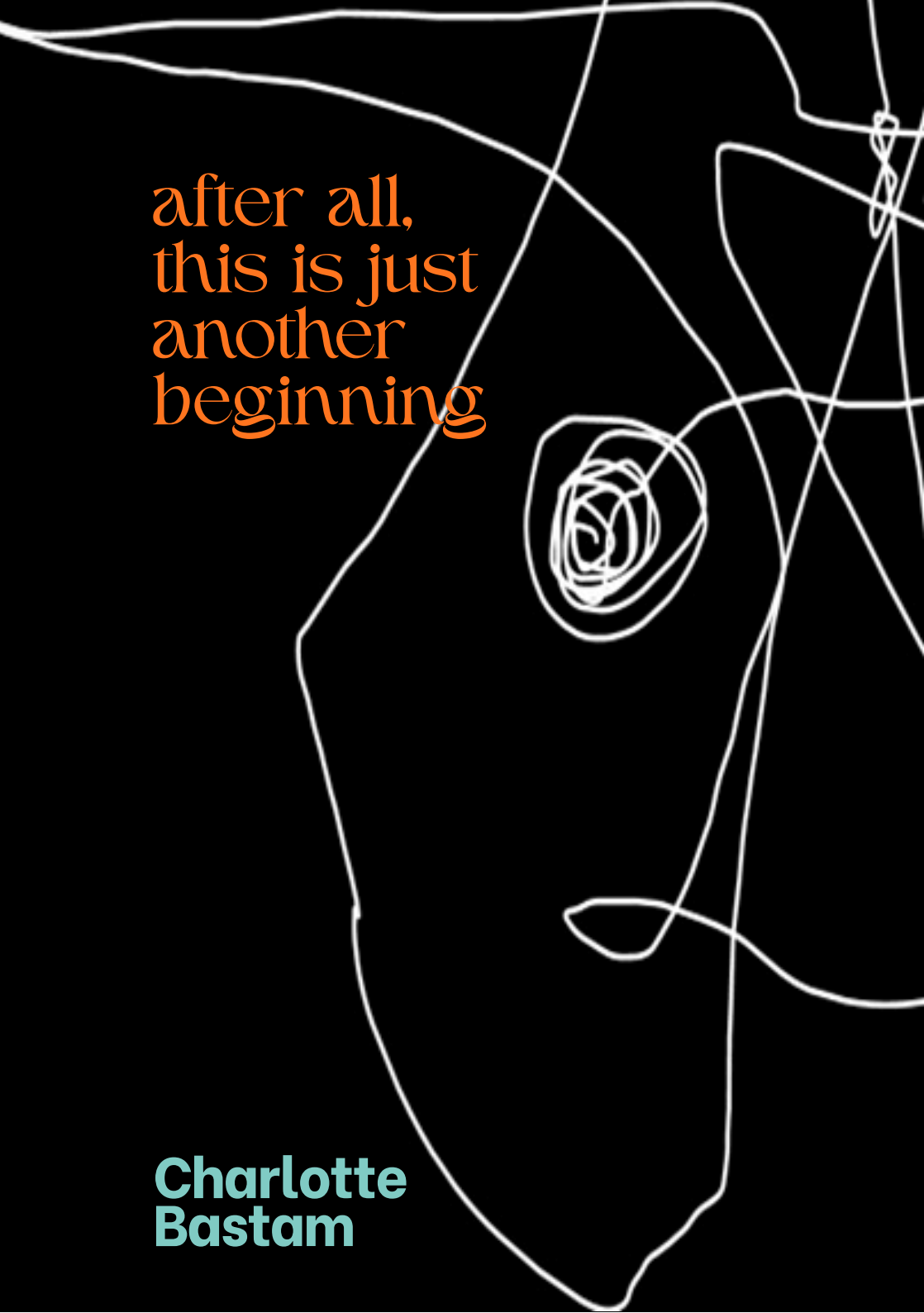




after all,
this is just
another
beginning

**Charlotte
Bastam**

After all, this is just another beginning

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After all, this is just another beginning is a conceptually experimental piece that explores the notion of beginnings through multiple disciplines and thematic entry points. Each of the three introductions approaches beginnings in its own way, allowing them to take shape differently across the text. Conceptually, they are connected by a shared inquiry into what happens when we think through beginnings themselves. The following introduction will dive into creation myths and explore how to think-through them in relation to artistic practices.

In the chapter titled *Preface*, I offer an analysis of how I connect the different beginnings to my meta-investigation of beginnings and to the performance of the same name, *After all, this is just another beginning*. At the same time, readers are invited to draw their own connections—or to approach the introductions as independent openings to books that have not yet been written. You are therefore free to choose your own reading order. However, I would suggest reading the Preface last.

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*Who really knows?
Who will here proclaim it?
Whence was it produced?
Whence is this creation?
The gods came afterward,
with the creation of this universe.
Who then knows whence it has arisen?
Whence this creation has arisen—
perhaps it formed itself, perhaps it did not
the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven,
only He knows or perhaps He does not know.
even, only He knows – or perhaps He does not know.*

– Rig Veda 10:129, retold by Doniger O’Flaherty.

It begins with a dark first world, or, as it turns out, underworld. Above that first world was another domed world, and another, and still another before our world, the fifth world. The people made their way through these worlds, evolving by the fourth world into people as we know them. Above our present world there is thought to be a sixth world of perfect harmony.

– Navajo Creation Myth, summarized by David. A. Leeming (2010, pp. 199/200).

There was a time when only the sea existed and Raven, who was a god then, was flying over it. He spied a tiny island below him and he commanded it to become earth, and it did. When the new earth had grown a lot, Raven cut it up, making Queen Charlotte Island out of a small piece and the rest of the world out of a large one. On one of his walks around the world he heard a sound coming from a small clamshell and he saw a small face

there. After a lot of coaxing, five little faces appeared and then five little bodies. These clamshell-beings were the first people.

- Haida Creation Myth. Retold by David A. Leeming (ibid., p. 120).

*When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name.
Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
(And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters commingling as a single body;
No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had
appeared, When no gods whatever had been brought into
being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined.*

- Enuma Elish, Babylonian Creation Myth. Retold by Charles H. Long. (1963, p. 70)

In the beginning there was chaos. Out of it came pure light and built the sky. The heavy dimness, however, moved and formed the earth from itself. Sky and earth brought forth the ten thousand creations, the beginning, having growth and increase, and all of them take the sky and earth as their mode. The roots of Yang and Yin — the male and female principle — also began in sky and earth.

- Version of Creation Myth in Chinese legend. (ibid., pp. 126/127).

*1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was
over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was
hovering over the waters.
3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4
God saw that the light was good, and he separated the
light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and
the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and
there was morning—the first day.*

- Genesis 1, Bible.

*Ta'aroa (unique) was the great supreme being, who
existed alone in a little world, in a shell like an egg,
revolving in dark empty space for ages. At length, he burst
forth from confinement, and finding himself quite alone he
conjured forth the famous god Tu, who became his
companion and artisan in the great work of creation.
When the universe was completed, gods innumerable were
conjured into existence to fill every region, and,
last of all creatures, man was made to inhabit the earth,
which was prepared for him.*

- Creation Myth found in Tahitian Folklore (Long 1963, p. 128).

1. Introduction

I have always been drawn to myths. My grandmother read me German fairytales and fables. Later came Greek and Roman myths in Latin class, and stories from the Bible in religion. Studying ethnology, I learned how myths are woven into the cultural and religious lives of people today. And I reencountered them while working as a fact-checker during the COVID-19 pandemic—then as something suspicious, even dangerous, capable of deceiving and luring people into false beliefs.

Yet for me, they were never about being true or false, right or wrong, literal or not. They were about searching; about symbols and metaphors that could speak of experience. Sometimes there was a lesson in them; sometimes they offered another way of connecting to the world—either confirming something I already felt (“Oh yes, that’s how it is”), or revealing something I had not known yet (“Oh yes, that is how it could be, too”).

Art, in many ways, does the same. It reconnects the dots. It offers possibilities of the world while making space for my own experience. I merge myself into a story, while (re-)connecting with the dots that are already there. It is always situated, happening within ongoing relations, just like science. But different than scientific knowledge, it offers a different kind of knowing, heavily induced with emotions, the not-knowing of what is beyond my grasp. It is personal while longing for connection, opening space for understanding and imagination alike.

Still, myths are, if not already abandoned as fake, treated etiologically, meaning they are a product of a pre-scientific society that wasn’t able to explain phenomena in any other way (Mills 2010, p. 301). While this might be partially the case, this purely functional view of myths falls short. Myths attempt to unify rational and emotional understanding without erasing their distinctions. They contain a knowledge that is transcendent and full of symbolism. They speak to the human quality of understanding their world not only

through rationalized facts but through practices of narration that invoke understandings that can be felt.

I find inspiration in Ursula K. Le Guin's writing. In her essay collection *The Language of the Night* (Le Guin 2024 [1979]), the renowned writer explores the idea of science fiction as modern myth-making. She approaches this topic with caution, as she observes too many hastily drawn conclusions, particularly regarding symbols. According to Le Guin, myths are often interpreted as specific meanings or symbols, yet symbols in fact point to things beyond our understanding. Were they merely equivalents, they would simply be allegories (ibid., p. 64).

Why is this distinction relevant? Understanding myths, according to Le Guin, requires deep exploration—finding meaning not by taking everything literally, nor being ignorant of rational thoughts. For her, too, art functions similarly to myths:

The way of art, after all, is neither to cut adrift from the emotions, the senses, the body, etc., and sail off into the void of pure meaning nor to blind the mind's eye and wallow in irrational, amoral meaninglessness—but to keep open the tenuous, difficult, essential connections between the two extremes. To connect. To connect the idea with value, sensation with intuition, cortex with cerebellum. The true myth is precisely one of these connections. (ibid., p. 67).

Is this why myths have always been immensely popular for adaptations in literature, theater, cinema, and also science (e.g. the Gaia Hypothesis (Lovelock, 2016 [1979]))? Their patterns of storytelling are familiar and still entail the power to be thought-provoking. Even the ancient ones, when brought into a highly different context, reveal something new, an aspect combined with our current discourse. I am thinking of recent feminist adaptations of Greek mythology here. Like in Margaret Atwood's phenomenal *The*

Penelopiad (Atwood 2022) where Penelope is no longer merely the silent, faithful wife sitting patiently at home but has her own thoughts and life while Odysseus has his adventures. Further use of myths can also be found in attempts to understand the human drive to create artificial intelligence, reflected in the artificially created beings of ancient stories, such as the figure of Pandora (Mayor 2018).

I am also creating a being, me, the emerging artist or emerging artistic researcher or researcher that does art, but is really only at the start. I had a hard time making sense of that so far.

My background lies in ethnology, science and technology studies, and journalism. All entail big chunks of creative thinking and work. You observe, you do research, you interpret contexts before unknown to you, you reflect, and you write. Even if many methods used in ethnology and also in journalism are in no contradiction but show similar patterns, my experience is that art wants me to let go at some point. It wants me to leave my trusted paths of understanding, which are marked by empiricism, proven scientific methods, and academic or media sources I can trust. It wants me to go into the wild of my own experiences. In the end, you do not so much tell a version of what is but invoke more of a personal reflection on what might be.

I have a hard time letting go.

When I started studying Art & Science, I felt lost trying to define my practice. Jealously, I have been looking left and right to my colleagues who, as it (wrongly of course) seemed to me, effortlessly came up with ideas for artistic projects and jumped adventurously into unknown practices or ingeniously combined their existing methods. While I got stuck with one question: *How do I begin?*

What used to be a paralyzing fear, I countered in the only way I knew: thinking it through based on literature and

empiricism. I became my own ethnographer to understand how I do art, or better, how I tell myself I am doing art, to understand what I want to do, and also how I want to challenge myself. What I needed was to situate myself, to tell a story of where I am now and, importantly, where I wanted to go from there. Not to find the one true story of how to do art – because I actually don't think this exists– but to have a narrative I can play with, use it as a reflection tool, anchor in it, and grow from it.

Then I remembered myths.

This led me not towards the beginnings of stories but the beginning *as* a story. And this led me towards creation myths.

Therefore, in this book, I am proposing a non-conclusive thought experiment:

What happens when I think through my artistic journeys with creation myths?

At the end of the book, the thought experiment should have evolved into a practice I call *thinking-through creation myths*.

But before arriving there, I will first explore existing ways of understanding creation myths.

