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## **Natality as a Philosophy of Rebirth through the Acts of Mothering and Artistic Production**

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*This article presents the concept of “natality” as a philosophy about how people go through new beginnings or rebirths during their lives, focussing especially on how mothers are socially and symbolically reborn anew when they have children. When they are born or adopted, children make a profound and transformational impact on the lives of their mothers. Having a child entails a rebirth of the self for mothers. However, mothers also go through multiple rebirths as they and their families grow, age, and change. All women (and others identifying as mothers) go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, which is socially recognized and transforms their identities to that of mothers. More broadly, natality refers to a metaphysics of rebirth in the human experience. People change in many ways; thus, rebirth is a part of what it is to exist.*

*Beginning as a philosophical examination of the concept of natality as explored most famously in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, this article is also a personal reflection, revealing how natality, birth, and rebirth emerged in my own life and work after I became a mother. For me, natality as rebirth has culminated in intellectual, philosophical, and artistic production—most recently, in my creation of *Rebirth Tunnels*, which are immersive matricentric art installations that participants move through to reach symbolic rebirth.*

### **Introduction**

This article explores how natality, a concept coined most famously in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, emerges as a philosophy of rebirth through the experiences of motherhood and matricentric art. The article begins by examining theories of natality, birth, and rebirth in the philosophies of Hannah Arendt, Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, and in the philosophical field of social ontology, ultimately explaining natality as a philosophy

of rebirth in how mothers are socially and symbolically reborn and begin anew when they have children. Moving into a discussion of natality and rebirth through matricentric experience and creative production, the article then examines the phenomenon of artists who describe a sense of renewal, both in themselves and in their artwork, after having become mothers. Part a personal reflection, I explore an additional form of rebirth that may emerge for some mothers through their maternal experiences and through art, which pertains to how they look back and come to understand both their childhoods and their adult selves. In my case, mothering and art affected how I processed inter-generational trauma, resulting in a rebirth of the self both through the acts of mothering my two children and through the creation of a new artwork called the *Rebirth Tunnel Immersive Art Installation* project. The installation, exhibited in various locations, provides a space for participants to reach symbolic rebirth in their lives.

### **Theories of Natality, Birth, and Rebirth**

In *The Human Condition*, twentieth-century German American political philosopher Hannah Arendt explains that the human condition of natality is connected to how “newcomers,” or those born into the world as strangers, possess “the capacity of beginning something anew” (9). Arendt’s concept of natality relates to a human capacity to act in the world, especially in the political sense of acting and speaking through which one’s identity is revealed (179). Neither mothers nor mothering is central to Arendt’s work. Arendt’s discussion of physiological birth is referenced in terms of the labour and work of a woman’s body (30), and fertility is similarly referred to in the context of “animal laborans,” or that mode of existence in which humans are like beasts and must produce and labour through the routines of life (112, 122).

Arendt also examines a “second birth” in the human experience, which she understands as available to humans through action and speech and word and deed. This second birth is not so much a rebirth as it is a new birth of a different part of the self:

With word and deed, we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity ... its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. (176–77).

For Arendt, it is through speech and action that humans go through a second birth. Speech and action are distinguished from human bodily existence; the

latter is related to physical objects and takes on a lesser status in her philosophy (176).

In her extensive work on Arendt, however, contemporary Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero extends the Arendtian concept of natality into the realms of the body and the maternal. Looking at material from Arendt's German notebooks, for example, Cavarero points to Arendt's discussion of the "rift of copulation and birth," with copulation in Cavarero's interpretation indicating a fundamental rupture and subsequent birth and coming into being through the woman's body. Cavarero states: "No-one of us would be in the world—or, as Arendt would have it, would have *appeared* into the world—if a woman's body had not experienced a 'rupture' in the act of giving birth, as part of the natural cycle of regeneration, that is, of the necessity of organic life" (236–37). Cavarero's exploration of Arendt's philosophy of natality concerning physiological birth and the maternal body is appealing. But this concept of natality and the maternal life also expands past begetting children and into the sphere of what it is to raise them. Natality in the maternal sense could also be an existential state whereby mothers transform and are reborn on multiple levels through mothering. After birth or adoption, mothers go through a transformation that is of a social ontological nature.

