

Article

Happiness and Transcendence: Heavenly or Earthly—Augustine and Bonhoeffer

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Abstract: This article explores two views of happiness in Christianity. According to one view, happiness is heavenly, something that is attained only in eternal life. In the other view, happiness can be experienced on earth. Augustine (354–430) advocated the first view, in which life on earth is viewed as full of misery. The conception of happiness as earthly is articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. This article clarifies both views by pointing to the use of different types of content regarding transcendence. The focus is on the comparison between the two views and their impact on daily life.

Keywords: Augustine; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; good life; happiness; interpretation of the Bible; transcendence

1. The Issue

Christians associate happiness with the transcendent, with God. Nonetheless, where they place emphasis when discussing happiness can be very different among Christians: it can be viewed as heavenly or as earthly. The heavenly (or eschatological) view sees life on earth as full of misery when compared with eternal life with God after death. The earthly view of happiness emphasizes life on earth, mainly on the basis of the joyful belief in Christ's resurrection. I will discuss both views here by pointing to the use of different types of transcendence. The focus is on the comparison between the two views and their effect on daily life.

Transcendence is an open concept and can be distinguished according to *form* and *content*. The *form* of transcendence is like a pattern or template that is then filled in with *content*, with a certain type of theology and view of happiness. The *form* concerns the way in which the relation between heaven and earth is seen. The *content* gives the further specification of the form or type (Stoker 2012, p. 10).

I describe the eschatological view of happiness as presented by the church father Augustine who interprets it in a classical way. It is undeniable that he set the tone for Western Christianity. Because his thinking is complex and too much to describe in detail in one article, I will limit myself to the core of his view of happiness to the extent necessary to identify the type (form) of transcendence within its content. I will discuss the earthly view of happiness as found in the (later) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose theology has influenced contemporary theology. Bonhoeffer formulated his view succinctly in his prison letters.

The term happiness can be variously defined as a comfortable feeling one experiences and rejoices at the blessing bestowed on him or as the pleasant state in which all of someone's wishes and desires are satisfied. We will see that the term has different connotations depending on which view of happiness—the heavenly or the earthly—we are discussing.

2. An Eschatological View of Happiness: Augustine

2.1. Happiness and God

Augustine (354–430) held to the premise 'we want to be happy,' and he points to Cicero's *Hortensius*, which he read at the age of 19 (St. Augustine 1999, I, 4). The *Hortensius*



Citation: Stoker, Wessel. 2023.

Happiness and Transcendence: Heavenly or Earthly—Augustine and Bonhoeffer. *Religions* 14: 1198. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091198>

Academic Editor: Anné Hendrik Verhoef

Received: 6 July 2023

Revised: 11 September 2023

Accepted: 11 September 2023

Published: 19 September 2023



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stimulated him to the “study of wisdom” (St. Augustine 1944, III, 4). In his dialogue *On the Happy Life*, Augustine compares the search for meaning in life to sailors searching for a harbor. He includes himself among those sailors who travel the open seas but still keep thinking about their beloved homeland. They roam around the world for quite some time until a calamity forces back into harbor, back to the quiet life they long for (St. Augustine 1999, I, 2).

Augustine was rhetor at the emperor’s court. He relates that, on the night before he was to deliver a eulogy to the emperor, he met a beggar in one of the streets of Milan who was cheerful because his begging had brought him enough food and drink for the day. He experienced the joy of temporary happiness, while Augustine himself, who was so successful as an orator, was consumed with worry. His learning was suddenly no longer a source of happiness for him (St. Augustine 1944, VI, 6).

His conversion to Christianity occurred in 386, and during the period before his baptism in 387, he resided at the Cassiciacum estate near Milan. There, he discussed the nature of a happy life with friends, his mother, and his son.

How, according to Augustine’s dialogue *On the Happy Life*, does a person become happy? We have to find something permanent, i.e., something that does not depend on fate or chance (St. Augustine 1999, II.11). Could wealth meet that criterion? It is possible for a rich man to possess everything he wants, despite setbacks. But it can still be objected that rich people fear losing something they love. So, the rich man who has everything could also be unhappy because he is afraid of losing what he loves. So, we should instead pursue what is truly permanent. Augustine’s conclusion is that the one who possesses God is happy (ibid., II.11). The happy life is nothing but the perfect knowledge of God.

