The Significance of the Fleeting: Happiness and Mortality in Augustine's *De Trinitate*

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Abstract: This paper challenges Augustine's claim in *De Trinitate* XIII that the universal human desire for happiness entails a desire for immortality. Augustine argues that because mortal life is inevitably subject to loss, suffering, and death, it cannot satisfy the conditions required for genuine happiness, and that the will to happiness must therefore be oriented toward eternal life. I argue that this inference is unpersuasive, as it depends on the contested assumption that genuine value requires permanence. After reconstructing Augustine's account of happiness as structured by the possession of what one wills, the right ordering of the will, and the absence of unwanted harms, I contend that his framework mischaracterizes the nature of human happiness. Many forms of human fulfillment are not merely compatible with finitude but are constituted by temporality, vulnerability, and the possibility of loss. Meaningful projects and experiences derive their value from unfolding over time, admitting risk and failure, and remaining subject to change. I further argue that Augustine commits a modal error by inferring from the desire for a good to continue within a temporal context to a desire for that good to exist eternally; wanting an experience to last longer does not entail a will for its eternal preservation, and in many cases its value depends on its impermanence. Finally, I suggest that finitude also renders suffering intelligible by situating it within a bounded temporal horizon, allowing happiness and suffering alike to be integrated into a coherent life. Absent the assumption that value requires permanence, the human desire for happiness does not entail a desire for immortality; mortality is instead a structural condition of meaningful human fulfillment.

"I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must

imagine Sisyphus happy."

Albert Camus
The Myth of Sisyphus

Introduction

In *De Trinitate* XIII Augustine advances a striking claim about the structure of human desire: the universal human will for happiness, when properly understood, entails a will for immortality. Because mortal life is pervaded by contingency, loss, suffering, and death, Augustine argues that it cannot satisfy the conditions required for genuine happiness. Anyone who truly wills happiness, he maintains, must therefore will a form of life in which desired goods are secure and unwanted harms are excluded—a condition that only eternal life can provide. This argument plays a pivotal role in Augustine's broader account of human fulfillment, linking ordinary practical desire to a metaphysical orientation toward permanence and incorruptibility.

This paper argues that Augustine's inference from the desire for happiness to the necessity of immortality is ultimately unconvincing. While Augustine offers a sophisticated analysis of happiness as a state in which the will is rightly ordered, fulfilled, and unthreatened, his conclusion depends on a controversial assumption: that genuine value requires permanence. I contend that this assumption mischaracterizes the nature of human happiness. Far from being undermined by finitude, many of the goods that structure human flourishing—projects, pleasures, relationships, and achievements—derive their meaning precisely from their temporal, fragile, and vulnerable character. The possibility of loss is not merely compatible with happiness but often constitutive of its value.

By examining Augustine's treatment of contingency, his rejection of Stoic and Epicurean strategies for accommodating finitude, and his appeal to the conditions of happiness articulated in *De Trinitate* XIII, I argue that his account conflates the desire for a good to continue within a temporal context with a desire for that good to exist eternally. This conflation, I suggest, amounts to a modal error: wanting happiness to endure does not entail willing it to be permanent, and the value of many human goods would be undermined rather than secured by eternal preservation. Once this assumption is rejected, the inference from the will to happiness to the will to immortality no longer follows. Mortality, rather than posing an obstacle to happiness, emerges as a structural condition of meaningful human fulfillment.

The Structure of Happiness in *De Trinitate* XIII

In Book XIII of *The Trinity*, Augustine begins with the widely accepted observation that all humans desire happiness, treating this not merely as a psychological tendency but as a structural feature of the will.[1] He then clarifies what it means to be truly happy by introducing three necessary conditions: [H1] one must have what one wills, [H2] one must not will what is morally wrong, and [H3] one must not have what one wills not to have.[2] Together, these conditions define what Augustine calls "living as he wills":[3] happiness is not simply possessing what one desires but also avoiding unwanted harms and rejecting what ought not to be willed. For the sake of argument, I accept these conditions as Augustine presents them.