CREATION MYTHS

It seems counterintuitive for an ethnologist to assume cultural universals. Yet creation myths and the everlasting question behind them, *What is the origin of us, of everything, really?*, seem to be such a rare occurrence. The origin of the world is such a fundamental question that not only religion but also physicists are going to great lengths and research to answer it. Astronomer and physicist Marcelo Gleiser, who researched the Big Bang Theory, calls it “The Question” (Gleiser 2005, p. 6). But there are also other ways creation myths differ from other myths, as psychoanalyst Marie-Louise von Franz points out:

For when they are told, there is always a certain solemnity that gives them a central importance; they convey a mood which implies that what is said will concern the basic patterns of existence, something more than is contained in other myths. Therefore, one may say that as far as the feeling and emotional mood which accompany them are concerned, creation myths are the deepest and most important of all myths. (von Franz 2017, p. 1).

Creation Myths describe the cosmogenic event or process of a culture: “The English word refers to the Greek *kosmogonia* (<-gonos, derived from the word for „producing” and *kosmos* meaning cosmos, universe, or world).“ (Leeming 2010, p. 392). It is therefore also part of the cosmology of a culture, a term which refers to the understanding of the universe and one’s place in it (ibid).

In the most general sense we could say that the creation myth is an expression of man’s cosmic orientation. This orientation involves his apprehension of time and space, his participation in the world of animals and plants, his judgement concerning other men and the phenomena of the sky, the interrelationship of these dimensions, and finally the powers which have established and continue to maintain his being in the world.” (Long 1963, pp. 18/19)

Religious scholar Charles Long points towards orientation, a term that also interests me in this book. However, not in a purely theological sense, as where I would need to go with art, but more as an open question: Where am I and where do I want to go from here?

The American philologist Adam Leeming, who has done extensive research on creation myths and published several

collections of creation myths from all over the world, refers to them as “cultural dreams” (Leeming 2010, p. xviii). Indeed, the connections between the research on mythology and psychoanalytical theory and practice are strong. Long’s, Leeming’s, and Le Guin’s thoughts are influenced by the theories of early 20th-century psychoanalyst C. G. Jung, particularly his concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes (Jung 1968 [1959]).

Marie-Louise von Franz developed Jung’s ideas in *Patterns of Creativity Mirrored in Creation Myths* (von Franz 1972), where she presents examples from her work as a psychoanalyst. She discusses how the symbols emerging in patients’ dreams and associations reflect archetypal creation motifs. In this sense, for von Franz—and for Jung—the study of myths was not only a theoretical pursuit but also a practical tool in analytic work. Motifs such as separation, destruction, and renewal were brought into consciousness through the appearance of these archetypal patterns. Or in von Franz’s words: “You find creation myth motifs *whenever the unconscious is preparing a basically important progress in consciousness*” (von Franz 1995, p. 13).¹

THINKING-THROUGH CREATION MYTHS

I would like to take up the notion of coming to consciousness, creativity, and orientation for artistic creation endeavors by introducing a way of questioning and thinking I like to call thinking-through creation myths.

¹ Upfront, it is necessary to say that it is less the archetypes that interest me, even though they had a lot of success in the arts and storytelling practices, as they do in Joseph Campbell’s influential work *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* (2004 [1949]). But I find them to be handled cautiously since they invoke some essentializing universalism, and depending on how far one goes, esotericism. Again, I am not expecting creation myths to tell me what kind of artist I am, and in this case, what archetypes lead my plot, but rather what potential is in them through thinking-through them.

Thinking-through derives from physicist and philosopher Karen Barad's concept of *Agential Realism*, which will be explained further in Chapter 3. It proposes a way of understanding phenomena not as pre-existing entities but as constantly co-creating and intra-active agencies (Barad 2012). The idea for Thinking-through stems from her notion of reading through things in a diffractive way (Barad 2007, pp. 71-94). This is something other than reflection, which for Donna Haraway signifies simply mirroring one thing against another (Haraway 2018 [1997], p. 16).

In this way, *thinking-through* becomes my methodology for this work. For me, as an artist and ethnographic researcher, creation myths are dynamic and creative sources of inspiration that need to be treated with *response-ability* to their complex situatedness, but still can be used to broaden my understanding of processes of creation.

How am I aiming to do this? I propose to first discuss several attempts at typologizing creation myths (Chapters 4-6) before I introduce my own interpretation of them. However, more than a typology, in my account, it will rather be a proposed set of scores, developed by thinking-through different types and motifs of creation myths. All follow the same question stated earlier in this introduction:

What happens when I think-through my artistic journey with creation myths?

For me, art has a lot to do with thinking-through specific contexts but creating something new - or rather - something else from it. As an artist, one often finds oneself at crossroads that can be highly political and vulnerable - it says something of the current state of the artist's surroundings, the discourses taking place right now - but it is also the artist, their persona and history that glues the ties. From society at large to something deeply personal, with every project, every story artists endeavor to invoke, they are creating specific

worlds. And it belongs to the analysis of the body of work of an artist to understand where this world is coming from.

I propose thinking-through creation myths as a useful tool because:

1. Creation myths are a creative product in themselves.
2. Creation myths connect science, philosophy, cosmology, art, the personal, and the public in often poetic ways that, when reading them with an open mind, are not limiting but can be very inspirational.
3. Reading Creation myths carefully can help one to understand the workings of symbolism and metaphors, and storytelling at large. Undoubtedly, those things are incredibly powerful in art, but also beyond. That is why they need to be treated with care.

TYPOLOGIES OF CREATION MYTHS

There have been several attempts to assemble and categorize creation myths. But before I introduce them here and go further into them in Chapter 4, I would like to answer a question that I have asked myself: Why categorize them at all?

imposing certain categories onto creation myths that stem from various cultural backgrounds can be a dangerous thing. Every myth is rooted in a distinct historical and cultural context, which shapes how it is lived and read. Symbols and metaphors might not just reveal themselves to us, and it would clearly be a mistake to impose values from one's own culture onto them. However, this is precisely the deciphering and interpretation skill that ethnologists, historians, scholars of literature, and classics are, in the best case, committed to.

Comparisons of culturally different myths have a big value for understanding the topics humankind has been busy with. It is also easier to navigate the question of how there have been different paths to encounter the question of our origin. Keeping limits in understanding such diverse cultural contexts in mind, certain subjects are reappearing. To categorize a creation myth under the label “primordial water” might assemble creation myths that are otherwise historically and geographically far from each other.

I see the categorization not as a fixed and limiting act but as a creative one that has to be done with care and the awareness of one’s own limit in understanding other cultural and historical contexts. That is also why I will discuss different attempts at such typologizations before I turn to my own attempt of how to think-through creation myths.

In his thorough work *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (Long 1963), Charles Long has brought forward a typology that features five different kinds of creation myths, which later have been taken up by David Leeming as well.

They include:

Emergence Myths, which focus on the creation of humans, other than the entire universe. The creative potential, represented through earth, is already there, yet humanity has to still find its way through it, often in several stages and by completing meaningful tasks, towards our world and into the light. Because of its strong connection to the earth, Leeming and Long attribute these myths to cultures with a mother earth goddess. Following their interpretation, the earth features the womb, and the coming to light features birth (Leeming 2010 pp. 21-24, Long 1963, pp. 35-38).

World-Parent Myths often feature primordial beings—frequently Earth (mother) and Sky (father). Initially united, they represent totality. Nothing, not even their offspring, has space between them. But their division brings about

differentiation and specificity. Only through their separation emerges space for further creation (Long 1963, pp. 66-67).

Creation from Chaos Myths describe a primal, formless state—often depicted as darkness or a watery abyss—from which the cosmos emerges. Chaos represents indeterminacy and potentiality: „Even in its indeterminate form of chaos, the possibilities of a cosmos were always present.” (ibid., p. 110). But it is an unstructured reality that must be organized (ibid., pp. 114-115). One common form that the Creation from Chaos Myth takes on is the Cosmic Egg. According to Long it represents the creative but chaotic material in many myths where the female and male principles are still united but are separated in the sake of the following creation (ibid., pp. 116-117).

Creation from Nothing or **Ex-Nihilo Creations** are known to people growing up with Christianity, although they are by far not exclusive to it. Ex-nihilo myths depict creation from an absolute void, brought into being by a divine force outside of time and space, existing in a somewhat pre-creational state (Leeming 2010, p. 2). Because this divine force exists in a state before everything, creation is absolutely up to it, which ultimately makes it all-powerful but also inscrutable and detached. It is precisely not part of the world it is creating, other than the earth and sky goddesses in other creation myths.

Earth-Diver Myths, as defined by Leeming (ibid., pp. 24-27), originate from many parts of the world, but mostly in Central Asia, India, and Native North America. They feature the creation of Earth set in a larger cosmos. Most of them reserve important roles to animals and water, some kind of Ursuppe, under which the earth is hidden. Furthermore, there is often a dualistic tension between evil and good forces taking place (ibid., p. 24).

While a categorization on that universal scale might seem stiff and limiting at first, it quickly becomes clear when reading Long and Leeming that distinctions and borders between the different types are not always clear. Many creation myths, as also in Leeming's dictionary, can be attributed to more than one of the different types. Indeed, they use the typology as an instrument to bring out certain symbols and motifs that keep on reappearing. These motifs, such as *Ancestors*, *Death*, *Bodily Waste*, *Incest*, or *Primordial Waters* etc., are not types per se. Leeming refers to motifs as "frequent patterns" and "elements" in a creation myth that keep on recurring (Leeming p. 301). He is introducing many possible motifs. For my further analysis, I have picked out a few that will later play a role in the formulation of the scores: *Creation by Word or Thought*, *the Trickster*, *Separation*, and *Deus Faber*.

That these motifs can also be types is one of the ways American anthropologist and folklorist Martha Weigle argues for alternatives on how to categorize creation myths. In *Creation and procreation: Feminist reflections on mythologies of cosmogony and parturiti* (Weigle 1989), Weigle offers a dialogue between such typologies mentioned before and "women's mythology" (ibid., p. xi). She puts a re-focus on the mundane during the creation process, in contrast to the epiphanic and monumental instance of creation as interpreted by other scholars. She also criticizes the reproduction of the dualism men/women that is often not only reproduced in such interpretations, but made out as culture-forming.

Both ethnocentrism and androcentrism bias such etic classifications. Generally discernible are implicit distinctions between "higher," metaphysical or spiritual, or ex nihilo creation and "lower" or "lesser" physical, natural, or elemental creation through accretion, excretion, copulation, division,

dismemberment, or parturition. The former are too readily regarded as male and more highly valued, especially when they can be associated with the monotheism of a supreme (preferably masculine) deity; the latter are often considered female and less valuable for being related to nature and animism. (ibid., p. 7)

Weigle reinterprets Long's classifications and adds other types that allow more fluid perspectives on creation myths: *Accretion or conjunction, Secretion, Sacrifice, Division or consummation, Earth-diver, Emergence, Two Creators, Deus faber, Ex nihilo* (ibid., pp. 6-7). With her analysis, she challenges an androcentric and patriarchal interpretation mode of creation myths and the notion of being creative and creating in general:

Much mythology, like much theology, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics, elaborates a fundamental premise: that procreation poses an antithesis to creation; to be procréant is not to be creative; parturition cannot be considered the symbolic equivalent of cosmogony. Procreation is thus relegated to elemental or physical or biological status, while spiritual or metaphysical or symbolic creation becomes the valued paradigm for ritual, custom, art, narrative, and belief systems. (ibid., xi).

This perspective is crucial for this work because, to think-through we must consider not only that our modes of thinking might be biased but also that the act of creation is not simply that: one act. Through exploring Weigle's work and other perspectives, I will discuss the dilemma of creation as a one-time achievement, while also considering keeping orientation, when something can be reconsidered again and again. Especially when starting a new artistic journey and/or trying to define oneself as an emerging artist, this can be a meaningful discussion.

THE SCORES

Finally, Chapter 6 will dive into how I developed several scores² and practiced them in my own performance practice. Through the analysis of my own experimentation, I have refined the scores iteratively:

Trickster by Thought

A score that implants a mindset of intervention and conscious sabotage—an attitude intended to disrupt habitual pathways and prevent falling into familiar patterns.

The Chaotic *Deus Faber*

This score begins with an undefined creative mass. The performer takes on the role of *Deus Faber*, shaping and stirring this raw material until form starts to emerge.

Emergence Through Separation

A score staged as a longer transition into another “world”, requiring an active departure from the previous one. What demands separation? What remains behind, and what follows into the new space?

