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The Modern “Desert” and the Self: Rethinking the Worldly and the Religious through Arendt and Kierkegaard

Christine Hsiu-Chin CHOU

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Abstract: This paper aims to inquire whether it is possible to negotiate the conflicting categories of “love of the world” and “love of God / Eternity” in the context of modern secularism. The investigation is oriented toward bringing into conversation the divergent perspectives of two important modern thinkers, Søren Kierkegaard and Hannah Arendt. In Kierkegaard, we find a modern believer’s (Christian) philosophy of existence featured by prioritizing singular individuals’ “religious inwardness.” In contrast, Arendt, with all her profound understanding of Saint Augustine’s pursuit of self and eternity, bases her political theory on the recognition of human reality as “worldliness” and “human plurality.” Ultimately, through re-estimating their heterogeneous propositions about hope for humanity in the modern “desert-world,” this comparative discussion attempts to reflect upon the possibility of negotiating their incompatible “loves” and “beliefs.”

Key Terms: Worldliness, Religiousness, Self, Arendt, Kierkegaard

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor proclaims that “Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices.”¹ Indeed, with no more naïve reliance on religious belief, human beings’ new self-understanding, or a “grown-up” sense of self-sufficiency, is the first and foremost characteristic of modern secularity. Perhaps the best representative of this secularized sensibility is the outspoken atheist Nietzsche, who wrote, “If there were

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p.22.

gods, how could I stand not to be a god!”² Intriguingly, such a self-sufficient mentality is intermingled with the modern quest for the self. It is discernible that out of a stronger ego, modern man actually undergoes the double loss—both the premodern belief in transcendent Being, eternal and other-worldly, and with that, the origin of human essence and the old source of self-identity. Therefore, given that the decisively disenchanting humans of modernity define themselves as beings pertaining to time and *this* world, as designated in Heideggerian ontology, they are inevitably driven by the same existential impulse of those self-reflective minds since ancient times to seek knowledge of the self. In other words, abandoning religious faith as well as the self-understanding based on it, modern man cannot evade being haunted by the question, “Who am I?”—indeed a very old question, as once asked seriously by a pious convert, philosopher, and Church Father in the premodern, Christianized era, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Yet, St. Augustine’s self-inquiry, *quaestio mihi factus sum* (I have become a question to myself),³ is not just profoundly existential and philosophical but also deeply Christian, by itself.

In the context of modern secularism, what is ultimately opted for in St. Augustine’s self-quest, i.e., pilgrimage toward love of God and Eternity, may sound to many, especially unbelievers, nothing but anachronistic and unacceptable. In fact, with the decline of the Christian faith in God and the rise of, in the words of Taylor, “purely self-sufficient humanism” as “a widely available option,”⁴ there seems to be, more than ever in history, irreconcilable divergence between the views of reality and human existence based on the respective principles of worldliness or religiousness. Nevertheless, situated within modernity, we may wonder whether it is still possible to negotiate the conflicting categories of “love of the world” and “love of God / Eternity,” which tend to define very differently the mere reality of who we are as human beings.

To investigate the possibility of such negotiation, this paper intends to bring into conversation the divergent perspectives of two important modern thinkers on the reality of human existence, Søren Kierkegaard and Hannah Arendt, who uphold, respectively, the

² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.65.

³ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), bk. 10, chap. xxxiii, p.244.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.18.

aforementioned opposite principles—religiousness and worldliness. In Kierkegaard, we find a modern believer’s (Christian) philosophy of existence featured by prioritizing singular individuals’ “religious inwardness.” Contrary to Kierkegaard’s emphasis on individual and human religiosity, Arendt, with all her profound understanding of Augustine’s double pursuit of self and eternity, bases her political theory on the recognition of human reality as “worldliness” and “human plurality.” Clearly, in regard to what is true about human existence, these two thinkers are in considerable disagreement. In order to look more thoroughly into their different propositions, this study is oriented to re-estimating firstly Arendt’s metaphoric conception of “the modern growth of worldlessness” as a *desert*-world and then her disaffirmation of Kierkegaard’s project as “escapism” (particularly referring to his concerns with doubt and self) that serves to “make a desert out of the world.” Furthermore, in light of Arendt’s confrontation with the problem of “the desert-world,” the comparative discussion will then move to scrutinize their contradictory assertions about the hope for humanity, that is, Arendt’s conviction of *political* promises grounded in love of the world versus Kierkegaard’s deliberation of *religious* promises rooted in love of God. Ultimately, this paper seeks to inquire whether such different promises and loves are necessarily incompatible or may co-exist within the self and for the world in a certain sense.

