Love, Religion, and Hannah Arendt

In 1929, Hannah Arendt (then just 23 years old) received her PhD in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers. Her thesis was entitled Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin (On the Concept of Love in the Thought of Saint Augustine). In it, Arendt announced that she would tackle “the question of the meaning and importance of neighborly love … [as] a simultaneous critique of the prevailing concept of love and of man’s attitude toward himself and toward God.”¹ She split her work into three sections which reflect her understanding of the three contexts in which Augustine articulates his understanding of love: the material world, the realm of human activity, and in community. Arendt’s analysis in 1929 laid the groundwork for many of the themes that she would later discuss at length in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), The Human Condition (1958), Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963), On Revolution (1965), and The Life of the Mind (published posthumously in 1978).² Arendt’s understanding of natality, the public and private realms, and the unworldliness of love all owe something to her early treatment of Augustine.

This essay starts from Arendt’s dissertation to think about what it means to take her seriously as a religious thinker. What motivates my writing is thus a desire to think actively about Arendt’s relationship with Christianity and Jewishness as it both figures in and influences her thought. I begin by attempting to closely trace Arendt’s thought regarding Augustine in her dissertation. I particularly focus on Arendt’s use of Augustine. For her, was he primarily a

² Here, dates of original publication are used; later references in this paper give the year of the specific edition cited.
Christian theologian? Or did Arendt think of Augustine as a philosopher first and foremost? I then shift to consider how the understanding of love developed in *Love and Saint Augustine* resonates with Arendt’s later, more explicitly political works. I focus in particular on a passage from one of Arendt’s letters to Gershom Scholem in the midst of the *Eichmann* controversy. There, we begin to discern Arendt’s idiosyncratic understanding of love, in this case as it dovetails with her sense of Jewishness. I then move to compare Arendt’s discussion of love in the Scholem letter with her exposition of this theme in *The Human Condition*. Here I will discuss what I think is one of the most striking assertions in all of Arendt’s oeuvre: love, she says, is “perhaps the most powerful of all anti-political human forces.” To understand Arendt’s conception of love, I argue, we must first think through her early work on Saint Augustine. Arendt’s understanding of love is, in the end, inextricable from her relationship with religion.

Why did Arendt choose to write her dissertation on the work of Augustine, the Christian theologian of late antiquity? This very question was put to Hans Jonas, Arendt’s lifelong friend and colleague, during the translation of *Love and Saint Augustine* in 1990. Jonas replied that “such a topic would not have been all that unusual in the German universities of the time,” since Heidegger and Jaspers were both attracted to “the existentialist message of Augustine.” Jonas thought that Arendt’s topic “grew out of her own reading in combination with Jaspers’s work at the time.” Indeed, many students of philosophy in German universities of the time were attracted to Augustine’s *Confessions* as a prompt to “self-exploration and the descent into the abyss of conscience.” Jonas stresses Arendt’s philosophical interpretation of Augustine (as opposed to a Christian theological approach), in particular as his thought intersects with the existentialism

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developed by her two mentors, Heidegger and Jaspers. Jonas’ thoughts provide a useful starting point for interpreting *Love and Saint Augustine.*

Arendt’s topic, then, was *de rigeur.* Was her scholarly treatment of Augustine also orthodox? Clues can be found in the contemporary reception of her thesis. Reviewers complained that Arendt was “oblivious to history, tradition, and the established canon of Augustinian scholarship,” though she was “given full marks for originality and insight.”

