

# **On Happiness: Its Duration, Its Name, and What Endures**

Non sumus Deus tuus; quaere super nos.  
— Augustine, Confessions

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## A Note on Method

This essay argues that what ordinary language calls happiness is insufficient as an account of what human beings are actually seeking when they use the word. The argument moves across three registers: philosophical, scriptural, and theological. These are not treated as equivalent and the essay does not present them as such.

Philosophical claims are made on structural grounds and identified as such. The central metaphysical model — the lemniscate, the crossing point, the Now as locus of actuality — is proposed as a philosophical instrument developed across the author's prior work. It is not demonstrated from first principles here, and the reader who accepts the model as useful while remaining agnostic about its ultimate metaphysical status has a coherent position.

A further clarification is required at the outset. The framework this essay proposes is a phenomenological reinterpretation — a structural vocabulary that organizes certain phenomena more coherently than the alternatives. It does not claim to demonstrate metaphysical necessities from indubitable premises. What it claims is more modest and, the author believes, more honest: that the crossing-point model makes better sense of the asymmetry between happiness and suffering, of the structure of the Beatitudes, and of the Catholic account of beatitudo than the happ framework does. That is a genuine philosophical contribution. It is not a proof. Readers who find the reinterpretation illuminating are invited to follow it. Readers seeking deductive demonstration should note that this is not the essay's methodological aim.

Scriptural engagements — with Qohelet and the Beatitudes specifically — are offered as philosophical readings of texts, not as exegesis claiming to recover original authorial intent. The framework is brought to the texts; it is not derived from them.

Theological identifications, particularly the framework of beatitudo drawn from Aquinas, are used in their established sense within Catholic theology.

One terminological note: *the self*, as used throughout, refers to the soul and will in the Catholic philosophical tradition. A full ontological account — including the question of whether this is a substance claim, a process claim, or something that resists both categories — is developed in *The Am That Remains* (Gaitan, 2026) and assumed here without re-argument. A fuller ontological treatment appears in that prior work and is not repeated here.

## I. The Word and What It Carries

The English word happiness descends from the Old Norse happ — luck, chance, fortune. It shares its root with happen and haphazard. This origin does not imprison the modern word. Words change meaning, and the etymological fallacy is a genuine fallacy: awful once meant awe-inspiring, enthusiasm once implied divine possession, nice once meant ignorant. Etymology does not prove what a word must mean.

What etymology can show is what a word carries — the sediment of historical use that shapes intuition even when speakers are unaware of it. And the happ family carries a specific inheritance: passivity, contingency, externality. Across its history in English, happiness has been weighted toward what

happens to the self rather than what the self is. Favorable circumstances arrive; the self is happy. They depart; it is not. The self waits. Fortune moves.

This inheritance helps explain a persistent frustration: the search for lasting happiness generates more anxiety than it resolves. If the intuitive content of the word already tilts toward external contingency, then seeking happiness that endures is seeking luck that does not run out. That search cannot succeed — not because lasting wellbeing is impossible, but because lasting wellbeing is not what the inherited word is aimed at.

The argument of this essay is therefore not linguistic. It is philosophical. The claim is not that the etymology proves something about the concept's limits. The claim is that the phenomenon most people are actually seeking when they use the word is better named and better understood through a different framework — one whose structure this essay attempts to specify.

## II. The Metaphysical Model

The framework this essay employs rests on a specific metaphysical model of the present moment. The model is proposed as a philosophical instrument, not derived from empirical neuroscience or phenomenological description, both of which raise important questions this essay does not attempt to resolve. Husserl's account of the specious present, Bergson's duration, and the neuroscientific literature on temporal integration windows are each relevant to the phenomenology of time and are not engaged here. The model operates at a different level of description.

The model holds that the present moment — the Now — functions as the singular locus of actuality: the point at which what is possible becomes what is real. The *actuality* of any event is constituted at the crossing from potential to real. That crossing, as a structural event, does not itself extend across time — it is the condition of temporal extension, not one of its instances. Whatever thickness experience lends to the present, the model distinguishes between experienced duration and ontological actuality.