At this point, Augustine still sees happiness in connection with earthly life. He sees it as something experienced primarily by the soul or spirit and only briefly touches on the influence of the physical situation on happiness. “The soul, which is perfect, has no needs” (ibid., IV, 25). Happiness is spiritual happiness and involves developing the soul and attaining wisdom. It is “fullness” or an abundance that implies that there is no lack of anything that contributes to one’s well-being (ibid., IV, 31). In addition, Augustine recalls that he had said in the foregoing that happiness lies in the knowledge of God. Wisdom and truth are from God. To be happy is to be permeated with truth, to have God in one’s soul, and to “enjoy God wholly” (*Deo perfrui*) (ibid., IV, 33–34). Whoever has wisdom is happy, and this wisdom is the wisdom of God or of Christ (ibid., IV, 34). This is not to be understood in an intellectual way: the one who possesses God lives well and does what God wills (ibid., III, 17).¹

2.2. Eternal Life

At the end of his life, Augustine wrote his *Retractions* and revised his earlier thinking. He amended his dialogue *On the Happy Life* and now spoke of happiness as a matter of eternal life: “that life alone may be called happy, where also the imperishable and immortal body is given without any effort and resistance to its spirit [the spirit of the man] is subjected.”² This eschatological view of happiness can also be found in his later writings, such as his *Confessions* and *The City of God*.

In his *Confessions* (397–398), Augustine recounts his own search for the happy life, for God (St. Augustine 1944, X, 20). He starts with desire: “our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee” (ibid., I, 1). In his search for the source of evil, he continued to experience restlessness in his soul (ibid., VII.7). Just before the death of his mother, Monnica, the two of them talked about eternal life. No earthly enjoyment can be compared with the glory of that life. Augustine had a mystical experience of that life: it is the land of inexhaustible fertility; it is eternity: there is no “has been” and no “shall be hereafter” (ibid., IX, 10). He desires the kingdom of God, not earthly things (ibid., XI, 2), and he confesses his sins to God and hopes that he will be happy in God, as Jesus indicates in the Beatitudes: “For thou hast called us to be poor in spirit, and meek, and mourning, and hungry, and thirsting for righteousness, and merciful, and pure in heart and peaceable” (ibid., XI, 1).³ The *Confessions*

culminates in a discussion of the biblical creation story and an exegesis of the seventh day on which God rested. As in *The City of God*, Augustine interprets this as an eschatological view of the eternal Sabbath (ibid., XIII, 35–38). Here, his restless heart finds rest. The Sabbath peace “has no evening”; it is everlasting (ibid., XIII, 35–36). The conception of complete happiness, according to Augustine, is incompatible with time.⁴ “Behold my life is but a scattering” (*ecce distentio est vita mea*) (ibid., XI, 29), but those who are given eternal life are happy because they are then no longer subject to changing time (ibid., XII, 11–12). The conclusion of his *Confessions* opens with a prayer: “O Lord God, grant us . . . the peace of repose, the peace of Thy Sabbath, the peace that has no evening”. (ibid., XIII.35).

Augustine elaborates on happiness in his *The City of God* (412–426). This book was written during the decline of the Roman Empire for which Christianity was held responsible. He therefore gave an apology for the Christian religion, but it was not limited to Rome and the indictment of Christianity.

The City of God describes the origin, history, and final destination of the city of God and the earthly city. The origins of this twofold history extends back beyond even the creation of human beings to the rebellion of the angels against God (St. Augustine 2006, XI). The history of both cities on earth begins with Cain and Abel (ibid., XV.1). The term *civitas* as an earthly city can be broadly understood as a political state that includes a certain religion, a community in which the political and the religious are interrelated. Augustine describes both cities in different terms, using, for example, Paul’s distinction between flesh and spirit: “the one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of those who wish to live after the spirit” (ibid., XIV.1).⁵

The city of God, the Christian community, is still mixed with the earthly city today. The members of the city of God are strangers and sojourners on this earth and look forward to eternal life. Augustine repeatedly describes the life of Christians as a pilgrimage:

“Thus in this world, in these evil days, not only from the time of the bodily presence of Christ and His apostles, but even from that of Abel, whom first his wicked brother slew because he was righteous, and thenceforth even to the end of this world, the Church has gone forward on pilgrimage amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.” (ibid., XVIII)

Concerning the final destination of both cities, Augustine speaks of what philosophy and Christian teaching say about the highest good, human happiness.⁶ The first seeks the highest good in humanity itself and considers it attainable in earthly life (ibid., XIX, 1–3). The citizens of the city of God, however, know that the highest good is eternal life (ibid., XIX, 4). So, the highest good, true happiness, and real peace cannot be found in this world, but only in the hereafter. With a reference to Paul (2 Cor. 5:6), he writes: “And because, so long as [the human being] is in this mortal body, he is a stranger to God” (ibid., XIX, 14).

Augustine views life on earth as a miserable existence. “For what flood of eloquence can suffice to detail the miseries of this life?” (ibid., XIX, 4). The world is evil because of, for example, the unjust judgments made by judges (ibid., XIX, 6) or the international crises that arise because nations speak different languages (ibid., XIX, 7). He describes believers’ sojourn on earth as an “abode of weakness” (ibid., XIX, 10). That, however, encourages them “to seek with keener longing for that security where peace is complete and unassailable . . . This is the final blessedness, this the ultimate consummation, the unending end” (ibid., XIX, 10). Life as such is eternal and happy, according to Augustine. If one has to fear an end to life, then one can no longer speak of life.⁷

Was Augustine’s view of earthly life as miserable determined by the living conditions at the time and more specifically by his reason for writing *The City of God*, i.e., that Christianity was being blamed for Rome’s decline? Or does his judgment as such apply to earthly life and thus to his eschatological view of happiness? I will come back to this below (Section 3).

In Book XIX of *The City of God*, Augustine repeatedly extols the happiness of eternal peace in God:

But, in that final peace to which all our righteousness has reference, and for the sake of which it is maintained, as our nature shall enjoy a sound immortality and incorruption, and shall have no more vices, and as we shall experience no resistance either from ourselves or from others. . . (ibid., XIX, 27; cf. XIX, 20)

Happiness has to do with the enjoyment of God and of one's fellow human beings in God (ibid., XIX, 13). The life of the believer leads to great happiness and thus to the praise of God. "How great shall be that felicity, which shall be tainted with no evil, which shall lack no good, and which shall afford leisure for the praises of God, who shall be all in all!" (ibid., XXII, 30).

Like the *Confessions*, he also ends *The City of God* with the eschatological view of happiness: "There shall be the great Sabbath which has no evening, which God celebrated among His first works . . .," referring to the seventh day of the creation story on which God rested from his works. We have also been promised that rest, to enjoy eternal rest, and to see that He is God. "There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end" (ibid., XXII, 30).

2.3. The Good Earthly Life and Heavenly Happiness

The believer's life on earth is that of a traveler on a pilgrimage to eternal peace with God, to heavenly happiness. Augustine limits the full enjoyment of God as the greatest happiness in eternal, heavenly life (ibid., XXII, 30) Among the several questions this view raises are the following: Is there no happiness on earth? How does the believer's earthly life relate to that of the expected heavenly happiness?

The answer to the first question is yes, but this happiness is limited if compared with the perfect heavenly happiness. God is the creator of this world and God created human beings and placed them on earth "as its greatest ornament" (ibid., XIX, 19, cf. XIX, 13; XXII, 24). Earthly goods are God's good gifts that fit this earthly life, such as the temporary peace that exists in our well-being and survival and in community with our kind. God also gives everything that is necessary to perpetuate that peace, such as all those things that present themselves to our senses: "light, night, the air, and waters suitable for us, and everything the body requires to sustain, shelter, heal, or beautify it" (ibid., XIX, 13).