The richness of perspectives mirrors for me the richness of creation myths and the possibilities to interpret characters and symbols. Creation myths are not only creative, but they also ask for creativity in reading and understanding them. Especially for artists, myths can open expansive and richly layered worlds while inviting reflection on the very matter of creation. I hope this book speaks both to emerging artists, who are exploring what creation means for them at this crucial—yet often confusing—stage of their careers, and to

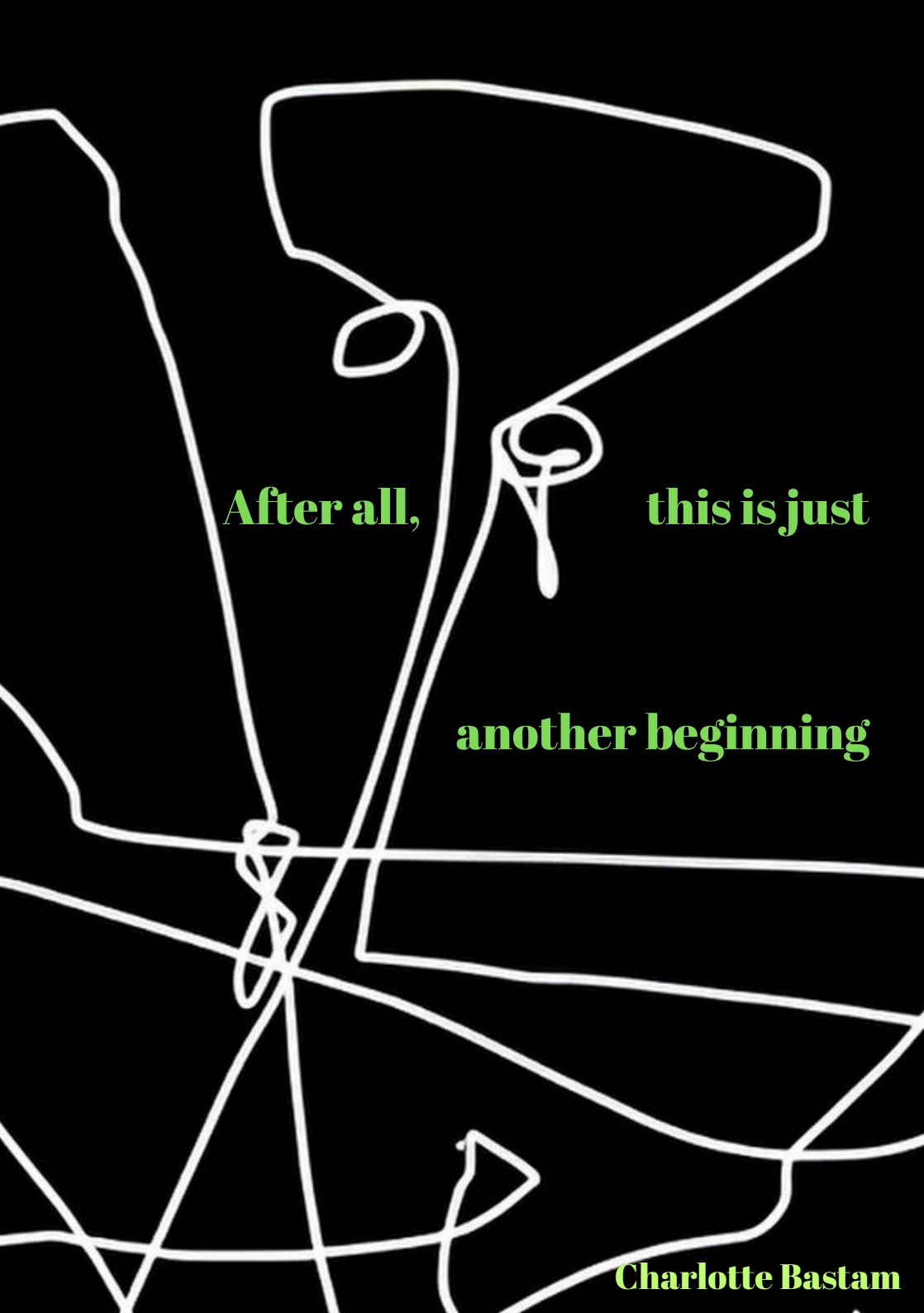
² There are several ways to define and also to produce and practice a score. While I will go deeper into what I mean with score later in the text, here a first practical definition: “In the performing arts, we identify a score as a set of instructions, guidelines or tasks related to the creation of a performance that serves as the starting point for improvisation or as a communication tool for generating movement and action.” (Franco & Chernetich, n.d.)

experienced artists, as well as to any kind of practitioners who continually dive into new projects and new worlds. In the following chapters, I will wander more deeply into the aspects of creativity, interpretation, and performativity, exploring how thinking-through creation myths—and the various kinds of beginnings they embody—can inform and enrich one's own creative process.

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Leseempfehlung zum Werk

After all, this is just another beginning ist eine konzeptionell experimentelle Arbeit, die die Idee des Anfangens über mehrere Disziplinen und thematische Zugänge hinweg erforscht. Jede der drei Einleitungen nähert sich dem Anfangen auf ihre eigene Weise. Konzeptionell sind die verschiedenen Einleitungen durch eine gemeinsame Frage verbunden: Was passiert, wenn wir durch das Beginnen denken? Die folgende Einleitung widmet sich dem Konzept der Natalität von Hannah Arendt.

Im Kapitel mit dem Titel *Preface* biete ich eine Analyse dazu, wie ich die unterschiedlichen Anfänge mit meiner Meta-Forschung über Anfänge und mit der gleichnamigen Performance *After all, this is just another beginning* verbinde. Gleichzeitig sind Leser*Innen eingeladen, eigene Verbindungen zu ziehen – oder die Einleitungen als unabhängige Öffnungen zu Büchern zu betrachten, die noch nicht geschrieben wurden. Es steht Ihnen vollkommen frei, in welcher Reihenfolge Sie die Einleitungen lesen. Ich empfehle aber, das Kapitel *Preface* zuletzt zu lesen.

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1. Einleitung

Ich beginne mit meiner Geburt.

CB: Gerne. Das ist mir noch sehr gegenwärtig. Es war Ostersonntag 1994. Und die Schwangerschaft war total problemlos. Charlotte ist mein zweites Kind. Bruder Felix ist fünf Jahre älter. Und so war ich im Grunde nicht schrecklich aufgeregt. Es war nicht meine erste Geburt, aber jede Geburt ist speziell und anders. - Transkript vom 25.11.2025¹

So viel, so einfach. Geboren zu werden ist vielleicht der banalste, aber auch entscheidendste Umstand, den wir alle miteinander teilen. In der *Vita Activa*, eines der maßgeblichsten Werke Hannah Arendts, macht die politische Theoretikerin mit ihrem Konzept der Natalität jenen Umstand zur wortwörtlich grundlegenden Eigenschaft. In der *Gebürtlichkeit*, im Geboren-Sein offenbaren sich Eigenschaften, die uns von der rein biologischen Gattung Mensch erst zum eigentlich menschlichen Wesen machen. Oder – ausschlaggebend bei Arendt – zum Handeln bringen (Arendt 2016 [1967]).

Arendts Konzept der Natalität bildet den Ausgangspunkt dieser Arbeit. Es beschäftigt sich mit dem Handeln, dem Vermögen, Anfangen zu können, und der Freiheit. Diese Gedankenmodelle verknüpfe ich mit einem weiteren Schwerpunkt Arendts: totalen Herrschaftsformen. Ihre Überlegungen hierzu erscheinen angesichts der aktuellen politischen Lage, insbesondere in Europa, aber auch darüber hinaus, hochgradig relevant. Ein Blick in ein beliebiges Medium genügt, und man stößt auf

¹ Im Nachfolgenden steht CB für Cornelia Bastam und Ich für mich, Charlotte Bastam.

eine extrem rechte Partei oder Figur. In Deutschland – dem Land, in dem Arendt geboren und philosophisch geprägt wurde und aus dem sie vor der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur fliehen musste – verzeichnet die rechtsextreme Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) seit Jahren einen rasanten Zuwachs an Einfluss und Wähler*innen. Seit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs war keine rechtsextreme Partei in Deutschland jemals so stark.

Diese Arbeit jedoch ist keine Untersuchung der Ursachen dieser Entwicklung. Die Frage, wie es so weit kommen konnte, ist zwar wichtig, wird jedoch bereits an vielen anderen Stellen diskutiert (z.B. Mullis 2024; Walther & Iseman 2019). Mein Anliegen ist vielmehr zu beleuchten, wie das menschliche Vermögen zu handeln, und laut Arendt dadurch immer wieder Anfänge zu setzen, durch potenzielle totalitäre Herrschaftsformen bedroht werden könnte. Und andersrum: Wie die Gedankengänge Arendts zum Anfangen-Können und zum Handeln potenziellen totalitären Herrschaftsformen etwas entgegensetzen können. Unter Betrachtung dieser Ansätze stelle ich mir die zentrale Frage:

Was könnte es für unser Menschsein bedeuten, wenn wir (wieder) unter einem totalitären System leben müssten?

Arendt hat sich zeitlebens damit auseinandergesetzt, was es bedeutet, unter bestimmten Bedingungen Mensch zu sein. Diese Frage möchte ich jedoch nicht allein bearbeiten, sondern gemeinsam mit meiner Interviewpartnerin Cornelia Bastam. Frau Bastam ist weder eine anerkannte Philosophin noch Hannah-Arendt-Expertin. Sie ist schlicht – und in diesem Zusammenhang nicht unwesentlich – meine Mutter.

Warum ich sie für dieses Thema als relevant erachte, hängt mit Arendts Konzept der Natalität zusammen. Natürlich verbindet meine Mutter und mich das Ereignis meiner Geburt und damit mein persönlicher Umstand

des Geborensseins. Doch das allein greift zu kurz. Bei Arendt geht es weniger um die Geburt als biologischen Vorgang, sondern um das Geboren-Sein als grundlegende menschliche Bedingung, die sich in der Fähigkeit äußert, im Leben immer wieder neu anzufangen – ein Zustand, der uns fortwährend begleitet.²

Das Gespräch mit meiner Mutter erweist sich deshalb als besonders wertvoll: Sie hat mich als Person in diesem ständigen „Geboren-Sein“ im arendtschen Sinne begleitet und bringt zugleich ihre eigene Geschichte und ihre eigenen Anfänge mit. Der Prozess des immer wieder möglichen Neuanfangens ergibt das, was Arendt unter Natalität versteht. Um sich diesem Konzept weiter anzunähern, nimmt Arendt zunächst eine Unterscheidung dreier grundlegender Tätigkeitsformen vor: Arbeiten, Herstellen und Handeln. Und damit stellt sich die Frage: Was tun wir eigentlich, wenn wir tätig werden?

CB: *Ich habe mich zu wenig mit Hannah Arendt bis jetzt beschäftigt, aber diese Einteilung in Arbeiten, Herstellen, Handeln, da ist für mich das Handeln immer ein bewusstes Vorgehen. Arbeiten tust du, wenn du Kartoffeln schälst. Herstellen, wenn ich Socken stricke.* -
Transkript vom 25.11.2025

Im Sinne Arendts umfasst Arbeit Tätigkeiten, die zur Gewährleistung der eigenen Existenz nötig sind und ständig reproduziert werden müssen (Arendt 2016, S. 16), jedoch nicht – und das ist entscheidend – über die

² In ihrer philosophischen Doktorarbeit, die sich mit Arendts Konzept der Natalität auseinandersetzt, bringt Katja Springer jenen wichtigen Einwurf zum Verständnis der Geburt bei Arendt: „Natalität“ bezieht sich eben primär auf die Geburt, die zum Geborenen (der „Geburt“) zugehörig ist und nicht oder eben nur am Rande auf die Geburt, die den jeweils Gebärenden betrifft. „Natalität“ legt ihren Schwerpunkt nicht auf den (biologischen) Ursprung und die jeweilige Festlegung durch ihn, sondern auf die Aktualisierung des Fakts der Geburt als Fähigkeit des jeweils Geborenen.“ (Springer 2018, S. 40).

eigene Lebensdauer hinausgehen. Ein naheliegendes Beispiel ist die immer wiederkehrende Beschaffung oder Zubereitung von Essen, das zum Beispiel das Schälen von Kartoffeln miteinschließt.

Arbeit ist hier nicht wie in unserem modernen Verständnis zu verstehen: Tätigkeiten, die wir heute als Arbeit verstehen und die über eine reine, immer wieder zu reproduzierende Tätigkeit hinausgehen, wie es z.B. bei der Kunst der Fall ist, fallen bei Arendt bereits in die anderen beiden Sparten des Tuns. Im Gegenteil, Arbeit ist bei Arendt in dem Sinne eine unproduktive Tätigkeit, da sie ständig wiederholt werden muss, wogegen das Herstellen Dinge hinterlässt (ibid., S. 104/105).

Das Herstellen produziert eine künstliche Welt von Dingen, die sich den Naturdingen nicht einfach zugesellen, sondern sich von ihnen dadurch unterscheiden, dass sie der Natur bis zu einem gewissen Grade widerstehen und von den lebendigen Prozessen nicht einfach zerrieben werden. (ibid. 16).

