

Second Thoughts, New Beginnings:

Notes on Arendt's Unmarked Itinerary from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition*

Roy T. Tsao

How can a man be born when he is old?
Can he enter the second time into
his mother's womb, and be born?
—John 3:4

1.

In these notes I wish to examine some neglected aspects of Hannah Arendt's itinerary from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) to *The Human Condition* (1958). I hope to demonstrate that Arendt's thinking between these two books underwent a far more substantial and systematic change than has been recognized by her commentators, running far deeper than her more obvious shifts in topical concerns. By comparing some of her better-known claims from *The Human Condition* with claims that she made in *Origins'* first edition, I will try to show that over this interval Arendt arrived at an entirely different understanding of human agency and its inherent predicaments—rejecting key concepts that she had taken for granted, dismissing conundrums that she had thought were inevitable, and repudiating a line of argument she had found inescapable. At the heart of the change is a fundamentally altered conception of human capacities and their limits, a different idea of the burdens we bear on account of those limits, and a different sense of where we might look to redress them. So closely connected are all of these modifications that I hesitate to identify any one of them as the impetus for the rest; my aim in these notes is no more than to point to the evidence of this change, identify some of its pat-

terns, and raise a few questions about their significance for making sense of Arendt's thought at each end of this interval.

It is not hard to guess why the patterns that point to this change have received little attention from Arendt's commentators. The theoretical armature of *The Human Condition* is plainly exposed on its surface—it being a work whose primary aim is the “articulation” of basic concepts—while that of *Origins* is generally not, and commentators have for the most part been more often inclined to seek similarities than attend to divergences. Generally speaking—although with a few key exceptions—the theoretical lexicon that Arendt employs in the two books is quite similar, notwithstanding the fact that she uses it in significantly different ways. There is a further mirage of similitude in the fact that every edition of *Origins* but the earliest one concludes with a chapter that Arendt wrote later, in conformity with the ideas of *The Human Condition*. Then there is also the fact that in neither that added chapter to *Origins*, nor *The Human Condition* itself, nor anything else that she wrote, did Arendt acknowledge the change. And then there is simply that Arendt's thinking in *Origins* moves in directions far different than anything readers of Arendt are primed to anticipate.

Or else it may be that the reason the genuine sea-change in Arendt's thought has gone little detected is that it bears little relation to certain other apparent differences in the two books. Commentators have often been vexed by the fact that the concept of human rights, a prominent theme in *Origins*, is hardly seen in her subsequent work, which to the contrary has often been thought (though erroneously) to pay homage to the politics of Greek antiquity.¹ The puzzle that has seemed to demand resolution is why Arendt abandons the first book's emphatically and self-consciously modern principles in favor of ones that hearken instead to pre-modern experiences. If the reading I sketch in these notes has any validity, though, this characterization may have to be reconsidered—perhaps even shelved. At any rate, there will be reason to look beyond it to a quite different fissure between these two phases of Arendt's thought.

2.

For a first glimpse of the gap separating *Origins* from *The Human Condition*, we might begin by considering a cluster of matters for which Arendt's arguments in the two books seem similar, at least in their general contours. Common to both *Origins* and *The Human Condition*, it would seem, is a sense that human beings are able to deal adequately

with the fact of sharing the world with other people—so as to bear certain predicaments that our doing so always involves—only through insight into something “miraculous” that inheres in human existence, manifest in the uniqueness of each human being. In *Origins*, she calls for a stance of “gratitude” for human existence, on the strength of an insight into what she calls the “tremendous bliss that man was created with the power of procreation, that not a single man but men inhabit the earth.”² In *The Human Condition*, she would seem to sound a similar note when she speaks of the “joy” of inhabiting a world that is shared with others, the “miracle” of our being born into it.³ In both books she identifies our openness to this miracle as the critical factor in our ability to live peaceably with each other—in *Origins* saying that it allows us to be “reconcile[d] . . . to the variety of mankind” (OT 438), and in *The Human Condition* connecting it with the capacity for forgiveness (HC 240-1). Yet the moment one probes any further into her arguments, the similarity shrinks to little beyond an overlapping vocabulary. Even the “miracle” that she seems to associate with human birth in the world is different in each case. In fact, the meanings are almost directly contrary. Let us look at them one at a time, in reverse order—starting, that is, with the one Arendt’s readers are most likely to remember.

In *The Human Condition*, the miracle is what she calls by the word “natality”: the capacity for human initiative, the ability to begin something new. (She speaks of this notion of “natality” in numerous other books, including every edition of *Origins* apart from the first.) It is not our literal, natural birth in the world that is really at issue, but rather a kind of figurative replication of birth, which we enact (so she says) every time we initiate meaningful action or speech.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. (HC 178)

Action is not birth, but is like a “second birth”: we insert ourselves in the world every time we answer to the name we were given at birth, or take a new name that others agree to acknowledge as ours. The basic idea, then, is that when we act we lay claim to our situation, responding to it in some way that may or may not succeed in getting us what we want, but that at least serves to “actualize the sheer passive givenness of [our] being . . . to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise [we] would have to suffer passively anyhow” (HC 208). Because every such act has the potential to call forth actions from oth-

ers, the smallest act may have the effect of shifting an entire array of human relationships so as to alter the situation to which it responds—and this very fact is sufficient for Arendt to qualify it as a wondrous event. In short, it is the “miracle” of human freedom.

