Augustine on Beatific Enjoyment

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1. **Use, Abuse, and Enjoyment**

In book one of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine states that all things (*res*) can either make us blessed (that is, for *frui*, or enjoyment) or can help us attain that which makes us blessed (for *uti*, or use).[[1]](#endnote-1) However, he warns, to enjoy what one should merely use, or to use some thing to attain an improper object of desire, is to abuse that thing.

It seems, then, that on Augustine’s account, joy emerges from the relationship between a person and a thing; joy is a systems-level feature based upon a person’s (affective) desire for the object, their intention in having the object (whether it is desired for enjoyment or for use), and, to some extent, their having (or resting in or uniting with or laying hold of) that object.[[2]](#endnote-2) Furthermore, whilst joy could emerge from the relationship between a person and *any* thing, Augustine thinks there are in fact proper and improper objects of enjoyment.[[3]](#endnote-3) Essentially, proper enjoyment leads to a person’s flourishing, and therefore, to peace and the good life, whilst improper enjoyment, on both counts, does not. To make his point more clearly, Augustine invites his reader to consider the story of a wayward wanderer:

Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland, and that we felt wretched in our wandering, and wishing to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In this story, of course, we are represented by the wayward traveller, and in enjoying what we should only use, we become engrossed in ‘factitious delight’, missing that which ‘would make us truly blessed.’ However, mere counsel against enjoying what we should but use is of little use in helping us to flourish. For it to be prove valuable, we must know what things are proper to seek enjoyment in. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Augustine thinks that for all people the only proper object of enjoyment is God in Trinity. Echoing the opening of his *Confessions*, he writes:

Wherefore, since it is our duty fully to enjoy the truth which lives unchangeably, and since the triune God takes counsel in this truth for the things which He has made, the soul must be purified that it may have power to perceive that light, and to rest in it when it is perceived. And let us look upon this purification as a kind of journey or voyage to our native land. For it is not by change of place that we can come nearer to Him who is in every place, but by the cultivation of pure desires and virtuous habits.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Unpacking Augustine’s thought, it seems only God can (or should) be wholly enjoyed, with this enjoyment fulfilled as a person first perceives God ‘as He is’ and then, once so perceiving, finds their ‘rest’ in Him. In order to ‘perceive’ clearly, Augustine suggests a person must go through a process of purification (namely, sanctification), whereby they come to have a pure, or wholehearted, desire for God. And in another work, Augustine connects this moment of clear perception to the beatific vision, where, in the eschaton, God blesses sanctified human persons by manifesting Himself to them.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Thus, on Augustine’s account, joy properly emerges from the relationship a person has with God; it is a systems-level feature emerging from (i) a person’s pure (or wholehearted) desire for God, where (ii) this desire for God is for no further reason, and where (iii) this desire is fully realised, in other words, where a person in some sense *has* God. And for the person to whom (i) and (ii) apply, (iii) is in some sense secured at the beatific vision, and therefore, for the person to whom (i) and (ii) apply, at the beatific vision, joy properly emerges and full flourishing ensues.

1. **An Immediate Concern**

Even given this cursory summary, it should be apparent that Augustine’s account of proper enjoyment is by no means uncontroversial. For one, his account seems excessively severe. If God alone is to be wholly enjoyed, and if this enjoyment is indeed reserved until the eschaton, it looks like all pre-eschaton joy will be a product of abuse, and therefore unconducive to flourishing. This general concern can be cashed out in three ways.

We might call the first way the **severity concern**:

**Severity Concern**

If only God is to be wholly enjoyed, and if God can only be wholly enjoyed in the eschaton, it looks like *any* joy that emerges before the eschaton must be a product of abuse.

And the second way, the **exclusivity concern**:

**Exclusivity Concern**

If only God is to be wholly enjoyed, what of those who do not know God or do not desire God? It looks like such people are incapable of proper enjoyment, and incapable of flourishing.

And the third way, the **friendship concern:**

**Friendship Concern**

If only God is to be wholly enjoyed, all other things must be used. So, it looks like other people, including our friends and family, are to be used but not enjoyed.

If any of these concerns are indeed entailments of Augustine’s account it would be to me at least a strike against its plausibility. However, I will suggest that appearances are deceiving, and in fact Augustine’s account has within it the resources to address each concern.

Regarding the severity concern, Augustine later introduces a distinction in the passions between desire (*cupiditas*), which is consent to chase after what we want, and delight (*laetitia*) which is consent to enjoy what we wish for.[[7]](#endnote-7) On at least Peter Lombard’s reading of Augustine, it is proper to enjoy what we delight in, even if what we delight in is not yet fulfilled. Thus, we can actually enjoy anticipation of the beatific vision, and thus, we can ‘use with delight’ any of those things we might use to enable us to receive it.[[8]](#endnote-8) Given this distinction, so long as joy emerges from delight in either anticipation of the beatific vision, or from using with delight that which will help us secure the beatific vision, joy can still properly emerge prior to eschaton. So, it seems the severity concern can be deflated.