Der Mensch ist zum einen ein biologisches Wesen mit Bedürfnissen, die es zu stillen gilt, er³ sehnt sich aber laut Arendt auch danach, diesen Kreislauf zu durchbrechen. Denn er ist sich in dem Maße des Todes bewusst, dass er sich Fragen nach einer Sinnhaftigkeit des Lebens stellt, woraus der Wunsch nach Transzendenz des eigenen Lebens und Überdauerung entsteht (ibid. S. 28/29). Gleichzeitig schafft sich der Mensch damit auch eine Welt der Dinge, zu der er immer wieder neue Beziehungen herstellen muss und die ihn gleichzeitig auch über jenen bloßen Erhalt identifizieren (ibid. S. 19). Hergestellte Dinge werden

³ Die Verwendung von „er“ ist keine mutwillige Missachtung des Genderns, sondern der Deutschen Sprache gegeben, weil „der Mensch“ maskulin ist. An anderen Stellen habe ich mich bemüht, zu gendern.

gebraucht und nicht verbraucht. Doch Herstellen ist bei Arendt noch kein Handeln. Jenes ist jedoch entscheidend für das Konzept der Natalität. Handeln ist laut Arendt die einzige der drei Tätigkeiten, die jeder Mensch ausüben muss. Ein Mensch kann sein ganzes Leben zubringen, ohne jemals eine Kartoffel geschält oder eine Socke gestrickt zu haben, aber zu handeln lässt sich nicht verhindern. Denn gerade beim Handeln offenbaren wir unser eigenes Menschsein. Oft geschieht dies durch die Verwendung von Sprache, jedoch immer in Pluralität, indem wir mit anderen Menschen in Aktion treten. Durch das Handeln werden Menschen zu Individuen, die sich aktiv voneinander unterscheiden (ibid. S. 214) und sich damit leibhaftig in die Geschichtlichkeit einbringen. Arendt schreibt dazu:

Handeln als Neuanfangen entspricht der Geburt des Jemand, es realisiert in jedem Einzelnen die Tatsache des GeboreNSEINS; Sprechen wiederum entspricht der in dieser Geburt vorgegebenen absoluten Verschiedenheit, es realisiert die spezifisch menschliche Pluralität, die darin besteht, daß Wesen von einzigartiger Verschiedenheit sich von Anfang bis Ende immer in einer Umgebung von ihresgleichen befinden. (ibid., S. 217).

Für Arendt ist jeder Mensch ein Neuanfang. Gebürtlichkeit, das Anfangen-können, ist die Grundprämisse für das Handeln und somit auch für die Besonderheit der menschlichen Existenz überhaupt. Handeln ist das, was den Menschen über die Existenz als bloße Gattungsinhaber*In erhebt und zu einem Individuum macht. Die Bedeutung der Natalität geht dabei weit über den bloßen biologischen Umstand der Geburt hinaus; Natalität ist das Prinzip, das dem Menschen eine sonderbare Stellung gibt im Vergleich zu anderen organischen Gattungen.

CB: *Das bewusste Handeln ist ja eine Eigenschaft, die den Menschen von allen anderen Lebewesen unterscheidet. Die Tiere handeln ja nicht bewusst, sondern instinktmäßig.*

Ich: *Ja, das würde Hannah Arendt auch sagen.⁴ Das finde ich in diesem Punkt zu kritisieren. Aber das sind Punkte, die man in einer weiteren Ausführung zu Hannah Arendt, und die sicherlich auch kritisiert wurden, ansprechen sollte. Ich glaube, gerade in der neuesten Verhaltensforschung, aber auch in anderen Überlegungen, wie man Verhaltensforschung zu Tieren anlegen könnte, ist es auch die Frage, wie man die Kategorie Bewusstsein definiert. Und natürlich, wenn man von einer menschlichen Art von Bewusstseinsstadien ausgeht, ist es schwierig, das bei einem Tier zu finden. Aber man übersetzt nur in eine Richtung dadurch.⁵ -*
Transkript vom 25.11.2025

Für Arendt unterscheidet sich der Mensch grundlegend vom Tier, da es bei ihm nicht bei der ersten Geburt und damit beim reinen Fortschreiten des Kreislaufes der Gattung bleibt, sondern er sein individuelles Menschen-Sein durch das Handeln immer wieder offenbart.

Der Mensch setzt einen Neuanfang erstmalig durch seine Geburt, da er als neues Wesen voller Möglichkeiten in die Welt kommt. Diese erste Geburt (*principium*) bestätigt bei Arendt, die in ihrem Denken von jüdisch-christlicher Theologie geprägt ist, die Schöpfung. Also die Erschaffung der Welt und der Gattung Mensch, die außerhalb unseres

⁴ In Retrospektive ist es etwas dreist, anzunehmen, dass Arendt etwas genauso gesagt hätte. Aber der Genauigkeit des Transkripts geschuldet, lasse ich es so stehen.

⁵ Dieser Einwurf ist von Vinciane Desprets Buch *Was würden Tiere sagen, würden wir die richtigen Fragen stellen?*, inspiriert (Desprets 2019). Darin untersucht die Wissenschaftsphilosophin unterschiedliche Fälle, in denen Verhaltensforscher*Innen oder Tiertrainer*Innen das Verhalten verschiedener Tiere interpretiert haben – und sie analysiert wiederum diese Interpretationen.

Einwirkens im Mythologischen liegt. Die zweite Geburt (*initium*) ist jene, die durch das kontinuierliche Handeln und das Offenbaren der Person passiert (Springer 2018, 86/87). Oder in Arendts Worten:

In diesem ursprünglichsten und allgemeinsten Sinne ist Handeln und etwas Neues Anfangen dasselbe; jede Aktion setzt vorerst etwas in Bewegung, sie agiert im Sinne des lateinischen agere, und sie beginnt und führt etwas an im Sinne des griechischen ἄρχειν. Weil jeder Mensch auf Grund des Geborens ein initium, ein Anfang und Neuankömmling in der Welt ist, können Menschen Initiative ergreifen, Anfänger werden und Neues in Bewegung setzen. (Arendt 2016, 215).

CB: *Ja, das kann ich nur voll bejahen. Jedes Kind ist eine neue Hoffnung auf ein besseres Leben, auf eine bessere Gesellschaft. Das sehe ich genauso.* - Transkript vom 25.11.2025

Im Jahr 2006 erschien Alfonso Cuaróns Film *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006). Das Setting: Es werden keine Kinder mehr geboren. Die gesamte menschliche Welt ist bereits seit Jahren unfruchtbar. Zu Beginn des Films stirbt der noch jüngste amtierende Mensch der Welt, die Reaktionen sind von Aufruhr und Gewalt geprägt. Und auch sonst muten die globalen Verhältnisse dystopisch an: Gewaltregime, das Recht des Stärkeren und allgemeinhin scheinen Solidarität und Fürsorge, die nicht den unmittelbar Nächsten gilt, nicht zu existieren.

Betrachtet man das Szenario mit Arendt, wird schnell deutlich, was fehlt: die Möglichkeit des Anfangens, die daraus resultierende Motivation zum Handeln und schließlich die Hoffnung. Nicht das Sterben, sondern das Ausbleiben des Geboren-Werdens treibt den Menschen an den Abgrund. Nicht nur in Form seiner bald ausradierten Gattung, sondern auch im

Verlust seiner Menschlichkeit. Handeln ist sinnentleert. Und damit jegliche menschliche Existenz.

Dies ist zwar ein fiktives Beispiel, jedoch verdeutlicht es die Relevanz der Gedankengänge Arendts. Während ihre philosophischen Vorreiter*Innen laut Arendt sich ausschließlich auf die Sterblichkeit des Menschen konzentrierten und daraus Konzepte zur menschlichen Existenz entwickelten (Springer 2018, S. 15), erkennt sie das inhärente Potenzial des Menschen im Anfangen-Können.

Diese Erkenntnis Arendts ist die Grundsache, mit der sich die folgende Arbeit auseinandersetzen wird. Die Relevanz einer derartigen Untersuchung ist mehrschichtig. Wir sind umgeben von mehr oder weniger abstrakten Untergangsszenarien: Kriege, atomare Aufrüstung, Pandemien und nicht zuletzt die Klimakatastrophe, die in sich selbst mehrfache Armageddons – zumindest für einen Großteil der Menschheit – birgt. Der „Armageddon“, mit dem sich diese Arbeit befasst, ist eng mit jenen anderen Krisen verwoben. Mit Arendts Überlegungen konzentriere ich mich auf erstarkende faschistische und autoritäre Systeme. Wie Arendts Gedanken zum Handeln und Anfangen hier interessant sein können, zeigt etwa das Beispiel staatlicher Zensur: Wenn Gedanken nicht mehr frei geäußert werden dürfen und pluralistische Zusammenkünfte eingeschränkt werden, dann wird damit auch die Handlungsfähigkeit beschnitten – die Möglichkeit, Anfangen zu können – und somit, in meiner Arendt-Interpretation, letztlich das Menschsein selbst.

Ich: Die Möglichkeit, jemand zu sein, ist gleich die Möglichkeit, frei zu sein. Hannah Arendt war ja eine sehr politische Denkerin. Totalität und Herrschaft ist ein ganz wichtiges Werk von ihr
[Anmerkung: eigentlich muss es *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler*

Herrschaft heißen]. Und in einer absolut totalitären Diktatur gibt es diese Möglichkeit des Handelns so nicht mehr und auch damit nicht die Möglichkeit des Neuanfangens und damit auch nicht die Möglichkeit, jemand zu sein und damit nicht die Möglichkeit, frei zu sein und damit auch nicht die Möglichkeit, ein wirklicher Mensch zu sein. Wie sie das versteht.

CB: Darüber muss ich nachdenken.

Zunächst werde ich dazu Arendts Werk *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (Arendt 2023 [1951]) heranziehen. In einem weiteren Kapitel widme ich mich aktuellen theoretischen Ansätzen, die neuere faschistische und autoritäre Strömungen fassen: dem Spätfaschismus (Toscano 2025), dem Postfaschismus (Traverso & Lessenich 2018) und dem Digital- bzw. Cyberfaschismus (Mühlhoff 2025; Kremnitzer 2024). Diese Ansätze versuchen, gegenwärtige Entwicklungen zu analysieren, die eng mit den Folgen des Kapitalismus (Rasmussen 2021) sowie mit andauernden Krisen wie dem Klimawandel verflochten sind.

Im Zentrum meiner Überlegungen steht die folgende These: Wenn wir uns – im Sinne Arendts – wieder vorrangig als handelnde und nicht bloß als arbeitende Wesen begreifen, eröffnet sich die Möglichkeit, unser eigenes Potenzial zum Anfangen neu zu entdecken. Gerade angesichts möglicher, erneut drohender totalitärer Herrschaftsformen ist diese Bewusstwerdung entscheidend, um unsere Fähigkeit zum Neuanfang zu bewahren und uns durch plurales Handeln aktiv gegen solche Tendenzen zur Wehr zu setzen. Auch stellt die Hyperindividualisierung im Kapitalismus ein Problem dar, da sie das plurale Handeln untergräbt.

Pluralität ist bei Arendt ein wichtiger Stichpunkt und ein weiterer Grund, warum ich das Gespräch mit meiner Mutter als Grundlage neben Arendts Werk für diesen Text gewählt habe. Wirkliches Denken ist bei Arendt

keine bloß abstrakte Tätigkeit, sondern eng mit dem aktiven Handeln verbunden. Dieses wiederum geschieht bei Arendt nicht in Isolation, sondern erst im Pluralen; erst wenn Menschen aufeinandertreffen, kommunizieren und zusammen handeln.

Denn über die „existenzielle Relevanz menschlicher Gebürtlichkeit“ im Handeln als „zweite Geburt“ hinausgehend, zeigt sich die „politische Relevanz“ der Natalität darin, dass nur das gemeinsame, zusammen mit anderen ausgeführte Handeln, im Abstrahieren vom Eigeninteresse und in Ausrichtung auf die Welt, etwas bewirken, etwas „zustande bringen kann. Der Begriff der „Natalität“ setzt auf allen seinen Differenzierungsebenen (als Grundbedingung, Vermögen und Prinzip), aber gerade in seiner grundlegenden Funktion für Arendts Politikverständnis, die Auffassung einer plural verfassten Welt voraus. (Springer 2018, S. 21/22).

Daher ist dieser Text keine bloß abstrakte philosophische Abhandlung, sondern ein angewandtes Experiment, in dem ich zwei Menschen – mich und meine Mutter, die durch Geburt miteinander verbunden sind – aufeinandertreffen lasse. In unseren Gesprächen erkunden wir unsere Lebensgeschichten, beginnend mit unserer Geburt, und reflektieren Entscheidungen, die wir im Verlauf unseres Lebens getroffen haben. Wir fragen uns, wie wir uns des Handelns – und damit unseres Menschseins – bewusst werden können, um diese Fähigkeit angesichts möglicher totalitärer Entwicklungen zu bewahren. Maßgeblich dafür ist das Anfangen-Können. Wo in unserem Leben haben wir angefangen? Wie können wir bewusster mit dem Anfangen umgehen, und wie lässt sich dieses Bewusstsein nutzen, um der Welt politisch aktiv zu begegnen?