There is something quite different at issue when she speaks about a miracle in human existence in the pages of *Origins*: different aspects of existence, different reasons for hailing it as a miracle, different concerns in urging its recognition as one. One need only look to her words in the earlier book to see this. It is to “mere existence” that she refers, to “all that is mysteriously given to us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds,” to our “natural givenness,” to “the fact that each of us is made as he is—single, unique, unchangeable” (OT 301-2). There is nothing at all about human initiative here, nothing about any capacity to surmount or alter the order of nature, nothing about human freedom at all. On the contrary. The miracle she would have us acknowledge inheres in the way we are made, in the fact of our natural givenness that eludes all our power to change or invest with significance as we choose. If she refers to our minds as our bodies, it is not to capacities but to talents—a word with a quite different resonance. In short, her attention is set on the literal fact of our birth, together with all we inherit thereby—not any notional “second birth” we enact at our own initiative.

Related to this—and perhaps the reason why the anomaly goes unremarked by Arendt’s commentators—is a curious reticence as to wherein the miracle lies. It is worth lingering on how different this reticence is from her attitude toward the “miracle” of human initiative in *The Human Condition*, where she spares no pains in explaining why the mere fact of novelty ought to be deemed a wondrous occurrence. (“The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” [HC 178]. Since when has statistical deviation, or a shock to our expectations, been held as the *grounds* for deeming something a miracle? Why not rather a monstrosity?) There is none of that fuss in her earlier talk of a miracle in our existence, and no sign that she is using the word in anything but the conventional sense. In any case, it hardly makes sense to presume otherwise on the basis of the things that she says in *The Human Condition*, considering how differently she locates the miracle in the two cases. We are faced with the contrast between a hushed thankfulness at the mystery of how we are made, on the one hand, and a vociferous admiration of human initiative, on the other.

3.

These changes come into much clearer focus if we follow the curve of another one, concerning the way she conceives human agency in the two periods. Although unobtrusive, the significance of this other change is immense, for it involves a scuttling of her concepts of freedom and nature. Here again, as in the case of the other shift, the scope of the change is obscured by her penchant for much the same language after the change as before, but it comes to the fore as soon as we fix our attention on how differently she uses that language in either case. Here again we had better begin with her later position, the one Arendt's readers remember.

Arendt's concept of action in *The Human Condition* is presented as part of a triadic scheme, whereby she distinguishes it from two other modes of human activity—labor and fabrication (or 'work'). According to that scheme, each of these three corresponds to one of three basic conditions of human existence: labor to our organic life, work to the man-made world that surrounds us, and action to our living together with other people. As labor obeys an ongoing rhythm of effort and rest, the cycle of exhaustion and regeneration, so fabrication terminates in the production of objects, erecting a "human artifice" to harness and shelter us from the natural flux. Action, as Arendt conceives it, is different. To act is to enact a story that arises as we respond at our initiative to the overtures of our fellows, joining their projects or beckoning them to join ours; it is to move in a flexible fabric of human relationships—the fabric of history, so to speak (see HC 184).⁴ The element of initiative that characterizes all action, on this account, is to be found in our making manifest, through our gestures and utterances, our intentions with respect to some practice or project, in relation to which other people are also engaged.⁵ From the moment we "make our appearance" in this way, the meaning of what we are doing is contingent on others' responses to us—if only because we predicate our own intentions on others' responses to us. So our freedom in acting lies not in some god-like prerogative to make of ourselves whatever we wish, but in speaking our minds, owning up to a situation we inherit, and claiming that situation for ourselves. This is the sort of initiative that Arendt has in mind when she describes action as an "insertion" into the human world, "in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (HC 176-7).

If we look back to *Origins* now, we can see that Arendt's trademark triadic scheme is . . . simply not there. (Except in the thirteenth chapter, added in later editions.) By this I do not mean that the scheme is not fully in view, not yet explicit. It is demonstrably absent from

Arendt's argument in the book. Whenever she reflects on the nature of human agency, she flouts the very distinctions that she later would treat with the utmost importance, conceiving action in a conceptual idiom that she would later reserve exclusively for fabrication. (Sometimes she even uses the word "labor" to name this undifferentiated activity [see OT 300].) This can be seen most easily in the section in which she discusses how persons deprived of the status of citizens in any state suffer the loss of their capacity to act. (This section comes at the end of the book's second part, "Imperialism," and is also the section that includes her remarks on the miracle of existence.) When she considers the plight of people in that position, her main concern is not their lack of any specific legal entitlement, but the manner in which their lack of juridical standing severs the tie between what they do and the consequences they suffer: "blessings and doom are meted out . . . according to accident and without any relation to what they did, do, or may do" (OT 296).⁶ To lack juridical standing is to lose the ability to act, for want of "a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions." (Note that this is not a claim about the enjoyment of civil liberties: an authoritarian state that prohibited freedom of speech or assembly would certainly offer a "framework" like this for its subjects, so long as the rule of law were maintained.) In deeming the loss of juridical standing to be incompatible with human dignity, she presumes that this dignity lies in being recognized as the author of one's own acts. Lest there be any doubt as to whether this means she assimilates action to what she would later call fabrication, consider that she describes the situation of stateless persons as having "lost all those parts of the world and all those aspects of human existence which are the results of our common labor, the outcome of the human artifice" (OT 300).

