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Arendt and Christianity: On Love and the World

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Philosophy

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Logan Andrew Daly

May 2023

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to Dr. Glen Mazis, who took me under his wing when I needed it most, mentored me even in his retirement, refrained from strangling me when I could have crashed his boat, never stopped answering the phone, and always told me the truth when things were done poorly.

## Acknowledgements

The completion of this project is indebted to the consistent organization and motivation of my thesis chair, Dr. Cassie Striblen. Without her knowledge of Arendt and her unwavering helpfulness throughout the writing process, this project would not have been possible. Dr. Matthew Pierlott, Dr. Dean Johnson, and Dr. Steven James also gave me crucial feedback.

I could not have finished this project without the unconditional support of my loving wife, Emily, and my family who have always been reassuring—especially when I was not all that sure what I was doing. My wife and mother have been tremendous interlocutors who have helped me hone my beliefs and recognize what I wanted to include in the pages of this project (though not all of it made the cut). I am also thankful for the intellectual competition I have found in my brother, the continuous backing of my work from my father, and the lifelong encouragement of my sister. I must also acknowledge the inspiration and motivation I gleaned from my father-in-law who made graduate school seem doable.

Above all, I attribute the completion of this project, as much as I possibly can, to Jesus Christ. It is my hope that the following writing is appealing to both the fundamentalist Christian and the skeptical atheist. This project is a *testament to* and a *fruit of* my own modest faith—for which I am eternally grateful.

Should the reader find anything in the following pages valuable in any way, then I urge them to reference this page for their source. Anything in this project that is worth reading is attributed to the individuals I have mentioned here.

I will *happily* take credit for the rest.

## Abstract

Hannah Arendt criticized the Christian faith for what she saw as an inherent wordlessness or ascetic attitude. She believed this focus on the afterlife was an affront to her political philosophy and kept people from participating in the public sphere. This thesis is a selective exploration of Arendt's criticisms against the Christian faith and aims to show that there is a way of reconciling the respective belief systems, allowing an Arendtian to benefit from Christian ideas and a Christian to improve themselves with the assistance of Arendtian concepts. The project is split into two chapters. Each chapter focuses on a point of comparison and tries to show how each side views the point before concluding that reconciliation is possible between the two parties. The first chapter addresses Arendt's main concern about the world and the Christian attitude of *contemptus mundi*. It makes the case that Arendt was wrong to say that Christianity is necessarily and inherently worldless, and that Christians ought to listen to Arendt's call to be active participants in the world. The second chapter wrestles with Arendt's concept of love. She believed love to be problematic for politics but seems to also say it is a necessary part of the proper attitude toward the world. This chapter aims to show that Arendt was wrong in her dismissal of love and that her philosophy is enhanced by the Christian faith's focus on love as the ultimate fulfillment of the Law.

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# *Introduction*

Hannah Arendt was a politically focused philosopher with no fear of making controversial statements. For example, Arendt was an open critic of the trial of infamous Nazi Adolf Eichmann, and she made some unpopular remarks on the desegregation of schools in places like Little Rock Arkansas. The potential for backlash never seemed to stop her or make her less sure of her views. Her writing reads as if she was absolutely certain she was right about whatever topic she wrapped her keen mind around. It should come as no surprise that she was a scholar of immense ability given that she studied under esteemed philosophers such as Heidegger and Jaspers—the latter of which was a lifelong friend and the former being an early lover.

As much as she may have been influenced by scholars such as these, she managed to carve out her own place in the world. Her work was often more easily recognized as political theory than it was philosophy, but her later work did not stray from metaphysics or what it means to live a good life. Early in her career, Arendt made a name for herself by reporting on the Eichmann trial where Israeli nationals illegally took custody of an escaped Nazi and brought him in front of a counsel of Jewish judges in Jerusalem. Much of the world wanted to see the Holocaust participant burned at the stake. The trial was problematically theatrical and far more

emotional than most legal proceedings; neither of these facts should be surprising given the context. Arendt was unsentimental in her observation of the proceedings. She was not caught up in the horror of what the man was being tried for—being a massive part of the logistical execution of the holocaust. Rather, she saw through it all and glanced at the bleak reality. She believed the trial was justified, writing that she “held and hold[s] the opinion that this trial had to take place in the interests of justice...”<sup>1</sup> The point where she disagreed with many others was whether Israel had the right or authority to be the judge, jury, and executioner of Eichmann. She believed Eichmann had committed crimes against *humanity* not a crime against *Jews*. The Holocaust was a crime committed against Jews, to be sure, but it was “first of all a crime against mankind.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than have Israel be the arbiters of justice for humanity, Arendt was in favor of an international tribunal where representatives of more than one group could stand up for the true victims—the entire human race. Understandably, this attitude was not held by the majority and resulted in incredible backlash. Still, she did not back down because she believed she was *right*.

*Eichmann in Jerusalem* is only one example of Arendt’s conviction-driven writing, and the point I have shared does not fully convey the controversy of her holdings on the trial. It does, however, paint a picture of the kind of coldly analytical writer Arendt was. Arendt’s discussion of the trial was thoroughly political and foreshadowed an academic career that would lean further into this political focus. She would go on to form a complete system of political philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.



recognized by its stratification of the world into three realms: the public, the private, and the social. To her, the public realm was the realm of politics where humans could exercise their humanity in the form of equality, freedom, and concern. The private realm was the part of one's life where they could discriminate, build hierarchies, and withdraw from relationships with others. The social realm was the most complex; it was a mix of both private and public without fully being either. This third realm is not addressed in this project.

With the stratification of the world came a valuation of the spheres. Arendt saw that the world had, in her eyes, incorrectly held the private realm in high regard and corrupted the public realm in various ways. She believed that the best life was one of balance where all humans were active participants in society through the public realm of politics. To be human meant to be obligated to live with others in a shared world where only proper political action could preserve both the world and its inhabitants. "No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings."<sup>3</sup> She argued that people needed to be *active* in their part of the public sphere. Her philosophy is an endorsement of the *vita activa* [active life] and its balance with the *vita contemplativa* [contemplative life].

This call for citizens to come out of their homes and do the hard work necessary to ensure the preservation of the human artifice meant that Arendt needed people to, first and foremost, *care* about the world. To her, the world was meant to be treated with an attitude of *amor mundi* [love of the world]. This way of looking at the world was presented in contrast to what she saw

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22.

as the more common attitude of *contemptus mundi* [contempt for the world] which was found most often in relation to religious traditions that promoted a belief in the afterlife.

This difference in how Arendt saw the ideal view of the world put her at odds with an ascetic Christian perspective because of its assumed contempt for the world and the favoring of the afterlife.<sup>4</sup> In her writing, she would interject snippets of her disdain for the Christian faith and betray her belief that it was too ascetic to be involved in politics. Furthermore, she seemed to believe that Christianity was a potential barrier for humanity. The ascetic nature of Christianity was seen as incompatible with the sort of publicly oriented life Arendt thought humanity ought to pursue. She wrote that “Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears,”<sup>5</sup> that Christianity wanted humans “to be free from entanglement in worldly affairs,”<sup>6</sup> and “Christianity, with its belief in a hereafter whose joys announce themselves in the delights of contemplation, conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position”<sup>7</sup> Her feelings toward Christianity are not difficult to ascertain; she was dismissive and demeaning, and this was rooted in her perception that the Christian faith

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this project I refer to this ascetic tradition with which Arendt took issue. I do not intend to speak of Christianity as a homogenous ideology. My use of the term ‘Christian’ and ‘Christianity’ as a general reference are rooted in Arendt’s own general invocation of the faith.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

is characterized by its concern with the afterlife and contemplation rather than the life of the world and activity.

This project is founded entirely on this appearance of opposition between Arendt and Christianity. I have endeavored to show that there is a position available to both Arendtians and Christians that authentically incorporates the spirit of both ways of thinking. The aim of this project is to provide the reader with the necessary context and arguments to convince them of the possibility of reconciling Arendt's political philosophy with the Christian faith in a way that allows a Christian to benefit from Arendt and vice versa. This pursuit inevitably involves compromises that members of either party may find too extreme to entertain, but my wish is only to prove the possibility of such a middle ground.

This project is split into two chapters which each deal with a specific concept on which both Arendt and Christianity expressed beliefs. These chapters are primarily comparative in nature. I have chosen the two topics *the world* and *love* because I believe they represent both the general spirit of Arendtian thought and follow a developmental arc useful for understanding both parties. Put simply, this arc is as follows: we live in a *world* we must *love*. In concluding this project, I add that our love for the world motivates us to act *courageously*. This arc represents a perspective of the human condition that is the reconciliation of the Arendtian position and its Christian counterpart.

The first chapter is the most comprehensive in this project because it provides so much framework for the second. It gives the reader insight into key ideas from Arendtian philosophy such as the *private* and *public* realms, the *vita activa* [active life] and *vita contemplativa* [contemplative life], *labor*, *work*, and *action*, and her idea that to be fully human means to be politically active.

The chapter begins by explaining Arendt's idea that the contemplative life has been elevated far beyond justification. She believed that the active life, marked by its use of speech and public action, ought to be viewed as valuable in its own right rather than being relegated to a lesser position. I also discuss the composition of the active life: the labor of our bodies, the work of our hands, and the action of our speech. I then provide the reader with evidence of Arendt's worldview and her understanding of the world as public and private. This background work is extensive but entirely necessary for the reader to know what motivates her criticisms against the Christian faith.

The primary criticism Arendt had for Christianity was her perception of the faith as being otherworldly and concerned only with the afterlife rather than the mortal life of this world. This indictment is the next topic addressed in the first chapter, and it reemerges throughout this entire project. Once the criticism is laid out for the reader, I move on to evaluating her indictment of Christianity. The main takeaway is that Arendt was criticizing a particular understanding of Christianity that is not representative of the faith as a whole or of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; Christians ought to be active in the world just like Arendt wanted. The conclusion of this first chapter is that Arendt is right to call humanity to act in the world and be involved with their neighbor, and Christians ought to take that call seriously because it is completely in line with the command of Jesus to "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>8</sup>

The second chapter of this project deals with Arendt's understanding of *love*. This is a concept of vital importance to Arendt's ideas. The first chapter showed her view of the world and humanity's place in it, and this view can be summed up in her belief that we ought to operate

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 12:31.

toward the world with an attitude of *amor mundi* [love of the world]. This central idea of Arendt's philosophy hangs on the meaning of love. The main issue here is that Arendt believed love to be unfit for the political sphere; this also motivated her criticisms against Christianity due to the faith's focus on love as the ultimate value. The chapter pushes Arendt on this question: How can one have *amor mundi* if love is relegated to the private realm?

I first show the reader Arendt's view of love and provide evidence that Arendt saw love as a political vice. She seems to have believed that love destroyed the possibility of equality—something necessary for the function of the public realm of politics. In doing this, I outline the fact that Arendt's *amor mundi* becomes incoherent when measured against this anti-political view of love. The section that follows addresses the fact that Arendt chose to use the word *amor* rather than alternatives when putting forward how she thought we ought to view the world. My exploration shows that there are several kinds of love, and these ways of loving can manifest in many ways and in many places—even politics. I spend some time on Arendt's personal experiences with love to show that she may have been hurt significantly by Heidegger, and this may have influenced her attitude toward love altogether.

I go on to show that there is a way of loving ontologically that is compatible with both the Arendtian idea of *amor mundi* and the political sphere. This way of loving can rescue love from Arendt's private exclusion. This ontological way of loving can be understood secularly, but it is most clear when viewed from a Christian perspective. This way of loving is rooted in Augustinian theology and builds a bridge between the Christian view and Arendt's. I attempt to show the reader that the Christian faith's focus on love as an active aspect of the Godly life allows for love to be involved in politics in a way that does not corrupt the political process. I argue that Arendt is wrong to say love cannot be fit for politics because love is actually a

necessity for a human to care to be present in the public sphere. This second chapter concludes that Arendt erred in her assessment of love, and her philosophy benefits from following the Christian example of wholly integrating love into its framework.

The conclusion of this project points to a topic that both Arendt and Christianity may agree on—*courage*. For Arendt, to be human was to be publicly active, and public activity demanded a selfless attitude which we recognize as courage. Writers such as Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung put forth an understanding of Christianity that agrees courage is an essential part of the human condition. Ultimately, this brief discussion of courage shows a point of total agreement between Arendt and the faith she criticized. Further, it stands as a great example of what a reconciled position may look like.

I have not aimed to compromise Arendt's ideas beyond recognition. The same is true of the Christian position insofar as it is a 'position'. Beyond that, I have also not meant to show that the two views are compatible in and of themselves; they can only be brought together when there is some compromise. If one is thoroughly Arendtian, then the Christian view is a dead option. The inverse is also true. However, this cuts one off entirely from the potential benefits of a reconciled position. Christians who take Arendt seriously will more authentically represent Christ in the world by being more active participants and loving their neighbors fully. Arendtians who listen to the Christian faith may recognize the utility of love and its necessity for public action. Thankfully, they can both agree that we live in a world which demands we take heart and act courageously; neither party will suffer a coward.

# 1

## *The World*

Allow me to begin this exploration of Arendt and Christianity by highlighting a keystone of Christian scripture. In the gospel according to Matthew, a scene is illustrated where Jesus charges the Apostles with the supreme task of discipleship, but something significant can be missed in the nuance of the passage. When Christ commands them to go “and make disciples of all nations,”<sup>9</sup> one can overlook the fact that they were commanded to go *into the world* to accomplish this task. After all, the world is the location of *the people*. Traditionally, this is referred to as the great commission, and it is central to the lives of many Christians. It is also a simpler conception of Christianity that may have been misinterpreted or mishandled through the course of history. Though the great commission is canon for many Christians, the understanding of the concept is not entirely consistent. What it means to ‘make disciples’ can differ dramatically from one Christian to the next, and even the concept of ‘the world’ may vary. This is a tremendous testament to the diversity of Christian belief.

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<sup>9</sup> Matt. 28:19, All scriptural quotations are taken from the NRSVUE translation.

Hannah Arendt sporadically indicted Christianity throughout her work for missing that exact nuance I have called attention to above. To go into the world requires one to not be consumed by privacy or give in to a mentality bent on escaping this life. Arendt was concerned and saddened by many of the intellectual and social tradition of the West. In modern times, she saw too much of the Christocentric past carried forward by the Romans via the Roman Catholic Church and its fathers who elevated what she called the *private realm*. Even worse, this elevation of the private came with an increasing amount of contempt for the *public realm*, a space which she saw as a necessity for one to lead a fully human life. This tradition, she argued, stemmed from the incorporation of the Christian Church into the Roman State <sup>10</sup> after the greater Christian tradition had taken on an attitude of *contemptus mundi* [contempt for the world]. She referred to this incorporation as the “Roman trinity of religion, authority, and tradition.” <sup>11</sup> This attitude is directly opposed to the attitude of *amor mundi* [love for the world] Arendt desired for the West to adopt. <sup>12</sup>

Arendt is correct in her assertion that the Roman politicization of the Christian faith had its own set of problems, and she is right to say that the tradition, as it was adopted by the Romans, was notably contemptuous toward the world in a way she sees as problematic for humanity. However correct these critiques may be, this is *not* to say that Christianity must be interpreted this way. In fact, it can be constructed in such a way as to avoid the brunt of Arendt’s indictment, and, fear of heresy aside, this interpretation is likely more authentic to the Spirit of

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 79.