At the same time, these conditions invite reflection and raise questions about their applicability to lived human experience. The first necessary condition [H1] suggests that happiness requires having exactly what one wills, but much of what we find fulfilling arises in the process of striving, learning, or engaging with challenges rather than in the mere possession of a desired end. Completing a creative project, mastering a skill, or building a relationship often provides joy in ways that cannot be reduced to achieving a static outcome; the process itself as the means to an end—the striving, engagement, and growth it entails—is central to what makes these experiences fulfilling independent of the ends themselves. Similarly, [H2]—the requirement not to will what is morally wrong—poses conceptual and practical difficulties. Morality is rarely absolute outside of a particular theological framework; desires we recognize as morally ambiguous or self-interested do not always render us unhappy, and moral growth can arise precisely from wrestling with and overcoming these desires. Even in moments when one wills something "wrong" in a conventional sense, the experience may contribute to self-understanding, character development, or the cultivation of empathy.

Condition [H3], perhaps the strictest of all, forbids experiencing anything one does not will. Yet much of what makes life rich—effort, risk, vulnerability, and even pain—would be disallowed under this standard. The intensity of a sporting competition, the emotional depth of a friendship, or the satisfaction of tackling a seemingly impossible project derives in part from the possibility of failure or loss. A mountaineer may relish the climb not despite the danger but because the very risk amplifies the accomplishment; a musician may feel exhilaration in performance precisely because it is fleeting and uncertain. In these cases, unwanted or "risky" elements do not undermine happiness but shape it. While I continue to accept the presented conditions, Augustine's framework, while philosophically rigorous, sets conditions that exclude the very experiences that imbue mortal life with meaning, fulfillment, and happiness.

With these conditions in hand, Augustine turns to the human condition and the problem of contingency. Mortal life, he observes, is fragile and unpredictable: bodies deteriorate, relationships end, achievements fade, and death looms over all.[4] Because we are exposed to harms we do not will, condition [H3] is constantly violated; even when we satisfy [H1] and [H2], the intrusion of unwanted events undermines the completeness of happiness.[5]

Philosophical attempts to adapt to this contingency, such as those of the Stoics and Epicureans, fail under Augustine's framework. The Stoics argue that happiness can be achieved by aligning one's desires with what is within one's control and treating external goods as

1 Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New City Press, 2015), 13.3–5; See also Augustine, *On the Happy Life (De beata vita)* 4.25, trans. G. E. M. Foley, modified; cited in Caleb Cohoe, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions*, 30–55, DOI: https://rb.gy/599elv. Here Augustine emphasizes that a wise person cannot be made miserable by external events that occur against their will, since true happiness is grounded in virtue and the divine law of wisdom, which remain secure regardless of external circumstances.

2 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.5–13.7.10.

3 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.5.7, 13.7.10.

4 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.10–13; Augustine, *City of God*, cited in Diana Lobel, "Six St. Augustine: The Happy Life of the Soul," in *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing Life* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 781. Augustine here asserts that, given the mortal condition, all humans are inevitably subject to wretchedness, and that true happiness cannot be fully attained in this life, highlighting the limitations of temporal existence for human fulfillment.

5 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.7–10; See also Matthew Drever, "Augustine on Hope in Times of Suffering," *Vox Patrum* 82 (2022): 145–166, 808, https://doi.org/10.31743/vp.13048. Drever explains Augustine's point that genuine happiness is incompatible with fear of losing what one desires; for Augustine, the soul's satisfaction depends on goods that are eternal and secure, which mortal life cannot fully provide.

"indifferents."[6] Similarly, the Epicureans locate happiness in bodily pleasure, which is fleeting but at least within one's immediate experience.[7] Augustine rejects both strategies: even if one endures suffering with virtue, unwanted harms still violate [H3]; and ephemeral pleasures cannot guarantee the possession of goods without threat of loss [H1] nor protect against misalignment of will [H2]. In short, neither adaptation nor pleasure secures the unthreatened good required for true happiness.