The most decisive sign of Arendt's assimilation of action to fabrication is the way she identifies this capacity with the attainment of "mastery" over nature. This is apparent from the way she compares the debility of stateless persons—whose lack of juridical status prevents them from legally earning a living or owning real property—with the condition of members of "savage tribes." She says:

If the tragedy of savage tribes is that they inhabit an unchanged nature which they cannot master, yet upon whose abundance or frugality they depend for their livelihood, that they live and die without leaving any trace, without having contributed anything to a common world, then these rightless people are indeed thrown back into a peculiar state of nature. (Ibid.)

This is not the only time Arendt speaks of "savage tribes" in this part of *Origins*. In an earlier chapter, she writes disturbingly of African tribal peoples as lacking a "specifically human reality," beholden to nature

and lacking all evidence of accomplishments (OT 190, 193). I will be saying more in a moment about this disturbing description of tribal peoples; for now I wish simply to note how Arendt's *concepts* of "savagery" and "civilization," as used in these and various other parts of the book, belong to a systematic conception of human agency. Mastery over "nature," contributions to a common world, and the establishment of legal order—all of these are treated by Arendt as if all were expressions of the selfsame human capacity. And so they are, on her way of thinking in this period. All involve the triumph of purposiveness over brute material, unmastered impulse, arbitrariness of all kinds.

4.

If there is one thing in *Origins* that Arendt's critics and commentators have found intolerable—an irritant seldom escaping indignant censure, except when simply ignored in awkward silence—it is the story she tells of the seeds of modern racist thinking, a story about the experience of the first Europeans to settle in Africa, the seventeenth-century Dutch at the Cape of Good Hope. Explaining the settlers' adoption of racist doctrines as nothing else but an ingenuous response to their new situation—their revulsion and horror at being surrounded by savage tribes lacking all civilization—Arendt seems to presume that civilized men could hardly be expected to react otherwise. "Race," she says, when first warming to this disturbing theme, "was the Boers' answer to the overwhelming monstrosity of Africa—a whole continent populated and overpopulated by savages" (OT 185). The idea of a radical gulf between races became axiomatic to their way of life simply because they "were never able to forget their first horrible fright before a species of men whom human pride and the sense of human dignity could not allow them to accept as fellow-men"; what so shocked the Dutch settlers was simply that the natives "behaved like a part of nature" (OT 192). (Note that Arendt uses the word "savage" as in the French *sauvage*, meaning "natural" or "untamed," not necessarily violent—"savagery" being distinct in her lexicon from "barbarity.")

It is no wonder that this sort of talk makes Arendt's readers uneasy, even those patient enough to perceive that Arendt is well aware of the terrible suffering inflicted on African peoples by Europeans. That uneasiness is only partly allayed when one reads on to find Arendt associating the Boers' adoption of racist doctrines with their own eventual alienation from civilized, law-governed life even their own degeneration into a tribal horde (OT 193). That uneasiness lingers through to the end of the chapter, even after one finds her attributing the later appeal of racist doctrines among Europeans in Africa to the oppor-

tunism of an unscrupulous mob that admired the Boers for their having arrived at that very result. For even when she comes to that darkly ironic conclusion—which should surely suffice to dispel the suspicion that she holds any brief for the conduct of Europeans in Africa—she nonetheless seems to hold fast to her initial presumption: that these horrible consequences followed from nothing else but civilized man’s affront to their “human pride and the sense of human dignity,” when brought into contact with peoples closer to nature, as if it were simply inevitable that some such disaster should follow whenever civilized man, with his great human dignity, were confronted with men drastically less well accommodated (OT 192).

It is hard to know what to make of all this. The most to be said on Arendt’s behalf, it might seem, is that she is haunted by civilization’s precariousness, and bracingly firm in resisting weak-minded cultural relativism. That is true enough, so far as it goes. But to leave it at that is to miss half the arc of her argument.⁷

To see where the argument actually leads, we need only assemble the pieces encountered so far—without being distracted by things that she says in her later works. In fact, we need only pay close attention to the way Arendt herself assembles the pieces, when she comes to the end of this part of the book.⁸ All “highly developed political life,” she observes (in a statement containing a phrase that I quoted before), “breed[s] . . . a deep resentment against the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is—single, unique, unchangeable” (OT 301). How she develops this thought deserves to be quoted in length:

This whole sphere of the merely given, relegated to private life in civilized society, is a permanent threat to the public sphere, because the public sphere is as consistently based on the law of equality as the private sphere is based on the law of universal difference and differentiation. Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.

Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals. The dark background of mere givenness, the background formed by our unchangeable and unique nature, breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity—which are identical with the limitations of human equality. The reason why highly developed political communities—such as the

ancient city-states or modern nation-states—so often insist on ethnic homogeneity is that they hope to eliminate as far as possible those natural and always present differences and differentiations which by themselves arouse dumb hatred, mistrust, and discrimination because they indicate all too clearly those spheres where man cannot act and change at will, i.e., the limitations of the human artifice. The “alien” is a frightening symbol of the fact of differences as such, of individuality as such, and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy. No doubt, wherever public life and its law of equality are completely victorious, wherever a civilization succeeds in eliminating or reducing to a minimum the dark background of difference, it will end in complete petrification and be punished, so to speak, for having forgotten that man is only the master, not the creator of the world. (OT 301-2)

She reiterates the final claim at the very end of the book (on the next-to-last page of her “Concluding Remarks”), where she warns ominously of the danger 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” (OT1 438). These statements demand close attention.

On the assumption that Arendt’s point is to celebrate the public sphere, in the spirit of *The Human Condition*, the passage appears as little more than a string of *non sequiturs*; that assumption dismissed, a coherent, and quite different argument comes to the fore. The elements all converge on a point that few readers of hers would expect, but there it is: she is taking the side of nature against politics, warning against a propensity she sees inherent in civilization. It is an indictment of civilized man for his arrogant pride in human accomplishment. She is warning that this very pride breeds a panicked disgust at the limits of human capacity. As if this were not disturbing enough, this indictment against human pride extends even—or rather, *especially*—to pride that attaches impersonally to all human accomplishments, in the form of respect for man as an end in himself.

None of what Arendt says here need be thought to imply any weakening in her belief in political equality, or her commitment to human rights. There is nothing in this that shows any sign of wavering on her insistence that all human beings be granted membership in some state, for the chance to take part in a common world; nor need her ominous warnings be taken as signs of anxiety about the basis of rights, or the civilized order allowing for them. Her warnings are centered instead on a psychological disposition, the propensity that we have seen her describe as “human pride” (OT 192). We might linger a moment over that phrase: *human* pride. Not simply pride that is found among

human beings, but a pride in being human—that is, pride in autonomous purposiveness. (One might recall the way Kant speaks of “human dignity,” using the word “human” to refer specifically to the capacity to set one’s own ends.) And not just regard for purposiveness, but *pride*. Arendt seems to regard this pride as sufficient, up to a point, to motivate civilized life, personal responsibility, and respect for the rule of law—all of which are certainly preferable to the arrant irresponsibility that comes of pinning one’s pride on something else, like lineage, race, or nationality (see OT 194, 197, 227). But it is pride nonetheless, and, in speaking of it, Arendt presumes we know what that means: the opposite of humility.

5.

If Arendt’s readers have often failed to perceive the full arc of her argument here about human pride and its dangers, that may be because it follows a course so unfamiliar to modern, liberal sensibilities. She has no inclination to cast aspersions on civilization’s achievements, or on the idea of civilization as an evaluative category. However fearful she is of the terrible consequences of civilized man’s pride in his achievements, she never sees any reason to question the reality of those achievements, so far as they go, or to doubt the manifest superiority of civilized life over its alternative. However alarmed she may be at maleficent tendencies intertwined with civilization’s advance, she has no wish to retire the idea of civilization as a normative category, or still less to conclude that we lack any basis for deeming particular ways of life as more or less adequately civilized. This attitude may make us uncomfortable, but it deserves to be taken seriously, not merely dismissed out of hand as a bias. After all, the primary achievement of civilization she has in mind is the rule of law, as an instrument to protect the equal rights of individuals. And there is nothing in anything that she says that claims civilization as an exclusively European or Western prerogative.⁹ (Nor does she assume that the achievement of civilization is to be taken for granted in Europe itself—far from it. She is mindful, in every word that she writes, of how a European people, the Germans, had willfully cast off civilization, abandoning the rule of law for a neo-tribal organization.)

At issue in Arendt’s fears, then, is not any inherent flaw in civilized norms, nor any doubt as to their validity, but something more ominous, less familiar to modern ideas: the thought that human abilities, human responsibility, may be unequal to measuring up to those norms. This is what she means in speaking of a “predicament of common responsibility”—not simply the need for broad-mindedness, for toleration of people

unlike ourselves, but the need somehow to deal responsibly in the face of their persistent irresponsibility, to contain and to punish their crimes against others. “The more peoples know about one another,” she says, in a variant on a repeated observation, “the less they want to recognize other peoples as their equals, [and] the more they recoil from the ideal of humanity” (OT 235). She traces the evils of racism to the attempt to escape that responsibility for other people, at the price of sacrificing any civilized self-understanding for oneself. And her view of the predicament is even darker than this, for she is alert to similarly murderous consequences in the response to it by civilized peoples whose sense of humanity is sturdy enough to resist that impulse to escape into racism (at least initially), but whose pride is consistent only with seeing less civilized ones as “hopelessly their inferiors and at the same time in need of their special protection” (OT 207). For that is how she understands the mentality of the French in Algeria, and the British in India and in Egypt—judging their ever-greater dependence on rule by decree, and on handling unrest by administered massacres, to be the ultimate consequence of their attempt “to bear a responsibility that no man can bear for his fellow man and no people for another people.”

6.

We are now in a position to get a sense of what Arendt is thinking at the very end of the book, when she poses the choice between modern resentment and “fundamental gratitude” for the mysterious gifts of existence. We can see the emergent pattern even more distinctly if we notice one further detail, from the parallel passage at the end of the book’s second part (the one I quoted at length), where we can make out the contours even more fully. In the lines just before the ones I quoted, she suggests, ever so faintly, that perhaps, after all, only *love*—that “great and incalculable grace”—is able to deal adequately with our own and our fellows’ incorrigibility (OT 301).¹⁰ And she proceeds to specify, though rather cryptically, what sort of love she has in mind—the kind 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.”

