

a thought experiment along the lines of “Would you sacrifice one to save five”? She is recognised today as “one of the most significant analytic philosophers of the 20th Century” (p296). *Natural Goodness* is considered her masterpiece, a moral vision grown from the seeds planted in the Forties.

Early in her career, Iris was a highly regarded academic and eyebrows were raised when she began writing her novels. She wrote not just great stories but also a sort of philosophy in action where individual lives are observed through an existential lens of recognisable themes including responsibility, chance, agency, resentment. A good example is her novel *An Accidental Man*.

After World War II she travelled round Europe and was widely read in the ‘new existential philosophy’ set including Sartre, Marcel (whom she met), Buber and Kierkegaard, among others. She gave talks on Sartre and wrote ‘Romantic Rationalist’ an exploration and critique of his philosophy which, fashioned in World War II during Occupation, she saw as a response to the loss of background to our moral and political thinking. She developed a different account of moral freedom, arguing it is not the ability to choose your own moral principles but “to look steadily at reality and to see things justly. To see what matters, what things are important and good” (p238).

The moral and ethical questions these women pursued have become more urgent and pressing in many areas of our lives: medical advancements; when to give or withhold treatment; how to programme self-driving cars (a modern version of the Trolley problem); and, of course, crucial questions of truth and morality in a time of social media and war. Working on this review during Putin’s invasion of Ukraine poignantly highlighted the relevance of the issues they were concerned with to our own times. When this is printed in July, things may have moved on, hostilities ended or exploded into greater conflagration. But now as then the world will be changed and things will look different, as happened for this quartet of brilliant English female philosophers.

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Being Born: Birth and philosophy

Alison Stone. 2019. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Our death will undoubtedly be the most significant event in our lives. It forms the end point of our existence and determines us as finite beings. Much of existential philosophy has been dominated by the idea that our mortality shapes the way in which we exist and create meaning in the world. Death, or rather the knowledge that we are bound in time, creates anxiety but also guilt, it impacts our sense of authenticity and inauthenticity, and it also influences our choices, feelings of responsibility and sense of freedom.

Mortality is inescapable, it pervades our lives. Whilst mortality, and the

thought of our own death, does bring a sense of urgency and agency to life, Stone argues that mortality is not the only way in which we are confronted by non-existence. It is just one end of our temporal presence. Where death marks the beginning of non-existence, there was also another period of non-existence before we were born and therefore, Stone argues, our birth has as much impact on the way in which we exist in the world as our death. Both birth and death contribute to the formation of the ontological structures of our existence, and it is these ideas around birth (and death) that Stone explores in her book.

All human beings begin life by being born, and all human beings die. In these two ways we are finite: Our lives are not endless, but they begin and they come to an end,

(p1)

What is interesting about Stone's thoughts around natality is how our birth brings to the fore different ontological conditions of our existence than those highlighted by death. Whereas for death, the ontological structures are concerned with individuation such as authenticity, freedom and choice, the opposite is true for birth, where relatedness, such as power, vulnerability and dependency are brought to the fore. Both ends of the spectrum concern our connectedness with others and shows how human existence oscillates between two paradoxical positions of needing others but also needing to be independent of others.

Stone notes that "in existentialism, then, death remains privileged over birth" (p59), except perhaps for the work of Arendt (1998), whose concept of natality, Stone sets out to explore further. In her book, Stone highlights four ways in which natality impacts our existence. The first relates to our dependency on others, particularly at birth, when a newborn baby is not only dependent but relies on others for its very existence. Our dependency on others also reveals our vulnerability, both of which are an issue, in varying degrees, across the lifespan. Stone notes how often independence is valued over dependence and yet dependency is our normal human condition. It appears that we move away from dependence and vulnerability in the same way that we move away from death; we try to avoid such aspects of our human condition that we have no control over.

