At Home in the World.[1] Hannah Arendt's Transposition of Saint Augustine's Concept of Love

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What prompted a young, nonreligious woman from a German-Jewish family to write a dissertation on the Christian philosopher and bishop Aurelius Augustine? She did so in the late 1920s, at a time when the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democratic experiment, was coming to an end and National Socialism was emerging.

It is unlikely that the author, Hannah Arendt, acted out of the Christian love for God or the Christian commandment of neighborly love. In view of her later critical remarks on the abstract man of human rights, it is also implausible that she acted out of a love for "man." The most likely reason for interpreting Augustine's concept of love is that she acted out of love for the world in which people live together. Or, who knows, out of love for philosophy.

Her motive remains guesswork, but that doesn't make her dissertation any less special. It tells not only about the thinking of Augustine (354-430) but also about Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). The now world-renowned philosopher and political thinker unknowingly laid the seeds in her dissertation for the ideas she would develop in later books. Not by adopting Augustine's thoughts, but by taking them as an outlet to arrive at her own insights about man's love of the world (*amor mundi*).

What did Arendt learn from Augustine? What did she find behind the incongruities in Augustine's love concept, and how did she develop her own thinking of love for the world in response? To provide an impetus for an answer, I will go through Hannah Arendt's oeuvre with seven-mile boots and give clues as to how, in her book on Augustine's notion of love, she takes the first steps toward her own interpretation of what it is to be at home in the world. By developing, in response to Augustine, her ideas of "new beginnings" (natality), "plurality," and the relationship between past, present, and future, Arendt created a solid and still current foundation for political thought.

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Loving With Your Back to the World

When Hannah Arendt defended her dissertation on November 28, 1928, in Heidelberg, the work of the – then almost 1500-year jubilarian – Augustine was at the forefront of attention in German philosophy and theology. Her thesis director Karl Jaspers, her former teacher Martin Heidegger, as well as her friend and fellow student Hans Jonas, all wrote about the work of the Christian Church father (Kurbacher 2018, VIII).

Arendt herself chose to study Augustine's concept of love – although it might be better to speak of "concepts," three ways of understanding love. The first is love as craving (*amor qua appetitus*), the second is love as a relation between Creator and creature, and the third is neighborly love (*dilectio proximi*) (Arendt 1996,[2] 3-7). Interwoven in the description of these concepts, Arendt reveals the incongruities in Augustine's thought. Examining the first and second love concept, her main question is: how can a person in God's presence, and isolated from all things mundane, at all be interested in his neighbor (Arendt 1996, 7)? The solution Augustine offers is the commandment of a specific form of neighborly love. In the final pages of the book, Arendt cautiously criticizes this commandment. How does she come to this criticism?

In her first analysis, Arendt explains that Augustine's "love as craving" is aimed at a specific object that human beings know and desire but do not have. This object is a worldly thing, a "good" (*bonum*) that we seek for its own sake. Once we have the good, our desire is satisfied and ends. We live happily as long as we possess and hold our good and have no fear of losing it. The ultimate or highest good of this *appetitus* is life itself: we would be most happy if we could fearlessly live forever. It would be a life we cannot lose, unlike life on earth, which is determined by death.

For Augustine, the difference between the craving for a "good" and the craving for the "highest good," *summum bonum*, is similar to the difference between a disordered, wrong love (*cupiditas*) and a well-ordered, right love (*caritas*). The former is a mundane love, the latter an eternity-seeking love. In disordered love, people love the wrong things or in a wrong way. For example, they want to cling to a worldly love object, even though it is not in their power. In well-ordered love, they let go of transient things and strive beyond the temporal to the pinnacle of goodness: God and eternity. By focusing on the highest good, the individual can leap out of time, reach eternity, and forget that he is a mortal man. That is the high-

est self-fulfillment. Man's temporal way of being has to be overcome in order to be, that is, to enjoy God (*Deo frui*).

Here, Arendt points out an incongruity in Augustine's definition of love: eternal life means that the present has become an eternity, it is a present without a future; but the *appetitus* itself is a longing in the present for the future *summum bonum* of eternal life. We are ordered to let go of perishable things and forget the present for the sake of the future. But that means we are no longer connected to things and men in the world, that is, to God's creation.

This last reflection brings Arendt to her second analysis of Augustine's concept of love: love as a relationship between Creator and creature. According to her, Augustine claims that in order to desire happiness, man must know what happiness is. This knowledge, which precedes desire, is stored in our memory. By remembering, we, as human beings, are able to reach back to the distant past, to the origin, and understand who we are in our primal self, as beloved creatures of God. We become aware that eternity, with which our existence begins and ends, is part of our being. By calling past and future into the presence of memory, man concentrates his whole life in the present and loves the eternal in himself and in others. In this movement of memory, the creature of God returns to God, "to Him who was before all things." As God's creature, he leaves the worldly world behind and denies himself in this world. He loves himself only insofar as he is God's creation and hates everything that he has made in himself (Arendt 1996, 91).

