


# On Augustine's theology of hope: From the perspective of creation

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Augustine was a representative of the theology of hope in the patristic age. He saw hope as the grasp of eschatological eternal happy life for human in this world. Together, the three virtues of faith, hope and love constitute the three interdependent faculties of the soul to know God. Hope, which comes from the grace of God given through Christ, is the knowledge of eternity, not of a future in time, and it helps one to resist the temptation of goods which comes from the flesh and earthly things. Hope in eternity gives one a cognitive power beyond time and space, which leads to a unified vision of past, present and future, thus also causing important changes in how one lives in this created world. However, because of this unearthly hope, people can form a gradually expanding community of fraternity in this world, which helps them transcend differences of belief and seek a more virtuous life.

**Contribution:** This article reconstructs Augustine's interpretation of the nature of hope by synthesising his various texts, analysing the theological structure of the concepts related to hope, sorting out the 'theology of hope' he advocates and finally, in light of the wisdom of his philosophy, responding to what and how we can hope in suffering.

**Keywords:** Augustine; theology of hope; creationism; philosophy of time; eschatology; happiness.

## Introduction

What may I hope? Kant once listed this question as one of the four ultimate questions of humanity and argued that this question could not be answered by philosophy but could only be left to religion (Young & Kant 1992:583). Theology and its traditions have many resources on this subject that can be consulted today. In the patristic age, the hope of Christians changed from the early reform of the social order to the hope of eternal life and resurrection (Murphy 1969:119). Augustine is an important representative of this shift in the theology of hope.

We often speak of hope when we are suffering, as if in the dark night looking forward to a sunrise that has not yet arrived, and future deliverance becomes a vision of hope.<sup>1</sup> Augustine, in his *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Love*, speaks of hope in a more comprehensive and detailed way within the structure of relations among the three. However, when we bring in a creationist perspective and see hope in terms of the cosmological structure of the created world where human live, that is, with nature, we find that his understanding of hope is full of theological tensions and complex theoretical constructions. According to Augustine, 'the Omnipotent God ... would not allow any evil in his works' (*Enchiridion* 8 in Outler 1955). In this world, evil is the privation of goodness and thus has no substance. Evil is eventually caused by 'the defection of the will of a being who is mutably good from the Good which is immutable' (*Enchiridion* 23 in Outler 1955). Those beings could be angels and humans. So in God's creation, everything has its goodness from the good and is good, where evil does not exist. He further argues that 'yet the Creator's goodness does not cease to sustain life and vitality' (*Enchiridion* 27 in Outler 1955). So the world lasts in time and is still preserved to be good. If, then, one is amid a plague caused by a virus in nature, it follows from Augustine's theory that the virus, as a part of nature, is not itself 'evil', let alone 'the source of evil'. Nor, by extension, is this created world a prison for human suffering, and the body is even less considered a yoke of the soul, as in Platonism, even when it is in sickness and pain.

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1. Especially as the world is in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of writing, and all humanity is experiencing a difficult battle against the pandemic, it becomes the hope of many to overcome the virus and return once again to a normal face-to-face state of life. It is this hope, which, however, is distinguished by Augustine as we may see below, that motivates us to persevere. This hope allows us to endure the temporary absence of seeing each other and the thousands of miles that separate us. This paper is a preliminary investigation of the outline of Augustine's theology of hope, and thus it focuses on a detailed text analysis.

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What, then, should we hope for while suffering? With this perspective in mind, this paper will reconstruct Augustine's interpretation of the nature of hope by synthesising his various texts, analysing the theological structure of the concepts related to hope, sorting out the 'theology of hope' he advocates and finally, in light of the wisdom of his philosophy, responding to what and how we can hope in suffering.

