

## Arendt's Augustine

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“*Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo*” – “that there be a beginning, man was created” (HC, 177).<sup>1</sup> These words of Augustine’s, from *The City of God*, recur as a *leitmotiv* in the writings of Hannah Arendt, where they invariably are associated with a concept of great importance to her: natality, the condition of having come into the world through birth. Augustine’s dictum appears in this way in numerous essays and books of hers over a two-decade span, from the mid-1950s to the end of her life – from the time of *The Human Condition* (1958), where the idea receives its most elaborate exposition, to that of *The Life of the Mind*, left incomplete at her death in 1975.<sup>2</sup> On each of these occasions, Arendt tends to make it sound as if Augustine’s point in this statement were closely connected with her own idea that our having been born into the world is a condition for the human capacity for action, “whereby we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (HC, 176). Augustine’s actual point is about something different: He is referring specifically, and solely, to God’s creation of the first man, from whom all humankind was descended. Arendt cannot have been unaware of this, but it did not keep her from quoting the line in this context. Apparently she found it congenial with her more general point that “men, though they must die, are

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: 1958), p. 177, quoting Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XII.21. Compare Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, edited and translated by R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 532. Subsequent references to *The Human Condition* are abbreviated as HC.

<sup>2</sup> *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), p. 211; *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 167; *The Life of the Mind: Willing* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), pp. 109–10, 216–7. In each of these passages, excepting the first of the two from *The Life of the Mind*, the citation is slightly inaccurate, given as XII.20.

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not born in order to die, but to begin” (*HC*, 246). It is an interesting question why she did.

Arendt’s involvement with Augustine’s thought goes back decades before she picked up the habit of quoting him in this connection. Augustine had been the subject of her first book, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (Augustine’s Concept of Love, 1929).<sup>3</sup> Based on her doctoral dissertation, it is a slender volume, dense with Latin quotations and recondite philosophical categories. Arendt was only twenty-three when it was published, and it would be many years before Augustine’s name would appear in her writings with any frequency. Even so, her reading of Augustine from that time had a profound and lasting impact on her. It was still reverberating in her mind twenty years later, when she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (published in 1951, but completed in 1949). In *The Human Condition*, too, there are traces of *Liebesbegriff* – but their pattern is very different from that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The differences between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* in this regard are significant and instructive, in that they betoken a basic reorientation in Arendt’s thinking between the writing of those two works. The concept of natality belongs to the later period only.

This is difficult to perceive from Arendt’s books in the form they are commonly read today, however. Every edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, except for the first, contains that very statement of Augustine’s about the creation of man, quoted by Arendt in just the same way that she does in *The Human Condition* and subsequent works. It comes in a chapter that Arendt added for the expanded German edition of 1955, and which was based on an essay first published in 1953. In other ways, too, the added material reflects Arendt’s thinking in the period of *The Human Condition*, so the reader encountering this statement may come away with the impression of an unbroken consistency in Arendt’s thought in all of the works of her maturity. Going back to the text of the first edition reveals a significant turnabout on Arendt’s part in the space of just a few years. This can be seen very clearly when the added material – and specifically, the passage referring to Arendt’s idea of natality – is compared with certain statements from the first edition’s “Concluding Remarks,” which were dropped from the text at the time the new chapter was added. Even in its revised editions, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* contains a number of formulations, scattered throughout the text, that are flatly inconsistent with her treatment of similar matters in *The Human Condition* and thereafter.

The text of Arendt’s early Augustine book presents much the same difficulty – at least for readers of the only available English-language edition, published in 1995 as *Love and Saint Augustine*.<sup>4</sup> Readers of *Love and Saint*

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation* (1929), edited by Ludger Lütkehaus (Berlin: Philo, 2003). (Subsequent references are to this edition, hereafter abbreviated *LA*.)

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Augustine find Arendt quoting Augustine's statement about the creation of man with reference to her idea of natality. And yet, *Love and Saint Augustine* is not in fact a strict translation of *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* as published in 1929. It is based on the text of a translation that was made, but never published, in the early 1960s – and which Arendt herself had a hand in revising, making substantial cuts and additions.<sup>5</sup> Only then, thirty years after writing the book, did she add the passages about natality. The original German text of *Liebesbegriff* contains nothing of this, nor any reference to the statement from *The City of God* she would later associate with the idea. It is not even clear whether Arendt's later use of that statement is compatible with her original reading of Augustine; the added passages sit awkwardly in the text, incongruous with her original argument.

The truth is that the concept of natality first emerges in Arendt's work only in the 1950s. It belongs to an understanding of human freedom that she first arrived at only after she had written *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. To the extent that this concept is associated in her mind with Augustine, it expresses a different response to his example than what is seen in her earlier work. Considering those responses in sequence, and locating each in relation to Arendt's earlier reading of Augustine in *Liebesbegriff*, is one way to tell the story of her maturation and development as a thinker.