Jesus of Nazareth than the Augustinian tradition Arendt criticizes. Such a conception has been present within Christianity since the beginning and reemerged throughout history, but it has been largely pushed aside by the massive influence of the Western fathers, such as Augustine and his successors. Unfortunately, the conception of Christianity Arendt saw as problematic became normalized over time. She believed this version of Christianity encouraged inactivity in the world—a grave sin for Arendt. Still, a politically viable conception of Christianity is possible beyond the theocratic instantiation of the faith Arendt argued against. Arendt herself admitted this curiously, but with a connotation of inherent failure:

The Church was eventually able to overcome the antipolitical and anti-institutional tendencies of the Christian faith, which had caused so much trouble in earlier centuries, and which are so manifest in the New Testament and in early Christian writings, and seemingly so insurmountable.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter holds that Arendt was justified in her claims against the ascetic Christian tradition she criticized. The main claim being that this tradition poisoned the well regarding public life and negatively impacted the balance between contemplation and action. For Arendt, the cause of this issue is rooted in the ascetic concern with the afterlife. However, I argue that this conclusion of hers stems from a misunderstanding of the teachings of Christ and misapplications of scripture. I believe further investigation shows that an attitude of *contemptus mundi* insofar as it is understood as a complete dismissal of the world is necessarily incompatible with Christianity. It will become plain to see that Christianity can weather Arendt's charge of being overly private and uninvolved with the world—the place we *must* inhabit.

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 125.

This chapter first provides the reader with an overview of Arendt's concepts of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* and the related idea of the *public* versus the *private* realm. Next, it addresses several excerpts from Arendt's writing where she criticizes Christianity. Then, I look to scripture many Christians maintain are central to their beliefs to refute her interpretation. Ultimately, this chapter shows that Arendt was, in a sense, right to criticize the Christian tradition. This means said tradition must modify its attitude toward the world going forward to fully satisfy Christ's command to go into the world and make disciples.

### **Labor, Work, Action: The *Vita Contemplativa* and the *Vita Activa***

Any discussion of Arendt must begin with an outline of the central themes of her life's work. The most important concepts for this discussion are those of the *public* and *private* realms, *contemplation* and *action*, and a love for the world which Arendt phrases *amor mundi*. At the center of this discussion lay two opposing views on the world and what sort of things are more valuable for humans to do within it. On one side, there is the Christian who, from Arendt's view, believes the world is worthy of contempt, contemplation is more precious than action, and death is a welcome release from the toils of earthly life. On the other side is Arendt and her belief that the world is to be loved, and to act is of greater importance than to contemplate. In her philosophy, action is necessary for one's life to be fully human. This section is a discussion of the latter side of this contrast. I will outline the relative themes of Arendt's political philosophy and refer to this section throughout.

To understand where Arendt is coming from when she criticizes Christianity for being too withdrawn from the public realm, it is crucial to also know her overarching views on the constitution of the 'good life.' Put briefly, her idea of the 'good life' was closely related to the

Aristotelian view. Being a thoroughly political philosopher, she spoke of *eudaimonia* [happiness, good spirit] in a political manner. She relates the goods which are found in the individual life to the goods found within the operation of proper government as if they were parallel. In *The Human Condition*, her own writing reflects Aristotle's, where she seems to agree that the good life is inherently the life of a good "citizen."<sup>14</sup> Arendt relates living a good life to the public sphere, and this shines a light on her political focus found throughout her philosophy.

In addition, Arendt's understanding of the Christian tradition was deep. Her doctoral dissertation, *Der Liebesbegriff Die Augusten* [Augustine's Concept of Love] is a deep exploration of orthodox ideas of the early Roman Catholic church from which much of modern Christianity has its genesis. To this same point, this dissertation was not a departure or harsh criticism of Augustine's ideas. Rather, it stuck safely to the most widely accepted view of the subject. In Ray Tsao's words, "Arendt kept her own beliefs in the background; the reader is met with an account of Augustine's understanding of human existence..."<sup>15</sup> This means she must have had an intimate understanding of the foundational ideas of the Christian church. Without such an understanding, her dissertation would have been dubbed a misrepresentation. She was by no means ignorant of the tradition she addressed in her work. Rather, she was well versed and sufficiently armed to criticize Christianity. To claim she was flippant or naïve would be unfair as well as misguided.

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah*

*Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45.

There is a complex integration of the Greco-Roman and Christian traditions that even further influences modern thinking. They are almost inseparable within the confines of this particular discussion. Later in life, when Arendt began writing from her own unique perspective rather than that of the church fathers, she laid out her views on one of these aspects of integration with which she took issue. This aspect was that of the inherited concepts of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* [the active life and the contemplative life, respectively]. These two concepts are most thoroughly outlined in her masterpiece, *The Human Condition*, but her lecture *Labor, Work, Action* is equally helpful for understanding these concepts. The latter is used more broadly in this project given that it was delivered to a predominately Christian audience at the University of Chicago's Divinity school.<sup>16</sup>

The *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* are more than mere concepts or lifeless theory; they exist only in *real life*—not in a vacuum. Arendt is careful to say that viewing the *vita contemplativa* as nothing more than one aspect of human life, the faculty of thinking and reasoning, and the *vita activa* as all the other non-cognitive functions leads to a misdescription of human life that harmfully influences where society places value. She asserts that these two things are named aptly as *vitas* [lives]. They are distinct ways of *living* that encompass so much more than mere faculties or abilities. She wrote that “when we speak of contemplation and action we speak not only of certain human faculties but of two distinct ways of life.”<sup>17</sup> One does not just *have* a thoughtful life or a life of action—they *live* it. These are not philosophical concepts

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<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 167.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 167.

destined to live and die in the mind of academics. Rather, they are deeply human expressions that carry with them the weight of an actual lifetime.

As one might assume, the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* are often thought of as counter to one another. This sets the stage for an opposition between two camps who view the proper way of living as drastically different. Arendt acknowledges this perceived conflict in her admission that there is a tradition of believing that “contemplation is of a higher order than action, or that action actually is but a means whose true end is contemplation...”<sup>18</sup>

The two sides of the discourse could be called the *contemplative* and the *active*, but one could more practically recognize them as philosophers and *everybody else* who is tasked with doing the hard work necessary for humans to thrive and survive. One could also say that Priests are a tremendous example of the publicly disconnected, intellectually elevated class of the contemplative. Regardless, on this view of the world, there are those who *think* and those who *act*; some do both, and some do neither. Both must be incorporated for a person to live a full, authentic life in the world. “Thinking” and “acting” here refer to the Arendtian concepts of self-reflection and political action through speech and public participation rather than the respective faculties. Arendt’s problem with Christianity is rooted in her belief that it is a faith that perpetuates the elevation of the *vita contemplativa* and the degrades the *vita activa*.

### **Balancing Contemplation and Action**

The need for balance is highlighted by Arendt’s own understanding of the *vita activa* as being comprised of labor, work, and action. For her, labor represents the sort of tasks that are

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<sup>18</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 167.

inevitable for the continuation of the species. “By laboring, men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body.”<sup>19</sup> This is meant to be juxtaposed with her concept of working, recognized by the fact that work ends “when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things and objects.”<sup>20</sup> Labor never ends as long as humanity lives, and work is always striving toward a specific goal which is *not* the direct preservation of life. She refers to Marx and notes that his desire was “not merely the emancipation of the laboring or working classes, but the emancipation of man from labor.”<sup>21</sup> This emancipation, which she believed can be accomplished through a major technological revolution, would free up humanities energy to do more of the remaining two categories of activity: work and action.

Work must be addressed further; it creates things which are not necessary for the continuation of life. Of course, this is not to say that these products are meaningless. They recognized as “durable.”<sup>22</sup> This durability is not permanent; even the durable creations of work break down over time, but they make up a great deal of the world while they endure. In her words, “The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies, fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice, the world we live in.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 170.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

If humanity was only able to work and labor, then the idea of being freed from labor would seem quite bleak. Naturally, we want to do *more*. Arendt seems to share in the visceral feeling that humans want to transcend the fragile products of labor and work that are lost to time. Humans want to contribute to the world, the human artifice, in a way that *lasts*. In a minor way, this can be accomplished by contributions to the world via works of art, but the most effective way of transcending the onslaught of history and its destruction, to become *immortal*, is not through work; it is through *action*.

Action can, in a sense, be understood negatively—it is that which is not labor and not work. However, it is better understood positively as that human capability to “take initiative, to begin, as the Greek word *arkhein* indicates, or to set something in motion, which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*.”<sup>24</sup> Arendt sees action as the pinnacle of human faculties because of its potential for timeless results. People are mortal and will always have to come to meet their death, but they can live on forever through setting something into motion that will forever change the world. Examples of this should be near to all of us. Martin Luther King Jr. is an individual example as is the Martin Luther of the protestant revolution. The founding fathers of the United States are a plural example that Arendt would acknowledge.

Acting is only made possible by the existence of a realm of humanity that allows for it. In Arendtian thought, there are three realms: the private, the public, and the social. The latter of these will not be addressed here because it is somewhat intuitively understood and largely irrelevant. When Arendt criticizes the Christian faith, she is concerned with its privacy and lack of public participation; the social is not considered. An argument could be made that churches

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 179.

are found in the social sphere, but this could only be said of the congregational body itself in a far less meaningful sense. A church as an institution goes beyond the limitations of the social sphere because it exists as a public entity that is inhabited by private individuals. Socialization may take place within the realm of the church, but the Christian faith has both public and private aspects that prevent its institutions from being able to be justifiably called *social*. Furthermore, when Arendt criticizes Christianity, she does so with the connotation that it is involved in a dichotomy of *public* and *private*. For the sake of this project, the faith of each Christian should be understood as a general but private commitment.

That still leaves the private and public realms which are *imperative* for this discussion to go any further; they are addressed at length in the following section. To understand Arendt's meaning when she speaks of action, the reader need only to know that action is made possible by the existence of the political realm also known as the public. This realm is marked by an artificial equality. Arendt writes that:

All human activities are conditioned by the fact of human plurality, that not One man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth and in one way or another live together. But only action and speech relate specifically to this fact that to live always means to live among men, among those who are my equal.<sup>25</sup>

Action is not so neatly categorized into the *vita activa* as one might think. Immortal action often requires the careful thought associated with the *vita contemplativa*. Rather than see her lecture *Labor, Work, Action*, as an indictment of the contemplative life, one should understand it as a call for balance between the two ways of living—an incorporation of each into all of our lives. Her focus on action and the elevation of the *vita activa* is an effort to throw off the

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<sup>25</sup> Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 179.



tradition of praising contemplation and instead showing the world that the good life ought to have both. We cannot, in Arendt's mind, just sit around in ivory towers of thought. We must leave our towers and act. The dichotomy is broken down; the juxtaposition of *activa* and *contemplativa* becomes an interplay.

Arendt also made the strong statement that action is, much to our dismay, unavoidable for humans. To her, the active life is "what no man can escape altogether."<sup>26</sup> What, then, would she make of the individual who managed to never act? Arendt's answer would be simple; they never even *lived*. At least, they did not live as humans. To be human is to possess the power to *act*. Failing to exercise this power is, in the individual, *suicide*, and in a society, it is *genocide*. Suicide in this case being the forsaking of one's own humanity, and genocide being the suicide of an entire section of society. It is important to note that acting in this case does not refer to the typical sense of the word. For Arendt, action is that which has a political impact on the public sphere, and its highest form is that of speech. This point must be punctuated with the caveat that action is often tied to thinking and acts of genocide are often tied to *thoughtlessness*. In the case of the Nazis, a great deal of horrendous action would have been prevented by a little bit of thought. Arendt saw the evilness of Eichmann and dubbed it *banal* on the grounds that he was neither stupid nor extraordinary: "It was sheer thoughtlessness."<sup>27</sup> Eichmann is an example of someone who escaped the *vita contemplativa* and became a shade possessed by mere activity. This will forever stand as a testament to the consequence of imbalance—of not incorporating the one aspect of life with the other.

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<sup>26</sup> Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 167.

<sup>27</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 363.

### **The Overvaluation of the *Vita Contemplativa***

Still, there remains the common way of perceiving the contemplative life that Arendt sought to dethrone. On this view, the *vita contemplativa* is an inherently elevated or objectively superior way of living that supersedes the active life in terms of value and importance. Perhaps this should not be the case, but I wager that when an individual says they have a PhD, they receive a more enthusiastically positive reaction than when an individual says they are a sanitation worker. We would also often assume the PhD earns more money. Although this attitude may be changing as a result of the current political climate, it remains true that it is the consequence of the intellectual tradition Arendt is coming up against. The Greeks valued Socrates more than the slaves who labored to keep the *polis* going. This is not to say that sanitation workers and slaves are examples of ‘active’ individuals in the Arendtian sense. It is merely an illustration of the elevation of the contemplative life in society. Arendt draws our attention to the consequence of such a line of thinking; we must recognize the necessity of the labor that keeps us alive as well as the thoughtful actions that may make us immortal.

It cannot be denied that the West, directly or otherwise, inherited this intellectual tradition—one that values thought over work and labor. It is vital to understand that the inversion of this hierarchy of contemplation over action is a central theme to Arendt’s writing. She rightly placed value in the active life without discarding the importance of the life of contemplation. Philosophers are sometimes quite intelligent and produce world-changing thoughts, but the fact remains that the sanitation workers keep society from drowning in waste. Still, humanity must not be confined to *just* labor. A balance must be struck. Arendt herself criticizes those who would call for a total avoidance of thought. When discussing the modern glorification of labor

that has occurred as a result of particular ideologies, she laments the fact that “contemplation itself [has become] meaningless.”<sup>28</sup>

In the past, the West has elevated contemplation because it seemed to transcend action, and this is true to some extent purely by virtue of what contemplation is. However, this transcendent character does not entail an elevation of value. For Arendt, action deserves to be elevated because of its inescapability and its immortal potential. There is also the fact that political action, the *ideal form* of action, is necessary for societies to continue in the same way that labor props up human life. This parallel is Aristotelian in nature and noted by Arendt: “As far as the members of the *polis* are concerned, household life exists for the sake of the ‘good life’ of the *polis*.”<sup>29</sup>

Action is an ideal human characteristic because “it is only action that cannot be imagined outside the society of men.”<sup>30</sup> Action, if it is to be justifiably elevated as Arendt wants, must be distinguished from the endless *labor* and less meaningful *work* of the human epoch. If these two things, labor and work, are removed from the truly virtuous category of action for Arendt, then what is left? What remains is *speech*. Put another way, the remaining venue for action is the political theatre—the place where words and actions are one and the same. More widely understood, the political theatre is everyday life outside of the home. This is the public realm that the following section will address further.

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<sup>28</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 170.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

As Arendt notes, Aristotle's theory of humans as the *zoon politikon* [political animal] is tied to the idea that we are *zoon logon ekhon* (as she translates it, [a living being capable of speech]).

<sup>31</sup> There is no action worthy of idealization apart from action that is carried out in politics as speech. Arendt writes that "speechless action somehow does not exist, or if it exists [it] is irrelevant."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Arendt's *vita activa* is the *vita vox poilitica* [the life of the political voice]. Of course, this does not mean that we are all tasked with being senators. Rather, it is a belief that "senator" is merely a job title, and politics is the task of everyone. The "political voice" is not necessarily speaking or talking; Arendt would categorize politically influential actions as speech.

### **The Public and Private Realms**

Thus far, much has been said about Arendt's concepts of the active life, contemplative life, labor, work, and action. However, I have only briefly addressed the most important dichotomy present within Arendtian thought—the public and private realms. I have swiftly noted that the private realm is that of the household and the public is that of politics and an artifice of equality and freedom. The present section will further explore this keystone of Arendt's philosophy and provide the additional framework necessary for an informed look at Arendt's criticisms of Christianity.