It is from these considerations that Augustine moves to his claim about immortality.[8] Since genuine happiness requires satisfying all three conditions, and mortal life makes this impossible, the will-to-happiness must extend beyond temporal existence.[9] Mortal life, however, is structurally incompatible with [H3]—the condition of "suffering nothing one wills not to"[10]—since vulnerability, loss, and death inevitably impose precisely the kinds of unwanted harms that the condition excludes.[11] In other words, anyone who truly seeks happiness must implicitly will a state in which unwanted harms cannot occur and desired goods cannot be lost—a condition that only eternal life can provide.[12] Augustine does not claim that

6 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.7.10; He notes that, according to Cicero's account of the Stoics, a wise person achieves *apatheia*, a state free from emotional disturbances like fear, pain, desire, or pleasure; in this condition, external events no longer threaten happiness, highlighting the Stoic view that virtue alone suffices for a stable life, Teng He, "Is Virtue Self-Sufficient for Happiness?: Augustine on Virtue and Happiness," *Journal of the Study on Religion and History* 1 (2025): 1–17, 4, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8350-3655.

7 Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159–160: "Augustine criticizes Epicureans for holding up pleasure as the goal of life—he mistakes Epicureans for sensualists—but he also criticizes the Stoics for taking pride in virtue, as if happiness is solely in human control. Augustine challenges the Epicureans: if we have a happy life, shouldn't we want it to go on indefinitely?"

8 Avramenko emphasizes the contrast between temporal and eternal existence, noting that "time is time insofar as it contains change and motion; eternity is eternity only insofar as it contains no change and no motion." He further highlights that human mortality is central to Augustine's philosophy: "God is eternal, unmoving; man changes and is movable…This movement toward immanent death…lies at the core…of his thought, Richard Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time: Augustine's Politics of Human Happiness," *The Review of Metaphysics* 60, no. 4 (Jun. 2007): 786–788, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20130859.

9 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.7–10; Augustine situates ultimate happiness in eternity, holding that mortal life alone cannot provide true fulfillment: as Lobel observes, he "believes eternal happiness is the only true happiness, and thus we must have the promise of an afterlife." Yet temporal life is not devoid of meaningful experience, because hope allows the present life to participate in a foretaste of the ultimate good, Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 158-59; Drever notes that "hope does not leave us unhappy in this life, but neither does it reduce to a temporal form of happiness. Rather, hope gives us happiness now as a proleptic vision of Christ's resurrection…toward true happiness," suggesting that hope enables finite humans to apprehend a measure of fulfillment while still oriented toward the eternal. In this way, Augustine integrates the temporal and eternal dimensions of happiness, showing that human flourishing in time points beyond itself, Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 158.

10 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.7.10.

11 Avramenko emphasizes Augustine's focus on the temporal condition of human existence, noting that "God is eternal, unmoving; man changes and is movable…This movement toward immanent death…lies at the core…of his thought…to be human means to be timely, and to be timely means to be hurrying along the road to death," underscoring how mortality fundamentally shapes the human experience of happiness. Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time," 787-88.

12 Lobel notes that Augustine "challenges the Epicureans: if we have a happy life, shouldn't we want it to go on indefinitely?" highlighting his claim that mortal happiness points beyond temporal pleasure. Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159; Drever observes that "And so all good and holy people, even amid torments of

people consciously articulate a desire for immortality; rather, the very structure of our desire for happiness, grounded in [H1]–[H3], reveals a deeper orientation toward permanence and incorruptibility.[13] Thus, the human desire for happiness naturally points toward the will for eternal life.[14]

Augustine's argument captures a subtle and enduring truth about human desire: our attraction to stability and security helps explain why fleeting pleasures often inspire a longing for permanence.[15] Even if one ultimately questions whether eternal life is required for happiness, his framework illuminates the profound connection between the structure of human desire and the temporal, moral contours of life.[16] Any critique of Augustine, therefore, must address whether this connection is necessary: does happiness truly require immortality, or can finite, mortal life provide a form of happiness that draws its value precisely from its impermanence?[17]

Temporal Happiness: Finitude, Value, and the Modal Fallacy in Augustine's Argument

A major challenge to Augustine's argument comes from a rival understanding of what happiness is. Augustine concludes that mortal life cannot satisfy human happiness, but this relies on the controversial assumption that genuine value requires permanence.[18] If we adopt a different account of happiness, one rooted in the structure of finite human life, Augustine's conclusion no longer holds.[19]

every sort, supported by God's help, are called happy because of the hope for that end, the end in which they will be happy," emphasizing Augustine's view that hope frames temporal suffering within the expectation of eternal fulfillment. Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 159.