I have written at length about social ontology; it was central to the thesis of my first book, *Imagery, Ritual, and Birth: Ontology Between the Sacred and the Secular* (2018). Social ontology pertains to the social nature of something or someone's being. To give a common example from the field of social ontology, money has a social ontology, which fundamentally pertains to its social meaning and transcends its physical nature. In other words, on a physical level, money's ontology is related to its nature as a piece of paper or physical object. But at the social level, money's ontology is related to what humans construe it to be or mean. People collectively understand money not simply as a piece of paper but as a medium of exchange. This is money's social ontology.

Returning to birth and mothering, all women (and others identifying as mothers) go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, which is socially recognized and transforms their identities to that of mother. A social rebirth, therefore, happens at the onset of mothering, as mothers are socially and symbolically reborn and begin anew when they have children. When they are born or adopted, children make a profound and transformational impact on the lives of their mothers; thus, having a child entails a rebirth of the self for mothers. However, mothers also go through multiple rebirths as they and their families grow, age, and change. A mother's journey is never static; it is everchanging. Thus, there is a constant natality to a mother's existence—both in the everyday phenomenology of what it is to care for infants, children, teenagers, and even adult children, as well as in the new beginnings or becomings that happen for mothers in their bodies and psyches as they grow through

their experiences of motherhood.

Nativity and maternity merge in a mother's life, experience, and existence through her child's passage of developmental milestones, for example, which often become a mother's milestones in her psyche. Whether the milestone be that of smiling, laughing, crawling, eating solid food, walking or talking for the first time, going to school, driving a car, or any other of the myriads of milestones children go through—for many mothers, a rebirth of the self, sometimes big and sometimes small, takes place during these moments. Mothers grow in knowledge and capacity with each step their children take. When a child begins crawling, for example, a mother's reality shifts. There are countless other changes that children go through during their lives, all of which have some impact not only on their existences but on the existences of their mothers.

Nativity refers to a metaphysics of rebirth in the human experience about how people go through new beginnings or rebirths during their lives. People's beings change in many ways; thus, rebirth is a part of what it is to exist.

### **Rebirth through Matricentric Experience and Creative Production**

Eminent Canadian scholar and professor Andrea O'Reilly has explored a mother-centred feminist theory and politics in her extensive work on matricentric feminism, including in her 2016 book, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* and her 2024 volume, *The Mother Wave: Matricentric Feminism as Theory, Activism and Practice*, among her other publications. Drawing from her work, some of my previous research has focussed on matricentric art, which explores birth and art about birth, not nativity and rebirth in the context of matricentric art. Yet some of my findings point to this exact phenomenon of rebirth in the maternal experience of the mother-artist. One area of interest to the research, for example, revolves around the finding of an increased artistic production and energy that some of the female artists studied report experiencing after becoming mothers. Canadian artist Kate Hansen, for example, explains how she and her artwork transformed after she became a mother and had children: “Contrary to the popular belief that art making is one of the things that falls to the wayside after the birth of children, in my case I felt inspired and compelled by my experience of childbirth and motherhood. It was almost as though the creative act of making another human being awoke a creative drive in me” (Hennessey, *Matricentric Art* 380).



**Figure 1:** *Krista and Colum*, conte crayon and goldleaf on paper. Copyright 2010, Kate Hansen, printed with permission.

What Hansen describes is a rebirth and renewal—a natality emerging both in her being and artwork after she became a mother. Nadya Burton, a sociologist and professor of midwifery, who edited the 2015 volume, *Natal Signs: Cultural Representations of Pregnancy, Birth and Parenting*, has also described “natal aesthetics,” which is a powerful way of creating change and envisioning the future (9).

This phenomenon of natality and rebirth through maternal life has emerged repeatedly, affecting my scholarship and artmaking on birth and rebirth. The physiological, psychological, social, and emotional transformations I went through after experiencing pregnancy, birth, and early mothering found an outlet and intellectual passage through my writing shortly after I had given birth to my first child.

Since the births of my son in 2009 and my daughter in 2011, I have written and presented for both academic and wider audiences about a range of topics centred on childbirth. Pregnancy, birth, and mothering, all physical dimensions of my life, revitalized my intellectual being. Birth, I have contended, while a topic of physical and physiological interest, is also one of philosophical and intellectual fascination (Hennessey “How Childbirth”). The wide range of topics I have worked on has included studies on pregnancy, birth, and mothering in philosophy, art, religious studies, and other areas of the humanities, as well as in neuroscience and inclusive of both western and nonwestern traditions.