## Hope towards the eschatological happiness

The intellectual atmosphere of late antiquity tended to define the end of life as happiness, and Augustine maintained throughout his life that 'the happy life is nothing else than a perfect knowledge of God' (*The Retractions* 1.2.1 in Bogan 2001). For most Platonist philosophers, the body was perishable, the soul was immortal and the soul was the cause of the activity of the body. Augustine was also influenced by this and believed that the soul not only has a life in this world with the physical body, but it also has another life in the spiritual world.<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes him from Greek philosophy is that he starts from the Christian belief that the human soul may go to heaven after the last judgement and obtain another life. Thus, in the ultimate sense of what one can hope for, only the end of the soul has meaning, and the nature of this world is only the vehicle needed for the journey where the soul and the body are traveling together to the end.<sup>3</sup> So he appeals to the fact that for Christians to achieve religious ends there is no need to know the nature of this world and its laws of operation as philosophers do (*Enchiridion* 16 in Outler 1955). We might also say that Augustine further exalted the status of the human soul and further neglected the value of nature. In short, he was convinced throughout his life that the true 'happy life' lies in the soul's entry, after the destruction of the physical body, into the eternal and truthful world of the other side with God, where it could see God directly in its resurrected perfect body (*Soliloquies* 1.13, 19.35; *City of God* 22.29).<sup>4</sup> The true 'hope' is the expectation of a not-yet-reached happy life on the other side.

Conversely, hope in this world is a necessary condition for the Christians to achieve a happy life. According to Augustine, 'as, therefore, we are saved, so we are made happy by hope' (*City of God* 19.4 in Dods 1989). The biblical source for this statement is primarily Paul's statement that 'we are saved by hope' (Rm 8: 24). For Augustine, it means that we are only in hope, though not yet in reality, that we are saved and that this hope is in Christ (cf. *c. Faust.* 11.7, 8). In the act of 'hope', one is thinking of 'salvation', that is, 'a happy life', which is to be lived after this world and therefore not in reality. Salvation, on the other hand, is, for Augustine, the action of Christ ('the Saviour') and not the action of humans, so that hope

necessarily includes Christ. With God's guidance, Christ as authority can lead people to a more certain hope in the mystery of truth (*c. Acad.* 3.20.44). The logic is not that Christ's faith is consistent with the truth but that he fundamentally believes that Christ is the truth itself. Augustine confesses that his 'whole hope is in thy exceeding great mercy and that alone' (*Confessions* 10.29 in Outler 1955).

Happiness in this world is to live in hope. According to Augustine, the martyr, or the person who dedicates his life in this world to the future life of faith and love, whether healthy or sick, is already happy in hope, although his happiness is not yet a reality (*Confessions* 10.29; *City of God* 19.20; s. 4.33.36). The greatest number of people who have attained this happiness in this world are not yet martyrs but those who have attained the victory of salvation through struggling hard on their sickbeds against their illnesses and demons, because they live in hope, believing that humans are the best of creatures, that this life is worthwhile and that this world is still God's creation, the best of all worlds. Even though they are no longer able to move, they still win a hidden victory in their hearts because they have succeeded in resisting physical harm and temptation. The greatness of their battle is even greater than that of those who fight the beast (s. 4.33.36).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Augustine valued eternal life more than the temptation to prolong life in this world.

In short, Augustine believed that humanity in this world could not achieve true happiness and that theological hope pointed to an eschatological future. This 'yet to come' life is not 'a time' but an atemporal eternity. Hope thus becomes the soul's imagination of eternity in the present time, and hope is the link between the present, the future and the eternal. In the light of his famous assertion that 'time is an extension of the mind', we must look further into hope as a psychological phenomenon.

## Hope in the triad structure of the mind

Augustine's 'theology of hope' must always be understood in the context of the triad of faith, hope and love. These three have their original biblical basis: 'Now abiding are faith, hope, and love, the three, the greatest of which is love' (1 Cor 13:13). Augustine (1948:84) first pointed out this triad structure in an earlier work, *On the Happy Life*, in the words of his mother Monica, paraphrasing Ambrose (Bishop of Milan), 'Help, Trinity, those that pray ... indeed, this is undoubtedly the happy life, that is, the perfect life which we must assume that we can attain soon by a well-founded faith, a joyful hope, and an ardent love'. This triad structure was already the formula for prayer for salvation in the circles of the Christians in Milan and had a vast influence in the late ancient Church.

Hope is a soul's ability to know. In the *Soliloquies*, written soon afterward, Augustine explains further: in order to know

2. For Augustine's ascent and descent of the soul in both worlds, see Chen (2014:68–82).

3. Chen (2014:65–67).

4. To be specific, this hope of the resurrection of body is based on the fact of Christ's resurrection to eternity. For details, see Afeche (1986).