This is not the only way for that story to be told. *Liebesbegriff* is not only the register of Arendt's early encounter with Augustine; it is also a record of what she had learned in her studies with Martin Heidegger. Arendt wrote her dissertation under not Heidegger's supervision, but that of Karl Jaspers; yet it attests to Heidegger's influence on every page. Her studies with him, just a few years before, had been during the very period in which Heidegger was refining his project of fundamental ontology, with its analysis of the conditions for meaning in human existence. She had already left to study with Jaspers in Heidelberg by the time Heidegger was ready to publish *Being and Time*, in 1927, but she was well-enough schooled in its presuppositions and procedures to be able to put them to elegant use in her dissertation. The questions posed, the inferences drawn, and the distinctions insisted upon all lie within the ambit of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, and conform with exactitude to its protocols. Her passage from *Liebesbegriff* to the works of her maturity

<sup>5</sup> On the serious difficulties with taking the text published as *Love and Saint Augustine* as a reliable proxy for Arendt's views at the time she wrote her dissertation thirty years previously, see Stephan Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 13–24. Kampowski also rightly observes there is reason to wonder whether Arendt's later reworking of the text for the English translation may be taken as a fair indication of her considered positions, even for the period when the revisions were made. Only about half of the text was revised before Arendt laid the project aside – defaulting on her contractual obligations with the publisher and forfeiting a payment she had already received for the anticipated edition. It is perhaps worth noting, too, that the revised portion of the text breaks off abruptly just a few pages after those with the added references to natality.

can be told not only as one of successive responses to Augustine's example, but also as one of the vicissitudes in her attitude toward Heidegger's formal ontology. Viewed from that angle, the swerve in her thinking between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* is the manifestation of her renewed appreciation for those aspects of Heidegger's work that had been most important for *Liebesbegriff* – after a period of many years during which that side of her education had been effectively disowned.

These two stories are complementary; they deserve to be fitted together. That might be more than is wise to attempt in a single essay, however. Of the two, the one about Arendt's responses to Augustine is by far the less familiar to students of her work; it holds more than enough interest in itself to be told on its own, leaving Heidegger out of the picture.

### 2.1 *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*

*Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* – Augustine's concept of love. A theme is announced in the title; a question is posed on its opening page: "the relevance of the neighbor" in Augustine's understanding of love (*LA*, 23). Yet the study provides no detailed exposition of Augustine's ethical teachings. Instead, it offers a complex analysis of the conceptual basis of Augustine's understanding of human existence. Arendt's focus on Augustine's concept of love reflects Augustine's own oft-stated belief that it is only through loving properly that we gain access to truth. Her question concerning the neighbor's relevance is really a question about the bearing of social relations on human self-understanding.

*Whether* the neighbor has any relevance in Augustine's understanding of love, or *why* – those matters stand in no need of philosophical clarification, as Arendt sees it. Augustine is a Christian; he is enjoined to love God with all his heart, mind, and soul, and also to love his neighbor as himself. The interesting question, for Arendt, concerns how he understood the last phrase in the latter commandment: to love the neighbor "as oneself" (*LA*, 107). Arendt supposes, with some support from Augustine's writings, that he took this phrase to imply something more than an equivalence in the degree or the magnitude of the love to be given to neighbor and self. The neighbor is to be loved *as* the self: A *manner* of love is prescribed, as would be consistent with recognizing some ontological commonality between self and neighbor. What manner of love might this be, whereby neighbor and self are thus understood? In what sense am I to understand the concerns or the interests of other people as proximate to my own? In what sense is the neighbor's existence to be seen as relevant to my own, or mine to his? Strange questions, perhaps – but interesting ones, when brought to bear on Augustine's thinking more generally. For if Augustine had the means to make intelligent sense of all this – and Arendt assumes that he did – then how might this complicate his oft-expressed sense that the Christian must sever himself from the cares of this world and seek the meaning of his existence nowhere but in God? What might this say of his understanding of self and world?

Augustine's sense of the neighbor's relevance thus offers a *point d'appui* for examining Augustine's thinking on human existence more generally. What allows her to frame this investigation in relation to Augustine's understanding of love is his own emphasis on the correspondence between our capacity to love properly, and our grasp of the truth. As any reader of Augustine knows, this emphasis is inseparable. If love opens the way to the truth, in Augustine's eyes, it must be love as informed by Christian belief. Arendt correctly recognizes this as the central axis to his thinking on all things human; she keeps this in view throughout her investigation. From the outset, she disclaims any intention to deal with the dogmatic basis of Augustine's Christian beliefs (*LA*, 25). But by this all she means is that she sets aside such questions as how his thinking was influenced or constrained by his acceptance of the Christian Scriptures or by his deference to the Nicene Creed and other doctrinal formulations. Instead, she limits herself to considering how Augustine took Christian beliefs to make better sense of what otherwise is seen only confusedly or incompletely. And in this her interest is not to evaluate the cogency of Augustine's Christian apologetics, but to analyze the concepts at work in his sense of what there is that stands in need of clarification through Christian beliefs, and of what manner of greater lucidity is the result. Her basic thesis is that those concepts are heterogeneous, belonging to three distinct "conceptual contexts" – corresponding to three different ways of conceiving the self and the world, and both in relation to God. Two of these three conceptual contexts tend to be dominant, at least when it comes to Augustine's own propensities when expressing himself in formal conceptual language. It is neither of these, however, that Arendt will deem the operative one for his making sense of the neighbor's relevance.