13 Lobel notes that Augustine "believes eternal happiness is the only true happiness, and thus we must have the promise of an afterlife," emphasizing the necessity of the afterlife for complete fulfillment; Drever complements this by observing that "Hope does not leave us unhappy in this life…toward true happiness," showing that temporal happiness functions as a proleptic anticipation of the eternal, Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159–160; Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 158.

14 Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159; Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 158–159.

15 Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159, notes that "Augustine challenges the Epicureans: if we have a happy life, shouldn't we want it to go on indefinitely?" (On the Trinity 13.18.11), highlighting Augustine's argument that true happiness points beyond temporal life.

16 Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 158, observes that "Hope does not leave us unhappy in this life, but neither does it reduce to a temporal form of happiness. Rather, hope gives us happiness now as a proleptic vision of Christ's resurrection…toward true happiness," emphasizing Augustine's view that hope allows temporal happiness to point beyond the finite toward eternal fulfillment.

17 Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time," 808, notes that "…one can never be truly happy if one lives in fear of losing that which satisfies one's desires. One cannot live in fear, Augustine argues repeatedly, and be happy at the same time. The wisdom that satisfies the soul must be eternal and eternally one's own," highlighting Augustine's argument that temporal insecurity prevents full happiness.

18 Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time," 780–81, observes that Augustine later sharpens this position in *City of God*, asking whether "man can have genuine felicity though mortal," and concluding that "the more credible and probable position…is that all men, as long as they are mortal, must needs also be wretched." This reinforces Augustine's underlying assumption that genuine happiness requires permanence, since mortality itself is treated as sufficient to exclude felicity.

19 He, "Is Virtue Self-Sufficient for Happiness?," 4, explains that for the Stoics, "happiness was characterized by permanence (*perpetuatio*) and constancy (*constantia*)," such that "pursuing bodily and external goods would affect the stability of happiness." This conception illustrates the background assumption—shared by Augustine—that genuine happiness must be permanent, an assumption your argument challenges

On this alternative view, happiness is not defined by the possession of an *unlosable* good but by active engagement within a finite temporal life.[20] Human projects derive their meaning from precisely the features Augustine treats as defects: that they unfold in time, require sustained effort, admit the possibility of failure, and are shaped by risk.[21] Finitude does not diminish value; it generates it. What is precious is often so *because* it can be lost.

Consider a simple example. If one is given a beautifully crafted gemstone, one may think its value lies in its intrinsic beauty alone, in the way it appeals to aesthetic sensibilities. Perhaps it could be admired regardless of loss or scarcity. Yet this reading is incomplete. While the gemstone's form and craftsmanship certainly matter, its significance is amplified by the fact that it is fragile and demands care. One guards it, cherishes it, and invests attention in it precisely because it might be lost. The possibility of loss is not a superficial add-on; it fundamentally shapes the way one relates to the object. Now imagine being told that identical gemstones appear automatically whenever one is misplaced or damaged. Suddenly, the gemstone retains its visual perfection but loses something essential: the lived experience of valuing, protecting, and attending to it. Its preciousness does not vanish entirely, but it is profoundly diminished. Beauty alone, divorced from context, engagement, and vulnerability, cannot carry the same depth of meaning.[22] This phenomenon is not confined to gemstones. Human projects, relationships, achievements, and pleasures derive much of their significance from the tension between desire and uncertainty, effort and risk, presence and impermanence.[23] A musical performance captivates precisely because it unfolds in time, allowing mistakes, surprises, and ephemeral moments of brilliance. A relationship matters not simply because the other person exists, but because it requires investment, attention, negotiation, and mutual vulnerability. Even suffering, when bounded and meaningful, gains coherence through its temporality and contrast with joy. To claim that beauty or value exists independently of risk or finitude is to miss the structural feature of human experience: things matter most when they are engaged with in the context of temporality, fragility, and effort. Far from being incidental, vulnerability and impermanence are constitutive of meaning; they are not a limitation to overcome, as Augustine suggests, but the very condition under which happiness and value arise.

