

Editorial

Introduction of the Special Issue “Transcendence and Happiness: New Perspectives from Religion and Philosophy”

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This Special Issue aimed to stimulate and revive scholarly interest in the relationship between transcendence and happiness, specifically from religious and philosophical perspectives. A broad spectrum of articles was received that focused on the link between happiness and being human in religion and spirituality in general, happiness within the Islamic tradition, the question of happiness and transcendence as heavenly or earthly, happiness in radical theology, happiness and the messianic promise, and happiness as hysterical salvation in a more philosophical and psychological vein. These articles engaged with an impressive diversity of highly influential theologians and philosophers as interlocutors, e.g., Ibn Sīnā and Ibn ‘Arabī, Augustinus and Bonhoeffer, John Caputo, Giorgio Agamben, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. This culminated in a highly original Special Issue on transcendence and happiness that made several significant contributions to this field of research.

Two problems were immediately evident regarding this Special Issue, namely, the definition of happiness and, secondly, how to obtain such happiness. In both cases, transcendence can play a crucial role; in the religious context, this often means how God may possibly provide happiness or not. However, within a more immanent or mundane understanding of happiness, it is often conceptualised (e.g., in analytic philosophy and positive psychology) in three broad ways. Firstly, happiness is understood as *psychological* happiness, denoting a state of mind like joy or satisfaction; *prudential* happiness, denoting a type of well-being and a successful or flourishing life, which includes feelings like joy; or *perfectionist* happiness, denoting a life that is good in all respects, including morally good. Within these understandings of happiness, there is often no room for any form of transcendence.

In contrast, happiness (as *shalom*, *makarios*) is generally transcendently defined in religious terms by referring to God or a transcendent being. Aquinas, for example, identifies happiness with God as, at once, real and ideal, and happiness without God would, therefore, be lacking, if not nearly impossible. The relationship between happiness and transcendence is, thus, crucial within many religious conceptualisations of happiness.

In the six articles published in this Special Issue, the authors all focused on different aspects of happiness, but the overlap was significant enough to at least agree that happiness is something positive, desirable, good, meaningful, and pleasurable. The difference in their understanding of happiness remains, however, significant and links strongly to their respective views of the need for transcendence for the possibility of happiness. The six articles can be positioned on a scale from a strong need for forms of transcendence to realise happiness to that of the denial of the need for transcendence for happiness.

The article that sets the stage well for this discussion is one by Wessel Bentley, “Happiness and Being Human: The Tension between Immanence and Transcendence in Religion/Spirituality”. Bentley argues convincingly that religion/spirituality has a role to play in facilitating well-being/happiness in terms of the tension held in their understanding of immanence and transcendence. Bentley follows the science–religion discourse to indicate how transcendence and immanence should not be exclusively linked to happiness, but that



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religion/spirituality can promote a greater sense of happiness as well-being. Happiness “manifest when these [transcendence and immanence] are held in tension in experiential reality” (Bentley 2023, p. 7). This can happen when religion/spirituality offers a “space where immanence and transcendence is held in tension by ‘grounding’ adherents through spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer and contemplation” (Bentley 2023, p. 8).

The importance of religion/spirituality for happiness is acknowledged and further explicated from within the Islamic intellectual tradition by Ismail Lala and Reham Alwazzan in their article, “Transcendental Happiness in the Thought of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn ‘Arabī”. The title already provides a clue that happiness is here related to the divine transcendent. This links back to the Aristotelean principle of happiness as the contemplation of God and Ibn Sīnā and Ibn ‘Arabī incorporates this with the idea of divine emanation which is driven by divine self-love. They agree that there is a reciprocal upward motion in response to this divine emanation that seeks to meet it, where humans can unite with the divine as “supreme” transcendental happiness. How this is obtained is something these two writers differ on, however. For Ibn Sīnā, when “the rational soul is completely liberated from materiality, it becomes a mirror for the divine and the soul is then able to unite with it” (Lala and Alwazzan 2023, p. 18). In contrast, Ibn ‘Arabī “makes materiality a necessary ingredient for the attainment of that happiness. Thus, it is in the acceptance of divine traits and the divestment of creaturely traits that transcendental happiness resides” (Lala and Alwazzan 2023, p. 18). So, while transcendental happiness requires divestment from materiality for Ibn Sīnā, Ibn ‘Arabī argues that it is carried out through the body, because transcendental happiness is “ultimately the realization of human potentiality to become a complete locus of divine manifestation” (Lala and Alwazzan 2023, p. 1).