Regarding the exclusivity concern, given Augustine’s belief in divine ineffability, even those who purport to know of God’s existence will, in doing so, come to rely on some non-propositional, non-conceptual knowledge of God. I will suggest that this non-propositional, non-conceptual knowledge (what Aquinas calls ‘connatural knowledge’) may be shared even by those who would deny that God exists. I will develop this response in more detail in section four.

Regarding the friendship concern, Augustine thinks that although only God can be wholly enjoyed, because human persons are made in the image of God, they can be both used and enjoyed, so long as their enjoyment does not supersede the enjoyment of God.[[9]](#endnote-9) I will develop the context for this response further in section five.[[10]](#endnote-10)

1. **Enjoyment, Love, and Union**

On the account presented so far, joy properly emerges as a systems-level feature when the following three conditions are met, or anticipated, or moved towards:

1. a person desires God,
2. this desire for God is for no further reason, and
3. this desire is fully realised, in other words, that a person in some sense *has* God.

Now, it seems clear how (i) and (ii) might be met, however it is not at all clear how (iii) might be met. What would it mean for a person to ‘have’ God? To get a grip on what Augustine is gesturing towards, it is important to note that the beatific vision is not merely God’s self-manifestation; Augustine also believed that through this vision the beholders are also (and in some sense finally) *united* with the One in whom their ‘restless hearts find rest’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

For Augustine, enjoying God requires love (that is, charity) of God, where such love is understood as an ‘affection of the mind’ aimed towards God.[[12]](#endnote-12) Following Augustine, Aquinas understood ‘affection’ to involve a ‘desire’ or a ‘movement’. But a desire or a movement must have some end, and so Aquinas proposed that love of God required the desire both for the good of God, and also for union with Him.[[13]](#endnote-13) If the general desire *for* God is understood as including a desire for *union* *with* God, it is clearer to see how (iii) might be realised: a person who desires union with God, and is in fact united with God, has, in that sense, what they desire. It is in uniting with God, and not (just) in beholding God’s self-manifestation, that a person’s restless heart finds rest.

But this response has not answered the initial question, it has only moved the goalposts. What, then, is required for union with God? Aquinas, quoting Augustine, offers an illuminating insight:

The union of lover and beloved is twofold. The first is real union; for instance, when the beloved is present with the lover. The second is union of affection: and this union must be considered in relation to the preceding apprehension; since movement of the appetite follows apprehension. Now love being twofold, viz. love of concupiscence and love of friendship; each of these arises from a kind of apprehension of the oneness of the thing loved with the lover…

The first of these unions is caused "effectively" by love; because love moves man to desire and seek the presence of the beloved, as of something suitable and belonging to him. The second union is caused "formally" by love; because love itself is this union or bond. In this sense Augustine says (De Trin. viii, 10) that "love is a vital principle uniting, or seeking to unite two together, the lover, to wit, and the beloved." For in describing it as "uniting" he refers to the union of affection, without which there is no love: and in saying that "it seeks to unite," he refers to real union.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Real union, the object of desire in desire for God, requires both our presence to God (for God, being omnipresent, is presumably already present to us), and also an ‘apprehension’ of God; a knowledge of who God *is*. In recent work, Eleonore Stump has interpreted this ‘apprehension’ as (comprehensive) knowledge of the other person’s mind.[[15]](#endnote-15) This being the case, it follows that knowledge of God is necessary for real union with Him. And, if real union with God is necessary for, in some sense, ‘having’ Him, and in some sense ‘having’ Him is necessary for the emergence of proper enjoyment, by the transitivity of causation, it seems knowledge of God is necessary for the emergence of proper enjoyment, and so for flourishing and the good life.

1. **The Exclusivity Concern Revisited**

In section two, I outlined one concern for Augustine’s view, namely, that it seemed to entail that joy could never properly emerge from those without knowledge of God. However, upon reflection, this requirement looks problematic even for those who claim knowledge of God. For, if Augustine is right, God is in some significant sense ineffable.[[16]](#endnote-16) Augustine writes:

Have I spoken of God, or uttered His praise, in any worthy way? Nay… How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. And so God is not even to be called unspeakable, because to say even this is to speak of Him...[[17]](#endnote-17)

But if God is indeed ineffable, if He is in some sense beyond knowledge, how can anyone have knowledge of Him? And if knowledge is required for union with Him, without knowledge how can anyone unite with Him? And if they cannot unite with Him, they cannot ‘have’ Him, and in not ‘having’ Him, joy cannot properly emerge. But once again, all is not lost, for, it seems, not all knowledge can be captured by propositions and by concepts. Connatural knowledge, the knowledge of persons or objects that is irreducible to propositional and conceptual knowledge is also available.[[18]](#endnote-18) If things can be known connaturally, it seems compatible with God’s ineffability that we can nevertheless connaturally know God and God’s goodness without ever being able to comprehend, or conceptualise or commit to propositions anything about God’s nature or mind.