Indeed, human experiences gain much of their significance from their fleeting, time-bound nature. A song we love delights in part because we cannot play it endlessly; repetition erodes anticipation, contrast, and the sense of discovery. The beauty of a sunset exists in its transience; extend it for decades, and awe dissolves. A photograph of a joyful moment preserves the form but not the substance: one does not feel the breeze, the laughter, or the lived experience. Similarly, a pinch of sugar enhances flavour precisely because it is limited—too much dulls the experience, The fleeting nature of these experiences, their impermanence, is what makes them meaningful and cherished.[24] Our desires themselves fluctuate—we may crave sugar at one moment and not the next, we may long for a song and later lose interest, or desire companionship at one time but retreat at another. Augustine's framework does not demand that desires remain static; one could, in principle, experience this kind of changing desire in an eternal life. On this reading, it may seem that mortality is not strictly necessary for meaningful engagement, since eternal life could, in theory, preserve dynamic desire.

Yet even granting this, the experiential richness of temporal life cannot be replicated by eternity. In a mortal context, the very alternation between wanting and not wanting, the anticipation of a sweet treat, and the knowledge that it will soon be gone all shape how we engage with and value the experience. These temporal boundaries create tension, surprise, and contrast, which give pleasures and projects their depth. In an eternal, unbounded context, even changing desires would unfold in a qualitatively different way: there would be no urgency, no finite horizon against which loss and gain acquire meaning, and the stakes that make ordinary joys vivid would flatten. Yes, the craving of a pinch of sugar may dissolve into indifference from one moment to the next even in eternal life—pleasure could respond to the ebb and flow of want. Yet it gains depth from temporality: knowing the treat is limited, anticipating it, and experiencing its fleeting sweetness intensifies the pleasure. The craving, the momentary indulgence, and the inevitable passing of desire are inseparable from the vividness of the experience. In eternity, the pinch of sugar might still be desired now and then, but without the temporal horizon that gives stakes and contrast, its significance would be muted. The fluctuating nature of desire might technically exist in eternity, but the meaning, intensity, and structure that finitude imposes on human life remain absent.

The temporal arc also enhances value through anticipation, reflection, and the contrast between presence and absence.[25] Longing for lost joys, remembering sunsets, or awaiting the

by grounding happiness in finite, temporal forms of life.

20 Avramenko, *The Wound and Salve of Time*, 808, summarizes Augustine's view that "…one can never be truly happy if one lives in fear of losing that which satisfies one's desires," since "the wisdom that satisfies the soul must be eternal and eternally one's own." This makes explicit the assumption your alternative account denies: that happiness must consist in the possession of an unlosable good rather than in finite, risk-laden engagement over time.

21 Avramenko, *The Wound and Salve of Time*, 786–788, emphasizes Augustine's sharp metaphysical contrast between temporality and eternity: "Time is time insofar as it contains change and motion; eternity is eternity only insofar as it contains no change and no motion," and accordingly, "God is eternal, unmoving; man changes and is movable—and specifically, man moves between life and death." This contrast clarifies why Augustine interprets change, risk, and failure as defects of the human condition, even as those very features render human projects intelligible and meaningful within a finite temporal life.

22 He, "Is Virtue Self-Sufficient for Happiness?," 4. Teng He explains that, for the Stoics, happiness is defined by "permanence (*perpetuatio*) and constancy (*constantia*)," such that "pursuing bodily and external goods would affect the stability of happiness." This framework illuminates the target of the gemstone example: by rejecting permanence as a criterion of value, the example directly undermines the Stoic—and by extension Augustinian—assumption that susceptibility to loss necessarily diminishes happiness, suggesting instead that fragility can be constitutive of meaning rather than a threat to it.