What is Augustine’s name doing here, affixed to the notion of love? The reference to Augustine would be too brief to make very much of, did it not fit so perfectly into the pattern we’ve seen. Might Augustine’s name be a key to unlocking the baffling opacities of Arendt’s text? Might we not recognize, after all, something distinctly Augustinian in the shape of an argument running from warnings against human pride, to a grateful humility before the “miracle that each of us is made as he

is” (OT 301); an argument passing from warnings against our failure to face and accept the congenital errancy of our condition, to expressions of hope in the “great and incalculable grace” of a love that surpasses all reasons? Might it be time to look closely at Arendt’s reticences?

Instead of asking, ‘What is Augustine’s name doing here?’ perhaps we might ask, ‘What makes us so quick to discount its significance?’ What makes it hard for us to conceive that, when writing *Origins*, Arendt might have been haunted by Augustine’s thought? Is it because of the things we recall from her later work, where Augustine’s name gets mentioned in ways that tend to direct our attention away from his central teachings? Or might it be other assumptions we make in locating Arendt’s work?

7.

Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin—“Augustine’s Concept of Love.” That was the title of Arendt’s doctoral dissertation, written under Karl Jaspers’ supervision in Heidelberg in 1928, and published with minor revisions the following year.¹¹ It would be unwise to suppose that Arendt’s ideas were unchanged in the twenty-odd-year interval between then and the writing of *Origins*, for obvious reasons. But a few general points might be made nonetheless.

The first is simply a caution regarding the text of *Der Liebesbegriff* as it is known to most students of Arendt’s work. Until 2003, when the original text was republished in Germany, the book was available only in a posthumously published English translation, *Love and Saint Augustine*.¹² Any reader of this English text is sure to be impressed by how uncannily the 23-year-old doctoral candidate sounds like the Arendt who wrote *The Human Condition* three decades later. There is a reason for this—as becomes clear from perusing the editorial apparatus. The reason is that this English “translation” is not a direct rendering of Arendt’s first book, but a composite text, assembled from two different states of a translation that Arendt herself had revised sometime in the 1960s. From the editors’ statements, one may discern that Arendt substantially rewrote certain parts of the text, while making at least minor changes throughout; and that she later abandoned the effort, for some unknown reason, before she got to the end. And the editors freely admit to having given their version some further finesse of their own, doing such things as altering terms they found overly Latinate, in the hope of making the final product more “readable”—that is to say, more accessible and familiar to Arendt’s confirmed admirers.¹³ Suffice it to say that the recent republication of the original German text is a welcome corrective to this situation.

My second point is that we had better take heed of our own possible prejudices in basing assumptions about Arendt's concerns as a thinker on things that we know—or think we know—about her life story. We know that Arendt wrote *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* after the end of her romantic affair with Heidegger, and so we say, rather knowingly, that Arendt's writing the book was somehow connected with how she felt about him. Perhaps. It happens that the phrase from Augustine that she quotes so casually in *Origins* may be found in one of Heidegger's letters to her from those earlier days.¹⁴ And it is true that her dissertation is filled with terms that sound at least vaguely reminiscent of terms used in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. But let it be said that most of these terms were Augustine's before they were Heidegger's, and that Arendt shows herself equally versed in those parts of Augustine's idiom not to be met with in Heidegger. At any rate, we should not be too quick to suppose that Arendt's interest in Augustine's concept of love moved entirely in the orbit of Heidegger's phenomenology (or, for that matter, Jaspers' existentialism). One need only look at the footnotes of Arendt's dissertation to see that she took herself into some rather different terrain in her work on the project. We are talking about a highly independent young woman, who surely felt herself free to study whatever philosophers interested her, and who found it worthwhile to immerse herself in Augustine's works: not just his *Confessions* and *Free Choice of the Will*—either of which might find a place on any philosopher's syllabus—but his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, *Commentaries on the Psalms*, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, *On Christian Doctrine*, and *On the Trinity*, just to name some of the notable ones. Oh yes, and one other: *The City of God*.

But of course, Arendt was a Jew: surely that matters somehow. Surely it does: but how, exactly? Arendt's self-identification as a Jew was unequivocal and unwavering. But I know of no evidence that it was anything but political—perhaps not much different, *mutatis mutandis*, from the loyalty that any child of expatriate parents might feel for the distant parental country. She had been raised in a non-religious household, and one looks in vain in her writings for any interest in Judaic religious traditions, or any great familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures—no more, at any rate, than the bare minimum to be expected of any student of Augustine's sermons and homilies. By contrast, she shows an offhand, if rather selective, familiarity with the New Testament. (This does not figure in *Origins*, though.) I certainly do not mean to suggest on this basis that Arendt was secretly Christian, or leaning that way. It is unlikely that she ever saw herself as anything but an outsider to the Christian faith. My point is just that we should not rule out the possibility that she may, nonetheless, have been

haunted by Augustine's thought at some point in her life—that she may have been haunted, that is, by doctrines concerning the intractability of human nature, the terrible evils arising from human pride, and the inevitability of our succumbing to them, save through our loving God before all. Unsheltered as she was by the roof of a church, might she have been spontaneously, electrically, struck on exposure to Augustine's massively cumulus mind, absorbing the shock but only partly transforming its energies? Might it not just be possible, even, that this would account for some of the charged intensities of Arendt's writing, the white heat that burns through the pages of *Origins*?

