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Against discontinuity: Augustine's theory of happiness reconsidered

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In research on Augustine, Peter Brown's paradigm of 'two Augustines' has been widely used. According to Brown, Augustine experienced a shift from optimism to pessimism. In his earlier works, Augustine held that humans could achieve happiness in this life by reason. In contrast, in his later works, Augustine emphasised grace, original sin and the imperfection of life. Against Brown's framework, this paper argues that Augustine does not experience a pessimistic turn. Augustine holds that humans can achieve happiness through faith, hope and love.

Contribution: This article explores Augustine's theory of happiness and revises the 'two Augustines' paradigm. On the one hand, Augustine does not deny the freedom of will. On the other hand, Augustine is confident in happiness through faith, hope and love.

Keywords: Augustine; *De beata vita*; *De civitate Dei*; Peter Brown; Kurt Flasch; two Augustines paradigm.

Introduction

Happiness (*beatitude*, *beata vita*) is a central theme of Augustine's philosophy and theology (Galvão 1990; Holte 1962). 'Everyone wishes to be happy' is Augustine's philosophical axiom. We can find his discussions on happiness in the different periods of his development. In the *Cassiciacum* Dialogues, Augustine argues against academic scepticism and defends the conformity between happiness and truth. The search for happiness can also be seen as the search for truth and God. The ascent of the soul and the contemplation of the truth are the main elements of Augustine's theory of happiness. In his later works, especially in *De civitate Dei* XIX, Augustine criticises different views of happiness in ancient philosophy. His starting point is the misery of life and the grace of God, which have been established in *Ad Simplicianum* 1.2. The role of Christ and God's grace are the centres for achieving happiness.

Augustine's discussion on happiness confronts modern interpreters with several serious challenges. On the one hand, its elements are scattered throughout his writings. Hence, Augustine's thoughts on happiness might be contradictory in different phases of his development. Hence, there are discussions about the continuity of Augustine's views, which can be classified into a discontinuous thesis (Brown 2000; Flasch 1992) and a continuous thesis (Harrison 2006).[1] For the sake of this discussion, many researchers focus only on the earlier period of Augustine in the research of Augustine's theory of happiness (Müller 2010; Topping 2012).

On the other hand, Augustine was heavily influenced by different ancient philosophical and Christian traditions. Identifying the differences between Augustine's thoughts and other traditions is challenging. Recent scholarship has contributed to the relationship between ancient themes and Augustine's new development (Ekenberg 2020; Tornau 2015; Wetzel 1992; Wolterstorff 2014).

Firstly, I will describe Augustine's theory of happiness, characterised by neoplatonic philosophy and Christianity. Secondly, I will summarise the discontinuous thesis argumentations centred on the weakness of human power and dependence on God's grace. Thirdly, I argue against the previous interpretative paradigm, centred on achieving happiness in this life, the relationship between free will and grace, and the power of the will. Finally, I will argue that humans can achieve happiness in this life through faith, hope and love.

1.Dupont (2008) has written a book review on the discussion of continuous and discontinuous thesis.

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The neoplatonic characteristics of Augustine's theory of happiness

The primary method that Augustine used to philosophise is the neoplatonic. Werner Beierwaltes remarks that there is an agreement between religion (*religio*) and philosophy (*theoria*) by Augustine (Beierwaltes 1981:76–77). Augustine's philosophical approach towards happiness is also neoplatonic and intellectual (Horn 1998, 2011). In the following, I will list several important aspects of Augustine's theory of happiness.

The conformity between happiness and truth

The main concern of *De beata vita* and *Contra Academicos* is to refute academic scepticism, which claims that happiness exists in the pursuit of truth. According to academic scepticism, there is no truth but rather a probability. One should avoid making errors to achieve tranquility of the mind.

Augustine rejects academic scepticism by stating that they are 'caducarii' – those who suffer from the falling sickness, known today as epilepsy (*De beata vita* 2.16). On the one hand, Augustine illustrates the unchangeable truth of, for example, mathematics and dialectic. On the other hand, Augustine appeals to the certainty of givenness. With the illustration of a curved rudder in the water, Augustine emphasises the certainty of impressions. Even though the impression is false because of sense perceptions, the perceiver is still certain of what he or she has seen.

