

# What St. Augustine Taught Hannah Arendt about “how to live in the world”: Caritas, Natalivity and the Banality of Evil

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As the *New York Times* labeled her in the 1990s, Arendt was “a woman of this century.” Indeed, she remains a woman of this 21st as well. Her writing can be as abstract as a Jackson Pollock painting and as concrete and particular as the daily political news. Honore Balzac’s famous quip applies equally well to Arendt. About her, “All is true.” How many Hannah Arendts are there? The answer is, as many as we choose to read, and to write.

Arendt’s doctoral dissertation on Augustine’s “strange dialectics” launched her academic career in Germany. It also propelled her lifelong concern with “the actual problem of how to live in the world.” A battered copy of the manuscript stayed with her in Parisian exile, internment in Vichy, and escape to New York City in 1941 where, in the early 1960s, she had planned to publish it. In the intervening years between emigration and the Post-World War II and Cold War eras, Arendt became a woman of the world – a public intellectual, with her face on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, her articles published in the flagship journals of the New York Intellectuals, and *Origins of Totalitarianism* establishing her as a new, authoritative voice on what she called the “shock of experience” in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Like the *City of God*, *Origins* recapitulates the recent history of European calamities, casting blame on the ideological paradigms of imperialism, anti-Semitism and totalitarianism, rather than liberal democracy itself, just as Augustine blamed Roman *libido dominandi* for the degeneration of the pax Romana, not the laws and institutions of Rome.

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1 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: A Harvest Book, 1968(1951), viii.

Indeed, with Arendt's dissertation in mind, *Origins of Totalitarianism's* Augustinian roots are hard to ignore. In the key chapter, "Ideology and Terror," which she added to *Origins* in 1958, Arendt ends her excursus on the frozen, dark world of ideological thinking with an Augustinian thought drawn directly from her dissertation – the promise of natality, a new beginning. As she glosses Augustine, "every end in history" opens the possibility of novelty, of the unprecedented. Arendt underscores this most ancient, yet most 20th century idea of radical change (her friend Harold Rosenberg called it the Modern "tradition of the new"), concluding that the shock of the unprecedented is not only an historical fact of our times, it is politically "identical with man's freedom." Or, directly invoking Augustine, she writes "*Initium ut esset homo creatus est.*"<sup>2</sup>

When I discovered her unpublished, translated dissertation manuscript in the LOC (the Library of Congress), two things immediately caught my attention.<sup>3</sup> First, was the visible process of revision she had begun, retyping the Ashton translation and editing as she went, then re-editing through interlinear additions and hand written notes. What emerged from the thicket of her working marks was an "American" text, with words like natality and plurality, community and evil added to dramatically name the complex arguments already in place in the original. However, the basic argument remained intact and, apparently, as relevant to America in the 1960s as

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2 Arendt, *The Origins*, 479.

3 The most likely reason the manuscript was never published is a simple one. Evidence is abundant that from 1961 onward she was consumed by the Eichmann Trial, her reportage in *The New Yorker*, and the subsequent firestorm of criticism (See Introduction). Indeed, the entire period from the late 1950s through 1968 was an extremely busy period in Arendt's life. Her published works, the range and location of her lecture appearances (before academic and general audiences), together with her absorbing concerns with American national affairs (desegregation in Little Rock, the Kennedy election, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Kennedy assassination) and international events (Khrushchev's Speech, the Hungarian revolution, the Suez crisis and its impact on Israel), suggest that she must have had little time or energy left to complete the project. Instead she could, and did, incorporate her dissertation research into her other more overtly political writings and transfer new terms, such as "natality" from them to her dissertation revisions.

In April 1961 Arendt travelled to Jerusalem to cover the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. She prepared her notes and wrote her analysis of the Eichmann trial during the summer and fall of 1962, right after she had signed the contract with Crowell to publish the dissertation. The five-part series on the Eichmann trial appeared in February and March 1963, with the publication of her book version, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*, quickly following in May. Almost immediately a vituperative controversy erupted in the New York community, and eventually around the world, focused on her notorious paradigm of "the banality of evil" and her assertion that Jewish elders had cooperated with Nazi officials in the deportation of their communities.

The controversy raged for years with an unrelenting ferocity, taking on a phenomenological existence of its own which Arendt termed simply, "The Controversy." By 1969 she returned to her original intention of not responding to the misrepresentations and personal attacks that had been hurled at her for six years. In the intervening period her efforts to answer in letters, in talks to the New York Jewish community and student organizations from Hofstra University to the University of Chicago, and in interviews, had only fanned the flames. Then too, by the end of the 1960s Arendt was engaged in many other projects at various stages of completion, including editorial work on Walter Benjamin's writings, *Illuminations* (published with her lengthy introduction) and the essays collected in *Crises of The Republic*. With the latter, Arendt ventured into the American political minefields of student violence on campuses and U.S. Military involvement in Vietnam. It is no wonder, in retrospect, that the Augustine typescript lay among her papers – unpublished but not forgotten.

to Weimar Germany in 1929. Second, the text stood out less as a scholarly study in Augustinianism à la mode Heidegger, than as Arendt's very respectful declaration of independence from her mentor. In the 1960s, and today, the text reads like a modern existential inquiry into the scope and limits of the avant-garde mentalité. The argument is framed in a positive valence resonant with the possibility of "new beginnings" and a vigorous rejection of the "habits" and "dispersion" of the world and its "matter of course" historicity.

