

## New and Unexpected! Female life practices resonating in the philosophy of time

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**ABSTRACT.** Most philosophers who have written about time are born in a male body, are raised in a masculine fashion and lived or live in a world in which men predominantly shaped language and order. Do female philosophers conceptualize time differently from their male colleagues? Female philosophers, like Hannah Arendt and Elizabeth Grosz, seem to be more concerned with natality, the new and unexpected, than with mortality. The article explores to what extent this interest can be attributed to the fact that these philosophers are women. Or is this concern more related to an involvement with raising and educating children? **KEYWORDS** • Arendt • female philosophers • new beginnings • time concepts • women/men

### Introduction

*This is my hope and for this I live, that I may gaze at the beauty of the Lord. You have measured my years with a brief span; they pass away; but how they pass, I do not know. (Saint Augustine, ±400/1961: 270)*

*When I was a child (and that happened in another time and another space), it was not uncommon to hear the question 'How far is it from here to there?' answered by 'About an hour, or a bit less, if you walk briskly . . . Nowadays, you may hear on occasion similar answers. But it will be normally preceded by a request to be more specific. 'Do you have a car? Or do you mean on foot?'. (Bauman, 2000: 110)*

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*In a few days I was allowed to go home. But those days lasted an eternity . . . The hour in which I travelled from boarding school to home had no duration . . . For a moment I felt reconciled with time. But time, which seemed abolished for just that little moment, took revenge afterwards. (Van Tongeren, 2002: 16–17)*

Many philosophers feel an urge to write, if only once in their lifetime, about time. As above quotes show, their writings on time are often rooted in and intermingled with personal experiences and observations. Grasping the notion of time in objective terms is not what philosophers in general aspire to. To the contrary, if there is one thing we learn from philosophical essays about time, it is that philosophers consider time to be a wondrous and elusive phenomenon. As a consequence, time continues to be a thought-provoking subject for philosophers. The ambiguity attributed to time also explains why experiences and personal reflections are of such relevance in philosophical literature on time. Particular observations, experiences and desires form the background of philosophical treatises on the phenomenon of time.

In the first example, it is the longing to understand his experience of ageing that incites Saint Augustine (±400/1961) to investigate the present and its relations to the past and future: ‘It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things’ (p. 269), he ponders.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000), the second example, argues how during his life new modes of transport such as cars, trains and airplanes have changed the relationship between time and space. His experience that the introduction of non-human and non-animalistic modes of transport have changed the conception of time, helps him to understand that time itself is a historical category. What time is, changes in the course of time.

In the third example, Dutch philosopher Van Tongeren’s (2002) personal experience that his homesickness stretched the time out endlessly and that the days flew by once he was at home, colors his reflections on time. By discussing these experiences he maintains that ‘we’, human beings, are the ones who shape the duration of time. Our minds establish the pace of time. At the end of his booklet, Van Tongeren shares with his readers a time experience that hiking offers him: when walking for days he feels he masters the art of living in the moment itself while simultaneously letting time go. An art he recommends to all of us.

In daily life, we all know that time can be experienced, perceived, used and conceptualized in various ways. That is also true for philosophers – they are humans like everyone else. This variety of time experiences explains why philosophers have written so many books on time and why they have provided us with such a variety of (often incompatible) perspectives on time. The world in which these philosophers, writing on time, live and lived, as well as their daily physical, psychological and social existence, resonate in their philosophical views.

If we take the resonance of the philosophers’ life world into their concep-

tualizing of time seriously, we may wonder what it means that until now most philosophers have been born in a male body. Moreover, almost all great philosophers have been raised in a masculine fashion and have lived or live in a world in which men have predominantly shaped language and order. To what extent is the history of philosophy of time influenced by this masculinity, by the male being-in-the-world?

The history of this 'male' philosophy of time, as described for example by philosopher J. A. A. Mooij (2001/2005), is dominated by questions as to

- whether time is dependant on the mind or separate from it, i.e. the issue of objective versus subjective time;
- how the succession of the past, present and future is related to the human inability to experience more than the present (one of the questions that Augustine raises);
- how we might, or should, deal with the passing of time, and thus with our own finitude.