23 Drever, "Augustine on Hope," 158. Drever writes that "hope does not leave us unhappy in this life, but neither does it reduce to a temporal form of happiness. Rather, hope gives us happiness now as a proleptic vision…toward true happiness." This account supports the claim that meaningful human fulfillment operates within temporality rather than through immunity to loss: hope sustains happiness precisely amid vulnerability and suffering, indicating that significance arises from finitude and anticipation rather than from the possession of an unlosable good.

24 Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time," 795; Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159–160. Avramenko emphasizes that time is experienced as difference and suffering, such that any account of happiness must contend with the unavoidable temporality of human life rather than its elimination. Lobel complements this by noting that Augustine, despite his emphasis on mortality and loss, nevertheless acknowledges the intrinsic goods of temporal life—virtue, achievement, and aesthetic beauty. Together, these observations reinforce the claim that the value of human experiences is bound to their temporal structure: meaning arises from contrast, anticipation, and transience, not from endless repetition or permanence.

25 Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time," 795. Avramenko characterizes time as an experience of difference that is endured and suffered, such that human happiness must reckon with temporality rather than bypass it. While Augustine interprets this condition primarily as a deficiency to be overcome by eternity, Avramenko's analysis also underscores why anticipation, reflection, and contrast are structurally inseparable

next cherished song amplifies their meaning. Happiness is realized in the flow of experiences, not in a single, eternal state.[26] Were joy eternal and unchanging, humans would not even recognize its intensity; every moment would blur into sameness, stripping life of surprise, urgency, and significance. To live eternally in an unchanging state is, in effect, to lose life itself: the fleeting, dynamic quality that gives meaning to experience disappears. Eternity, rather than guaranteeing happiness, would flatten value: courage, hope, commitment, and desire would vanish, and the very structure that makes life meaningful would collapse.

If this is so, temporality is not an obstacle but a condition for meaningful engagement with life. Augustine's inference from the natural desire for happiness[27] to the necessity of eternal life[28] thus presupposes that a good must be permanent to be genuinely good.[29] Without this prior assumption, desiring happiness does not compel a desire for immortality.

One might concede Augustine a small victory: surely a runner in the midst of a euphoric high, or a person enjoying a trip or special moment, wishes the feeling could last "forever." Augustine could argue that this demonstrates the human will's natural orientation toward permanence,[30] yet closer examination reveals a crucial distinction. The runner's desire is finite and contextual: she wants the sensation to continue a little longer, not to exist eternally in a frozen state. Human experience teaches that the fleetingness of happiness is essential to its value; permanence would render it banal or meaningless. Wanting a moment to continue does not imply wanting it endlessly. The inference from temporal to eternal is, at best, a conditional or modal error: a necessary condition for happiness now is mistaken for a necessary truth about desire forever.

This modal fallacy is evident in everyday examples. Consider a simple pleasure: a cup of coffee. In the moment, we may wish it not to spill, yet this does not imply a desire for infinite cups of coffee. The enjoyment of one cup is contingent on its temporality; if coffee were available eternally, each cup would lose its significance. Similarly, the runner may feel a euphoric high and wish it could last a few more minutes. But she does not wish to exist perpetually inside that state; the value of the experience comes precisely from its temporality. If it were eternal, the thrill would flatten into monotony. These experiences gain meaning from vulnerability and transience.

In each case, the desire is for a temporal continuation, not eternal preservation. Augustine might respond that even fleeting pleasures reveal a deeper orientation of the will toward permanence: the runner or the coffee drinker could be seen as implicitly desiring a state in which the good is unthreatened, echoing his condition [H3]. Yet this observation applies most clearly to ephemeral, consumable pleasures. What about intangibles that we hope might endure such as love and trust in a romantic partner, the bonds formed through friendship, or ideals like justice, peace, and knowledge? Surely, we often value these for their stability, and the threat of loss can seem corrosive.