5. Cf. Fitzgerald and Cavadini (1999:419). Donald X. Burt, O.S.A., explained in entries of "Health and Sickness".

God, these three virtues – faith, hope and love – are needed. In order to keep rightly gazing at God as the light, the eye of the soul (that is, reason) needs faith to believe that the goal of the gaze is happiness, hope to believe that ‘vision will follow right looking’ and love to motivate the act of looking (Soliloquies 1.6.13, 1.13.23 in Burleigh 1953). Obviously, here, faith and hope are interpreted as ‘virtues’, that is, the ability of the soul to achieve goodness and the cooperation of the three to fulfil the complex function of the soul to know the goal (God). Hope is a cognitive faculty of the mind, and it is able to imagine in the present moment the process of the soul’s own attainment of the goal and the state of happiness. Insofar as it is a grasp of the future, it is incomparable to the other two cognitive faculties.

Faith, hope and love are, in fact, ways of worshiping God, and all three are prayers to God (*Enchiridion* 3, 7). These three cognitive faculties are especially important for the Christian religion. For the reason that God cannot be seen with the naked eye, one can only rely on the help of the scriptures to believe in the God whom one has not yet seen, to hope and to love the God in whom one believes (*Trin.* 8.4.6). But Augustine quotes Paul as saying: ‘Who hopes for what he sees if he does not hope for what he sees? But if we hope in that which we do not see, we will wait patiently’ (Rm 8:24–25). This shows that people believe and hope in things not yet seen and that hope is believing (faith) in good things to come.

The three – faith, hope and love – exist interdependently of each other, and one cannot exist without the others (*Enchiridion* 8; cf. *Trin.* 14.4). If we are to discuss the difference, then hope follows faith (*En. Ps.* 18.31). Secondly, hope is in vain if one does not have love; for example, if one hopes for eternal life but does not love righteousness, one will never receive eternal life (*Enchiridion* 117). In eternal life, faith and hope will cease to exist because they have already been fulfilled, and only love will continue to exist and become more passionate (*doc. Chr.* 1.38.42, 39.43). Therefore, Augustine ranked the three in order. Faith takes precedence over hope, while love endures more than either. In this order, we see that love is the greatest. Hope is a bridge to eternity in this worldly time, a necessary intermediate means by which we reach the end and then no longer need it. Hope does not follow one to the other side; it is no longer needed in eternity, and therefore, it is, together with faith, a unique ability of the soul in this world. Therefore, hope must have a unique relationship with the nature of this world in time.

## Hope in this created world

Hope points to a goal that has not yet come and is related to but different from the future. Augustine’s unique philosophy of time is closely linked to his historical theology. He believed that the future and the past do not exist, and therefore cannot be seen, but that all three are somehow present together in our souls and therefore can be known to us. He famously asserted, after subtle arguments, that time is the extension of the mind (extendedness, *distentionem*) (*Confessions* 11. 18, 23).

The past is memory, the present is attention, and ‘the time present of things future is expectation’ (*Confessions* 11. 20. 26 in Outler 1955). This expectation (*expectatio*) is theologically related to and distinct from hope (*spes*); the former is the knowledge of things in time, while the latter is the knowledge of eternity.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, hope is not a cognition of the future by the human mind living in time but transcends the three temporal cognitions, for it acts so that the three form a continuum. Hope allows future happiness (salvation) to be transformed first in mind into a happy memory of the future so that a person can wait patiently in the present.

Nevertheless, ‘hope’ is, after all, an everyday word used to describe a universal psychological phenomenon. So Augustine makes a strict distinction between the hope of the present world and the hope of the world to come. Although all people hope for what is good for them in this world, we can distinguish between two different kinds of hope on the basis of whether the object is ‘temporal’ or ‘eternal’ (*doc. Chr.* 1.38.42; s. 105.5.7).