In *De beata vita*, Augustine defines happiness as 'possessing God' (*deum habere*). He argues that God is 'eternal and everlasting' (*semper est indigus*) (*De beata vita* 2.11). Therefore, those who possess God would never lose happiness. Happiness does not lie in the pursuit of external, concrete pleasures but the internal search for oneself and the pursuit of the inner good. Thus, Augustine considers happiness an unchanging, timeless being, an idea, absolute truth, wisdom and God. The search for happiness is then transformed into the knowledge of the truth.

We can illustrate the definition of happiness as 'possessing God' from two perspectives. Firstly, this definition of happiness resembles Augustine's 'two worlds' theory. Augustine's theory of happiness is based on Platonic metaphysics, namely the distinction between the intelligible world (*mundus intelligibilis*) and the sensible world (*mundus sensibilis*). For this distinction, Augustine finds its biblical support – 'My kingdom is not of this world' (Jn 18:36). The division between the two worlds implies that one should not seek the changeable, visible world but rather the unchanging, eternal world of ideas. For Augustine, unhappiness lies in searching for the things we will necessarily lose.

Secondly, possessing God relies on truth and wisdom. Through the knowledge of truth and wisdom, man can know and possess God, achieve happiness and complete the soul's journey, namely the return to the Oneness (*reditus ad unum*). When reason rests in what is eternal, happiness can never be lost. This labels the intellectual approach towards happiness in Augustine's philosophy.

Happiness as contemplation

Augustine advocates for happiness as contemplation throughout his works. In *Contra Academicos*, Augustine defines happiness as 'living according to the best in man',[2] where 'the best' refers to reason (*ratio*). In Augustine's view, the rational soul is God's creation and is closer to God than anything else. The participation of ideas (*participatio*), which is based on the eyes of the soul, can be identified as the happiest vision (*beatissima visio*). In *De quantitate animae*, Augustine argues that the highest level of the soul is the contemplative state (*contemplatio*). This position persists in his later works. Although Augustine criticises the philosophers' claim to pursue happiness in this life (*hac vita*) in *De civitate Dei* XIX, he formulates the state of happiness in the eschaton as the viewing of God (*visio dei*) in *De civitate Dei* XXII.29. The definition of happiness through vision is not only an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:12, which states that 'then shall we come face to face', but it is also an interpretation of the contemplative life advocated by neoplatonism.

In order to achieve such a vision, Augustine provided an intellectualist approach, namely the ascent of the soul, which he described in *Confessiones* VII, summarised as follows: the body or *corpora* (*numeri sensibiles* or *locales*), the soul or *anima* (*sensus*), the interior power or *interior vis* (*sensus interior*), rational power or *ratiocinans potentia* (*ratio*, *mens*), intelligence or *intellegentia* (*sapientia* and *numeri intelligibilis*), and the incommutable or *incommutabile* (*unum*) (Horn 1994:414). The seven steps correspond to the seven levels of the soul: animation, perception, art, virtue, tranquility, approach and contemplation.

The Christian elements of happiness

In this part, we can summarise the Christian characteristics of Augustine's theory of happiness. The texts are mainly quoted from his later works: *Retractationes*, *De civitate Dei,* and *Ad Simplicianum* I.2. From the perspective of Christianity, Augustine argues for imperfection in this life, confidence in human power and the grace of God.

The imperfection of life

In *Retractationes*, Augustine has criticised his confidence in rational power mainly from three aspects: (1) the over-emphasis of liberal arts (*Retractationes* 3.3.2); (2) the over-emphasis of mind (*mens*) or rational power (*ratio*) (*Retractationes* 1.1.2.); and (3) the dependence of wisdom of the soul (*Retractationes,* 2.1.2). To sum up, Augustine argues that he was confident in man's perfection through human efforts or by relying on humans' natural faculties.

Augustine describes the miserable life of human beings in *De civitate Dei* XIX. A remarkable argument is Augustine's attack on the pagan cardinal virtue. In *De libero arbitrio* II.19.50,

2.*Contra Academicos*, I.5 (CCL 29.6/23): '*secundum id quod in homine optimum est*' (author's translation).