Arendt’s Encounter with Augustine

Never committed to any religious belief yet deeply engaged with the works of St. Augustine, Hannah Arendt presents in her remarkable dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*,⁵ her perceptive reading of this Christian saint’s devout and penetrating discourses on man’s “essential nature” as “lack of self-sufficiency”⁶ and the search for self-knowledge as “returning to God from the world.”⁷ In her interpretation, Augustine’s contemplation over his quest for self-discovery is rendered clearly as a spiritual journey

⁵ Hannah Arendt, ed. with an interpretive essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, p.19.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.91.

per se because the quest for the self ultimately culminates in discovering not only the reality of man but also the Creator. To reach the discovery of the Creator means to Augustine arriving at “the real truth and meaning of his createdness.”⁸ Moreover, Arendt expounds that this twofold discovery of the saint’s is achievable only on the condition that the “pilgrim soul” make a self-choice of *caritas* (love of God and eternity) instead of *cupiditas* (love of the world).

Through Arendt’s elucidation, we are guided to see that in Augustine’s thought “the problem of love plays a decisive role”⁹ in the relationships of the human being to the world, the self, the Creator, and to other human beings. Simply put, from Augustine’s Christian perspective, God is the eternal source of the fulfillment of love from which springs one’s love for oneself and for other human beings. What then does it mean to the human life to “crave” and possess such sacred and eternal love? As well-termed by Arendt, it signifies the existential “transit to eternity,” which corresponds exactly with Augustine’s manifesto that human existence is *in the world but not of the world*. It thus follows that in the context of Augustine’s thought, love is rooted in “man’s attachment to God,”¹⁰ which at the same time dictates man’s detachment from the *desert-world*.

For all her discerning analysis of Augustine’s quest for self and love which by nature pertains to Christian pilgrimage, Arendt, nevertheless, does not share Augustine’s religious sentiment and perspective, let alone his Christian worldview. Her “interest in the saint,” according to the editors of her dissertation Joanna Scott and Judith Stark, “is determinedly nontheological.”¹¹ What really fascinates Arendt, in fact, is Augustine’s inexhaustible enterprise of “understand[ing] and interpret[ing] the world in philosophical-cosmological terms”¹² Still, even if her real interest is the philosophical questioning of Augustine, who is in Arendt’s mind “the only philosopher the Romans ever had,” it is reasonable to argue that Arendt possesses a sort of “split mind.” Playing very capably the role of a perceptive interpreter of Augustine’s discourses, she also shows no hesitation to “betray” the saint’s

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.91.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.31.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.122.

¹² The original citation of these words is taken from Arendt’s short essay on “Augustine and Protestantism” published in the 4 December 1930 issue of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. See *Love and Saint Augustine*, p.121.

philosophical-cosmological thinking of man as essentially eternal with her own secularized conviction that all humans are quintessentially worldly. This “betrayal” deserves careful reconsideration, because for a robust thinker like Arendt, underlying her curious “contradiction” may be a typical phenomenon of modernity, or, as suggested by Charles Taylor, the unfortunate fact about modern culture that “the multi-cornered debate is shaped by the two extremes, transcendent religion, on one hand, and its frontal denial, on the other.”¹³ Undoubtedly, Arendt takes the denial side. In this paper, we shall get a closer look at her secularist position within the modern “world of doubt”¹⁴ through scrutinizing her “debate” with a modern “descendent” of St. Augustine, the early nineteenth-century Danish writer Kierkegaard.

