

Who's Afraid of Birth? Exploring Mundane and Existential Affects with Heidegger

Tanja Staehler

Abstract

While certain levels of fear and anxiety seem quite appropriate to the experience of birth, it is detrimental if they become overwhelming. This article strives to understand birth-related affects more thoroughly by asking which affects are commonly involved, and how they come about. Martin Heidegger provides the most developed phenomenology of affects available to us. A phenomenological perspective proves useful because its close description allows categorising affects into mundane ones like fears—evoked by specific entities and circumstances—and existential ones like anxiety. Anxiety concerns our existence in its entirety and brings us face to face with the fact that we are finite beings in a groundless existence. Giving birth means needing to negotiate existential affects in a mundane situation. The birth-giving woman is dependent on others to take her seriously in her experience of affective turmoil in which anxiety and wonder, fears and anticipatory anxiousness come together.

--

I had no choice, needed to make no decision. I was moved because something was in preparation that was new and came from us, and because the world seemed to me to be waxing. Like the moon before which one is supposed to bow three times when it is new and stands tender and breath-coloured at the start of its course. [...] Now I trembled at the very thought.

Ingeborg Bachmann, "Everything"

When it comes to the emotions associated with the process of childbirth, fear and anxiety take priority. They hold a peculiar status because on the one hand, they seem a natural or normal emotional response and are expected to give way to relief and happiness later. On the other hand, they have detrimental effects if they become too strong or even get out of control. Martin Heidegger claims in his existential philosophy that fear and anxiety are not naming the same mood, but need to be distinguished. This article will take an existential-phenomenological approach to develop a more differentiated idea of the emotions or "affects" involved in the birth process and the conditions that evoke them. The term "affects" is chosen in accordance with the neutrality of the phenomenological perspective to describe how women are emotionally *affected* before and during the birth process.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ The decision to use the concept 'affect' for purposes of this article does not concern the difficult and ongoing discussion as to how the terms *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung* in Heidegger's work should be translated. Stambaugh suggests 'attunement' and 'mood', Macquarrie and Robinson use the rather unhelpful 'state-of-mind' and 'mood'. When citing from *Being and Time*, I give the translation that seems most convincing or provide my own, without specifically indicating. All page numbers refer to the German edition; they are provided as marginal numbers in both English translations.

Phenomenology of Affects

An initial definition of phenomenology can be provided by describing the focus of phenomenology as concerned not with *what* we perceive and experience, but *how* we perceive and experience it. Normally, we dwell in the world by attending to objects as well as tasks and states-of-affairs; in other words, we concentrate on *what* is to be done. Phenomenology requests for us to change this attitude, focussing away from everyday tasks and objects towards *how* we approach and experience world. In the case of birth, such a change of focus seems helpful since the experience is not really about objects, and what is crucial about it cannot be reduced to tasks or practices.

Because it is not about objects, phenomenology is particularly suited for an analysis of affects. The rather substantial topic of affects will be addressed here only in a preliminary fashion to prepare for the discussions of fear, anxiety, anticipatory anxiousness, and wonder below.

Firstly, the advantages of a phenomenological approach to affects will be outlined by mentioning briefly some shortcomings of the main alternatives. Secondly, we will provide a frame for Heidegger's discussion of affects, specifically fear and anxiety, by previewing it with the most common objections. In examining Heidegger's discussion of fear and anxiety, we can then immediately see to what extent he is vulnerable to these objections and to what extent our investigation of birth requires us to expand the framework provided by him. Let me respond to a potential discomfort from the beginning: it might appear surprising that we will follow Heidegger's analysis so closely, especially considering the substantial objections his analysis evokes. Yet we will see that his

account carries much further than it first seems. Even though there are a few moments at which we need to add to his elaborations, his analysis overall proves very resourceful for understanding the differences between the affects involved in birth, the reasons behind them, and the possibilities to create conditions that would facilitate a balance between the relevant affects and minimize the danger of detrimental anxiety and fear.

Concerning the philosophical history of approaching affects, Heidegger maintains that the “fundamental ontological interpretation of the affects has hardly been able to take one step worthy of mention since Aristotle.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, Heidegger praises Aristotle for realizing that affects are not as such a matter of psychology; Aristotle treats them in the *Rhetoric* and discusses how they relate to speech and speakers, and we will return to this important connection below.

Affects are undoubtedly difficult to describe in a fashion that moves beyond the merely subjective, and yet phenomenology is determined to accomplish such a move. Philosophers may have made little progress with the topic since Plato and Aristotle, but why not trust psychology as a discipline that focuses exactly on the soul (*psyche*) where already the Ancient Greeks located affects? In his critique of psychology as a science, Heidegger is mostly concerned with certain questionable metaphysical assumptions underlying psychology.¹³⁹ Traditional psychology, like other

¹³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Albany: SUNY University Press (2010), 39.

¹³⁹ It seems that Heidegger might be more sympathetic to phenomenological psychology, as some psychologists developed it following Husserl's leads. Heidegger never states that psychology should be abandoned; he only points out that Daseinontology precedes psychology and other sciences, and that the latter

sciences, treats human beings as if their mode of existence was equivalent to an object, that is, something merely present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), merely present in the physical way.¹⁴⁰ Biology and physics become paradigmatic sciences, and the relations between humans or the relation between a human being and his or her world are treated in terms of natural causality. An affect turns into a reaction that is caused by a specific object which can be quantified and, if so desired, removed. Once a quantitative framework with its behaviourist implications has been accepted, affects indeed appear alterable. Yet our experience shows that affects overcome us, and that we are more vulnerable to them than a traditional psychological account makes it seem.

What does a phenomenology of affects have to offer, in contrast? It investigates affects as phenomena arising out of being-in-the-world. Usually, we think of affects as something occasional, subjective, and unreliable. Yet affects do not just depend on the subject, on my personality and disposition; otherwise, my affective disposition would be much more stable, and I would not experience affects as linked to a certain object or situation. At the same time, affects are not merely object-dependent either: different people are affected differently by the same object or situation. Heidegger concludes that a mood “comes neither from ‘outside’ nor from ‘inside,’ but arises out of being-in-the-world.”¹⁴¹ Affects emerge from the interplay between inside and outside, or between Dasein and world.

remain groundless if they do not consider ontological issues while constantly making implicit claims about being.

