examined in its own right. To enter a world is always to enter something one depends upon before being able to understand it. This dependence first takes the form of a radical vulnerability: a being who can as yet do nothing alone, who depends entirely on a world and on hands it did not choose for its survival, manifests a fragility that is not an accident of birth but its most constant condition. The next chapter will dwell on this: no longer to describe what the child receives, but to understand what it means to receive one's existence within a body so radically exposed.

Chapter V — Founding Vulnerability

1. *A Fragility That Is Not an Accident*

The first chapter of this volume already noted this paradox without yet developing it: the human being is, of all living creatures, the most dependent at birth. Where most mammals are born capable, within hours or days, of moving, of suckling unaided, sometimes of following the group, the human newborn remains for long months incapable of providing for itself in any way. This immaturity is not an accidental delay that nature miscalculated. Incompleteness is not a provisional defect of the human species; it constitutes its proper way of entering the world. It is the very condition that makes possible everything the human species later calls its freedom: a being born already complete would need no one in order to become what it is, and would consequently have nothing to learn, nothing to receive, nothing to become.

2. *The Unfinished Body*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has shown that this immaturity is not confined to the most visible functions — walking, feeding, speaking. It touches the very structure of the body as schema, that is, the unity by which a body knows itself as a body, capable of coordinating its limbs, situating its own boundaries, recognising itself as one and the same being through time. This unity is given to no child at birth. It is built progressively, and strikingly, through the mediation of another: before knowing that its body belongs to it as its own, the child often discovers it in the gaze, the gesture, or the reflection of another body than its own, in what Merleau-Ponty called intercorporeality. One learns to fully inhabit one's own body only through contact with other bodies.

3. *Flesh as Exposure*

In his last works, Merleau-Ponty deepened this intuition through the notion of flesh: to be a sentient body is to be at once that which senses and that which can be sensed, that which touches and that which can be touched. My body is never simply turned toward the world; it is simultaneously exposed to it. This reversibility is not a mere curiosity of perception. It means that no sensibility exercises itself without being exposed by that very same movement: one cannot perceive the world without being, by that very perception, exposed to it. Vulnerability is therefore not merely what the child lacks while waiting to grow; it is the very condition of all sensibility, at any age, and the child only manifests it in its most visible form.

4. A Fruitful Rather Than Deficient Vulnerability

This analysis must not be confused with a mere lament over human weakness. A fragility that was nothing but a lack would call only for pity, or for the impatient expectation that it resolve itself with age. But the vulnerability this chapter has discussed is rather what makes possible the plasticity proper to the human species: because the child's body is not already fixed in a finished form, it can learn languages that no biological program dictated to it in advance, inherit gestures and customs that no other species could transmit on so vast a scale, transform itself in contact with a world it had not anticipated. This vulnerability is the condition of an exceptional plasticity in human existence — a bridge between biology, culture, and each person's history. An invulnerable being would also be a being incapable of learning, incapable of receiving, incapable of transforming itself. In this sense, it would be, by construction, a closed being.

Vulnerability is not what prevents the human being from becoming itself; it is what makes it capable of doing so.

5. Toward Filiation

One last consequence must be drawn from this analysis, one that opens directly onto the next chapter. So profound and so lasting a vulnerability cannot be borne by a single, one-time welcome, by a single face encountered only once. It demands continuity: someone must continue to answer, not once, but throughout the time this dependence lasts, and often well beyond. This continuity of response, by which a society assumes, over time, the vulnerability of the newcomer, bears a name: filiation. It is filiation that the next chapter will take as its object.

Chapter VI — Birth, Filiation, and Transmission

1. Filiation as Name

Even before the continuity of response announced in the previous chapter unfolds in time, it condenses into a tiny yet decisive gesture: giving a name. To name a child is to inscribe it within a lineage, a language, sometimes a family or religious memory, before it can itself claim or refuse this inscription. Even before receiving a material or symbolic inheritance, the child receives a place. The proper name is thus the first visible trace of what this chapter will now unfold: no one enters a filiation by their own choice; one is first inscribed within it, and one learns only later what this inscription means.

2. Ricœur: Receiving a Story Before Being Able to Tell It

Paul Ricœur has shown that a person's identity is never reducible to a fixed substance, identifiable once and for all, but is built as a story — what he calls narrative identity. Now every story presupposes a narrator. And it is here that birth reveals a fundamental asymmetry: before being able to tell their own life, the born being is first its character, told by others. They are told where they were born, from whom they descend, what their family hoped for them, sometimes even what happened on the day of their birth, which they will never be able to remember for themselves. This received narrative precedes all self-narration, and it is only by relying on it, never by ignoring it, that the subject will one day be able to become the narrator of their own story.

One becomes the narrator of one's life only after having been, unknowingly, its first character.

This received story does not, however, enclose the subject within an immutable identity; it constitutes rather the starting point from which the subject will be able to become itself otherwise.