According to the first conceptual context, the world is made up of material things, possessing a greater or lesser degree of fixity and subsistence. Within this conceptual context, to love is to want; love is felt as desire to have and to hold – and is limned with a constant fear of loss (*LA*, 30). Seen in the light of desire such as this, the world appears as a scene of mutability and transience, of perishing and evanescence; love as desire chases at wisps, knowing nothing of true enjoyment – except for those who seek their enjoyment in God. To love God in this sense is to cleave to that which alone is eternal and incorruptible. By aligning oneself with a cosmic order transcending all temporal flux, those who order their loves properly may then also appreciate merely transient things, insofar as these too point toward that cosmic order, and thereby participate in it. Except – what then can be said of the relevance of the neighbor – or even the self? Neighbor and self alike are disowned and forgotten, reduced to bit parts in the great scheme of things (*LA*, 53).

As Arendt is hardly the first to observe, this side of Augustine's thought owes more to his schooling in Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy than to his Christian beliefs (*LA*, 44). The next conceptual context is more closely tied to Christianity. Within this second conceptual context, the things of the world are known not in light of their sufficiency in themselves, but with regard to their serviceability. The world so construed is a site of human activity, available for

human use, hospitable to human purposes. Or so it would seem – so long as its denizens stay absorbed in their business and pleasures, avoiding the fact that this seemingly well-stocked world fails to supply the one item they need to keep carrying on like this indefinitely: security against death. As with the first conceptual context, true enjoyment is spoiled – this time not merely by fear of loss, but by anxious foreboding in the face of death, and consequent sense of estrangement from the world (*LA*, 77).

As with the prior conceptual context, Augustine holds that the situation can be properly illuminated only by turning to God. This time, however, God is understood in a sense that is proper to Christianity: God as Creator (*LA*, 92). The insight granted the Christian is understood, this time around, not as a glimpse of a rational order beyond all transience and perishing, but instead as a view to the goodness of Creation – a view that is lost to all those who, in their prideful esteem for things human, have forgotten their Creator. With the recovery of this perception comes a reevaluation of self and world – all within the same conceptual context. The world is not seen as something made to order for men, but as Creation, the work of God's hand, made for God's purposes; instead of panicking when things fall apart, the Christian confesses a brokenness all his own, in his incapacity to serve God adequately (*LA*, 98).

This second conceptual context, then, is the one that informs Augustine's thinking when he famously speaks, in his *Confessions*, of having become a problem to himself, a riddle he lacked the means to solve. Out of his own most painstaking efforts at self-recollection came only an inchoate sense of himself as a creature of God, a longing to be restored to the presence of his Creator. And with this, Arendt's question about the neighbor's relevance asserts itself again: If this were how Augustine had to understand his existence vis-à-vis God, what place could there be for a neighbor? How can the neighbor be seen as someone close to oneself, if even the self is grasped only by God (*LA*, 101).

Having found each of the two dominant conceptual contexts unsuited for making sense of the neighbor's relevance, Arendt proceeds at last to discuss Augustine's actual understanding of that relevance, with the aim of supplying that answer with a degree of conceptual articulacy that she supposes it lacks. To pinpoint what Augustine takes the neighbor's relevance to be, she looks to his conception of the Christian community – that is, the True Church, the company of the faithful (*LA*, 108). She does not delve into Augustine's ecclesiology per se, but limits herself to the implicit criteria in his understanding of fellowship among Christians – in particular, those which the prior conceptual contexts fail to illuminate. The Church has to be a community that lays claim to its members' truest sense of themselves, while being based on a faith that is common to all. Moreover, it must be a community into which any human being anywhere might be included; its members must be able to recognize every last human being on earth as potentially one of their number, whether presently so or not. How is this to be conceived?

The crux of the answer, as Arendt sees it, lies in the specific historical content of Augustine's Christian faith – a matter left to the side of Arendt's

interpretation up to this point. The God in whom Augustine places his faith is not merely the Neoplatonic Highest Good, nor is He understood only as Maker of heaven and earth. For the Christian, the order of Creation is restored through the action of redemption – and fulfilled through the life-giving history of salvation. If the Christian has hope for redemption, it is because he finds himself part of that history – and this means to understand his own situation as one that is common to all human beings (*LA*, 110). All are descended alike from a common progenitor; none are exempt from the doom of the Fall. Yet all are potentially to be counted among the elect who are freed from that doom, through Christ's cancellation of Adam's sin; there is none who might not be destined for citizenship in the Heavenly City (*LA*, 112). But only potentially: Redemption is already won, but salvation is not yet accomplished. It is thus that Augustine understands the situation of humankind: to inherit the past as a doom, to be granted the hope for a future unmarred by that burden – but a hope to be realized only through constant striving (*LA*, 110).

This then is where Arendt locates Augustine's sense of the neighbor's relevance. The individual Christian's existence is poised between the inherited curse and the hoped-for regeneration; his passage on earth takes the form of continuous struggle against the dead weight of the past, a striving for newness of life. And he sees all human beings in just the same situation. To fail to recognize this is to misunderstand one's own situation – for it would be to forget one's own helplessness in securing one's own salvation. In the conduct of others, the Christian is to find constant inducements to greater effort, and greater humility. In the conduct of some, he is to find models to emulate in his striving; from others, a humbling reminder of his own former condition (*LA*, 117). In his own conduct, he is to take thought to the example he sets for his fellows – whether by way of encouragement or rebuke.