In other words, Arendt began her career in Germany as a writer with an ear for what was in the air – that is, adopting modernist themes of spiritual alienation, intellectual abstraction and the need to act in the world, and often "against" it. Even before she left Germany in 1933 she had written an influential book review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* for *Die Gesellschaft* (1930) and an article on Søren Kierkegaard for *Frankfurter Zeitung* (1932). In 1930, also in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, she transposed her Augustinian studies to the format of popular journalism for an article on the relationship between Augustine and Lutheran Protestantism. Simultaneously during this period she also worked on her study of Rahel Varnhagen and, in a guarded way, identified with Zionist causes and Kurt Blumenfeld. The Varnhagen study which she termed a "structured montage," superimposed her Augustinian paradigm of the Christian pilgrim's progress on the odyssey of an assimilated Jew at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This paradigm was more than an aesthetic; it was in fact the life she would herself lead as she stayed one step ahead of the Gestapo, fleeing to France and, in 1941 to New York, with the help of Varian Fry. "Love and Saint Augustine" in 1929, and as she reworked it in the 1960s, situates Arendt as a literary force in her own right, directly engaging the *quaestio* of the obligation of the avant-garde thinker/pilgrim to the public world/community. She learned about alienation in Marburg and Heidelberg, in the world of 1920s Weimar, but she would learn how to write about it in New York, as a journalist, a literary and political critic, and as a historian-cum political scientist.

Peter Gay, in *Weimar Culture*, provides a glimpse of Arendt's "radical" critique of Weimar politics – an attitude which he says she acquired not from academic studies but from Expressionist literature and art. He writes: "As Hannah Arendt has recalled, 'George Grosz's cartoons seemed to us not satires but realistic reportage: we knew those types; they were all around us. Should we mount the barricades for that?'"<sup>4</sup> It is ironic that in an age of the "new objectivity" in German academic in the 1920s Arendt preferred to learn her politics through what she termed "political expressionism."<sup>5</sup> These radical artists and writers,

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4 Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1970, 70.

5 Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 120, n.3.

said Hajo Holborn, “wanted a new culture,” leading a cynical Max Weber to term expressionism a “spiritual narcotic.” Gay reports that “survivors” like Arendt, Holborn and Neumann were convinced “the end had come.” Franz Neumann recalls that, long before 1933, the attitude among Weimar intellectuals was “one of skepticism and despair, bordering on cynicism.”<sup>6</sup>

What was “in the air” at Heidelberg also provides the atmospheric context for her dissertation. From the outset of her academic career Arendt was attracted to Christian existentialism, as German intellectuals rediscovered medieval roots of modern angst. For Arendt, particularly, Augustine told a compelling story of pilgrim souls moving through a world doomed to destruction but, nonetheless, engaging with it as Roman citizens. The contradiction in Augustine’s works between Christian *caritas*/natality and the older framework of craving/desire for Neo-Platonic disengaged self-sufficiency is the central hypothesis of Arendt’s dissertation, and would remain a leitmotif of her writing in America after 1941. For her, it is precisely Augustine’s willingness to make a new start amidst the “terminological context” of traditional Neo-Platonic Christianity which fascinates her.<sup>7</sup> It is as if she herself had found a model for her own struggle to move beyond the Husserl-Heidegger-Jaspers nexus to a new position which could locate the thinker firmly within the political world yet maintain the authenticity of critical distance.

In the dissertation, her “Quaestio” is, “why man, existing in and anticipating the absolute future, using the world and everything in it (including his own self and his neighbor) should establish this kind of emphatic relationship [*caritas* as neighborly love]?”<sup>8</sup> Augustine’s pilgrim, as Arendt read him, was more than a pariah frozen in the margins of social life without recourse. Indeed, a “radical” pilgrim could choose *not* to be irrelevant to the world, but could also avoid becoming a (philistine) parvenu in “love” with the historical, givenness of the world. In her years of independent study at the University of Berlin, where she passed examinations for the *Arbitur* in 1924, Arendt studied Greek and Latin and also took classes from Romano Guardini, a prominent purveyor of Christian existentialism. Guardini led her to the works of Kierkegaard and to a decision to major in theology when she entered university. She had already read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* at the age of sixteen and, by 1922, had also consumed Karl Jasper’s *Psychology of World Views*.<sup>9</sup> Arendt was also a student of Karl Mannheim. But it was to be Heidegger’s lectures on the problematic of worldliness which fundamentally

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6 Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 136.

7 Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*. Edited with an Interpretive Essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 3–7.

8 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 39.

9 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of The World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 33–36.

reoriented Arendt's approach to thinking. Arendt's exposure to both Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology gave her the intellectual tools she needed to proceed with her exploration of Augustine's *caritas* as her first major foray into what her friend Walter Benjamin would call the "alchemy" of bridging past and present.

Arendt recalls German students' receptivity to the "rebellious element" in Heidegger's teachings, and in Jaspers' as well. Looking back at Heidegger in 1968, she paints a picture of rebellion against the "schools," "circles," "world views" and their "partisans" which dominated university life in Weimar. Philosophy was not "rigorous science," in her opinion, despite all the "academic *talk* about philosophy," because it failed to distinguish "between an object of scholarship and a matter of thought." Within the discipline both the new "schools" – neo-Kantians, neo-Hegelians, Neo-Platonists – and the old specialties – epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, logic – seemed to have "drowned in an ocean of boredom."<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, Arendt carried her Weimar-style persona of principled alienation, compounded by being a Jew and a woman, into exile. Displacement was simply an extenuation of a distanced mentalité already fostered by her mentors. From another perspective, however, Arendt's German education in the cartoons of Georg Grosz and the Existenz of Heidegger and Jaspers were the necessary, but not the sufficient, causes of the theorist of natality, plurality and the public realm which she would become in America. Absolutely crucial to Arendt's future brilliant career as a "woman of this century" was her émigré odyssey to New York City. Once there, she immediately immersed herself in the mid-century parallel world of American modernism at a time when *Time* magazine declared the turbulent 20th to be an "American" century.