To the second question, Augustine's answer is that to arrive at the blissful life, we must live a "well-directed life". A just life has proper emotions and a wrong life has wrong ones (ibid., XIV, 9). In this context, Augustine's distinction between "enjoy" (*frui*) and "use" (*uti*) in his ethics is important. With this, he indicates how the believer should deal with earthly goods, with things, with people, and with God. Fruit (*fructus*) has to do with enjoyment (*frui*) and use (*usus*) with use (*uti*). *Frui* is to love for itself, and *uti* to use for something else. God alone may be enjoyed (*frui*), and the temporal should be used (*uti*) only for sustenance (ibid., XI, 25). For example, the beauty of the body is indeed created by God, but the body should not be loved in the wrong way, at the expense of the eternal good, putting God in second place. Enjoying God is of a different order than dealing with other earthly goods (ibid., XV, 22): "Whoever enjoys a good is not its lord; for in order to enjoy it he must adhere to it, and indeed for the sake of good" and that is true only of God (Böhner and Gilson 1954, p. 223).

Martha Nussbaum criticizes Augustine because his focus on the future life could lead to the neglect of justice and love in the earthly. She criticizes his "insistent otherworldly direction": "Death is irrelevant, real suffering in this world is irrelevant, all that is relevant is coming into God's presence" (Nussbaum 2001, p. 552). Is this critique justified if we look at what Augustine says about the good life on earth in our pursuit of love and justice? The driving force of the moral life is love. Virtue is the "straight order of love" (St. Augustine 2006, XV, 22). Although this love concerns (neighborly) love towards people, it is primarily about love towards God. An essential characteristic of the city of God is that it enjoys God (ibid., XI, 24). Augustine's explanation of the double commandment of love is that *we must help our neighbor love God* (ibid., XIX, 14, italics mine). God comes first, then our neighbor.⁸ He uses a similar line of thought with respect to having friends.

Having friends is a gift from God, according to Augustine (Woldring 1994, p. 72). Friendship does not begin with the love of one for the other, but with the love of God for both. Love of friendship implies a calling to bring friends to God (St. Augustine 1944, IV, 12). Friends should keep their connection to God alive, which will bring them an eternal connection. True friendship is a school of love (*caritas*) and is completed in heaven (Woldring 1994, p. 73).

Augustine speaks of eternal peace in a superlative way, but that does not make earthly peace in the Roman state community unimportant to him. “Here, indeed, we are said to be blessed when we have such peace as can be enjoyed in a good life; but *such blessedness. is mere misery compared to that final felicity*” (ibid., XIX, 10, italics mine). The Christian community participates in earthly peace and thereby participates in the political community. Augustine discusses, among other things, Cicero’s view of the Roman *respublica* and of the origin of justice. “Justice is that virtue which gives every one his due” (ibid., XIX, 21) and “Domestic peace is the well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is a similar concord among the citizens” (ibid., XIX, 13). As long as believers live in the earthly city as if they are foreigners, “no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are administered” exists (ibid., XIX, 17).

If, as in the (later) Augustine, happiness is understood as perfect happiness in mind and body (ibid., XIX, 27; XXII, 24), then it can only be understood as heavenly. That is the difference between the early Augustine of *De Beata Vita*, in which he conceived of perfect happiness solely in a spiritual sense (see above), and the later Augustine, who viewed perfect happiness as both spiritual and physical in combination and in conjunction with the other in the *City of God*. Thus, happiness cannot be conceived as anything other than heavenly.⁹

Is Nussbaum’s criticism that the focus on the future life could lead to the neglect of justice and love in the earthly life justified? Cohou wants to refute Nussbaum and concludes from his reading of the later Augustine that the latter does not view happiness in an individual sense. He also argues that, in contrast to the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition, “his good involves the mutual love and excellent conditions of all members of the city of God, he sees how he can contribute to happiness by loving them now and feeling sorrow and anger alongside with them” (Cohou 2020, p. 34). That is correct, but does this answer Nussbaum’s objection? After all, according to Augustine, the Christian recognizes his own sinfulness, following Paul, but that does not alter the fact that the Christian must commit himself to a morally good life (St. Augustine 2006, XIV, 9). Thus, Nussbaum’s criticism can be nuanced, but the fact remains that, in the pursuit of a morally good life, the focus is more on heaven than on earth. This focus on God and on the heavenly future is the context in which Augustine speaks of charity, friendship, earthly peace, and justice.