Aligning herself with such modern philosophers as Heidegger, Spinoza, and Descartes, all of whom “never explicitly rejected ... religious beliefs” or “accepted” them, Arendt tries to justify this ambivalent attitude of the aforementioned intellectuals by denying belief to be an indispensable “precondition” for knowledge or understanding. Were the opposite true, she argued, “then we would be forced to throw out more than one thousand years of philosophic thought.”¹⁵ This mindset also explains why in her dissertation, between her ruminations about Augustine’s dogmatic renunciation of worldly love and the saint’s own justification concerning the ultimate dissatisfaction of worldly happiness, Arendt once asks: “Would it not then be better to love the world in *cupiditas* and be at home? Why should we make a desert out of this world?”¹⁶

Put in the context of Arendt’s canon, not simply the dissertation, these questions are far from rhetorical but raised in the authentic voice of her modern self, especially in her position as a political theorist. In political terms, “making a desert out of this world,” in Arendt’s own opinion, designates “the modern growth of worldlessness, the withering

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.20.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, in the essay titled “Religion and Politics,” makes the following statement of modern secularity: “Our world is spiritually a secular world precisely because it is a world of doubt.” See Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), pp.369-370.

¹⁵ The quotation is borrowed from the editors of Arendt’s dissertation, who cite Arendt’s remark in 1950. See *Love and Saint Augustine*, p.141.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *ibid*, p.19.

away of everything *between us*,”¹⁷ that is, the demolishing of our *worldliness*. In fact, for Arendt, as a modern thinker on politics and “the human condition,” to “make a desert out of this world” is nothing but wrong-headed, apolitical, and inhumane. In striking contrast with Augustine’s Christian phenomenological conception about the nature and the real home of human existence as “in the world but not of the world,” Arendt’s manifesto is that all living beings, including humans, are “not just in the world” but “of the world,”¹⁸ as deliberated in her last, posthumous work, *The Life of the Mind*. In other words, to Augustine, the reality of man lies in eternity; to Arendt, in worldliness. Furthermore, in the same book that tackles human selfhood at the mental level Arendt attempts to legitimize the notion of human worldliness with her inventive concept of “human plurality,” which refers to the simple fact that “[n]ot Man but men inhabit this planet;” on that account, the world’s “phenomenal nature” is “human plurality.”¹⁹

The very idea of “human plurality” is central to Arendt’s thinking about the world, human beings, and politics. According to Arendt, the concept is ascribable both to the worldly existence of human beings and to politics. As suggested by Seyla Benhabib, the notion of human plurality is key to Arendt’s “anthropological universalism,”²⁰ which is, for instance, perceivable in her essay, “What is Existential Philosophy?”:

Existence itself is, by its very nature, never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of others’ existence. ... Existence can develop only in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all.²¹

To further the concept of human existence in plural, Arendt assigns the qualities of “distinctness and equality” between humans as the core elements that constitute political

¹⁷ These words of Arendt’s are cited from the text of her conclusion in the 1955 lecture course, “The History of Political Theory,” given at the University of California-Berkeley. This concluding remark is collected as the “Epilogue” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. with an introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p.201.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1978), p.20.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.19.

²⁰ See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), p.196.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy?,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.186.

activities and bodies politic.²² This idea is elucidated in another essay by Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics": "Politics is based on the fact of human plurality... deal[ing] with the coexistence and association of *different* men"²³ in their common world. Concerning Arendt's political understanding of the human world, Jerome Kohn rightly observes that "[t]o Arendt, the world is neither a natural product nor the creation of God; it can only appear through politics."²⁴ Thus, when it comes to transforming the desert-world back to a human world because we humans "are not of the desert though we live in it,"²⁵ Arendt underlines her "creed" of human plurality as the necessary ground for such transformation to happen. Evidently, "the desert" understood by Arendt does not mean the imperfect world that would drag down the pilgrim soul yearning for perfect and eternal happiness. From Arendt's secular perspective, the desert signifies the "absence" of our "public political life," which means precisely "our increasing loss of the world"²⁶—the home that we only have and share.