## 2.2 The Origins of Totalitarianism

Twenty years separate *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The latter book seems to come from a different world than that of her doctoral dissertation – and not simply because of the difference in topic and scope. In *Liebesbegriff*, Arendt kept her own beliefs in the background; the reader is met with an account of Augustine's understanding of human existence – with the final accent on Augustine's irreducibly Christian sense of the meaning of history. Speaking in her own voice these two decades later, Arendt maintains an emphatically secular – that is to say, agnostic – perspective from the start, and by the book's end has cast her lot with the Enlightenment project of “modern man's coming of age.” In an era in which mass deportations, police terror, and concentration camps had darkened the fate of humanity, she calls upon her contemporaries to establish “a new law on earth,” to affirm and uphold human dignity – in none but humanity's name. “If there is any sense in the eighteenth-century formula that man has come of age,” she writes (in the “Concluding Remarks” to the book's first edition), “it is that from now on

man is the only possible creator of his own laws and the only possible maker of his own history” (*OT*, 437).<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is also another, less commonly noticed, side to Arendt’s thinking in this book. She may speak in Promethean tones when she calls for the completion of modern man’s “coming of age,” yet she also shows herself – in the very same passages – to be haunted by a quite different sense of the human condition. “The first disastrous result of man’s coming of age,” she says at the end of the book, “is that modern man has come to resent everything given, even his own existence – to resent the very fact that he is not the creator of the universe and himself” (*OT*<sup>1</sup>, 438). What is this but that most characteristically Augustinian theme: man’s attempt to usurp the position of God, and coming to grief when he finds he cannot? The only difference is that Arendt avoids making any positive reference to God; she seems determined to describe the same syndrome without making any claims one way or another about God’s existence. Statements with this same pattern can be found throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

“The more highly developed a civilization,” Arendt observes, “the more accomplished the world it has produced, the more at home men feel within the human artifice – the more they will resent everything they have not produced, everything that is merely and mysteriously given to them” (*OT*, 301). This remark introduces a passage of great concentrated density, at the close of the chapter titled “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man.” Her immediate concern in this passage is a pressing political problem, modern nation-states’ resistance to assimilating aliens through naturalization. Why is it, she asks, that even liberal polities are averse to admitting persons of foreign birth to full citizenship? Why is it that political communities so often are loath to welcome persons of differing ethnic origins into their midst, even where it is understood that political life is “based the assumption that we can produce equality through organization” – that is, through equal treatment under law?

Arendt’s answer is unexpected. She claims that it is *because* civilized peoples base their political life upon that assumption, and stake their pride on this fact, that they incline to xenophobia. The more they identify with the norms of civilized life, the more they take pride in human achievements, and the less they are able to cope with conspicuous ethnic differences, the manifestation of traits that neither are chosen nor alterable at will. The antipathies that are aroused in this situation are ultimately much the same, she suggests, whether those differences are of appearance or manner, whether due to descent or to upbringing. Either way, they bespeak the inescapable limits to human freedom, and therefore present a standing rebuke to civilization’s engrained self-conceit.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 437. The statement quoted is from the “Concluding Remarks,” dropped from every edition of the book after the first. References to passages found only in this first edition are cited as *OT*<sup>1</sup>; references to material added to subsequent editions (those of 1958 and after) as *OT*<sup>2</sup>. References to material contained in all editions are cited simply as *OT*.

The émigré's accented speech, his awkward retention of manners anomalous in his present milieu, his imperfect mastery of the local customs and usages – all of this constitutes an unwelcome reminder that no man is truly self-made. As Arendt puts it,

The reason why highly developed political communities . . . so often insist on ethnic homogeneity is that they hope to eliminate as far as possible those natural and always present differences and discriminations which by themselves arouse dumb hatred, mistrust and discrimination because they indicate all too clearly those spheres where men cannot act at and change at will, i.e., the limitations of the human artifice. The “alien” is a frightening reminder of difference as such, of individuality as such, and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act, and therefore has a distinct tendency to destroy. (*OT*, 301)

Why should men who feel themselves at home in the human artifice be so loath to accept strangers into their midst? Because it arouses their own “deep resentment against the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is – single, unique, unchangeable.” Why should that resentment be provoked simply by the sight of those strangers’ inability to make themselves fit in? Because it reminds them of a truth about themselves that they would sooner evade: that they too are strangers in this world, unable to choose or control the conditions of their existence. Why should they find this reminder so unnerving? Because, Arendt goes on to suggest, they stake their pride on the human artifice, “having forgotten that man is only the master, not the creator of the world” (*OT*, 302).

Arendt's reasoning here is peculiarly reminiscent of the Augustinian pattern of thought that she had examined, twenty years previously, in *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*. She even mentions Augustine by name – and with reference to his notion of love. When speaking about those aspects of who we are that we are unable to change, she says,

This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, “*Volo ut sis* (I want you to be),” without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation. (*OT*, 301)

*Volo ut sis*: This very phrase had been used by Arendt in her dissertation, when paraphrasing a longer statement from Augustine's *Tractates* on the First Epistle of John (*LA*, 102). In *Liebesbegriff*, the Latin phrase is used to stand for Augustine's conceptualization of the love he believes must be shown to all human beings because they are fellow creatures of God. Perhaps that original context is still somehow in Arendt's mind when she now adds, rather too cryptically, that this love “is unable to give any particular reason for such supreme and surpassable affirmation.”