Lekkerkerker concludes his article on happiness in Augustine that Augustine’s ethics:

has suggested to many simple people that the Christian life is about salvation, that the highest Christian desire is: I want to go to heaven. . . the salvation of the soul is separated from the salvation of the world and all emphasis is placed on the enjoyment of heavenly bliss. (Lekkerkerker 1944–1945, p. 257)

I conclude that the eschatological view of happiness bears the risk that the concentration on heaven will lead to a neglect of the good life on earth.

2.4. Scripture as the Source of His View of Happiness

How does Augustine come to speak of the heavenly Jerusalem as the place of happiness? He points to the Psalms (St. Augustine 2006, XI, 1), referring to Psalm 87:3¹⁰, where Zion is spoken of as the city of God; Psalm 48:2, 3, and 9, which talk about the city of God on the holy mountain, Mt. Zion; and Psalm 46:5. In my opinion, these psalms do not describe an antithesis between the two cities in the Augustinian sense. They are talking about the earthly Jerusalem and not the heavenly one. Augustine, however, reads those texts from the perspective of Paul’s letter to the Galatians where Paul speaks of the two

covenants. Hagar, Abraham's slave girl, represents, according to Paul, the covenant of Mount Sinai, the present-day Jerusalem. "But the heavenly Jerusalem is free, and she is our mother" (4:26). Augustine quotes this passage (Gal. 4:21–31) repeatedly in *The City of God* (e.g., *ibid.*, XVII, 3 and 7; XV, 2). Van Oort rightly concludes that the texts from the psalms quoted by Augustine never refer to Jerusalem as the heavenly city (Van Oort 1986, pp. 263, 297). Augustine was also familiar with Paul's letter to the Philippians (3:20) where it talks about our citizenship in heaven (St. Augustine 2006, XX, 9) and the already quoted 2 Corinthians 5:6, where Paul says that as long as we are in this body, "we far from dwell in the Lord" (*ibid.*, XIX, 14). Augustine explains Paul in a unilateral way and stops short of the cosmic component of salvation. In Paul, reconciliation also applies to "everything on earth" (Col. 1:15–20).¹¹

In short, in *The City of God*, Augustine's view of heavenly happiness is determined by his concept of the two antithetical cities and their role in history. All emphasis is on the future. As a result, heavenly happiness is dualistically placed over against earthly happiness.

2.5. Transcendence in Augustine

From the perspective of philosophical theology, Augustine's view of happiness can be clarified by looking at his conception of transcendence. He employs the type of radical transcendence I described elsewhere as "the absolute is the wholly other and thus may be sharply distinguished from mundane reality" (Stoker 2012, p. 13). We can call this the *form* of the radical transcendence to which he subscribes. Its specific *content* consists of Augustine's theological description of happiness as described above. The absolute is present here as (1) God as the object of happiness and (2) perfect happiness beyond time as a matter of eternity. Happiness is here understood as a supreme good, as perfect happiness that can only be *heavenly*. That happiness is thus dualistically distinguished from vulnerable, earthly happiness. There seem to be two realities: the heavenly and the earthly.

3. Happiness in Modern Times

Augustine describes life on earth, earthly peace, as miserable. Happiness is not to be found there, and, if it is, it pales in comparison with heavenly happiness. Do better living conditions in modern times give rise to a different conception of happiness and transcendence? Does the modern age not call for a different theology and a different understanding of happiness and transcendence?

Living conditions in Europe have changed since the Renaissance, and earthly life has become viewed more positively due to the rise of (medical) science, the consciousness of human beings as individuals (Descartes and Locke), and the emergence of nation states, etc. In the early modern period, the liberal Christian and Enlightenment philosopher John Locke focused on happiness on earth in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Earlier, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1275), following Aristotle, had written more about happiness on earth than Augustine had, even though for him, as for Augustine, perfect happiness was to be found in the future eternal life (McMahon 2005, pp. 124–40). The Reformation emphasized ordinary life as holy. The natural sciences drew attention to the beauty of nature, and physicotheology flourished (Stoker 1980, pp. 62–69, 145–51). The third president of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson, considered the pursuit of (earthly) happiness as stated in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) to be a "self-evident truth" (McMahon 2005, pp. 311–17). The young Karl Marx spoke of happiness that millions would enjoy (*ibid.*, p. 387).