¹⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 49.

¹⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 136.

We assume that we experience affects every so often, for example, when we are sad or happy. Heidegger emphasizes that we always have a mood, even if this mood is just indifference, and that it is a mistake to only focus on the extreme cases of moods. The fact that we are always in some mood also makes it easier to understand that we do not first perceive or know something to then develop an emotional approach in a second step; only by abstraction can affects be considered something secondary. Instead, we always already “turn toward or turn away.”¹⁴² If an investigation of affects requires an analysis of being-in-the-world, phenomenology emerges as the most suitable method.

Fear versus Anxiety

The significance of the concept of world makes it possible to distinguish between such affects which are concerned with entities in the world and those fundamental affects which concern everything there is, the whole, or the world. Heidegger explains this distinction in his famous analysis of the distinction between fear (*Furcht*) and anxiety (*Angst*). Before we attend to the relevant sections of *Being and Time*, let me outline two objections against Heidegger’s analysis which by now qualify as classic objections. This procedure will allow us to already read Heidegger’s account with the relevant objections in mind and consider to what extent the criticism is justified.

Firstly, it has been objected that Heidegger places too much emphasis on anxiety. Secondly, Heidegger has been accused especially by French phenomenologists (such as Jean-Paul Sartre,

¹⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 135.

Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida) to not give sufficient attention to the Other, or the other person. These two objections have been combined into one by Klaus Held who argues that it is exactly the emphasis on anxiety that causes difficulties for Heidegger in addressing issues of intersubjectivity or being-with-one-another.¹⁴³ According to Held, the analyses presented in *Being and Time* are one-sided because they focus on anxiety at the expense of wonder and on death at the expense of birth¹⁴⁴. We will return to the connection between birth and wonder below.

Heidegger approaches fear and anxiety by asking specific questions which reveal the determining dimensions of affects, such as the “in the face of which (*Wovor*) we fear,” “fearing itself,” and “that which fear fears about (*Worum*).”¹⁴⁵ To prepare for the contrast to anxiety, Heidegger summarises his discussion of fear in the following way: “Our interpretation of fear as an affect has shown that in each case that of which we fear is a detrimental entity within-the-world which comes from some definite region but is close by and is bringing itself close, and yet might stay away.”¹⁴⁶ The detailed analysis leading up to this summarizing statement occurs in Section 30 where Heidegger explains how the object of fear is not yet close enough to be in our control, and how we do not quite know

¹⁴³ Held’s article (1993) is intended to contribute to the heated debates about the connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his brief period of sympathy for National Socialism. This political dimension is not relevant for our purposes here. Nor will we attend to Held’s suggestion that love would provide a helpful supplement to the one-sided focus on anxiety. I have argued elsewhere that this proposal is questionable since love does not seem to fulfil the definition of a fundamental mood (see [removed for blind review]).

¹⁴⁴ Held points out that there are a few exceptions even within *Being and Time* (*BT*, 391, 373 f.) and especially in later texts (Held 1993, fn. 53).

¹⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 185.

whether it will come closer or not, which increases rather than decreases the fear.¹⁴⁷

Especially the uncertainty as to when the entity might be coming close and the fact that this uncertainty (and even the possibility of “staying away”) enhances rather than decreases the fear is highly relevant for our case of birth. It is one of the most unsettling features of birth that it can begin to happen at an almost entirely unpredictable moment: as a premature, normal, or late birth; during night or day; while the pregnant woman is at home, in a public place, outdoors, etc. Although every pregnancy will lead to some birth such that birth will never entirely “stay away,” it is quite possible that the actual birth is so different from the anticipation that some of the feared elements might indeed never come about.¹⁴⁸

But does birth even fit the definition of “that in the face of which we fear”? Heidegger claims that fear always comes about through some “detrimental entity within-the-world.” More precisely, this entity can have the character of an object or of *Mitdasein*¹⁴⁹, that is, an entity whose mode of being is existence, like our own.¹⁵⁰ Yet when it comes to fear in the face of birth, what we fear are not objects, nor is it the infant to be born (*Mitdasein*), but the *event* of birth. An event is not an entity. What follows from this? Firstly,

¹⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 140.

¹⁴⁸ E.g., in the case of a Caesarian. In turn, those women who fear a Caesarian most will normally indeed find themselves in a situation where what they fear might well pass them by.

¹⁴⁹ Heidegger introduces the term *Dasein* to avoid misleading understandings of the human being (like the ones to which traditional psychology ascribes, as outlined above). He explains the concept as follows: “This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being, we shall denote by the term ‘*Dasein*’” (*BT*, 27).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

there is the possibility that Heidegger's statement might be wrong, and fear might not always be about an object or about *Mitdasein*. Yet we should only consider this option after giving Heidegger the reader's benefit of doubt and see whether the claim might still be defensible. Another possibility would be that birth is not something in the face of which we experience fear, but something which gives rise to anxiety. This possibility will now be explored because the contrast between fear and anxiety reveals both affects more clearly.

While we experience fear in the face of an innerworldly entity, anxiety is characterized exactly by the lack of such an entity. Because we cannot identify what is causing anxiety, we tend to be evasive and say that it is "nothing": no thing, nothing specific, no definite entity. Rather, everything becomes problematic. Nothing in the world can provide a hold, and in that sense, "the world has the character of completely lacking significance."¹⁵¹ The contrast to fear becomes more defined when returning to the dimensions Heidegger distinguishes. That in the face of which we fear is an innerworldly entity, and that which fear fears about is our existence to which this entity will be detrimental if it comes to hit us. For anxiety, that in the face of which (*Wovor*) we experience anxiety and that which we are anxious about (*Worum*) coincide. It is nothing specific that threatens us, but rather, our existence as a whole is revealed in its precariousness and vulnerability. For this reason, anxiety is not tied to any specific moments or experiences, but can arise in the "most harmless situations."¹⁵² In and through this experience, "being-anxious discloses, primordially and directly, the world as world"—although obviously not on the level of cognition, but on the level of affects.¹⁵³ As everything in the world

¹⁵¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 186.