3. Jonas: Answering for a Being Who Cannot Yet Answer

Hans Jonas sought, in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, a model for thinking a responsibility that depends on no contract and no expected reciprocity. He found it in the relation of parents to the newborn child, which he considers the purest, most original case of all true responsibility: here one answers entirely for a being who can, by construction, neither consent to this responsibility, nor merit it, nor return it.

The child has promised nothing. Yet someone already answers for it.

This response comes in advance and unconditionally, simply because the child exists and is vulnerable.

Jonas sees in this structure the very model of all responsibility toward what cannot yet respond — extending, well beyond the family, to responsibility toward future generations, who do not yet exist and can therefore demand nothing, but toward whom we already answer through our present acts. Filiation, in this sense, is not one particular case among other forms of responsibility: it is their origin and their most accomplished model.

4. An Asymmetry That Is Transmitted

One must, however, be careful not to fix this asymmetry as though it were meant to last forever. The child who today receives a name, a story, and a responsibility without reciprocity will, in turn, become capable of telling, of answering, and finally of answering themselves for another more vulnerable than they are. Filiation is therefore not merely a chain of dependence; it is a chain of transmission, in which each link first receives what it will later give. Ricœur and Jonas, taken together, thus trace the same structure across two different moments: one receives a story one could not write oneself, and one is the object of a responsibility one could not have merited — in order to become, later, capable of both in turn. Filiation is the concrete form by which generations are linked without ever being merged.

5. Toward Contemporary Metamorphoses

Stable as this structure may appear, it does not pass through our own era unquestioned. The technologies of procreation, the new configurations of parenthood, contemporary claims to self-determination each interrogate, in their own way, what this chapter has just posited as a founding asymmetry. The final chapter of this volume must confront this directly, yielding neither to nostalgia for an old model that perhaps never existed as we imagine it, nor to the illusion that technology might one day abolish the very structure of birth.

Chapter VII — The Contemporary Metamorphoses of Birth

1. A Structure Tested Rather Than Abolished

It would be easy, and ultimately of little use, to approach this chapter through one of the two postures contemporary thought most readily adopts toward the transformations of birth. The first laments an old, supposedly stable model that technology and individualism have corrupted. The second, conversely, celebrates a radical emancipation by which humanity would finally become master of its own origins. The six preceding chapters allow us to avoid both postures, because they have established a structure precise enough to let us ask, of every contemporary transformation, a simple question: does it truly touch this structure, or only its visible forms?

The whole question is whether contemporary transformations touch the structure of birth, or only its historical modalities.

2. Medicalisation: Mastering Birth Without Mastering Being Born

Contemporary birth is, to a large extent, monitored, dated, planned, sometimes induced or delayed according to medical protocols of unprecedented precision. One might think that this technical mastery of the process alters the originary passivity described in Chapter II. Yet this is not the case, or not in the way one first imagines. Whether birth is monitored by a medical team or occurs with no assistance whatsoever changes nothing in the position of the one who is born: they continue to receive their existence without being able to consent to it, whatever the sophistication of the instruments surrounding the event. Medicalisation transforms the conditions of birth; it does not transform the structure of the one who undergoes it.

We can increasingly master the conditions of birth; we never master the fact of having been born.

3. Assisted Reproduction: From Givenness to Production?

The most serious challenge comes from elsewhere. Assisted reproductive technologies give adults a mastery over conception itself that no generation before ours has known on this scale. One might conclude that the child thus conceived ceases to be given and becomes, at least in part, produced — programmed, chosen, willed in the very conditions of its appearing. This conclusion deserves to be examined with precision rather than welcomed or rejected outright.

For what changes, in assisted reproduction, is the parents' mastery over the conditions of conception — not the child's position with respect to its own existence. A child conceived by the most advanced techniques chooses no more than any other to be born, to be born at this moment, to be born of these particular parents. They receive their existence exactly as Chapter II described, whatever the degree of planning that preceded their conception, and this degree of planning, however great, never diminishes the passivity of the one who is its object. The increase in parental mastery in no way diminishes the passivity of the one who is its object; it only makes it more visible.

4. Claims to Origin: When Autonomy Confirms Filiation

A paradox deserves mention, one that indirectly confirms everything Chapter VI established about filiation. Persons conceived through gamete donation today claim, with growing insistence, the right to know their biological origins. One might expect an age that celebrates

individual self-determination to regard such origin as indifferent, since each person would be free to define themselves independently of it. The opposite occurs: it is precisely those born of the parental configurations most distant from the classical model of filiation who are often most insistent in demanding its truth. What is thus claimed, however, must be specified. It is generally not an enclosure within genealogy, but the possibility of integrating that genealogy into one's own story — exactly what Chapter VI, with Ricœur, already distinguished: to know one's origin is not to be determined by it, it is finally to be able to tell it. This claim therefore does not dissolve the structure described in Chapter VI; it confirms it with particular force, showing that knowing where one comes from remains an anthropological requirement, even — and perhaps especially — when contemporary techniques have made that provenance harder to establish.