Why is Augustine talking about neighborly love, Arendt wonders, after these two analyses, if God's creature is ordered in the *appetitus* to covet the highest good, rather than mundane goods and persons, and, in the second love, is ordered to leave the mundane world behind and deny the self of self and others?

In her third analysis, Arendt explains that Augustine's concept of neighborly love surmounts this incongruity. By understanding neighborly love (*dilectio proximi*) as loving one's neighbor as God does and secondly, as loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself – i.e., as God's creature – neighborly love becomes an extraworldly relationship: I deny the other as well as myself, but love in him the Being who lives in him as his source. This source, the Creator, is similar in every human being. In neighborly love, our "neighbors" are not loved as unique persons, but only as "occasions for love"; they are no more than occasions to love as God loves and to love ourselves and others as God's creatures.

Why then, Arendt asks, is the *dilectio proximi* so important for Augustine, if the creature finds the meaning of its existence only in a complete isolation that denies both itself and the other? Could it be that there is another world, society, community, or context, with a different origin and independent of God, in which the neighbor has a specific relevance? Arendt shows how Augustine introduces the idea of the "earthly city" (*civitas terrena*), which precedes the city of God (*civitas Dei*). In this city or community, all people are kin by virtue of their common descent from Adam, the First Man. The advent of Christ, the new Adam, added a kinship of all people based on the grace of God, which also referred back to the common sinful past. That past created a common faith and life, grounded in Christ. Because of their common share in original sin and the redemption of all through Christ, all people are equal before God.

The commandment of neighborly love seeks to replace the mutual dependence that people experience in living together with mutual love for, or faith in, the Creator. In this love, the believers dissolve the ties that bind them to the earthly city and become "brothers," sharing a community of faith and being on the road to the heavenly city of God. For Augustine, *caritas* does not grow out of the mundane interdependency of people living together, but out of this tie of brotherhood. Thus understood, neighborly love has become an unworldly love.

At the end of the book, Arendt criticizes this detachment from the world that makes mutual dependence, which cannot be chosen, impossible. Our neighbor is already there, Arendt writes before any choices can be made (Arendt 1996, 110-111). The indirectness of neighborly love, that is, loving my neighbor only for the grace of God and not for his own sake, breaks up social relationships. These are made provisional and radically relative by eternity because caritas is only needed in the mundane world. The neighbor as a unique individual with whom we live together before any choice and share the dependence in which all people live with one another is absent from Augustine's vision.

It is fascinating to follow, in the elaboration Arendt gives in her dissertation, the doublings Augustine adds to his thinking about love as he grows older. But it is equally exciting to decipher the developments in Arendt's own efforts to understand the world as a home to human beings – and not as a site of transition. If we look at her later works, it becomes clear that, for her, the highest good is not love for God or eternity, but love for the concrete, man-made and man-inhabited world (*mundus*). In this

world lives not one person to whom all are equal, but a multitude of different people, each of which comes into the world as a unique being. Here, people enter into relationships, not for the sake of God, but because they live together, creating webs of human relationships and experiencing mutual dependence.

Arendt's love for the world and concrete temporality in the here and now are at odds with the Augustinian leap from temporality. Characteristic of her "humanity" then is not the origin of divine creation or the eternity that precedes and transcends creation, nor is it the common descent from the First Adam and the salvation by Christ as the new Adam, but the fact that new, unique human beings are continually being born into the man-made world.

New Beginnings

How does Hannah Arendt elaborate this love of the world in her later work? What role does Augustine's work play in it? Many years pass before her next book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is published in 1951.[3] The book is a multifaceted examination of the various elements that made the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia possible. Love appears in it only in a negative sense, as the destruction of love for the world. Arendt describes how millions of Europeans lost their homes after World War I because of poverty, unemployment, or because they were deprived of their nationality and were cast adrift. The uprooting created masses of "atomized" individuals who experienced daily loneliness. The severing of social ties rendered them worldless and there was no longer an in-between, a world in which they lived together. This loss of their everyday world made them susceptible to the propaganda of the totalitarian movements, which portrayed to them a new, ideological "home": a perfect world glowing on the horizon. The catastrophes into which the totalitarian movements and their promises culminated are indescribable. Arendt ends her book pessimistically with the warning that this entirely new form of totalitarian government is likely to remain with us from now on (Arendt 1960, 478).[4]

But then, Augustine pops up in a quote from *De civitate Dei* (City of God): *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – "that a beginning be made man was created" (479).[5] Arendt understands "being created" not as "God-made," but as "human creatures" who are newcomers and beginners by

birth. In history, she argues, every end contains a new beginning. She regards this "beginning" the supreme capacity of man. Through this new beginning, we have the freedom to always make new beginnings and do things differently than before (Arendt 1998, 177). No matter how black the pages of European history are, her confidence that people in unity can achieve much good remains intact.