Why she might want to mention that here is not easy to say, and it is probably best not to make too much of the allusion. Even without it, the

passage gives ample reason to suppose that Arendt was thinking of Augustine in pursuing this unsettling line of thought. And this is just one of several key passages in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where continuing reverberations of *Liebesbegriff* can be felt. Consider this statement from the “Concluding Remarks,” where Arendt broaches the question of what might be needed to give human community a more adequate basis:

No divine command, derived from man’s having been created in the image of God, and no natural law, derived from man’s “nature,” are sufficient for the establishment of a new law on earth, for rights spring from human plurality, and divine command or natural law would be true even if there existed only a single human being. (*OT*<sup>r</sup>, 437)

Read apart from *Liebesbegriff*, the statement is deeply obscure. It may not be surprising to find Arendt doubting the usefulness of appeals to divine command or natural law in the circumstances, given her secular outlook, but why offer *this* as the grounds for rejecting them – the fact they “would be true even if there existed only a single human being”? When the statement is read in light of *Liebesbegriff*, the point comes into focus. A natural law might direct our aspirations; the command of our Maker might chasten our pride. But neither can tell us the relevance of our neighbor, in the sense that this had been understood by Augustine. Neither suffices for making sense of a basis of solidarity with other people; neither can show us our own situation reflected in theirs.

What we most sorely lack, as Arendt sees it, is not some more authoritative moral standard – she is satisfied that we know well enough how to tell apart right and wrong. What we lack is a way to make sense of the fact that human beings fall short, so often fail to conduct themselves responsibly. “The more peoples know about one another,” Arendt says, “the less they want to recognize other peoples as their equals, the more they recoil from the ideal of humanity” (*OT*, 235). The *more* peoples know about one another – such knowledge may be founded on actual experience, so far as that goes. She insists that racist thinking is not to be understood merely as an expression of self-serving bias or ignorant prejudice – for to see it that way is to miss what makes it so insidious. She latches instead on to an aspect of racist thought that is not easily grasped by the liberal imagination: its connection with moral indignation. If there is hope for us to hold on to a sense of our common humanity, it must be an idea of humanity that extends not just to the decent and the innocent, the admirable and the diligent, but also to the backward and the compromised, the brutal and the misguided.

The problem comes most clearly into focus in the chapters devoted to the subject of racism. When discussing the rise and proliferation of overtly racist political doctrines and ideologies in the nineteenth century, she lays particular stress on such doctrines’ denial of a common *origin* of all peoples – thus repudiating the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in a common progenitor for all humankind. She sees this not only in formal doctrines of polygenism, but

equally in the claims that Russians, say, or Germans, were set off from all other peoples on account of some special, divinely infused quality of their souls. Her remarks about this are worth quoting at length:

The untruth of this theory is as conspicuous as its political usefulness. God created neither men – whose origin clearly is procreation – nor peoples, who come into being as the result of human organization. Men are unequal according to their natural origin, their different organization, and fate in history. Their equality is an equality of rights only, that is, an equality of human purpose; yet behind this equality of human purpose lies, according to Jewish-Christian tradition, another equality, expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose – the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God's creation. This divine origin is the metaphysical concept on which the political equality of purpose may be based, the purpose of establishing mankind on earth. (*OT*, 234)

She goes to some trouble here to specify that it is *only* the first progenitor of the human race who is to be seen as God's creation, all others having originated in procreation. It is revealing that Arendt would lay such emphasis on this particular tenet of Western religious traditions – even when she herself is so quick to call it no more than a myth. Here again, Augustine figures in the background of her thinking.

“God chose to create one individual for the propagation of many,” Augustine writes in *City of God*, “so that men should thus be admonished to preserve unity among their whole multitude.”<sup>7</sup> The statement was noted by Arendt in *Liebesbegriff*; the idea it expresses was pivotal to her account of how Augustine understood the neighbor's relevance (*LA*, 114). As she had then explained Augustine's view, it is the descent of the whole human race from Adam – together with Christ's undoing of Adam's sin – that define the historical situation in which the Christian discovers the relevance of all human beings to himself. All stand under the same dispensation of judgment and mercy; none has a special access to grace. To refuse to acknowledge this common origin (in the context of Christian belief) means something far worse than to refuse ties of natural kinship; it amounts to claiming to merit salvation on the strength of one's own achievements. To deny any basis of commonality with all human beings – the standing temptation of those who would make themselves judges of righteousness when confronted with human wickedness – can be done, but at the cost of losing one's sense of one's humanity.

