

The Intellectual Marginalization of Childbirth and its Real-World Implications

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the topic of childbirth, exploring the history of its marginalization within the humanities. This history becomes particularly salient when we compare academic research on birth to that on death. This paper demonstrates that ignoring birth on an intellectual level contributes to diminishing the topic more broadly on the cultural level, and this has real-world implications for how our societies treat children, women, and families.

Keywords: prenatal and perinatal psychology, bonding, childbirth

Although we have significant scientific evidence that the early parent-child bond is crucial to the development of a physically, emotionally, and psychologically sound individual—an individual who will then affect society more specifically during adulthood—our cultural practices continue to diminish the importance of this relationship. The care, love, and education of children, from before they are born and into their early years, should be of central interest to all concerned with individual cultivation and the bettering of society. Yet work-related achievement is often prioritized over the activities of childbirth or child rearing. We see this priority manifested in both public spending and governmental policies, such as those that encourage people to return to work shortly

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after the birth of a child or that do not provide adequate funding on prenatal care programs; and more broadly in our cultural beliefs, such as is found in societal expectations related to the sending of infants and toddlers to out-of-home care programs. Philosophers and those working in the humanities can help to change our cultural understandings of parenting and early childhood development. The topic of birth and parenting, however, are still deeply marginalized within the academic sphere. This paper focuses on the topic of childbirth, exploring the history of its marginalization within the humanities. This history becomes particularly salient when we compare academic research on birth to that on death. Ignoring birth on an intellectual level participates in diminishing the topic more broadly on the cultural level, and this has real-world implications for how our societies treat children, women, and families (Hennessey, 2017).

The humanities study the human condition, something that begins at conception and ends in death. But if the scholarly production on these two topics is any indicator, then academics are more fascinated with death than they are with birth and prenatal life. The top listing that popped up when I searched under “childbirth” in Oxford University Press, for example, was “Death in Childbirth,” and searching under “birth” in the same publication brought to the top a book called “Death before Birth.” Oxford University Press is the largest university press in the world. Why we choose death over birth goes much deeper than simple intrigue, however. Some investigation reveals that intellectual approaches to birth are suppressed in both active and passive ways. While one could argue that the historical domination of white men in the academic world is part of the problem, the lopsided coverage of these two monumental endpoints of life is quite complex and cannot be reduced to that one argument. Understanding the reasons behind this suppression requires a rethinking of how we address major life transitions.

A quick explanation for the bias is that death is more interesting because people have yet to experience it. Anyone living has already been born, whereas death remains cloaked in mystery. But this explanation loses steam when we contemplate birth and death as they exist more broadly. How matter first came into being is just as intriguing as the question of the universe’s demise, and we become mesmerized over again at other beginnings—the beginning of our sun, our planet, life on earth, and life in general. Yet when it comes to human birth, investigative interest and philosophical approach fall precipitously within the academic realm. All of this begs the question: What is it about death that so attracts us, or is it that there’s something wrong with birth?

Lily Gurton-Wachter (2016), Professor of English Language and Literature at Smith College wrote last year about a similar gap, looking

at literature about pregnancy, childbirth and parenting when compared to literature on war. Although a rich canonical literary tradition revolves around the latter, she explains, "... we don't have a familiar canon of nuanced literary or philosophical texts about the experience of having a child, even though having a child, too, is a profound, frightening, exhilarating, transformative experience at the boundary of life, an experience from which one comes back a different person (p.1)." There are many aspects of intellectual interest related to war, including the topic of victory, but the issue of mortality is intimately bound to the subject matter.

Canonical western philosophers have historically focused on universals in the human experience, including the universal of death, but they have given much less attention to birth. Plato categorized pregnancy and childbirth as mere bodily functions and motherhood as a sub-rational activity, while Aristotle diminished and ignored motherhood's import beyond its connection to biology. Thomas Aquinas devalued the acts of childbirth and motherhood, viewing the father's influence (right down to his semen) as most foundational in the creation of a human being, and both Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau naturalized motherhood, describing it as a romantic or naturalistic endeavor as opposed to a philosophical one.