And this view has some interesting consequences for the exclusivity concern, for, if the only knowledge we can have of God is connatural, enjoyment of God *cannot* be reserved for those who have the most (propositionally) true beliefs about God. Indeed, it cannot be reserved for those who have *any* (propositionally) true beliefs about God. It cannot for the simple reason that there are no such beliefs to be had.

But, this raises a further question. Certainly, it seems that if connatural knowledge of God is possible, such knowledge might be available at the beatific vision. But could such knowledge be available before the eschaton, too? If not, it seems difficult to know what one would be delighting in anticipation of. However, here too there is a straightforward answer. For Aquinas, goodness, and beauty, and truth, both through the theological and the moral virtues, can also be known connaturally. Aquinas writes:

The theological virtues direct man to supernatural happiness in the same way as by the natural inclination man is directed to his connatural end. Now the latter happens in respect of two things. First, in respect of the reason or intellect, in so far as it contains the first universal principles which are known to us by the natural light of the intellect, and which are reason's starting-point, both in speculative and in practical matters. Secondly, through the rectitude of the will which tends naturally to good as defined by reason.

…[as to the former] First, as regards the intellect, man receives certain supernatural principles, which are held by means of a Divine light: these are the articles of faith, about which is faith. Secondly, the will is directed to this end, both as to that end as something attainable--and this pertains to hope--and as to a certain spiritual union, whereby the will is, so to speak, transformed into that end--and this belongs to charity. For the appetite of a thing is moved and tends towards its connatural end naturally; and this movement is due to a certain conformity of the thing with its end. [[19]](#endnote-19)

Thus, inasmuch as being, goodness, and beauty are in some sense coreferrential (as Aquinas argued they are[[20]](#endnote-20)) and inasmuch as God is the greatest being, God resembles goodness and beauty. And so, irrespective of the propositional beliefs a person might hold about God, a person who cultivates virtue can attain (at least) some dim connatural knowledge of God. If this is correct, it seems plausible that a virtuous person who has never seen a religious text may nevertheless have more connatural knowledge of God than a vicious person who has memorised lengthy passages of scripture. Thus, the virtuous person, in conatively desiring those connaturally perceived God-resembling-transcendentals, may be thereby also (inadvertently) desiring union with God. So, even on Augustine’s seemingly limiting account of joy, proper enjoyment is not and cannot be reserved for the lucky few who, perhaps through mere happenstance of birth, happen to believe a certain set of propositions about God. In delighting in the use of those things that bring a person closer to goodness or beauty, or truth, joy can still, it would seem, properly emerge.

1. **The Friendship Concern Revisited**

This connection between love and joy can be developed further, too. Recall that for Aquinas, love is the product of two desires; the desire for union with the beloved, but also the desire for the good of the beloved. If God desires union with all human persons, in desiring what is good for God, that is, in loving God, one must desire that others also come to union with God, and therefore that you also come into union with others. Consider the following from Augustine:

Whoever, then, loves his neighbor aright, ought to urge upon him that he too should love God with his whole heart, and soul, and mind. For in this way, loving his neighbor as himself, a man turns the whole current of his love both for himself and his neighbor into the channel of the love of God, which suffers no stream to be drawn off from itself by whose diversion its own volume would be diminished.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Even so, this desire for such union with others remains inextricably bound up in the language of use. However, it is worth noting Augustine’s nuanced account of use is better understood as ‘rightly ordered love’ than it is some form of instrumentalization. Not only are all persons things (*res*), they are also signs (*signum*) pointing to God, in whom only is a sign of nothing else. To love a person (*res*) for their own sake, without qualification, is both to incorrectly indicate they are capable of making me finally blessed, and also to ignore the fact they are a sign (*signum*) of their maker, thereby taking something from that person’s ‘actual ontological complexity and dignity’, as Rowan Williams recently put it.[[22]](#endnote-22) Given this, inasmuch as use with delight can lead to the emergence of proper joy, so might we properly enjoy the rightly ordered use of complete human relationships. And indeed, Augustine continues:

But when you have joy of a man in God, it is God rather than man that you enjoy. For you enjoy Him by whom you are made happy, and you rejoice to have come to Him in whose presence you place your hope of joy. And accordingly, Paul says to Philemon, Yea, brother, let me have joy of you in the Lord. For if he had not added in the Lord, but had only said, Let me have joy of you, he would have implied that he fixed his hope of happiness upon him, although even in the immediate context to enjoy is used in the sense of to use with delight. For when the thing that we love is near us, it is a matter of course that it should bring delight with it. And if you pass beyond this delight, and make it a means to that which you are permanently to rest in, you are using it, and it is an abuse of language to say that you enjoy it. But if you cling to it, and rest in it, finding your happiness complete in it, then you may be truly and properly said to enjoy it. And this we must never do except in the case of the Blessed Trinity, who is the Supreme and Unchangeable Good.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Might this mean, however, that relationships not so intentionally used with delight necessarily fail to lead to a person’s flourishing? Perhaps not. For, plausibly, just as one might have knowledge of God and desire for God without propositional knowledge of God, so too I suspect one might be able to love someone ‘in the Lord’, noting in them the sign of goodness and beauty, without having propositional knowledge of the Lord.[[24]](#endnote-24)

1. **Conclusion**

In concluding, I have suggested that on Augustine’s account of joy, joy is a systems-level feature properly emerging when the following conditions are met, or anticipated, or worked towards: (i) a person wholeheartedly desires God, where (ii) this wholehearted desire for God is for no further reason, and where (iii) this desire is fully realised, or in other words, when a person in some sense *is united with* God.

I suggested that despite framing joy in the context of a relationship with God, joy can properly emerge from relationships shared between human persons, if it is the case that such enjoyment is also done in the context of the desire for God (even if one is not fully aware of such context). Furthermore, granting God’s ineffability, propositional knowledge of God cannot be required for union with God Himself (for such knowledge is impossible), and therefore, joy may also properly emerge in the relationships of those who profess no knowledge of God.

Given this, I think Augustine’s emergent account can still offer a plausible and illuminating account of the connection between proper joy, flourishing, and the good life. And in as much as it can account for the plausible proper emergence of joy in those who do not know God, and in the relationships we share with friends and family, Augustine’s account can also offer us a final unsurpassing image of joy: the joy of a person who wholeheartedly desires God for no further reason, and who, at the beatific vision, both knows God fully, and is completely united with the God who knows them, and who they now have. In the words of the Apostle Paul:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.[[25]](#endnote-25)

1. Augustinus, Aurelius, *De doctrina Christiana,* ed. Joseph Martin, CCSL 32 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1962)I.2, 2, lin. 22, p.7-lin. 20, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Commenting on this Augustinian account of enjoyment, St Bonaventure note that ‘Enjoyment includes those three namely, vision, love, laying hold.’ St Bonaventure *Sentence Commentary,* Book 4, Distinction 49, Question 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Where ‘proper’ means something like ‘appropriate’. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *On Christian Doctrine,* Book I,Chapter 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I,Chapter 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *City of God*, Book XXII, Chapter 29. See also his Letter 147 ‘On Seeing God’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Severin Valentinov Kitanov, *Beatific Enjoyment in Medieval Scholastic Debates: The Complex Legacy of Saint Augustine and Peter Lombard* (Lexington Books, 2014). p8. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kitanov, Beatific Enjoyment, p16. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Kitanov, Beatific Enjoyment, p17. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. It is interesting to note that Augustine does not make room for enjoyment of nature, either of non-human animals, or inanimate objects, or abstract ideas. The limits of space prevent me from addressing whether his account could be extended to include enjoyment of such non-human things, however suffice it to say that such things can still be ‘used with delight’ as mentioned above. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Confessions*, Book I, Chapter 1 “You move us to delight in praising You; for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ‘I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God’ *On Christian Doctrine*, Book III, Chapter 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See *Summa Theologica*, II:II 23:2, also *II.II:25:3, I.II:26:2-4, I.II:28:1,4*. This is also loosely alluded to in Augustine himself. See, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, Chapter 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Summa Theologica* I:II 28:1. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Eleonore Stump "Union, Presence and Omnipresence" in *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For a recent attempt to show how the sentence ‘God is ineffable’ does not entail a contradiction, see Jonathan Jacobs, “The Ineffable, Inconceivable, Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Volume 6, edited by Jonathan Kvanvig, 158-176. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, Chapter 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Jacques Maritain, "On Knowledge Through Connaturality," in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1952) and Eleonore Stump "Narrative and the Knowledge of Persons" in *Wandering in Darkness* on connatural knowledge and knowledge of persons respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See his *Summa Theologica*, I:II 62:3. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See his *Summa Theologica,* I 5:1,4. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, Chapter 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016). p196. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, Chapter 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. To enjoy oneself, however, would constitute (self-) abuse. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. 1 Corinthians 13:12. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)