All of this resonates in Arendt's account of the consequences of racist and tribalist thinking – minus the content of Augustine's Christian beliefs. It is no wonder, then, that she might be disposed to echo Augustine's emphasis on the singular origin of the human race, even if without ever asserting the truth of that proposition. She invokes this very same Biblical teaching in the book's

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XII.28, quoted (in part) in *LA* at 114. The English version given here is from Augustine, *The City of God*, 539.

final pages, suggesting that it holds the “insight” needed if we are to come to terms with human diversity:

We can reconcile ourselves to the variety of mankind, to the differences between human beings – which are frightening precisely because of the essential equality of rights of men and our consequent responsibility for all deeds and misdeeds committed by people different from ourselves – only through insight into the tremendous bliss that man was created with the power of procreation, that not a single man but Men inhabit the earth. (OT<sup>r</sup>, 438–9)

Man was created with the power of procreation – “man” in the singular, “created” in the past tense. There is something peculiarly cagey in this, the way Arendt alludes to the “insight” – even the “bliss” – connected somehow to a religious belief, the truth of which she does not assert. And there is something revealing, too, in that caginess. The pattern of her thinking here consists in transposing the Augustinian pattern into a strictly secular register – and therefore, inevitably, compressing its range, reassigning its parts.

Paradoxically, this very pattern seems also to be the impetus for Arendt’s most Promethean-sounding assertions, those calling on man to become “creator of his own laws” and “maker of his own history.” For when she speaks of the need for “a new law on earth,” she means something larger, more awesome and elusive, than the practical business of treaties and federations. It is to be nothing less than “a consciously-planned beginning of history” (OT<sup>r</sup>, 439). In the absence of eschatological hope, how else are we to meet all human beings on earth as part of the same perilous striving? We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and

The Rights of Man can be implemented only if they become . . . the, so to speak, prehistorical fundament from which the history of mankind will derive its essential meaning, in much the same way Western civilization did from its own fundamental origin myths. (OT<sup>r</sup>, 439)

### 2.3 The Human Condition

It was in the years immediately after she completed *Origins of Totalitarianism* that Arendt first arrived at her notion of natality. The notion (but not the term itself) first enters Arendt’s published writings in 1953, in the closing lines of “Ideology and Terror,” an essay that would later be appended to *Origins of Totalitarianism* in its revised editions. As its title indicates, that chapter consists primarily of a further discussion of aspects of totalitarianism, but it closes with a more general reflection on human history and hope. There she makes her first use of Augustine’s statement from *The City of God* about how a beginning came into being with the creation of man:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event is the supreme capacity of man;

politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – “that a beginning be made man was created,” said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by every new birth. It is indeed every man. (*OT*<sup>2</sup>, 478–9)

As on later occasions, Arendt identifies the notion of “beginning” thus evoked with the human capacity of freedom, associating both with the phenomenon of human birth. The gloss she provides in *The Human Condition* is characteristic: “This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (*HC*, 177).

This marks a departure from her thinking from the time she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Before she had spoken of the need for a “self-consciously planned beginning of history”; she now speaks instead of beginnings *in* history, and suggests they take care of themselves. Before she had referred to “the disturbing miracle” of human birth as a reminder of the *limits* of human freedom, the emblem for all those natural qualities and inherited circumstances that we are helpless to alter (*OT*, 301). Now human birth is offered instead as an emblem for the fact that human beings are capable of acting on their own initiative. As if to reinforce this latter difference, moreover, she now suggests that this very capacity is to be seen as nothing short of miraculous. “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (*OT*, 178). She goes so far as to call this capacity for human initiative as “the one miracle-working faculty in man” (*OT*, 246).

These changes correspond to one that is still more fundamental, in Arendt's conception of human agency. The 1953 text that was pressed into service as the new last chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is also the first in which this is adumbrated (*OT*<sup>2</sup>, 475); it would come to the fore in Arendt's next book, *The Human Condition*. The hallmark of Arendt's new way of thinking is her emphatic insistence on strictly distinguishing among different modes of human activity, each with a basis for intelligibility of its own. In this way, she conceives “action” in contradistinction to “fabrication” (and both in contradistinction to a third, “labor”).

That this constitutes a break with her own former practice, from just a few years before, can be seen from a glance at any of the various passages in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in which comparable themes are addressed. There, she had consistently identified human action with the fulfillment of chosen purposes, the achievement of self-given ends. Its limiting condition was said to be nature's resistance to human purposes; its enabling one, participation in a “human artifice” in which human purposes are recognized and respected. Thus, for instance, when discussing the plight of stateless refugees, deprived “the right to action” by being denied recognition in any state's legal system, she had seen fit to compare their condition to that of people who “inhabit an unchanged nature which they cannot master, yet upon whose abundance or frugality they depend for their livelihood, [and who] live and die without

leaving any trace, without having contributed anything to a common world” (OT, 296, 300). Mastery over “nature,” contributions to a common world, and participation in a juridical order – all of these had been treated by Arendt then as expressions of the same human capacity.

All this would change in *The Human Condition*. Whereas before she had employed such concepts as purposiveness and instrumentality when speaking of human agency generally, she now deems this appropriate only with reference to that mode of activity whereby we produce and use the nonhuman things that compose our human world – not so with reference to action, defined as that “activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (HC, 7). Action, so defined, is to be understood as a response to the acts and words of others, so as to elicit some further response in return. For this reason alone, the meaning of action cannot be reckoned in terms of successful achievement of purposes, of employing suitable means to determinate ends. For this reason, she argues, any idea of autonomous self-determination is not only unattainable, but illusory and chimerical. “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality” (HC, 234).