5. Gauchet: The Symbolic Weakening of Filiation

Marcel Gauchet has shown that contemporary societies have profoundly weakened the symbolic frameworks that once automatically stabilised filiation — religious authority, patriarchal transmission, customs inherited without possible discussion. This disinstitution does not mean that filiation has disappeared, but that it now relies far more on an explicit and continually renewed will than on a social framework that once carried it effortlessly. Where filiation could once seem self-evident, it must today be constructed, stated, reaffirmed — by blended families, chosen kinships, configurations the law itself sometimes struggles to name.

This disinstitution — which could also be described, more neutrally, as an individualisation of filiation — is a real transformation, one it would be dishonest to minimise. But it does not touch the anthropological structure this volume has described; it only changes its regime of support. The child continues to be received, preceded, inscribed within a history it did not choose — but those who welcome it must now sustain this structure through a more explicit commitment, less carried by the collective certainties of earlier times.

6. What Remains

At the close of this journey through the most contemporary transformations of birth, a conclusion imposes itself, one that dissolves none of the legitimate concerns these transformations raise, but that clarifies their exact nature. What medicalisation, assisted reproduction, and the symbolic weakening of filiation change are the social, technical, and institutional conditions under which birth takes place. What they do not change is the very

structure of the one who is born: a being given to itself before being able to posit itself, given by another before being able to choose, given into a world that precedes it, vulnerable before being free, inscribed within a filiation before being able to tell it. Techniques may transform the paths of birth; they never abolish what it means to be born: to enter an existence that already precedes us.

General Conclusion — What Precedes Us

At the end of this journey, it is fitting to return once more to the question that opened it: what does it mean to be born?

The preceding chapters have attempted to approach this enigma from several angles. They have shown that birth cannot be reduced to a biological event, nor to a date entered in a register, nor to a beginning that could be described from outside as a mere fact among others. Birth designates a deeper structure: that by which a human being enters existence without being the author of that entry.

This structure has gradually appeared under various forms. The born being first discovers itself given to itself before being able to posit itself. It receives its existence before being able to make a project of it. It is welcomed by another before being able to choose its relations. It enters a world already there before being able to transform it. It depends on a constitutive vulnerability before being able to exercise its freedom. It is inscribed within a filiation before being able to tell its own story.

Through each of these dimensions, one and the same fundamental trait of the human condition becomes visible: existence begins within what precedes it.

Existence always begins within what precedes it.

This is perhaps the principal teaching of this volume.

Modern anthropologies have often privileged the categories of autonomy, choice, decision, or self-determination. These categories are indispensable. They describe something true of human existence. But they always intervene after the fact. They describe what the human being can become; they do not yet describe what makes that becoming possible.

For no freedom begins by itself. Every freedom is exercised from within a language it did not invent, within a world it did not build alone, within a history it did not begin. Every autonomy presupposes a received origin. Every initiative presupposes a prior welcome. Every word presupposes a word already heard.

Anteriority is therefore not the external limit of freedom; it is its inner condition.

One might fear that such a claim reduces the human being to mere dependence. This would be to misunderstand what this book has tried to show. What precedes the human being does not confine it. On the contrary, it is precisely because one receives that one can later act; because one is welcomed that one can answer; because one inherits that one can hand things on; because one depends that one can become free.

The paradox of birth lies here: what at first seems to limit autonomy in fact constitutes its very possibility.

The child chooses neither its name, nor its language, nor its era, nor those who welcome it. And yet it is from these received givens that it will gradually be able to become itself. Nothing that is given to it entirely determines what it will be; but nothing, either, can simply be erased as though it had received nothing.

Human existence thus appears as a work of resumption. We never begin from nothing. We always begin from something that precedes us and that we must learn to inhabit, to interpret, to transform.

This structure does not concern birth alone. It illuminates the whole set of thresholds this collection sets out to explore. To learn presupposes a knowledge already transmitted. To exercise authority presupposes a received legitimacy. To enter an institution presupposes a prior history. To grow old presupposes having been preceded by the ages that formed us. To mourn presupposes having received other lives into one's own. Even the most contemporary transformations of the digital world do not escape this logic: they modify the forms of our presence in the world without abolishing the necessity of a world already there.

Birth is therefore not merely the first threshold of human existence in the chronological sense. It reveals its most general structure. It shows that the human being is one who always comes about from what they did not themselves produce.

This is why this first volume naturally opens all the others. It offers not merely a reflection on origin; it proposes a way of looking at the whole of human experience. Every threshold of existence will henceforth appear as a new figure of this same truth: we become what we are from what has been given to us.

At the beginning of every human life, then, there is not an act of mastery, but a welcome. Not a self-founding, but a reception. Not an already-constituted subject, but a being who receives enough to be able, in turn, to begin.

And this, perhaps, is finally what it means to be born.

A poem accompanies this threshold in *Le Pédoncule des seuils*, the companion collection of poems that accompanies this series.

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