Eine der Herausforderungen einer so angewandt verstandenen Theorie liegt darin, dass selbst komplexe Denkmodelle der Relationalität des

gelebten Lebens oft nicht gerecht werden. Wie so viele philosophische Arbeiten ist auch diese als ein experimenteller Auseinandersetzungsversuch zu verstehen. Indem ich sie im Dialog mit meiner Mutter entwickelt habe, ist sie im Plural entstanden – und nicht einfach hergestellt, sondern *erhandelt*. Die Arbeit ist daher eher als philosophisch-künstlerisches Experiment zu begreifen, das nicht nur philosophische Fragen aufwerfen und ausloten, sondern auch praktisch erproben möchte.

Dieses Experimentelle wird sich auch im Schreiben niederschlagen: Ich werde Arendts Theorie, ihre Kritiken und die Sekundärliteratur immer wieder im Gespräch mit meiner Mutter reflektieren. Dadurch mögen einige Erzählstränge herausfordernd sein, Argumentationslinien nicht immer eindeutig verlaufen. Aber tun Sie es gerne wie wir – und sprechen Sie darüber.

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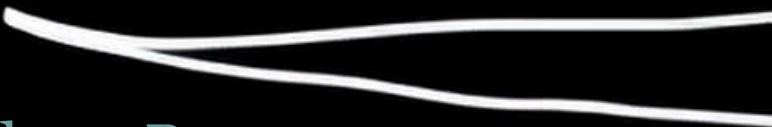
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After all, this is
just
another
beginning



Charlotte Bastam

After all, this is just another beginning

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Suggestion: How to Read This Work

After all, this is just another beginning is a conceptually experimental piece that explores the notion of beginnings through multiple disciplines and thematic entry points. Each of the three introductions approaches beginnings in its own way, allowing them to take shape differently across the text. Conceptually, they are connected by a shared inquiry into what happens when we think through beginnings themselves. The following introduction concerns itself with the question of *When human life begins*.

In the chapter titled *Preface*, I offer an analysis of how I connect the different beginnings to my meta-investigation of beginnings and to the performance of the same name, *After All, This Is Just Another Beginning*. At the same time, readers are invited to draw their own connections—or to approach the introductions as independent openings to books that have not yet been written. You are therefore free to choose your own reading order. However, I would suggest reading the Preface last.

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Introduction

In the last 30 years, legal access to abortion has expanded significantly. Over 60 countries have broadened the legal grounds for abortion (Women and Foreign Policy Program, 2024). This progress is the result of decades of activism by women^{*1}, health organizations, medical professionals, and advocacy groups worldwide. Yet what many view as a milestone in women's rights still faces loud and organized opposition. Few debates polarize societies as much as abortion, where protests juxtapose “My body, my choice” against “Abortion is murder.” This divide has been especially visible in recent years in the United States, one of only four countries — alongside Poland, El Salvador, and Nicaragua²— where abortion rights have been severely restricted rather than expanded.

In 2022, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, giving states the authority to enforce their own abortion laws. Before this, abortion was permitted in the entire U.S. up to 24 weeks, the point of fetal viability outside the uterus (Center for Reproductive Rights n.d.). However, this renewed decision has not quietened voices on either side of the debate. On the contrary, abortion remains at the heart of the so-called U.S. “Culture Wars” (Mouw & Sobel, 2001; Oh 2025), dividing the society for decades. In the United States – as in other countries- religion, medicine, and politics remain deeply

¹ It is important for me to say that when I speak of women* I mean the culturally and politically charged bodies of FLINTA* people who are able to become pregnant.

² Despite the change to a more liberal government in 2023, abortion laws in Poland continue to be very restrictive (Sieradzka 2025). El Salvador and Nicaragua have completely illegalized abortions (Blicke, Blicke & Schönleben 2022).

intertwined. Opposition to abortion often draws on conservative religious beliefs—like evangelical Christianity in the U.S.—and increasingly on anti-woke rhetoric and calls for restoring patriarchal norms.

Indeed, it is again the debate in the U.S. that predominantly absorbs media and academic attention alike.³ However, this book's main focus is not the recent state of the abortion debate in the U.S or in any other country – although it will constantly inevitably touch this issue – it is more so directed to a somewhat old and fundamental question that spans political, biological, religious, philosophical, and legal arguments alike: *When does human life begin?*

This question is inextricably bound up with the issue of abortion, for, as the research for this study has demonstrated, many of the positions subsequently articulated in today's public discourse can be traced back to it. At the same time, it encompasses a multidisciplinary dilemma.

The question when a human life begins and how to define it, could be answered only through the inner-connecting pathways of history, philosophy, medical science and religion. It has not been easy to determine where to draw the fine line between the competence of science and metaphysics in this delicate philosophical field. To a large extent the drawing of this line depends on one's fundamental philosophical outlook. The point at which human life begins will always be seen differently by different

³ Because there is a high amount of sources deriving from an U.S. contexts many examples will draw on the recent state from there. However, not exclusively. Although I wouldn't dare to say that the fight about abortion rights is universally existing in societies, it is striking how the debate is coming up and up again throughout the world.

individuals, groups, cultures, and religious faiths. (Kurjak & Spalldi Barišić 2021 pp. 23/24).

The central focus of this book is the question of when human life begins. I argue that *through* asking this question in the first place, significant implications for women*'s right to choose emerge. The act of posing the question is not neutral; it shapes the ethical, political, and legal terrain on which women* must navigate their reproductive choices. The question is continuously reshaped by developments in human embryology and prenatal diagnostics, entangled with philosophical, religious, and legal debates. The literature review will demonstrate how this ongoing, contested inquiry itself produces consequences for women*. Yet this book does *not* offer a definitive answer. As the previous citation already suggests, no final response exists.

So why ask a question there is no answer to? Precisely because lives are at stake. It matters who is asking the question and is providing an allegedly definite answer to it. Unsurprisingly, definitive answers come far quicker from groups with a religious and/or political agenda. As one can easily see when reading the news: far-right politicians and anti-abortionist groups are using the question to restrict women*'s right to choose in more and more severe ways. Maybe more surprising is that anti-abortionists fall back on science, or better, an interpretation of it, to argue that human life starts at the moment of conception.

As a feminist researcher, I therefore argue that it is of strategic importance to engage with the question. Because if the answer is so dependent on *Zeitgeist* and fundamentalist religious lobbying groups, it is strikingly vulnerable to changes within politics and society. In other words: whatever group, party, or religion holds power, will answer the question – for

us(!). Which ultimately renders women's bodies and their choices at the will of such power shifts.

Therefore, my intent in this work is not to provide a conclusive answer to the question of when human life begins, but rather to engage with the question itself. By moving through the fields of developmental biology, religion, philosophy, sociology, and law, and by conducting a discourse analysis of the current language used in public debates and media coverage, I will show the complexities involved and the various ways different disciplines answer—or refuse to answer—the question in relation to one another.

Alongside a feminist vantage point, my perspective as a researcher trained in Science and Technology Studies—an approach that understands research as shaped by both technical and social factors and sees scientific inquiry as intertwined with its societal, ethical, and political contexts—guides my aim to further unpack arguments, beliefs, and the framing of scientific findings surrounding the question of when human life begins. Because these debates – not only in the U.S but also in other countries – might lead to laws, might lead to more or fewer reproductive rights.

To explore this, the following book will dive into how various disciplines engage with the issue of the beginning of human life. How do human development biologists embark on it? What about philosophers? Legal experts?

From the beginning, it must be stated that none of these disciplines are working as closed-up entities; they are clearly influenced by each other and by the political discourse of their times. Methodologically, this makes this book mainly a philosophical endeavor discussing a possible point of beginning through its end. The dilemma to find a starting point,

partially, might result from the fact that the end seems so utterly clear – death or no possibility of further development.

But first, how did we end up with this dilemma?

A History of Abortion

Although much of the recent debate around abortion in media, politics, and law either centers on or touches the question of the beginning of human life, it has not always been immediately connected with the issue of abortion as it is today. Frankly, it is the rise of the abortion debate in the public eye itself that added to the grasp of the question. The history of abortion is deeply intertwined with issues such as childbirth, sex, living conditions, social and economic statuses of women*, and gender hierarchies. In short, the history of abortion is a history of women*.

One book makes this intriguingly clear. In *Abortion: A History* (Fissell 2025), historian Mary Fissell guides one through a 2000-year-old history⁴, where the embryo or fetus only recently became the central focus point. She shows abortion was not always so entangled with the question of the beginning of human life, and its ethical and political interpretations. Abortion has gone through multiple – often parallelly existing – meanings. Discussing some of her major arguments will give an impression of how the reading of abortion has changed throughout time and how the focus on the question of the beginning of life - and its ethical and political implications - has increased in significance over time.

⁴ Fissell almost predominantly discusses the European and U.S. American history of this matter. Evidently, if space and time would allow it, it would be important to engage in a more global historical analysis.

In fact, let alone the term abortion in English, and its analogies in other European languages, have long been a stand-in for a range of intended or unintended ends of pregnancy, like miscarriages. The politicization of the term belongs to our very recent history (ibid., p. 5).

Neither in Antique Greece nor during the Roman Empire was abortion treated as an ethically repugnant thing concerning unborn life. The sources Fissell is listing in her work are mainly showcasing the interest of scholars of that time seeking to understand the processes of early pregnancy and remedies to end it (ibid., pp. 16-28).⁵ Some women* who were in the center of these “empirical” observations were slaves who were, to put it in modern terms, sex workers. Being pregnant or not was an economic issue (ibid., pp. 15-16). Slavery was a common social status resulting in a high amount of the daily workforce (plowing fields, organizing households, sex work, et.al.). A not enslaved woman*, especially in Athens (where Fissell puts her focus on), was not to be considered free in our terms. She was married off early, around the age of 14, her chastity a prime good, “protected” first by her father or male legal guardian and later by her husband. Fertility was valued and needed for women* to ensure their status. Of course, this was predominantly meant to bear a son. So the societal struggle evolved more around fertility than around ending pregnancies (ibid., pp. 16-18). The Husband decided if the child was worthy to be kept and raised. In the case of abnormalities or female sex organs, sources indicate that such infants were left out to die. However, Fissell warns that sources for this practice are thin (ibid., p. 18).

⁵ Historical testimonies of women* are still scarce. Literacy, especially among women*, was low. What we know today comes mostly from courtrooms. Where women* were already persecuted (Fissell 2025).

Another factor that influences the relationship towards the unborn or the newly born is clearly the high mortality of infants. As Fissell reports, in Athens, newborns were not introduced to other family members before the fifth day and named until the tenth (ibid.). It raises the interesting question of how the historically high rate of infant mortality co-shaped the way the beginning of life was conceptualized. Rather than being primarily concerned with the possibility of ending a pregnancy, women* often sought help simply to become pregnant in the first place. One example of this can be seen in the construction of temples dedicated to fertility, where offerings and sacrifices were made in hopes of conceiving (ibid., p. 17). Our current ideas around the rights to one's own body were different. The obligation to bear children, and predominantly sons, was strong, while infant mortality and miscarriages were frequent.

In Rome, the ethical implications of abortion were shifting. From the period of Nero's reign (from 54 CE) onward, ending a pregnancy was increasingly suspected as a sign of female adultery. This shift may also be connected to the fact that Roman women* enjoyed more social freedom than women* in Athens, who were largely confined to the household. As Fissell reminds us, we need to read these sources through a male and often quite misogynist gaze, as we are lacking sources with actual female experiences (ibid., pp. 34-37). Although from male writers we can assume the societal hegemonic discourse and how abortion was a topic dependent on the dynamics of gender hierarchies. The condemnation of abortion was connected to the potential of a man's right to an offspring (ibid., p. 31) more than ethical questions of life. It even went so far that elite Roman women* were accused of

contraception and abortion because of vanity issues concerning their figures (ibid., p. 33).

With the shift toward Christianity, views on abortion also changed—though not yet with the rigidity that is associated with the Catholic Church today. In its early period, Christianity was only one among many religions in the Roman Empire, and abortion may have served more as an additional example used by early Christians to condemn what they perceived as Rome’s “moral decay” (ibid., p. 38), rather than as a fully developed conviction of faith.

How differently the catholic church dealt with unwanted pregnancies comes to astonishing light with the story about Saint Brigid, who was considered to perform several miracles, which have been recorded mostly in the 6th century after her life in Ireland. In one of them, a young woman, also referred to as a nun, who was considered to be faithful and chaste, eloped with a young man. As a result, her belly started to swell. After she received a blessing from Saint Bridget for her womb, the swelling went away, and her virginity was restored (ibid., p. 39). One journalist accounts that for the first story of abortion in Ireland (Audley 2018). Today, other miracles of Saint Bridget are remembered, but it didn’t hinder the anointment of sainthood, or that the myth was forgotten. It is, in fact, still part of the mythological canon.