In *the Enchiridion*, Augustine considers the Lord’s Prayer as the complete explanation of what true ‘hope’ is. It says that Christians should have seven kinds of hope and that they should pray to God for all of them. The first three are eternal happiness: ‘Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Mt 6:10). The other four are the happiness needed for this worldly life: ‘Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are in debt. We forgive the debt of man, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’ (Mt 6:11–13). These last four are no longer needed when we have eternal happiness. Thus, what these two hopes have in common is that what they seek is happiness, but the happiness in this world is only necessary for living in this world and not as a direct contribution to happiness in the next. Augustine even argues that hope for temporal things in this world is ultimately false, empty, perishable and shakes the mind (*Expositions on the Book of Psalms* 7.11 in Schaff 1989).<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the Christian’s hope in temporal things is eventually for the hope for eternal things, and the two are not unrelated.

There is, indeed, a difference between the two kinds of hope. Augustine recognises the hope of this world despite his exhortation that hope should not be placed in oneself or in others, i.e. in this perishable and changing world, but in the eternal and immortal happiness (*City of God* 15. 18 in Dods 1989). No historical phenomenon in time can serve as a place of genuine hope. Lying on her deathbed, his mother said: ‘My hope in this world is fulfilled’. That is, her hope to see Augustine become an ecumenical Christian (*Confessions* 9. 11. 26 in Outler 1955) came true. This hope was not for herself

6. For related analysis, see Zhang (1999:190–193).

7. Teske suggests comparing to the scheme of Platonist epistemology of knowledge and opinion, of which Augustine is deeply influenced, hope is ‘the contemplation of the eternal being of God’, while faith is opinion towards this changing world and temporal events (Teske 2009:37). Cavadini also indicates that Augustine adopts the Neoplatonist idea of our mind ascending from corporeal things (of this world) to the contemplation of God, and it is the virtues of faith, hope and love given by Christ that eventually make it happen (Cavadini 2019:25–27).

but for others. Augustine, who had made his mother a model Christian, naturally recognised this hope and could not forget it for a long time.

Eternal hope also has a positive effect on this earthly life, regulating the harmonious relationship between the soul and the body. Augustine did not elevate one and suppress the other, nor did he consider the two to be incompatible.<sup>8</sup> He believed that as long as we have a physical body, we need faith, hope and love to help us withstand the trials it brings. A complete human being is the inseparable union of soul and body, which does not mean that the body is our enemy, but in fact it is the friend of the soul (s. 155. 15). The hope of eternal life does not mean the accessible abandonment of the physical body and earthly life (Fitzgerald & Cavadini 1999:25–27).<sup>9</sup> Because we live in the flesh in this life, and the flesh has the potential to expect and tempt the soul in it to go astray, we need faith, hope and love to help the soul resist this tendency. Hope makes us believe that after death, all these trials and tribulations brought about by the flesh will not exist: 'In this life hope never departs from the soul' (*Soliloquies* 1.7.14 in Burleigh 1953). The human flesh does not defile the soul except when the soul lusts after the good of the perishable body (*f. et symb.* 4.10). Hope is the key force that regulates the relationship between the two; that is, it helps the soul to will the happiness of eternal life and thus resist the temptations from the flesh.

Hope is not a rejection of this worldly life or an aversion to suffering, but in Augustine's view, humanity's hope comes from the grace of God, more specifically from Christ. He even argues that the prerequisite for having and maintaining hope is the grace of God through Christ (*Enchiridion* 118 in Outler 1955; *lib. arb.* 1.20.54). Augustine said that our present life is like a pilgrimage, and we must trust in a guide who has been to the end and knows the way, Christ, in whom our hope for the right path rests. Thus, hope is like a goal for those walking in the desert because we know this goal is possible and can sustain us through all kinds of hardships and difficulties. Love motivates us to act toward this goal and makes us love our fellow travellers (*En. Ps.* 42.2, 60.4, cf. *Civ. Dei.* 11.2).<sup>10</sup> In this sense, he says that 'no man in this world is strong, except in the hope of God's promises, for as to our own deservings, we are weak, in His mercy we are strong' (*En. Ps.* 89. 1 in Schaff 1989). Thus, the resurrection and ascension of Christ give the believer a secure hope, distinguishing the Christian faith from worldly wisdom (*doc. Chr.* 1.15.14; *En. Ps.* 60.4).<sup>11</sup>

Following Augustine's logic, we may say the world is a place of testing behind which lies the only way out. So the hope is not speculation or self-imagination but the knowledge of a

8.Cf. Wu (2007). Augustine believed Christians must give up the hope of earthly happiness to have 'hope of virtue'. Prof. Wu uses the term 'hope of virtue' to refer specifically to the hope of eternal life.