To some extent, the meaning behind this public/private distinction is as obvious as it seems. The private realm is that place where a person can be an island. It is in the home, shut off from the rest of the world, where a person is the master of their household or, at least, the master of

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 179.

themselves. Most notably, it is the sphere in which a person can excuse themselves from the world because this sphere is apolitical and marked by decision making processes unconcerned with the rest of humanity; the private realm is characterized by “exclusiveness.”<sup>33</sup> This does not mean, however, that this sphere is devoid of the powerful vessel of action afforded to all humans—speech. It is without a certain sort of speech; a kind that acts upon the public in a meaningful way as was referred to in the previous section. A great deal of *speaking* happens within the private realm, but there is not any true Arendtian *speech*. The moment the effect of speaking goes beyond the confines of the home is the moment it becomes public. It has then become active, political *speech*.

The private sphere is the home of contemplation; it is the place where one is “not alone,” but *by* themselves.<sup>34</sup> It is the realm where we can have a conversation with ourselves. To Arendt, this is *thought*, and it is only truly possible in solitude.

In the public, one must be concerned with others in a way that prevents self-dialogue. One cannot think in public; in public, thought manifests as action. Here one should think of the reclusive Descartes mulling over melting wax while people outside his sphere of privacy were trying desperately to get enough sleep to make it through the next day of work.

It should also be noted that the private realm is inherently *privative*; it *lacks* something important to Arendt. In her own words, “A man who lived only in private life, who like the slave

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<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr. (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 239.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1971), 219.

was not permitted to enter the public realm, like the barbarian who had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, those who perpetually hide, are not alive.

The private realm itself cannot exist within a vacuum, either. It presupposes the existence of the public realm which defines the society of humans. In Arendt’s words, “No human life, not even the life of the hermit, is possible without a world which directly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”<sup>36</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, a metaphysician remembered for his groundbreaking process metaphysics, famously penned a phrase whose spirit is echoed in that quote from Arendt: “there are no self-sustained facts floating in nonentity.”<sup>37</sup> Humans are not exempt from the truth of this metaphysical fact. To live is to live in a world—a *shared* world. Coexistence is a necessary part of the human condition, so living as if one is unaccompanied is denying oneself an essential aspect of their humanity. The idea that a purely private life is not a fully *human* life is central to Arendt’s writing. The same is true of the notion that action is also essential to living the best life. Let me stress that both points play a part in Arendt’s criticisms of Christianity.

With the private realm sufficiently defined, we can turn our attention to the public realm which is the home of politics. As Arendt noted, Aristotle defined man as the *zoon politikon* [political animal]. Arendt adjusted this definition a bit to *zoon logon ekhon* [(roughly) rational animal]. It is perhaps true that humans are the *zoon politikon* Aristotle thought us to be. Many

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<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W.

Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 11.

will have a negative reaction to such a claim as they may be averse to identifying themselves with politics in a modern sense. Nevertheless, I wager that this is the consequence of a political system robbed of its authoritative power—a matter deserving of its own analysis. In any case, when Arendt writes that humans are the *uniquely* political animal, it is in the sense that people are only ever human in their full capacity when they are participating in the parts of their lives that are *not* private—those parts of their lives we would call *public*.

It should be clear from what has been shown thus far regarding action and speech that the public sphere is the womb from which the political life is born. Furthermore, this realm is both the home and the mother to speech and action; both these concepts are hallmarks of Arendt's philosophy on proper living. Where there is humanity, there is speech and action. Where these are absent, the landscape is inhumane.

For Arendt, the terms speech and action are largely synonymous, but should not always be used interchangeably. It suffices to say that Arendt believed humans to be unique in the capacity to form political societies concerned with welfare, prosperity, and the freedom of their individual members. It is also critical to understand that Arendt believed in the separating of these spheres so that one did not negatively influence the other. However, this does *not* mean that a person should live wholly within one realm. Complete privacy is a subhuman existence. Being totally public causes one to be swallowed up by the amorphous glob of mass identity where there exists no individual—no benefactor of the fruits of the political realm that are *freedom* and *equality*.

One can nearly gain a sufficient understanding of what the public life is from a negative definition of the private life, but this approach would still omit something important. As mentioned previously, Arendt believed that to be human is to spend part of one's life in the

public sphere being *active*. For her, action is itself one of the chief defining characteristics of humanity. "...the world into which we are born... would not exist without the human activity..."<sup>38</sup> The human 'artifice' I have referred to is the product of the undeniable human ability to act.

This action that creates the world is not something that takes place within the private realm. Though the thoughts behind action may begin in solitude or private discussions of the household, the battlefield of action will always be in the public realm of politics. For action to have a lasting effect on the world, for it to be immortal, it must be carried out under the political characteristics of freedom and equality. One must be free to act. Likewise, they must be viewed equally so their action is not trampled by the force of some inauthentic hierarchy. To *act publicly* is to participate in politics and treat others as one's equal even if, in the private realm, they are not at all equal.

In sum, Arendt believed that humans need to be publicly involved, and an ideology that was against this was problematic. Arendt's criticism of Christianity, addressed in the following section, is based primarily on her belief that Christianity is characterized as uninvolved, inactive, and private. This is a criticism of a specific, ascetic understanding of the Christian faith. Christians are not incapable of action insofar as speech is the most prominent of its forms. Historically speaking, Christians are exceedingly interested in the practice of rhetoric as a tool for the advancement of the Gospel. This emphasis on the power of the word, *logos*, is a consistency in many sects of the Christian faith.

Arendt is correct; to act is to *speak*. Christians would do well to remember that God's first *act* in Genesis was that of *speaking*. Many Christians believe that with speech, all of

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<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.



existence was brought into being. As my last-mentioned quote from Arendt states, the world exists because of action—because of speech. In the next section, I will address Arendt’s charges against Christianity, given this framework.

### **Arendt’s Critique of Christianity**

This section will outline Arendt’s background as it relates to an Augustinian tradition and provide the reader with evidence of Arendt’s attitude toward the Church. It is important to note, however, that Arendt does not often make lengthy statements in her writing on the topic of Christianity. Rather, she infrequently betrays her thoughts on the matter. Each of these instances could be individually refuted, and each refutation would itself be a lengthy project. However, there is an underlying theme in her comments on the Christian faith. She seems to suggest that Christianity is too private and concerned with individual salvation for the faith to be compatible with her belief that the fully human life is necessarily public. When she speaks of Christianity, she is referring to a conception of the faith that meets this criterion of contempt for the world. Her understanding of Christianity is a particular, Augustinian version of the faith. When I make use of the term “Christian” with respect to Arendt’s critiques, it is this Augustinian Christianity to which I am referring. While this section shows the basis of Arendt’s critique, the following section will attempt to diminish its potency.

The present argument is not that the two views, Arendtian philosophy and Christianity, are altogether reconcilable. The aim here is only to carve out a space of possibility, of compromise, where an individual may find themselves comfortable as an Arendtian entertaining Christian ideas or a Christian enjoying the benefits of Arendtian philosophy. In short, I only wish to argue that irreconcilability is not a forgone conclusion.

Arendt never seemed to be wary of writing things that were controversial so long as she believed she was *right*. Examples of this attitude are *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Reflections on Little Rock* where she stoically stood by her assertions of wildly unpopular opinions on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and racial segregation, respectively. Unsurprisingly, this noble trait led to Arendt having a set of critics who took jabs at her. Even with the presence of criticism, she never shied away from leveling her own cutting speech at epochal giants such as the Christian church.

Some of her critics read her work and were inspired to call for a patriotic return to God in a belief that such a thing would restore political order in the U. S. It seems like what they really wanted was to reinstate God as the supreme dictator of not just the Church, but the State. Arendt answered these ‘faithful’ critics by writing that, “Those who conclude...that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents.”<sup>39</sup> The opponents in this case included Arendt herself. By this she means that anyone willing to casually invoke God in politics has either misunderstood or misrepresented the power, influence, and, most importantly, *place* of God. Arendt held the belief that Christianity, though it can be *used* politically, is incompatible with politics and public life in general because she believes it orients its adherents toward the afterlife rather than the current life of the world we live in—the world which was so important to her philosophy.

Her belief was held up by a common view of western Christianity as it was propelled forward by the Romans and Church fathers like Augustine with which she was intimately familiar. It must be understood that her knowledge of Christianity and her conclusions on the

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<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, “A Reply top Eric Voegelin,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr. (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 162.

matter are bound up in her formative educational background in an inseparable way. As I have mentioned, her dissertation was on the Augustinian concept of love. In that dissertation, she seems to have been careful not to stray away from an ‘accurate’ portrayal of Augustine’s own ideas on the topic. The meaning of ‘accurate’ here being in line with the generally accepted, received view of Augustine’s work. To hand down such a faithful description as is found in her dissertation, she would have needed to have a knowledge of the related tradition thorough enough that it cannot be ignored. That is, her understanding of traditional Christian theology would have been considered nearly *expert*. The greater point here being that Arendt was by no means ignorant of the tradition she would go on to criticize; her defendants, should she be shown to be *wrong* on the matter of Christianity’s relationship with asceticism, cannot make any claims of her naivety. As will be shown, it was precisely this matter of a perceived ascetic tradition that she was criticizing— ‘ascetic’ here referring to a tradition focused only on the transcendental world to come rather than the present world.

It is generally accepted that Augustine was one of the primary fathers of the Church as we know it, and Arendt’s conclusions depend on her knowledge of such monolithic figures. Her beliefs regarding Christianity are beliefs regarding an Augustinian tradition in particular. To that point, Dr. Ray Magill Jr. has noted that this subset of Christianity was rife with the sort of doctrine Arendt would abhor. Magill uses Tertullian, another major figure that helped form what would later become the dogma of Western Christianity, to point out that the Romans made a conscious decision to promote a doctrine of private over public that was not necessarily rooted in scripture—though what ‘scripture’ was at that point (roughly 200 B.C. in Tertullian’s case) is complicated. Magill mentions Tertullian’s statement that “*Nec ulla magis res aliena quam*

*publica*. [No matter is more alien to us than what matters publicly].”<sup>40</sup> This attitude shown by Tertullian is a testament to the fact that the ascetic, anti-public attitude has been with Christianity since the death of Christ. The central point worth noting here is that Arendt’s understanding of the Christian tradition is as specific as it is intimate. Furthermore, it is an understanding that is antithetical to her own philosophy from the onset. She begins from a tradition that diminishes the public life.

If Arendt’s understanding of Christianity comes from the tradition that took on such statements as Tertullian’s, then it would be no surprise for her readers when she took issue with the Christian faith. After all, it would appear to be a faith formed against her own values. This anti-public attitude is, by extension, anti-political and completely opposed to her own views developed years after her dissertation. When Arendt discussed the distinctions between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* in her lecture delivered at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, she addressed Christianity directly by writing:

Christianity with its belief in a hereafter, whose joys announce themselves in delights of contemplation, conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* while, on the other hand, the command to love your neighbor acted as a counterweight against this estimation to unknown antiquity...<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> R. Jay Magill, Jr., “Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Spiritual Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward,” *Christianity and Literature* 67, no. 1 (2017): 34.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 168.

This is perhaps the most telling quote I can provide regarding her core criticism of Christianity because it is straightforward—blunt, even. She argues that Christianity committed what was to her a capital crime; it pushed people toward a less active, less publicly involved life, and urged them to be more private while placing less value on what was done publicly. Now one can see that her claims are not only that there is a sense of incompatibility between Christianity and the public life, but that the faith may have inauthentically integrated this incompatibility and doubled down on it. Her mention of “love your neighbor” is likely rooted in her Augustinian background, as well. The contradiction between the emerging doctrine of privacy and unapologetic love for others was addressed directly in Augustine’s own writing.

She goes on:

The point of the matter, which I can only mention here in passing, is that Christianity, contrary to what has been frequently assumed, did not elevate active life to a higher position, did not save it from its being derivative, and did not, at least not theoretically, look upon it as something which has its meaning and end within itself.<sup>42</sup>

Several things must be noted about this quote. First, she shows that this theme is recurring, though this quote is from the same piece as the previous one, because she admits this is a point made in ‘passing.’ When a belief is brought up in this ‘passing’ manner, it is often because it is a regular thought for the writer. This idea that Christianity had forsaken the active life, something dear to her own philosophy, is no small ordeal to her and the claim warrants more of an address than she afforded herself here. Second, she concedes that it is a generally accepted belief that Christianity causes individuals to be *more* active in their community by saying that this is ‘assumed.’ Third, she further qualifies exactly what harm she believes Christianity did to the

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<sup>42</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 168.

active, public life—it made it *derivative* of the private. That is, it did not just degrade it in her eyes, it painted it as having its origin in the private life. This would mean the only *real* life would be the private; the public life would be but a pale imitation. This is finally cemented in the end of her statement that Christianity placed no value in the public life itself.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discussed the idea that the Church actually erased the public life of politics and citizenship. She wrote that “it was the catholic church that offered men a substitute for the citizenship which had formerly been the prerogative of the municipal government.”<sup>43</sup> She recognized that there was a historical incorporation of the Church and government. This politicization of the church formed the Roman trinity of tradition, religion, and authority was, in effect, an effort to make the church more worldly. Arendt combats the efficacy of this early movement: “no matter how ‘worldly’ the Church became, it was always essentially an other-worldly concern which kept the community of believers together.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, even if the Christians were acting in the world in the way she would have deemed positive, she believed they did it on the basis of an ascetic, private motivation which she found problematic.

Arendt also had more modern critiques of Christianity. These came in the form of the condemnation of individual members of the ecclesiastical body in her own lifetime. However, the censuring continued on beyond the matter of individuals. Showing her own thoughts through a discussion of Italian issues with the church, she writes, “Thus, for Machiavelli, the reason for the Church’s becoming a corrupting influence in Italian politics was her participation in secular

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

affairs as such and not the individual corruptness of bishops and prelates.”<sup>45</sup> Here we see that she was perfectly aware that the individual misconduct of members of the church from the lowly attendant of Sunday service to the pope himself. Still, this corruption was minor; the real issue was the church’s involvement in politic matters *at all* because it was disrupting the free and equal nature of politics.

In summary, Arendt’s criticism of Christianity is that it stood in the way of her own philosophy. It was her belief that human life was necessarily public and political. Anything less than this was simply not *human* life. This criticism is based on her received view of Christianity as a faith that focuses only on the afterlife rather than the public life of this world. She condemned the Church’s involvement in politics and believed that the actions of church members were tainted by an ascetic motivation that did not properly value the active life she saw as so essential to the human condition.

### **Dismantling Arendt’s Criticism**

The goal of this project is to carve out a space where one may comfortably be a Christian while benefitting from Arendt’s political philosophy. If Arendt is correct in her belief that Christianity really is anti-public as outlined in the previous section, then this sort of reconciliation is not possible. To have any chance of making the views compatible, it must be shown that Arendt may have been wrong to believe that the anti-public rhetoric of the Roman, Augustinian tradition authentically represented the faith as Christ wished it to be.

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<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 76.

This section will show that there is a way of understanding Christianity that is *not* antithetical to Arendt's political philosophy. That is, there is a way of being Christian that does not promote the contemplative life above all else. Being Christian does not mean forsaking the world. Rather, an authentic understanding of Christianity pushes one to be an active participant in the world and strike a balance between the public and private realms just like Arendt wanted. Additionally, this way of seeing Christianity is original to the faith.

Arendt's issue with the Church was its overly ascetic attitude toward the world that was incapable of being involved in politics in a positive way. Even so, she seems to have recognized that this anti-public theme within the Church was at odds with the character of Christ himself. In Arendt's eyes, for Christianity to involve itself in the secular matters of politics was a grievous misstep and departure from the commandments of Christ. In essence, she saw this involvement as anti-Christian:

Yet secularization as a tangible historical event means no more than separation of Church and State, of religion and politics, and this, from a religious viewpoint, implies a return to the early Christian attitude of "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" rather than a loss of faith and transcendence or a new and empathic interest in the things of this world.<sup>46</sup>

Arendt believes that the early Christian attitude was one noticeably different than the one which she charged with corrupting the public sphere. The admission that there is a difference shines a light on an invaluable matter of fact: the Christian faith is variable and nuanced. This is all to say that the traditional attitude Arendt indicts in her writing need not be the attitude that Christianity adopts. Of course, it may be the dominant attitude, but the fact remains that this *need*

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<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 252.



