

Eric Gregory
Princeton University

Happiness: Experienced and Remembered

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Nonetheless, if any man uses this life in such a way that he directs it towards that end which he so ardently loves and for which he so faithfully hopes, he may without absurdity be called happy even now, though rather by future hope than in present reality.

Augustine, *City of God*, 19.20

Augustine would not have been surprised by recent findings in behavioral economics that people make mistakes with regard to their happiness. He too thought happiness was opaque. We bundles of loves are tempted to elevate certain aspects of the good as if it were the whole and produce irrational desires that only disappoint. Consider empirical discussions of cognitive biases that challenge appropriate measurement of subjective well-being and raise doubts about the anthropology of social choice theory.¹ Adjustments to objectively bad situations by “adaptation,” restless desires that fuel a “hedonic treadmill,” or overestimates of utility by “focusing illusions” are ripe for Augustinian diagnoses.

We might think of them as Pelagian fictions in framing judgments about happiness. They reflect narcissism unconfessed, Augustine might claim. They require therapy in order to change our way of feeling and thinking. In fact, with important political implications for the Western tradition, Augustine held that pastoral responsibility demands helping others “consult their

¹ See Sen (1992), Burchardt (2004), Kahneman, et.al. (1999), and Seligman (2002).

[objective] interests rather than their [subjective] preferences.”² While not focused on cognitive biases or their possible relevance for public policy, this paper pursues a related route into a conversation between resurgent interest in happiness studies and the Augustinian tradition. It remains psychological, and attends to an important distinction in the “happiness” literature between experience and memory that resonates with the confessional Augustine who also worried about our time-boundedness. But it follows larger philosophical and theological inquiry in order to resist hyper-Augustinian spiritualizing temptations that plague Christian understandings of happiness torn between time and eternity, self-interest and other-regarding virtue.

Recent psychological literature makes a suggestive distinction between an “experiencing self” and a “remembering self.”³ The distinction trades on differences between affective experience and retrospective evaluations of subjective well-being. On this view, the self that experiences happiness in time “barely has time to exist.”⁴ It experiences happiness only in the *present* moment. By contrast, the self that evaluates and remembers provides a relatively more stable psychic identity. This self keeps score, tells stories, and maintains records about how one’s life goes. It is this integrating or “global” self that reports and registers the happiness of our lives.

But, as with other cognitive illusions, it is prone to error. In particular, it privileges final moments of a particular experience or remembers only how they were experienced at peak

² Augustine, Letter 138 (to Marcellinus). Welfare economics and political philosophy are full of debates about how to measure and promote well-being, especially contrasts between objective-list and subjective approaches to welfare. Augustinians generally side with objective-list approaches, but Augustine’s epistemology and notion of radical grace tempers any enthusiasm for complete knowledge of objective interests. For comparison of Augustine’s rhetoric of “*compelling*” the neighbor to her good and recent uses of happiness studies to “*nudge*,” see Eric Gregory, “Augustinians and the New Liberalism,” *Augustinian Studies* 41:1 (2010): 315-332.

³ See Kahnemann & Riis (2005), and Kahnemann & Deaton (2010).

⁴ Kahnemann & Riss (2005), 285. “A common estimate is that each of these moments of psychological present may last up to 3 seconds, suggesting that people experience some 20,000 moments in a waking day, and upwards of 500 million moments in a 70-year life.”

pleasantness or unpleasantness (“peak/end” rule). Remembered scoring of experience creates various biases that often lead to bad choices, or “misguided preferences of the remembering self.”⁵ The remembering self is insensitive to duration: “the thrill of ‘flow,’ the joy of intimacy, the sense of engagement in purposeful action” in the moment.⁶ Such findings have led Daniel Kahneman and others to argue that well-being research focused on life-satisfaction or various eudaemonic conceptions of well-being emerging from positive psychology or Aristotelian conceptions of the “good life” are distorted by exclusive concern with the remembering self. Measures of “objective happiness,” if they are to be found, must include the experienced self. Experienced utility matters as much as remembered utility. These discussions typically relate to how scientists might measure happiness, including physiological indicators of momentary affect. They also are thought to resolve certain paradoxes in reported well-being in a global context (i.e., the supposed low level of life satisfaction among the French relative to Americans). More normatively, however, the distinction raises questions about how to weigh good and bad experiences relative to the overall arc of one’s life projects. It might even shape whether one focuses on minimizing suffering or maximizing happiness. But it also raises interesting philosophical questions about personal identity that shift us back to Augustinian ground.

