

Caritas and Conscience

Natasha Levinson
Kent State University

These zombie are complex figures: at once monstrous in their lack of affect, and yet, Peter Nelsen hopes, capable of rebirth and regeneration. As Nelsen reminds us, there is a great deal at stake here. These zombie students will soon be let loose as teachers in schools, where they will come into contact with vulnerable young people. Much hinges on this capacity for transformation, and on the question of what teacher-educators like us can do to facilitate the process. Nelsen looks to Hannah Arendt for philosophical guidance in relation to these zombie students. This turn makes sense in one regard because it puts the phenomenon of the zombie student in an institutional context that in many ways works against the cultivation of the two things that Nelsen rightly takes to be essential to education: the cultivation of respect for plurality and the preservation of natality. As Nelsen sees things, these zombies are not aberrations of schooling but are instead the monstrous products of schooling itself. But in two other respects, the turn to Arendt is curious: it misses Arendt's ambivalence toward the idea that conscience creates the conditions for natality, and it misses what is at the heart of her concerns about the limitations of *caritas*, the Christian view of love which she examined in her dissertation on Augustine.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CONSCIENCE

Arendt attributed much of the evil that came to characterize the twentieth century to “thoughtlessness,” a term that does not bear the weight of the crimes attached to it. Nonetheless, it led her to wonder whether “the activity of thinking as such” could function as a bulwark against the “absence of thinking.”¹ While she concluded that the activity of thinking as a constant unraveling of seemingly definitive answers is valuable, she does not share Nelsen's faith that either thinking per se, or its “product” — conscience — leads easily to the sort of transformative action needed in the world.² The nub of her critique of conscience is that it is subjective and “entirely negative.”³ To understand her concern about the subjective nature of conscience in the modern era, we need to remember that conscience is no longer understood to be the internalized voice of a shared God who holds others equally accountable to the same criteria of right and wrong. Today, the claims of conscience hold for the individual thinker alone. As Arendt puts it, “[W]hat I cannot live with may not bother another [person's] conscience.”⁴ In these circumstances, conscience becomes no more, but also no less than “an opinion.” Like other opinions, it must enter into the marketplace of ideas if it is to influence others. Cultivating conscience is an important first step en route to political engagement, but it is unlikely to combat the moral isolation of Nelsen's zombie students, and ironically, may well exacerbate it. The second way in which conscience is subjective is that its orientation, finally, is toward the moral status of the self rather than the circumstances of the other. Arendt is fond of quoting the Socratic dictum that “it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.” Her rejoinder is stern: Socrates “clearly

meant that it was better *for him*,” to which she adds, “what counts is that a wrong has been done.”⁵ Even though the moral springboard for extricating oneself from a particular action is the suffering of others, the culminating consideration of conscience is whether it is good or bad for *me* to participate in x or y.

This shift in the locus of concern from the suffering of others back to the moral standing of my own self helps us understand what Arendt means when she criticizes “the rules of conscience” for being “entirely negative.” Conscience tells a person what not to do rather than what they ought to do.⁶ It occasions a politics of abstention rather than one of engagement — unless, of course, the decision not to participate is publicly articulated with a view to influencing opinion. At such a point, Nelsen’s zombie students might well be sparked into action. At the very least, they will be released from their isolation and brought into the educational *agon* of an Arendtian classroom. But they have to be brought to the point of wanting to engage in this way. The question to which I now turn, is whether *caritas* can create the conditions for this kind of engagement, thereby breaking the isolation that Nelsen ascribes to his zombie students.

THE LIMITS OF CARITAS

Although Arendt is not known as a philosopher of love, Nelsen reminds us that her ruminations on the limits of love from the perspective of political life are a recurring theme in her books, and she wrote her posthumously published dissertation on the theme of *Love and St Augustine*. Her dissertation grapples with the meaning of the Christian commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” The first thing to note is that Arendt is talking about a particular kind of love that is at the core of Pauline Christianity: *caritas*. Moreover, she is interested mainly in the implications of “social” *caritas* (the quotation marks denote her skepticism about the concept), which is to say, its manifestation in the world in the relations between the believer and the neighbor.⁷ Arendt concludes that *caritas* is a fundamentally unworldly love because it enjoins believers to make a choice between the temporal ways of the world and the eternal love of God. *Caritas* does not merely signal a return to God, however. It requires a particular kind of renunciation of “the world as well as of [one]self, insofar as [one] is of the world” (*LS*, 91). True, this renunciation of the self extends “only” to those parts of the self that are not made by God, but what is left after one has gone through this purging of the very things that make us who we are in the world? A more perfect being? Possibly. One who is more worthy of God’s grace? Perhaps. But nonetheless, a person singularly unsuited to the task of engaging and valuing others in all their distinctiveness and difference.

It is not only the self that is denied, but the identity of the neighbor also. *Caritas* is only putatively unconditional. It is actually a qualified love because one is enjoined to love the neighbor not as they are in themselves but in “[their] createdness.” Essentially, we are asked to discern which aspects of the neighbor were created by God, and to separate these facets of their identity from others of their own making. (Not for nothing is Augustine credited with coining the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.”) Moreover, we are enjoined to love the neighbor for what “we wish that [they] may be” (*LS*, 96). Far from drawing us toward the neighbor, *caritas* actually

preserves our isolation from one another. This isolation is essential, because it is what motivates the desire for God. In the end, the neighbor is irrelevant, or rather, is relevant only as a conduit to God. The world is similarly disparaged in all this. It “remains a desert for man’s isolated existence” (*LS*, 94).

We can see here the strangeness of an appeal to “social” *caritas* in light of Nelsen’s hope of finding a way to reconnect the zombie student with the world, and more specifically, with the suffering of sexual minority students. Social *caritas* may well begin with a concern for the suffering of the other, but its hope lies not in fostering the “we” of human togetherness, but of transcending the very need for such togetherness. What need have I of another if I have the love of God? Under conditions of social *caritas*, human relations are at best provisional (*LS*, 111). Transcendence rather than togetherness is the ideal.

This is a rather discouraging note on which to end a response to an essay about natality, that most hopeful of conditions. Arendt’s dissertation comes to a similarly disheartening conclusion, although she continued throughout her life to recognize the profound counter-narrative within Augustine’s thought: that God’s creatures have within them the capacity for creation. While this capacity separates us from God, and creates the estrangement from the world that gives rise to the longing for reconciliation, it also makes it both possible and essential for us to create a world of genuine human togetherness on earth. *Caritas* turns out not to be the mechanism for such a world. And while the cultivation of conscience is not, in the end, satisfactory, it is a good place to begin.

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1. Hannah Arendt *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978), 4–5.
 2. *Ibid.*, 56.
 3. Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1972), 63.
 4. *Ibid.*, 64.
 5. *Ibid.*, 62.
 6. *Ibid.*, 63.
 7. Hannah Arendt, *Love and St Augustine*, eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 95. This work will be cited as *LS* in the text for all subsequent references.