*not be the case*. Perhaps a ‘return to the early Christian attitude’ would deliver us a form of Christianity that could be reconciled with Arendt’s political philosophy.

Arendt seems to be, perhaps covertly or unintentionally, making one of two claims. She may be claiming that the Jews of the early Christian tradition had a certain understanding of life, labor, and work that was lost in the evolution of the Christian faith. If not that, she may have been implying that there could be a way of reformulating the Christian tradition that manages to give life on earth its appropriate value. Arendt may have argued that Christianity promoted the contemplative life and demoted the active life of politics, but she seems to consistently betray the fact that a return to the gospel may make it possible to reconcile the Christian faith with her political philosophy.<sup>47</sup>

Arendt is not wrong, however, to make her general claim that Christianity is private in its very nature—that it is uninvolved in the world. She is leveling her criticism at the traditional Christian attitude handed down by the theologians such as Augustine known as *contemptus mundi* [contempt for the world]. This idea is by no means new, and it is certainly not uncommon. Its most prolific reification was Thomas a Kempis’s *De Imitatione Christ* [*The Imitation of Christ*]. According to Magill, “*The Imitation of Christ* is a book of instructions about how to lead a more fulfilling and perfect spiritual life, a life that mirrors the original Christian Himself.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See the earlier quote from *The Human Condition* where Arendt speaks of the “early Christian attitude.”

<sup>48</sup> Magill, 40.

This handbook has been translated into over 340 languages and has had over 6000 editions published.<sup>49</sup>

This book is as paradoxical as it is prolific. The author was a devoted man of God who maintained contempt for the world until the bitter end, but he still made a point to go out into the world to help people as Christ commanded. He simultaneously maintained that the world was worthy of contempt but seemed to be invested in trying to correct it rather than forsaking it and waiting to die. In fact, when he was exhumed, he was denied beatification by the Church because they made a startling discovery that went against the contemptuous attitude his handbook called for—they found clumps of hair in his hands and wood underneath his fingernails. He had, unfortunately, been buried *alive*. Why was he denied beatification, then? “A true saint, the Church reasoned, upon waking in his grave, would have resigned himself peacefully to death and rested in the peace of the Lord. Kempis had instead succumbed to despair like a mere mortal. Beatification denied.”<sup>50</sup> Arendt wrote that the Church beatifies “saints only after they have long been safely dead.”<sup>51</sup> ‘Safely’ here could be seen as meaning ‘without damaging the doctrine of *contemptus mundi*.’

Like the Church, one could blame Kempis’s actions on a lapse in character. On the contrary, I maintain that it was the act of a man who recognized the value of earthly life. To that point, one ought to remember that Christ performed several healing miracles during his life. He even brought a man back from the dead. Given that, it is not unreasonable to believe that he was

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<sup>49</sup> Magill, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

extremely invested in the preservation of earthly life—even if it *was* lesser than the life to come. When sick individuals came to Christ, he did not tell them to die silently; he healed them, and he did so even when it took a miraculous act of God. Kempis should have been considered for sainthood on the grounds that he was a man of conviction who cared deeply for those around him rather than based on his prolific handbook on hating the world. His life of activity within the world, a life of loving the world and its inhabitants, is far greater than being ‘safely dead.’ Martyrdom may be glorious but dying quietly when there is still work to be done in the world is *cowardice*. A true saint is saintly enough to dirty himself a little longer in the fallen world to help those who remain. Kempis, then, can be seen as an example of a Christian person who lived a life against doctrines Arendt thought were anti-public, anti-world, and unfit for politics. He is but one example of a man who lived like Christ: in the world and full of love. This is despite the fact that he wrote the veritable handbook on *contemptus mundi*.

*Contemptus mundi* is heavily integrated into classical thought even before Kempis solidified its place with his publication of *De Imitatione Christ*. The anti-world attitude results from a particular understanding of doctrinal statements made by the apostles. In the first epistle of John, the author writes “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.”<sup>52</sup> On its face, this seems like an outright statement against Christians holding the world itself in high regard. Even so, opposing doctrines have been explicitly held since the time of Christ Himself as exemplified in the active life of Christ. His own life is an example of not following this doctrine of ‘not loving the world’ in a literal sense.

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<sup>52</sup> 1 John 2:15.

Amanda Shaw has noted that Kempis’s ideas regarding the world “did abate somewhat in modern thought, but it didn’t disappear.”<sup>53</sup> Still, it did *abate*. This abatement was not the result of new scripture being written or a recent movement that pushed for a drastically different understanding of scripture. This shift in is evidence that disagreement on the matter has *always* been present within Christianity. Looking at the life of Christ is the greatest way to understand what Christianity is all about, and there are ways of looking at Christ’s life that are totally in line with what Arendt demands of a fully human person. In other words, Christ himself fit the bill for Arendt in terms of the good life of citizenship and activity.

Shaw defends this truth about Christ in her piece “*Contemptus Mundi* and the Love of Life.” After discussing the classical, Augustinian origins of the doctrine of *contemptus mundi*, she writes:

What is the modern, life-affirming Christian supposed to conclude? Perhaps it is just poetic overstatement, or a bit too much fervor for the ascetic ideal. Or, seeing that most of the authors were writing protesting corruption in Church and society, perhaps *mundi* needs qualifications: It is not the world as God’s physical creation that is contemptible; rather, it is the evil that has crept in and fashioned the City of Man, in hostility to God’s loving Providence. As Leo crucially noted, we should condemn this world “when it is opposed to virtue.”<sup>54</sup>

If the world opposes virtue, which is idealistic and innately transcendental rather than material, then Christians ought to condemn the world in a spiritual manner. Instead of condemning the world itself, Christians should condemn the attitude behind the opposition. As the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians, “for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against, the rules, against

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<sup>53</sup> Amanda Shaw, “*Contemptus Mundi* and the Love of Life,” *First Things*, May 2008, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Shaw, 17.

the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”<sup>55</sup> Christians are to love the world insofar as it is created, but to condemn only that aspect worthy of disdain.

### **Conflicting Views on Love and the Public: A Brief Address**

Love is at the center of the Christian faith. It could be argued that Arendt’s issue with Christianity is based largely on a difference in how love is understood. Arendt has a definition of love that is inherently incompatible with the public sphere. In her own words, “Love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in the public.”<sup>56</sup> This is supremely convenient for her position because it creates a sheer incompatibility with Christianity and the public sphere. For Christianity to be reconciled with Arendt’s philosophy, this confounding understanding of love must be dealt with. Christianity, insofar as it is broken free from the rigid Law of Judaism, has only two outright commandments. Both commandments include the concept of love that Arendt believes to be *private*. Jesus’s answer to the Pharisees in the Matthew 22 is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...Love your neighbor as yourself.” He further qualifies the seriousness and completeness of these two commandments by saying “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Eph. 6:12.

<sup>56</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Matt. 22:37-40.

The main takeaway here is that Arendt pits Christianity against the public sphere from the onset because she has adopted a narrow definition of love—one she developed apart from the Augustinian tradition with which she began her career. Christianity is a faith based on love. If love is private, then it seems there is no chance of Christianity having a pathway into the public sphere. Yet, this conception of love can be refuted quickly here by saying that this private-only definition of love would *never* be a fully satisfying definition of love; it only covers the sort of private, romantic love present in intimate relationships and private family affairs. There is, without a doubt, a public understanding of love for one's neighbor and allies in political ventures, a love for one's country, and a love for public justice and equality that is completely looked over and obviated by her definition. Therefore, the inherently private nature of Christianity presupposed by this definition of love is fully refuted by a justifiable rejection of its founding premise—Arendt's overly narrow definition of love. A broader investigation of love as it applies to Arendt and the Christian tradition is found in the second chapter of this project.

There is a common theme that undergirds this discussion of Arendt and Christianity, and it is twofold in nature. First, one must understand Arendt's central belief about the public and private spheres outlined by the earlier portion of this chapter and know that it is characterized by a demand that the public, active life is necessary for one to lead a wholly *human* life. Any view contrary to this elevation of action is worthy of indictment in Arendt's view. Second, one must see what she is getting at when she presents her conception of Christianity to the reader. Namely, it is a view that is directly opposed to her goal of elevating the active life and need not be the way in which one practices Christianity. Christ himself did not even practice it the way Arendt presents it to the reader. Together these concepts form the baseline for her fundamental critique

of Christianity: *It is a faith incompatible with the public sphere*. Now, one is obligated to ask the question, ‘is it *really* incompatible?’ I hold that it is not.

### **Worldly Christianity: A Reconciled Understanding**

Thus far, I have outlined the essential tenets of Arendt’s philosophy and provided the reader with a basic understanding of her criticisms of the faith and their roots. I have, in passing, implied that her thoughts and the Christian faith can be reconciled if Christianity is understood in a different way. This ‘different way’ returns to the original spirit of Christ in the way Arendt alluded to in the above-mentioned quotes from *The Human Condition*. It is a faith characterized by active, loving involvement in the world. If it can be shown that a Christian can integrate the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* effectively, then it becomes possible for a Christian to enjoy the benefits of Arendt’s political philosophy such as the good life of citizenship and political efficacy—both of which make one’s life fully human.

Arendt conceded that Christianity inherited a tradition of valuing the active. That is, Christ himself did not seem to promote a purely ascetic life. This is the original spirit of Christianity that she refers to in the quotes above. I mentioned this in my discussion of the Old Testament and its attitude toward the public sphere. To a large degree, this is an admission that there is at least a *possibility* of reconciling Christianity with the public life Arendt wanted us to live. Arendt was obviously aware of the details of Christian Theology and even some of the more

fringe historical views surrounding it. This is made evident by her quoting Origen<sup>58</sup> and his radically different understanding of salvation. Origen was another monolithic figure of the early church, but his views are less prevalent in Western Christianity. A theologically ignorant person is not likely to bring up soteriology—the study of salvation—but Arendt does just that. Theology varies significantly, and this variance makes way for the reconciliation desired here to be possible. Arendt’s knowledge of figures like Origen bear testament to the fact that her criticisms are only applicable to *one way* of being Christian.

Frederick Dolan has also made the case that Arendt’s concept of *natality* was itself derivative of Christian theology,<sup>59</sup> (she quotes Augustine: *initium ut esset homo creatus est* [that there be a beginning, man was created])<sup>60</sup> so she obviously was not prepared to completely discard its value. She does not discard the faith completely. Rather, her indictments seem to be a repetitive call for a reformulation of the faith. This is all to say that Arendt was aware of a formulation of Christianity that was potentially compatible with the public realm, but chose, for some reason or another, to represent only the incompatible view. Perhaps the reason was that the incompatible view is the most commonly held, but this is not sufficient for such a grand indictment and is not as intellectually honest as one would expect from Arendt. Perhaps she

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<sup>58</sup> Arendt refers to Origen and the unique story of Christ conquering the underworld. This shows an understanding of theology beyond that of the typical lay person. For further context, see pages 128-31 in *Between Past and Future*.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick M. Dolan, “An Ambiguous Citation in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*,” *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 2 (2004): 606.

<sup>60</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 181.



presented Christianity this way because it was the view she saw lived out in her lifetime as this view seemingly prevented the Church from intervening in the Holocaust in a more effective way.

For Arendt, to live “in the world” was characterized by willfully inhabiting the man-made artifice of society here on earth.<sup>61</sup> Her criticism of the faith is mostly rooted in and defended by the Christian belief in an afterlife that she believes robbed *this* life of its value. This is at least partially refuted by the above-mentioned Old Testament attitude she was aware of, but it can be further argued that death and afterlife do not themselves toss the value of *this* life into oblivion. Martin Heidegger was Arendt’s teacher. She was aware of his writing and likely had a better understanding of it than most others will *ever* have. This is evident in her work because she effortlessly incorporates his heady concepts into her own work in a way that simplifies them and makes them practical.

One of Heidegger’s central concepts as they pertain to human life was that humans are, characteristically, *beings-toward-death*. Immediately one will recognize that Christianity accepts this because its belief in an afterlife implies a real belief in the mortality of earthly life. Contrary to the outcome Arendt argues this death-focus has for Christians, Heidegger believed that it is the chief source of meaning in human existence. That is, the very fact that we are dying means there is value in the choices we make as they are irreversible, and we will one day cease making them. Heidegger summed up this attitude well: “[W]e must characterize Being-towards-death as a *Being towards a possibility*.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 305.

Because we are dying, we have the power to make miraculous choices endowed with incredible value *because of* our mortality. Arendt utilized this same idea in her own writing. She wrote that, “the consequences of each deed are boundless...though we do not know what we are doing when we are acting, we have no possibility ever to undo what we have done.”<sup>63</sup> The irreversibility of action in a world that is filled with others who are never isolated from the rest of the world in a complete sense is the exact characteristic of life that gives gravity to action. When one acts, it is imprinted on history *forever*. For Arendt and Christianity alike, this irreversibility of action is also what makes forgiveness necessary for the world to continue to exist. Therefore, Arendt’s claim that death-focus is inherently escapist and devalues life on earth is, at least, over-presumptuous, and, at most, *false*. *Memento Mori* [remember that you must die] is valuable for our lives now and stands as an authentic representation of the Christian relationship with death.

What of this concept of living in the world, then? Are Christians really doing it? Well, for the sake of argument it needs only to be *possible* that they are doing it, but there is evidence that they *are*. Christian organizations are invested in worldly charity and have been since the death of Christ. As mentioned, He certainly made a point to be out in the world while He was here. Arendt was aware of this, as well. She says herself that Augustine made charity the main political task of Christianity.<sup>64</sup> Charity can be argued about, but it cannot be abstracted from the world. The very fact that such a thing can be expressed, ‘the political task of Christianity,’ is problematic for Arendt’s critique. As a modern example of this worldly action, one can look at the Christian Caritas and Diakonie organizations in Germany which are the country’s largest

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<sup>63</sup> Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 181.

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51.

welfare providers.<sup>65</sup> This shows that it is not only conceivable that Christians could act publicly, but that it is happening right now just like it has for thousands of years. Aleksandra Lewicki notes that there are some problems with Christian public action, that it is discriminatory, a *private/social* practice,<sup>66</sup> but these problems could be solved quite simply by having the organizations remember the above-mentioned commandment of Christ to love one's neighbors.

These examples do not necessarily show a systematic possibility for Christianity to be active. Examples are fantastic, but a return to the original attitude of the Church should be accompanied by theoretical backing. Scripture alone, if read a certain way, satisfies this systematic criterion. It can serve as a sort of guidebook to the Christian who wants to know how to live in the world in a way that reconciles the faith with Arendt's philosophy. Regardless, history has proven that whole sects of the Church fail to read the Bible this way.

Christian thinkers like Paul Borthwick, who is the author of the book *Great Commission Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World*, has made great strides in advancing an understanding of Christianity that is more in line with Arendt's philosophy. From the title alone, one can deduce that this book is a direct argument for the possibility of world-loving Christianity. Though it was not likely written to fill this void, it perfectly refutes the criticisms Arendt made against Christianity. Christopher J. H. Wright, author of the foreword, states that Christ himself testifies to the possibility of an embodied, world-loving Christianity:

God gave us a working model of how to embody justice and compassion...Jesus not only endorsed that scriptural model [of the Old Testament's love of the world], he fleshed it

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<sup>65</sup> Aleksandra Lewicki, "The Christian Politics of Identity and the making of Race in the German Welfare State," *Sociology* 55, no. 6 (2021): 1228.

