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Wilfred M. McClay

Some Reflections on Joy, Happiness…and Guilt

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Some Reflections on Joy, Happiness….and Guilt

Wilfred M. McClay
Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty
University of Oklahoma

Is the full experience of joy a vanishing phenomenon in the present-day Western world? We rarely use the word itself anymore, and when we do, we don’t seem to mean by it what the word used to mean. Books like The Joy of Cooking, The Joy of Sex, and so on hardly seem to be about joy, but instead are about acquiring the mastery of certain skills, which are assumed to be productive of joy or pleasure or whatever. Clearly the fact that we use “joy” so pallidly and generically in contemporary life is an indication in itself that we may have lost contact with it.

And yet, the matter is not so simple as that. Sometimes there is good reason to revive a word that has fallen into disuse. Words are historical creatures with roots in the past, and they come to us, not plastic and malleable, but heavy with the hidden cargo of their earlier meanings. Those older meanings are also latent possibilities, hidden assets we can draw upon. That is why we care so much about etymologies, because word origins are not easily erased, even when words cease to be used in the original senses. If our sense of “joy” is weakened in this age, and if its weakness is both reflected and reinforced in the instrumentalism or sticky Hallmark-card sentimentality many of us now attach to the word, then perhaps the correct response is not to ditch the word, but rather to insist upon recovering its original meaning, which traces back to the Latin gaudia, to the act of rejoicing. To put it more directly, we should treat the word’s former valence as a potential resource that we can use to renew our own sense of the possibilities of our lives, and our souls, possibilities that we may have neglected or even discarded. And we’ll likely find that its rehabilitation will lead to other rediscoveries.

So let me begin by insisting upon the distinction between “joy” and “happiness.” In the world of antiquity—and here I am thinking specifically of the world of ancient Greek and Anglo-Saxon epic, or of Sophoclean drama, and not of philosophical discourse—happiness was seen as something that befell one. The word “happiness” is linked to the Middle English word happ, from which we get words such as happenstance and perhaps. In other words, happiness was something you receive passively, rather than achieve actively. (Even the Aristotelean eudaimonia depended in crucial ways on early habituation to virtue, something that one could not provide for oneself.) The
Stoic understanding of happiness represented a change, but one that involved not the transformation of the external world, but the transformation of the inner world.

It was with the advent of modernity, and of what we call “the Enlightenment,” that a decisive change comes, creating the idea of happiness that dominates our own time—an idea which envisions happiness as something that all human beings can rightly aspire to, in the here and now, without resort to world-denying asceticism, as a natural expression of their natural human endowment. By the time of the American Revolution, the natural right to the “pursuit of happiness” was one of the “self-evident” truths to which Thomas Jefferson felt free to recur in writing the Declaration of Independence. There is no more characteristically modern assumption than the belief that it lies within our power to find happiness.

But the story does not end there, of course. What we most earnestly want for ourselves is not always—indeed, only rarely—what we actually need. The self-conscious pursuit of happiness often leads to un-happiness, an unhappiness that is only intensified by the perception that one’s unhappiness is entirely one’s own responsibility—precisely because we assume that happiness is, or should be, something within our power to achieve for ourselves. So the experience of being unhappy, which is bad enough in itself, is rendered even worse by the sense of failure that attends it. Not only are we unhappy, but it’s our fault that we are! And in its most sophisticated expressions, the Enlightenment project has led (paradoxically) to a renunciation of the very possibility of happiness, as in these cheerful words of Sigmund Freud: “Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual’s libido.” One can be grateful Jefferson didn’t put any of this into the Declaration. But perhaps it was implicit in what he did write, whether he knew it or not?