The same tension between the bodily and the spiritual in relation to happiness and the divine in the Christian tradition is explored by Wessel Stoker in his article, “Happiness and Transcendence: Heavenly or Earthly—Augustine and Bonhoeffer”. Stoker explains that for Augustine, happiness is heavenly—something that is attained only in eternal life—while Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues, in contrast, that happiness can be experienced on Earth. Stoker clarifies their different views of happiness by pointing to their different understandings of transcendence. Augustine understands the transcendence of God in a radical sense, and that amounts to the “conception of happiness as perfect happiness, which is possible only in eternal life without limitation and unhappiness. Happiness as the pleasant state in which Christians sees their desires and needs fulfilled, the enjoyment of God and fellow human beings in God in heaven” (Stoker 2023, p. 9). In contrast, Bonhoeffer understands God’s transcendence as much more immanent, and this immanent transcendence amounts to the “conception of happiness as earthly happiness dialectically connected with unhappiness. Despite the harsh conditions of his imprisonment, he [Bonhoeffer] repeatedly describes his feeling of happiness for the divine blessing that has been bestowed on him” (Stoker 2023, p. 9). Stoker argues, in the end, that Bonhoeffer’s view of happiness and transcendence is more convincing and that there is no dualistic conception of happiness.

This preference for a more immanent understanding of transcendence, especially in relation then to happiness, is further developed by Joeri Schrijvers in his article, “Keeping Up with Caputo: Of Specters and Spooks—Transcendence and Happiness in Caputo’s Radical Theology”. The first part of this article introduces John Caputo’s Radical Theology, which demonstrates, according to Schrijvers, a genuine contemporary search for transcendence. The second part of the article investigates Caputo’s “rather enigmatic insistence of the possibility of joy and happiness in a mortal, finite world that would celebrate only a finite, mortal God. That finitude, instead of lasting and eternal salvation, serves as the very condition of possibility of true joy” (Schrijvers 2023, p. 1), and this is, for Schrijvers, an unexamined axiom that runs through Caputo’s recent works. Schrijvers argues that the type of transcendence that is at issue for Caputo is one that can be conserved by the world, in its traditions and communities. This is a transcendence of love “that stretches out from the simple fact of (always) being with the other, holding him or her, all the way to holding on to the presencing of love to all beings within our world” (Schrijvers 2023, p. 18).

This is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's understanding of transcendence, as Stoker discussed it. The implication of this type of immanent transcendence for happiness is that happiness is something earthly, that we must affirm the world, and "everything in it, 'for the while that it is' and will so try to find an 'austere joy' in its mortal God" (Schrijvers 2023, p. 15). It is this "affirmation that sparks hope, and a certain happiness perhaps; this hope is not the hope of an afterlife, but the simple hope for 'more life', not because the future will be better, but because there always is future and time" (Schrijvers 2023, p. 16).

This emphasis on the immanent in relation to happiness, the acknowledgement of the importance of love, and the ethical life, which Schrijvers described regarding Caputo's radical theology, is taken a step further, one can argue, by Ype De Boer in his article, "The Profane Land of the Happy: On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben". De Boer gives an interpretation of the enigmatic concept "happy life" in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben "as a messianic life, a blessed life, while he, at the same time, explicitly defines it as a perfectly profane life" (De Boer 2023, p. 1). He argues that for Agamben, a happy life entails an ethos of love and "functions within a theoretical complex that decidedly opts against anything 'sacred' and which aspires to immanence rather than transcendence" (De Boer 2023, p. 2). Agamben thinks about happiness on an ethico-ontological level and "calls into question specific modes of understanding and being in the world in such a way as to induce a new one: happy life" (De Boer 2023, p. 2). This strongly links back to Lala and Alwazzan's emphasis on happiness as the realization of human potentiality. It is a "liberatory happiness of restoring things and being restored oneself to a state of potentiality" (De Boer 2023, p. 5). The ethico-ontological is found in the fact that the "messianic" state to which things are to be restored in this process is one of justice. This way of looking at things is that of love: to love someone's specific way of being. This love entails the affirmation of life, as Schrijvers found in Caputo's work, of everything beyond good and evil, not in a fatalistic way, but to bestow "the gift of potentiality on things, thus enabling them to grow, develop, change, etcetera" (De Boer 2023, p. 9). When Agamben describes a happy life in its positivity he makes "new" and "free" use of religious and esoteric tropes and opposes happiness to mere satisfaction. Happiness is rather, for him, the "fundamental reconnection with or rooting oneself back in the generative potentiality of life itself" (De Boer 2023, p. 13). Through this ethico-ontological mode of being we find the freedom to allow "for all kinds of changes to take place through the use and love it enables" (De Boer 2023, p. 13).