Augustine defines virtue as the excellent good (*magnum bonum*) leading to happiness. However, Augustine states that the cardinal virtues are proof of the misery of human life. We can take his comment on prudence as an example.

> [T]ake, next; the virtue called prudence. Is not this virtue constantly on the lookout to distinguish what is good from what is evil so that there may be no mistake made in seeking the one and avoiding the other? So it bears witness to the fact that we are surrounded by evil and have evil within us. This virtue teaches that it is evil to consent to desires leading to sin and good to resist them.[3]

According to Augustine, prudence is not a constant state of mind but rather evidence of the existence of evil. Even though people can distinguish good from evil by prudence, weakness and moral sickness dominate human life. The disorder between soul and body leads to unhappiness in this life.

In my view, the conflict between soul and body is rooted in the chain of the will that Augustine presents in *Confessiones* VIII.5. Augustine is split into two wills, which are the 'new will' (*nova voluntas*) and the 'old will' (*veta voluntas*), or carnal and spiritual. Augustine transforms the conflict between spirit and flesh into the battle within the will. This conflict cannot be solved by humans but rather by the grace of God.

The election of God

Augustine's work *Ad Simplicianum* I.2 was addressed to Simplician and was an exegetical work to *The letter to the Romans*. This work plays an essential role in the development of Augustine's thoughts. On the one hand, Augustine has changed his previous ideas on God's grace and human weakness. On the other hand, Augustine started *Confessiones* after finishing *Ad Simplicianum.*

In this work, Augustine presents the election of Jacob and Esau, where the relationship between grace, faith and action is shown. Furthermore, he dealt with this question in the context of his doctrine of original sin and grace.

The order for a happy life is as follows: grace (*gratia*), faith (*fides*), good works (*bona opera*) and eternal life (*aeterna vita*). The beginning of faith lies neither in human work nor in God's foreknowledge of faith. Therefore, it seems that neither work (*opus*) nor will (*voluntas*) contribute to achieving a happy life. The achievement of happiness is no longer in the good will (*bona voluntas*), as Augustine states in *De libero arbitrio.*

Faith and work are not man's merit (*meritum*) but a gift of God (*donum dei*). Those who receive grace can begin to believe and do good works. This leads to Augustine's statement in *Retractationes*: 'I, indeed, laboured in defence of the free choice of human will; but the grace of God conquered'.[4]

We have already presented the contradictory characteristics of Augustine's theory of happiness. On the one hand, Augustine identifies the truth and happiness and the intellectual vision of God. On the other hand, Augustine emphasises the imperfection of life, the weakness of human power and God's grace.

The paradigm of 'two Augustines'

A dominant interpretation claims that Augustine's theory of happiness experienced a crucial change in Augustine's understanding of happiness. Namely, Augustine shifted from optimism to pessimism. I name it a discontinuous interpretation.

The most important representative of this interpretative trend, Peter Brown (2000:490), contrasts the earlier Augustine and the later Augustine.[5] The earlier Augustine (386–396 AD) is Platonic-optimistic, emphasising wisdom and human power. Augustine is confident in human power. The later Augustine, especially after finishing *Ad Simplicianum* I.2 in 396–397 AD, presents a more pessimistic view of human beings.

Brown's (2000) discontinuous thesis is based on the following aspects:

1. *The utter dependence on God*: Brown argues for the utter dependence on God in *Ad Simplicianum* I.2. (Brown 2000:148). Brown bases his interpretation on this text: 'But the will itself, unless it comes into contact with something that attracts and beckons the soul, can by no means be moved'.[6] According to Brown, delight (*delectatio*) is provided by God and does not reside in human power. Accordingly, delight is no longer controlled by human beings but directed by God (pp. 148–149).
2. *The imperfection in this life*: The new change lies in Augustine's realisation of imperfection and incompletion in this life. Augustine ends the 'long-established classical ideal of perfection' (Brown 2000:150). This differs from Augustine's earlier belief in a well-trained soul and liberal arts. Furthermore, Peter Brown contrasted Plotinus and Augustine regarding the confidence and weakness of the inner world. Although Plotinus is confident with the authentic self, Augustine emphasises the weakness of human beings (p. 172).
3. *The new understanding of Paul*: The discovery of Paul contributes to the development of Augustine's thoughts. The earlier Augustine interpreted Paul as a Platonist, whereas the later Augustine emphasised the unresolved tension between flesh and spirit in Paul (p. 145).