Arendt was, indeed, fortunate in her life as a émigré. She had landed in her natural habitat – a New York avant-garde world writing in the American idiomatic English she soon mastered. Lionel Trilling, Randall Jarrell, and Alfred Kazin taught her to read American literature with a Modernist eye. And, in turn, it was she who introduced her new cohort at *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Menorah Journal*, and *Commentary* to the Modern European writers whose works she championed at her first major job in New York, as an editor for Schocken Books. It is also ironic that she entered the world of a specifically American public intellectual life through the door opened for her by an important New York literary establishment, founded by German émigrés. It was Arendt who edited the diaries of Kafka, sat in on discussions with T.S. Eliot, and taught Kazin and her friends how to read William Faulkner as a Modernist master, not simply as an oddly Gothic Southern storyteller. She loved the poetry of Auden and Jarrell, both of whom

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10 Hannah Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at Eighty." In Michael Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978, 295.

became close friends, and she and her husband encouraged the Black painter Romare Bearden, and the émigré artist and teacher Hans Hoffmann. Her husband, Heinrich Blucher, often lectured on art and philosophy at New School and Bard College. Together they were heavily engaged in the visual and literary avant-garde culture of post-War New York.

New York made Hannah Arendt. She moved with fluid ease in ever widening, but always concentric, circles of Modernist critics, writers, artists, academics, ranging from theologians like Paul Tillich to radical political critics like Dwight Macdonald. Against this heady background of brilliance, fierce battles and friendships, Arendt's work on Augustine comes into closer focus. It was, after all, in America that Arendt developed the full range of her professional writing style, and it was here in media res, while working on several other key projects, that she took up her editing pen and reworked her Augustinian musings dissertation for publication. This fact makes *Love and Saint Augustine* an American text, which was being rewritten at the same time (1958) as she was adding a crucial new chapter to *Origins*, published *The Human Condition*, prepared the articles and lectures that would be published in *Between Past and Future*, wrote *On Revolution* and proposed to *The New Yorker* that she cover the Jerusalem trial of Adolph Eichmann. That is, Augustine re-entered her publishing agenda at the most productive period in Arendt's professional life.

Arendt had already set up her basic paradigm in the original 1929 text. It was a replay of the Modern Existential dilemma, recounted in Weimar drama, poetry and art as well as philosophy. As Augustine had exclaimed, much to Arendt's admiration, "*Quaesto mihi factus sum.*" The only difference was the 5th century theological context. But that didn't deter Arendt who immediately warned her readers that she had no interest in "purely" theological debate, or the hierarchical proclivities of the Saint in later life. His thinking was conflicted, fascinating, and completely seminal for her own. It was he whom she dubbed "the first philosopher of the will and the only philosopher the Romans ever had."<sup>11</sup> It was he who reversed the ancient concept of time, so that the past did not flow into the present and on to the future. Instead it was the future as divine Eternity which, for Augustine, flowed into the present where it met the past. Both were recalled and preserved in the "vast storehouse of memory." Augustine taught her to think of the present as both lived experience and as a space of reflection in the mind, the *nunc stans*. Her favorite aphorism for the present – "between past and future" – was one of Augustine's many gifts to her.

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11 Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, "Rediscovering Hannah Arendt." In Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 148.

It was what she termed the “heterogeneous,” – that is, conflicting – strands of his thought that fascinated her. She was not going to “yoke him to a consistency foreign to him,” or for that matter to herself. And she definitely seemed uninterested in his institutional role as the Bishop of Hippo Regius. What Arendt was going to focus on was her own basic *quaestio*, which assumed was also Augustine’s. That is, how can the pilgrim soul “carried away by God” to a place of timeless thought “out of the world” still be engaged with “societas,” or the neighbor. The encounter with the Creator who is both the Source of the self, and the goal of the Self’s journey through life to eternal reunion, is accomplished through the moral capacity of *caritas*. And it is the same “love,” empowered by the force of the will, which returns the pilgrim from the mental *nunc stans* to the world. From abstraction to the experience of community, from past and future to an engagement with the temporal present, Augustine somehow attempted to reunite contradictory states of being – existing both in and out of the givenness of history, inheritance, the “thereness” of existence and the plurality of humanity.

In the Dissertation the reader encounters the cultural debates of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism worked out through the writings of a Christian philosopher who, like Arendt, stood at in the *nunc stans* between past and future, in the transition from Roman certainties to the unknown of an uncertain and violent age. In the late 50s and early 60s, Arendt’s revisions, adding key terms and incorporating footnote material, had the cumulative effect of enhancing this effect. By the time she put it aside to work on the Eichmann trial, Augustine had come to resemble a Greenwich Village intellectual, not the harried public official which he also was. Augustine, a Bishop of the Roman Church, protégé of St. Ambrose and a player in Roman and North African ecclesiastical politics is backgrounded, his social philosophy foregrounded. This is, to use her term, a “prepolitical” Augustine.