In 2010, I founded the website Visualizing Birth ([visualizingbirth.org](http://visualizingbirth.org)) while pregnant with my second child. The website is an archive containing over two hundred pages of images, videos, and stories to use in birth as a rite of passage. In 2019, another mother and I cofounded the San Francisco Birth Circle ([sfbirthcircle.org](http://sfbirthcircle.org)), a community group for low-income families in San Francisco. At the end of 2023, I founded the Society for the Study of Pregnancy and Birth ([ssprb.org](http://ssprb.org)), an academic hub for those who study birth in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and psychology.

My experiences as a mother have served as the main catalyst behind these projects, and this production of written material and other projects related to birth has been prolific. It has not occurred in a cerebral vacuum, rising to the surface of my thoughts and being instead as part of my embodied experience as a mother. Like the phenomenon artist Kate Hansen describes, which pertains to a growth in her creative drive after she had become a mother, I have been filled with new energy ever since the births of my children.

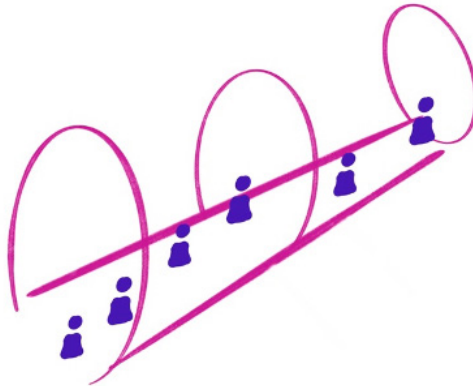
Mothering, however, entails a large amount of carework and can be exhausting. Hansen explains how even considering the amount of work mothering made her responsible for, she could still find time for her artmaking. Parenting affected her organization of time: “I also found that the time limitations involved in caring for an infant forced me to be more disciplined in my art making. I would eke out hours here and there when my son was sleeping to continue my portraits” (Hennessey, *Matricentric Art* 381). This reorganization of time after becoming a mother is familiar to me. While I could not have produced as I did without the help of my husband, especially when our children were very young, I also learned to work differently after becoming a mother: optimizing time and accessing a new way of working.

A recent development in my work inspired by this mothering experience has emerged in artmaking around rebirth. This new project stems from years of researching birth, rebirth, and my personal rebirth experience, which took place outside of the academic sphere. The specific art project I have been working on, *Rebirth Tunnel*, is an immersive art installation that people walk through. A recipient of an American Academy of Religion (AAR) grant,

I used the grant funds to create a *Rebirth Tunnel* installation in Las Vegas, Nevada, at a March 2024 regional conference of the AAR. Two nonprofits in San Francisco have since awarded funds to create a different installation in San Francisco, and most recently, the Henry Luce Foundation has also awarded a grant for further development of the project.

Much of my earlier scholarship, including my first book, focussed on art and birth as a rite of passage; the *Rebirth Tunnel*, however, represents a shift in focus on physiological birth, as well as mothering in all forms, to symbolic rebirth for all. Many participants who completed the 2024 *Rebirth Tunnel* in Las Vegas reported a sense of renewal upon completion. For some, the experience was emotional. There was a diverse range of participants across gender, race, and age, and I have begun recording individual responses of their experiences on the *Rebirth Tunnel* webpage.

Participants begin their rebirth experience in the installation by processing the self in a reconception pod before entering the tunnel. Alone in the pod, they write statements on paper, either about something they would like to shed from themselves—most often a memory—or about a hope for the future. At the middle arch and centre of the tunnel, they encounter a rebirth box, an object integral to the rebirth experience because it is where the participants read their written statements and then discard them. While moving through the tunnel, they also hear verbal affirmations of love played through recordings, and they see a projection of an animated image of a child who looks off into a peaceful valley. Upon completion of the tunnel, participants receive rebirth certificates, which they sign themselves, which helps them to be present with their name and self as the ritual ends.



**Figure 2:** *The Rebirth Tunnel*, graphic design on 2024 program of the American Academy of Religion, Western Region, Montserrat Batchelli-Hennessey, copyright 2023, printed with permission.



The idea for the project began emerging organically as a product of the intellectual work I had been doing for years and a personal rebirth experience I went through with my children in the summer of 2022.

Following the publication of my first book in 2018, I began looking at birth and pregnancy in their abstract or symbolic forms. Of special interest to me at that time were ways in which art about birth or rebirth after trauma is often therapeutic for individuals and communities, helping them to rebirth themselves in the wake of hardship. I looked at this phenomenon most closely in the context of Catalonia, Spain, in part because my husband Toni is Catalan, and we are close to our Catalan family, community, and culture.