Arendt uses the aforementioned Augustinian quote again in *The Human Condition,* published in 1958, shortly after the launch of the Russian Sputnik that ushered in the arms race between Russia and the United States. In this book, Arendt opts for a seemingly un-Augustinian way of examining the "being" of man. She focuses on the human-inhabited world: what activities are fundamental to what she calls "the human condition"? This "being-in-the-world" refers not to the contemplative life in search of the origin or the future *summum bonum* but to the active life in the present.

In this everyday world in which people live together in plurality, according to Arendt, they are active in three ways: by caring for children, food, and a clean house, by fabricating worldly things such as houses and books, and by speaking to and acting with other people in the public sphere. These three activities, "labor," "work," and "action," constitute the active life, the *vita activa*.

That active life in which we depend on one another, in which we restlessly labor, work, and act, and in which we engage in politics in the public sphere, is reminiscent of the "belonging to the world" that falls under Augustine's *cupiditas*. Augustine commands Christians to reach into the past and yearn for the highest good of the future. In contrast to Augustine, Arendt sees that people live in the present; they care for the world, which they love for the sake of the world itself, and they address the concrete needs of those with whom they share the world in real-time.

At this point, she again cites Augustine's quote in which he says that man was created that there be a beginning. This is not the beginning of the world, but the beginning of "somebody, who is a beginner himself" (Arendt 1998, 177). With the creation of man, as one who takes initiatives, the principle of beginnings, natality, was born – which is the principle of freedom.

Arendt would not be Arendt if she did not give that "beginning" her own personal interpretation. According to her, God is not at the cradle of beginnings, as He was for Augustine – human beings are. Unlike God's one man, from whom all others descend, Arendt's human beings are plural, and they begin – i.e., are born – billions of times. Beginnings are not

about one God-made creature, or about neighbors who are all equal before God because of their common descent (Arendt 1996, 102) but are about a plurality of different people. That we as humans can make a beginning we owe not to divine creation, but to human natality. Arendt's beginning is thus not limited to the first birth. People can make new beginnings throughout their lives or throughout history by telling their diverse stories, bringing together points of view, and taking action with each other in the human world (Arendt 1998, 176).

Natality and plurality are thus, for Arendt, the preeminent conditions of being human. *Natality* is the condition for new initiatives and thus entails the freedom to do things differently. *Plurality* is the basis for political life – since there are many perspectives and points of view, we can arrive at political decisions in conversation.[6]

These two key concepts are ones that Arendt reads in Augustine's *initium*. But this "beginning" leads her not to the Creation, a one-time and unique event according to Augustine, but to the man-made world, in which new and unique people are time and again born who take the initiative to care for the world in which they live together.

Between Past and Future

Augustine's notions of time also return to Arendt throughout her life. For example, the image of man as sandwiched between the eternity preceding and following his life returns in a mutated form in the 1961 collection of essays, *Between Past and Future*. Using Franz Kafka's parable "HE," in which a man stands sandwiched between a force pressing him from behind, from the origin, and a force blocking the way ahead, Arendt shows that man is not only a "beginner," but also someone who breaks in on time. Man punches a hole in time, metaphorically, by placing himself in time, "making a stand against past and future" (Arendt 2006, 10). At the first cry of a newborn, there is suddenly a time before and a time after birth. We would now say: just as with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in early 2022, there is suddenly a time before and a time after the start of the war. Again and again, this is how people create gaps in time and separate past, present, and future.

In doing so, Arendt seems to stay close to Augustine, who indicated in book XI of his *Confessions* that, although he doesn't know what time is, he

does know that things pass and therefore, there is a past and a future time with the present time in between. The past is no longer there, with Augustine, and the future is not yet there. But thanks to the memory of the past, the view of the present, and the expectation of the future, which dwell in the soul, man can picture what is past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future (Augustine 1966, book XI ch. 14 and 18).

Yet, here too, there is a clear difference, for whereas, according to Arendt, people break in on time over and over again, according to Augustine, man does so only once, at the time of Creation when God created something completely new – that is, the first human creature (Augustine 1998, book XII). The mankind descending from this creature is part of a chronological history, an ongoing time that cannot be disturbed by secular events or the birth of unique, new human beings (Arendt 2006, 66-67).