However, even these goods are experienced and realized within temporal life, and their meaning depends crucially on the risk, effort, and attentiveness that mortal existence requires. Romantic love, for example, gains significance precisely because it demands commitment, communication, and vulnerability; the finite nature of life gives urgency and moral weight to acts of fidelity and care. Friendship deepens because we invest in it over time, navigating challenges, disagreements, and growth together. Ideals of justice, knowledge, and peace are structured by temporal struggle and uncertainty; pursuing these goods demands reflection, effort, and moral deliberation, and the possibility that they might be threatened or imperfectly realized gives ethical and experiential weight to our endeavors. It is precisely the process—the striving, maintenance, and care—that shapes our attachment and satisfaction.

In other words, the value of these enduring goods does not lie in their mere existence, but in the lived experience of pursuing, cultivating, and sustaining them. The process itself—tending to love, maintaining a friendship, or working toward justice and knowledge—engages us and creates emotional investment. We care about something precisely because it requires effort and responsiveness; we experience satisfaction not simply from the good existing, but in the labor of achieving or contributing to them. Finitude intensifies this: knowing that love could waver or that ideals could be compromised sharpens our awareness and imbues actions with moral and emotional weight.

Eternity, by contrast, would remove these stakes. If love, friendship, or justice were guaranteed forever, there would be no challenge to navigate, no vulnerability to manage, and no uncertainty to heighten appreciation. Achievements would feel hollow, relationships would lose their poignancy, and moral engagement would become rote. The work—the striving and care—is what produces the richness of attachment, satisfaction, and happiness itself, and the possibility of loss is what makes these experiences urgent, precious, and emotionally resonant. Finitude does not undermine happiness; it creates the conditions under which happiness can be fully realized, showing that mortality is not a limitation to joy or fulfillment, but the very structure that makes enduring human goods morally, emotionally, and experientially rich.

Augustine's reasoning thus overlooks the constitutive role of finitude:[31] vulnerability, impermanence, and change are precisely what give our pursuits, attachments, and joys their meaningfulness. A mortal happiness that satisfies [H1]–[H3] need not exclude contingency or

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from temporal life: value emerges through difference, succession, and affective tension, all of which depend upon the very temporal arc Augustine treats as an obstacle to happiness.

26 Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159–60. Lobel notes that "despite his catalog of the ills of our mortal life, Augustine also recognizes the wonders of this life, including our capacity for virtue, our achievements in the arts and sciences, and the aesthetic beauties of the world."

27 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.5-8.

28 Augustine, *Trin.* 13.7-10.

29 Lobel, "Six St. Augustine," 159–60. As Lobel explains, Augustine holds that "eternal happiness is the only true happiness, and thus we must have the promise of an afterlife…strictly speaking, we cannot [be happy in this life], although we can be called happy if we have the firm hope of eternal happiness." This formulation makes explicit the assumption underwriting Augustine's inference: that a good counts as genuinely happiness-conferring only if it is permanent. Once this assumption is rejected, the move from the desire for happiness to the necessity of immortality no longer follows.

30 He, "Is Virtue Self-Sufficient for Happiness?," 6. As He notes, Augustine holds that "happiness does not lie in the possession of external and bodily goods, but in the possession of the unchangeable good," since virtue grounded in good will aims at what cannot be lost. This helps explain why Augustine would interpret the wish that a pleasurable experience last "forever" as evidence of the will's orientation toward permanence; however, it also clarifies the contested assumption at issue, namely that desiring a good's continuation commits one to valuing it only insofar as it is unchangeable, rather than temporally bounded and context-dependent.

31 Caleb Cohoe, "Augustine's Pursuit of Wisdom: Happiness as the Common Goal of Philosophy and Religion," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions*, ed. Caleb Cohoe (Brill, 2023), 43, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004739147_004. As Cohoe observes, in our present life "our knowledge and love of God are sadly limited," requiring "a more achievable standard for our thoughts and actions, especially for the knowledge that will guide us through our daily lives."

risk; on the contrary, fully realized happiness in a temporal life necessarily includes engaging with these conditions. The ignorance of this, he mischaracterizes what it means to "fully" satisfy the will to happiness, making the leap to immortality unnecessary—and at worst, a modal error.