The obvious "heterogeneity" between Augustine and Arendt in their opposite treatments of the desert-world reinforces our understanding of Arendt as thinking in the paradigm of modern secularism. Given that Arendt seems the saint's "faithful" and probably life-long admirer, as her dissertation is seen by critics to "contain the seeds" of many of her later thoughts, perhaps equally unquestionable is the fact mentioned by Scot and Stark that "Arendt abstracts and transfers only those aspects of Augustine's thought that are useful in formulating her own and leaves the rest offstage."²⁷ Indeed, as Augustine's reader and interpreter, Arendt tends to read and "use" the saint selectively, overlooking deliberately the close ties between his thought and adherence to his religious faith as well as worldview. Here, the tendency involves intentional ignorance of Augustine's religiousness. Interestingly, such a tendency in Arendt is not found in her "encounter," indeed argumentation, with Kierkegaard, an exceptional Christian thinker in the secular age of modernity.

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p.61.

²³ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.93.

²⁴ Jerome Kohn, "Introduction," *The Promise of Politics*, p.xxx.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Epilogue," *The Promise of Politics*, p.201.

²⁶ Kohn, "Introduction," pp.xxxi-xxxii.

²⁷ See these two editors' essay in *Love and Saint Augustine*, p.122.

Through investigating Arendt's disagreements with Kierkegaard and then figuring out how Kierkegaard would respond to her critique, a fruitful "conversation" between these two thinkers is expected to emerge. More importantly, through their conversation or debate, this paper intends to wrestle with their divergent positions—one primarily concerned with human worldliness and the other, human religiousness.

Arendt's Debate with Kierkegaard

In a short essay titled "Søren Kierkegaard," Arendt "hails" Kierkegaard as a "radically religious" thinker in the milieu of modern secularism:

To the extent that such a thing as a religious existence is possible at all in the [secularized] modern world, it has to turn to Kierkegaard as its forebear. The differences between Protestantism and Catholicism pale in comparison with the gigantic abyss that has opened up between a self-contained atheistic world and a religious existence in that same world. To be radically religious in such a world means to be alone not only in the sense that one stands alone before God but also in the sense that no one else stands before God.²⁸

This profile of Kierkegaard evidences Arendt's keen observation of the polarized modern world—one characterized by what she calls "the gigantic abyss" between atheistic and religious modes of living in the same "wholly secularized" world. Even though Arendt does not mention her own religious attitude and position here, yet from her description of Kierkegaard's religious profile, we still can sense the distance that she personally keeps from the extraordinary but solitary believer "in the same world" predominated by the pervasive spirit of modern secularity.

Not just unsympathetic to the religiousness of Kierkegaard, Arendt is vehemently critical of Kierkegaard's distinctive patterns of thinking and believing. She questions, for instance, the validity of Kierkegaard's "radical skepticism" and its potential impact in the realm of religious belief. According to Arendt, Kierkegaard is tremendously influential and

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Søren Kierkegaard," *Essays in Understanding*, pp.45-47.

authoritative, even to atheists like Sartre, not just as the father of modern existential philosophy but most importantly because of his “radical skepticism.”²⁹ That Kierkegaard is “radically skeptical,” Arendt argues, is crucially manifested in what he preaches as the way to faith, i.e., a leap from doubt to belief. From Arendt’s viewpoint, such a leap is homogeneous with the modern atheistic “leap from doubt into non-belief,” as they both share the “ground in modern spiritual secularism,”³⁰ i.e., *doubt per se*.