This new understanding of human agency is the impetus for Arendt’s concept of natality. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world,” she says, “and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the fact of our original physical appearance” (HC, 176–7). A *second* birth. It is not within normal human capacities to be born at one’s own free initiative; none of us chooses the time or the circumstances of our actual birth. No mere human being has ever been born at his own initiative; none of us chose the circumstances into which we were born. The initiative of which we are capable consists in our owning up to those circumstances, speaking up for ourselves. It is a matter of responding to that situation in which we find ourselves, so as to engage and sustain the attention of others – so that they might take interest in our situation, see it as part of their own (HC, 178–9). It is *because* human beings are capable of such initiative – or more to the point, it is because this is how we understand human beings – that our original, physical birth, too, carries the sense of a beginning (HC, 9). The actual event of our birth in the world is meaningful as a beginning only in retrospect – or in others’ anticipation.

So much for the theoretical basis for Arendt’s idea of natality. Now to the puzzle: What could this possibly have to do with that statement of Augustine’s, from *The City of God*, that she habitually quotes when broaching this theme – not just once, but in book after book, over a two-decade span? “*That a beginning be made, man was created*”: The statement refers to a singular act, God’s creation of Adam. The statement comes from the very same part of *The City of God* in which Augustine makes so much of the difference between this singular act of creation and the subsequent generation of the human race through procreation. And it is hard to believe that Arendt would not have been mindful

of this, for not only had she written of that in *Liebesbegriff*, but it had made enough of an impression on her to reverberate in her mind when she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. There is even a reference to it in *The Human Condition* itself, tucked away at the end of a footnote (*HC*, 8n.1). Augustine does also speak, elsewhere, of each human being as owing his existence directly to God. But that way of speaking – as Arendt had emphasized, properly, in *Liebesbegriff* – belongs to a different *conceptual* context entirely. How can she have found this quotation even remotely appropriate to her purposes? Why should she be quoting from Augustine at all?

A clue can be found in the fact that natality is closely connected in Arendt's mind with the practice of forgiveness. This connection goes unmentioned on many occasions when Arendt discusses natality, including the sections of *The Human Condition* in which that concept is first introduced and explained. It comes to the fore only when Arendt takes up the topic of forgiveness itself, late in the book. There it emerges that natality and forgiveness are opposite sides of the same coin: Only because we are able to seek and offer forgiveness is natality of any significance, because it is only thus that we are capable of making *new* beginnings at all. "Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever" (*HC*, 237). Arendt emphasizes that the disburdening is mutual: If the party receiving forgiveness is spared any blot on his name, the party forgiving, too, is freed from the past, obtaining what Arendt calls "freedom from vengeance" (*HC*, 241). Through seeking and offering forgiveness, we are spared the otherwise irrevocable doom of mischance and resentment, opprobrium and indignation.

It might sound like an exaggeration to say that new beginnings are possible only because of forgiveness – or, if not an exaggeration, a truth that is applicable only within a narrow range of situations, where some palpable wrong stands in need of rectification. This is not how Arendt would have us see it, however. Her point can be seen in its proper proportions when put together with her conception of human action generally. If the initiative taken in action consists in newly inserting oneself in a realm of human affairs, in response to what others have done and are doing; if it is in asserting a claim on others' attention that this is meaningful, and in eliciting some further response from them that it becomes significant – if all that is so, then action *consists in* a taking of liberties, a trespass on others' time and attention. Our every venture is in principle an impertinence – not unwelcome, we hope, but that is not for us to determine. The most we can do, if our impertinence is ill received, is to ask that it be forgiven – and that is to say, to ask to be given another chance.

In pursuing this theme, Arendt is clearly revisiting the concerns that had haunted her when writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The telltale sign of this is her emphasis on the "freedom from vengeance" to be had through the willingness to forgive others the burden of their past mischances and misdoings. As before, she seeks an insight into the human predicament that

might counter men's tendency toward self-righteous resentment and sterile indignation in the face of the limits of human freedom. The difference in her approach is as much as anything due to her understanding of human freedom. Whereas before, she had conceived those limitations in terms of the recalcitrance of "nature" – which had been obscurely linked in her mind with a tendency toward evil – she now focuses instead on limitations that are simply the obverse of the conditions for action as such. That difference is of great enough moment to prompt quite a different sense of the requisite insight. But despite that difference, the motivating concern is still much the same. So it should come as no surprise that Arendt's thoughts would have turned once again to Augustine, just as they had in that earlier period. She has come back once again to the question posed in her dissertation: the relevance of the neighbor.

Forgiveness had not been addressed explicitly in *Liebesbegriff*. Even so, Arendt's treatment of this subject in *The Human Condition* recalls the themes of her early study of Augustine. "The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs," Arendt now writes, "was Jesus of Nazareth" (*HC*, 238). Now, Arendt makes it plain that she is speaking of Jesus solely in human terms: "The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense." The Jesus of Christian faith – Jesus as Christ, Redeemer, and Judge – lies outside the scope of her discussion, and properly so. And yet she is more closely attuned to the specific Christian context of Jesus' teachings than the phrase "strictly secular sense" might seem to imply. All that she really means is that she believes she can set aside the theme of God's forgiveness of sins, so as to focus on Jesus' insights regarding the role of forgiveness in men's dealings with one another. She does not mean to say that Jesus' precepts can be extracted straightforwardly from their setting in the Gospel, as if to yield moral rules of general applicability. On the contrary, what interests her most about Jesus' precepts is that they were framed specifically for "the closely-knit community of his followers." What manner of fellowship is this, if its members must seek and grant forgiveness of one another?