The Saint was indeed a man of his century, according to Arendt. But he was so by virtue of understanding it thoroughly and urging believers to exert care (*caritas*) for the late Roman world they had created, sinners and saved together. Augustine, via Arendt, is not yet a specifically political theorist, or even a political actor. Instead, he spins a narrative of temptation, sin, redemption and the obligation to morally engage the world in order to change it. Rather like the 20th century American President, Woodrow Wilson, Arendt’s Augustine was a warrior whose goal was to make the world safe for peace, habitable for Christian believer and philosophers, as well as ordinary Roman citizens. It was this paradoxical theme which fascinated Arendt: how to be an obedient member of a visible, legitimate institution like an Empire or a Church, while also maintaining the integrity of an inward “order of love.” It was a conundrum that compelled had Augustine to confront “the actual problem of how to live in this world.”<sup>12</sup>

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12 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 41.

Augustine was encumbered by a Neo-Platonic inheritance which, untroubled by contradictions, he managed to push aside when it suited him. In the dissertation Arendt carefully dissects Augustine's struggle with Neo-Platonism's "regulatory" notion of love.<sup>13</sup> Desire for spiritual self-sufficiency sustained by a transcendent source, she argues, forces Augustine into a position which reduces persons and the man-made world to mere occasions for the exercise of good works. This is not a result which satisfies him or her. Arendt writes that the Neo-Platonic *ordo amoris* (order of love) has "a point of reference that lies, in principle, outside the world itself and which therefore can [...] serve as a regulator of all things inside the world as well as of [...] relationships."<sup>14</sup> The result is a "reification of existence" which extends even to the pilgrim's present life. "The regulator whose objectivity toward the world and himself is guaranteed by the loving anticipation of the desired good, is no longer concerned with either the world or himself." For Arendt, this is indeed a "strange dialectics." It makes plurality and judgment impossible on earth because of an absolute standard of truth in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

The remedy for this dilemma, Arendt continues, lies in Augustine's singular creativity as a theologian. He simply, and radically, reworked Pauline Christianity to create another new idea – *caritas*. This was not based on appetitive craving, either for transcendence or for worldly happiness. This "entirely different" concept derives from the union of the radical pilgrim with a Creator God who is "inside" not "outside." The mechanism of contingent grace, as Arendt interprets it, is Augustine's way of internalizing the process of salvation and legitimating the possibility of freedom of choice. God's absolute power to save or damn is internalized in the free will of the individual who, while embedded in the facticity of a given community, has the God-like capacity to initiate "new beginnings." In other words, Arendt rewrote Augustine as an intellectual whose point of reference is removed from the "givenness" of the world, but who at the same time uses the life around him as the occasion for exploring the "equality" of God's Creatures and their mutual interdependence in "social community." Her central organizing concepts – *caritas*, natality and their opposites in the banality of thoughtless evil – had their conceptual origins in 1929 in the original text, and were further enhanced by her American additions. It is not without significance that she was also at work on the Augustine dissertation in English translation at the precise moment that she lobbied *The New Yorker* to send her to Jerusalem as their "reporter" at the trial of Adolph Eichmann.

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13 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 36–44.

14 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 37.

15 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 43.

## Coming to Terms with Arendt's Augustinianism

The Augustine connection to Arendt's contemporary concerns still remains an uneasy one for the Arendt scholarly cottage industry. Peter Baehr, in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, doesn't include the text because he is concerned about the "danger" of "exaggerating" its significance for her "mature" thought and because the "density and abstract nature" of her writing would make excerpts "barely intelligible."<sup>16</sup> Actually, the dissertation makes Arendt's veiled, indirectness on the subject of marginal groups such as Jews and Negroes, and her own self-understanding as an avant-gardiste in New York much more understandable, rather than less.

Another wary approach to *Love and Saint Augustine* and its relevance to her later work come from scholars who are dismayed by the Arendt-Heidegger connection. Given the Heideggerean aura which radiates from the surface of Arendt's discussion of the "Creator" and "natality" in Augustine as surrogates for "Being" and "death" in Heidegger's work, some initial caution is understandable. Accordingly, Mark Lilla's "Menage a Trois,"<sup>17</sup> based on the published correspondence between Arendt and her mentor, wants to explore the various meanings of the "love" among Heidegger, Arendt and Jaspers as, on her part at least, an redemptive evolution from physical desire to Platonic friendship. Because she was a Jewish woman-under-the-influence of a nascent Nazi in the late 1920s, her work from that period is fatally contaminated, according to Lilla. Even the term "Love" in her dissertation title, as Lilla reads it, is an erotic double entendre, since it is a "work inspired in more than one sense by her encounter with Heidegger."<sup>18</sup>

If so, then why did Arendt return again and again to the text and to the thought trains emanating from it, long after her "encounter" in both senses had terminated? Augustine recurs in almost every one of her important works, and many of her journal essays and newspaper articles – either speaking directly or offstage, whispering from the wings. Arendt boarded a major thought train as she wrote in 1929, and it carried her to France and to New York, away from Heidegger and toward the new world. How many graduate students in the Weimar German academy of the "Mandarins" would have acted so boldly?

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16 Peter Baehr, "Introduction." In *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, xlvii, note 8.