Modern and contemporary artists in Catalonia have over the past century used themes of birth as a material means of rebirthing both their own identities and Catalan cultural identity more broadly, not only following the events in which they have lived, including in some cases the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), and in all cases the devastating dictatorship of Francisco Franco (ended in 1975 upon Franco's death), but also in the wake of Catalonia's long history as a nation without a state in Europe. Birth is an overlooked topic within the arts and humanities, but in modern and contemporary Catalan art, it is easy to find if one looks for it. The topic, which can pertain to physiological birth or more broadly to cosmogony, genesis, and rebirth, is ever-present in the works of Catalan modernists, surrealists, and contemporary artists (Hennessey, "A Philosophy" 1–15). In a work such as Joan Miró's 1925 painting *The Birth of the World*, for example, we see a new world rise from the dust and remnants of a former place.

Parallel to this research on Catalan art, I also began looking at rebirth and the "eternal return" as they occur in the philosophy and history of religion, including in the thoughts and writings of Albert Camus, Mircea Eliade, and Friedrich Nietzsche. I interpreted the Catalan artworks of my study as physical representations of rebirth that relate in part to a longstanding Catalan sentiment of an eternal return to life, community, and identity after cultural trauma.

More broadly, I explored how this concept of rebirth emerges in different religions and traditions. Across history and time, different peoples and cultures have expressed an interest in the eternal return, focussing on cyclical patterns of physical or spiritual rebirth, life after death in a celestial or nonterrestrial world, an eternity of recurring histories, or a repetitiveness within the human lifespan. Themes of rebirth exist in a wide variety of cultural contexts, including those of the Ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, Buddhists, Chinese Daoists, Christians, Hindus, Native Americans, and the Norse.

In the context of Catalan art, I found that following the devastating events of war and dictatorship in their lives, the artists of my study had successfully rebirthed themselves and their sense of Catalan culture through the material form of their art.



Figure 3. *The Birth of the World*, oil on canvas, 1925. Catalan artist Joan Miró, Image in the Public Domain.

## **Rebirth after Trauma through Art and the Maternal Experience**

Midwife and artist Jeanne Lyons writes, “Art making and birth giving have enormous potential to reveal beauty born of deep authenticity and truth. Both have the potential to be transformational and involve working with forces that can be perceived as ‘larger than oneself’ and at the same time as being extremely personal in how they work through any individual” (233). Similarly, artmaking and rebirth have great potential in helping individuals and larger communities to transform, particularly after trauma.

A form of rebirth that emerges for some mothers through their maternal experiences is a new vision in how they look back and understand their childhoods, which in turn helps them to understand their adult selves. When a mother’s child turns six years old, for example, she may remember her own life from when she was six years old, suddenly viewing it differently than she had before the time in her life when she was a mother.

A mother may not have experienced an optimal childhood, yet her mothering may serve a reparative function, healing her connections to her childhood and how she was raised. Providing her child with the nurturing she did not receive from her family when she was young can heal the wounds carried by her inner child. These realizations of the mother are also beneficial to the child, who may receive love and understanding once the intergenerational transfer of trauma from mother to child has been broken. Studies have shown that unresolved childhood trauma can harm a mother’s ability to develop attachment with her children; thus, part of the process of resolving one’s trauma also necessarily takes place outside the sphere of parenting (Iyengar et al.).

The birth of my first child and my rite of passage as a new mother kickstarted a cathartic rebirth process that led to my current life and work. During the period of researching rebirth after trauma in the context of Catalan art and culture more broadly, I was also going through a personal transformation and rebirth that was connected to my experiences of being a mother in the present and having been a child in the past. My childhood was marked by deep instability and dysfunction. By age twelve, I had lived under twelve different roofs in four states across the United States and one year in Asia. Alcohol was ever-present in the home throughout my childhood, as were a wide range of people who came in and out of my life, some disappearing and never to be seen again after another relocation. Unfortunately, due to these life circumstances, I endured various types of abuse from a young age. Scapegoating was also prevalent in the family. As the eldest child and only daughter in a patriarchal Irish American home, I became the primary target.

Years later, after maltreatment following the birth of my first child, which was particularly egregious, I reached out to specialists for advice on how I had been raised. This began a process through which I revisited my past and

learned how to mother my inner child, a child who had been parentified at a young age and never really mothered or parented herself. Fortunately, it was through the lens of motherhood that I could see how intergenerational patterns of trauma and abuse had affected my life, enabling me to stop the pattern from continuing.