<sup>66</sup> Lewicki, 1228.

out even further with his own teaching, often even more radical, demanding, countercultural and subversive.<sup>67</sup>

Borthwick continues the point:

Every day we make choices. Will we turn inward and focus on the life that Jesus gives us only as it benefits our own lives? Or will we live a lifestyle that illustrates that we see and relate to the world around us through the lens of Jesus' compassion for people and the world?<sup>68</sup>

His book argues that we ought to do the latter—love the world and its inhabitants the way Christ did. Borthwick's conception of Christianity is one that can be reconciled with Arendt's philosophy and, perhaps more importantly, it is a conception that is not *his*; it is nearer to the life and message of Jesus than the more Augustinian tradition Arendt criticized.

Given the preceding context from both Arendt's writing and scripture, along with the addition of Borthwick's formulation of Christianity, it has been made clear that there is a way to be a Christian and still entertain the main tenets of Arendtian thought. A Christian need not forsake the world the way Arendt believed they must. Christianity can be rescued from the often-well-aimed criticisms of Arendt, and Arendt's philosophy can be protected from the dismissal of the *contemptus mundi* tradition associate with Christianity. In other words, Christianity can be active enough for Arendt, and Arendt's ideas are justifiably protected from the ascetic attitude that underlies her opposition.

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 9-10.

<sup>68</sup> Borthwick, 12.

## Conclusion

Though the writing in this chapter was more granular, its overarching topic is the world. Arendt's philosophy viewed the world as something to be valued and lived in because it was the unique creation of human action. This action, which is innately political was, in her mind, one of the most important things humans have at their disposal. To desire an escape from this world was, to her, to desire an escape from the human condition itself. On her view, the world was to be loved.

She presents Christianity and its views toward the world as the foil to her political philosophy. She argues that the Church was to blame for an ascetic tradition that devalued the active, public, political life, corrupted politics, and pushed humanity to not live in the world the way she believed humans must. In short, she portrayed the Christian tradition as having a hatred for the world.

The purpose of this chapter was to present the reader with these two views of the world and show two things: first, Arendt's portrayal of Christianity need not be the case, and second, that Arendt's standard for loving the world can be reconciled with the Christian life. I have not endeavored to argue that this *must* be the case. Rather, it has been my goal to show that there is a possibility for such reconciliation to happen. I believe that the life of Christ, and works like that of Borthwick, show that a reformulation of Christianity that loves the world is certainly a possible and perhaps better way of understanding the faith as a whole.

# 2

## *Love*

The preceding chapter wrestled with Arendt's view of the world and how her philosophical beliefs motivated her criticism against a particularly ascetic understanding of the Christian faith. One may view that chapter as presenting a situation where Arendt was justified in her claims and Christians should answer with a listening ear and modified actions. Throughout that chapter, there was a connotation that Arendt believed we ought to love our lives in this world rather than wish them away in exchange for an afterlife. This chapter is narrower in its scope; the present focus is the Arendtian understanding of love and how it interacts with a Christian conception.

I began the previous chapter with the great commission; this chapter must begin with another quotation from Christ that has been equally influential on the Christian epoch. The author of Mark writes:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and

with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>69</sup>

The same event is recounted by the author of Matthew, but it ends with Christ adding a compelling qualifier: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>70</sup> In these examples from scripture, Christ makes it perfectly clear that loving God and neighbor represent the ultimate Good.

Christianity does not have a monopoly on this primacy of love. Arendt also believed that the apex of human life was found in love. For her, however, the love she favored was that of the world—*amor mundi* [love of the world]. In the previous chapter, I showed that her writings are underscored with this theme of *amor mundi*. To her, the human condition was itself something only possible in the world “into which we are born” and would not exist without “human activity.”<sup>71</sup> Her desire was for people to recognize the unique human potential for political action found in public life.

She was particularly interested in the act of creation that gives birth to freedom via the public realm. In a discussion of Augustine, she wrote that, “With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.”<sup>72</sup> Loving the world via an attitude of *amor mundi* was important to her philosophy because it meant being

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<sup>69</sup> Mark 12:28-31.

<sup>70</sup> Matt. 22:40.

<sup>71</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

invested in the world's preservation. Even more, it meant protecting individual liberties of citizens within the public realm. She said herself that, "the 'good life,' as Aristotle called the life of the citizen was not merely better, but more carefree and nobler than the ordinary life..."<sup>73</sup> For her, like Aristotle, the overarching goal of life was *civic excellence*, and she saw that love was the avenue for achieving this goal—albeit on a specific, narrow conception of love. She had a view of love that was favorable in that it had the potential to motivate the preservation of the public space and all its profits for humanity, but she would go on to criticize love by arguing that it was not fit for politics. Her views on love are complex and developed over the course of a lifetime. Most importantly, her beliefs regarding love differ dramatically from the conception invoked by Christ in the scripture quoted above.

The guiding question for the present chapter is this: What is *love* to Arendt, and how does it motivate her criticisms of Christianity's supposedly private nature and lack of political viability? I provide a discussion of what Arendt believed love to be by utilizing the noteworthy writings of Eric Gregory, Shin Chiba, Ian Thomson, and, of course, Arendt herself. In the end, I will conclude that Arendt started from a misconception; she misunderstood the true meaning of love in the Christian faith and continued a long-held tradition of liberal criticism of Augustine that yields a definition of love "stripped of value"<sup>74</sup> and unfit for politics.

The previous chapter aimed to show that Arendt was right to say we ought to be involved in the world, and Christians can benefit from this public-oriented attitude because it is in

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<sup>73</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

<sup>74</sup> Eric Gregory, "Augustine and Arendt on Love: New Dimensions in the Religion and Liberalism Debates," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21, (2001): 163.



accordance with the life and commandments of Christ. It can be said that the preceding chapter was an instance of Arendt being right and the overly ascetic Christians being wrong. On the matter of love, the conclusion is reversed; Arendt's philosophy benefits from the centrality of love in Christianity, as the Christian faith recognizes love is the greatest motivation for action within the world. Put another way, Arendt was wrong about the political viability of love and Christianity is *right*.

Gregory's article, "Augustine and Arendt on Love: New Dimensions in the Religion and Liberalism Debates" is profoundly useful for understanding Arendt's dissertation and her perspective on Augustine's idea of love. It points out that Arendt follows the liberal tradition of reading (perhaps *misreading*) Augustine in a certain critical sense; her views going forward are deeply affected by this foundation. Chiba's "Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship, and Citizenship" betrays Arendt's view in the very title. Arendt saw love and politics as diametrically opposed, or, at least, irreconcilable. Still, as that title suggests, Arendt's view on love *can* have a positive relationship with politics and citizenship.

Thomson's "Thinking Love: Heidegger and Arendt" is the most unique inclusion in this chapter. It deals with three philosophical conceptions of love whose definitions are propped up by the real-life example of Arendt's lifelong affair with one of her first and most influential teachers—Martin Heidegger. This piece is exceptionally personal, that is beyond doubt, but the discussion of love is itself a personal endeavor. Furthermore, the article sheds light on what sort of experiences may have helped shape Arendt's ideas on love. As for Arendt's own writings, I have mostly drawn from her masterpiece *The Human Condition*. I believe this to be the best place to look to find many of Arendt's most mature concepts. In many ways, her views on love shown in this work are the culmination of her own lifetime spent wrestling with the concept of

love—in part, an intellectual task that began most truly in her dissertation. Of course, her dissertation, *Der Liebesbegriff de Augustine* [Love and Saint Augustine], has been useful for this project.

Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is the same as that which has preceded: to show that Arendt's criticism of Christianity (that it is unfit for public action because of its focus on loving God and neighbor, and because it drives people toward a contempt for the world that results in a lack of political action) falls flat upon further analysis. That is, Christianity, contrary to Arendt's belief, actually drives one to act and, by her own account, be more fully human. The goal unique to this chapter is to show that love *does* have a place in politics. In fact, as I will argue, love may very well be the best possible foundation for invoking political action in society. Thus, an ideology that puts love at the center of everything would be invaluable for someone like Arendt who, above all else, desires that humans *act*.

### **Arendt's View of Love: Political Vice and Private Relegation**

Arendt's conception of love is by no means a simple one. As one would expect of any mature adult, her relationship with love as a concept changed over the course of her life and was nuanced if not altogether complicated. That said, it *is* possible to state her view in the most important respect: *she believed love to be apolitical and dangerous for the public realm*. However, appreciating this simple explication requires both some review of the preceding chapter and an in-depth analysis of Arendt's ideas.

As the first chapter of this project showed, Arendt was supremely concerned with humans taking full responsibility for that which they are uniquely capable—*political action*. Acting is not something that is, in a political sense, at all possible within the confines of one's home. In other

words, acting is not something found in the *private realm* as action *qua* action. To act, for Arendt, is to step out into the world and become involved with the greater community to which one belongs. If one fails to do this, then they have failed to accept the reality of their condition and are not exercising their full humanity—they are deprived of their uniquely human character. In her mind, there is the *natural world* and the *artificial world*. The former exists necessarily, but the latter is the result of human creation; it is the human artifice. It is in this artifice, the *public realm* or *sphere*, where humanity attains its defining characteristic. For one to be fully human, they must be oriented toward the world in such a way that they do not shy away from their political potential to act.

This view is the very center of her political philosophy and is neatly summed up in her concept of *amor mundi*. This idea, love of the world, is present throughout nearly all her writing. This should come as no surprise as she developed this political attitude over the course of her entire life. It is fair to say that she likely died without, in her own eyes, closing the book on the subject. The *amor* in *amor mundi* is of particular interest to this chapter.

*Amor*, in its plainest understanding, means *love*. Hence, the translation ‘love of the world.’ The careful reader of Arendt may find themselves puzzled by her use of *amor* in one of her most prolific ideas. She promotes an attitude of *amor mundi* but disparages love in her writing. Here is an example of what Arendt had to say regarding *love*:

Love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public. (“Never seek to tell thy love/Love that never told can be.”) Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51-2.

The most important aspect of this quote is her invocation of the term *worldlessness*. In this instance, her attack on love is that it is a totally ideal entity; it orients one toward a heaven of perfection and away from the imperfect reality of the world. In Arendt's mind, love cannot exist meaningfully within the public section of the world because it has some transcendent character that could never manifest in the political realm without obviating the central tenets of the public realm—freedom and equality. The public realm is not only the *home* of equality; equality is a necessary characteristic of it. The private relegation of love is motivated largely by the idea that love promotes inequality through valuing certain entities over others.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this way of thinking about love is immediately problematic for the layperson because it goes completely against our own phenomenal experience of love. If we take her seriously, then we are to reject the notion that love can exist between people in the public realm because love is supposedly only in the household. Of course, she concedes the viability of private love (romantic love) but 'love for the world' is a necessarily public matter. This phenomenological criticism does not need to be followed further. I believe that Arendt made a stronger statement here than intended, and I will give her the grace she deserves.

If taking the quote from Arendt above literally is an overstatement of her view, then what *does* she mean by worldlessness? The meaning is found in the latter half of the quote. Worldlessness is a characteristic assigned to entities or actions that lack either have no use in politics or do damage to the legitimacy of the political sphere; they are not welcome in the world of humanity which is necessarily public. How then, can one *love the world*, if love is itself a worldless ideal? In asking this question, one sees that we have followed Arendt down a path of nearly insurmountable semantic difficulty.

Surely Arendt was aware that there is at least the *appearance* of contradiction in saying that we must love the world but then condemning love to worldlessness. If that is the case, then she must have been speaking of two different concepts when she used the word ‘love’ in *The Human Condition* and *amor* in her larger body of work.

The idea that there are multiple ways of defining love is not at all unheard of. *The Symposium* is probably the most well-known example that comes to mind on the subject. Love can be defined in an almost endless number of ways, and it can manifest itself in nearly just as many. In English, we have rolled all the many ways of defining love into the singular word. As Charles Peirce put it, English is a “pirate-lingo” of a language that “is poor in such-like words” as *eros* and *agape*.<sup>76</sup>

Shin Chiba names seven words for love in which Arendt seemed to take particular interest: *eros*, *philia*, *agape*, *cupiditas*, *caritas*, *compassio*, *fraternitas*<sup>77</sup> [Respectively meaning sexual love, friendship, total and universal love, desire, compassion,<sup>78</sup> and brotherhood]. With respect to the sheer complication of discussing the definition of love, Chiba writes: “the theme of love is, as many theorists have noted, a complicated and even ‘swampy’ one, mainly because ‘semantic confusion’ surrounds the concept of love.”<sup>79</sup> In order to accomplish the human task of

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<sup>76</sup> Charles S. Pierce, “Evolutionary Love,” *The Monist* 3, (1893): 176.

<sup>77</sup> Shin Chiba, “Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship, and Citizenship,” *The Review of Politics* 57, no. 3 (1995): 505.

<sup>78</sup> Both *caritas* and *compassion* can be translated to mean compassion.

<sup>79</sup> Chiba, 505.

loving the world, then, one must have a clear grasp of Arendt's understanding of that kind of love which *can* be political, *amor*, and the apolitical love she calls worldless.

In its simplest form, Arendt's *amor*, politically fit love, could be more accurately called *philia* [friendship]. As the reader may have noticed, she used the word herself in the above-mentioned quote. In fact, she put friendship forward as distinct from love. "Love, in distinction from friendship..."<sup>80</sup> In the larger context of *The Human Condition*, the significance of her using the word 'friendship' can be missed, but the importance of friendship has been noted by Chiba and others. Similarly, Eric Gregory has argued for the view that Arendt invokes 'respect' in a manner akin to 'friendship.'

It should be noted that Arendt's criticism of love comes with a "distinction." Returning to that quote from *The Human Condition*, Arendt makes the point that love is to be distinguished from friendship: "love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public."<sup>81</sup> A closer look at this quote shows that friendship can survive being practiced in the public realm of politics. *Philia* can be political, then, on the grounds that it recognizes the freedom and equality of citizens—unlike love, which she seems to believe is too passionate to respect these rules of public engagement. As Gregory puts it, "For Arendt, unlike the worldly eros of the Greeks and the Renaissance humanists or the Kantian notion of respect, true Christian love—like the European revolutionary spirit or the strict conscience of a Thoreau or Socrates—is worldless."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51-2.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory, 161.

This endorsement of *philia* is confounding for the reader that remembers Arendt did not call for *philia mundi* but *amor mundi*. How can love be worldless when Arendt herself invokes a relational word summarily defined as *love* when she speaks of the ideal relationship to the world? In a letter to Karl Jaspers, she wrote “I’ve begun so late, really only in recent years, to truly love the world, that I shall be able to do that now. Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theories *Amor Mundi*.”<sup>83</sup> The task of understanding what ‘love’ means to Arendt becomes even murkier when one looks at other quotes from her about respect and friendship. Here is one of the most enlightening:

Respect, not unlike the Aristotelian *philia politikē*, is a kind of “friendship” without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem. Thus, the modern loss of respect, or rather the conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem, constitutes a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalization of public and social life.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps Arendt *should* have said *philia mundi* rather than *amor mundi*; her understanding of the Aristotelian love of politics displayed in the quote above suggests that a *philia* relationship really *is* the sort of relationship she wants us to have with the world. *Philia* can be translated simply as love, but to do so would be to lose the nuance of the word. This simplification and loss of meaning is a risk always present in translation; this is particularly true in the case of translating into modern English. One could say that a person cannot befriend the world, and *philia* can only exist between people. However, this is too narrow a view of friendship. In this

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<sup>83</sup> Young-Bruehl, 79.