Is it possible to think of another kind of philosophy, one that comes from thinkers that are born in a female body, that are raised in a feminine fashion and are living in worlds in which women equally participate in the shaping of language and order? Would such a philosophy reflect in a different, more female, way on the concept of time? Do female philosophers conceptualise time differently from their male colleagues? It seems as though after 2500 years everything has been said in Western philosophy. However, introducing the daily world of women into philosophy might produce a number of new insights and ideas on time.

### Starting Anew

Just like their male colleagues', female philosophers' thought is influenced by personal experiences, observations and contexts. Hannah Arendt, one of the few (academically acknowledged) women in the history of philosophy, started her book, *The Human Condition* (1958), with the example of the launch of the very first man-made satellite in 1957 into the universe. Her experience of this new event, 'second in importance to no other', brought her to the statement that mankind for the very first time was able to escape from imprisonment to planet earth. Arendt recognized a similar desire in the attempts in the 1950s to create life in the test tube, which she understood as attempts to produce superior human beings whose life span would extend far beyond the 100-year limit. According to Arendt, these activities distance people from their human condition.

She portrays the human condition, the 'realm of human affairs', as consisting of a 'web' of human relationships. This web exists whenever humans come together, speak to each other, and share their stories. The web is something

between people, something intangible, which shapes the horizon of all human affairs (Arendt 1958/1998). Philosophical thought, from Plato to Marx, has always disregarded human affairs, Arendt argued. Human affairs are deemed too fragile, unpredictable and complex to be interesting for these philosophers.

Arendt's view that scientists (including philosophers) lack a genuine interest in daily human affairs is interlaced with her thinking on the concept of time in terms of 'natality'. Whereas philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Michel de Montaigne and others seem to have a passion for mortality and the finitude of human kind, Arendt's philosophy is more concerned with the fact of natality, that is the fact that we have entered the world through birth.

In her dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Arendt already took Augustine's concept of *initium*, the beginning of man, to claim that the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or 'natality', whereas the decisive fact determining man as a desiring being is death or mortality, 'the fact that we shall leave the world in death' (1926/1996: 51–2). Rather than grounding philosophy in the anticipation of death, she aims to do philosophy out of a gratitude for life having been given at all.

In the *Human Condition* (1958/1998), she further develops the notion of natality. The fact that new human beings are born every day, and that every newborn is different from all others that have ever lived, or will ever live, is related to freedom. The continuous birth of new lives captures that it is always possible to start anew, to begin again – not only in a biological, but also in a social and psychological sense: a child is born in a web of human relations, learns the language and the actions of the community in which it is born and becomes, in this learning process, his own initiator of new deeds and words. In this manner, the child inserts itself into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth, as if it is born again. The process, in which the self is actualized, repeats itself every time a human being shows who he or she is, or has become, by speaking and acting in a network of relations that he or she shares with others.

Does Arendt's concern with natality, and thus with the new and unexpected, have anything to do with her being a woman? In her book, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* political philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1996) claims it does: 'And, surely, it is no accident that the thinker who countered Western philosophy's love affair with death with her category of "natality" – that a child is born to us – was a woman' (p. 35). Benhabib doesn't mean female in the sense of being able to have children or doing domestic work, but she meant the educating and raising of children, an activity that traditionally has been the domain of women. Mostly it is a woman that in every word and gesture she makes, with every sound and action she produces, transfers a world to the child, and consequently brings the child into the public domain.

Psychoanalytic Julia Kristeva, in her book *Hannah Arendt* (2001), also notices that it has been a woman who initiated the question of natality. The freedom

Arendt located in being born – starting something new within already existing human relations – suggests, according to Kristeva, an extraordinary experience that always creates new meaning and purpose. The wonder of birth shows how the risk of starting something new is always combined with the freedom human beings have to think, to judge and to love each other.

Are Benhabib and Kristeva right? Is a philosophy of time that is predicated on natality and a new beginning linked to the female sex? And if so, do physical differences between men and women clarify this? Does it have to do with motherly love? Should we assume that it is caused by a different temporal socialization as men and women, and thus by a difference in temporal desires? Or is it first of all a matter of actually rearing and educating children, no matter whether the philosopher is male or female?

### Other Female Philosophers

Arendt is not the only female philosopher writing about time in terms of new beginnings. In *Time, The Modern and Postmodern Experience* philosopher of science and technology Helga Nowotny (1989/2005) describes three ‘Uchronias’ – a concept that expresses not an ideal place or space (utopia) but an ideal state of time. The first Uchronia is a temporal state in which there is an abundance of time. In this paradise of time, all persons can do everything simultaneously. They can live as fast as they want, or as fully as they like, without ever arriving too late or too early. Hurry sickness does not exist in this Cockaigne of full time.