This idea of Peter Brown finds resonance in the German interpreter Kurt Flasch. He argues for the discontinuity from the following aspects:

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3. *De civitate Dei*, XIX.4.4 (CCL 48.666/80): '*quid illa uirtus, quae prudentia dicitur, nonne tota uigilantia sua bona discernit a malis, ut in illis appetendis istisque uitandis nullus error obrepat, ac per hoc et ipsa nos in malis uel mala in nobis esse testatur? Ipsa enim docet malum esse ad peccandum consentire bonumque esse ad peccandum non consentire libidini*' (transl. Walsh & Honan 2008:197–198).

4. *Retractationes* II.1 (CCL 57.89/20): '*in cuius quaestionis solutione laboratum est quidem pro libero arbitrio uoluntatis humanae, sed uicit dei gratia*' (transl. Bogan 1968:120).

5. Peter Brown published *Augustine of Hippo* in the year 1968. He published revised versions, respectively, in 2000 and 2013. In the 2000 version, Peter Brown has specifically discussed his discontinuous thesis in the new directions.

6. *Ad Simplicianum* I.2.22 (CCL 44.55/792): '*sed uoluntas ipsa, nisi aliquid occurrerit quod delectet atque inuitet animum, moueri nullo modo potest*' (transl. Augustine 2008:206).

1. *The denial of the synthesis between grace and free will*: Flasch radicalised the thesis of Brown, who finds it difficult to defend the synthesis (Brown 2000:142). Flasch holds that there is no synthesis (Flasch 1992:90), and Augustine has given up freedom of will (Flasch 1992:81).
2. *The destruction of the value of life*: After 396 AD, the search for truth is no longer Augustine's concern (Flasch 1992:26). The achievement of the goal is only decided by God's will, not by the power of human beings (Flasch 1992:28). Original sin dominates human life. Thus, human life is no longer the image and trace (Bild und Spur) of eternal happiness (Flasch 1992:71).
3. *The arbitrariness and justice of God*: The arbitrariness of God is different from Plato and Plotinus (Flasch 1992:31). The righteousness of God has denied the pagan-philosophical values (Flasch 1992:124).

Brown and Flasch commonly believe that the mature Augustine has a pessimistic view of human life. The first concern is the achievement of happiness in this life; the second is the power of will; the third is the relationship between grace and free will.[7]

Argument against discontinuity
The rethinking of optimism in the earlier works

The first discontinuity argument is based on Augustine's shift from optimism to pessimism. The passage Rist relies on is *De beata vita* 4.25, where Augustine argued for the soul's happiness for the sake of its perfection. Augustine criticised this passage in *Retractationes* I.2 by pointing out that a happy life can only be achieved in the life to come. According to Rist, Augustine has established his Christian idea of happiness in *De vera religione*, namely that happiness cannot be achieved in this life but rather in the next life (Rist 1994:50). Thus, Rist presents a shift from optimism to pessimism in Augustine's development.

However, is such a claim plausible? Firstly, *Retractiones* I.2 describes the harmonious relationship between body and spirit regarding happiness. In contrast, Augustine has not mentioned the body in *De beata vita* 4.25. Whether one can achieve happiness depends not only on the perfectness of the soul but also on whether the body is subject to the soul. From this contrast, we can remark that Augustine ignored the impediment of the body in *De beata vita* 4.25. In this passage, he does not discuss whether man can achieve happiness in this life.