This reception is equally evident in Jaspers’ own judgment of her work. In his assessment following Arendt’s oral exam, Jaspers both praised and critiqued Arendt’s dissertation:

> A philosophical interpretation of Augustine demands the ability to perceive, in reading a text that is largely rhetorical and preacherly, the intellectual structures and the pearls in which the intellectual content is concentrated and which leap out at one here and there in their brilliance. … The writer of this dissertation has [this] ability [*diese Fähigkeit.*] … Neither historical nor philosophical [sic] interests are primary here. [*Weder historische noch philologische Interessen sind maßgebend.*] The latter should rightly be translated “philological” rather than “philosophical,” which also aligns better with Jaspers’ larger argument. The impulse behind this work is ultimately something not explicitly stated: through philosophical work with ideas the author wants to justify her freedom from Christian possibilities, which also attract her. She does not try to assemble the didactic pieces of the whole into a system, but focuses instead on how they do not fit together, and so gains insight into the existential origins of these ideas [*auf existentielle Ursprünge des Gedankens zu gewinnen.*]

So far Jaspers has mostly complimented his student’s work. His interpretive comments seem to suggest a response to the criticism Arendt will face from reviewers: she does indeed reject the “canon of Augustinian scholarship” precisely *because* she wants to use Augustine’s writings as resources to articulate conceptions of love free from “Christian possibilities.” Jaspers seems to suggest that we view Arendt’s identity as a Jew — who is nonetheless attracted by Augustine and Christian understandings of love — as a hermeneutic for understanding *Love and Saint Augustine.*

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4 Ibid., xvi.
Augustine. Ultimately, though, this is not sufficient for Jaspers to give Arendt’s dissertation the highest (or second-highest!) grade:

In the quotations some errors [Malheurs] appear … [Arendt] has not always escaped the danger of having Augustine say things that are not in the text [etwas sagen zu lassen, was so doch nicht dasteht, ist sie aber nicht immer entgangen]. … But in view of the real accomplishment here, which is one of objective philosophizing with historical material [ein sachliches Philosophieren in einem historischen Material], this failing mars the work but does not invalidate it. I hope that it has been reduced to a minimum. But because of it, this otherwise impressive work, outstanding in its positive content, can unfortunately not be given the highest grade. Therefore: II–I. 6

I do not think that Jaspers is unfairly criticizing Arendt or questioning how a Jew might write about a Christian theologian. Rather, I read Jaspers’ assessment as highlighting two key traits of Arendt’s thought that persist throughout her life. Arendt makes original insights that build on her particular experiences (as a Jew, as a refugee, as a student of Heidegger) while sometimes neglecting attention to historical detail and accurate representation of her sources.

If Arendt’s dissertation is neither especially original in topic nor particularly rigorous in its treatment thereof, why should we still read Love and Saint Augustine? The answer (I argue) is that Arendt’s early thought on Augustine illuminates her later work. A number of scholars have conscientiously demonstrated how particular themes from Love and Saint Augustine are developed in Arendt’s later works.7 I will not reproduce this wealth of scholarship in what follows but will instead highlight a few relevant points. First, Arendt reads Augustine primarily

6 Ibid.
as a philosopher. Arendt admits that this move that might seem “completely irresponsible.” In her defense, she argues that

none of the philosophical ideas of antiquity and late antiquity that Augustine absorbed in various periods of his life … were ever radically excised from his thinking. The radical choice between philosophical self-reflection and the obedience of religious faith … remained alien to Augustine. … However faithful and convinced a Christian he became, … he never lost the impulse of philosophical questioning.8

Arendt here stakes out an unorthodox path that might seem a bit concerning: she will read Augustine as a philosopher, even if this means ignoring the historical development of Augustine in his later years into the Father of the Church. We can see why Jaspers judged his student as both negligent in her attention to historical detail and also impressively courageous in her originality.

These two traits are also palpable later in Arendt’s study, when she dwells on the conceptual issue of linking the two key commandments: loving God and loving your neighbor. Here, she brings in original insights from her mentor, Heidegger, connecting Augustinian love with Dasein.9 Arendt’s (and Augustine’s) starting point is Jesus’ famous teaching in Matthew 22:35–40 (NRSV):

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Arendt’s argument hinges on the crucial final words of the second commandment: love your neighbor as yourself (wie dich selbst, sicut teipsum, ὡς σεαυτόν).10 For Arendt, Augustine means by this not just an equivalent magnitude of love for the self and the neighbor. Rather, Augustine is making a strong claim about ontological commonality between self and neighbor. The manner