17 Mark Lilla, "Menage a Trois." *The New York Review of Books*. Nov. 18, 1999, 37.

18 Lilla, "Menage a Trois," 37.

## Caritas, Conscience and Habituated Worldliness

Arendt wrote that, having been violently cut loose from 19th century traditions – religious, philosophical and political – the avant-garde in the 20th century must set out on radical “new beginnings.” It was the faculty of “imagination” which could forge links between the shocks world of wars, revolutions and economic upheaval and the abstracted *nunc stans* of the “two in one” – the timeless, eternal space of the mind where thought lives. Precisely because “the thread of the tradition was broken” it was possible to discover the past anew.<sup>19</sup> Arendt’s rediscovery of Augustine was part of her journey of anti-traditional thought. Her own particular pilgrim’s path, however, led beyond Husserl’s destination of “the things themselves” to the question of the relationship between thought and social life and, particularly, “the relevance of the neighbor.” Passionately engaged in the cultural ferment surrounding her, Arendt found her own voice as a radical public intellectual.

By the end of the 1940s, Arendt had emigrated to America and inserted herself into a new public arena, the world of the New York Intellectuals. She was a senior editor at Schocken, where she gave Irving Howe his first job as her assistant, sat in on editorial conferences with luminaries such as T.S. Eliot, and arranged for the first English edition of Kafka’s *Diaries*. She published reviews in the “little journals” with large impact, and was a regular on the New York artists and writers cocktail party circuit. Her Jewish background and recent personal history as an escapee from a French detention camp gave Arendt a dramatic credibility with respect to “the Jewish question.” During and after World War II she also wrote frequently for Jewish journals in New York about Jewish affairs in Europe, including the controversy surrounding the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine. Arendt was the first of the New York writers to deal directly with the camps and problems of guilt. As a result, her work was widely cited by the New York avant-garde as directly influencing their own work.<sup>20</sup>

For Arendt the givenness of her membership in a historical Jewish community did not in itself answer what she would term the Augustinian “*quaestio*” (“*quaestio mihi factus sum*”)<sup>21</sup> of who she was by choice of her free will as a thinker, as a

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19 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. New York: A Harvest Book, 1978, Vol. I, 212.

20 See Arendt’s articles “The Concentration Camps.” *Partisan Review*. Vol. 15, July, 1948, 743–763; “Organized Guilt and Responsibility.” *Jewish Frontier*. Jan. 1945. Dwight Macdonald indicates his debt to the latter in his correspondence. Michael Wreszin (ed.), *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald*. New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2001, 310–311. For the impact of her journal articles on the existentialism and the camps see Robert Hobbs, *Lee Krasner*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999, and Nancy Jachec, “Myth and Audience: The Individual and the Collective and the Problem of Mass Communication by the Early 1950’s.” In David Thistlewood (ed.), *American Abstract Expressionism: Critical Forum Series*, Vol. 1. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993.

21 The “*quaestio*” figured prominently in her dissertation. See Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 57–58, 69; Scott and Stark, “Rediscovering,” 143, 202.

woman and as a Jew. The problem of vantage point would be a persistent and troubling one for Arendt. When she did not explicitly raise it, her critics obliged. The torrent of abuse which descended upon her after the publication of her “report” on Eichmann’s trial in 1961 for *The New Yorker* and her 1963 “banality” addition to the book-length study, honed in on the apparently lofty position from which she judged not only the defendant but also his victims. David Riesman, a friend and critic, thought she was “a snob.”<sup>22</sup>

Part of the difficulty with readers’ reactions to *Eichmann* in the 1960s stemmed from the fact that the idea of “radical” evil which she had briefly noted in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, was abandoned by the early 1960s as she simultaneously prepared her dissertation on Augustine for publication and her Eichmann report. Arendt was turning her understanding of evil inward to the deformed judgment of the doer of evil, Augustine’s natural habitat. For Arendt, the essence of radicalism was instead the positive capacity to engage in fundamental thought. To be evil meant to succumb to thoughtlessness, to fail to exercise moral judgment, and was better characterized negatively, by an absence rather than a presence. Augustine’s terms *consuetudo* or *habitus*, which meant the behavioral effect of *cupiditas* (worldly desire), became her point of reference.<sup>23</sup>

In the dissertation, Arendt begins the argument, which remains unchanged in her 1960s revisions, that all creation is “good” and “evil” stems from the thoughtless misjudgment of its basic reality. Man is “created into the world,” and is by that definition separated from the Creator. But nonetheless, “the law is written in the hearts of men, which even iniquity does not erase,” says Augustine. That law is “conscience,” the capacity to know the *ordo amoris* (the order of love) and to treat the “neighbor,” in all his plurality and difference, as equal to me before God. Refusing to acknowledge the law of conscience, or ignoring it out of habituated “covetousness,” “pride” and “dispersion” in worldly pleasure, is what constitutes evil. And the evil of turning away from the order of love is tied directly to the fear of death, since the horror of loss of the world one covets is the compulsion that makes moral judgment impossible. Augustine’s explanation of the will divided by an internal war of “willing and not willing,” of the “good conscience” and the “evil conscience” becomes Arendt’s model for the dilemma of Adolph Eichmann’s inability to understand the discrepancy between the “Kantian” values he claimed and his unwillingness to act on them.

In the *Report* Arendt dissects multiple examples of Eichmann’s delusion that he “had a choice,” for example in making decisions about deportation of the

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22 Private correspondence from Riesman to me, on the occasion of my Op-Ed article in *The New York Times*. 7.28.06.

23 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 81–83.