The claim that this crossing has zero thickness — that actuality as such has no intrinsic extension — is the model's foundational axiom, not its conclusion. A Bergsonian can object that actualization is itself durational; a phenomenologist can point to the specious present as evidence that experience resists instantaneous punctuality. These are genuine objections to a different metaphysical position — one this essay does not hold but does not claim to have refuted. The model begins here, by stipulation, as a philosophical starting point. What follows is conditional on accepting this beginning.

From this model, one structural consequence follows. Memory is the retrieval, in the present, of what was actual. Anticipation is the projection, in the present, of what might become actual. Neither is itself actual in the primary sense — both are present-moment activities whose content refers to other times. Within the model, the self is always and only operating at the crossing point. The loops of memory and anticipation are real as activities but do not themselves constitute alternative locations where the self can actually reside.

This yields the model's governing constraint, which requires precise statement to avoid a direct objection. The objection runs: if I was happy yesterday and remember it today, happiness appears to exceed the instantaneous Now. The model's answer is that what persists is not the *actuality* of the original occurrence but its representation — a memory trace, a causal consequence, a coordinate in

the loop of retrieval. The original occurrence was actual at its crossing point. What remains is real, but real as a present-moment activity of memory, not as a continuation of the original actuality. The claim is about actuality, not about aftereffects. What exceeds the Now is always a representation of what was actual, not the actuality itself.

The search for happiness that endures by accumulating in the loops is, within this model, a search conducted in the wrong location — not because the loops contain nothing real, but because what is real in them is the present-moment activity of retrieval, not the original occurrence being retrieved. The reader who disputes the model has a genuinely different metaphysical position. This essay does not attempt to compel assent — only to show what follows if the model is accepted as a philosophical instrument.

### III. Residency and Reference: Why Suffering Feels Longer

If the model holds — if no moment is ontologically extended beyond its own actuality — a serious question immediately arises. Why does suffering feel heavier and more extended than happiness? The asymmetry is real and it deserves a structural explanation, not dismissal.

The model draws a distinction between two modes of relation to the memory loop: *reference* and *residency*.

Happiness received at the crossing point — as a complete event, in full presence — becomes *reference* in the memory loop. It is filed as a finished coordinate: real, unreachable by subsequent subtraction, but not generative of structural demand. The loop returns to it and moves on. It does not pull the self backward.

Suffering operates differently in structure. It is almost always the record of an interrupted presence — a person, a condition, a coordinate of the self's existence that was removed before the relationship with it could complete. The memory loop returns to where that presence was and finds absence. Each return adds weight without resolution. This is *residency* in the loop: not reference to a finished event, but habitation of an unfinished one. The self lives in absence rather than arriving at the present moment.

A clarification the argument requires: this is a structural description, not a moral diagnosis of the grieving person. The widow who cannot release the memory of her husband overnight is not failing at presence. She is inhabited by a love whose coordinate has been removed — and that love is real, its weight is real, and the loop's inability to close is the natural consequence of genuine attachment, not a dysfunction to be corrected. The distinction between residency and reference is offered as an account of why suffering feels longer, not as an instruction to grieve differently or more efficiently.

Papini, in *Giudizio Universale*, gives Heloise a formulation that models this precisely: the happy years passed like days, the sad days like years. Not because more occurred in the sad days. Because the sad days did not pass. The self was returning, again and again, to the same vacancy rather than moving through crossing points toward new actuality.

The asymmetry does not violate the model. Both happiness and suffering occur within moments of the same ontological structure. What differs is not the duration of the moments but the mode of the self's relation to memory: one event completes and becomes a coordinate; the other remains open and

becomes a residence. Duration is not experienced because the moment is longer. It is experienced because the self does not leave it.

#### IV. Three Words, Three Frameworks

The most direct evidence that what ordinary language calls happiness is not what the tradition identifies as the proper end of human existence is lexical — not as proof, but as illustration of how different conceptual frameworks name structurally different conditions.

