

Augustine, the fall of Rome and Christian world alienation in Hannah Arendt

(Abstract)

This project aims to explore the peculiar tension between Hannah Arendt's appropriation of Augustine for the notion of natality, which occupies a central place in her thought, and her critique of what she calls world alienation or worldlessness (*Weltlosigkeit*), whose origin she also associates with Augustine. Focusing on how Arendt develops her political theory with and against the mindset of Augustine and the late Roman empire, the project straddles various fields of study, among them intellectual history, the afterlife of Greco-Roman antiquity (or what is now sometimes called "reception studies"), philosophy, and political and social theory.

In her first letter to the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who was to become her thesis advisor, Hannah Arendt asks how it is possible to learn something new from history. This letter from July 1926, one of the earliest extant documents of Arendt's thinking and questioning, betrays a keen skepticism towards the idea that the course of history is transparent and fully available to those who seek to understand it, a topic which was to occupy an important place in her work. In the background looms an even larger question, though it is not raised explicitly in this letter, namely whether novelty occurs at all in history, or whether everything that happens is either part of a predictable development towards a final goal or a constant repetition of the same.

Over twentyfive years later, in an essay entitled *Understanding and Politics*, Arendt will strongly take position in favour of the occurrence of novelty, and in developing this position she refers to Augustine and the fall of Rome in 410 CE. This is remarkable, considering that the modern interest in the end of antiquity was usually closely tied to a cyclical model of history, which gained currency in the early modern era and continued to influence the vision of history alongside the Christian teleological model. By contrast,

Arendt argues that only the experience of an end, such as was the fall of Rome for Augustine, enabled the latter to recognize that with the creation of the human being, a beginning was made and, hence, novelty came into the world (see *City of God* 12.21). It is by expanding on this observation that Arendt develops her concept of natality.

By investing the fall of Rome with such a decisive meaning for the development of Augustine's thought on beginning and newness, Arendt as it were denies or counteracts the very detachment from the world that she elsewhere denounces so firmly in Augustine. If Augustine fosters Christian world alienation by focusing on the afterlife, Arendt grounds his thought in history. It is fair to say that the reference to Augustine's historical situation encapsulates the whole thrust of her influential reinterpretation of Augustine's key sentence on the creation of the human being. Augustine refers to the original creation of man to conclude his argument on otherworldly happiness, but Arendt makes Augustine's insight one of the fundamentals of her political theory.

Arendt is a highly original and creative thinker, so much so that one almost wonders why she refers to Augustine (among others, of course) so consistently in developing her arguments. What is more, she often reads an ancient text in order to tease out something that the text actually does not say, but *could*, or even *should*, have said! In *The Life of the Mind*, for instance, she writes that if Augustine had thought through the consequences of his statement on the creation of man, he would have called humans not mortals, but *natales* (vol. 2, p. 109). One way to look at this puzzle is that Arendt's work after all contains the answer to the question she raised in her first letter to Jaspers, namely whether it is possible to enter into a real dialogue with the works past generations left behind and to learn something new from them, something one did not know already. Paradoxically, it is often in engaging with these works that Arendt discovers genuinely new ways of looking at things.

In her "Thinking diary" (*Denktagebuch*) Arendt writes (p. 428, August 1953, my translation):

“We usually understand each other only in an “in-between”, through the world and for the sake of the world. If we understand each other directly, immediately, without referring to something that is in common and between us, we love.”

Elsewhere Arendt uses the metaphor of the table for this in-between, a table which both separates and connects those who sit at it. Perhaps we can look at texts as another form of an in-between that connects people over a distance.

In my view, tracing the details of this dialogue through texts, without committing the error of playing down its openness and unpredictability, deepens our understanding of the truly innovative and thought-provoking aspects of Arendt’s thought. In this sense, further aims of my project comprise a better assessment of other voices that participate in Arendt’s dialogue with Augustine. Among them are Augustinian scholars, such as Romano Guardini, the author of a little monograph on the first five books of Augustine’s *Confessions* significantly entitled *Anfang (Beginning)*, of which Arendt owned a reprint from 1950. Among them are also other readers of Augustine who contributed to the lasting influence of the late antique philosopher on modernity, notably Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), whose works Arendt studied in the 1950s and ‘60s. Last but not least, this enquiry will also serve to put into perspective the influence of the one figure whose shadow looms large in scholarship on Arendt, Heidegger.¹

¹ For this aspect see for instance the recent controversy over Arendt in the *Jewish Review of Books* and the *New York Times*, in which Seyla Benhabib rightly refutes Richard Wolin’s assumption that Heidegger is the source for Arendt’s notion of thoughtlessness (Gedankenlosigkeit).