So happiness is a problematic ideal. But what does this suggest about joy, and about what makes joy so dramatically different? To begin with, it suggest that joy is something radically different precisely in that it is free from the self-mastering, self-engineered, and self-referential character of happiness. Joy is perhaps a little bit more akin to ecstasy in that regard, that it places a much lesser emphasis on self-consciousness and self-direction, and a greater emphasis on self-yielding, on emptying the ego of its compulsion to direct and manage all things, and reveling in the world as it presents itself to us. It is less about action than passion, less about possessing and more about being possessed, less about human ingenuity and more about what Edmund Burke called “the unbought grace of life.”

Joy is not merely unselfish, but it is a triumphantly selfless disposition that conquers every worldly affliction. It does not do so by transforming the world to “make it safe
for joy,” or by dissolving the self altogether into a romantic or drug-induced ecstasy, or by giving one the skills to be a smooth operator in the kitchen or the bedroom, but by feeding on spiritual food that comes to us from elsewhere, living by grace and not works. It wells up unbidden, out of sources that are not susceptible of being tapped by human ingenuity, but that are seemingly boundless and powerful. And because the comforts and consolations and exaltations of joy are so intense, powerful, and world-conquering, the very experience of joy suffuses us and disciplines us, turns our eyes toward new suns and stars, toward a new and different way of being in the world.

Happiness, by way of contrast, is bound up in the endless cycles of generation and corruption, and it always has a tendency toward enervation, toward entropy, because it is tied to the circumstances and pleasures of the world. Happiness is fragile and transitory; it has an expiration date. Joy is an affect that transcends those circumstances. It is no coincidence that so many of the Scriptures and early apostles of the Christian faith speak confidently of treating afflictions as joys (see James 1), and it is in such usage that the value of distinguishing joy from happiness becomes clear.

So what, then, has caused us to abandon, or lose our connection to, so wondrous an affect or “state”? And how can we regain that connection? Some will point as causes to the unequal conditions of modern life, the all-pervasive culture of advanced capitalism, the devolution of citizenship, the loss of sustaining connection to the natural world, the massive distraction provided by the all-absorptive power of our electronic and digital media, and a dozen other external factors. All of these doubtless play an important part. But I want to argue for another factor, one that is far less visible, but that is uniquely powerful in inhibiting the possibility for a recovery of joy. That factor is the problem of guilt, and particularly guilt that is disconnected from the transactional structures of forgiveness and atonement that once accompanied it. This is a burden that we rarely acknowledge. Indeed, we like to think that guilt is a burden that we have overcome. But this is not so. Guilt lays so heavy upon us that it leaves little room for the possibility of joy’s reemergence. Unexpiated guilt smothers the possibility of joy; and the recovery of joy depends on our discovering, or recovering, ways of dealing honestly with the sources of our guilt, and the inexorable demands of sin, guilt, and atonement.

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To begin to explain my thinking, let me return for a moment to Freud. In his grand and gloomy book Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud identified the tenacious sense of guilt as “the most important problem in the development of civilization.” In fact, he continued, it seems that “the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.” Such guilt made for an
elusive quarry, however. It was hard to identify and hard to understand, and even harder to counteract, since it so frequently dwelled on an unconscious level, and could easily be mistaken for something else.

Of course, Freud was notoriously hostile to religion, and surely the decline of religious faith, and of the sense of transcendence in human existence, has something important to do with the steady recession of both joy and happiness. But when it came to guilt, Freud thought religion deserved some grudging credit: the world’s religions “have never overlooked the part played in civilization by a sense of guilt,” which is why they seek “to redeem mankind from this sense of guilt, which they call sin.” Freud understood this, though the same cannot be said of many others in the modern secular dispensation, which often finds itself entirely baffled and defenseless against guilt’s formidable power. The sense of guilt often manifests itself to us moderns, Freud argued, not as anything actually resembling guilt, but “as a sort of malaise [Unbehagen], a dissatisfaction,” for which modern people seek other explanations, whether external or internal. Guilt itself turns out to be exceptionally crafty, a born trickster and chameleon, capable of disguising itself, hiding out, altering its size and appearance, moving its location. And yet it remains notoriously difficult to dislodge, managing to tighten its hold even as it is undergoing protean and unpredictable transformation.