Despite this shift of happiness from heaven to earth, the eschatological view of happiness persists in modern times. An example is Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897). Her theology does, admittedly, differ from Augustine's. Her view of happiness is connected to a personal emotional attachment to the incarnational Christ. But like Augustine, she too has an eschatological view of happiness, happiness as found in eternal life. She describes and sings about her love for Jesus in the present, but with a view to and emphasis on the future. For her, earth means exile in the valley of tears and heaven is her homeland

and place of happiness (Thérèse of Lisieux 1995, pp. 65, 323). In her poem, *Mon ciel à moi*, she says: “I need the gaze of my divine savior to endure the exile of the vale of tears” (Descouvemont 2022, pp. 225–26). Many Protestants also have an eschatological view of happiness. Lekkerkerker sees a hidden connection between Augustine’s ethics and pietism (Lekkerkerker 1944–1945, p. 257).

A different view of happiness has also emerged in modern times among Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer sees the modern world as having come of age and searches for the place of the Christian faith in that world (Bonhoeffer 1999, 8 June 1944, 16 July 1944). As a Christian theologian, he provides an earthly view of happiness.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Earthly Happiness

The Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) came from the well-to-do bourgeoisie in Berlin. He was a minister, traveled extensively for study and ecumenism, and, as a teacher of theology, he chose to share seminary life with his students. He became known for his resistance to Hitler, which cost him his life, and for the letters he wrote from the prison where he remained from 1943 until his execution in April 1945.

Bonhoeffer was affiliated with the seminary of the Confessing Church. In Finkenwalde (1936–1937), he opted for a life in community with the students, which he describes in his *Living Together*. It is an example of how the church can joyfully function as the body of Christ. The beginning of the day, as the sun rises, is seen from the perspective of Easter morning, the resurrection of Christ, the “sun of righteousness”. The dark had receded: “death and sin lay prostrate in defeat and new life and salvation were given to mankind” (Bonhoeffer 1954, pp. 40–41). Joy echoes throughout Bonhoeffer’s description of everyday life at the seminary. Eating together had “a festive quality” (ibid., p. 68) as a reminder of God resting on the Sabbath after work and the day of the Lord’s Supper is “an occasion of joy” (ibid., p. 120).

From his cell in Tegel, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge that it was horrible here (Bonhoeffer 1999, 15 December 1943). A month earlier, he had written that he had been considering suicide (ibid., 18 November 1943) but survived mainly because of his strict discipline, his prayer, reading the Bible, and religious songs. Months later, he wrote to Bethge not to worry about him in prison. Though people said that “I’m ‘radiating so much peace around me’, and that I’m ‘always so cheerful’,” he added that he himself certainly had very different experiences (ibid., 30 April 1944).¹² He continued to read, study, write, and develop his theology for a world come of age, a theology in which happiness for the believer is above all earthly.

4.1. Happiness as a Blessing

A year before his death, Bonhoeffer wrote from prison about happiness and Christian faith. He rejected the view that the Bible is not concerned with “health, fortune, vigour, etc.”. On the contrary, in the Old Testament, blessing is the concept that connects happiness with God. The patriarchs had God’s blessing, which included all earthly goods. He opposed a spiritualized interpretation of the New Testament.¹³ Blessing and the cross should not be played off against each other. The blessed patriarchs also had to suffer a great deal. In the Old and New Testaments, happiness and suffering, blessing and cross, are never placed over against each other in an absolute way (ibid., 28 July 1944).

The later Bonhoeffer read the Old Testament very differently from Augustine. Through his intensive reading of the Old Testament, he understood Christian faith in a very earthly (*diesseitig*) (ibid., 27 June 1944) sense and wrote about the love for life and the earth:

it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that, without them, everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and the new world. (ibid., 5 December 1943)

In his *Ethics* (1940s), Bonhoeffer had already written about the right to physical life and the right to physical joy (Bonhoeffer 1995b, pp. 154–64). He linked this to the question

of “housing, food, clothing, recreation, sex” (ibid., p. 155). He also wanted to discuss the right to happiness, but his *Ethics* remained unfinished (ibid., p. 184).