¹⁵² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 189.

¹⁵³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 187.

becomes insignificant, we are made aware that we usually rely on a context of significance or a world which we take for granted and which seems to be our home, but which is on the most fundamental level uncanny.

Returning to the question of birth, we should now decide whether it causes fear or anxiety. Unfortunately, neither the description of fear nor the one of anxiety seem to entirely fit. For fear, we encounter the already mentioned problem that birth is an event and not an entity, and the fears involved in the event do not seem to be about specific entities either. Anxiety is a more fundamental mood, not tied to any particular events or experiences, but to our existence or world as a whole. To understand the elusive mood of anxiety better, interpreters tend to relate it to death, as Heidegger himself does at times. This is partly justified, partly problematic:

(1.) Death indeed plays a crucial role for anxiety because we do not know when it will happen, and the impact which this uncertainty has on anxiety is at least as effective as not knowing when the detrimental entity will confront us in the case of fear. In both instances, the uncertainty increases rather than decreases our fear/anxiety. Yet in the case of death, the situation is nonetheless different because it cannot “stay away” – even though, due to its elusiveness, we tend to presume exactly that, on an everyday level.

(2.) However, anxiety should not be exclusively linked to death, especially not to death as an event, but more generally to our finitude or mortality, and even more generally, to nothingness. *Being and Time* examines our existence and thus places particular weight on the nothingness of Dasein which is brought about by death. But there are moments in *Being and Time* which emphasize the significance of nothingness more generally, and the way in which it contributes to the world’s uncanniness.

The connection between anxiety and nothingness is helpful for our discussion because birth seems to evoke the kind of anxiousness – the term anxiousness is selected to avoid settling on either fear or anxiety for now – that is not related to death specifically, but indeed to our nature as finite beings with limited powers and capabilities. In other words, we are not usually afraid that we are actually going to die during the process of giving birth. Nowadays, this happens very rarely. Furthermore, whatever anxiousness we might have in that direction would not single out birth in relation to other bodily experiences such as, for example, small operations which usually carry a minimal chance of death (e.g., from anaesthesia) yet which do not normally make us anxious, or at least not in the same fashion as birth.

It thus seems more plausible that any anxiety before and around birth is not caused by anxiety before death as such, but by a wider ontological anxiety which birth can indeed invoke. This ontological anxiety is best described by way of questions about this incomprehensible event. How would one finite creature be able to release another finite creature from itself? Does not embodied existence seem too fragile to be capable of undergoing an event of such unimaginable dimensions? Is not the exposure of existence to nothingness such that we cannot possibly imagine ourselves emerging from such an experience unscathed, in one piece, still in the body from which we started? The body which I used to inhabit by myself but which has come to house another creature whom I have not yet seen, which adds to making the event more mysterious and unimaginable.

Yet at this stage, it should become obvious that in relation to birth in particular, but also in general, there is a counterpart to the nothingness that causes anxiety. The nothing is countered by the

“there is.” As Leibniz put it, the question, “why is there something rather than nothing?” creates a fundamental and irresolvable puzzle for us.¹⁵⁴ It is amazing that there is something rather than nothing; this amazement is usually referred to as awe or wonder. Birth is more obviously related to the “there is” than to the nothing that stands over against all things as their potential or actual end. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly true that birth causes anxiousness, and although the anticipation of wonder might help to balance this anxiousness, it does not eliminate it. This is only appropriate, given the nature of wonder. What brings about wonder, in this instance, is exactly the fact that we do not yet know what will emerge and cannot even imagine it, and that we cannot ultimately imagine that there will indeed be a living creature.

When it comes to our objective of identifying the affects related to birth as fear or anxiety, it has thus emerged that anxiety as explained by Heidegger does not completely fit because the event of birth is not very closely connected to death or the nothing (except as its counter-pole, which is certainly not irrelevant). More importantly, Heidegger’s description of anxiety does not capture birth-related affects well because if asked what she was anxious about in relation to birth, the mother would not say that it was “nothing.” The indefinite character of anxiety and the fact that it can arise in any situation do not hold for birth. It is a specific event, an event that is coming close and yet will come about at an indefinite moment that is causing anxiousness. Nonetheless, it is not fear about a specific entity either.

At this moment, we may ask whether this is not rather a shortcoming of Heidegger’s analysis more generally: apart from the

¹⁵⁴ Leibniz “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason,” 527.

contrast between fear and anxiety, are there not several closely related affects that fall outside of this division, at least in the way Heidegger sets it up? If fear is about an entity in the world and anxiety is about nothing specific (but the nothing that threatens the “there is”), it would seem that his account fails to apply to any events (specific, but not entities). Furthermore, he appears to have omitted the temporal dimension quite relevant for birth and many other events. What is at stake for birth as well as several other events is something like anticipatory anxiousness. Given that Heidegger explains so well how the entity coming close which might also stay away gives rise to heightened fear and also given the title *Being and Time*, it would be quite surprising if time ended up being one of Heidegger’s blind spots.

Perhaps we need to expand Heidegger’s account and add new concepts aside from fear and anxiety to capture kindred affects? It turns out that Heidegger himself makes a suggestion in this direction at the end of Section 30; yet for him, this is a further specification within the category of fear: “thus various possibilities of fear result.”¹⁵⁵ When something threatening suddenly indeed comes about, “fear becomes alarm (*Erschrecken*)” (ibid.). Furthermore, “when what threatens has the character of the completely unfamiliar, fear becomes horror (*Grauen*).” And when these two come together, that is, when the unfamiliar and thus horrible comes so close that it is alarming, we experience “terror (*Entsetzen*).”¹⁵⁶

These distinctions are helpful for continuing our analysis of birth-related affects. In particular, the characterization of something “completely unfamiliar” is fitting and is indeed crucial to the

¹⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 142.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

experience. Birth is an event that qualifies as entirely extraordinary, that is, outside of the ordinary, and completely unlike our everyday experiences. It is indeed completely unfamiliar as an experience, and this unfamiliar nature of the event is a major factor in the anxiousness that it causes.¹⁵⁷ The unfamiliar nature of the event is linked to the fact that we cannot imagine the event, both because it is so unlike everything else and because as an event, it seems quite impossible. Every time that we try to imagine the event (and it is both useful as well as inevitable that we would try imagining it during pregnancy), this unfamiliar nature makes itself present and gives rise to what Heidegger calls horror. And once it becomes obvious that the process leading up to the event has suddenly begun and is in its early stages, such that birth is indeed coming close, there is alarm. This alarm combines with horror into terror – yet due to the anticipation of wonder, also a kind of excitement.