8 Arendt, Love and Saint Augustine, 6.
9 I am grateful to Nick Andersen for pushing me to make this link more explicit throughout this essay.
10 In any language, this is the second person reflexive person. As we would expect from Jaspers’ comments, Arendt seems to be playing a bit fast and loose with this, conflating “thyself” (second person) with “oneself” (third person).
of love that is prescribed must then be consistent with this ontological claim. We should love the neighbor as one loves oneself — not just to the extent that one loves oneself. By linking love to *Dasein*, the theological work Augustine does is transformed in Arendt’s hands into existential thinking: as Roy Tsao puts it, Arendt’s “question concerning the neighbor’s relevance is really a question about the bearing of social relations on human self-understanding.”

How does this ontological exegesis of Matthew 22:39 become an existentialist interpretation of neighborly love? Augustine on the one hand claims that a Christian sees the meaning of existence only in God. On the other hand, a serious ontological reading of Matthew 22:39 seems to point to some other mode of human existence, or at least another register of love. To elucidate this apparent tension, we should focus on the three contexts that structure Arendt’s analysis. In the first context, we live in a material world where love “desires a worldly object, be it a thing or a person.” To borrow Tsao’s words again, “love as desire chases at wisps, knowing nothing of true enjoyment — except for those who seek their enjoyment in God.” But God in this sense is the transcendent, eternal *summum bonum* (the Neoplatonic Highest Good). How could one love this God and also love the ultimately transient neighbor? The first context is clearly unsatisfactory. In the second conceptual context Arendt limns not a world of material things but a world of human activity. The fear in this context is not of material loss but rather of death — that is, the cessation of activity. In response to our fear of death we turn again to God — this time not the God of rational order but the God of life, God as Creator. Just as before, we find no place for love of the neighbor if we attain illumination only by loving a transcendent God.

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11 Tsao, “Arendt’s Augustine,” 42. I closely follow Tsao’s analysis in the subsequent paragraphs.
13 Tsao, “Arendt’s Augustine,” 43.
For Arendt, Augustinian neighborly love finds its only suitable context in the Christian community. Here, we find God as Redeemer. In a Christian community redemption is afforded to all human beings by Christ’s salvific act. But although redemption is won for all, this grace of God is revealed only through constant striving in community:

The reason one should love one’s neighbor is that the neighbor is fundamentally one’s equal and both share the same sinful past. … Salvation itself is made to depend on the conduct of the world, or rather, on its conquest. Thus the world is relevant, not because the Christian still lives in it, to a certain extent by mistake, but on the ground of his constant tie to the past and thereby to original kinship, which consists of an equal share in original sin and thus in death.  

We see in some of our fellow Christians models of good conduct to emulate, and in others humbling reminders of our former condition. Whether through encouragement or rebuke, our fellow members of the Christian community push us to strive for salvation. Our love of God the Redeemer is thus identical to a turn to our fellow members of the Christian community. In Arendt’s words:

I never love my neighbor for his own sake, only for the sake of divine grace. … This indirectness turns my relation to my neighbor into a mere passage for the direct relation to God himself. … We are commanded to love our neighbor, to practice mutual love, only because in so doing we love Christ.  

It is only with God as Redeemer that love of the neighbor is fully consonant with love of oneself and of God. This third context, in other words, is the only suitable one for understanding the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself.

We thus understand that we must love God not in his transcendent capacity as Highest Good or as Creator, but as Redeemer of all humans — including the neighbor. Is this a distinctly Christian assertion? Arendt thinks not. She argues that

the neighbor’s relevance is not tied to Christianity. … Faith in Christ redeems the past and only the common past can make the faith a common faith. This past alone is common to all. … Divine grace gives a new meaning to human togetherness — defense against the world. This defense is the foundation of the new city, the city of God. Estrangement itself gives rise to a new togetherness, that

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15 Ibid., 111.
is, to a new being with and for each other that exists beside and against the old society.\textsuperscript{16}

Arendt is attracted to Augustine’s explanation of Matthew 22:39 because it is grounded in community. For Arendt, the God as Redeemer is figurative: that is, he \textit{stands in for} estrangement. In Arendt’s formulation, estrangement is the ultimate cause of the new togetherness. Augustine’s ontological exegesis thus becomes an existentialist claim: a “new being with and for each other” that is premised not on faith in a Christian god but rather on the human condition of estrangement. Arendt asserts the primacy of human existence in her elucidation of love.