During later times of the Middle Ages, the approach towards abortion by members of the clergy evolved in interesting ways, as it is also deeply inclined with the history and development of medicine. Hildegard von Bingen, a German nun and later abbess living in the 12th century, is until today a well-known scholar of medicinal plants. In her work, she was describing several herbal plants enhancing blood flow and medicines

that can be used to end a pregnancy while also stating potential dangers for the woman* without entering an ethical discussion on why a woman* would want or should or should not do so (Campbell 2021). In fact, Historians John M. Riddle and J. Worth Estes (1992) have indicated that several plants have been known to women, and especially midwives, throughout ancient times to the Middle Ages. However, how effective many of them were is questionable when analyzed scientifically today. Nevertheless, it indicates that knowledge about abortion and contraception was always part of many women*'s lives.

At this point, it is important to note that this does not imply that obtaining an abortion was safe for women*.⁶ Methods involving plants or more surgical approaches carried significant risks, including incorrect dosages, injury, or infection. Women* had to navigate their reproductive lives carefully, often taking measures that placed their own health in serious jeopardy.

While there has always been a gap between what was preached and what was practiced, women*'s actions were often constrained by a hegemonic dogma, which in European history included both the Catholic Church and patriarchal structures. The Bible's *Exodus* offers an interesting reference to abortion. It frames the issue in terms of violence: if a man harms a pregnant woman* during an ambush and the pregnancy is lost, he must compensate the husband (or owner, in the case of slavery). If the woman* is killed, the penalty is the same as for homicide (Fissell 2025, pp. 41-42). This reflects the principle of "an eye for an eye." Importantly,

⁶ Unfortunately, we have very few first- or even second-hand testimonies of women* performing or receiving abortions in the Middle Ages and beyond (Fissell 2025).

the penalty is not exclusively for ending the life of the woman*, but also for depriving a man of a potential offspring, highlighting the gendered valuation of reproductive life. But more than that, the penalty increased with the stage of pregnancy. Early abortions were subject to much less scrutiny and lighter punishment. The first marker was the concept of formation (ibid. p. 42), largely taken from Aristotle, who claimed that a male fetus would be formed after 40 days, a female after 90. Christian thinkers later added the idea of ensoulment (Gilbert & Pinto-Correira 2017, pp. 98–101). In Christian belief, the soul—central as the carrier of humanity and belonging to the children of God—once granted, became an eternal part of God’s kingdom, marking the beginning of human life. Yet, before the invention of prenatal diagnostic technologies, there was clearly a problem in defining the definitive moment of formation, let alone the sex of the fetus. That is why a later point became important to divide pregnancies into two stages throughout the Middle Ages until the 19th century in Europe and later in the U.S: *Quickening*. The phenomenon refers to the moment when a pregnant woman* first feels fetal movement, which roughly appears between the 16th and 20th week of pregnancy (Fissell 2025, pp. 58-59). It had several important aspects. First, throughout history, quickening was often the only legally accepted proof of pregnancy before it would physically show. Before feeling movement, a woman* could not be certain she was pregnant. Missing the monthly period could also have other reasons. Quickening became what used to be formation for the Catholic Church. It was regarded as the moment of ensoulment. Thereby, women* held the authority to declare their pregnancy, as they were the only ones able to provide “proof” as severe punishment or excommunication frequently

depended on their testimony if they had felt quickening or not, and thereby they retained some degree of power. Although Catholic dogma has condemned abortion as sinful since early Roman times, the perceived degrees of sinfulness varied. Early Christian theologian Augustine argued that abortion before ensoulment was wrong, but primarily because it was considered a form of contraception, which was linked to illegitimate sex. Sex was considered strictly to be reserved for procreation. Sexual intercourse outside of this aim was in itself already sinful (Castuera 2017).

After quickening, however, abortion was considered murder. These distinctions between ensouled and not-ensouled fetuses meant that early abortions were generally frowned upon but often tolerated by the Catholic Church (ibid., p. 122). Castuera goes further in his review of several centuries of Catholic hegemonic thought, showing that abortion was often treated as a “non-issue,” with many Church thinkers regarding it as far less central than it is considered today (ibid., pp. 134–135). Papal doctrines on abortion shifted over the centuries, but the concept of ensoulment remained influential from early Christianity through the discovery of the egg and sperm in the late 17th century, enabled by the newly invented microscope (Cobb 2012), and persisted until the 1870s, when scientific consensus on fertilization emerged (Hopwood, Flemming, Kassell 2018).

Only then, from 1869 onward, did the Catholic Church under Pope Pius IX declare abortion at any stage as impermissible, defining the beginning of human life at conception.

This shift helped raise the question of *When does human life begin?* to the level of significance it holds today. What might have led to this more limiting view on abortion is part of

Chapter 1, when abortion enters modernity and is discussed with new scientific findings.

From Women to Wombs*

Chapter 1 will start with an exploration of how technological innovations in prenatal diagnostics and findings in biology have brought the question of “when does human life begin” to the foreground. From the invention of the first microscope at the end of the 17th century, it took another 150 years until the first fusion of sperm and egg was observed (Hopwood, Flemming, Kassell 2018). More and more the idea of quickening and therefore the agency of women* declaring their state of pregnancy was sidelined by scientific evolution and the rise of male-dominated medicine as an organized institution and its influences both on religion and politics (Fissell 2025, pp. 171-176).

For this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that this also hits the moment in time when not only medicine but also natural sciences emerged in their “modern forms”. And with this emergence also came the positivist conviction of science that over time evolved into a powerful myth that only recently has been challenged in science itself (e.g. Fuller 2007). As we will later see in the chapter discussing today's intermingling of science and religion, this matter-of-fact assumption on science is still very much en vogue in public debate, leading to assumptions as fertilization being the start of life as an undisputable fact.

It is therefore also the history of how the womb became un-private. More and more it became possible for the public “to enter wombs”. And more so, the emergence of the embryo/fetus as an entity being studied, depicted and socially and politically considered independent from the mother. This

is why the Chapter 1 is called “From Women to Wombs – The emergence of fertilization and prenatal diagnostics”.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine how visualization practices and prenatal technologies have shaped debates about the beginning of human life.

What comes to mind when you think of a human fetus? Is there an image? Close your eyes for ten seconds and notice what appears.

Perhaps the image that appeared resembles the iconic 1965 *Life* Magazine cover that depicts a fetus floating in a dark void, thumb in mouth, umbilical cord attached yet seemingly free.⁷ Lennart Nilsson’s photographs profoundly shaped public perceptions of “unborn life”, presenting the fetus not as a biological process but as a fully human entity (Björklund & Jülich 2024).

Yet, photography was only one influential form of visualization. In *Icons of Life*, Lynn M. Morgan shows how embryo collecting in the 20th century contributed to imagining embryos as “ourselves unborn” (Morgan 2009). Furthermore, technologies now routine in gynecology—especially ultrasound—further transformed prenatal diagnostics and reinforced the idea of the fetus as an independent life form.

⁷ Interestingly, only one of Lennart Nilsson’s famous photographs was taken with an endoscopic camera inside a womb; the others depicted aborted or miscarried fetuses. The in-womb image could not show a complete fetus, while the remaining photographs were carefully staged to resemble an already born baby and largely omitted any connection to the mother (Jansen 2019). This is a fact that anti-abortion advocates often overlook when citing these images.

These developments have significantly influenced debates about abortion and the question of when human life begins, and a discussion of their emergence concludes the first chapter.

But what exactly happens at fertilization? And how do biologists, embryologists, and medical doctors use these findings to form an understanding of the beginning of human life? In Chapter 2 I will dive into current findings of what is happening during fertilization and the first 14 days of the gestational process.

Fertilization and the first 14 Days

It won't come as a surprise to readers that fertilization happens through the union of an egg and a sperm. Two cells that become one. One new life. A clear beginning. Distinct and easy to trace.

But is it? I am probably not the only one who grew up with the image of racing sperm, in a matter of life and death contest, to find the ultimate prize: the egg, and to be the first one to hit it. Yet, this is not really how it works. The review of literature in this chapter will not only shed light on the processes taking place during fertilization (Gilbert & Pinto-Correira 2024) but also why the first roughly 14 days hold potential for other markers to pin a start to human life. First, it is worth looking into the definition of life from a biological perspective:

The basic level of organization and the simplest form of life is the cell. Biologically speaking human cellular life never stops - or if it did, the extinction of the human species would result -and is passed on from one generation to another. (Kurjak & Tripalo 2004, p. 6).

Life in biology is something continuous. To mark a starting point, therefore, is somewhat counterintuitive. So the first distinction to be made is between life and human life. The latter has a certain life span, but terming it “human life” inevitably comes with historically and culturally grown connotations, which makes many human embryologists wary of settling the issue by only describing the biological process of fertilization.

Polina Loseva and Vadim Gladyshev (Loseva and Gladyshev 2024) have focused on the first 14 days of the gestation process.⁸ They highlight several different possible stages after fertilization that also could be argued for as the beginning of human life from a biological perspective: Development of a unique human genome, gastrulation, the end of the possibility of twinning, and the beginning of aging.

All of these markers point towards an idea of individuality. Experts in the field of human development are highly aware that individuality is a concept that comes with a lot of cultural, political, and historical connotations. The emergence of a distinct DNA is a marker for individuality that can be assessed in a biological framework. However, as Gilbert points out, we should be careful to believe that our entire individuality derives from our unique set of genes:

Sometimes, when we read magazines and hear advertisements saying that DNA is our soul or that we are slaves to our DNA (another metaphor!), we must remember that the activity of DNA can be modified by our environment and chant it to ourselves often. (Gilbert & Pinto-Correira, p.10).

⁸ Especially since 14 days is a time limit crucial for IVF procedures and stem cell testing.

Human uniqueness is one marker that connects a biologist's perspective of the beginning of human life with philosophical and cultural debates. I will therefore end Chapter 2 with two ideas: Independence and the question of what makes a human being human. The first one is discussed through the concept of viability, the moment a fetus can survive outside of a woman's body, and the latter is exemplified through the brain wave theory (Goldenring 1985).

As we will see, these ideas cannot be discussed without embedding them in a wider socio-cultural discourse: What does independence mean when an infant is still highly dependent on caretakers for years after birth? And why should brain waves be the indicator of humanness? These initial questions are only a foretaste of how complex the issue is again. We are moving on from a biological interpretation of the beginning of human life towards an even more complex issue: When does a human become a person?

This is why Chapter 3 begins with an introduction to the concept of personhood. Historically, this concept is closely intertwined with scientific findings in embryology, but it also serves as a framework for discussing biological facts alongside other possible markers of human life from philosophical and cultural perspectives.

Personhood Debate

Scientific findings of fertilization and early embryonic gestation processes, and the possibility of visualization, have broadened our knowledge of human development immensely. It is a scientific breakthrough and a medical one for the improvement of prenatal care. Nevertheless, it has also brought the debate of abortion to a pressing complex

dilemma: The more we know as a society, the more complicated the debate on the beginning of life seems to be getting. In a way, the stronger the belief of the start of human life at fertilization became, the stronger was the need to identify what else might be important indicators that one is not only a biological organism but a member of society, which receives the same legal and social status as already born humans.

In light of more and more insights about the biological beginning of life, philosophical analyses of the issue have arisen. Personhood considers other factors to be important in considering what makes a human being, aka a person, who is receiving the benefits of constitutional human rights.

We have already encountered some of these identifiers, like individuality and independence, that, from a philosophical vantage point, seem to be markers of a “full” human life, which in consequence, has full legal rights. In the end, it’s the legal sphere that makes this status so pressing.⁹

This is why I will draw on Mary Ziegler’s recent book *Personhood: The New Civil War over Reproduction* (Ziegler 2024a), which – as the title already suggests – is an in-depth reflection on Personhood entangled with the abortion debate in the U.S. since the 1960s. While feminist and abortion-rights advocates have used the concept of personhood to argue

⁹ It is important to note that the question of what it means to be considered a “full human” must also be examined in the context of colonialism, racism, slavery, and eugenics, all of which reveal the brutal consequences when certain people are deemed less than fully human. While I will reflect on these issues in Chapter 3, a broader and important task remains: exploring how the history and meanings of abortion differ when considered in relation to these intersecting systems of oppression.

against a definite beginning of life at fertilization, while situating it within broader political and philosophical contexts, Ziegler demonstrates that the debate around personhood can be framed in the opposite direction, as seen in the fetal personhood movement:

In U.S. politics, fetal personhood is most significantly a claim about the meaning of the nation's Constitution: that a fetus is a separate, unique human individual from the moment of fertilization, and second, that because of that biological and moral uniqueness, the Constitution gives (or at least should give) that individual rights. (Ziegler 2024b, p. 4).