Ironically, the most plausible reason for doubting Augustine's impact on Arendt may be the frequency, and peculiar exuberance, with which she quotes from him in her later work. In nearly every one of her books, from the *second* edition of *Origins* to her unfinished last work, *The Life of the Mind*, she quotes from a sentence of his whenever she introduces her later concept of action as initiative, using his words “that there be a beginning, man was created” (*initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo*) as a kind of motto for her doctrine of natality. She does this so often that readers may be excused for supposing that Augustine was the source of the doctrine for her (which is more than she ever said). Her other references to Augustine are few and often oblique, overshadowed by this recurrent pattern in connection with her notion of natality. At times she even creates the impression that Augustine's “political philosophy” consists in this notion of natality, although on closer inspection it seems she is merely referring to the fact that her quotation is *from* his great political work—*The City of God* (HC 177). Even so, one does not have to be deeply versed in Augustine's works, or even *The City of God*, to know that the notion she cites is rather peripheral (to say the least) to Augustine's great intellectual edifice. So this habit of hers has the ironic effect of making her seem wholly innocent, as it were, of Augustine's central doctrines.

There is more to be said about this—for instance, at what price that innocence may have been won. But, whatever we wish to conclude from her manner of speaking of Augustine in *The Human Condition* and subsequent works, it would be implausible to assume that the same should hold true in the case of *Origins*. And the reason is simple enough: the very idea of natality is not yet a part her mental armory—nor could it have been, given the concept of action then at her disposal. We are brought back to the fissure with which we began: the gap between hailing the miracle in how we are made, and finding occasion to wonder at human initiative.

8.

If attending to the discrepancies between *Origins* and Arendt's subsequent writings allows us new purchase on parts of that book that are otherwise simply opaque, it also invites a new way of reading *The Human Condition*. Attending to these discrepancies would make it possible to tell a story of her intellectual itinerary in that interval, by showing how doctrines that she enunciates in the later book are not only a fresh departure for her, but also a kind of disburdening—perhaps even an emancipation of sorts. That in turn might allow us to make sense of one or two mysteries in *The Human Condition* and its various sequels, while also drawing our attention to some other, unnoticed opacities. Without attempting to tell that story with any completeness, let me just point to a few of the elements it might involve.

To re-cross the gap separating *Origins* from *The Human Condition*, going this time in the other direction, we might seek our footing in a postscript of sorts that Arendt added to *Origins* in its revised editions, at a time when she was already well on her way to writing the later book. The postscript I mean is a curious statement she added for the first time in its 1955 German edition, and included in all subsequent English-language editions as well. (The statement is from a passage inserted near the end of the chapter on statelessness and human rights; much of the passage consists in material salvaged from the scrapped “Concluding Remarks.”) It seems best to consider this statement apart from those in *Origins* we have examined already, on account of its later date; nevertheless, it seems consistent with the position encountered so far. The immediate context, again, is the prospect of shoring up human rights, about which she now professes a certain grim doubt. She warns ominously of modern man's inevitable drift into purely instrumental standards, for want of any transcendent ones (OT 298). That then leads her to the following observation:

Here, in the problem of factual reality, we are confronted with one of the oldest perplexities of political philosophy, which could remain undetected only so long as a stable Christian theology provided the framework for all political and philosophical problems, but which long ago caused Plato to say: “Not man, but a god, must be the measure of all things.” (OT 299)

The reasoning here is all rather murky; there is something uncomfortably cramped in the way the whole paragraph is squeezed into the earlier text of this chapter. What is worth noting, though, is that the “perplexity” that she names, and which she identifies with a fairly obscure statement from Plato's *Laws*, corresponds exactly to the alternatives posed in Augustine's *City of God*—that is, the choice between

citizenship in the city of man and the city of God. (In this connection, it is worth recalling that Augustine's idea of the "city of man," given over to human pride, is not merely Babylon, but Rome: that is, the city devoted to human standards, even when true to the finest of Ciceronian virtues.)

If one were to come upon this passage added to *Origins* without prior knowledge of Arendt's writings dating from roughly this period, one would have little reason not to take the theistic response she attributes to Plato but as her own. In light of those other writings, however, another reading seems more likely: that she is not necessarily stating a view she continues to hold, but saying less guardedly what she had formerly thought. Her greater explicitness now may be due to no more than a certain impatience in tying up hanging loose ends that were left when she scrapped the "Concluding Remarks." For the curious thing is that in her other writings from this period, including *The Human Condition*, she seldom misses an opportunity to inveigh against Plato's view of the matter. She does so not by taking the opposite view of the question, as summed up by Protagoras' claim to make man the measure of all things, but by rejecting both alternatives, dismissing them as two sides of a false choice (HC 174).¹⁵ I would hazard that this one anomalous statement might be deemed an indirect sign that by this time she understood herself to be arguing against her own former position in *Origins*—or at any rate, to be resisting the implications that she herself saw latent in it. In other words, the added passage may be taken as a confirmation of the reading of *Origins* I have proposed, and also a clue to Arendt's own subsequent self-correction.