To see why the idea of accommodating doubt within the realm of religion would provoke such an ironic and antipathetic reaction in Arendt, we must turn back to her understanding of the modern world—not just a world without God but more importantly marked by the phenomenon of “worldlessness.” Employing the metaphor of “desert-world” for such a phenomenon, Arendt believes that the hope for transforming the desert to a human world again depends on the “promise of politics,” which means to restore “our plural existence” (i.e., politics). Also, she holds that the “plural existence” in the modern desert-world is under threat of disruption, the chief danger being the “sandstorms” of totalitarian movements, and a lesser but more common danger which ruins the “oases [e.g., religion] in the desert” being *escapism* exemplified by Kierkegaard.³¹ Quoted below is Arendt’s dispute against Kierkegaard’s “escapist” obsession with the problem of doubt:

In attempting to escape, we carry the sand of the desert into the oases—as Kierkegaard, trying to escape doubt, carried his very doubt into religion when he leaped into faith. The lack of endurance, the failure to recognize and endure doubt as one of the fundamental conditions of modern life, introduces doubt into the only realm where it should never enter: the religious, ... the realm of faith.³²

In support of her critique of Kierkegaard’s concern with doubt, Arendt at one point uses Kierkegaard’s own words: “belief has brought doubt into the world,” so much so that

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.46.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.369.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, pp.202-203.

³² Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.203.

doubt “is not defeated through knowledge but through belief.”³³ Yet, Arendt reasons against Kierkegaard’s principle of leap of faith on the ground that in a secularized modern age doubt is not to be defeated, since living with the tension between doubt and belief should be a typical way of religious life, particularly for the dwellers in the modern “world of doubt.” Under such a rationale, she further comments that perhaps “the leap [from doubt] into belief has done more to undermine authentic faith,”³⁴ which also means to damage the intactness of the “oasis”-religion for the desert inhabitants.

If rethinking this rationale of Arendt’s with Kierkegaard’s proposition (overcoming doubt through faith), we might take up the debate and inquire: Must a leap of faith signify a kind of spiritual blindness and failure to bear *doubt*—the intrinsic part of modern religious life? Can’t the attempt to defeat it mean some true and serious recognition of its existence and also a sincere and determined act of seeking an existentially and voluntarily authentic life of religion? If these counter-interrogations could stand, we may go further to defend Kierkegaard’s leap from doubt into belief by arguing that instead of lacking endurance, it ought to be viewed as some genuine resolution not merely to overcome doubt but more likely to dispel the temptation of *escaping belief*. Arendt would probably not accept such a point. Nevertheless, thinking Arendt’s opposition in reverse, we may find it not groundless to claim that Arendt’s insistence on enduring rather than escaping doubt might equally serve to despoil the oasis of authentic faith for those modern dwellers “in the desert but not of the desert.”

In addition to the question about doubt in modern religion, the problem of the self is another significant topic of contention. Kierkegaard’s understanding of human selfhood appears totally different from Arendt’s views of the human condition. One highlights the individual’s subjective relationship with God, and the other emphasizes plural existence in the human world. Their contrast is indeed clearly between religiousness and worldliness. In terms of Arendt’s conception of desert-world, the very attempt (of Kierkegaard) to prioritize the singular, the self, and the spiritual over the plural, the public, and the political is both a manifestation of and contribution to “worldlessness,” namely, making the world

³³ This quotation is Arendt’s translation in her essay, “Religion and Politics” (*Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.369), cited by Arendt from the German translation (by Wolfgang Struve, Darmstadt, 1948) of the Danish edition of Kierkegaard’s *Collected Works* (1909), vol. IV.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.369.

a desert. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt proscribes “the flight from the world into the self,” exhibited in the axis of Kierkegaard’s enterprise, as precisely the ill of “modern world alienation.”³⁵