Secondly, we need to remark on the characteristics of the earlier dialogues. Augustine does not present his idea to his interlocutors directly, but leads them and the reader step by step to his thought through the Socratic art of midwifery. In *De beata vita* 4.25, it seems that Augustine advocates the perfection of the soul. However, it does not mean that

Augustine holds that human beings can achieve happiness in this life. He claims later in the text that 'we' (the interlocutors in this dialogue) are still not wise and happy and in search of God (*De vita beata* 4.35). If we take this dialogue as a whole, Augustine does not advocate for the perfection of the human soul. Besides, we can remark that Augustine realised the impediment of the body (*labe corporis*) in *Soliloquia* I.6.12. That is to say; earlier, Augustine has already acknowledged that human beings could not achieve happiness in this life.

The compatibility between free will and grace

The second argument for the discontinuity is based on our interpretation of free will. At first sight, Augustine has given up his theory of free will by claiming it has been conquered by the grace of God. God solely decides the election and damnation of humans. Therefore, human efforts do not make any contribution to the achievement of happiness. Thus, Brown (2000:149) argues that humans are utterly dependent on God. Flasch denies the synthesis between grace and will.

However, this thesis is not plausible. Firstly, we can contrast his earlier and later works regarding the relationship between free will and God's providence. The third volume of *De libero arbitrio* was finished in 395. The letter that is addressed to Simplician was written after 397. Augustine began to write *De civitate Dei* after the fall of Rome in 410. In the *De libero arbitrio* III, Augustine argues for the compatibility between the providence of God and free will by differentiating necessity (*necessitas*) and providence (*providentia*). It resembles the discussion in *De civitate Dei* V.9. Augustine criticised the theory of determinism of the Stoics and the negation of God's providence by Cicero. Therefore, it is not plausible to claim that Augustine has radically changed his understanding of free will in this single letter.[8]

Secondly, we can consider Augustine's distinction between free decision (*liberum arbitrium*) and will (*voluntas*). Free decision is the faculty to decide, whereas the will is the inclination. With this structure in mind, free decision is not necessary but not sufficient to formulate a good will (*bona voluntas*). Augustine holds that the grace of God does not influence the free decision of human beings but rather the inclination of the will (Horn 1996:127).[9]

Based on this conceptual distinction, we can find more textual evidence to show Augustine's defence of freedom of will in *Ad Simplicianum* I.2. As indicated by the following quote:

> [*A*] disorder and a perversion of the human being – that is, a turning away from the creator, who is more excellent, and a turning to created things, which are inferior.[10]

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7. Rist (1994:48) has also shown that Augustine modifies his previous Platonic optimism in the following perspectives: (1) man's self-sufficiency; (2) the negation of the small group, such as Stoic sages, who can arrive at wisdom by themselves; (3) the impossibility of happiness in this life because of moral evil.

8. The continuity of Augustine's freedom of the will has been meticulously discussed by Wilson (Wilson 2018).

9. This distinction is also made by Den Bok (1994).

10. *Ad Simplicianum* I.2.18 (CCL 44.45/548): '*est autem peccatum hominis inordinatio atque peruersitas, id est a praestantiore conditore auersio et ad condita inferiora conuersio*' (Augustine 2008:200).

It is evident that Augustine insists on his understanding of power and will and voluntary sin.

Furthermore, we should notice the relationship between the vocation (*vocatio*) and the assent of the will (*nutus voluntatis*). Augustine has emphasised the effect (*effectus*) of vocation by introducing the conception of congruous vocation (*vocatio congruens*) (*Ad Simpicianum* I.2.13). However, Augustine still leaves the possibility of rejecting this call. 'Because they did not follow even though they were called'.[11]

The power of will and delight

According to Brown, Augustine states that the delight of humans is entirely dependent on the grace of God and escapes self-control in *Ad Simplicianum* I.2 (Brown 2000:149). Thus, no one is sure whether they can be chosen. This labels the weakness of human beings. We can turn directly to the text where Augustine discusses delight (*delectatio*) in *Ad Simplicianum* I.2.22.

The passage is concerned with the relationship between power (*potestas*) and will (*voluntas*). The discussion of the power of will could be traced back to the Stoics and Aristotle, especially 'what is up to us'. It is accepted that wisdom, virtue and reason are in our power, through which we can long for happiness. In their teaching on emotion, the Stoics believed that 'impression' (*phantasia*) is produced by an external object. However, human power lies in rational judgements about the 'impression' to consent or reject it. Augustine, influenced by Stoic philosophy, would also argue that the action of God on the 'perceptual presentation' of the mind does not destroy the power of reason and will.