Augustine meditates at length on the subjectivity of time, marked by distension, longing and psychic dispersion. He tells a long story about our failures of rationality and virtue in this “troublesome pilgrimage.” He was a master analyst of self-deception, and his writings identify the many tricks our minds play as we think about how are lives are structured (or always being restructured). They are among the many “woes of this mortal condition” in the pursuit of

⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

happiness.⁷ In a sense, Augustine would deny any experienced self. We are caught between the past of memory and the future of anticipation. The only true present, for Augustine, is eternity when we will truly *experience* happiness as integrated rather than fragmented selves. Here we are exiles, resident aliens longing to be “gathered all that I am, my whole disintegrated and doomed self, into that dearly loved mother’s peace...so you may reshape me to new form, new firmness, for eternity.”⁸ But Augustine’s faith resists complete unmasking of intelligible desires that might make sense of embodied life. His wisdom grieves, but it holds hope that temporal desire for happiness might speak to something more real than false, even though our disordered loves perpetually cloud our vision and capacity for felicity in virtue.

Augustine has a reputation for pessimism, even raging against human embodiment itself. With sufficient historical examples, Augustinians are thought to be dogmatic, coercive, and intoxicated by desire for God. They long for the transcendent with authoritarian abandon and puritanical vigor, tending either toward theocratic efforts to hasten its arrival or sectarian withdrawal. Much of modern thought tries to leave dreary Augustinianism behind, despite recent laments about a cramped moral universe (of either deontological or utilitarian varieties) in need of something like an Augustinian construal of transcendence.⁹ Time can be construed as punishment for Augustine, associated with decay and death of the Fall. But he offers no tragic vision as might be found among our modern secular contemporaries bereft of eschatology:

We are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies....We know that the world was not made for

⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.5.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.16,23.

⁹ Consider, for example, Charles Taylor’s account of “the world we have lost, one in which spiritual forces impinge on porous agents” (Taylor 2007, 61). Taylor describes a secularizing transformation in the Western social imaginary along Augustinian and Enlightenment lines. He contrasts the “fullness” of a “communion-defined” Augustinian world of charity framed by transcendence to the flat providential deism of Adam Smith’s world of bourgeois Reform framed by immanent human flourishing.

us, or we for the world, that our history has not purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities.¹⁰

The source of genuine happiness in Augustine diverges from contemporary assumptions in psychological literature and, indeed, other strands of ancient eudaimonism or various secularized eschatologies of modernity. To think of Jesus as happy on the cross, for example, immediately challenges static notions of happiness as pleasant feeling or egoistic self-fulfillment, though it raises profound questions of its own.¹¹ To picture worldliness and autonomy, for example, as threats to true virtue wedded to a given teleology invites even further suspicion. Augustine deferred happiness for eternity, but importantly transformed his Platonic and Manichean roots by confessing an eternal love abiding in time. In fact, this transformation is seen as a “major philosophical achievement and a decisive progress beyond the Platonic accounts, because it situates ascent within humanity and renounces the wish to depart from the human condition.”¹² We should respect this historical distance even as we think about what it might mean for us, whether we adore or despise Augustine. For better and for worse, he is one of the most important architects of Western thought and practice, transforming the classical world by inventing a notion of an inner self present to God, and, perhaps most importantly yet often neglected, spreading a social language of love as emotional investment with those who suffer wrongdoing.

Augustine on Virtue and Happiness

¹⁰ Williams (1993), 166.

¹¹ For the best critique of “happiness studies” from a virtue ethic perspective, see Annas (2011). On suffering and happiness from a theological perspective, see Charry (2010).

¹² Nussbaum (2001), 547.

Secular advocates of virtue ethics have countered now dominant Enlightenment ethical theories like utilitarianism and deontology by turning to Aristotle and Hume. Those interested in a more Christian idiom have turned to Aquinas, though often neglecting the Augustinian elements of his *Summa*. Augustine opens his famous Book 19 of the *City of God* with a long discussion of various opinions about the highest good and the nature of happiness. In fact, with more than a hint of parody, he borrows from a Roman philosophical textbook that distinguishes 288 different schools of opinion. Like most ancient authors, Augustine assumes all people seek happiness. But where is happiness to be found? Is it found in a life of virtue? Do we need material blessings in addition to virtue? Or is happiness found in a life of pleasure, or some combination of virtue and pleasure? Moreover, is happiness to be enjoyed with others, or on our own? Augustine's answers to these questions are sometimes obscured by more fundamental moves he makes in response to his fellow philosophers.