**Happ** has been described above. Its semantic inheritance points toward external contingency — what fortune delivers to a passive self.

*Makarios* — the Greek word used in the New Testament Beatitudes — is a term whose meaning broadened considerably across its history, and a full account of its Koine usage is a matter for specialists in Greek lexicography. What can be noted, with appropriate caution, is that the word retains historical associations — from its classical usage in connection with the condition of gods and the fortunate — that can suggest elevation and distance from ordinary suffering. These associations are not the whole of the word's semantic range in New Testament Greek; Koine usage is more varied. But the connotation of something above or beyond ordinary circumstances is present enough that translations using *makarios* or its Latin equivalent *beati* risk importing an elevation-and-distance reading that the Aramaic original may not carry.

Ṭūwayhūn — the Aramaic word Jesus most likely used, from the root Ṭ-W-B — carries connotations that differ from both. The root denotes goodness, excellence, and uprightness in Syriac and related Semitic usage (Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*). Ṭūbā, the noun form, functions as an exclamatory expression of blessedness directed toward a state of being. The root's connection to uprightness suggests a state of being as one should be — rightly ordered, correctly oriented within the structure of things. This is not elevation above circumstances. It is a condition within circumstances, defined by orientation rather than by what fortune delivers.

The distinction matters for the Beatitudes specifically. What follows is a philosophical reading of those texts, not exegetical reconstruction. Read through the lens of ṭūwayhūn — acknowledging that exact semantic recovery across two millennia and two linguistic traditions is not possible — the Beatitudes become structural descriptions rather than paradoxes requiring compensatory explanation. The poor in spirit arrive at the crossing point without the obstruction of a self-sufficient false center; they receive with empty hands. Those who mourn are genuinely present to what the crossing point actually contains, rather than evacuated into the loop of what should be different. Neither is waiting for better happ. Both are — in the orientation of their will — rightly ordered at the present moment.

This reading is offered as philosophically consistent with the text. It is not claimed as the text's original meaning. The essay does not require the exegetical claim — it requires only that the distinction between happ, makarios, and ṭūwayhūn illustrates structurally different accounts of human wellbeing, which it does regardless of the precise historical semantics.

## V. Presence and Acceptance

If *ṭūwayhūn* names the condition of being rightly ordered at the crossing point, the model identifies two necessary coordinates. The first is **presence**: the self at the crossing point rather than displaced into the loops of memory or anticipation — receiving what the present moment contains rather than residing in the loop of what was or projecting into the loop of what should arrive.

The second is **acceptance**: the self arriving at the crossing point as what it actually is, rather than as a deficient version of a foreign template. This coordinate is the one most easily misread as quietism or passivity, and the misreading requires correction.

Acceptance does not mean the suppression of ambition or the refusal of change. The Great Commission — go into the world and preach — is not an instruction to remain passive. Genuine movement is entirely compatible with this coordinate. The distinction the model draws is between movement that originates at the crossing point and movement that originates in the loop of comparison.

Movement from the crossing point — from what the self actually is, toward what the present moment genuinely requires — carries the self's actual identity with it. It arrives at each new location as itself, present, capable of genuine reception and genuine giving. Movement from the loop of comparison — driven by the distance between what the self is and what a foreign template says it should be — is displacement wearing the mask of progress. It arrives at each new location to find the same vacancy it was fleeing, because the vacancy was not in the circumstances. It was in the self's absence from them.

The modern apparatus of comparison — the curated life, the optimized self, the metrics of success by one or another cultural standard — operates precisely against the second coordinate. It installs a foreign template as the measure of the self's own crossing point, ensuring that even when the self arrives at the present moment, it arrives already measuring the distance between what it is and what it should be. A life evaluated by whether it matches the template is a life whose self is perpetually slightly to the side of its own actuality.

## VI. Gideon's Three Hundred: A Philosophical Reading

What follows is not exegesis of Judges 7. It is a philosophical meditation on a scene from which the model draws a structural illustration. The reading is offered as illumination, not as textual derivation.