In the second Uchronia, temporal regimes are so flexible that everybody is always in charge of his or her own time. The dream of self-determination with regard to time is fulfilled. Everything and everybody adjusts immediately to the temporal desires a person has. Although time is scarce in this Uchronia, it feels as if you have plenty of it.

The third Uchronia describes an ideal state of time in which nothing has to stay the same. It seeks to ‘liquefy frozen time again’, to make time die again in order to approach other ideas of time, and to find a new balance between the linearity of time and the unexpected, spontaneous elements of life. In this Uchronia, it doesn’t matter whether there is a lot or just a little time. You can always stop if you feel hurry sick, and start anew. Routines, linear patterns, continuities, everything that seems to be frozen in time, can liquefy again in this Uchronia.

Nowotny (1989/2005) points out that this third Uchronia has a lot to offer to women. She argues that women are more aware of the temporal quality of changes. Men live their lives like they are processing on a conveyor belt. They only then notice that something is the matter with them when they are overcome with the vicissitudes of life. Women have a greater desire for the unexpected. They don’t need to know in the morning what the evening will bring. That is why

they are more inclined to stop the so-called treadmill, to halt routines, and to introduce cycles by which an incentive for something new originates. By doing so women bring about new connections between continuity and change.

Elizabeth Grosz (1999), philosopher and literature theorist, is an example of how female thinkers happily give in to this desire. 'This is what time *is* if it is anything at all', she writes: 'not simply mechanical repetition, the causal ripple of objects on others, but the indeterminate, the unfolding, and the continual eruption of the new . . . Elaboration is time's mode of acting, but an elaboration that frees up, undetermines, interrupts, and deflects rather than causes' (p. 28). She claims, in line with Arendt, that the new produces a difference to whatever is and has been. But, where Arendt connected the new with human natality and the way a person places him or herself in the world, Grosz seems to place the new in everything that is unexpected. She wants to affirm the value of 'the nick, the cut, or rupture' in order to welcome the new, and affirm the unknown future rather than to plan or organize it (Grosz, 2004: 14, 244–61). Even cloud formations or ocean currents are in her definition full of unexpected possibilities that can come into being from one moment to the next.

It is remarkable that Grosz, who is known as feminist theoretician, explicitly calls male thinkers as Charles Darwin, Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche or Gilles Deleuze as her inspiration for her philosophy of time. According to her, 'among them, time is dynamized, seen as a virtual force and as that which builds, binds, contains, and transforms all relations, whether natural, cultural, or personal while also ensuring their dispersal, their development beyond current forms and parameters' (1999: 5). We might argue that since Grosz is a female philosopher, it is no surprise that she feels at home with thinkers that advocate the new and unexpected. This conclusion, however, does not answer the question where the 'female' desire for something new springs from. Does it have to do with women being able to give birth opposed to men?

Kristeva is one of the few female philosophers who explicitly connect the passion for something new to the female sex, specifically to motherly love. Contrary to Arendt and Benhabib, she believes that motherly love for daily human affairs is crucial for the beginning of something new. Motherly love can guarantee our human condition – our condition as beings that are engaged in what it means to live in the here and now. The arrival of a child leads the mother to an experience of what it is to love a truly other being. That love is not a love for herself or for an identical being, or for someone with whom she fuses (in love or sexual passion), but it is 'the slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself. The ability to succeed in this path without masochism and without annihilating one's affective, intellectual, and professional personality – such would seem to be the stakes to be won through guiltless maternity' (Kristeva, 1981: 31).

In her essay 'Women's Time', but also in her book on Arendt, Kristeva (1981)

connects the love for a child explicitly to women/mothers. At one side because the upbringing of a child is still largely a woman's task, at the other because Kristeva hopes to give language to intra-subjective and corporeal experiences of women that are left mute by culture – and thus by the history of philosophy. According to Kristeva, these experiences do not fit in ('male') linear and historical conceptions of time. A similar argument is given by anthropologist Emily Martin, in her book, *The Woman in the Body* (1987), where she argues that women find a different notion of time in the concrete experiences of their body, a notion that is incompatible with the linear time dominating in industrial society. Women are grounded in cyclical bodily experiences, whether they like it or not, she argues.