This understanding of love (unmoored from Christianity) will influence Arendt throughout her life. As we will see below, this conception in particular undergirds Arendt’s relationship with Jewishness. In 1963, Arendt published a series of articles in \textit{The New Yorker} documenting the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, a former Nazi bureaucrat. She included a few paragraphs that seemed to indict some Jewish community leaders as Nazi collaborators. A firestorm immediately erupted. The reams of paper used in this controversy are probably already responsible for the destruction of several forests. For our purposes, therefore, it suffices to note that one of those who wrote Arendt in reproach was Gershom Scholem, the pioneering scholar of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and a friend of Arendt’s.\textsuperscript{17} In response, Arendt wrote a letter to Gershom Scholem on 20 July 1963:

\begin{quote}
I’ll begin with \textit{ahavath Israel} [“love of the Jewish people”] … How right you are that I have no such love, and for two reasons: first, I have never in my life “loved” some nation or collective — not the German, French, or American nation, or the working class, or whatever else there might be in this price range of loyalties \textit{[sonst was in dieser Preislage]}. The fact is that I love only my friends and am quite incapable of any other sort of love \textit{[bin zu aller anderen Liebe völlig unfähig]}. Second, this kind of love for the Jews seems suspect to me, since I am Jewish myself. I don’t love myself or
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\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 107.

\textsuperscript{17} Their friendship was unlikely and always testy, though linked (until his tragic early death) by their mutual friend Walter Benjamin; see Marie Luise Knott, “Why Have We Been Spared?,” in \textit{The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem}, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), vii–xxvi.
anything I know that belongs to the substance of my being [irgendwie zu meiner Substanz gehört].\textsuperscript{18} Is the action of love in this context recognizably Augustinian? Yes, though parsed by Arendt’s existentialism. First, it is clear that the conception of love outlined earlier does not leave room for \textit{ahavath Israel}. One can love a Jew as a neighbor in just the way one loves oneself or one loves God. But no collective can be the object of such love; even the Christian community is loved only as it is constituted by individual believers. When Arendt notes that she is incapable of love other than that of her friends, I believe she is again echoing the third context of neighborly love. Remember that in this context love for the neighbor or the friend is possible \textit{if and only if} one loves oneself and God: “We are commanded to love our neighbor, to practice mutual love, only because in so doing we love Christ.” When Arendt says she is incapable of loving anyone other than her friends, she is \textit{not} disavowing love of self or of God or of anything else. Quite the opposite. Arendt realizes the wide diversity of loves she practices. She is saying that all these sorts of love come down to love of God (standing in for estrangement). Love of God \textit{is identical to} love of the neighbor.

The second claim Arendt makes in her letter to Scholem is a little more puzzling. On the one hand, Arendt seems to be saying that there is \textit{one kind of love} in the world, the one in which neighborly love is identical to love of God. On the other hand, Arendt clearly states that she does not love anything that “belongs to the substance of [her] being.” How can we resolve this apparent contradiction? Well, a first clarification is that Arendt is not saying that she cannot love a Jew. Jews and gentiles alike are neighbors, and we love them just as we love God. What is suspect is “this kind of love,” namely \textit{ahavath Israel}. This love is suspect because it is argued for

from a common faith. Arendt refuses to love Jews just because she herself is Jewish. A useful analogy here is Arendt’s argument in *Love and Saint Augustine* about why Christians love fellow members of their community. It is not because they share a common identity, since “the binding power of common faith in Christ is secondary.” Rather, Christians love each other because of the past that is common to all. Arendt is suspicious of loving a Jew because she is a Jew. One should love a Jew not because he “belongs to the substance of my being” but because you and he and all the gentiles share a common past. We all experience estrangement, the fundamental fact of human existence; love of the neighbor proceeds from this commonality. Once again, we see how Arendt’s original commingling of Augustine and Heidegger motivates her conception of love.