At the river, two groups of Gideon's men drink differently. The majority kneel and put their faces to the water. A minority lap the water from their cupped hands. God selects the second group. The text gives a military reason — the lapping men proved more vigilant. The philosophical reading the model suggests runs alongside that reason without displacing it.

The two modes of drinking illustrate two different relationships between reception and presence. To kneel and submerge the face in the water is to surrender to the act of drinking entirely — to dissolve, however briefly, into the body's demand and the relief of thirst. The crossing point is abandoned to the loop of sensation. The body is fed. The self, in the model's terms, is momentarily elsewhere.

To lap from cupped hands is to receive without being displaced by what is received. The body is equally fed. The thirst is equally satisfied. But the self remains present to both the water and the world in the same gesture. The gift is received without the self being consumed by the act of receiving.

Whether this is what the text means in its original context is a question for exegetes and lies outside this essay's scope. What the scene models, read through the framework, is the structural capacity the model identifies as necessary for *ṭūwayhūn*: to receive fully while remaining at the crossing point. Not the denial of the body's need. Not spiritual detachment from physical reality. The simple capacity to remain upright while drinking — to receive the gift without losing the self that receives it.

## VII. What Qohelet's Text Permits

*That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil — this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.* (Ecclesiastes 3:12-14)

The framework is brought to this text; it is not derived from it. Qohelet does not argue the metaphysical model this essay proposes. What the text offers, read through the framework, is a set of observations that the model finds coherent — without claiming the author intended the illumination.

Three observations. First: satisfaction in eating, drinking, and work is named as gift — not as achievement or earned reward. Within the model, no one sustains the Now. The crossing point has no intrinsic reserves from which to draw its own continuation. It is held open by what holds everything open — a ground that does not itself require a prior moment to exist. This is a philosophical claim, not an exegetical one. But it is consistent with Qohelet's framing: the capacity to receive the fruit of effort as genuinely satisfying is not within the self's power to generate from within the loops. It is given at the crossing point or it is not had at all.

Second: nothing can be added to what God does, and nothing taken from it. Within the model, this describes a completed event — one that has passed through the crossing point and become a permanent coordinate. Not extended across time, but finished in a way that makes it unreachable by subsequent subtraction. The gift of seeing one's children in the morning is real not because it will last but because, received at the crossing point in full presence, it is complete. What is complete cannot be made less by what follows.

Third: the satisfaction is found in the toil itself — not after it or despite it. Happ arrives from outside, as fortune. The satisfaction Qohelet names is found within the act, which the model reads as a function of how the act is inhabited, not of what it delivers externally.

## VIII. A Brief Comparison with Buddhist Diagnosis

The Buddhist tradition — specifically the Theravada and Mahayana streams, though with significant internal variation across schools — identifies what this essay calls *happ*-happiness as a form of *dukkha*: suffering or unsatisfactoriness grounded in the structural impermanence of all conditioned states. The first noble truth holds that ordinary happiness, being conditioned and impermanent, cannot serve as the ground of lasting wellbeing. This diagnosis converges with the argument of this essay at the level of diagnosis.

The difference is in the response. The broadly Buddhist response to the impermanence of conditioned happiness is detachment — the attenuation of craving, the loosening of the self's grip on the contents of the loops, the movement toward liberation from conditioned experience as such.

The framework of this essay does not prescribe detachment. It prescribes right reception. The child's face in the morning, the meal, the satisfaction in honest work — these are gifts to be received at the crossing point: fully, as complete events, without grasping at their extension beyond the moment of their occurrence. The difference between the two frameworks is not that Buddhism considers phenomena unreal — that would misrepresent a tradition whose account of dependent origination is considerably more nuanced. The difference is that Buddhism treats conditioned phenomena as *not ultimately reliable as enduring refuge*, and responds with the path of non-attachment, while the Catholic framework treats them as real gifts whose completeness is located at the crossing point rather than in their extension across time, and responds with the practice of right reception. Both diagnose the same problem in conditioned happiness. They prescribe structurally different responses.