The entire project of Martin Heidegger's (1927) master oeuvre, *Being and Time*, revolves around a complex discussion of how true *Being* is realized through a process of *Dasein*, or "being there," in which a lived contemplation of death, or a *Sein-zum-Tode* is accomplished. This Heideggerian focus on death, integral to the philosopher's work, makes a strong mark on continental philosophy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom considered issues such as pregnant embodiment in their philosophies, made much less of an impact on the field, as did Hannah Arendt who developed a theory of *natality*. Creative ideas on birth in the writings of contemporary German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk (i.e., Sloterdijk, 2011), as well as in recent volumes on the philosophy of birth, *Philosophical Inquiries* (Lintott & Sander-Staudt, 2011) and *Coming to Life* (Adams & Lundquist, 2012) remain unexplored by many philosophy professors.

A similar bias persists in other fields. The American Academy of Religion (AAR), the world's largest association of religious studies scholars, for example, has a permanent conference group on death. Its statement of purpose is emblematic of how the field not only overlooks birth but negates it: "While death is the single certainty in every life, a myriad number of ways exist to study and approach it." Simply stated, death is not the single certainty in every life. Birth is also a foundational event experienced by every being. The AAR provides its members with regular listings related to death and religion, including announcements

about books on death, notices on teaching prizes and journalist awards to scholars who have taught or published on the topic, recommended reading lists on death, and blurbs about films on death. Neither birth nor childbirth receives similar treatment.

As for art and art history, one would think that it would be easy to find art images of childbirth since thousands of years of art have been an integral part of human culture and development. While we do find some images in the archaeological contexts of ancient and indigenous cultures, representations of birth all but vanish in the context of “fine art” shown in art museums and galleries. In the meantime, art that portrays death is pervasive.

American artist Judy Chicago embarked on her five-year long Birth Project in the 1980s (<http://www.judychicago.com/gallery/birth-project/bp-artwork/>) precisely because she was unable to locate images of birth when looking for them, noting, “When I approached this subject matter again in preparation for the Birth Project, I went to the library to see what images of birth I could find. I was struck dumb when my research turned up almost none. It was obvious that birth was a universal human experience and one that is central to women’s lives. Why were there no images? Attracted to this void, I plunged into the subject.” Chicago’s project comprised a series of monumental needlepoint tapestries depicting birth, created with the help of 130 needleworkers.

As successful as Chicago’s exhibition was, however, her images of childbirth are abstract and do not show the visceral, realistic aspects of birth. Jonathan Waller, a contemporary British artist, created just such realistic images, which were shown briefly in his exhibition, *Birth*, at the Flowers East gallery in 1997 in London. Devoted entirely to paintings of his wife giving birth to their first child, the exhibition withdrew some of Waller’s work based on the reaction of viewers who found it offensive. [“Is Birth the last taboo subject in art?”](#) wrote Keren David and Mark Rowe (1997), two reporters for *The Independent* who covered Waller’s show, “The response to Jonathan Waller’s paintings inspired by the arrival of his daughter suggest that it may be. One picture of a woman giving birth was considered so shocking by the staff of a London gallery that it was removed from an exhibition on its opening day (para.1).” Through his representations, Waller had apparently crossed a line and transgressed a taboo.

Only since the ubiquity of the internet have people been able to access contemporary images and videos of childbirth through New Media, particularly blogs and social media. But most of these images receive little publicity, and are again not shown in the context of fine arts exhibitions in major galleries and museums.

The absence of realistic childbirth art images cannot be attributed to a recoiling at the flesh and blood of birth. Anyone even vaguely familiar with art history knows that visceral images abound in the context of death. Wikipedia has a category called “Paintings of Death” but, as will by now perhaps come as no surprise, contains no category for “Paintings of Birth.” In looking at these images of death, we realize that it cannot simply be a matter of queasiness with flesh and blood that keeps the subject of birth off the fine arts table.