<sup>84</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

discussion, *philia* finds its greatest meaning in its characterization as a form of love that maintains the distance between persons, remains unromantic, and always promotes equal respect—this is the proper way to view *philia* with respect to the world. The bottom line here is that Arendt’s political theory and attitude toward the world was so heavily integrated with love that even respecting a person meant loving them. This concept of love that she seems at some points to want to ban from the political sphere is, at the same time, the crux of her own theory of value.

Chiba sums up Arendt’s overall opinion on the matter of love perfectly: “According to her assessment, romantic love is private and worldless.”<sup>85</sup> Chiba is careful to note that she does not hold this attitude toward all notions of love. Rather, this negative view is characterized specifically by a romantic aspect that seems to pull the lover away from any possibility of making the sort of rational decisions required to fulfill the goals of the public sphere via politics. To be even more accurate, Arendt seems to take issue with love because it is inherently sentimental. I believe this sentimental character is the seed from which her skepticism grows. As Chiba notes in his own analysis of Arendt and love,<sup>86</sup> her writings in *Origins of Totalitarianism* give us further insight into her belief. Arendt wrote that love is problematic because “it remains committed to *ideas*—to greatness, or honor, or dignity—rather than any *love* of men.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Chiba, 517.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>87</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Jews and Society,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 88-89.



So, Arendt clearly has in her mind a sort of love that *would* be workable in the structure of the public realm. Namely, the *love of men*. Of course, by ‘men’ she means all members of humanity—the world through all members of the public. It is likely that what she is speaking of here is what she properly means when she uses ‘*amor*’ in *amor mundi*; it is the love in the individual who comes courageously to others in the public sphere, and it is the love that meets this person with the necessarily distant *respect* they deserve.

Arendt has a history of being opposed to ideas or passions that cause a person to lose their sense of their own individuality or, just as bad, the individuality of others. When a person is possessed by passion and gives themselves over to an ideology, they run the risk of committing atrocities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this passionate, cold, ‘irrationality’ is what made the holocaust possible. To that point, the true albatross Arendt sought to hang around the neck of Eichmann was his “idealism.”<sup>88</sup> The reasonable question to ask at this point is how love can manifest as both ‘passionate’ and ‘cold.’ That is, how can love be problematic because it forgets the equality of citizens while also being so indifferent to humanity that it forgoes the *love of men* for the *love of ideas*?

Normally, ‘passion’ and ‘coldness’ would be opposed to one another. In the case of love, as it pertains to public relations with others, this is not true. Expanding on Arendt’s view, we see that love is passionate because it can push someone to step out of the realm of common sense and do the unthinkable—like assisting happily in the slaughter of millions of innocent people—but it is cold, too, as it achieves its passionate ends through a total disregard of the value of others. Love can blind us both to reason and to the equal existence of others. Naturally, it

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<sup>88</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 75.

becomes apparent that this way of seeing the matter goes against the typical definition of love. To say that love can cause a person to disregard the value of others seems to be saying that love defeats itself. The assumed validity of these statements stands as a testament to the semantical black hole that is the discussion of love.

Still, Arendt has a conception of love in mind that *does* manage to be compatible with politics by safeguarding the value of individuals. As I have mentioned, this way of seeing love is most easily recognized as *friendship* and *respect*. This sort of love may or may not be romantic, but its romantic character can never overtake its “regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us.”<sup>89</sup> To be in the world is to be *together* but always at a distance—closeness is a romantic quality reserved only for the private realm. This ‘respect,’ as Chiba points out, is Kantian in origin. Gregory also notes this in his own analysis of Arendt’s relationship with Augustinian thought. More importantly, Gregory makes it clear that Arendt’s understanding of love is extremely specific when she invokes the term in discussion of political theory:

Yet, the "love" for the world relevant to Arendt's vision of citizenship is a particular notion of love—one drained of piety, personality, and affectivity so as to be suitable for the political world of action and appearance.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

<sup>90</sup> Gregory, 161.

Gregory's statement is not without justification. After asserting that "Arendt's rejection of love runs throughout her writings,"<sup>91</sup> he points to one of her most outright condemnations of it. She writes that:

...love, for reasons of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others... love by its very nature is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most antipolitical of forces.<sup>92</sup>

Arendt placed great value on the 'in-between'—the space that separates us from one another in such a way that makes concepts such as *self* and *other* possible. If I fail to recognize that there must always be an abyss, no matter how small, between myself and others whom I encounter in the public world, then I destroy the individual value of the person by obviating them. This idea incorporates an obviously Kantian understanding of self, as Gregory recognizes, but it seems to add a note of Kierkegaard, too, with this understanding of the dangers of personal negation. As Kierkegaard famously put it, "Once you label me, you negate me." This Kantian/Kierkegaardian influence should be no surprise as Arendt "had read Kant's first *Critique* on her own at age sixteen," and soon after "fell in love with the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Gregory, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.

<sup>93</sup> Ian Thomson, "Thinking Love: Heidegger and Arendt," *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, (2017): 459-60.

### Investigating Arendt's *Amor*: Various Modes of Loving

To summarize, Arendt believed that love has no place in politics because it contains within it the atrocious potential to negate the individual value of other humans which is so important to her—particularly when it comes to the concept of the public realm, as it is meant to be the realm of freedom and equality. This negative view of love plagues her writing with a dispassionate connotation that looms over her concept of politics, and her political theory of *amor mundi* is negatively affected by it because it necessarily involves love in a positive sense.

Without delving too far into personal history and unjustified speculation, I can say that this view of love may itself have been the symptom of Arendt's own affair with the famous author of *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger, who was one of her first teachers. Ian Thomson's "Thinking Love: Heidegger and Arendt" summarizes the entire affair sufficiently for those interested in details beyond what I can provide in this project. What *is* worth noting here is that Arendt's dissertation on the Augustinian concept of love closely followed her contentious departure from the university where Heidegger taught. It is believed by some that she left Heidegger hoping that he would commit to her and ask her not to go.<sup>94</sup> Not long after, she began her dissertation with Jaspers. To say that her severely pessimistic, or drastically *limited*, view of love that is present throughout her work is the direct result of being scorned by a lover several times over the course of fifty years<sup>95</sup> would likely be an overstatement. However, to say it had *nothing* to do with it would be unrealistic. This is all to say that Arendt may not have been

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<sup>94</sup> Thomson, 469.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

objective in her interpretation of love, and it remains possible to save the concept in a way that incorporates it into her view.

To bring love back to its rightful place, one must remember the way Gregory described *amor* in Arendt's thought. That is, to rescue love, it must have its *piety* returned.<sup>96</sup> Gregory argues that Raymond Canning is correct in his understanding of Augustinian love as promoting a unity between the worldly love of neighbor and the pious love of God: "turning to the neighbor forms such an integral part of human turning to God that the latter may be defined by it."<sup>97</sup>

Thomson's article goes beyond a simple discussion of the affair between Arendt and Heidegger. The article delivers us three unique ways of looking at love. He argues that there are three potential ways to love someone which are perfectly modeled in Arendt and Heidegger's relationship. These three models of love are the *perfectionist*, the *unconditional*, and the *ontological*.<sup>98</sup> The first two models are of particular concern to the present discussion because they are examples of how *not* to love someone, and they show us the sort of thing Arendt may have been worried about when she made the effort to bar love from the political realm. Thomson writes that the *perfectionist* lover "focuses his love on the essential but often inchoate characteristics he finds most worthy of being loved in his beloved, thereby seeking to help nurture and cultivate the development of those distinctive traits."<sup>99</sup> He writes that the problem

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<sup>96</sup> Gregory, 161.

<sup>97</sup> Raymond Canning, "The Unity of the Love for God and Neighbor in St. Augustine," *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (1996): 396-98. [Quoted by Gregory on 161].

<sup>98</sup> Thomson, 454.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

inherent to this way of loving is that it is doomed to fail because it is based on parts of an individual that cannot possibly be maintained indefinitely. Beauty, for example, *must* fade; death comes for us all, of course. This model of loving is deeply conditional because its existence hinges on the possession of the trait upon which the lover has fixated. Such ‘loving’ might be called infatuation.

But why would this model be of concern to Arendt? She could have been worried about this conditional sort of love because it is, in a way, totally incompatible with what it means to be a person who lives in the world with an attitude of *amor mundi*. If someone loves the world enough to want its inhabitants to prosper, then they feel compelled to protect it. Ultimately, that is the exact thing Arendt seems to be aiming at when she calls for an attitude of *amor mundi*—she wants people to love the world so much that they cannot help but take up their political cross and carry it into the public realm where freedom is created through political action. If this is true, then it would mean we, as humans who have the power to create and protect freedom, have an *obligation* to never shirk our responsibility by entirely withdrawing from the realm of politics. A person must always return home from the town hall meeting or from the senate, but the fact remains that they must first *go* and *act*.

If the sort of politically viable love Arendt speaks of is *amor*, then *amor* cannot possibly be a perfectionist type of love because it would put people in too fragile a relationship with love and their responsibility to act. If we love the world *perfectly*, in Thomson’s way of using the word, then we will love it *on the condition that* it remains lovable *to us*. In politics, as we all come to know time and time again, there are those who get what they want and those who do not. Every election is itself the declaration of those who have won and those who have been passed over. Perfectionist lovers would become hermits the moment their vision for the world

was trampled. For example, if someone is a massive political actor, someone who never misses an opportunity to be out in the public space fighting for what they believe to be right, and a president is elected who is vehemently opposed to everything they hold dear, then they are, in an oversimplified sense, put in a position of having two choices. Either they keep ‘fighting the good fight,’ or they pack it in, go home, and mourn the death of the world they *loved*.

The latter of these options is unacceptable to Arendt. In fact, I believe it to be a disappointing exemplar of the death of politics itself. We cannot, when things do not go our way in politics, give up. When the world goes in a direction we do not like, we cannot walk away and let it burn. No matter how much we may be dismayed with the way things are, the fact remains that we are humans, and humans are blessed, or *doomed*, to inhabit this world. Arendt reminds us that we cannot escape social and political attachment to the world: “No human life, not even the life of the hermit, is possible without a world which directly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”<sup>100</sup> If we cannot escape the world, then we must act in it, and a love of the world which is perfectionist is insufficient if not altogether incompatible with Arendt’s *amor*.

Thomson’s second model of love is the *unconditional* model. This way of loving is characterized by the lover basing their love on “something inherently mysterious, some *je ne sais quoi* that defies conceptualization.”<sup>101</sup> When this model of loving is present in personal, romantic relationships, it is more durable than the perfectionist model because it is not so obviously contingent on characteristics that are certain to fall away. Nevertheless, when investigated further, one finds that this model of loving is incredibly fragile. At least the

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<sup>100</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Thomson, 456.

perfectionist lover has *something* they can point to when they are asked why they love what they do. Though it is adolescent and exceedingly impermanent, the perfectionist lover can say they love their partner for their beauty or vitality. The unconditional lover, on the other hand, has no such thing to invoke when they are asked the same question. They do not know *what* to point to because their love is contingent on a volatile, immaterial, emotional attachment to that which they love. This is the pinnacle of the negative aspect of emotivism. That is, these sorts of lovers are left speechless or, at most, can only say that they love something because they *'feel* like they do.' Surely this is not enough of a justification for going as far as to say that they *love* something; this would disgrace and diminish the powerful meaning of love.

The question arises again: why would Arendt deny this model of love as a fitting definition of her concept of *amor*? In the case of personal relationships, Thomson writes that the unconditional lover is likely to find that same *je ne sais quoi* in some other person who is new and exciting.<sup>102</sup> This danger does not transfer so obviously into politics because, as I have previously shown, we are stuck in *this* world. If I love this world unconditionally, by Thomson's definition, then what does it matter if I cannot ground my love? We cannot just pick up and pursue another world to love because this is all we have.

Perhaps that is not entirely true, though. When Arendt made her claims about even a hermit's life being a declaration of a world which is social, it is not likely that she meant hermits, whether they like it or not, live an innately social and political life. Rather, they benefit from the discoveries of humanity's past such as food preservation and cloth making techniques. To that extent it is true that the hermit is never alone, but the reality is that the hermit has an *experience*

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<sup>102</sup> Thomson, 458.



of life that is indeed *completely solitary*. This is not mere phenomenology, either, because this experience of life as solitary has dire consequences for the political realm. If people choose to not show up in the public sphere and sidestep their ability to act publicly, which they really *can* do, then death of freedom follows. If freedom is, by its very nature, a right meant to be given to all members of the world, then those who do not show up are always going to be robbed of this freedom by virtue of their lack of representation in the realm that makes decisions on how freedom may be preserved and exercised.

The larger point here is that people cannot ever choose another world in an absolute sense, but they can certainly choose to step out of the public sphere and reside almost entirely within the private realm. It would not be completely wrong to say that these two realms may as well be separate worlds. In the end, the unconditional model of love is incompatible with Arendt's concept of *amor* because it has the danger of providing humans with no real obligation to participate in politics. On the unconditional model, to live as a hermit could be just as attractive as living as a senator. Put simply, loving the world unconditionally would be to love whatever world struck our fancy, and this cannot be Arendt's *amor mundi* because *amor mundi* is uniquely concerned with a particular world to be loved. That is, the one that necessarily includes the political sphere with a great deal of primacy—the *world of men*.

### **The *Ontological* Model of Love**

I have not only included Thomson's conceptions of love because I believe them to show the sorts of things Arendt may have been worried about with respect to a politically useful love. I have looked to his writing because I believe his third and final model of love, the *ontological*, shines a light on several aspects of this paper with which I would like to close. The first two of

Thomson's models of love are relatively easy to grasp, and their associated dangers are obvious enough. However, this third model, the ontological model, is nowhere near as simple. As Thomson puts it, ontological love is an "unconditional affirmation of the entire *being* of the beloved."<sup>103</sup>

In his own explanation of this way of loving, he references a couple of exchanges between Arendt and Heidegger where Augustine's love is brought up. Thomson shows that Heidegger, in a love letter to Arendt, has a love for Arendt that has evolved past the perfectionist and unconditional models. Following this evolution, Heidegger seeks not to change Arendt or be infatuated with her based on some ambiguous characteristic. Rather, he loves her just how she is and just how she will be. In his letter, Heidegger writes, "*Amo* [love] means *volo, ut sis* [I want you to be], Augustine once said 'I love you—I will that you be what you are.'"<sup>104</sup> One should pay special attention to the fact that Heidegger uses the same word for love here that Arendt would later adopt in her philosophy of *amor mundi*. This is not likely an arbitrary choice considering her extensive education on the topic of love and the countless Greek, Latin, or even French words that could be used and carry modified meanings.

What does it mean, then, to love someone ontologically? For Thomson, it seems to be a great victory to achieve this type of love—at least in cases like Arendt and Heidegger's where the perfectionist and unconditional models ran rampant for so long. Basically, the positive aspect of the ontological model of love is derived from the fact that it does not contain any hint of the negative aspects of the other two models. That is, because it recognizes the person as they are, it

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<sup>103</sup> Thomson, 472.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 472. [Thomson is quoting personal letters between Arendt and Heidegger].

can point to actual qualities to be loved. Thus, it avoids the pitfalls of the unconditional model. It also allows for the person to become what they desire to become, so they are not beholden to a static standard that is the main condition of one's love in the perfectionist model. The great power of ontological love, then, is simply in the fact that it avoids these two dangers.