4.2. *Earthly Happiness Is Dialectically Connected with Unhappiness*

Bonhoeffer did not teach the God is dead theology or secularization theology. He was a Lutheran theologian who wanted to revive his faith tradition by focusing on earthly life. This did not, for him, preclude belief in eternal life. In a sermon on marriage (May 1943) from prison he wrote “earthly society is only the beginning of the heavenly society” (Bonhoeffer 1999, p. 46). And in a letter to his fiancée Maria von Wedermeyer, he said he thinks of her on the 22nd because of the anniversary of her father’s death: “Father is with God” (Bonhoeffer 1995a, 13 August 1944). Shortly before his execution by the Nazis, he gave Payne Best, an English fellow prisoner, this farewell message to give to George Bell, Bishop of Chichester: “This is the end, for me the beginning of life” (ibid., p. 202).

In his theology, Bonhoeffer points to Easter as Christ’s victory over death as a last enemy (1Cor 15:26). “It’s . . . from the resurrection of Christ, that a new and purifying wind can blow through our present world” (Bonhoeffer 1999, 27 March 1944). He calls earthly life polyphonic:

God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts—not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. (ibid., 20 May 1944)

He adds that the Song of Songs is also in the Bible. In the next letter, he recalls this image of polyphony: “Pain and joy are also part of life’s polyphony” (ibid., 21 May 1944). In my opinion, this image can also be applied to what Bonhoeffer writes about happiness and unhappiness in his poem *Sorrow and Joy* (*Glück und Unglück*). There, he connects happiness dialectically with unhappiness. After all, happiness in earthly life is always connected with misfortune—after all, the blessed patriarchs also had to suffer a great deal. The loyalty of mothers and lovers, of friends and brothers, does not erase pain and sorrow but surrounds it with its own mitigating presence.

Loyal hearts can change the face of sorrow,
softly encircle it with love’s most gentle
unearthly radiance. (ibid., p. 335)

In his letter about the baptism of the son of Renate and Eberhard Bethge, he wrote that the baptized child can be happy with the parents that he has. He hopes that “in times of care and sorrow [this child] will keep a ground-bass of joy alive in you” (ibid., May 1944).

4.3. *Living with and for Others*

Unlike Augustine’s metaphysical view of God, Bonhoeffer asks “How do we speak of God—without religion”, i.e., without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwards, and so on? How do we speak . . . ‘in a secular’ way about God? . . . “God is beyond in the midst of our lives” (ibid., 30 April 1944). Bonhoeffer rejects Kant’s view of the transcendence of God as that which lies beyond our knowledge (ibid., 30 April 1944; cf. 29 May 1944). A real experience of God is encountering Jesus.

In Augustine’s writings, charity is determined by their heavenly oriented belief. Their difference from Bonhoeffer lies in how he speaks about God and Jesus. “His [Jesus] ‘being there for others’ is the experience of transcendence” (Outline for a Book: ibid., p. 381). With this he also sees the relationship between earthly and heavenly happiness differently. In his commentary on a song about “that this poor earth is not our home”, he writes:

I believe that we ought so to love and trust God in our lives, and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the times comes (but not before!) we must go to him with love, trust, and joy. . . if it pleases him [God] to allow us to enjoy some overwhelming earthly happiness, we mustn’t try to be more pious than God himself and allow our happiness to be corrupted by presumption and arrogance. . . (ibid., 18 December 1943)

Christ is central for Bonhoeffer. Already in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had written: “Christian life is life with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ” (Bonhoeffer 1995b, pp. 132, 130–32). He repeats this in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*: “Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection)” (Bonhoeffer 1999, Outline for a Book, p. 381). “There is hardly anything that can make one happier than to feel that one counts for something for other people” (ibid., 14 August 1944; cf. Bonhoeffer 1995a, 16 April 1944, italics mine).

Bonhoeffer wanted to learn to believe; he stated that it is about surrender to God. One then no longer takes one’s own suffering seriously but focuses on God’s suffering in the world; one then watches with Christ in Gethsemane (ibid., 21 July 1944; cf. 18 July 1944). Bonhoeffer wonders whether the individualistic demand for the salvation of one’s soul has not almost disappeared in the modern world. Is there a question about the salvation of the soul in the Old Testament? He asks whether justice and the Kingdom of God on earth are not, after all, the center of everything (ibid., 5 May 1944).