Augustine frames his response in terms of time and eternity, and love for God and love for all that is not God. The philosophers "believe that the Final Good is to be found in this life, and that they can achieve happiness by their own efforts."¹³ This is the source of their errors. They are philosophical failures betrayed by their own lives that cannot account for the weak relation between virtue and happiness in time. By contrast, Augustine's response is a profoundly eschatological: "though human life is compelled to be miserable by all the great evils of this world, it is happy in the hope of the world to come, and in the hope of salvation."¹⁴ We are made happy only in hope as we "look forward to happiness in the future, and 'with patience.'"¹⁵ In

¹³ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.4

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.5

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Augustine continues: "we are in the midst of evils, and we must endure them with patience until we come to those good things where everything will bestow ineffable delight upon us, and where there will no longer be anything which we must endure... Yet these philosophers will not believe in this happiness because they do not see it. Thus, they endeavour to contrive for themselves an entirely false happiness, by means of a virtue which is as false as it is proud."

this hope, we are blessed, not because we possess the object of our yearning, but rather because one day we will. In time, we are tempted by idolatry to find our rest in created things. For Augustine, we should “use” creation, but not “enjoy” it. True virtue and prospects of happiness are humbled by anticipation rather than experience. Temporal happiness is only a shadowy image of beatitude.

After Marx and Feuerbach, to hope for a dynamic life with God and others as the eschatological end of human flourishing finds many critics—both Christian and non-Christian—of a supposed remote reward of future bliss. His erotic tales of loves gone wrong were meant to seduce and liberate his readers, but they often travel with a dour, grim Augustine who harps on the limits of virtue and the sadness of life. This Augustine has become the patron saint of an otherworldly pessimism anxious about temporal desires—save the desire to be with God. Augustine is usually blamed for putting all the real action outside of time when our restless hearts enter the Sabbath of God, when the grief of this world comes to an end on the other side of death. But Augustine, like most Christian exegetes over the ages, held that transcendent hope and erotic desire for a final happiness was to shape one’s attitude to this life, and it has much to do with a God who assumed flesh and inhabits the sorrow of time.

Augustine was a culture warrior, living in a period of violence and pluralism, uneasy about a new world order, worried about prosperity, security, and civic identity. His polemics bear the marks of identity politics. He did not want to give an inch to his opponents when all sorts of ideals were in flux, leaving him vulnerable to charges that he hated the world, took flight from the temporal, and rejected pagan virtue as splendid vice (a term he never used). Yet Augustine was enchanted: he not only professed things to be sacred, he perceived in God’s creation signs of divine presence and eschatological destiny. The good acknowledged in any

good thing is an acknowledgement of the highest good. God, he writes, “did not create and then depart; the things derived from him have their being in him.”¹⁶ This vision of participation complicates his received dualisms. Unlike the fallen angels, those pure intellects without bodies that fall completely, we embodied creatures, are on the move, up and down a ladder of salvation. He constantly revised his imagination for what God and virtue are like, how they are related to the city of God in its earthly pilgrimage, and the purposes of temporal existence in facilitating this pilgrimage.

Most of the 20th century interest in virtue and Augustine, in the wake of Anders Nygren’s critique of Augustine’s notion of *caritas*, was preoccupied with the relation between self-love and love of God. Nygren charged that Augustine corrupted the purity of Christian love (gratuitous *agape*) by lodging it within a Platonic structure of egocentric desire to possess the good (*eros*). Nygren, by contrast, pits the charity of Jerusalem (a decidedly Christian Jerusalem) against the erotics of self-interested happiness in Athens. But I think Augustine’s great innovation was to index the language of virtue to his account of our sociality, his fascination with ways in which languages and meanings are shaped by historical communities, and our proleptic glimpses of God, like his vision at Ostia, occur in communion with (rather than without or against) others. For Augustine, the great question is how to accommodate love of anything other than God in this life. In working through this question, he came to argue that the vices of communal life are a perpetual danger, but they are parasitic on its fundamental virtues.