There is something more. For Hannah Arendt, the gap men leave in time is the preeminent moment for thinking. Sandwiched between past and future, they make a new beginning by thinking and, subsequently, by speaking and acting together. By giving political shape to their ideas in the here and now, in concert with each other, they can turn the struggle between the forces of the past and the future in new directions (Arendt 2006, 12-14).

In Augustine's perspective, nothing remains of this collaborative political action. It is to this, according to Arendt, "greatest theorist of Christian politics," that Christianity and its "anti-political impulses" transformed into the great political institution that we know it as today, from the fifth century onwards (Arendt 2006, 73; 126-127). Although ecclesiastical and secular power were separated, the authority of the Pope and the Church increased so much that the durability and permanence of political structures were lost.

The trick with which Augustine managed this transformation in *De civitate Dei* (412-426), which he wrote after the fall of Rome, is the distinction he made between the heavenly city of God and the earthly city, where people are equal to one another because they have the same sinful past (Arendt 1996, 100; Augustine 1998, Book XIV, ch. 1). An "unworldly" brotherly love has taken the place of being-attached-to each other, Arendt says. This shared love in faith – or now in an ideology – is diametrically opposed to her love of political life, which takes place between people who together take responsibility for arranging the human world so they can live well together.

Augustine remains a close friend to Hannah Arendt to the very end, when her mind withdraws from the world, without ignoring it, and she devotes herself to her last book, *The Life of the Mind* (Young-Bruehl 2004, 439). He is frequently present in the posthumously published volumes I (*Thinking*) and II (*Willing*) (cf. Arendt 1978a and 1987b). His statement about the "*initium*" also recurs on several occasions. She does, again, correct her old friend here and there. In *Willing*, for example, she notes that if Augustine had taken his idea of man as a "new beginning" to its logical consequence, he would have defined man not as mortal but as "natals." Moreover, he would also have understood freedom of the Will not as the free choice between willing and nilling, but as the freedom to spontaneously make a new beginning (Arendt 1978b, 109).

Totalitarianism wanted to completely erase human spontaneity. But precisely this freedom, Arendt does not fail to emphasize, is the condition for political life.

The World as *Summum Bonum*

Writing a dissertation in philosophy forced Hannah Arendt to delve deeply into the work of Augustine, a philosopher whose thinking was in many ways far removed from hers. In her academic willingness to understand and reflect the other's vision as completely as possible, she experienced how Augustine's work helped her develop her own, in many ways opposing notion of love. Contrary to his *cupiditas* or "wrong love" for the world, she worked out the idea that love for the world is a principal condition for man's being and living. Not vertical love, directed to God and eternity, brings the highest good, *summum bonum*, but a horizontal love for the world where people live and act together. By the term "world" or *mundus* she does not refer to the earth, as she explains in later work, but to "the man-made home erected on earth," (Arendt 1998, 134) that is the man-made world of languages, buildings, tables, institutions, and so on.[7] God, Creation, and eternity are absent in Arendt's love-of-the-world narrative. And yet, in the *initium*, with which Augustine refers to the creation of man, she finds a pearl that shows her the way to what characterizes men and their political action, i.e., natality. *Initium* and natality guide her to a political thinking that starts from the plurality of unique, world-bound, and mutually dependent people, each capable of setting something new

in motion, making promises to each other, and shaping political life together – thus making the world a home for men during their life on earth. This outcome is radically opposed to Augustine's political thinking, in which the Church was the authoritative institution that decided on politics and destroyed the structures for public and political speech between people.

Arendt thus shows the importance of plurality within philosophy: by immersing herself fully in the thinking of a philosopher who thought completely differently, it became possible to find the depths in her thinking.

Notes

1 This contribution is a translated and highly revised version of my preface to Hannah Arendt, *Het liefdesbegrip van Augustinus*. 2022. Utrecht: Ten Have.

2 This is the dissertation's English version of 1966, translated by E.B. Ashton, substantially revised by Arendt herself and edited by J.C. Vecchiarelli and J.C. Scott.

3 In 1933, she finished her book *Rahel Varnhagen: Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik.* It was not published until 1959.

4 This Second Enlarged Edition of 1958 contains two extra chapters "Ideology and Terror" and "Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution."

5 The quote is included in the chapter "Ideology and Terror," added to the second edition. Arendt incorrectly refers to chapter 20 of book XII of *De citate Dei.* The correct reference is chapter 21 of book XII (last sentence). The translation of the quote is Arendt's. In *The Human Condition*, she included the whole sentence and translated it more literally: *[Initium] ergo ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* – "that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody" (Arendt 1998, 177).

6 For a more detailed explanation of Arendt's concepts of plurality and natality see: Vasterling 2011, 83-7.

7 See Oliver 2015, Chapter 3 for a further analysis of the relation between earth and world.

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