Arendt’s denunciation of prioritizing the self, in a sense, reminds us of her questioning of Augustine’s pursuit of self in eternity instead of the world. As mentioned previously, toward the saint’s denial of worldly love, Arendt’s response is tinged with suspicion, if not repulsion, as she deliberately shuns the theological dimension in Augustine’s contemplation over existence. But, with Kierkegaard, the modern Christian philosopher of existence, Arendt becomes far from hesitant to confront the perspective in conflict with her politics-based paradigm of thinking. One possible explanation is that her frame of mind has little room for the Christian perspective Augustine and Kierkegaard stand for. After all, she tends to bypass the Christian paradigm and takes a different path for discovering the truth of human existence. Thus, we have Kierkegaard, who becomes inevitably Arendt’s substantial opponent in debate. Definitely akin to Saint Augustine, Kierkegaard lays claim to the foundation for the truth of the self in the faith of eternity. In the book about his Christian anthropology, *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard designates the human individual’s disunity with God as disunity with self/spirit—an existential disease which Kierkegaard terms “sickness unto death,” meaning to exist in “despair.”³⁶ Undoubtedly, such a Christian anthropological view cannot but sound too “un-worldly” to fit in with the mindset of readiness for life of human plurality and love of the mundane world, which dictates (political) freedom in speech and action among human fellows on earth. Contrary to Kierkegaard, Arendt believes that the despairing condition of human existence has nothing to do with the self’s love of God; it is simply the opposite of politics, with its consequence of life in the desert-world.

Related to the controversy of the self, another debatable question concerns whether to reform man is important for transforming the world. Against the subjective and

³⁵ In “The Prologue” of *The Human Condition* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), Arendt mentions the “twofold flight [of modern world alienation] from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self.” P.6.

³⁶ Kierkegaard defines his central concepts of “the self as spirit” and “despair” in his pseudonymous book (1849), *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

individualistic approach proposed by Kierkegaard to the problem of despair, Arendt, unsurprisingly, disputes the idea of putting human beings or the self in the center of solving the problem of “worldlessness.” Her logic is simple: worldlessness is a political crisis, so not man but the world should be the concern.³⁷ Opposite to Arendt’s politics-centered viewpoint, Kierkegaard, whose precedence is always given to the singular instead of the plural, makes a clear-cut claim: “Every reform which does not realize that the real problem is to reform every single individual, is *eo ipso* an illusion.”³⁸ Nonetheless, Kierkegaard’s concern is not with the individual only. Nor does he care only for the religious. As rightly observed by Michele Nicoletti in his enlightening article entitled “Politics and Religion in Kierkegaard’s Thought: Secularization and the Martyr,” “Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of the single individual for the world, not just for religious life. ... [His] proposal is to reform the single individual rather than to escape from the world.”³⁹ Nicoletti’s defense of Kierkegaard is echoed by Louise Carroll Keeley, who maintains that Kierkegaard’s individualistic appeal to “self-development,” such as in his book on Christian ethics of love, *Works of Love* (1847), does not deserve the charge of “acosmism,” or “worldlessness,” because it actually concerns “real actions in the real world.”⁴⁰ However, perhaps we may argue that Arendt is absorbed in her impulse to de-legitimize “pursu[ing] the phantom of the self”⁴¹ out of her strong adhesion to the belief in human plurality and “promises of politics,” and therefore she would tend to ignore the importance of mending the self for the world’s sake and the value of the Christian sense of love, both of which are vehemently upheld by Kierkegaard.

³⁷ See Hannah Arendt’s “Introduction into Politics,” *The Promise of Politics*, pp.105-106.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler, or a Circle of Ethico-Religious Essays*, ed. by Frederick Sontag and trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p.xxiv.

³⁹ Michele Nicoletti, “Politics and Religion in Kierkegaard’s Thought: Secularization and the Martyr,” *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. by George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (London: Humanities Press, 1992), p.190.

⁴⁰ Louise Carroll Keeley, “Subjectivity and World in *Works of Love*,” *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community*, pp.96, 97.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy?,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.186.

Conclusion: Possible Negotiation

Toward concluding the debate between the worldly Arendt and the religious Kierkegaard, we may wonder whether there can be a certain negotiable ground for the divergent stances of the two modern thinkers. Probably, the crucial issue is ultimately concerned with the kind of love embraced by the self, i.e., eternal love or worldly love, with the seeming confliction between the two. The confliction of these two loves prompts us to inquire further: Do they necessarily exclude each other, and must they be rendered as the either-or option for human existence? Before coming to any definite conclusion about whether a certain complementarity of thought is possible to draw from their debate, we may consider the critique of Anita Craig, who offers one scarce but interesting comparison between Kierkegaard and Arendt in terms of better solutions for the problem of the self in the context of society.