Like most classical authors, Augustine was a virtue (and vice) thinker concerned with whether or not the happy life is a social life. Virtue and happiness bear a strong relation in his thought; they are inter-related even if happiness is not wholly constituted by being virtuous (at

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.12.18.

least not virtuosity untouched by divine blessing). Augustine transformed classical notions of virtue, notably in terms of their mode of reception: they are not achieved by human willing, but received as gifts of God. In this life, they emerge only in a diminished way that is “a solace for our wretchedness rather than the joy of blessedness.”¹⁷ As he elsewhere puts it, “here we have the practice of the virtues, there their result; here their labours, there their reward; here there duties, there their goal.”¹⁸ Note here the accent on active engagement in this life. Happiness is a gift of God’s grace and yet it comes as a virtue, a perfection of human action that somehow does not compete with divine action. Virtue, while always rightly referred to God, should not become the enemy of confession.

If Augustine is famous for this account of the dangers of love, modern scholarship has repaid its debt by emphasizing the dangers of following Augustine on love. *Using* the world and *enjoying* God may be infelicitous phrases to modern ears who hear in them only manipulation (following Kant) or alienation (following Feuerbach). What is sometimes lost in these debates is the theological dimensions of Augustine’s correlation of love and sin. Under the pressure of his reading of Christian Scripture, and I think most importantly, his meditations on the compassion of God in Christ and the love commands, Augustine innovates on ancient eudaimonism and sees love not simply as an emotional feeling that disrupts practical reason or an elite virtue of excellence. Love is an anthropological and cosmological fact; it is at once everywhere and ordinary but very hard, in need of ordering and training. Evil, he argued, was not as fundamental as good; the problem of happiness involves *how to desire the good* without grasping or stealing it. Possessiveness and corruptibility, marked by a failure to acknowledge dependence and vulnerability, are the key terms of Augustine’s moral and political psychology.

¹⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.27.

¹⁸ Augustine, Letter 155.

Sin finds its mysterious birth in the freedom of love itself. The logic of Augustine's account of love's relation to sin has many critics, especially those who read it as promoting an otherworldliness that finds rest only in the love of God rather than the risky loves in this world. It is difficult to read Augustine without reading into him various dualisms that plague Christian spirituality and metaphysics. Hyper-Augustinianism—with its visions of a totalitarian God and worthless humanity or a false “public body” and a true “inner soul” safely locked up and protected from the world—has been the besetting temptation of the Augustinian legacy for some time.

But we are distracted by so-called Platonic contrasts of “*amor dei*” and “*amor mundi*” in ways that betray Augustine's refusal of any subordinationist view where earthly goods are only a means to an ultimate, often solipsistic, good. Love, it seems to me, does not work that way for him. He worried about *how* one is to love without desperately trying to possess and consume any good, whether finite or infinite. His distinction between “using” and “enjoying” the world is more a matter of how we engage the world, than whether or not we value activities in the world. His primary concern is “using things badly or enjoying them badly” (*Trinity*, 10.13). In *On Christian Teaching*, he tells us that human beings both enjoy and use (*aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur*), deponent verbs, passive in form but active in meaning, highlighting the quality of our loving. True virtue is a “rightly ordered love” (15.22), suggesting the need be to trained in learning to love well which involves adopting eschatological faith. To love an eternal God, who becomes flesh, stretches the soul to allow for a love which can include all that is not God. A tournament of competitive loves is precisely what the *uti/frui* texts and the Christology of *Confessions* Book 4 and Book 10 *City of God* reject. The world is not enough to contain our desire, but creation is not the problem, only our expectations of it. His condemnation of

disordered loving is a challenge to fantasies of possession, when we consume others as part of our non-receptive private world.¹⁹

If God is in solidarity with humanity through the Incarnation, then creatures can enjoy the gifts of God even as we are perennially tempted to enjoy them in the wrong way. In fact, to put it crudely, the problem for this Augustine is not so much that we love too little. This is the familiar problem of motivation that tries to generate other-regard in the face of self-interest. But the deeper problem for Augustine is that we love too much in the wrong ways. Our affections are distracted and crowded by their excess not scarcity. They need ordering in community, not the pruning or repression of desire. We are overwhelmed by the good things of the world, tempted to grasp them as our own, rather than be in relation to them with others. This is the cause of love's grief in the world.