Finitude also shapes the intelligibility of suffering in a way Augustine does not fully consider. Just as happiness is fleeting, so too is pain, and this symmetry is crucial for understanding human experience. Our awareness that experiences—both positive and negative—allows us to place suffering within a meaningful temporal context. Knowing that moments of happiness will end naturally brings a degree of anxiety, but this same knowledge also implies that moments of misfortune, grief,[32] or pain are similarly bounded. The awareness of transience moderates our fears and desires: we do not need eternal happiness to value it, because we understand that all experiences unfold within a finite arc. Therefore, the bounded nature of suffering is not a flaw to be eradicated by eternity (as H3 demands), but a structural feature that makes our temporal happiness coherent and complete.

Conclusion

Mortality, rather than being a deficiency to lament, functions as a structural condition that gives coherence and intelligibility to human life. The temporal arc of experience—its beginnings, middles, and ends—allows both joy and suffering to acquire significance. Happiness is appreciated not in spite of its impermanence, but because of it: pleasure is savored because it will pass, achievements are valued because they are not guaranteed, and effort carries weight precisely because failure is possible. Similarly, suffering is comprehensible only within a temporal framework; knowing that pain is bounded allows it to be endured and placed in perspective. The finitude of human experience, then, is not a barrier to fulfillment but an essential condition for the intelligibility of value, risk, and meaning.

This temporality directly challenges Augustine's inference from the natural desire for happiness to the necessity of eternal life. While Augustine interprets fleeting pleasures as evidence of the will's orientation toward permanence, closer analysis reveals that these desires are always conditional and context bound. A runner may wish a euphoric high to last a few more minutes, or a coffee drinker may wish their cup not to spill, but such wishes do not entail a desire for infinite repetition or eternal stasis. The modal fallacy arises when one assumes that because a momentary good is desired to continue, it must be desired to continue indefinitely. Human experience teaches that value is constituted by temporality; permanence would flatten intensity, stripping joy of its contrast with loss and rendering effort and achievement meaningless. The role of finitude also reframes the relationship between virtue, happiness, and human limitations. While Augustine critiques the Stoics for overstating the sufficiency of virtue, his own solution—orienting virtue toward God and eternal happiness—relies on an abstract, unachievable ideal. In contrast, recognizing happiness as temporally bounded allows virtue and effort to remain meaningful within the mortal sphere. Courage, prudence, and temperance gain significance because humans must act amid uncertainty, vulnerability, and risk. Similarly, the fleeting nature of human knowledge and love does not diminish their value; rather, it makes the pursuit of understanding, attachment, and moral effort rich and consequential. The temporal framing of life enables a coherent, dynamic engagement with both pleasure and suffering without appealing to the necessity of eternal perfection.

Ultimately, the finitude of human life provides the very conditions under which fulfillment, meaning, and joy are possible. Mortality ensures that experiences are vibrant, that losses and gains are felt, and that human endeavors carry weight. It is within this temporal structure that happiness can be realized, not as a static or eternal state, but as a dynamic interplay of effort, desire, achievement, and reflection. Augustine's insistence on eternal happiness overlooks the constitutive role of transience and contingency; the human will can be fully satisfied without aspiring to the immortal, unchanging good. In embracing finitude, we see that temporal happiness is not a provisional or incomplete good, but a deeply intelligible and experientially rich form of human flourishing.

32 Grief, however, can stretch beyond immediate events, resurfacing long after loss, sometimes unpredictably. Yet even in these cases, the finite nature of life shapes how we experience and interpret it. Because our lives are bounded, we recognize that loss is part of a larger temporal arc: grief is not eternal, and our awareness that it will eventually ebb—or that life continues despite it—allows us to process, learn from, and integrate the experience into the broader narrative of our existence. The finitude of life gives us perspective, urgency, and opportunity for reflection, making even prolonged or recurring grief intelligible and, in a sense, meaningful. We can see it as part of a life lived fully, rather than an unending, formless state of suffering.

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