Puritanism, Essentialism, Abortion, and the “Baby Penalty”

Could it perhaps be the case that not just any flesh is the problem for the viewer but rather a *type* of flesh? In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller (1998) details examples of a pervasive human disgust with the vagina, and with genitals, as well as with orifices and bodily wastes more generally. He relates this disgust in part to a general Christian moral discourse on the topic of sex. Descriptions of a puritanical hold on societal perceptions of the female body in Europe and the United States have been well-documented in academic literature. Some of these perceptions pertain to negative ways in which the birthing body came to be viewed in the spheres of medicine, religion, and society. Ann Braude of Harvard Divinity School has described the influence of a Puritan worldview to the views and practices of 19th century male physicians (Braude, 1989). Working closely with doctors, Protestant clergy asserted the health of women (be it of a physical or spiritual sort) to be ill and curable only through the means of male ministers and doctors.

Max Weber’s assertion that the Protestant work ethic, founded on Calvinism, was ingrained in the spirit of modern capitalism, has influenced thinkers for over a century. Perhaps this same religio-cultural influence is at work not only in the “spirit of birth,” but in the study of it. If Puritanism is at the root of how a woman’s body is viewed within the realm of western medicine, then it is plausible that this same ideology also penetrates the academic sphere, silently directing intellectual work away from the childbirth topic.

As it turns out though, there are other somewhat counterintuitive reasons for scholarly resistance to birth in the humanities. The topic has received cool reception within the area of women’s studies, for example. One might assume that this field, of any, would embrace the topic. But as it turns out, birth is a problem for many feminist scholars due to the issue of *essentialism*, which refers to the generalization of a woman’s identity based on basic, or essential properties (biological or social). Even assuming that women’s studies would be a good place for promoting the study of childbirth, as I just did, is problematic.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949/1993) paved the way for discussion on essentialism within feminism. In her seminal work, the

French existentialist emphasized how the understanding of a woman's identity as intimately bound to her biology was problematic, and she rejected the concept of maternal instinct. De Beauvoir's ideas influenced later feminists, popular and academic, including Betty Friedan, whose pivotal book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), was dedicated to the French philosopher. Like De Beauvoir, Friedan rejected procreation, as well as marriage and childrearing, as the integral and necessary components of a woman's identity, encouraging women instead to seek out other avenues of life, such as education and joining the workforce.

Publication of Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, often considered the catalyst for second-generation feminism in the United States, contributed significantly to how feminists, and particularly educated white feminists who have dominated the discourse, have approached the topic of childbirth over the past five decades. The entire field of women's studies grew in large part out of 1970s activism. Thus, in the academic sphere, feminists have devoted significant research and writing to the problem of essentialism and the relating of a woman's identity to her biology. The childbirth topic, often connected to biology and the female body, inevitably became a sensitive issue right from the outset of the field.

Yet another crucial issue to consider in looking at the intellectual silencing of birth is how academic mothers are treated. Mary Ann Mason, professor and co-director of the Center, Economics & Family Security at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, conducted a lengthy study over the course of a decade on how childbearing and rearing affect the academic careers of both men and women. Mason and her team published their findings in the 2013 book, *Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower*, as well as in her widely read article for *Slate* (2013). The results demonstrate that academic women who decide to have children pay a great "baby penalty." In fact, childbearing and rearing often result in the end of a woman's career, while for men, having children is a career advantage.

Ultimately, the reality of these penalties play a decisive role in how significantly less women than men in academia have children. On average, tenured women who do decide to have children are age 40 when they begin a family, often having one child. Mason's study also reveals cases in which academic women are blacklisted once they notify faculty of their pregnancies, as well as other cases in which women report how even simple *discussion* of having children negatively affects their job candidacy during interviews.

While these facts are interesting in themselves, what seems most pertinent to the discussion here is the possibility that academic women, aware of the negative effects of pregnancy and childbearing on personal,

actual, and administrative levels, could be less likely to pursue research on these topics on an intellectual or ideological level. Worthy of study is how the actual suppression or rejection of birth and mothering within the academic sphere participates in a suppression of intellectual focus and publication on these matters.