Sin does find its ground in the excessive attachment to finite goods. But he is not primarily engaged in abstract metaphysical speculation on what one is to safely consider as appropriate objects of love. Augustine's God does not compete with the neighbor for the self's attention, as if we might measure the reality of God against other realities. Rather than being morally paralyzed by the infinite claims of the neighbor or spiritually distracted by the infinite claims of God, the Augustinian self loves the neighbor *in God*. To love the neighbor in God, Augustine's mature formulation, aims to morally protect the neighbor from the self's prideful distortion that the neighbor exists only in terms of one's own ends, or that the neighbor is a threat to the self's relation to God. In fact, Augustine daringly suggests that "the two commandments cannot exist without each other" (*Trinity*, 8.5.12). The wrong way of disordered loving

¹⁹ I think this framework offers the best context for reading Augustine's regret at weeping over the death of Dido and his analysis of grief after the death of the unnamed friend in *Confessions*. The more common reading takes these passages simply as signs of an excessive Platonic spirituality.

(*cupiditas*) grasps at carnal images of divinity and the neighbor, making them our own. To borrow from one of Augustine's favorite metaphors for sin, this love is a kind of adolescent theft that robs the neighbor and God of their reality beyond our absorbing self-conceptions. This is the Pelagian and Platonic lust—to grasp what can only be given.

Augustine's break from the Stoic ideal of freedom from emotion (*City of God* 9 and 14) offers a radical break with significant implications. The Christian rhetoric and practice of love was an intellectual, cultural, and political watershed. I think it is not hyperbole to think that if Augustine had not begun this re-evaluation of classical philosophy, with its primary concern for self-mastery in pursuit of excellence, we would live in a very different moral and political universe. He furnished a deeply humanitarian ethic premised on concern for the suffering of creatures who bear the image of God. Virtue is stretched by an eternal standard, but since God enters time, the eternal and the temporal are mixed. We come to share, by the grace of God, in perfectibility, even as we long for perfection. Augustine here navigates between "ethically responsible" Stoicism and "spiritual" Platonism, but he is driven by his Christology. This, I think, captures Augustine's sensibility of a hope for a happiness deferred, and yet the conviction that eternal love abides in time. I think this gets at the tension between his anti-Pelagian doubts about self-transcendence with his neo-Platonic conviction that human happiness come only as eternity displaces time. In fact, as John Bowlin recently noted, since eternity's love enters time in the Incarnation, Augustine argues that "when eternity's love enters time and fixes itself upon time's objects, it needs time's many virtues for the perfection of its act."²⁰ As deferred, the heavenly city cannot erase time's virtues, but as a matter of hope, it displays their imperfection.

Bidirectionality is native to Augustinian love: at once descending and kenotic, yet also ascending and erotic. But notice my accent on time. Augustine's account of Incarnation moves

²⁰ John Bowlin, "Augustine Counting Virtues," *Augustinian Studies* 41.1 (2010): 277-300.

time in both directions: the memory of being in Adam and the new body of Christ, allowing for the deep interpenetration of grace in both creation and redemption. I think this helps get beyond spatialized metaphors which usually result in dualisms of church and state or church and world. On my reading, nothing is neutral for Augustine. The world is saturated with God. All communal life, whether what we call politics or we call church, is about fellowship, being shaped in accord with one of the two cities. Jesus, God incarnate, used his humanity to love God perfectly in this life, and God's entering time normatively binds love for God and love for neighbor, without collapsing one into the other; indeed, they are bound in the identity of Jesus himself, the divine neighbor. To refuse the Incarnation, the entry of divine love from eternity, or to see it only as rescue mission for individual souls, is to refuse creation itself. This was the fundamental error of the Platonists, failing to see God's compassion in Christ. Our life in time, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, is not to be regretted. It is a "school for eternity," where there will be no tears, and suffering shall cease.

The gift of eternity is when we finally *experience the present* for the first time in our resurrected body, with others. But, as Augustine claims, even those members of the heavenly city "have a life in this age which is not in the least to be regretted: a life which is the school of eternity, in which they make use of earthly goods like pilgrims, without grasping after them."²¹ History is no waiting-game, as Augustine's many critics charge. It is the time when our loves are training in loving in the right way (with mercy and humility), at least in part, since the maturity of love admits no closure, even when "the beauty of the entire temporal universe, with its individual parts each appropriate to its time, will flow like a great song by some indescribably great composer."²² In the end, Augustine wanted complete intimacy, no tears at all, a final

²¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 1.29.

²² Augustine, Letter 138.

righteousness. He longed for the good, not just feared the bad. He called it “holy longing,” and through longing, he thought, God extends our souls to make room for everything, including happiness. But it takes time for time to come to an end. This might be an Augustine we can also use, if not enjoy.

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