At the end of the analysis of fear, Heidegger thus provides us with further categories that help capture the affects related to birth. For Heidegger, terror is still a version of fear. Yet the character of what is threatening here, namely, being completely unfamiliar, moves beyond the category of innerworldly being. If the threatening is an innerworldly entity of complete unfamiliarity, we can no longer pinpoint it. It could thus be an event of sorts, with dimensions that are causing the fear without being clearly identified as such. Especially if we consider that the entities causing fear also include

¹⁵⁷ This characterisation is appropriate even for the case of multiple births, though it then obviously needs to be qualified. Firstly, there is normally indeed more anxiousness connected to the first time of giving birth. Secondly, there are still sufficiently many unknowns for all subsequent births to justify the characterisation (e.g., will it be similar to the first time or entirely different? Timing, location, and mode are again almost entirely unpredictable).

other people (*Mitdasein*), a number of exemplary fears can be described. The situation might not be quite right, or the place might feel wrong, or there might not be the right people in terms of the health professionals. Furthermore, we might fear that the person whose support we were hoping for would somehow fail to be there, or be prevented by external circumstances. A version of such fears might thus be at stake – yet they would not quite capture the deeper level anxiousness. Here, the distinction between fear and anxiety becomes relevant again which Heidegger introduces with the purpose of showing how anxiety is the more “fundamental” affect. Heidegger claims that anxiety “first makes fear possible” as it is the deeper affect that reveals the precarious nature of our existence to us.¹⁵⁸

We can conclude from our discussion that both fear and anxiety are involved in birth, in a peculiar combination. Birth brings us face to face with the nature of our existence that usually remains concealed. Our finitude is disclosed through the fact that we are not only mortal, but also come into the world in a way that we cannot grasp. Not only is it impossible for the creature who is being born to remember consciously how this happened, but even for the mother, the event is fundamentally unimaginable and ungraspable. It is an event of enormous existential and ontological magnitude, and nonetheless, the event must be negotiated within a very mundane situation. Because birth happens within the tension of fear (as terror) and anxiety, seemingly small disturbances of the mundane level concerning the situation or interpersonal communication can easily undermine the precarious equilibrium.

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 186.

So far, we have seen that the distinction between fear and anxiety is useful in relation to birth. But we have not yet seen whether the distinction is complete or whether other affects belonging to the general realm of anxiousness should be considered. Furthermore, the issue of temporality has arisen as relevant; our next topic will thus be anticipatory anxiousness.

Anticipatory Anxiousness

There is a difference between fears and anxiety that come about once the actual birth process begins, and anticipatory anxiousness that affects women during pregnancy. Upon closer examination, there are actually four kinds of birth-related anxiousness to be considered here:

Anticipatory anxiousness. Such anxiousness relates to anticipating the birth process, and it can emerge quite some time ahead of birth, during any moment of the pregnancy.

Terror, or the kind of fear that emerges when it is clear that the birth process has begun. Heidegger's term "terror" for describing the combination of alarm and horror seems indeed quite appropriate here. The experience of something radically unfamiliar and horrifying (already by virtue of its unimaginable nature) has suddenly come close, and it is only a matter of hours.

Anxiety. As discussed above, birth or the close prospect of it can well lead to moments of revelation and thus anxiety about our ontological situation as finite creatures. The world in which we dwell as finite creatures is itself a landscape in which the "there is" constantly stands over against the nothing.

Fears emerging during the actual process. As explained in the previous section, the need to undergo an unfamiliar and inconceivable process in a mundane situation, and thus the stark contrast between the weighty and the ordinary, can well give rise to and exacerbate various fears about this situation. These fears might under different circumstances appear trivial, but in the face of such an existentially volatile situation, they are not.

(2) is a version of (4), but nonetheless worth singling out for clarity. Yet what is the character of anticipatory anxiousness? It stands out in a number of ways. Firstly, it might seem that it should not be discussed in this article because it occurs during. However, it is clearly an anxiousness that is anticipatory of birth and thus relates to the close description of birth-related affects as undertaken here. Secondly, its character as anticipatory anxiousness involves a crucial temporal component which will provide an opportunity to examine the resources Heidegger provides in this respect. Thirdly, anticipatory anxiousness has a surprising empirical dimension which will be the starting point for our discussion.

From the perspective of empirical research in psychology, anticipatory anxiousness is peculiar because it stands in an unexpected correlation to the birth experience. Women who undergo anticipatory anxiousness are likely to fear that they might not cope very well with the actual birth process if already the prospect thereof is proving so unsettling. But there is unexpected good news: psychological research has proven that more anxiousness before birth correlates to a more positive birth experience. The article in which Crowe & von Baeyer present these findings concludes as follows: “This is the portrait of the woman who is most likely to have a positive childbirth experience: anxious and fearful (perhaps realistically so), yet competent in her

knowledge of the labour and delivery process and confident in her ability to control the pain associated with it.”¹⁵⁹ Women were asked about their levels of anxiety when attending pre-natal classes, and this was compared to findings up to 48 hours after birth. While high anxiety levels during birth correlate to high pain levels, there is the reverse relation between high anxiety around the time of pre-natal classes and the actual birth experience.