Jews to Lodz. It is her way of answering the question Judge Landau posed as to whether Eichmann had a functioning conscience. Eichmann thought he did, and insisted that he had been “determined to do all (he) could” to save Jews, indicating his capacity for moral judgment. However, all of the rhetoric of choice and saving was, as Arendt said, “patently untrue.” His testimony was a patchwork of self-aggrandizing rhetoric, lies and lapses in memory. He may have thought with part of his mind that he had saved Jews by diverting them to Riga or Minsk. But three weeks later when he met Heydrich Eichmann had no qualms about saying that “the camps used for the detention of (Russian) Communists” who were to be liquidated immediately, could “also include Jews.” As a result, 50,000 Jews were sent from the Reich specifically to the *Einsatzgruppen* operations in the East. With her prose saturated in irony, Arendt concludes that “he had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around.”<sup>24</sup>

He appeared to be able to hold in his mind simultaneously the convictions first, that his was a Kantian moral framework, adjusted for the “little man” and, second, and equally “fervent” belief in the importance of “success” as the “chief standard of ‘good society’.” Arendt finds it “typical” of Eichmann that he explained his faith in Hitler in terms of inevitability, the obligation he owed to such a strikingly charismatic and successful success. Eichmann said,

[Hitler] may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German Army to Fuhrer of a people of almost eighty million [...]. His success alone proved to me that I should subordinate myself to this man.<sup>25</sup>

Arendt reports that “his conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness which ‘good society’ everywhere reacted as he did.” Replicating Augustine’s argument almost verbatim, Arendt writes,

He did not need to ‘close his ears to the voice of conscience,’ as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice,’ with the voice of respectable society around him.<sup>26</sup>

Arendt cites Augustine directly, saying that “[...] the law of sin is the force of habit (*consuetudo* or *habitus*), by which the mind is dragged along and held fast, even against its will, but still deservedly so, since it was by its will that it slipped

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24 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 95.

25 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 126.

26 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 126.

into the habit.”<sup>27</sup> The good conscience has its counterpart in the “evil conscience” which is controlled “from the outside” in the world whose pleasures of ambition, and sensual lust it fears to lose. Her gloss on the passage is that “time and time again, habit is what puts sin in control of life [...] he has already yielded to the temptation of turning the world into a place defined by those who love it.”<sup>28</sup> Living “in a world he has made jointly with other men, he no longer hears what he is from conscience [...] but from another’s tongue.” She writes, “This alien tongue determines man’s being, whether good or evil, from outside and from what man has founded.” He has “turned himself,” says Arendt, “into a resident of the world.”<sup>29</sup> However, while the habituated worldly person is literally trapped in the realm of *Das Man*, the thinker/pilgrim soul is no less compelled – this time by a different, authentic, inner voice.

Conscience speaks in ourselves against this alien tongue and it speaks so that the one addressed cannot escape. The faculty by which the right will and the good conscience can overcome habit is *caritas*. It’s the reverse of being in thrall to the “things made” instead of to the “Maker.” The individual seized by *caritas* has actualized “the return” from encountering divinity in timeless thought, remembering a future yet to be and knowing one’s “origin” from the same source. Good conscience “summons him against [...] habit.”<sup>30</sup> In contemporary terms, Arendt observes, “estrangement from the world is essentially estrangement from habit” and makes “natality” possibility. As she would write in 1964, in a famous interchange of letters with Gershom Scholem who accused her of failing to write from the vantage point of a “daughter of the Jewish people,” Arendt that retorted her Jewishness was a fact not a choice. She refused to accept an ascribed identity as determinative of her thought. That she was a Jew was a given. That she wrote as a “radical” from a critical, distanced perspective should be understood as the equally necessary process of thought and expression in the Modern world. She wrote to Scholem:

What confuses you is that my arguments and my approach are different from what you are used to; in other words, the trouble is that I am independent. By this I mean that, on the one hand, I do not belong to any organization and always speak only for myself.<sup>31</sup>

Arendt’s Jewishness is now a prominent focus among Arendt scholars precisely because it was not a factor she herself chose to highlight explicitly in her political thought, other than through metaphors of modernist disengagement. While she

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27 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 82.

28 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 82.

29 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 84.

30 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 84.

31 Hannah Arendt, “A Daughter of Our People”: A Response to Gershom Scholem. In Peter Baehr (ed.), *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 395.

coined the phrase “pariah people” to describe Jews in Western history,<sup>32</sup> she did not often apply the term pariah directly to her own life situation. By the end of the 1940s in New York, she almost never used it with respect to the stance of the thinker in the public world. Instead, the label she most preferred was that of “radical.” Only once and only briefly, in the Preface to the first edition of *Origins*, had Arendt paired the term radical with negative connotations, in this case the “absolute” and “truly radical nature of Evil” in the final stages of totalitarianism. Instead, Arendt had no hesitations about applying the term “radical” as a positive attribute to herself and her new friends among New York writers, artists and critics.

For example, Arendt insisted on a radical self-definition in response to the exasperated eruption of David Riesman who could not understand why she displayed such an “animus against the bourgeois and the liberal.” He fumed, “Are you not a liberal [...] was Clemenceau not a liberal?” Answering both questions simultaneously, Arendt scribbled in the margins of her response, “No, a radical.”<sup>33</sup> What she meant is that she claimed a critical vantage point in, but not of, the middle class world of what she termed “conformism.” She had heard the term in current usage when Heidegger had spoken of the need “to grasp the problem of Being in a more radical way.”<sup>34</sup> After emigration, she learned that to be a cultural “radical” was the most common reference point among her New York Intellectual colleagues who wrote for *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *The Nation* and the other “little” journals with very big impact. Indeed, they could agree on little else besides their deliberately radical, avant-garde vantage point. In 1968, Arendt drafted a retrospective tribute to Dwight Macdonald’s “radical,” defunct journal, *Politics*, which had ceased publication in 1949. She had been a close friend of Macdonald for over two decades, and was the source for his famous musings on totalitarianism and the banality of mass culture. In tribute to his radical sensibility Arendt wrote:

*Politics*, which counted so many non-Americans among its contributors was radical in the sense of going back and reviving much that belongs to the very roots of the American tradition as well as much that belongs to the roots of the radical tradition everywhere – the tradition of nay-saying and independence, of “cheerful negativism” then confronted with the temptations of Realpolitik and of self-confidence; pride and trust in one’s judgment.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*. New York: Grove Press/Random House, 1978.