Now we turn back to the passage of delight and power of will. The stem of the word *delectatio*, *electo* or *lacio* means allure, entice and grip (Van Bavel 1993:504). Therefore, *delectatio* expresses only the objective properties of the object. The will is attracted by delight and changes its inclination. However, it does not necessarily follow that the will has entirely lost its power. In a word, the grace of God has only influenced the inclination of human will.

Above all, we can conclude that the later Augustine does not give up the freedom and power of the will. He still defends the freedom of will in the *Ad Simplicianum* I,2.

Happiness in this life

In the last part, I argue that the later Augustine allows for happiness in this life. This grounds an optimistic understanding of Augustine's later theory of happiness. However, I argue that his optimism does not rely on the natural human faculty but rather on faith, hope and love.

> [T]here is one certain way whereby each man when he possesses this object, is then happy, and there also are those who are happy in hope. The latter possess it in an inferior way, compared to

those who are already really happy, yet they are better off than those others who are happy neither in reality (*in re*) nor in hope (*in spe*).[12]

> [I]t is true, however, that a man who makes his life here below a means to that end which he ardently loves and confidently hopes for can even now be reasonably called happy – though more in hope than in present happiness.[13]

In these two texts, we can see that Augustine distinguishes between possessing happiness in reality (*in re*) and hope (*in spe*). Although happiness in hope is inferior to happiness in reality, Augustine confirms that man can achieve happiness in this life by faith, love and hope.

On the one hand, Augustine argues the imperfection of life for the sake of the misery of the earthly world and the inevitability of original sin. On the other hand, Augustine has provided his Christian suggestions for fallen people. The Christian virtues contribute to happiness in this world.

Augustine's understanding of faith can be appealed to a text from *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 77.10:

> [T]herefore, the will which is in the just heart is prepared by the Dominus. It precedes the faith through which it is tended to the just God so that the heart will be just.[14]

Faith is not a rational judgement but a preparation for God's love. God prepares the will and faith. It is not a destruction of human will and happiness; rather, grace perfects and completes fallen people to search for happiness in this life.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the relationship between the Christian faith and neoplatonism regarding Augustine's theory of happiness. We can find different elements of happiness that show Augustine's thoughts' development. I conclude with the following remarks.

Firstly, Augustine always insisted on the inner coherence between philosophy and religion, neoplatonism and Christianity. Faith seeks understanding, and rational understanding must be defended by authority.

Secondly, even though Augustine set grace into the centre for the salvation of the fallen people, he does not deny the autonomy of the will. There is still the synthesis between free will and grace.

Thirdly, Augustine's theory of happiness in his later works was not pessimism. He pointed out that even if one could not

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11.*Ad Simplicianum* I.2.13 (CCL 44.37/353): '...*qui hoc modo uocati non consentiunt...*' (Augustine 2008:195).

12.*Confessiones*, X.20.29: '*Et est alius quidam modus, quo quisque cum habet eam, tunc beatus est, et sunt, qui spe beati sunt. Inferiore modo isti habent eam quam illi, qui iam re ipsa beati sunt, sed tamen meliores quam illi, qui nec re nec spe beati sunt*' (transl. Bourke 2008: translation, 289).

13.*De civitate Dei*, XIX.20 (CCL 48.687/10): '*quam tamen quicumque sic habet, ut eius usum referat ad illius finem, quam diligit ardentissime ac fidelissime sperat, non absurde dici etiam nunc beatus potest, spe illa potius quam re ista*' (transl. Walsh & Honan, translation, 2008:232).

14.*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 77.10 (CCL.39.1076/55): '*Uoluntas igitur quae est in corde recto, paratur a Domino, fide praecedente, qua acceditur ad Deum rectum, ut cor fiat rectum*' (author's translation).

be happy in this life, one can still hope. Human efforts gain the merits in grace.

To sum up, Augustine holds that human value is also reconciled with grace. His understanding of happiness does not deny ancient values but is rather a perfection of them.

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