In naming Jesus as "the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs," Arendt does not mean to suggest that he was the first to recognize or to teach the importance of forgiveness generally. What she considers decisive is simply his having recognized that forgiveness is needed not just where there has been animosity or conflict, but even among those who see themselves as brethren, the company of his disciples. Justice would be rendered by God at the Last Day; even so, he commanded his followers to be unstinting in forgiving one another their trespasses (*HC*, 240). In this she sees a crucial insight regarding the conditions for human action generally. "Trespassing," she observes, "is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within the web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly" (*HC*, 240).

There is a further, more specific sense in which Arendt's discussion of this is reminiscent of her reading of Augustine's sense of the neighbor's relevance. In a typically Augustinian vein, she stresses that the readiness to forgive, as commanded by Jesus, is not to be confused with complaisance or tolerance. (In this she might well be taking a page out of Augustine's homilies.) The proper response to a brother's trespass may well be reproach and rebuke; forgiveness comes next, but only upon the offender's repentance. What makes Jesus' mandate a difficult one is that forgiveness is *always* to follow upon repentance, no matter how often the situation repeats itself.<sup>8</sup> Our fellows are not to be written off, no matter how many times they have failed in the past; the prodigal is always to be welcomed back. There is no question here of recommending Jesus' teaching as a general ethical rule; it is no part of her business to offer what Jesus did not, a secular reason for granting unlimited second chances to those who repent. So far as she is concerned, the lesson is not that we *must* grant forgiveness when it is asked, but simply that we *might*. Not the command to forgive, but the capacity, is her theme; it is there that she locates the basis for human natality.

Why then her habitual use of that statement from *The City of God*, about the beginning arising with man's creation? The tie between natality and forgiving may suffice to account for her having had Augustine somehow in mind when her thoughts turned to this topic, yet it sheds little light on her penchant for quoting that particular statement. That may be a puzzle without a real answer, but there is one further clue to consider. It involves one further, allusive reference to another statement of Augustine's, which is found in *The Human Condition* just after the section on forgiveness. The allusion comes in a passage addressing the relation between natality and mortality – considered in relation to the meaningfulness of human affairs. "If left to themselves," she says, "human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death." It is only because of natality, she continues, that the realm of human affairs yields more than a chronicle of ruin and futility:

The life-span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction, if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die, but in order to begin. (*HC*, 246)

*The life span of man running toward death:* From the very beginning of our existence in this body, "there is not a moment when death is not at work in us" – so Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, in a well-known passage noted in

<sup>8</sup> Arendt cites Luke 17:3–4, quoting from the King James Version. "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."

Arendt's dissertation.<sup>9</sup> We are all hurtling forward toward death all the time, every hour of our lives, with never a respite or slackening in our pace – for those who live longest have simply been given a greater distance to run. Arendt does not contest that description – if anything, she takes it for granted. She simply insists that this need not be the last word on human affairs – that awareness of this need not drain human action of meaning or significance. In this much at least, she is in perfect accord with Augustine's sentiment in the statement she echoes.

The clue lies in how she proceeds to develop this thought, a few sentences on: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted" (*HC*, 247). *The miracle that saves the world*. Arendt cannot mean to claim that natality, as a general human capacity, does the work of that world-saving miracle in which Augustine, or any Christian, places his hope. What is "saved" in this manner is simply "the realm of human affairs," and the only sense in which it is saved is that it is able to exist for us *as* such a realm. All that Arendt actually means with the phrase, strictly speaking, is that natality may be counted among the (existential) conditions for the possibility of meaning in human affairs. In calling the condition of natality "the miracle that saves the world," Arendt is speaking figuratively, making self-conscious use of the religious overtones of the phrase, but only as a kind of allegory, to describe an aspect of the human condition. It is just the same with her penchant for quoting Augustine's words about the beginning made with man's creation – which for her is but the opposite pole of the same allegory. Whereas Augustine speaks of actual events – corresponding to divine actualities, from both of which together proceeds all meaning in human history – Arendt intends no more than to clarify the corresponding conceptual context, so far as this might be intelligible from a secular standpoint alone. In drawing on Augustine's language for this, she is ultimately doing no more than recording her debts to the pattern of thought in which she had found that conceptual context to be most vividly illuminated.

*The Human Condition* contains one further reference to Augustine that deserves to be noticed in connection with this, if only to indicate something of the care Arendt takes, at least in this period, not to stray beyond the bounds of her secular standpoint. It comes near the beginning of the book, where Arendt is explaining why her inquiry takes as its theme the human condition rather than human nature. "The problem of human nature," she remarks, "the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* ('I have become a question for myself') seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense" (*HC*, 10). We can no more answer that question than jump over our shadows; those who make the attempt "almost invariably end with some construction of a deity, that is, with the god of the philosophers"

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XIII.10; compare *City of God*, pp. 550–1.

(*HC*, 11). But then again, she observes, this is something that Augustine knew very well. Rounding out that thought, in a footnote, she adds: “The question of the nature of man is no less of a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer” (*HC*, 11n.2).