Analyzing parts of Ziegler's book will show that personhood doesn't settle the question of when human life begins, but rather comes with its own complex problems:

Does recognizing personhood mean the United States has to criminalize most or even all abortions? What about IVF? And how can the rights of fetal persons be balanced against those of other persons, including pregnant women? (ibid.)

Science and the Abortion Fight in the U.S.

Chapter 4 shows what happens when scientific findings meet political agendas. Especially in the U.S., the question of personhood has been actively reduced by anti-abortion lobbying groups to a matter of scientific "fact" to silence other possible perspectives on the beginning of human life. The chapter will also highlight how this question "helped" to push anti-abortion campaigns to the forefront of the American Culture Wars, where fundamentalist and far-right politicians come together to win over the American public.

In the recent debates in the U.S., fired by pro-life groups, biologists and physicians are often called as expert witnesses.¹⁰ This strategy frames fertilization as scientific consensus and, by extension, common sense. Scientific findings about fertilization frequently enter highly political and moral debates about abortion, carrying cultural and religious biases. Pro-life arguments often use fertilization as a scientific “truth” to support fetal personhood claims:

By positioning pro-life scientific claims as objective, non-religious, and non-ideological, the movement attempts to lend credibility to its arguments about fetal personhood. (Oh 2025, p. 29).

In the U.S., one focal point in defining life’s beginning is the *heartbeat debate*. Since 2019, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Ohio, and South Carolina have passed heartbeat bills, banning abortion after six weeks—when an ultrasound detects what is commonly called a heartbeat (Evans & Narasimhan, 2020). Pro-life advocates use the culturally loaded image of a beating heart to argue that abortion after six weeks is murder. However, scientists describe this as “fetal cardiac activity,” emphasizing that the embryo is far from viable at this stage and that viability generally requires at least 20 weeks’ gestation (Lambert et al., 2023). This debate exemplifies how scientific findings acquire moral weight. For many pro-life advocates, fertilization already marks life’s beginning; the heartbeat allegedly makes it “undeniable”, while Pro-choice advocates stress that such legislation relies on cultural symbolism rather than biological viability.

¹⁰ Surveys of the U.S. public indicate that biologists are considered the most qualified to answer this question (Jacob, 2021, p. 226)

But why the heart? What possible implications arise for women* when their rights can be restricted based on such vaguely defined markers as the concept of a human heart?

In Chapter 4, I address these questions and examine the role of language within these debates. We have already encountered a range of terms—such as *gestation*, *embryo*, and *fetus*—each with distinct biological meanings. In heated public discourse, however, these are often replaced by terms like “the unborn,” “baby,” or “child,” which are used to convey particular positions rather than biological precision.

Vo v. France: A legal case

However, the issue has never belonged exclusively to biology or philosophy; it has always been about how particular ideas become embedded in institutions and translated into decisions that affect women’s bodies and daily lives. It is the law, after all, that most directly shapes women’s immediate futures. Chapter 5, therefore, turns to the legal repercussions of trying to define when human life begins. As a concrete illustration of these dynamics, it examines the case of *Vo v. France*, where the legal complexities surrounding life’s beginning appear (European Court of Human Rights, 2004). In a hospital mix-up, the six-month pregnant Madame Vo lost her fetus during a mistaken procedure and filed for criminal charges. French courts ruled that, as the fetus was not legally a person, the doctor could not be charged with unintentional homicide (*ibid.*).

Appealing to the European Court of Human Rights, Vo argued that Article 2 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (“Everyone has the right to life”) should protect the fetus. The Court rejected her claim, citing the absence of consensus on when life begins. A contrary ruling, it reasoned, could have

jeopardized reproductive rights (ibid). This case illustrates the difficulties of translating contested scientific and moral concepts into legal definitions and decisions.

What happened to Women's right to choose?

Chapter 6 addresses a central and urgent issue: women's right to choose at any stage of pregnancy. A report, carried out by a working group of the UN Human Rights Special Procedures, has emphasized that discussions of personhood must consider not only the fetus but also the full personhood of women* (Raday et al., 2017):

Insisting on the right to life of zygotes and fetuses and equating this right to the right of a born woman to her life, her health, her autonomy, and her entire personhood by criminalizing termination of pregnancy is one of the most damaging ways of instrumentalizing and politicizing women's bodies and lives, subjecting them to risks to their lives or health and depriving them of autonomy in decision-making. (ibid., p. 8).

While abortion debates have intensified in recent years, especially in the U.S., women's right to choose remains an ongoing struggle (Berer, 1988). Contemporary arguments in favor of this right are often entangled with debates that claim scientific authority over the beginning of fertilization. Fixating on a single starting point for human life, however, inherently restricts women's autonomy: the very question of when life begins is used politically to undermine reproductive rights. This chapter explores a central paradox: not answering the question leaves women vulnerable to political and legal contestation, yet defining it definitively risks permanently curtailing their rights. The stakes are clear—how society

frames the beginning of human life has direct and profound consequences for women's autonomy, health, and freedom.

Before I dive into the first chapter, it is important to me to state the relevance of this work again. Putting the question of *When does human life begin?* in the current re-heated abortion debate, it might be a rather odd thing to do for a woman and a feminist scholar. After all, dealing with beginnings has always had essentialist qualities. But the question is nevertheless at the heart of many brutal and utterly misinformed anti-abortionist campaigns.

So my motivation for this work was to get informed on how this question emerged and what it does in different contexts today. Women's wombs are political and therefore vulnerable to political and ideological changes. We can see how fast laws can be changed in the case of the U.S. However, in Germany and Austria, abortion is not a constitutional right; it remains legally prohibited, although women are not prosecuted if it is performed within the first three months. Women all over the world have to continuously ask themselves: What if an extreme right party comes to power? How sure can women be to always have the possibility to obtain an abortion legally and safely?

And on another, more personal account: would it be safe for me to talk about my own abortion here? Or would it haunt me someday, professionally, politically, because this work will be saved in some archive accessible for the future? Of course, this is a hypothetical question only.

But it shows the effect this question has on women. It makes them and their bodies vulnerable, and therefore we need to know – maybe not how to answer it but how to deal with it.

*And the Bible doesn't mention us
Not one of us women not one mother
Who with germinating child said no
we women who with little flames
in our bellies we women with candles
who drank turpentine who threw
down forty stairs leapt so high
we hit our heels on our backsides
landed on bird spikes pricked our inflated bellies
with pins pulled out deflated skins on strings
we women who lay like fish all night in the snow
baths full of ice cold hung ourselves like fur coats
on wire hangers we women who stepped over
vipers swallowed gunpowder not once did the Lord
God use his word to praise us to damn us to
name us*

*for whereof one cannot speak
thereof Lord hear us*

this is what we did

-Genesis by Amelia Louli

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PREFACE

After All

This Is

**Just
Another**

Beginning

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After all, this is just another beginning

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Abstract

In contemporary discourse, where philosophical and artistic thought is often shaped by relational ontologies, *After all, this is just another beginning* asks what has become of beginnings. Are they everywhere, emerging with new contingencies? Or have they vanished, since everything co-emerges from pre-existing relations? And yet we still mark beginnings socially: we celebrate them, we time them, perhaps even fear them.

After all, this is just another beginning exists as both a durational performance and a written piece. The written part explores this dilemma by examining beginnings across different themes and disciplines. The chosen form is a set of introductions, each highlighting beginnings in its own way and raising distinct questions. One introduction addresses Hannah Arendt's concept of natality, another explores creation myths, and a third considers the beginning of human life in relation to the abortion debate.

The chapter titled *Preface* offers insight into how the author connects these introductions under the guiding question: What do beginnings do when we think through them? It also relates the written work to the eponymous performance. Since readers are invited to make their own connections, the author recommends reading the *Preface* last—but the choice is ultimately yours.

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I started to perform

It was during a residency in February 2024 that I began to perform with beginnings. This was not the initial plan. Originally, I intended to create a performance structured like a scientific paper, divided into several parts: an Abstract, an Introduction, a Theory section, a Discussion, and a Conclusion. The idea was to develop a fragmented performance that would examine how knowledge is produced in scientific writing through performative storytelling.

During the residency, however, I received feedback from fellow participants that the piece felt overstretched, confusing, and overall overwhelming. To my surprise, they were most drawn to the Introduction section, which I personally found the most confusing of all. It was also the most difficult part to rehearse, as much of it was improvised. In this section, I unrolled a thread and drew it through the space while reciting a text about beginnings. As the repetition continued, I increasingly leaned into the absurdity of asking again and again where and when to start, accompanying the text with ever more absurd actions. Gradually, the red thread accumulated, forming a net that eventually spread across the space.

Much of what I do today in the performance *After all, this is just another beginning* was already present during this residency: the red thread, the making of a net, the repeated text, the shifting actions and movements. Yet much has also changed. Most importantly, I began to take introductions seriously in their own right, rather than treating them merely as openings to what would later “actually” happen. I discovered a depth within them.

Previously, I was still trying to construct a dramaturgy that would connect the introduction to the subsequent sections. Now, I was confronted with the task of creating a piece that would, in a sense, remain stuck at the beginning. From one rehearsal to the next, I delved deeper into the complexities of beginnings. It also became clear that, through this process, I was engaging with broader conceptual questions:

How do I perform beginnings? What could the dramaturgy of a performance look like if it revolves solely around beginnings?

Such conceptual questions call for a theoretical framework. So...

I started with a dilemma

It was during my first Master's degree in Science and Technology Studies that I became familiar with what I would later frame under the label of *relational ontologies*. I was introduced to Actor–Network Theory and its material-semiotic approach, in which ontology, facts, objects, textual forms, and reality are enacted in networks, and the exclusivity of human agency is challenged (Callon 1986; Akrich 1992; Law 2009).

It was, however, Donna Haraway's ideas that truly blew my mind:

Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. (Haraway 2016a, p. 58)

This passage on sympoiesis summarizes much of Haraway's thinking for me. It captures a notion that runs through her work: that nothing simply exists or emerges out of nothing—like an *ex nihilo* myth—but is instead the ongoing result of relations. In another well-known line from *A Cyborg*

Manifesto, she makes this particularly clear: "In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense[...]" (Haraway 2016b, p. 8). Within this line of thought, it was getting tough for beginnings in my mind.

It got even tougher after I encountered Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Barad 2007), in which she questions the existence of entities altogether: "In other words, relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions." (ibid., p. 140).

Although these theories are more complex than just putting them under the same roof of *relational ontologies*, I use the label to describe how I understand their common ground: beings, objects, and knowledge come into being through relations. This fundamentally changes how the world is perceived—not as static, but as a dynamic, ongoing becoming.

From this position, I found myself in the studio, struggling with performing beginnings and encountering a dilemma: If nothing pre-exists relations, what becomes of beginnings? Either they are everywhere, constantly emerging—or they disappear, because everything co-emerges. I struggled with this dilemma: Would I always fall back into essentializing stories? It felt like chasing a phantom. Endless regressions. Threads and more threads.

And yet, culturally, we perform beginnings constantly: in speech ("let's begin"), in rituals (initiation rites), in calendars and festivities such as New Year's Eve, and in imperatives—like calls to finally start doing something about the climate crisis. From an ethnological perspective, this dilemma begins to dissolve.

Beginnings can be profane or immensely powerful—or dangerous, especially when they harden into origin stories.

Postcolonial critique has shown the risks embedded in essentializing people into invented categories of race and levels of civilization (e.g., Said 1978). Or we might recall the debates around the origins of COVID-19, where the search for an ultimate source fueled conspiracy theories (Qiu 2025).

I kept asking myself: How can I work with this dilemma when I personally subscribe to relational ontologies? And most importantly: How can I work with them without falling into essentializing traps?

I had a hard time wrapping my head around this dilemma. Especially since relational understandings also appear in contemporary art. One example is the exhibition I participated in during my first year in Art & Science. In *From there through here*, we students presented individual artworks that were nonetheless produced in active reflection of each other's processes. The curation emphasized this ongoing-ness and co-emerging production: "The projects have been, are, and will go on, through some-bodies, some-time, something, somehow." (Künstlerhaus 2022).

The piece I created for this group exhibition was titled *This is not an audioguide* (Bastam 2022). It was a portable sound installation that visitors could use like a conventional audioguide, listening through an MP3 player and headphones while walking through the exhibition. Yet it was not an actual audioguide: rather than explaining the artworks, it offered a sound collage composed of various recordings I made while we were planning the exhibition. One question guided me in particular: "How many stories must be made invisible in order to tell only one?" (ibid.).

Looking back, it feels somewhat strange to realize that I was already engaging with the notion of beginnings. In trying to reveal something of the exhibition's becoming, I now think in retrospect that I was also implicitly asking when an exhibition

actually begins. When a visitor enters the space at the opening and encounters the artworks? When an artist installs a finished piece? When the idea for a work first emerges? Of course, all of these moments—and none of them—can be considered the beginning of *From there through here*.