The procedure that yields these findings proves somewhat questionable from the phenomenological perspective. The authors state that their usage of self-report measures makes their results susceptible to distorting factors. From the phenomenological perspective, any attempt at quantitatively measuring anxiety and pain is questionable because subjects selecting numbers from a pre-given range to gauge their anxiety creates a substantial element of interpretation which is then concealed behind the numbers that convey an impression of objectivity and precision. More refined measures like the McGill Pain Questionnaire which was applied in this study involve a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures since the subjects are asked to choose terms to describe their pain. Yet such questionnaires bring in a wide semantic range (e.g., “pain as bad as it could possibly be”)¹⁶⁰ that is neither explained nor explored, but simply translated into quantitative descriptors.

Despite these and similar hesitations, the result that is of interest to us here seems reliable and could have been yielded with a simplified interview mechanism. The reasons for the correlation between high

¹⁵⁹ Kathryn Crowe and Carl von Baeyer, “Predictors of a Positive Childbirth Experience,” *Birth* 16:2 (1989): 63.

¹⁶⁰ This is an interesting category since it involves the subject’s imaginative powers which have multiple dimensions, as introduced above.

anticipatory anxiousness and a positive birth experience, however, are not clear from the study. A phenomenological description allows understanding the result better since the description is closer to the explanation. Crowe & von Baeyer suggest that the correlation comes about because the women with higher anticipatory anxiety expected more pain and were thus positively surprised. But such an explanation would only be truly plausible if the pain experienced was of a definite level and independent of the expectation. Furthermore, the maxim “expect the worst and be positively surprised” can certainly not be applied as a mechanism for positively influencing experience in general. It may rather lead to discouragement which impacts negatively on the situation.

For birth in particular, the correlation previously mentioned between anxiety and fear during the process and a negative birth experience could be evoked by high anticipatory anxiousness. Why does this not happen? In their abstract, the authors suggest that this is because “women may have recognised and dealt with their concerns earlier.”¹⁶¹ Since the article concludes in general that knowledge, competence and confidence are factors contributing to a positive birth experience, the interpretation implies that it is because of their anticipatory anxiousness that women seek out information and prepare themselves better for the birth process. But anxiousness could also lead to repression, denial or a kind of debilitating nervousness that deters from mentally engaging with the process beforehand.

Why does anticipatory anxiousness as identified by the authors of the empirical article not lead to evasion and thus more likely to a negative birth experience? From the phenomenological perspective,

¹⁶¹ Crowe and von Bayer, “Predictors of a Positive Childbirth Experience,” 59.

it is relevant that these women report their anticipatory anxiousness. Admitting this anxiousness to an interviewer or questionnaire indicates the kind of awareness that points to a mental engagement with the process and affects involved in it. This also means that the “self-report measures” involved in this research which the authors consider a “limitation” of their research is indeed relevant: not as a limitation, but as a factor that picks out a specific affect which could be called “acknowledged anticipatory anxiousness.” In other words, those women who experience a debilitating level of nervousness are quite likely to not admit of it to themselves and others. But once anticipatory anxiousness has been identified and admitted, the authors’ suggestion that these women prepare themselves differently for the birth experience seems plausible.

However, to what extent is it even possible to prepare for a positive birth experience? What can anticipatory anxiousness motivate us to do? On the practical level, such preparation consists of various imaginative exercises which involve selecting place and circumstances for the birth (within certain limits of possibility), writing a birth plan, obtaining information about the process, possible remedies and interventions, etc. Why such mental exercises are helpful can be explained with the help of Heidegger’s philosophy, and moving to more general philosophical considerations at this point can also be helpful in terms of dealing with other events that cause anticipatory anxiousness which can be addressed in equivalent ways.

For Heidegger, the crucial event which gives rise to the most fundamental anticipatory anxiousness is death. What Heidegger describes as anxiety is, in fact, always related to the most fundamental form of anxiety which is anticipatory anxiousness

before death (though it has been emphasised above that anxiety must not be reduced to anxiety before death, but involves other phenomena related to nothingness and the overall groundless ontological scenario that we are facing). In his considerations on death, Heidegger presents the enigmatic notion of “anticipation of death (*Vorlaufen zum Tode*)” which sometimes leads to the distorted understanding that Heidegger encourages us to spend our existence reflecting on death. But he says explicitly that the idea of anticipating death does not mean “thinking about death,” let alone “brooding” over it.¹⁶² The point is not to think about death as death, but to grasp existence as something that always involves the possibility of death and is co-determined by this possibility. Death should be contemplated as a possibility, not in terms of its actuality. We relate “to something in its possibility by expecting it,” yet the difficulty consists in expecting it on the level of possibility rather than actualisation.¹⁶³ An anticipation of death or a perception of existence as involving the possibility of death means to understand my existence as very much mine, and thus my responsibility. Since nobody else can die for me (at least not in such a way as to make me immortal), death individualises – as does birth.

There are some crucial parallels as well as differences where the anticipation of death versus that of birth is concerned. While death is relevant exactly as a possibility, an anticipation of birth involves anticipating its actualisation. Birth will be actualised, around a certain “due date” or during several weeks before and up to two weeks after. When it comes to imagining birth as an encounter with the unfamiliar, it is an impending actuality that we imagine. However, there is an affinity between birth and death revealed by

¹⁶² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 261.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

these thought experiments in the sense that both are individualising. Just like death makes me aware of my existence as ownmost and my responsibility, there is also a realisation that giving birth is my responsibility. This is the case all the more so since such anticipatory engagements make me aware that the most vulnerable creature in the process is not me, but the infant. Hence, the connection to wonder. Wonder, however, here does not mean thinking about the "cute baby," but rather, astonishment that birth as an event is possible, and has been proven possible, by generations; yet it is one of the most ungraspable aspects of our existence. It is wonder as inextricably linked to anxiety, as will be discussed below.