The question one should have at this point should be about what it means to love someone in a way that you want them to not only 'be what they are,' but 'become what they will.' Loving someone 'as they are' is rather easy to understand; it is something that many of us do every day. The staggering aspect here lies in trying to understand how we can love what someone must become. How do we determine what we must become, and how does one ground their love when they know that the beloved is going to become something different? Certainly, this model of loving does account for the fact that humans do indeed change over the course of their lives, but it seems to be perfectly existential when it comes to determining *what* a person can or should become. That is, this model of love seems to posit a view of human development that is *relativistic*—a person could become anything without being held to some standard. The danger in this relativism is that saying I love someone ontologically could put me in the position of having to love them *no matter what* they become—even a monster. For Arendt, this is supremely problematic because it could mean that we love a completely *monstrous* world. Even more, we would be obligated to continue to work on this monstrous world to improve it. On its face, we are likely to take issue with this and have an immediate desire to put boundaries and qualifiers on this way of loving, and we *should* have that response. But there is something to be said about the power of this truly radical unconditional form of loving.

This way of loving as I have just described it seems to be exactly the sort of love God has for the world and humanity. The oft quoted words of John 3:16 tell us that "...God so loved the

world...”<sup>105</sup> Any Christian who wanted to defend their position against Arendt’s criticism that Christian’s have an attitude of *contemptus mundi* could point to this verse to show that an authentic understanding of Christianity does *not* have such an attitude. But the important takeaway here is that scripture tells us God does indeed *love this world*. Why should He? Afterall, we live in a world of constant chaos and atrocity. From a Christian perspective, we have, in the face of God, waged war, killed our own families, destroyed parts of the planet, and turned away from Him. Why should He love such *monsters*? He loves the world unconditionally, in a radical sense of the word, because he *wills that we be*. Our very existence is important to Him, and the Christian epoch is largely a tale of saving humanity for the glory of God.

Thomson’s ontological model of love is compelling and, when put forward against the other two models, seems to be the remedy for a multitude of ills brought on by the flawed perfectionist and unconditional models. In its most optimistic sense, this concept of ontological love can be seen as the authentic understanding of Arendtian love. If we have *amor mundi*, then we have an ontologically loving relationship with the world which obligates us to stay and do the work necessary to make the world a better place. This is balanced with the idea that the world must become what it will, so we understand that we do not have God-like authority over the direction of the world even though we do affect it dramatically. This ontological love is useful for understanding Arendt’s *amor mundi*, and it can be understood in a way that is thoroughly consistent with Christianity.

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<sup>105</sup> John 3:16

## Moving Toward Christian Love

How, then, can we locate a foundation on which to base the value of ontological love? Loving someone, willing that they be, must be done within the presupposed context of the existence of some absolute ideals—some things that are eternally *Good*, in order for being itself to have any value. The world itself must be of value if we are to be compelled to fight for its preservation. Atrocities abound, but we must never *accept* them. Avoiding the pitfall of ontological love means accepting a foundational view that the world is worth saving.

A Christian model of love, in its simplest terms, can show us a picture of what it might look like to love someone ontologically while keeping in mind that this ontological love cannot be without some eternal, idealistic grounding that provides value down the line for the meaning of being itself—that which is the subject of ontological discussion.

I return, then, to the scripture which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The author of Mark writes:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>106</sup>

Arendt’s dissertation and countless other scholarly engagements with Augustinian thought dealt largely with the difficulties that lie in any attempt to reconcile the two modes of loving put forward by Christ in this context: loving our neighbors and loving God. As I have shown, Arendt’s views on love, politics, and the ascetic Christian tradition pushed her to suggest that

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<sup>106</sup> Mark 12:28-31.

they be strictly separate. She also seems to have been concerned by a Christian attitude that love needed to be present at all times and in all acts toward others. She recognized accurately that “public love often becomes the intense, violent destroyer of freedom,”<sup>107</sup> but there needs to be a distinction drawn here. If there are, as Thomson has shown, ways of loving that are riddled with shortcomings and inherent dangers, then it can be said that there are without a doubt several ways to love that are harmful or dangerous to those involved. What matters here is whether these forms of love can even be rightfully called *love*. Arendt strikes out against forms of love that obviate individual freedoms in the public world—surely love *can* cause the destruction of freedom because it can crush rationality—but she may be failing to recognize that a love that does this should not be called love at all. In a sense, she is crying out against the wrong thing, or, at least, she is addressing that which she is concerned with by the wrong name.

Generally speaking, Christians seek to love God. If one is to fully love God, then this love could overcome and consume all other forms of love in one’s life. It happens often that a person comes to God and leaves behind all their previous friends, sometimes family, to pursue Him. In the public sphere, this can manifest as a complete and total disregard for people who are valuable in their own right. It can cause the lover to lose sight of other humans as *imago Dei*. This seems to be Arendt’s primary concern, which is justifiable.

Arendt is not the only one who would have a problem with this problematic form of love. For some Christians, there is major issue with this way of loving because it completely neglects the other aspect of the Law Christ lays out in Mark: to love our neighbors. Debate can occur over where exactly the lines should be drawn regarding the meaning of ‘neighbor,’ but I do not think

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<sup>107</sup> Gregory, 162.

that matters much for the present discussion. I see no way that the people whom we encounter in the public sphere could be portrayed as anything other than neighbor, and if this is true, then Christians have a responsibility to love them. In fact, it would seem they would have the same responsibility to love them as they do to love God. To Thomson's credit, the way many Christians love God is an altogether ontological one. Willing that God be what He is can be said to be the meaning of the Lord's prayer: "Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done..."<sup>108</sup> Another example of this ontological sort of love manifesting in scripture is Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "...not what I want but what [God] wants."<sup>109</sup>

### **Trying to Reconcile Love with Politics Via Christianity**

This brings us to the issue at hand regarding this dual nature of love. How can one love God without destroying the individual value of their neighbor, and how can one love their neighbor without betraying God and His will? The easiest way to resolve the contention between these two objectives is to say that they are, in a sense, one in the same. In "Augustine and Arendt on Love: New Dimensions in the Religion and Liberalism Debates," Eric Gregory, calls love a "public virtue in need of a public affirmation."<sup>110</sup> If one loves God, then they must respect His creative decisions that have manifested in the world; namely, the people who He created in His image. If one is to love at all, then they cannot do so by holding on to some invisible virtue in

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<sup>108</sup> Matt. 6:9-10

<sup>109</sup> Matt. 26:38

<sup>110</sup> Gregory, 157.

their heart that never obtains through action. As the existentialist view would argue, if one is to be called a lover at all, then they must *go out and love*. The *essence* of being a lover is tossed aside in favor of the *existence* of loving action. One can call themselves a loving person, but if they never perform an act of love, then they are hardly worthy of the title to which they have laid claim.

To Gregory's credit, then, many Christians would do well to begin with a love for God which exists in actuality as a deep regard for the idea that there is an objective Good against which all actions should be judged. This is loving God—a devotion to the higher things which are worthy of love. The Good is not a merely ideal; it exists in various forms in the world, and Augustine calls for us to recognize them when we see them and praise them because they are worthy of loving.<sup>111</sup> For Arendt, fighting for the preservation of freedom and equality through political action is a real-world example of the Good. She does not love this type of action arbitrarily; to her, it *really is* better than the contrary. God, here, can be seen as a linguistic placeholder for the Good. Many Christians and Arendt are alike in that they are aiming at loving that which is worthy. For these Christians, that which is worthy of love is God—which includes a love for the world and its inhabitants. For Arendt, it begins as a love for the world. The two cannot be said to be the same, but they are not entirely dissimilar. Once a Christian has correctly set their mind on God—the Good—the real work begins. They must then go forward and accomplish the second task Christ set before them: loving their neighbors. The love of God is a starting point, a catalyst for action, which is always awaiting its reification in the world through

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<sup>111</sup> Gregory, 164.



interactions with others that testify to the love He has for humanity. If a Christian fails to do this, then they have not only gone wrong in Arendt's eyes but in the eyes of God.

Thus, loving God and loving our neighbor is not duality in need of reconciliation. Rather, they are two points in one process that occurs without end. If this view is applied in a political context, which is possibly the greatest place to speak of *neighbors*, then love becomes supremely useful for two reasons. First, the aspect of love that is focused on our neighbors drives us to be concerned with them in a particular, individual way that avoids the pitfall of erasing their value as a person by viewing them as a mere member of a group. Second, the danger Arendt seems to be most concerned about, the potential for love to be destructive of public virtues like freedom, is tempered by the overarching love for the Good. This love of the Good manifests itself publicly as the prioritization of absolute virtues like freedom, justice, and equality.

In his own work on this subject, Gregory recognized the possibility of this approach, but he seems to dismiss it. I believe this dismissal is a mistake. He points out that in her dissertation, specifically on the topic of how some Christians conceive love, Arendt wrote:

I never love my neighbor for his own sake only for the sake of divine grace. This indirectness, which is unique to love of neighbor, puts an even more radical stop to the self-evident living together in the earthly city. This indirectness turns my relation to my neighbor into a mere passage for the direct relations to God himself.<sup>112</sup>

There seems to be a bit of an impasse hidden in these words. Arendt wants her reader to have a negative attitude toward this idea of interactions being, above all else, instances for the grace of God to be manifest—for relationships between people to be seen as primarily (perhaps

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<sup>112</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

[Quoted by Gregory on 461].

singularly) useful because they are reified moments of the worship of God. For some Christian readers, the very opposite view of her proposition would be taken up. These Christian readers would not be appalled at this understanding of relationships. Rather, they would be delighted to know that they were doing God's work in their interactions with others so long as they were being loving. I call this an impasse because the situation is dire as far as Arendt meaningfully communication with these Christians goes. One might say that she does not care to communicate with Christians, but it is a strange thing to speak *of* a group solely and have no desire to speak *to* them. One of the guiding principles for this project has been to try and remedy this sort of impasse to some extent and force the conversation that seems so improbable. Perhaps there is available to Christianity a way of understanding love that does not objectify others through loving them only because it fulfills the will of God. Perhaps a Christian could love a person because they want to love that which God loves. Still, it could be said this conception of Christian love is derivative. I believe it to be possible for one to hold love for God and love for neighbor in a non-derivative, simultaneous manner that avoids this criticism. This would be a potential solution to the impasse, but its formulation is outside the scope of the present project.

Arendt believes that to love God is to diminish the value of the person because God takes precedent. To put it plainly, Arendt is committed to a simple failure of logic in this case. It is *not* necessarily true that one's actions toward another are demoted to meaninglessness purely because they are motivated by something greater than the persons involved. An act of kindness, let us call it *love*, toward one's neighbor can absolutely be both an instance of loving the person as they are *and* an act that testifies to the glory of God. In a loving act toward one's neighbor, the law is fulfilled; the neighbor is loved because it is ontologically right, and God is loved because

the neighbor has been given the love they deserve. Loving God must be reified through the active love of neighbor.

Gregory's analysis of the subject led him to Thomas Breidenthal's writing on the topic which shows, again, Arendt's logical misunderstanding of Christian love:

For Arendt, Christianity's anti-politicality is one with its belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus. To state Arendt's view plainly: if God has become my neighbor, then love of God has outsmarted love of neighbor on its home turf. The claim of Jesus is greater than all other human claims...so to love him as neighbor is to be drawn away from all other human loves, except as they serve and repeat the love of Jesus.<sup>113</sup>

This conception of love as the destruction of 'human loves' is not the only way for a Christian to be loving. Arendt has the idea that the introduction of loving God into the scenario where a loving act is carried out automatically destroys the power of the act completely independently of the act itself. She confuses motivation for meaning. Furthermore, she misrepresents the way Christ conveyed love to his followers and the way it has developed in the Christian epoch. It is a bare fact that Arendt is wrong in believing love is diminished when it carries the additional—not sole—characteristic of being an instance of God's love manifested. Still, Arendt's criticism of Christian love, if it is to be understood as destructive of the love of other humans for their own sake, is a valid concern. She is right; we ought to love others in a way that recognizes their inherent value. Many Christians would just like to add that this act of loving others is Good in an ideal sense.

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<sup>113</sup> Thomas Breidenthal, "Jesus is My Neighbor: Arendt, Augustine, and the Politics of Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 4 (2002): 491.

To love one's neighbor is to show that one truly does love God. To love God is only meaningful for a Christian insofar as they are a living, embodied person if they are willing to love their neighbor. To love God is also to be aimed at the Good. In politics, the more granular, specific decisions on what the Good is becomes complicated and can often seem relativistic, but it remains true that the political deliberation is still oriented toward the search for knowledge of the Good. Society, in its most ideal form, is always trying to close the epistemic gap on what the Good is in an effort to promote and protect it.

Still, many major political decisions are *not* of this granular, widely debatable nature. The American enslavement of countless Africans which was upheld by law is a great example. The issue of slavery in this country was not that should have been up for debate. When one has the Good in mind, it is plainly evident that the subjugation of those people to the horrors of slavery was as near to Evil as humanity can get. In this example, loving God manifests as a most profound instance of loving one's neighbor because it drives the political lover to recognize that the laws are *wrong*. A Christian conception of love can be to want what is Good whether it be for our significant others, our children, our neighbors, our political opponents, our country, or our entire world—*His will be done*. Politics, too, should be oriented toward the pursuit of the Good. However, politics *must* be aimed at the absolute, Platonic Good, synonymous with the will of God even in a cold, secular context. If politics is not chasing the Good, then democracy itself is reduced to a purely *statistical* matter—the counting of meaningless votes, the prevailing of the unguided mass. Love may orient us toward the good, but *loving* may not; Rather, it is the proper, virtuous action toward that which is worthy. If society loves atrocities, then they do not love properly because atrocities are, by definition, not worthy of loving. Politics as a societal endeavor, is an epistemic activity that seeks to love the Good. This pursuit, though never

completed, is what makes *amor mundi* worth it; it makes fighting for the world have value because there is a foundational ideal to which we should aspire.

### **Love as a Political Necessity**

Thus, love seems to not only be suitable for politics but a *necessity* if politics is to be a meaningful pursuit at all because it serves as both a catalyst for action and a guiding principle to determine what ought to be pursued. Of course, all of Arendt's political theory is founded on her own belief that the realm of politics is where we should all be thrust when it becomes our responsibility. In addition, she believes that we are responsible far more often than we think. If this is true, then Arendt is consequently concerned with the preservation of value in the political sphere. That is, she cares about the preservation of value for the political sphere *itself*. I argue that protecting the value of the public realm requires that the members of the public be more loving, albeit in a manner that is tempered by an overarching love for the Good lest it become destructive and overly passionate. If Arendt had understood Christian love to be a useful example of this as I have promoted here, then perhaps she would not have had such a critical attitude toward the faith—though she would have certainly been left with plenty of individuals to criticize. The criticism would be modified, however, because it would not be aimed at the faith itself but the members of the faith that failed to live out the commandment they were given—that failed to *love*.

This chapter has dealt primarily with Arendt's own attitude toward love and how she built her understanding of it. Through quoting her own writing, I have shown that she viewed love as a danger to politics, which was at the heart of her philosophy. She believed that humans were most fully themselves when they participated in what she called the public sphere—the

realm of politics. To her, love carried the passionate connotation which can so easily crush the rights of others in order to protect what someone cares most for. This way of looking at love caused her to relegate it to the private realm where it could be quarantined away from the public and do no harm.

I have shown that this conception of love was rooted in her work on Augustine, her misunderstanding of the possibilities for the meaning of Christian love, and, potentially, in her own lifelong experience with the turmoil of love-based relationships. Once one comes to understand that Christian love in its orientation toward the will of God has the power to be a safeguard against the relativization of politics, then they see that love may just be a *necessity* for justified, meaningful political action. That is not to say that a theocracy is necessary or that Christians have access to a framework for love that the secular realm of politics can never attain. The secular, public realm does not need to be Christianized to protect itself against relativism; it need only understand the primacy of ontological, unselfish love as a motivating factor for public action. It could be said that Arendt was wrong to cordon off politics from love, and that she should have been invested in a re-understanding of love that aided her in her pursuit of the elevation of the active life.