The second element, relationality, is connected to the area of dependency as it concerns our connections to other people. It is at this point that Stone turns towards more psychoanalytic ideas of how relationships, primarily our first relationships, impact, not only a person's sense of self but their relationships in later life. Stone argues that because we are vulnerable at birth due to our immaturity, we are therefore also 'highly permeable'. This means our first relationships have a significant impact on us and form a

template for our future relationships. However, Stone does not see this as a determining factor in how we develop as human beings, in the way psychoanalytic theory may conceive it. She gets round the issue of determinism by focusing on inheritability; that we inherit certain aspects of ourselves from other people but this inheritability is also something that can be chosen and changed over time. It is through meanings that we inherit the most from others, as we take on meanings from those around us who have been an influence. Stone further argues that “the net result is that, although we are meaning-making beings, none of us makes the meanings of our lives alone or independently of others” (p66). The notion of inheritability and shared meaning draws out how interrelated we are with each other and develops Heidegger’s (1962) concept of Being-with. It is also in line with Sartre’s (1943) ideas of how a sense of self develops through a process of establishing what is me and not me. What Stone highlights in her book is the paradoxical nature of human existence – how not just our meanings are co-created but also our sense of ourselves. Again, this fits well with Sartre’s view that ‘existence precedes essence’ and that if our existence is a shared one then it follows that our essence will be shared too.

The third aspect of natality is situatedness, which relates to Heidegger’s (1962) concept of thrownness. We are always situated in a particular context, in a certain location and at a particular time in history. Stone notes that “individuals only ever make choices from within their pre-given situations, without which they would not be presented with the particular possibilities they face” (p4). She argues that ‘birth is an unequalizer’ (p xx) and that benefits in life are unevenly distributed.

Stone’s fourth element emerges from situatedness and concerns social power relations. These aspects are part of our situatedness and concern gender, race, class, economic position, age and disability. Human beings, Stone states, are immediately embedded into social power relations at birth. It is this rooted nature that makes it so difficult to see social power relations at work and their impact on the individual. As Stone elucidates, “precisely because power relations shape us as natal beings, it can be hard for us to think critically about these relations and even to develop the capacities to be critical of them” (p 105). This is particularly pertinent in our current time and explains why some find it hard to see the privilege they have both in terms of their social power relations and their situatedness.

Both situatedness and social power relations are not new concepts for existential therapists and existential therapeutic thinking. These elements have formed part of existential psychotherapy literature for some time (Deurzen, 1988). What is interesting is that existential philosophy as an academic discipline can learn much about existence from existential psychotherapeutic literature and practice. Through the process of psychotherapy and listening to the multitude of client experiences, therapists can gain a

far deeper understanding of human existence from a lived or ontic sense.

Once she establishes that relationality is a core ontological structure of natality, Stone turns to mortality, which she also believes is relational. She states that death is always shared, the death of someone close to us always involves a part of us dying too, where there is a loss of shared meaning and shared experience. Our birth and death are intrinsically linked to others. Human existence comes into being within the body of another and its end is one that is shared and felt by others. Our whole existence is intertwined with the existence of others, and this relationality and dependency on others brings an ambiguous vulnerability, which Stone explains as “to be vulnerable is to be open to being either harmed or benefitted” (p77).

Stone ends her books by looking at the mystery of existence, that there is always an unknown element as to how and why we have come into being and have become the person that we are: “To be born, then, is to have an element of mystery at the core of my being. This mystery can provoke anxiety in us” (p147). In the same way that mortality provokes anxiety, so does natality. There are always questions about our existence that can never be answered.

Throughout her book, Stone systematically develops her arguments by drawing on a multitude of thinkers not restricted to the existential field. Her book brings some much-needed balance in existential philosophy. It highlights the paradoxical nature of human existence and how we are caught in the tension between dependency and independence, and how vulnerability can be both a harm and a benefit. Stone notes that “we fear death...as we do not fear having been born” (p65). Her refocus on the period of non-existence before we were born may lessen the fear of non-existence that death brings. These concepts, along with ideas around inheritability and shared meaning, will be useful for existential therapists to think about their clients’ lives from other perspectives for them to gain a deeper understanding of how their relationality, and therefore their natality, permeates their entire existence.

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