That clue is worth teasing out a bit further, in that it betokens the remarkably systematic character of her self-correction. When she rejects the alternatives posed by Plato and Protagoras (which might be taken as proxies for those posed in Augustine's *City of God*), she does so on the strength of the conceptual scheme she had hammered out for herself only after completing *Origins*' first edition. The choice is a false one, she says, because "measures" or "standards" are significant only with reference to fabrication, not action or the "web of relationships" that are the field for that activity. Consider the change in her position. Before, she herself had understood human action as the imposition of human order on nature, treating the mastery of non-human nature and the achievements of disciplined human conduct as the outcome of one and the same activity. She now differentiates action and fabrication as two distinct sorts of activity, transferring that former description to fabrication alone. So it makes perfect sense for her to identify standards and measures solely with the latter activity—and so to reject the

idea that either man or God need be taken as an ultimate standard in human affairs. More generally, she castigates Plato for having imported the notion of “measure” into a theory of politics, blaming him for having set a disastrous precedent for the later “Western tradition of political thought” (HC 225). (Although Arendt tends to be rather vague in specifying what she means by the “Western tradition of political thought,” there is reason to think it is precisely the tradition established through Augustine’s work that she has in mind.)¹⁶

By differentiating action from fabrication in this way, Arendt effectively undermines her prior understanding of what she had called the “predicament of common responsibility.” Given the way she now understands “human affairs,” there is no longer any question of interest for her in “limitations of human action” arising from the resistance of human nature to the artifice of civilized standards, or from resentful pride of those who would act in the name of such standards. That whole issue is quietly shelved, dismissed as *une question mal posée*. “The frailty of human institutions and laws and generally, of all matters pertaining to men’s living together,” Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, “arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature” (HC 197). When she comes to speak about “human pride” in *The Human Condition*, she does so without the least hint of disapprobation (HC 209). More to the point, she now locates that pride, not in accomplishments, but in a capacity for initiative that transcends anything already achieved.¹⁷ Thus, *The Human Condition* contains no trace of her former call for a humility before human incorrigibility, to be prompted by gratitude for the miracle of our createdness.

9.

I have touched on just a few of the ways in which Arendt’s thought in the years after *Origins* undergoes systematic modification. There are also significant changes in the way she comes to conceive of the “human artifice,” of the “public realm,” and of “human reality”—to name just a few more. No proper account of these developments would be complete without considering Arendt’s altered sense of the “predicaments” in human action, or paying due heed to her effort to replace the idea of “standards” in human affairs with a “moral code” based on the “good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them” (HC 245). And that is still not even to broach the question of how this complex of changes in Arendt’s thought in the years leading up to *The Human*

Condition might bear on her work in the years after that—a question especially pertinent to her altered manner of dealing with topics from *Origins* in two later books, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Revolution*.

There is also a great deal more that would need to be said about those few aspects of this subject that I have addressed in these notes. For one thing, I have left to one side the question of Heidegger's influence on Arendt's thinking about human agency. Arendt owes a clear debt to Heidegger for her eventual distinction between freedom and purposiveness, the basis for her separation of action and fabrication—a fact that has hardly escaped the attention of her leading commentators. But to be reminded of this, in light of my preceding argument, is to confront yet another puzzle about Arendt's itinerary. So far as I can tell, there is nothing whatever in *Origins*' first edition that might not have been written by someone entirely unacquainted with Heidegger's thought; only afterward do all the tell-tale signs of Arendt's indebtedness to him appear in her work. (This is perhaps less surprising when one realizes that it was only in 1950—with *Origins*' manuscript already complete—that Arendt renewed her personal ties with him, after a rupture of more than twenty years.) However we choose to make sense of that puzzle, its resolution must intersect with our understanding of the whole complex of changes in Arendt's thought over this interval. If my interpretation of those changes is sound, it would mean that Arendt's recourse to Heidegger's thought is best understood in relation, somehow, to her attempt to disburden herself of an entirely different manner of thinking about the human condition, unmistakably Augustinian in its general drift. At any rate, it should prompt us to look at the question of Heidegger's impact on her quite differently than has generally been done.

10.

In following the trail of Arendt's unmarked intellectual itinerary from *Origins* to *The Human Condition*, I have marked movement from a pattern of thought that is at least incipiently religious, to one that by contrast seems emphatically secular. She has gone from a stance of chastening the excess of human pride and espousing a reverent gratitude for the gifts of Creation, to asserting the intramundane meaningfulness of human initiative. And yet this substantive swerve in her thought coincides with an inverse one in her language: from a manner of touching on traditional religious themes with the utmost delicacy and obliqueness, to a manner of talking about purely human phenomena with an idiolect that is redolent in religious—specifically, Christian—associations. One instance of this would be the way she

habitually implicates Augustine's name in her idea of natality, as if calling the Bishop of Hippo as a witness against his own teachings. Here is another:

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. . . . Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether. . . . It is this faith and hope for the world that found its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their "glad tidings": "A child has been born unto us." (HC 247)

If she can afford to be imprecise here with her Biblical references—it is not in the Gospels that these "glad tidings" are "announced," but Isaiah 9:6—it is of course because she is merely speaking figuratively, with Handel's music in mind. Her literal argument is concerned with a purely human capacity, for which the one thing needful is not love, but simply the company of responsive peers. And yet—why strive so assiduously to set these purely secular themes to the strains of a sacred oratorio? Why speak of the exercise of this purely human capacity as "the miracle that saves the world"? What resonances might she mean to evoke, what alternatives might she mean to suppress, in describing such purely this-worldly activity as a "second birth"?