9.Stephen J. Duffy in 'Anthropology', notes that there are differences between early and late Augustine's theories of the relationship between body and soul, but he consistently argues that the temptation of the flesh comes primarily from sexual desire. Cf. Fitzgerald and Cavadini (1999:25–27).

10.Cf. Kroeke (2017:114).

11.Ibid.

certain future that comes from a 'guide' to the truth of the world. We can refer to the early conversion experience of Augustine, who believed that hope for eternity is not inherent in all people but comes together with the establishment of faith in God. He says that faith, hope and love occur when the Christian life begins, nourishes and thus tends toward perfection (*vera rel.* 53.103, *ep.* 181A). Moreover, in the last paragraph of *City of God*, he says that this is the end of our life's journey and the end of all human ages, which he likens to the never-ending end of the seventh-day Sabbath – the eighth day of the eternal Lord – and it is then that we see what is invisible in this world (*City of God* 22.30 in Dods 1989). Thus, hope is from God's grace, and its completion is in God, and the two form a closed loop. In this course of life in which hope runs through, it is neither the past nor the present but the eternity at the end of the future that is the starting point for the Christian's understanding of time, history and meaning in this world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we find that Augustine's 'hope' seems to be easy in everyday life; in fact, it is heavy and unique. It carries the weight of the whole of the life and implies a grand picture of the only good and the ultimate destination of humankind, for it points forever to eternity, without the slightest room for compromise with earthly sufferings. Thus, we can understand why Kant says that hope is a religious issue. Among the 'seven things of hope' that Augustine described as prayers to God, hope for freedom from evil is only one of the needs of earthly life. The created world is not something to be overcome, and even the body, which can be tempting to the soul, is an object of hope for improvement. Our hopes ultimately boil down to the hope for the happiness of soul.<sup>12</sup> With love and faith, 'true hope' gives a larger spatial and temporal picture of perception, which indirectly helps one reach a larger community and improve this worldly life. In this way, hope is a virtue to heal the weakness of our will, to strengthen it to endure the harshness of life, and guide it to look to the true happiness.

Putting together Augustine's theory, hope (together with faith and love) is a cognitive faculty oriented to the ultimate concern (God as the goal of the happy life), which, because its object is eternity, is not the 'future' that is often thought of. Hope corresponds to the eternity of transcendental space, and expectation corresponds to the future of space and time, which are not on the same level. Hope is not simply the expectation of possible future events but the grasp of eternal facts beyond time. In the context of modern Christian research studies on hope, it is inevitable to mention Moltmann. According to Moltmann (1996:xii), 'Christianity is wholly and entirely eschatology, not just in an appendix. It is hope, a vista, and a forward direction, and it is hence a new departure and a transformation of the present'. It can also help us understand the state of human existence in time that Augustine shows us through hope. In the hope of eternity, we remember the past, feel the present and expect the future, all three of which are not discrete but unified in a continuous

12.It is interesting that Nightingale (2015) notices that Augustine speaks of two lives saying that '[in heaven] we have already cast our hope, like an anchor on the land of promise ... I am here on the earth ...'. So to say, in hope we unite and 'I' am completed.

vision beyond time. Augustine emphasises that the perfection of a Christian life should reach the level of loving one's neighbours and even one's enemies. Since hope is inseparable from love, people can form a gradually expanding community of fraternity in which they can transcend differences of belief and seek world peace as well as a more virtuous life.<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, the world of time and space was created for good, but it is only an intermediate link, and evil arises because the soul is absorbed in it and forgets its ultimate purpose. In the same way, the hope of man is misplaced if he indulges in the events of space-time, and thus evil arises. For Augustine, any suffering in this world is temporal, and none of them can outweigh the eternal hope in the Creator of all things.

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C.Y. is the sole author of this article.

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13.Lamb also argues that in the order of hopes, Augustine will encourage the earthly contemporary hopes, especially 'civic peace', and so the Christians will be also encouraged to engage in political affairs for peace (Cf. Lamb 2018). He also has some related articles and a forthcoming book *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought*, (Princeton University Press). I agree to his attempt to reveal Augustine's political hope. In this article, I lay my stress on the virtue of hope as a whole.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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