To move this essay towards its conclusion, I would like to take up one of the most beguiling statements Arendt makes on love. In the following passage from *The Human Condition*, Arendt focuses on the words of Jesus of Nazareth, the “discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs.”

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20 Ibid., 241–42. The following quotations come from the same pages.
is driven by a direct relationship of one human being to another. This understanding leads to
nothing so much as the

conviction that only love has the power to forgive. For love, although it is one of the rarest
occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequaled power of self-revelation and an
unequaled clarity of vision for the disclosure of who, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point
of total unworldliness with what the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no
less than with his achievements failings, and transgressions.

Why does love possess this unequaled power? Because love proceeds from estrangement, a
fundamental fact of human existence. In the commingling of Augustine and Heidegger, Arendt
realizes that existence precedes essence: who precedes what. More precisely, love of God is
identical to love of any human existence, whether that be the self or the neighbor. We are
commanded to love our neighbor, and our self, because we share in common human existence.
This takes precedence over what it is we are loving — that is, the essence of our love’s object.
But there is a problem with this existentialist–Augustinian understanding of love. It so dismisses
the question of what it is we love that it becomes totally unworldly. There is only one thing that
can break the spell of love’s unworldliness:

The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common, is
representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a
new world into the existing world. Through the child, it is as though the lovers return to the world
from which their love had expelled them. But this new worldliness, … is in a sense, the end of love,
which must either overcome the partners anew or be transformed into another mode of belonging
together. Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is
not only apolitical but anti-political, perhaps the most powerful of all anti-political human forces.

Why would one call love anti-political? What concept of love (Liebesbegriff) might lead to this
assertion? I have already demonstrated why love is unworldly: because it is identical to love of
God qua estrangement. In other words, love is inherently motivated by human existence rather
than the worldly realm of human politics. This is not necessarily an issue. Earlier we noted how
love of the Jews is possible within this framework; it is just not possible as love of a collective,
that is as ahavath Israel. Similarly, political forms of love are possible, but they are identical to
the unworldly form of love because all love is driven by the existentialist God of estrangement. Love is *anti-political* only insofar as it is unworldly. That is to say, love is anti-political because it is fundamentally concerned with human existence, not human activity. After all, we have seen why love of the neighbor is impossible within a world driven mostly by human activity. So how can Arendt reconcile this understanding of love’s impossibility *qua* activity developed in *Love and Saint Augustine* with her concerns in *The Human Condition*, some twenty-nine years later? By noting that love is anti-political, not to thus deny the potency of love but rather to recognize that it exists in a different context. As Arendt had demonstrated so many years earlier, love of the neighbor is only possible in the third Augustinian context: it is possible only insofar as it is unworldly. Arendt’s statement that love is “the most anti-political of all human forces” is a way of reminding us that Arendtian love is *identical to* love of God *qua* estrangement. We see once again just how deeply Arendt’s conception of love is influenced by (her Heideggerian understanding of) Augustine.

This essay has been an exercise in reading Arendt sympathetically, on her own terms. At every step I have tried to understand Arendt’s conception of love. What I have clearly demonstrated is that the commingling of Augustine and Heidegger that Arendt first formulated in her dissertation is an essential aid to parsing her later understanding of love. One concomitant is that we must not neglect the role of religion in Arendt’s thinking. This is not to say that she is a Christian theologian like Augustine or a scholar of Judaism like Scholem. Rather, I mean by this that an inclusive, comprehensive understanding of Arendt’s thought should foreground her relationship with both Christian and Jewish thought and experience. Such a move helps us better understand Arendt and in turn think more clearly about how to deploy her original, powerful, and at times baffling understanding of love in the world.