## IX. Beatitudo and Structural Inertia

Catholic theology does not promise happiness in the happy sense. What the tradition offers under the name *beatitudo* — in Aquinas's usage in the *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qq. 1-5 — is the fulfillment of the will in its proper orientation toward its ultimate end. Not a psychological state. Not a feeling with duration. The condition of a will that has arrived at what it was ordered toward.

The will is not formed in one moment. It is formed across every crossing point of a life — every moment of arrival at the center or departure from it, every act of genuine presence or displacement into the loop, every reception of the gift or extraction of it as compensation. Each crossing point leaves a trace. The trace becomes habit. The habit becomes orientation. The orientation becomes, at death, the fixed configuration of a will built crossing point by crossing point.

The model names this process structural inertia: the accumulated weight of repeated orientations, in either direction, that makes subsequent orientation progressively more natural. A self that has formed the habit of arriving at the crossing point builds an inertia toward the center. A self that has formed the habit of evacuation — of residing in the loops, measuring the crossing point against a foreign template, extracting rather than receiving — builds an inertia away from it.

Lot's wife models structural inertia at its terminal expression. She did not make a fatal decision at the last moment. She revealed, at that moment, the direction she had already been facing. The inertia of a will organized around the left loop expressed itself in one gesture that disclosed what had been forming across an entire life. The image is used here strictly as a structural model — a philosophical illustration, not a theological claim about the literal narrative or its proper doctrinal interpretation. A Catholic theologian reading the text within the tradition's exegetical framework may interpret the passage differently, and that interpretation does not depend on the model this essay proposes.

Hoping to reach beatitudo at the deathbed is, within this framework, a serious miscalculation. Not because the ground withdraws at the final moment — the model holds that the crossing point remains open until the last. But the will that arrives at the final crossing point carries the full weight of every prior orientation. The tradition preserves the exceptions — the thief on the cross, the eleventh-hour



worker, the prodigal son received while still a long way off — with great care. It preserves them as mercy that exceeds the structure. Not as the structure itself. Not as grounds for deferral.

The practical weight of this is motivating rather than punitive: every crossing point matters. Not the dramatic ones only. Every ordinary morning. Every meal received in full presence or consumed in distraction. Every moment of arrival or departure. Each one is forming something. The question is only what.

## **X. What Duration Happiness Actually Has**

The question the essay set out to answer: does happiness have duration, and if so, of what kind?

Happiness in the *happ* sense — what fortune delivers, what favorable circumstances produce — has exactly the duration of the circumstances that generate it. It rises and falls with the loops. It is real as content. It is not real as ground. And because it is not real as ground, it cannot be what the self is actually seeking when it seeks something that endures.

What the crossing point contains — when inhabited in full presence, rightly ordered — is complete at the moment of its occurrence. Not extended. Complete. The distinction matters: extension is a property of states that persist across multiple moments. Completeness is a property of events that are whole within a single moment. The gift of seeing the children in the morning is complete. It does not need to extend beyond the moment of its occurrence to be real. It is already, at the moment it occurs, unreachable by subsequent subtraction.

This is *ṭūwayhūn* — understood as a philosophical proposal consistent with the Aramaic root's connotations of uprightness and right-ordered being, not as a claim of exegetical precision. The internal uprightness of a self rightly ordered at the crossing point of actual existence. In good conditions and harsh ones. In the morning with the children and in the cell with the chains like the apostles. In the meal and in the mourning. Not despite what the crossing point contains. Within it, as it actually is.

It does not last longer than the Now. It is complete within it.

Which is not less than duration. It is more — because duration is always running out, and what is complete at the crossing point is, in the only sense the model recognizes, already whole.

*The gift is already as large as it needs to be. It is exactly the size of the Now — which, within this model, contains everything that is ever actual, and which is held open, at every moment, by what does not itself require a moment to exist.*

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