In "The Possibilities for Personhood in a Context of (Hitherto Unknown) Possibilities," Craig addresses Kierkegaard's option of relying on faith in God for the restoration of "fragile" single individuals as an answer both "untimely" and unfavorable when compared with Arendt's alternative solution. In Craig's opinion, Arendt's theory of *worldly promises* for human salvation is preferable to Kierkegaard's project: "Rather than attempt to secure our lives in God, Hannah Arendt highlights another option: she focuses on ... accepting both our freedom and the plurality of our reality, ... to live well with others like ourselves; others whom we need to save our reality."⁴² Evidently out of a modern secular mindset tinged with a post-modern tendency to shun any truth claim, Craig further questions the outdated, individualistic, and worse, God-centered theory she finds in Kierkegaard: "[M]ust we have faith in *God*? Will it not do to have faith in *ourselves*?"⁴³ From this interrogation, the ethos of secularism, which Arendt definitely shares with her adherent, is undoubtedly in view. Thus, we may once again confirm the observation that what makes Kierkegaard and Arendt divergent modern thinkers essentially lies in their

⁴² Anita Craig, "The Possibilities for Personhood in a Context of (Hitherto Unknown) Possibilities," *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp.64-65.

⁴³ For both quotations, Craig, *ibid.*, p.64.

heterogeneous “beliefs”: the (modern) belief in Christianity and the belief in modern secularism. More precisely, Kierkegaard, with his creed of leap from doubt to faith, is substantially adherent to “modern belief,” whereas Arendt is committed to what she defines as “modern atheism, which has leaped from doubt into non-belief.” Intriguingly, to Arendt, these two kinds of allegiance have something in common at the crux: “both are grounded in modern spiritual secularism.”⁴⁴

Does such a sense of commonality based on Arendt’s understanding of “modern spiritual secularism” open the door of negotiation for us at all? In effect, this notion of the common spirit of modern secularity does not suffice to wipe out the fact of the two thinkers’ heterogeneity in their diagnoses of the modern predicament of the self in the desert-world. Perhaps returning to Augustine’s spiritual and confessional pondering over “love” would be more promising. In Augustine, we can definitely detect a distinct, albeit distant, resonance, an equivalent context to Kierkegaard’s rumination about works of love, i.e., the context of the eternal. For Augustine, the fulfillment of the soul’s pilgrimage out of the world toward the eternal could not be achieved until the pilgrim soul gets back to the world with love of eternity, which is, after all, for the world.

In the light of this picture of double-tracked pilgrimage, both progressive and regressive, we seem entitled to perceive that worldliness and religiousness are not entirely incompatible in the realm of love. Also, it could be inferred that love of eternity and love of the world are ultimately not contradictory but complementary and co-existent within the self in the desert-world—who is a pilgrim rather than a worldly being per se. This vision of complementarity between the worldly and the eternal, no doubt, appertains to the Christian view of human reality held by Augustine the ancient saint and Kierkegaard the child of modern secularity as well. How about Arendt, another child of modernity and yet apparently uncongenial to Augustine, at least sharing no such Christian vision of pilgrimage for the self being in the world? Since we see in Kierkegaard, echoing Augustine, a possible negotiation between Christian love of eternity and secular love of the world, manifested in the Kierkegaardian and also Augustinian notion of back-to-the-world practice of eternal love, or, love of eternity, can we find any possibility of such a negotiation in Arendt, given that her view of human existence is admittedly opposite to the

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, p.369.

religious, modern or premodern, recognition that human selfhood is essentially not of the world but of eternity?