33 Riesman correspondence, Library of Congress, Box 12.

34 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 46.

35 Hannah Arendt, “Introduction to *Politics*,” Library of Congress Mss.

## Return to the “Desert”

In the dissertation, both in its original form and in her revised English translation of the early 1960s, Arendt sets about transforming the “Being” of Heideggerian phenomenology into a “Creator” by resurrecting the Augustinian paradigm which Heidegger had set aside. She juxtaposes mortality with “natality,” adding the term itself during her early 1960s revisions in order to name the phenomenon already present in the 1929 text.<sup>36</sup> The death-driven, worldly “love” entailed in Augustine’s *cupiditas* is set against *caritas* as “love of neighbor” which preserves both plurality and community.

In 1929, Heidegger’s “clearing” merges with Augustine’s “nunc stans” to create a spiritual terrain for the radical pilgrim. Augustinian tropes merge with her American project of articulating both a pre-political realm of cultural conversation and a specifically political public world of action. Arendt’s existential “space” provides the thinker, or the Jew as radical pilgrim, with a sheltering vantage point. In her political thought this terrain becomes the man-made public world of word and deed. While only addressed by implication in her German works of the late 1920s and early 30s, the distinction between deliberately chosen or mutually constructed communities, on the one hand, and given social institutions and mores, on the other hand, would become a crucial one for Arendt in her American writing.

Once in New York, Arendt gave the negative space of civilization’s crisis a precise temporal location. She speaks of an “empty space” in the Western tradition resulting from the “catastrophe” of Europe from 1914 to the end of World War II. As early as 1946, in *The Nation*, Arendt borrows language and concepts directly from her dissertation to review Hermann Broch’s *Death of Virgil*.<sup>37</sup> Returning to her 1929 (reinforced in her 1960s revisions) modes of expression, Arendt writes that when “the creature” (the individual) asks “both about the ‘whence’ and the ‘whither’ of his existence,” a double negative is posed about the “not yet,” which “denotes the source of life” in reunion with God as the Creator, and the “no more,” which refers to death.

Arendt’s Broch review transforms the *nunc stans*, materializing it on the blasted minefields of World War I. The search for a Creator takes on the agonized quest for meaning in the modern world. The title, “No Longer and Not Yet,” is one of her many metaphors for the “space” borrowed from the dissertation. But in the 1940s a negative valence predominates.

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<sup>36</sup> Scott and Stark, “Rediscovering Hannah Arendt,” 132–33.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Hermann Broch’s ‘Death of Vergil’.” *The Nation*, Vol. 163, Sept. 14, 1946, 301–302.

The chain is broken and an empty space, a kind of historical no man's land, comes to the surface which can only be described in terms of the "no longer and the not yet." In Europe such an absolute interruption occurred during and after the first World War.<sup>38</sup>

In the revised dissertation, the term *societas* retains its positive Latin implications, rather than those of the banal "social realm" of modernity which she later so thoroughly rejected. In Arendt's Augustinian narrative, *societas* is not the locus of capitalist transactions, parvenu culture or the state regulation. Neither is it the primordial organic community derived from German romanticism. It is the realm of human plurality where communities of choice appear. Later, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt goes into much greater detail on the linguistic origins of *societas* and its relation to *communitas*. In 1958, the meanings part company and modernity claims the former, much to its detriment. However, in both the 1929 and 1958 settings the given, historical world provides the challenge, often fraught with violence, inequality and injustice, to which individuals must respond. The mode of response varies with Arendt's analytic focus: the Augustinian mode of withdrawal and reentry for the evangelistic purpose of moral exhortation, the isolation and alienation of the Jews as a pariah people; or the secular mode of constituting new public spaces which her favorite sociologist, de Tocqueville, wrote about in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. These forms of social bonding are not primarily "worldly" in the dissertation's sense of being driven by materialism and fear of death. Nor are they phenomena of the specifically "public" world of action and communication. They are instead what Arendt termed "pre-political."<sup>39</sup>

Scholem had proposed a kind of living in the world which required Arendt to declare an unjudgmental allegiance to the Jewish people as their "daughter." Jews per se are not a public body characterized by plurality and communication, but rather a community based on the "facts" of uniformity of inheritance and situation. Bearing in mind that she was working on revising the English translation of the dissertation in New York at the same time as the Eichmann controversy erupted, her responses to Scholem and the legions of others who challenged her vantage point are more nuanced than they appear at first reading. Arguing against Scholem in the *Encounter* letter that she never loved collectivities, only persons, Arendt might have been paraphrasing a very similar passage in the dissertation. There she takes Augustine's Neo-Platonic biases to task for not providing some reasonable basis of judgment of particulars and individuals. When speaking of love as craving or appetite, Augustine at first is compelled to adopt an undifferentiated egalitarianism.

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38 Arendt, "Hermann Broch's 'Death of Vergil'," 300.

39 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 34–35, 53–56.