Before exploring more closely what the imaginative engagement with birth can consist in, the nature of anticipatory anxiousness will be explored a bit further from a phenomenological perspective. This exploration also sheds more light on the character of birth since an affect is always linked to that in the face of which it arises. For anticipatory anxiousness, the "anticipatory" character appears crucial. It is an affect that is defined by its temporality as future-directed. Already in his initial analysis of fear, Heidegger places emphasis on the way in which that in the face of which we fear is "coming near," yet in such a way that it also "bears the revealed possibility of not happening and passing us by."¹⁶⁴ This possibility, Heidegger submits, "does not lessen or extinguish fearing, but enhances it."¹⁶⁵ A first reaction to this description might be that birth does not fit this characteristic since it is definitely going to happen once pregnancy has occurred. True, there might be the terrible event of a miscarriage or the medical event of a Caesarian section, but the latter is still a form of birth and will be discussed

¹⁶⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 141.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

below, and the former does not seem relevant to the experience of anticipatory anxiousness.¹⁶⁶ If we ask more closely why the possibility of not happening enhances the fear, it turns out that birth indeed exhibits the relevant characteristics described by Heidegger. The reason as to why the possibility of the fearsome passing us by enhances fear is not because we are somehow also afraid of the entity's staying away. Since the object or event is fearsome, its not-happening would be a cause for hope rather than fear. But since we do not know whether it will or will not come close, the uncertainty enhances the fear.

In other words, the uncertainties surrounding the fearsome are increasing the fear. Something is approaching, yet we do not know when it will occur, and not even whether it will definitely occur. Uncertainty is something with which we do not cope well because it makes us aware of our helplessness in relation to that which we fear. Taking appropriate measures, for example, it significantly more difficult if we do not know when and whether something will happen. In the case of birth, its not-happening is indeed only possible in certain abnormal ways. The possibility of a Caesarian, however, is one of the factors contributing to anticipatory anxiousness since it is itself a cause of fear, for many women, and at the same time, it would make some of the other fears irrelevant. Since a scheduled Caesarian is unusual and should in any case (due to the increased danger of medical complications) not be a response

¹⁶⁶ If we wanted to engage more closely with the possibility of miscarriage, it would actually confirm the Heideggerian characterisation since such a possibility indeed enhances rather than decreases fear. On a more general level, the possibility of premature birth can be a component of anticipatory anxiousness since one of the dimensions of the ungraspable character of birth might manifest by way of a sense of fearing for the infant to come out early. Yet this would not always be the case, and it thus still seems true that such events are irrelevant to the main characteristics and motivations of anticipatory anxiousness.

to anticipatory anxiousness, the uncertainty of a (non-scheduled) Caesarian only adds a dimension of unpredictability and thus increases rather than decreases fear. In general, the unpredictable character of birth regarding its “when” and “how” is one of the main factors causing us to fear it, and Heidegger’s analysis proves helpful in this respect.

Yet the temporal character of anticipatory anxiousness has so far only been a minor factor in the discussion, as one of several uncertainties surrounding birth. Given that Heidegger names his work *Being and Time*, we can rightfully expect time to be the focus. Heidegger states that the temporal dimension most relevant to affects is the past, or that which has been: “attunement temporalizes itself primarily in having-been.”¹⁶⁷ This is surprising and, given our concern with anticipatory anxiousness, unhelpful. Yet Heidegger thematizes this very problem in relation to his analysis of fear. He plays devil’s advocate and raises the concern that fear emerged as related to a “coming evil (*malum futurum*).”¹⁶⁸ It is true that fear emerges in the face of something coming, yet the basic character of affects nonetheless connects us to the past because affects reveal our thrownness or the fact “that we are” without being able to grasp or even access our own ground.

The groundlessness of our existence relates exactly to the inaccessibility of our own having been born. Not only do we have no access, by way of memory, to our birth, but we were born as thrown into this world that we did not bring about and that is on a primordial level uncanny. We enter this world as entirely helpless creatures to whom birth is presumably even more alien of an experience than to birth-giving adult women. To be sure,

¹⁶⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 340.

¹⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 341.

Heidegger does not usually discuss thrownness in terms of birth (and Hannah Arendt was the first of many to accuse him of this omission)¹⁶⁹, but given our emphasis in this study, it seems helpful to explain thrownness as revealed by affects in terms of birth, or having been born.

Yet even if affects reveal and originally emerge from our being thrown and thus our having been born before we ever engage with our existence, the relevance for anticipatory anxiousness still needs to be clarified. Firstly, anxiousness before birth brings us face to face with the inaccessibility of our own birth and thus connects us to our uncanny origins. This connection thus explains better why the prospect of birth is existentially so relevant and connects us to a level of our existence where anxiety resides, as evoked by the realisation that we *are*, yet as emerging from and being held out into the nothing, as Heidegger would put it. To exist means to exist (Latin *ex-sistere*), that is, to stand out (into). Secondly, Heidegger shows how the three dimensions of temporality – past, present, future – are much less separate than it usually seems. The past “does not follow after Dasein but always already goes ahead of it.”¹⁷⁰ Similarly, we are able to anticipate our future in the present, by way of our imagination. When it comes to birth, the intertwining and mutual dependence of future and past creates special possibilities as well as a special weight. Birth is not just an event that happens at one definite moment in time, but an event that will accompany us, both infant and mother. The extreme case relevant to this realisation would be birth traumas which make it obvious that the impact of a terrifying birth experience has consequences for the long-term future.¹⁷¹ Yet it is the same

¹⁶⁹ Arendt 1999.

¹⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 20.

¹⁷¹ See Ayers, Eagle, Waring, 2006 and Thomson, Dykes, Downe, 2011.

interconnectedness that makes it possible to prepare for birth by way of the imagination, and to anticipate wonder.

Wonder

The parents' experience of the newly born infant is that of a stranger or alien – even more so for the father than for the mother, but ultimately, for both. Because birth turns out to be an encounter with the infant as a stranger, there is an emotion complimentary to anxiety involved in the experience which can best be designated as wonder. Wonder emerges in the encounter with something new and unexpected, or with that which we cannot reliably anticipate. When it comes to birth, wonder is certainly involved as an affect because there is suddenly a new creature, a new beginning, a new world.