The last article in this Special Issue is one by Erik Meganck, "'We Know a New Happiness . . . ' from Heidegger's Happy Event to Nietzsche's Hysterical Salvation". Meganck moves completely away from any connection between transcendence and happiness in his attempt to connect happiness with the end of metaphysics. He focuses first on Heidegger to look for "a connection between freedom and authenticity that hides in the unthought" (Meganck 2023, p. 1), then moves to Nietzsche's philosophy to "introduce the metaphors 'artist' and 'woman' to arrive at an articulation of hysteria as a philosophical name for a perspective on happiness" (Meganck 2023, p. 1). With Nietzsche, Meganck argues that happiness is the "escape from the dynamics of metaphysics, the persistent unmasking of one Supreme Being in the name of yet another. Nietzsche unmasks the system of unmasking and can therefore forsake the need to provide another. God is dead, the dynasty of Supreme Beings is over. We, who no longer mourn the loss of certainty, are free and thus happy" (Meganck 2023, p. 6). To be happy, freedom from metaphysics as the "male desire for unity, transparency, logical consistency, and system" (Meganck 2023, p. 8) is needed. This can become possible through the allowance of hysteria in the philosophical sense—hysteria as the ultimate resistance against any domestication, as "the promise that transcends what is ending endlessly—with this ending itself being a transcending—and will hopefully lead us beyond the world-as-crisis" (Meganck 2023, p. 9). This will be, for Meganck, ontological happiness, a happy event, to be "like a woman-artist: fruitful in its vigilant distortion and creative receptivity towards the 'other'" (Meganck 2023, p. 9). The similarity of the ethico-ontological notions of Agamben regarding happiness is remarkable

in Meganck's thinking. The complete denial of transcendence places Meganck's article at one pole of the articles in this Special Issue regarding happiness and transcendence.

The question of what exactly happiness is remains, and with it, the question of how such happiness then relates to notions of transcendence. These six articles did, however, succeed in broadening the scope of these questions and answering them in creative and meaningful ways. The complexity of these answers indicates the need for humility from religion and philosophy in providing overly simplistic and final answers to these questions. While happiness remains something fundamentally part of being human, it remains a mystery that is part of every aspect of our being. The challenge to rethink these answers may help us to rethink our being, the affirmation of life, and our ethical task.

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List of Contributions:

Bentley, Wessel. 2023. Happiness and Being Human: The Tension between Immanence and Transcendence in Religion/Spirituality. *Religions* 14: 877.

De Boer, Ype. 2023. The Profane Land of the Happy: On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben. *Religions* 14: 808.

Lala, Ismail, and Reham Alwazzan. 2023. Transcendental Happiness in the Thought of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn 'Arabī. *Religions* 14: 729.

Meganck, Erik. 2023. 'We Know a New Happiness...' from Heidegger's Happy Event to Nietzsche's Hysterical Salvation. *Religions* 14: 738.

Schrijvers, Joeri. 2023. Keeping Up with Caputo: Of Specters and Spooks—Transcendence and Happiness in Caputo's Radical Theology. *Religions* 14: 550.

Stoker, Wessel. 2023. Happiness and Transcendence: Heavenly or Earthly—Augustine and Bonhoeffer. *Religions* 14: 1198.

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