NOTES

I would like to thank the many individuals with whom I have discussed these aspects of Arendt's work in recent months, especially Steven Aschheim, Seyla Benhabib, Jay Bernstein, David Bromwich, Agnes Heller, George Kateb, Jerome Kohn, Patchen Markell, Sankar Muthu, Dana Villa, and Yirmiyahu Yovel. I am especially grateful to Rocío Zambrana for her expert editorial advice and assistance.

1. On the error in supposing that Arendt's attitude toward Greek antiquity in *The Human Condition* is admiring, see my "Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*," *Political Theory* 30:1 (2002), pp. 97-123; see also Jacques Taminiaux, "Athens and Rome," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 165-77.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), pp. 438-9. Except where noted (as in the present instance), all citations of this text refer to the revised edition of 1973, henceforth OT, followed by page number. Further references to the first edition are abbreviated OT1, followed by page number.

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), pp. 178, 244; henceforth HC, followed by page number.
4. The significance of this passage is clearer in Arendt's later German version of it, where she draws on the double meaning of the German word *Geschichte*, which means both "story" and "history." See Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* (1960; reprint Munich: Piper Verlag, 1998), p. 228; henceforth VA, followed by page number.
5. For a recent discussion of these and related aspects of Arendt's theory of action, see Patchen Markell, "The Rule of the People: Arendt, *Archê*, and Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 100:1 (2006) pp. 1-14.
6. Cf. OT 433, 445, and 447, where Arendt elaborates on this same idea in the context of totalitarianism.
7. As I myself have done in the past. What follows is intended as a corrective to certain claims made in my "Arendt and the Modern State: Variations on Hegel in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," *Review of Politics* 66:1 (2004), pp. 105-36.
8. For a different reading of this part of Arendt's argument, see Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 71ff. The account of Arendt's argument that I present here differs widely from Birmingham's, but I am indebted to Birmingham's work for drawing my attention to the pertinent pattern of statements in *Origins*.
9. Much as one may regret the incaution in Arendt's summary judgment on the level of civilization among indigenous African tribes, it is worth noting that she never doubts their capacity for civilization, and even wonders aloud whether the tribal groups whose way of life she contemns might in fact be the remnants of a civilization destroyed by some overwhelming catastrophe (OT 192; see also 195 and 205).
10. To be sure, in this sentence she also refers to the "the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy" as means of "dealing adequately" with the aspects of human existence of no concern to public life. But I take it that she includes them because her proximate point is mainly to mark out the difference between public justice and private feeling. Of the three, it is only love that she associates with sheer, unqualified affirmation—and so it would seem the only one that is relevant to the issue of gratitude for that which is "mysteriously given" in human existence.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*, ed. Ludger Lütkehaus (1929; reprint Berlin: Philo, 2003).
12. Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).
13. See the editors' preface to *Love and Saint Augustine*, pp. x-xiv. These difficulties are noted by Ludger Lütkehaus in an editorial note to the 2003 edition of *Der Liebesbegriff*; see p. 19.
14. See Martin Heidegger to Hannah Arendt, 13 May 1925, *Briefe: 1925-1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1998), no. 15. The editor of the

correspondence reports some difficulty in locating the original source of the quotation in Augustine's corpus, and suggests that it may be a paraphrase; see pp. 269-70.

15. This statement is admittedly rather cryptic, but see the German version, VA 212; see also HC 156-7, and 166. Arendt's notebooks confirm that even before she wrote the passage added to OT, she had already decided that neither man nor God was needed as a "measure" of all things. See Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950-1973*, vol. 1, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2002), p. 392.
16. At any rate, this is the only way I am able to make sense of some otherwise baffling statements about this "Western tradition" that Arendt makes. Consider just her claim (from a lecture) that Roman political experience "lost" to this Western tradition, on account of Cicero's failure to mount an adequate philosophical challenge to Plato. (See Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn [New York: Schocken, 2005], pp. 54-6, 82-6.) Note that her penchant for blaming the failings of the tradition on Plato is not inconsistent with her taking Augustine as the tradition's unnamed founder, for she herself suggests that "tradition" is a Roman, not Greek idea, implying that Plato's stature for it was something like Homer's for Virgil. If this is correct, it would of course raise the question of why Arendt would be so disposed to dealing with Augustine's role largely by preterition. Without going into that here, let me just point out that this is probably closely connected with her peculiar insistence on associating her notion of "natality" with Augustine's name.
17. Cf. HC 209 with Arendt's remarks in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 257. She does speak unfavorably of "hubris" (HC 26, 191), but this is hardly the same as her manner of speaking of "pride" in OT.