We can thus return to the first of the two widespread objections against Heidegger's account as indicated above. Does the emphasis Heidegger places on anxiety make his account one-sided? The reason Heidegger focuses on the fear/anxiety contrast, as we have seen, lies in anxiety being a fundamental mood that has no specific object, but comes about by way of our being-in-the-world as such which is always threatened by nothingness. Fundamental affects are affects which determine our world as a whole, and when the affect is revealed to us, it reveals the world. We have now seen that there is at least one other such fundamental affect: wonder. Wonder emerges as a kind of counter-affect to anxiety, being invoked by the "there is" that stands over against the nothing. It is an affect relevant for our purposes because it is indeed an affect relevant to birth. Most of the interpreters who argue that Heidegger's account of moods in *Being and Time* is one-sided claim that it is the

emphasis on mortality rather than natality or death rather than birth that makes his account insufficient. Yet we have seen that anxiety also relates to birth.

As both a phenomenological analysis of fundamental affects in general and a closer description of affects involved in birth reveal, wonder is by no means a straightforward opposite of anxiety. The story "Everything" by Ingeborg Bachmann already implies this complexity since wonder comes to evoke a new level of anxiety, an other-related anxiety. In this instance, the anxiety relates to preserving and protecting the new beginning which can best be understood in its radical newness by describing it with the help of the concept of world. "He was the first human. Everything began with him, and it was not excluded that everything might become entirely different through him."¹⁷² We will return to this description; for now, the passage only serves to suggest that what is at stake are "existential" emotions, weighty ones of the order that belong to birth and death, old and new worlds, and the possibility of new beginnings.

The general affinity between wonder and anxiety is indicated by the way in which the "there is" and the nothing belong together. We would not be amazed about the fact that there is something if it was not for its contrast with the nothing that stands over against it and seems ontologically the more likely option. On the existential level, natality and mortality indeed signify our connectedness and exposure to the nothing. Our embodied existence exposes us to damage, injury, and accidents to such an extent that we have developed numerous mechanisms of ignoring and repressing these threats. This denial becomes habitual and contributes to our

¹⁷² Ingeborg Bachmann, "Everything," in *The Thirtieth Year*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), 64.

conviction that the death of others is an “undeniable ‘fact of experience’,” as Heidegger puts it but my own death is nonetheless inconceivable.¹⁷³

On the wider ontological level, the nothing makes itself manifest by way of decay and disappearance. Being is not static, but is coming to be and ceasing to be, by way of ongoing circles of life and materiality. In these ways, we encounter nature. Heidegger rightfully points out that we have started to misconceive nature in mechanistic and technological terms, as something to be “mastered and possessed”¹⁷⁴, and fail to see the original meaning of *physis* as “coming forth into itself.”¹⁷⁵ Wonder designates exactly this amazement at the fact that animate and inanimate nature comes forth by itself and yet always remains in threat of falling back into the nothing from which it emerged. Hence the close connection between wonder and anxiety as fundamental affects.

In response to the first objection, namely, that Heidegger places too much weight on anxiety at the expense of other fundamental affects, we can thus respond that his account is not one-sided since anxiety is intrinsically linked to its counter-affect, wonder. Overall, there is a very limited number of fundamental affects since they need to concern the world as a whole rather than individual entities in the world.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, it can be argued with the help of Heidegger that the link between the “there is” and the nothing is so intricate that there is only one fundamental affect that presents

¹⁷³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 257.

¹⁷⁴ As Descartes’s famous formulation of the “maîtres et possesseurs de la nature” has it (Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, I, 6).

¹⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” In *Basic Writings*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 21.

¹⁷⁶ Another one would be boredom (see Heidegger 1995).

itself differently (with more emphasis on the “there is” or more emphasis on nothingness).¹⁷⁷ Anxiety is the name for this fundamental mood as it shows itself when considering the nothing, and wonder is its name when it manifests by way of the “there is.”

The essential link between wonder and anxiety also becomes obvious in one particular feature of that in the face of which we experience this fundamental affect. That in the face of which we experience wonder or anxiety has a strong component of unfamiliarity. Wonder is related to the unfamiliar as surprising and new, anxiety to the unfamiliar as uncanny and threatening. Yet in their radical manifestations, namely, as radically unfamiliar, the completely new and the uncanny indeed coincide. Birth brings this to the fore in an exemplary fashion. On some level, it seems entirely predictable that a baby will emerge; yet who and how this baby is cannot be anticipated, and the encounter with this unforeseeable Other brings about the “trauma of wonder.”¹⁷⁸ The Other whom we encounter in the infant is alien, in a wondrous as well as in a traumatizing fashion. The alien infant thus becomes a most intriguing manifestation of nature, not in the sense of mere organism but in the sense which Heidegger has reminded us of: coming forth by itself. In all his or her complete vulnerability and helplessness, the infant is nonetheless very much a thing of its own, independent and willful.

¹⁷⁷ Heidegger makes this claim in his *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, but since the argument behind this suggestion is based on a framework of complex interconnected ideas beyond the scope of the current article, we will take the general ontological picture as indicative and Bachmann’s story as exemplary.

¹⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 39.

It becomes tempting to hope for this entirely new creature to come into his or her own without any external influences or intervention. Yet the realization of such a desire can only lead to tragic consequences, as Bachmann's story shows to which we will now return. Fipps' father experiences his newly son as something new that could bring about an entirely different beginning: "Everything began with him, and it was not excluded that everything might not also become entirely different, through him. Should I not leave the world to him, blank and without meaning?"¹⁷⁹ If it were possible to let Fipps grow up without introducing him to this world of engrained prejudices and customs, he might be able to reveal the nature of the human. Fipps' father hopes for this nature to be something innocent and self-defined, something authentic, it seems.¹⁸⁰ Such a new and different creature might finally be able to bring about a new beginning rather than simply following the ways of others. The father hopes that Fipps would listen to that which usually gets ignored, such as shadows, or the language of leaves.¹⁸¹

Yet the hope is thwarted. Fipps' father identifies the cause of this failure: language. "And suddenly I knew, it is all a question of language and not merely of this one language of ours that was created with others in Babel to confuse the world."¹⁸² Indeed, the meaning of the world is conveyed to us through language, in the narrow and in the wide sense, and through linguistic products:

¹⁷⁹ Bachmann, "Everything," 64.