Love is not the enemy of politics or Arendt. Rather, it is an underutilized ally to her goals and is an undeserving target of venomous criticism. In closing, I will leave the reader with a restatement of this controversial sentiment: Humans are necessarily thrust into a world where they must act politically to be fully human, but it is only through love that we can both be motivated to fight for the world and recognize our overarching political goals. Politics, in order to retain any meaning at all, must be committed to loving the world ontologically. This statement is compatible with both the Arendtian concept of *amor mundi* and the Christian love of neighbor.

For Christians, it is a spiritual statement, but it may be a rigid philosophical posit for the nonbeliever. Without utilizing love to motivate and base its pursuit, the political sphere is left with only the bleakest of options. It can resort to the totalitarian rule of a baseless ideology like Nazism, or it can turn to democracy to hide its relativism behind bureaucratic process. In both cases atrocities are made possible.

# *Conclusion*

The preceding chapters have made explicit the meaning and significance of two concepts: love and the world. The first chapter showed that Arendt viewed the world as necessarily human and inescapable; we are humans who cannot outrun the fact that we are, in a sense, the authors of our time. To be in the world is to occupy several semi-distinct places or realms which Arendt recognized as the public and private. The second chapter explored the political viability of love and its proper model within a Christian worldview.<sup>114</sup> I want to conclude this project by pointing

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<sup>114</sup> There is a third realm which is of significance to her work at large, the *social*, but it has been omitted in this project to avoid unnecessary complication and confusion for the reader. In some sense, the church can exist as a social institution. For the purposes of this project, the church is treated as a blend of public and private akin to the social sphere. The concept of the ‘social’ is one which would unnecessarily complicate discussions of her opinions on Christianity; addressing the world as public and private is sufficient to represent her view within the scope of this project.



toward one of the most significant areas where this work of comparing Arendt and Christianity may continue: *courage*. In a sense, it is an intersection of the previous two chapters.

Furthermore, the matter of courage may be one of the greatest points of agreement between the two parties.

### **Arendt's View on the World, Love, and Ascetic Christianity**

In the first chapter of this project, I showed that Arendt took issue with individuals who shirked the reality of their existence in the world and tried to live entirely private lives. This sheltered life was marked by its apolitical nature—its aversion to involvement with the public world that is inherently political. She wrote that such attempts to avoid the outside world were futile: “No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”<sup>115</sup> To be human is to be thrust into a world of other humans. To her, this means that something must be done to maintain the harmony of this unavoidable coexistence. Namely, she believed we need to embrace our ability to *act*. She put it beautifully when she wrote that “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, we live in a world where we cannot escape action, which is innately political, and we must embrace this human condition of being-in-the-world.

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<sup>115</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Arendt was coming up against an intellectual tradition which loved itself; it was a tradition that favored heaven over the earth and the labors of the mind over the labors of the body. She sought to put thought in its proper place and reinstate action as the primordial force that made humanity what it is. This did include the caveat that there must be balance between action and contemplation: “every kind of activity, even the processes of mere thought, must culminate in the absolute quiet of contemplation.”<sup>117</sup> In one there is always the remnant of the other.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt gave her readers an indication of the sort of people she was speaking out against, and she left little to the imagination when it came to her feelings toward said groups. Once such group was Christianity, both in antiquity and in modern times—though her criticism seems most properly aimed at the beginnings of the church rather than its existence today. Put simply, she was upset with the ascetic Christian attitude that the world was to be hated so that the realm of God, Heaven, could be loved for all the perfection it held. She wrote that, “Christianity, with its belief in a hereafter whose joys announce themselves in the delights of contemplation, conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position...”<sup>118</sup> In that one sentence, we see what Arendt believed was the original sin of Christianity toward the world—it elevated contemplation above action to the point that her beloved political sphere, with its action and creativity, was seen as purely *derivative*. This relegation of action to the fringes of importance was intolerable to a thinker like Arendt who was desperately trying to save the dual nature of humanity that must include politics.

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<sup>117</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

For her, though we are not all born to be *politicians*, we are all born to be *political*. No one outruns their obligations to the world.

In the second chapter of this project, I addressed Arendt's concerns regarding the concept of love and how it may or may not fit into our political lives. There is no doubt that love is rightfully present in the private lives of individuals where romance and familial ties abound and flourish. Arendt was more worried about this love bleeding over into the public realm where everyone was meant to be on a level playing field. Defining the differences between the public and private realms, she wrote "The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals,' whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality."<sup>119</sup> She believed that love had the ability to corrupt the political proceedings of humanity she held in such high regard, so she cast it aside and relegated it to mere privacy. This is another point at which she disagrees with Christianity as its faith is largely centered around love being the ultimate virtue of both private and public matters. She detested the heaven-oriented character of love in the West writing that "Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world."<sup>120</sup>

Love, to Arendt, was *worldless*. This is, of course, a horrendous thing to be in her eyes, so she felt justified in her disdain for the presence of love in the public realm. This put her at odds with much of Christianity in a way that may have even trumped the level of disagreement brought on by her view of the world and how she believed a Christian sees it. Thus, *the world* and *love* stand as two massive disagreements between Arendt and Christianity.

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<sup>119</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 31.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-2.

### Comparing Arendt and Christianity Going Forward: Courage

This project has made brief arguments that Arendt was not as intellectually opposed to Christianity as she may have believed, but I have not yet sought to portray the two as completely united on any subject.<sup>121</sup> This project concludes by doing just that—showing that Arendt and Christianity may agree on *something*. Rather than make the case that the parties are in agreement, I only wish to point in a direction where the present project could continue. This exploration of courage is also a potential consequence of a position that is both Arendtian and Christian.

Both Arendt and some Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's "Courage as a Christian Virtue" agree on the value of courage; it is the public virtue *par excellence*. To put it in a way styled after Arendt herself, we are all thrust into a world which we cannot escape, and the innate politicality of our lives demands that our love for justice and equality motivate us to act in the only way that makes true political change happen—with *courage*.

It is uncontroversial to say that courage is the virtue *par excellence* of the public sphere and is characterized by one's lack of regard for their own life in exchange for the good of their given society, or, in grand cases, all of humanity.<sup>122</sup> I conclude this project with courage because it is the intersection or the proper integration of the two previously analyzed topics—*the world*<sup>123</sup> and *love*.

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<sup>121</sup> This is partially due to the nuance and variation present in speaking generally of Christianity.

I do not intend to speak of Christianity as a homogenous group.

<sup>122</sup> Suicide bombers are an extreme example that Arendt would not likely endorse.

<sup>123</sup> Insofar as 'the world' refers to the public life of humanity.

For Arendt, to be courageous meant to risk one's life for the good of the public. She said herself that the public realm was a sector of existence that was not at all concerned with the prosperity of a single individual. Rather, the world, as it has been used here, is narrowly concerned with the freedom of the general public. Her view of the public sphere carried with it her own definition of courage found in her attitude toward its place in life: "Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life..."<sup>124</sup> In her view, to be courageous meant to prepare for death when one was involved with the public sphere—something which she believed we all needed to do if we wanted to be fully human. Courage, then, becomes a virtue that lurks beneath the skin of all humanity and awaits the moment where it must manifest itself in action. Courage is both an armor we wear when we go into the world and the sacrificial garb we adorn ourselves with when a matter of public goodness demands we risk our life.

Discussing love and the world leads to a discussion of *courage*. To be human, we must go into the world and act, to act faithfully we must find a way to balance the various types of love that exist and place them properly where they belong, and once we have done these things we are faced with the simultaneously bleak and honorable reality that our duty to the goodness of humanity and its freedoms may require a blood sacrifice. To be human demands that we be courageous lest we run away from the consequences of our humanity. Human life, if it is to be meaningful, must be the sort of life that is always in question—it is forever waiting to be offered up for the good of one's neighbor.

Christianity, conceived generally, is about the lifelong pursuit of being Christ-like. Many Christians such as DeYoung believe that Jesus was the greatest exemplar of courage that

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<sup>124</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 35.

humanity has ever known. DeYoung’s “Courage as a Christian Virtue” states immediately that Christ’s life was the picture of courage:

What if we try to understand the virtue of courage by means of another narrative—the story of the gospel? Jesus Christ, for all his “super-powers,” was no sword-wielding battlefield hero. But his life and death, his ministry and moral character, nevertheless show us an exemplary form of courage.<sup>125</sup>

DeYoung’s writing points out that courage is normally seen as an “indomitable never-say-die spirit” found in superheroes like “Spiderman, Batman, and now Ironman—who use their superpowers and superior technology to ensure that the good guys win and justice prevails.”<sup>126</sup> What does it really mean to ensure that the good guys win? Really, talking about good guys winning is a plain way of saying a profound theological holding—God is omnipotent and always wins in the end. The gospel, simply put, is an instance of this. To many Christians, Christ died so that the sins of humanity could be washed away and God’s will could be done—so the good guy could win. A hallmark of courage is the complete disregard for one’s life when a sacrifice is necessary for the good of others; this is the Arendtian view as well as the view that allows for Christ to be viewed as courageous.

DeYoung points out that Aquinas had a dual conception of courage. He recognized courage as “aggression” and “endurance.”<sup>127</sup> Aggressive courage is the type that is seen in movies about war and superheroes. Sometimes, being courageous just means being of strong

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<sup>125</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, “Courage as a Christian Virtue,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 2 (2013): 302.

<sup>126</sup> DeYoung, 301.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

mind and enduring adversity. Often, courageousness is about “suffering well.”<sup>128</sup> This view of courage is acceptable to both the Arendtian and many Christians who would agree with DeYoung.

Insofar as Christianity is a faith in pursuit of being Christ-like, Christianity is itself chasing the virtue of courage. Christianity is everyday demanding that its adherents recognize their own capacity and duty to be enduringly courageous when life makes it necessary. The gospel is the story of an ultimate act of courage—a selfless public act for the good of humanity. As the gospel is the center of many Christians’ faith, so too is courage a virtue positioned at the heart of such faith. By the same token, insofar as Arendt’s philosophy drives one toward the public realm and demands that they act, it is a philosophy that demands courageousness. Yet, this discussion of courage is only one example of how further explorations of Arendt and Christianity may manifest.

### **Closing Remarks**

Arendt’s philosophy is regarded as having an unbreakable tie to the human realm of politics; this is not an unbased belief. There is a danger, however, in looking at her writing as a *mere* political philosophy. I believe that her work represents a lifelong endeavor to understand what it means to be human and what we ought to do about it. Some of the most memorable parts of her career are the controversial takes she had on topics such as the Eichmann trial and the Little Rock Nine, but we would do well to remember that her academic career began with concerns regarding love and its meaning on an ontological level. Her career may have been

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<sup>128</sup> DeYoung, 307.

uniquely political in its focus, but behind that specialization lurked a more transcendent motivation. Her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, stands as a testament to the fact that Arendt's real concern was far beyond political theory; she was truly interested in the nature of being human.

This project has been an investigation into Arendt's philosophy as it pertains to the world and the lives of humanity. More specifically, it has been an exploration of how her ideas on love and the world interact with their Christian counterparts. This pairing of Arendt with Christianity is by no means arbitrary. In a sense, it is a group Arendt never strayed far from intellectually. That is not to say that she entertained a Christian ideology. Rather, she seems to have always had Christians on her mind in her writing—though not always at the forefront. Her dissertation topic, the Augustinian conception of love, could be mistaken for a theological dissertation. Her landmark philosophical works such as *The Human Condition* are riddled with passing mentions of Christianity. Often, these comments are critical. The fact remains—Arendt seems to have carried Christianity in her mind throughout her career.

She often criticized the ascetic Christian tradition because her own philosophy was concerned with the world and politics; she viewed Christianity as being diametrically opposed to what she believed. She saw Christianity as one of the largest opponents to what she thought the human life necessarily was—*political*. Of course, this view of hers requires that 'Christianity' refers only to an ascetic tradition. This project has attempted to show that this ascetic position is not entirely representative of Christianity.

I have not set out to entirely refute the critical attitude Arendt held toward Christianity. In fact, there are points throughout this work where I admit Arendt was justified. For example, she was right to say that Christianity can be problematic when it pushes people away from being



involved in the world in exchange for a sole concern with the afterlife. I concede this point, but I do not believe this means the two parties ought to be opposed to one another.

The overarching motivation for this project has been to navigate the respective thoughts of Arendt and Christianity in an attempt to find some ground on which a person can stand as a Christian while still taking Arendt's philosophy seriously. It would be impossible to address every point within either party's thought in a meaningful way. In the case of Christianity, it is impossible to address the ideology entirely because it is a varied, nuanced position without one homogenous perspective. In light of that, I chose two points on which to focus my exploration. These points are *the world* and *love*.

There are two main reasons for my selection of these two topics of inquiry. The first reason is a matter of fairness; I believe *the world* to be a subject where Arendt is mostly correct, and *love* to be an area where Arendt benefits from the Christian conception of the idea. The second, more important reason for choosing *the world* and *love* is my belief that they are related and represent a logical progression through thinking about the human condition. The first chapter dealt with Arendt's conception of the world and its stratification into different realms. She believed that the world had become far too concerned with the private realm of the household and lost its concern for the public realm of politics. To her, this meant that freedom and equality were at risk of being lost. In her assessment of the world, Arendt criticized Christianity as an example of an ascetic tradition which pulled people away from the realm of politics and action. Arendt's censure was justified, but that does not mean Christianity is *necessarily* opposed to her ideas. Rather, it asks that Christians rebalance their lives in such a way that they authentically incorporate the public realm into their lives. In short, it requires them to be *active* in the world. I

concede that Arendt is right in her assessment of the world in that we really do need to be involved in it. Put simply, *we live in this world and must act in it.*

If we must be involved in the world, then there comes the question about *how* we ought to do it. Arendt had her own answer to such a question. She believed that humanity needed to adopt an attitude of *amor mundi* [love of the world] if we were to act properly toward others. In that answer we can find the sticking point of the second chapter: *love*. Arendt was right to call for an attitude of love toward the world, but her own writing on the topic of love complicates things. She seemed to have an understanding of love that was disparaging of its public viability. This puts her in a bind, but a Christian conception of love can help with this issue. For many Christians, love is central to the Christian epoch. It is the motivation for *everything*—even the creation of the world. This Christian perspective illustrates the idea that love, conceived ontologically, may be what pushes us to act toward others whether it be in private or public. This second chapter holds that Arendt’s philosophy benefits from integrating ontological love in the manner that many Christians have. The progression of thinking about the human condition then becomes this: we live in this world, must act in it, *and it is love that causes us to care enough to act.*

The first two chapters tell us that we are in the world and must act in love but do not touch on the consequences of this condition. Arendt thought that public involvement was a necessary part of the fully human life. Further, she held that this public involvement demanded *courage*. This is profound in that it indirectly means that the human condition is one that is marked by its need for courage; to be human is to be courageous. If one shirks this responsibility and becomes a coward, then they shed a part of their humanity. Christianity is in full agreement with this aspect of Arendt’s philosophy. For some Christians, it is essential that humans act

courageously just as Christ courageously gave His life for the salvation of the world. This agreement on the subject of courage is the punctuation of this project's progression through thinking about the human condition: we live in this world and must act in it, *and this means that we must always be courageous lest we shirk our human and/or Christian responsibility.*

This work is meant to roughly outline a position where Arendtians can bolster their philosophy through adopting certain Christian perspectives. I have been critical in my own way throughout, but I have endeavored to provide a fair defense to both parties when necessary. I find that the major holdings of both sides of this discussion are valuable to humanity as a whole. For many, the compromise that brings unity between the two sides may come at too high a cost, and they will abandon the prospective outcome. My hope for a synthesized position is largely speculative, but I do not believe it is unwarranted. In the end, I wish for this project to be a step in the right direction for the defense of Arendt's thoughts and the legitimization of a Christian position that loves the world.

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