Love as-being-there-for-others and justice characterize Bonhoeffer’s life. Even when it comes to the distant neighbor or the German nation: “And I regard my being kept here. . . as being involved in Germany’s fate, as I was resolved to be” (ibid., 22 December 1943).

4.4. Transcendence in Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer has a different conception of transcendence than Augustine does, the type of immanent transcendence I have described elsewhere as follows: “both realities are viewed as closely involved with each other—the absolute is experienced in and through mundane reality” (Stoker 2012, p. 11). Both realities—the reality of God revealed in Christ and the reality of the world—are closely intertwined (Bonhoeffer 1995b, p. 210). That is the *form* of immanent transcendence. Its specific *content* consists in Bonhoeffer’s theological description of happiness as described above. Happiness is earthly, fragile, and stamped by God and Christ, happiness as God’s blessing in daily life that can be lived from faith in the resurrection. Earthly life and, with it, happiness is “polyphonic”: the *cantus firmus* of ‘God and his eternity’ is loved, but not in such a way that the other voices of life, such as ‘earthly love,’ are weakened. Earthly happiness is dialectically connected with misfortune.

5. Two Views of Happiness: A Comparison

I will clarify both views of happiness by pointing to the use of different forms and content of transcendence. The *content* of Augustine’s use of *radical transcendence* is the conception of happiness as perfect happiness, which is possible only in eternal life without limitation and unhappiness. Happiness as the pleasant state in which Christians see their desires and needs fulfilled, the enjoyment of God and fellow human beings in God in heaven. The *content* of Bonhoeffer’s use of *immanent transcendence* is the conception of happiness as earthly happiness dialectically connected with unhappiness. Despite the harsh conditions of his imprisonment, he repeatedly describes his feeling of happiness for the divine blessing that has been bestowed on him.

Nussbaum and Lekkerkerker criticize Augustine for his focus on the future life that comes at the expense of the good life on earth. Although this criticism has been nuanced above, it has not been completely answered. In Augustine, happiness is understood as a supreme good, as perfect happiness that can only be heavenly. The eschatological view of happiness runs the risk of viewing it dualistically.

Belief in eternal life is indeed part of Christian faith (the Apostle’s Creed) but not, in my opinion, its dualistic interpretation. The commandment to first seek God’s Kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33) is central, and that Kingdom already begins in the present world, our earthly life, and is not exclusively a heavenly one. Moreover, cosmic salvation is much wider than personal salvation. Bonhoeffer’s view of happiness and transcendence is more convincing. There is no dualistic conception of happiness. “A new and purifying wind can blow through our present world” (Bonhoeffer 1999, 27 March 1944), thanks to the resurrection of Christ.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Elsewhere Augustine also speaks of the good life as loving virtue, wisdom and truth (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, I, c.13, 22, 23) cited by (Lekkerkerker 1944–1945, p. 223).
- ² Augustine, *Retractiones* I, 2, see (St. Augustine 1999, p. 111).
- ³ Augustine explains the beatitudes as various steps of a staircase that the believer climbs on his way to the heavenly kingdom (St. Augustine, *Our lord's sermon on the mount, according to Matthew*).
- ⁴ Thus C. Mayer on his commentary on the *Confessiones* (Mayer 2004, p. 574). Augustine also considers time in a negative way in other writings (op cit. 572–574).
- ⁵ For Augustine's summary description of the two civitates, see: St. Augustine (2006, XIV, 28).
- ⁶ Augustine's vision of happiness in relation to the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition is extensively discussed by, among others, Lekkerkerker (1944–1945) and Cohou (2020).
- ⁷ *Sermo* 306 quoted by (Lekkerkerker 1944–1945, pp. 248–49).
- ⁸ Also in this order in his *Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium* (Marrou 1962, pp. 117–18). See also Böhner and Gilson (1954, pp. 215–23).
- ⁹ Rightly so Cohou as well (Cohou 2020, p. 35).
- ¹⁰ See also St. Augustine (2006, X, 7).
- ¹¹ Similarly Marrou (1962, p. 74).
- ¹² See also the poem 'Who am I' (Bonhoeffer 1999, pp. 347–48).
- ¹³ For Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Bible, see: (Van Hoogstraten 1971, chps. 3 and 4).

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