I do not want to deny that giving birth to a new and truly other being is an extraordinary experience. It might even be true that women are more aware of cyclical time than men because of their bodily experiences. But I am not convinced that female or male philosophers need the experience of bringing a new life into being to take the new and unexpected as starting point for their philosophical theory. Arendt, who herself did not have children, refutes this connection as well. To her, sex differences are indeed important but just as important as any other differences that exist between human beings. Precisely these differences make us all the same – in the sense that every human being is the same, that is, human, in such a way that he or she is always different from any other who ever lived, lives, or will live (Arendt, 1958/1998; Kristeva, 2001)

Moreover Arendt's emphasis in her writings on new beginnings lies more on the second than on the first (biological) birth. So, if we follow Arendt, the differences in temporal desires and philosophies of women and men do not necessarily depend on (biological) sex differences.

Another option, put forward by Nowotny (1989/2005), is that women and men move in and are socialized into different time cultures. Women spend much more time on their children and domestic work, they have less free time and less possibilities to structure their time, and their life course is less unified and coherent than men's. Women's time is more than men's time defined as relational, that is, by being directed to the care of others. Women often feel alienated from their 'own' time. Time is not a resource to be used for themselves, but rather for others (Youngs, 2001).

Time sociologist Barbara Adam adds to this that caring, loving and educating, household management and maintenance, and female times of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation cannot be forced into timetables. These activities need to be open-ended, since they are unpredictable and cannot be planned beforehand. Moreover, the times of these activities are often incompatible with times that operate according to economic principles. And yet, women are forced to coordinate the various times, usually by sequencing and prioritizing certain times and reaching compromises in allocating time.

Although the notion of open-ended-time applies not just to women, but also

to those who live or work outside the commodified time of the economy of employment relations, Adam (1995) takes women's time to be the most coherent and wide-ranging exemplar for times lived 'in the shadow of the hegemony of universal clock time' (pp. 95–9). Based on both Nowotny's and Adam's view on the specificity of women's time, we may conclude that the attention that female philosophers give to the new and unexpected stems from a difference in time experiences between men and women, in which women's experiences of time allow for a greater openness to the uncertainties of life.

In the last decades, however, a large number of uncertainties and unexpected elements have also entered the lives of men. Their life course has become less linear and self-evident as well. Moreover, men have become more involved in the upbringing of children. Does this mean that the importance of being female for thinking in terms of the new and unexpected will eventually disappear? It could be that the upbringing of a child – in which the child becomes a (second) self – is such an extraordinary experience, that this makes women as well as men look differently at their own temporality and the temporality of the world. Stated differently, someone who helps a child answer questions of identity, 'Who are you?', will become less obsessed with his or her own finitude and will be more open to new beginnings. Not the passing of time is most important, but being able to always start anew is. Not the anticipation of the future (in the case of Heidegger: death) is what counts most, but the involvement with the world of this moment, and of this moment only.

'Children force you to live in the here and now, to come out of your study room', French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov said in response to the question of how he, as an armchair scholar, turned into a public intellectual. His fatherhood was the most important reason he shifted his philosophical interests (Van den Blink, 2004). Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis (2003) also writes that his experiences as a father made him realize the importance of having an openness to the here and now. Happiness, love, and enjoyment happen when we are receptive to experiencing it, and when we take the time and space for it: 'The best exchanges with my children often came unexpected. I heard the most beautiful stories by accident' (p. 56).

Should we conclude from the examples of Todorov en Achterhuis that this experience is not typical for females? Do male philosophers who raise children from an early age onwards also think differently about time? And on the other hand, do women who are not interested in motherhood and raising and educating children derive more meaning and purpose from thinking about their finitude rather than about their natality? An example thereof is Simone de Beauvoir who in her novel *All Men Are Mortal* (1946) stressed human's finitude as the condition *par excellence* that gives meaning to life.

It is difficult at this stage of human history to assess what impact the involvement of educating children will have on the philosophy of time. Women have



only recently entered the philosophical arena, and men are just starting to get used to raise children. It would not surprise me, though, if in the coming decades – in which I expect female thinkers to become more prominent and male thinkers to be more involved in the upbringing of children – philosophical interest will shift from a preference for human finitude and the passing of time to an interest in the unfolding of time that has within itself the new and unexpected.

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