In fact, even if Arendt persists in founding her political theory on the existential conception of human plurality and always sticks to her modern secularist position of identifying worldliness rather than eternity/worldlessness as the reality of the existential self, nonetheless, in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind* on Willing, she has no hesitation to look back at the ancient sources, both Hebrew and Roman, of the foundation for Western political thought, including the very idea of political freedom and the nature of political action, i.e., the Action of “a plural We . . . , in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Arendt deliberates that this “We” as a political community actually involves every individual self and “always needs a beginning,” insofar as political Action refers to engagement of freedom in *creating* a changed, new world. Most significantly, seeking for light to shed on “the haunting obscurity of the question”⁴⁶ about this “beginning,” Arendt returns to the thought of Augustine, the Christian saint and the sole Roman philosopher, specifically his concept of “natality,” which Arendt accepts as the very foundation for such a “beginning.”

Toward her conclusion about how to understand the freedom of the willing Self as an individual agent in the political action of “We,” Arendt evidently attempts to lean on Augustine’s Christian-Roman thinking which she interprets as associating the philosophical “foundation” for the political act of “beginning” with the Christian notion of “natality”:

In his great work on the *City of God*, he [Augustine] mentions, but does not explicate, what could have become the ontological underpinning for a truly Roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics. According to him, God created man as a temporal creature, *homo temporalis*, . . . The purpose of the creation of man was to make possible a beginning: “That there be a beginning man was created, before whom nobody was.”⁴⁷ The very capacity for beginning is rooted in

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p.200.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, pp.200, 202.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt’s own note for this citation: *De Civitate Dei*, bk., XII, chap.xx.

natality, ... the fact that human beings, new men, again and again appear in the world by virtue of birth.⁴⁸

According to Arendt, Augustine's political philosophy with its root in the Christian concept of "natality," namely, birth/beginning of life given by the eternal Creator-God, can be counted as the only "tentative alternative" to the Marxian fantastic vision that politics ultimately promises a final "classless and warless 'realm of freedom,'" which rather frustratingly coincides with "the end of all things."⁴⁹ Definitely, to Arendt, the preferable and clearly more uplifting version of political theory is Augustine's, one that envisions political freedom and action as the possession and enterprise of "the human legislator—created in God's own image and therefore able to imitate God—when he lays the *foundations* of a human community, creates the condition for all future political life and historical development."⁵⁰

In other words, regarding the foundation for the Occidental tradition of political thought, Arendt aligns herself with Augustine's religious understanding that every human self is born a *political* creature in the sense that he or she is by nature free, eternal, and capable of making a beginning and a history—just like the Creator. Also, such an alignment is evidenced by her tendency to render the Christian idea of the self as exclusively enlightening to the problem of the foundation of politics, the quintessentially *worldly* enterprise of "We" comprised by each singular "I" that wills and acts in freedom. In light of this, it seems also justifiable to conclude that to some extent like Kierkegaard, Arendt too is up to negotiate her "enlightened" modern secularism with the traditional, already discarded belief "in the Hebrew-Christian Creator-God"⁵¹—explicitly for the sake of discovering the "foundation" not just of political freedom and action but even more fundamentally, albeit implicitly, of the self in the world but not of the world. In this sense, we may hold that as Kierkegaard engages in bringing into a rendezvous his religious faith in an eternal God and his birthmark of secularized modernity, so Arendt sets her foot in possible negotiation between her entirely secular glorification of worldliness and the

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, pp.216-217.

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.216.

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, pp.208-209.

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *ibid.*, p.208.

Christianity-informed understanding of the self. Furthermore, from these two children of modern secularism we can also infer that any exclusive embrace of either the worldly or the religious would be a true "desert" for the self in modernity.

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現代「沙漠」及自我：鄂蘭與齊克果的 世俗觀和宗教觀之對立與反思

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內容摘要：此論文旨在探討世俗之愛和永恆之愛兩種追求能否相容並存的問題。透過鄂蘭的「人類複數性」政治哲學和齊克果強調個人「宗教內在性」的存在哲學之間的對話，並針對現代「沙漠世界」與人類存在本質的矛盾與解決之道，重新審視基於世俗之愛的政治承諾和基於上帝之愛的宗教承諾之間的歧見，藉此反思鄂蘭的世俗化視域和齊克果堅持信仰的異質信念，有否協商或兼容之可能。

關鍵詞：世俗性、宗教性、自我、鄂蘭、齊克果