To the question “Who is my neighbor” [...] Augustine always replies “Every man” (*Omnis homo*). The answer is equivocal. It can literally mean everyone is next to me; I have no right to choose; I have no right to judge; all men are brothers.<sup>40</sup>

Reading through the dissertation to her situation in New York in 1964, Arendt means that to be a Jew or a member of any other community by birth is not a sufficient factual datum to justify suspension of judgment about particular Jews or to hesitate in reporting Eichmann’s banal normalcy. To say every Jew is my brother is to acknowledge consanguinity and common history. It is not to say that I must choose every Jew as my brother of my own free will and adjust my words and behavior accordingly. As she wrote to Jaspers only a year after completing her dissertation in 1930, accepting the given, as a sort of “fatefulness [...] can occur *only* in a separation from Judaism” and its “historical conditions of life,” not in rejection of the reality of the Jewish experience.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the unconditional lovers of the world, like Eichmann, whose souls are at war, with wills and conscience divided and judgment immobilized, Arendt writes of empowered “everymen.” In the 20th century, indeed, the avant-garde is not the sole repository of the capacity to think, act and judge, as she says in *The Life of the Mind*. At the end of her life, returning to her first thoughts, Arendt identifies the “banality” of Eichmann’s mentality as the impetus for her return. The “fact” of his presence put her in possession of the notorious phrase, and now she wanted to think again about what she had written to see by what right she had appropriated the idea of ordinary evil. Was it thought alone, the space of timeless encounter with past and future, that made evil impossible? Was it the empowered will? Was it possible, yet again, that *caritas* as a binding principle might eliminate the struggle between the “I will” and “I do not will”? If so, it means that Augustinian, but not Heideggerian *caritas*, is the answer because it is intimately bound up with bridging not only the warring parts of the mind, but also in binding the thinker/pilgrim soul to “the neighbor” – to love one’s neighbor as oneself, but also to joint together to change the world.

Arendt finds in Augustine her own theory of the avant-garde in the Modern world with decidedly democratic overtones. The radical pilgrim, whether a Jewish New York Intellectual, or what she and her American cohort called the “common reader,” must move in and out of the given, historical world constituted by men without ever being wholly determined by it. As Augustine put it, the fact that all humans are equally damned by original sin and equally eager for redemption produces an “equality of condition” which is overlaid upon the social bonds of historical contiguity and inheritance. Both notions of equality are “the historically pre-existing

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40 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 43.

41 Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926–1969*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, 10–11.

reality,”<sup>42</sup> but they demonstrate once again that for Augustine human life is always social. Or, as Arendt explains it, “this *civitas terrena* is not arbitrarily founded and not arbitrarily dissolved.” It is a “social organism” made up of “people’s living with and for each other” and not merely accidentally “side by side.”<sup>43</sup> Looking for God, the radical pilgrim finds his neighbor and accepts the ties of humanity that follow from that free choice.

Though freedom of choice recalls the individual from the world and severs his essential ties with humankind, the equality of all people, once posited, cannot be canceled out. In this process, equality receives a new meaning, love of neighbor. Yet the new meaning denotes a change in the coexistence of people in their community, from being inevitable and matter-of-course to being freely chosen and replete with obligations.<sup>44</sup>

Arendt’s concept of plurality means the mutually recognized integrity of persons and, with Augustine’s help, can be sustained even in the midst of uniform historical conditions and mores. Augustine is able to shift the definition of equality from a historical condition to freely chosen love of neighbor because he has devised “an original definition of man as a social being.”<sup>45</sup> Free will, following Augustine, allows individuals in their plurality to choose the world. As Arendt paraphrases Augustine, “when I attain the explicitness of my own being by faith, the other person’s being becomes explicit as well, in equality.” The result is that “only then will the other become my brother.” Individuality, multiplied and validated, creates equality and love of neighbor. *Caritas* in fact “grows out of” or is expressed by means of, this “explicit” tie of brotherliness. Just as Arendt notes Augustine’s repeated use of the terms “brother” for neighbor and “brotherly love,” so too she insists on the “explicitness” of the individual’s “own being” as the foundation for freely chosen community solidarity.<sup>46</sup>

Indirectness denotes the triangular relationship between the individual, God and the neighbor. Human awareness of historical descent as the basis of equality is superseded by acknowledgment of common sin, common grace and, ultimately, a common source in the divine Creator. “This indirectness,” she writes, “puts an even more radical stop to the self-evident living together.” Indirectness “breaks up social relations by turning them into provisional ones” and allows the individual as a distinct being to be fully validated.<sup>47</sup>

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42 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 99.

43 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 100.

44 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 102.

45 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 104.

46 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 108.

47 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 111.

Somewhat surprisingly, Arendt's gloss of Augustine does not confine the category of neighbor to believers. Pushing Augustine's logic beyond its contextual limits, she argues that the "relevance" of the neighbor is "not tied to Christianity" or, by implication, to any exclusive community.<sup>48</sup> Faith is not the primary constituent element of *caritas*. Indeed it is "secondary" to the duty to "bring one's neighbor to the explicitness of his own being."<sup>49</sup> Unlike his more apocalyptic contemporaries, Augustine refused to equate the City of God and the institutional church, and thus to delegitimize the political institutions of late Roman life. He "rarely" spoke in what she terms the "hyperbole" of dissolving individuals into anthropomorphic "members" of the Body of Christ. For his "great sanity," Arendt applauds him. Like Arendt, Augustine preferred "the ambiguity of the human being in the world."<sup>50</sup> The radical pilgrim lives in simultaneous isolation and engagement, drawn by the strange dialectics of *caritas*.

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48 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 107.

49 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 108.

50 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 109.

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