¹⁸⁰ Yet authenticity is itself a tricky concept, and the difficulties in understanding Heidegger's usage of it (German *Eigentlichkeit*) show that it is questionable whether we can ever bring about something truly authentic or be truly authentic, and if so, whether it would be possible to discern it as such. For a discussion of authenticity in Heidegger, see my [removed for blind review].

¹⁸¹ Bachmann, "Everything," 63.

¹⁸² Bachmann, "Everything," 61.

stories, songs, rhymes.¹⁸³ But would it be possible to present Fipps with a world that is “blank and without meaning”? No: this would be an isolated world, a world without others. The infant not only needs others (for comfort, support, food); he also wants others, is drawn by meaning, wants to participate in this world which seems exciting precisely because others have shaped it in multiple layers of meaning. Fipps becomes like the others, and his father cannot accept this. When Fipps is taken from this world through a school accident that is nobody’s fault, this event only serves as an external marker for a tragic development: the outcome of an experiment doomed to failure. Fipps’ father was right in sensing that birth shows how new beginnings and new worlds are possible -- but only on the basis of and in dialogue with the existent world. Without language which always bears traces of others, Fipps’ father cannot relate to Fipps and introduce him to this world which, despite the fact that “[h]ere, where we are standing, the world is the worst of all worlds, and no one has understood it up to now,” is still the only world we have and thus the starting point for everything else, including all new beginnings.¹⁸⁴

This world is a shared world, and we need the engagement with and relation to others. The infant exhibits this need in a primordial, immediate, unconditional fashion. Being the guide in somebody’s primal world encounter is an enormous opportunity and daunting responsibility. The event of birth is determined by a sense of this enormous responsibility. What does it mean to be the place where this impossible, incomprehensible, and entirely

¹⁸³ Just as Fipps mother, much to the father’s chagrin, seduces the son: “She stood unflinchingly bent over the nameless river and tried to draw him across, she walked up and down on our bank enticing him with chocolates and oranges, tops and teddy bears” (Bachmann 1987, 63).

¹⁸⁴ Bachmann, “Everything,” 61.

unfamiliar event is going to happen? How can we carry responsibility for another creature who is invisible up to birth and when visible, still unfamiliar and alien? Luckily, we do not need to find an answer to this question because we are always already carrying this responsibility, already during pregnancy. Over time, this realisation grows on us, naturally evoking wonder and anxiety.

Conclusion: Who's the Who?

The questions at the end of the last section returned us to the main findings from this article. Birth seems impossible and yet is happening all the time, with a necessity that can be intimidating as well as reassuring. Birth gives rise to existential affects where anxiety and wonder are closely related because our existence is determined by natality as well as mortality, and on the ontological level, the “there is” stands over against nothingness. In addition, the process of giving birth also evokes a variety of mundane affects, especially fears arising from the situation. These mundane fears can become volatile because they arise in conjunction with the weighty existential affects.

It is clear that it is me who is giving birth, and nobody else can do it for me. Nonetheless, the event and the affects involved are so complex that the “who” question is not a trivial one. Those who assist in the birth-giving (midwives, doctors, partners, doulas,...) should be aware of this complexity. It is due to the confrontation with weighty existential affects that seemingly small discordances on the mundane level can become quite disruptive. Being the one who gives birth means having to negotiate existential affects in a mundane situation and having to endure the tension between existential and mundane affects. Other people are a crucial

dimension of the mundane situation we find ourselves in, and they have an enormous impact on our affects. The second objection against Heidegger's phenomenology of affects as reported above has thus also proven misplaced. Even though Heidegger might not say much about the specific roles that others play in our lives, it is clear that the world in which we exist is essentially and through and through a world that we share with others. Furthermore, others are what affects us most, and by providing us with the most developed phenomenology of affects, Heidegger also gives us the resources to think about how others contribute to our affects, for better or worse. In sum, even though Heidegger does not elaborate in detail on the topic of the Other in *Being and Time*, his phenomenology of affects provides the condition for the possibility of reflecting on the role of others for our life, and this role cannot be overstated.

Especially our sense of self or of "who" we are is essentially determined by our relations to others. If the "who" is not taken seriously with her anxiety and fears, even those fears that might appear trivial, and if the body is treated like just a physical body, the "who" wants to withdraw. During the various stages of the birth process, the "who" of the experience can get so discouraged that there is no longer a "who." Yet this is detrimental because at the end, it has to be me who owns up to the responsibility. There has to be a "who" to pluck up the necessary strength and determination.

The process involves so much fragility, waiting, unpredictability, dependence on others, and confrontation with affects, that the "who" can easily get crushed. If there is no longer a "who" to respond to the "who's afraid" question, it becomes impossible to summon this "who" in the crucial moments. If all that is left are affects, that is, fears and anxiety, without a subject, medical

interventions become much more likely. This is detrimental for anybody involved, and most of all for the “who” to re-emerge. This “who” wants to be able to look back and be able to say, who gave birth? Me. The fact that this impossible event did happen is a cause for anxiety and wonder, and both are going to accompany the “who” in relation to the “to whom” for a long time to come.

References

- Ayers S., A. Eagle, and H. Waring. “The effects of postnatal PTSD on women and their relationships: a qualitative study.” *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 11:4 (2006): 389-398.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.
- Bachmann, Ingeborg. “Everything.” In *The Thirtieth Year*, 62-82. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987.
- Crowe, Kathryn and Carl von Baeyer. “Predictors of a Positive Childbirth Experience.” *Birth* 16:2 (1989): 59-63.
- Heidegger, Martin. “What is Metaphysics?” In *Basic Writings*, 93-110. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.
- *Being and Time*. Albany: SUNY University Press, 2010. [abbreviated *BT*]
- Held, Klaus. “Fundamental Moods and Heidegger’s Critique of Contemporary Culture.” In *Commemorations: Reading Heidegger from the Start*, edited by J. Sallis. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1982.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason.” In *Leibniz Selections*, edited by P. Wiener. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Thomson, G., F. Dykes, and S. Downe, editors. *Qualitative Research in Midwifery and Childbirth: Phenomenological Approaches*. London: Routledge, 2011.