Even so, I sensed that there was something significant about beginnings, although at the time my focus lay more on questions of representation and on the assumption that, even within a highly collaborative exhibition, artworks come into being as individually authored pieces. And yet, concepts such as individuality, representation, and beginnings are somehow related to each other (pun unintended). They point toward an understanding of the world that privileges entities over processes of becoming. I am much more convinced by the latter perspective, but it is difficult not to think in terms of entities at all. And so I began to wonder whether it might be useful to find ways to think with them—to work through them, and to challenge their entity-ness from within.

I started reading

Since I do not subscribe to the one and only story of presumed origins but still wanted to work with beginnings, I began to explore what they do across disciplines, authors, and contexts.

First, I thought about the contexts in which beginnings are placed at the center of a discussion. It seemed obvious to look into performance-making, storytelling, and dramaturgy, but I soon realized this was too close to my own artistic practice to create any real shift in my thinking. Yet from thinking about storytelling, I arrived at creation myths. I thought: How else to engage with beginnings than by reading how everything came into being?

So many different worlds opened up to me—poetic, intriguing, sometimes funny, sometimes strange or obscure. And beyond their beauty, I encountered the possibility of wrapping beginnings into an entire story, leaving many things open, especially to interpretation, as my introductory chapter on creation myths also shows. This was both liberating and inspirational for my performance practice.

Here, I adopted the method that would guide me through all the introductions, the performance, and how I connect all of it. Thinking-through is a method of not only research and perspective but also practice. It is lent from physicist and philosopher Karen Barad and her interpretation of diffraction, which she both derives from Donna Haraway's broadened understanding of reflection, that would only be mirroring something against each other (Barad 2007, p. 29). Barad develops the idea further with quantum theory:

One important aspect that I discuss is that diffraction does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance, and so, unlike methods of reading one text or set of ideas against another where one set serves as a fixed frame of reference, diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter. (ibid., p. 30)

I take this approach to read but especially think through different sorts of beginnings; not to find the truest one, but to broaden my understanding of what beginnings can do. The focus on difference, the flexibility of what might be at stake in a given context, and to gain also flexibility in interpretation seems relevant for my entire approach for both the research and the performance.

Precisely because there are so many different creation myths, they have been highly inspirational for this work. For me, engaging with them was not about identifying the most convincing story or the “best” set of symbols. Rather, it was about encountering many different ways in which beginnings are made to matter.

Because performance-making is deeply tied to experimentation, creation myths offered rich material to play with. During rehearsals, I conducted try-outs that incorporated different qualities I encountered through reading these myths and their interpretations: How could I perform a beginning out of nothing? As emergence? Through separation?

What began as a game gradually became a tool within the rehearsal process, which ultimately fed back into the introduction of creation myths. From this process emerged different modes of starting a project: *Trickster by Thought*, *The Chaotic Deus Faber*, and *Emergence Through Separation*. Throughout the performance of the piece, I constantly experience diffractive moments. I am both enabled and limited to do certain things with the string; the same goes for the net that continuously grows; it becomes something to play with, but also something that can literally bind me. And of course, there is the aspect of audience interaction: since I cannot plan how people will react when I am, for example, offering them the string, I give up a certain amount of control, as well as the thread of the story I have just begun to create. Through these interactions, I am required to come up with something else and to start over.

At some point, a friend mentioned Hannah Arendt and her concept of natality to me. I had read other works by her before, but engaging more deeply with her ideas on human

agency and freedom—and the way she connects them to the capacity to begin—proved revelatory for this project. Arendt's understanding of the ability to begin as ultimately inseparable from the ability to act gave me a strong sense of empowerment.

While she, in a way, also suggests that beginnings are everywhere—since they ground the human capacity for action—she does not render them insignificant. On the contrary, for Arendt, beginnings are what make us truly human. They constitute our political power and serve as a constant reminder that life is change, and that we are part of it. Even if this may sound somewhat cheesy, I still find it deeply important.

When I look at the current state of the world, I often feel powerless, and sometimes I am even close to despair. Reading Arendt reminds me that we still have the potential to act—and in some cases, even the responsibility to do so. Her insistence that we can only truly begin, act, and ultimately be human in plurality is particularly crucial to me. It is a major inspiration for the strong emphasis on audience participation in the performance.

In this sense, the interview snippets with my mother are not only a reflection on birth and an engagement with Arendt's theory, but also a way of putting that theory into practice: *Handeln* through communication.

In the introduction to *The Question of the Beginning of Human Life*, my position as a researcher trained in Science and Technology Studies initially takes the foreground. My artistic intention is not immediately visible. Yet in relation to the performance *After all, this is just another beginning*, the engagement with these themes becomes immensely important. Within the performance, I reflect on my personal

political position regarding both the difficulty and the political relevance of beginnings.

On the one hand, it becomes clear that the legal and political framing of beginnings and endings can have life-changing—or even life-threatening—consequences. On the other hand, this topic has shown me that one cannot simply turn away from the question of beginnings, despite all commitments to relational ontology. One must expect counter-arguments that cannot simply be met with the response: *But it could be otherwise.*

I find it important to take a stand against such essentializations, which also appear within the lines of argumentation of far-right politicians and anti-abortion advocates who seek to fix the beginning of human life in service of a political agenda. A key concept here is *response-ability*, also borrowed from Haraway:

Relays, string figures, passing patterns back and forth, giving and receiving, patterning, holding the unasked-for pattern in one's hands, response-ability; that is core to what I mean by staying with the trouble in serious multispecies worlds. Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game [...]. (Haraway 2016a, p. 12).

Again, it is about taking differences into account to form responses that think through and with the others. I understand response-ability as a meaningful yet complex task, with the question of the beginning of human life, because essentializing arguments are out there, and I argue we need a broader understanding to weaken them. Taking it to beginnings in general, I argue that in order not to fall for essentializing origin stories, we need to understand better what beginnings can do.

So...

I started writing

And decided the best way to do navigate through all of this was by writing only introductions.

Introductions in academic writing provide an overview of what will come. They look backwards, written after the research is complete. Beginnings work differently: they don't know yet.

In my case, introductions made me envision something I hadn't produced yet—like an entire book. I had to imagine it, speculate, write with the confidence of hindsight I didn't have. However, I still did extensive research for each introduction. It mattered to me to know enough to ask the questions that might appear in an introduction.

Also, during my previous studies in ethnology and Science and Technology Studies, we read countless dense introductions—they seemed enough for us to “get the hang of something.” I wanted to challenge myself to allow gaps, not to have collected everything, not to conclude. As a performance artist, I think about the audience: I wanted to lay out material that others can think further with. In a way, I wanted to present enough material to have a conversation with people that would make up the “rest” of the book.

Not only was this task interesting and suited my preference for variety. I also started to conceive it as a feminist endeavor that favored plurality over single authorship. Writing introductions of non-existing books was a way to break with patriarchal dramaturgical structures where the beginning only serves the triumphant end after overcoming challenges. Why not make the beginning *the* story?

And then...

I started to encounter myself

Hi there. So, where to begin?

I feel like most storytellers would argue that the end of a story is what really counts, no? The big grand finale.

But, a story first must be told in order to become one and the telling only happens with the beginning.

So the question of where to start is crucial, you see?

However, the beginning of something is always the end for other possibilities.

And that is why I have always been more afraid of beginnings than of endings.

You get the situation I have brought myself into.

The text that I constantly repeat in the performance *After all, this is just the beginning* accompanied me for months during rehearsal periods in the studio. Over those months, it changed slightly—but not much; in fact, I mostly shortened it. Through constant repetition, it became a mantra whose meanings shifted in relation to the performative actions I was undertaking at different moments.

But what do I wish to say? I came up with this text long before I arrived at the concept of writing only introductions.¹

¹ One major inspiration that ignited my desire to work with text was the performance “Black Hole” by Jyoti Dogra, which I saw in January 2022 (Dogra 2022), even before I began the Beginning project. Although the theme was very different from my own work, Dogra deeply impressed me: all she had was a story and a white linen sheet. Over the course of about one and a half hours, she connected the story of her mother’s death with black holes, finding different ways to fold the white linen. This was all—and it was incredibly powerful.

Of course, many other performance and dance artists inspired me, whom I was fortunate to see or learn about over the past four years. Still, I return to Dogra when thinking about how I would like to tell a story: with simplicity, my own voice, and endurance.

Underlying it all, there was always something else going on: me. Even though I sensed it, understood it rationally, and wrote it into the text for the performance, I still could not fully grasp or deal with it—my fear of beginnings.

Throughout my twenties, I was quite restless. I changed cities and countries, study programs, and career goals frequently. What might be considered “normal” for a privileged European passport holder growing up within capitalism gradually began to weigh on me. Why couldn’t I just arrive? I felt as though I could never stay long enough with something or somewhere to truly get the hang of it. By the end of my twenties, when I began Art & Science, I thought of myself as *a jack of some trades and a master of none*. It would take another four years for me to realize that, precisely because of this feeling, Art & Science was the right environment for me. In the introduction to *Creation Myths*, I have already described how I felt at the beginning of this Master’s: hectic in trying to “discover” my artistic practice, jealous of colleagues who seemed to find their way more easily, and largely clueless about how to be an emerging artist. Nevertheless, I consciously chose to venture into the arts—into what was, for me, unknown.

Without going into detail about why I may have felt this way—seeking out beginnings while simultaneously fearing them—I will say this: now, at the end of my Master’s in Art & Science, I have not changed in my tendency to seek out new things, but my approach to them has shifted. I am less afraid. More often, I am able to perceive beginnings as a wonderful and integral part of making art, of constantly diving into different worlds. It is also this project on beginnings that brought me here.

And if you wish, you may find different creation myths of me within the introduction chapters and the performance. I will

not lay them out explicitly, but, as with myths more generally, you are invited to seek out the symbols and interpretations for yourself.

I started to perform but differently

Coming to this realization evidently also altered the way I continued performing. As the performance initially triggered my research process, the research in turn changed the way I built the score. Through reading many different approaches to beginnings, I realized how strongly I had previously been attached to the idea of constructing a conclusive dramaturgy that would somehow deliver a resolution. It became clear that this was beside the point. Instead, I needed to break with the classical arc of dramaturgy.

The dramaturgy had to remain a kind of no-dramaturgy, in the sense that as soon as I encountered a storyline, I would need to break it again and move in a different direction.

The repetition of the text remained crucial—not because of what I was saying, but because of what I could do with it. Do I really believe that most storytellers would argue that the end of a story is what truly counts? To be honest, I don't know. But that is not the point. What matters to me is playing with meaning, and how meanings can be shifted by performatively enacting new beginnings again and again. Being able to work with the material this short text offers is essential. For this reason, it became clear that the piece had to be durational. Within a conventional fifty-minute time frame, the temptation to build a concise dramaturgy is strong. Durational work, by contrast, allows for multiple ways of diving into different beginnings. It also entails endurance—not only physically, but even more so mentally. Going through this process was crucial.

I remember a moment in the studio that felt like a small epiphany. Once again, I was struggling with the material and conceptually felt as though I was falling back into endless regressions. And then it became clear: the performance is not about finding beginnings; it is about beginning again and again. That's all.

This may sound banal, but it became a significant task for me. Improvisation is, of course, an important element of the performance. At the same time, I spent intensive periods rehearsing and collecting materials that felt right. I also trained my voice and body language. Maintaining a certain level of tension at all times was something that emerged directly from the research on beginnings.

In each moment of the performance, it can truly be about that particular beginning—until it moves somewhere else.

Outlook

Finally, *After all this is just another beginning* is a multilayered endeavor for me. The performance and the written part are connected, but they can also be regarded independently. The same goes for the three different introductions. All of it is a way to explore and engage with beginnings. As with beginnings they can be regarded as one single thing and at the same time as something very relational, built up and inspired through each other. This sort of dialectic is important for thinking through beginnings. And one needs to watch out: they are highly performative. Either they make us act as with Hannah Arendt, they are building cosmologies as with creation myths, or they bring legal and therefore very physical consequences as with the question of the beginning of human life.

I conceive *After all, this is just another beginning* as a continuous project. I imagined producing many more

introductions—and still intend to. When you start thinking about beginnings you see them everywhere.

I am thinking about evolution theory, geological processes, paleontology, and about performance-making: how to deal with the pinnacle moment of entering the stage, how to break it.

Not only content, but also form interests me. The writing process was a challenge of weaving content and form. Yet I can imagine more experimental ways—introductions as initial notes, or dropping an argument mid-sentence. Looking for and through beginnings has set me on an exciting path, one that leaves many aspects open. I hope that by not concluding everything, it invites readers to engage personally and imagine how the story might continue.

In other words, this was just the beginning.

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