Also contributing to the way that academics treat the topic of birth are the issues of reproductive freedom and legalized abortion. Abortion-rights advocacy has become a central piece to the ideological portfolio of most academic liberals, not only within the area of feminism but more broadly within the humanities. Since birth is related to the topic of abortion, there is an intuitive connection that one might make between an intellectual interest in pregnancy and birth and a stance on abortion. However, there are many other philosophical issues related to birth that have nothing to do with abortion or any other ethical issues for that matter (e.g. stem cell research, the making of designer babies, etc.). Unfortunately, this connection persists: when birth does surface as a topic of philosophical inquiry, it is usually within the sphere of ethics.

There are of course some important academic publications in the arts and humanities devoted either exclusively to childbirth or to themes related to birth. Indeed, Mircea Eliade (1954), one of founding figures of the field of religious studies, wrote extensively on cosmogonic and origin myths, which relate to the theme of birth, although not specifically to childbirth. This topic of the cosmogonic myth was fundamental to Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1955), a work that cemented his career and participated in establishing the field of religious studies. In light of Eliade's influence, it is curious that the study of religion did not develop more of a focus on birth and origin. Eliade was certainly also interested in eschatology, but the study of cosmogony was primary to his work.

Beyond the noteworthiness of birth's underrepresentation in the intellectual sphere, there are profound implications, ideological and actual, that result both from academia's inability to treat birth as a fundamental topic of scholarly interest, and from its intellectual prioritization of death over birth.

Death is an end, a future, or a representation of transcendence; whereas birth, by contrast, is a beginning from which life emanates and extends—a past that is intricately part of the present, a representation of being and of immanence. Ideologically speaking then, one of the results of this academic focus on death over birth is an avoidance or dissociation with coming into being, especially as being occurs in its most physical of senses. The insinuation is that aspects such as transcendence, the afterlife, or non-being, are more significant for study than are those related to coming into being and material existence.

Another ideological concern is the way that women's experiences of birth are suppressed and under-explored in the arts and humanities.

Maternal subjectivity is often negated from philosophical discussion, while images of childbirth and women giving birth are not exhibited in gallery halls because the birth event is deemed inappropriate. This underrepresentation of research and art material on the theme of childbirth points to an ideological rejection or diminishing of the importance of the rite of passage that many women go through.

Beyond ideologies, there is also an actual diminishing or downplaying of the importance of birth to society, something that is especially visible in the United States, a wealthy nation where, nevertheless, infant and maternal death rates remain high, and most new parents receive no paid time off after childbirth and adoption. The medicalization of birth is at an all-time high in the US and worldwide, even though the World Health Organization and other important institutions continue to recommend against it. In the United States, this situation is especially alarming for African American women, who die three times as often as white women during childbirth (Belluz, 2017); as well as for African American infants, who die at a rate more than twice that of white infants (Carpenter, 2017).

A growing body of research in fields across the sciences has shown the profound impact that prenatal care and early parent-child relationships ultimately have on the physical, social, emotional and psychological developments of children. On a primary level, the architecture of a child's brain is significantly affected by social experiences with parents and caregivers during the first three years of life, and stemming from pregnancy and childbirth. This evidence underlines the fact that children, from before they are born and into their early years, should be of central interest to all concerned with individual cultivation and the bettering of society. Childbirth is quite simply the foundation from which the human experience evolves.

Acknowledging gaps in our history of ideas provides fertile ground for exploration. As thinkers such as the late French philosopher Michel Foucault would concur, it is precisely through examination of the discontinuities and gaps in our history of ideas that a true archaeology of knowledge emerges, giving us a better perspective on our past, something that is inevitably bound to our present condition. Sight of the gap in scholarship on birth and death is the tip of the iceberg. For when we begin to explore it, we unearth complex cultural, ideological, philosophical, and psychological reasons for which it exists.

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