These personal details became woven with my work on rebirth, which then merged with a serendipitous and makeshift rite of passage with my children. The rite of passage happened in the summer of 2022 when I took the children to Ireland for a short trip while my husband spent time with his parents in Catalonia. Most of my ancestors are from Ireland, and I had been there a few times, although this was the first trip for my children, who were at that time eleven and thirteen. We went to one of the places from where I knew our ancestors had come, an area full of peat bogs called Turraun, about an hour and a half from Dublin in County Offaly. On the flight over to Ireland with my kids, however, I suddenly found myself questioning why I was going to the place of my ancestors when my family of origin had created deep pain for me in my life. It was then that I realized how my children and I needed to say goodbye to them in some way.

I thought of a material way to commemorate the moment, and on the second day of our trip, we took a piece of paper with writing about the family to the banks of the River Shannon. The children and I stood in a ring, holding hands. I said words that acknowledged some of what I had been through as a child and adult but also wished the family well in this world. We then said goodbye to them and ripped up the paper together. The three of us buried the pieces in the mud on the riverbank.

The ceremony did not last very long, just a few minutes, and I did not expect much from it. But I began to feel a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. Upon our return to Catalonia, I was light and free. As weeks and months went by, I realized something fundamental had happened that day by the River Shannon: I had gone through a personal rebirth. My children have since then commented on the ceremony at various points, indicating a sense of closure with family they never knew or knew very little, as well as with a reconnection to their Irish heritage. My son has become a gifted bagpipe player, and my daughter is an Irish dancer. Both children have performed in San Francisco's St. Patrick's Day parade.

This story, which is one of natality as rebirth in my own life, is intimately connected to the creation of the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation and is a part of the psychological fabric of which the artwork is made. The act of ripping or discarding paper, which symbolizes metabolization of the self and moving forwards, stems from how my children and I had ripped paper and buried it by the River Shannon together during our ceremony in 2022. The idea of creating an art piece through which to be rebirthed stems from studying how other

artists had rebirthed themselves and their cultures through their creations.

After the process of rebirth with my children, I realized that other communities could benefit from an immersive space through which to process life events, particularly events of a traumatic nature that had affected them personally or were part of something broader; thus, the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation was born.

Gina Wong-Wylie describes the term “motherline” as “a feminist, maternal genealogy of knowledge and wisdom handed down from mother to daughter through generations,” which “can be warped and severed by the grand narratives of a particular culture” (140). Wong-Wylie, a psychologist and professor whose private practice supports women through maternal transitions, is influenced by both Alice Walker, who introduced the term “motherline” in her 1982 essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” and Sara Ruddick, who further developed the concept in her 1989 book *Maternal Thinking*. Inspired also by Adrienne Rich’s discussion of “matrophobia,” which relates to our fear of turning into our mother, Wong-Wylie introduces the term “matro-reform,” defining it as, “an act, desire, and process of claiming motherhood power ... a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one’s motherline” (142).

Through Wong-Wylie’s work, including her personal stories by way of photographic images, she went through her process of matroreform and mothering apart from her motherline during pregnancy and mothering. My case of mothering apart from my motherline has been similar, involving artistic and intellectual production, as well as personal story, and resulting in an intergenerational and personal rebirth.

### **Conclusion: Natality, Rebirth, and Art in Existential Renewal**

Most of us go through multiple rebirths during our lives. Birth, like death, is a universally shared human experience. Yet our lives and existences are ever-changing and not static after birth. We are reborn in many ways throughout our lives, sometimes regularly and other times during important, pivotal periods of growth and transformation. Going through these new beginnings or rebirths during our lives makes us natal creatures, not mortal ones. Especially after change or tumult, a ceremony, ritual, rite of passage, or physical event can help to actualize a person’s rebirth. In the case of mothers, they are reborn and begin anew when they have children. Not only do they go through a rite of passage when they become mothers, they also go through multiple rebirths during their own lives and their children’s.

In my case, there has been a material and artistic output, which stems from life mothering my children. Motherhood was the catalyst for multiple rebirths in my life, which have involved physical, psychological, emotional, communal,

and other transformations in my person. A physical and embodied manifestation of how these changes have been processed in my own life, the *Rebirth Tunnel* installation is ultimately a new form of natality along the path of my existence.

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