We live in a therapeutic age; and nothing illustrates that fact more clearly than the striking ways in which the sources of guilt’s power and the nature of its would-be antidotes have changed for us. Freud sought to relieve in his patients the worst mental burdens and pathologies imposed by their oppressive and hyperactive consciences, which he renamed their superegos, while deliberately refraining from rendering any judgment as to whether the guilty feelings ordained by those superegos had any moral justification. In other words, he sought to release the patient from guilt’s crushing hold by disarming and setting aside guilt’s moral significance, and redesignating it as just another psychological phenomenon, whose proper functioning could be ascertained by its effects on one’s more general well-being.

What this amounts to is the de-moralization of guilt. Health was the only remaining criterion for success or failure in therapy, and health was a matter of managing a tolerable equilibrium among the competing elements in the psyche—less a state of peaceable harmony, or the optimal flourishing of an organism realizing its telos, than the achievement of an uneasy truce or stalemate between intrinsic antagonists, a condition sufficiently pacified to allow for mature and rational behavior. There might be an occasional faint and fleeting glimpse of something like happiness. But joy? Not likely. That was consigned to psychopathology, or to the childhood of the human race.
This change manifests itself in every corner of the moral universe. Take for example the various ways in which “forgiveness” is now understood. Forgiveness is one of the chief antidotes to the forensic stigma of guilt, and as such has long been one of the golden words of our culture, with particularly deep roots in the Christian tradition, in which the capacity for forgiveness is seen as a central attribute of the Deity itself. To forgive others is taken to be a sign of a full and munificent and sacrificial heart, and moreover a heart that wisely recognizes the fleeting nature of life and the universal weakness of all human beings, very much including oneself. For Christians the willingness to forgive has an even deeper source: the simple acknowledgment that we should be willing to extend to others, in a spirit of gratitude, the same forgiveness that God has graciously extended to us.

Yet forgiveness rightly understood does not deny the reality of justice. It is not a mindless erasure of all standards. We feel guilt because we are guilty. To forgive, whether one is forgiving trespasses or debts, precisely means suspending all the just and legitimate claims we have against the other, in the name of the higher ground of divine love and human solidarity. That is why forgiveness, if properly understood, is both costly and rare. It affirms justice even as it suspends it.

Scan the self-help shelves of American bookstores today, however, and you will find something very different. You will see that there is a lot of interest in forgiveness, but embodied in books bearing such titles as Total Forgiveness, and Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get On With Your Life, and Choosing Forgiveness: Your Journey to Freedom, and Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All. Dozens of websites devote themselves to the subject, including a website called “Forgive for Good” by one Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., director and cofounder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project (and author of Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness), who declares that “forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.” Even the respected journalist Gregg Easterbrook posted an article on the Beliefnet website entitled “Forgiveness Is Good For Your Health.”

I don’t mean to disparage these writings in a blanket way or label them utterly wrong. There is a great deal to be said for any effort to release the soul from captivity to hateful emotions, and encourage the more noble and expansive side of our natures. But the shift in emphasis is notable. In the new acceptation, forgiveness is all about the forgiver, and his or her well-being. And the motivation sometimes borders on the suspect. As Luskin puts it, in arguing for the health-giving benefits of forgiving, “Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge…Forgiveness is about personal power.”
Thus is forgiveness incorporated into the toolbox of modern happiness, something that we can and should use in the work of self-constructing our happy state. Forgiveness is translated into the proverbial “act of random kindness” whose chief value lies in the sense of release it brings to us, the forgivers. Like the similar acts of confession or apology, and other transactions in the moral economy of sin and guilt, forgiveness is in danger of being debased into a kind of cheap grace, a waiving of standards entirely, standards without which such transactions have no meaning. But this waiving of standards does not make the standards go away.

There is another factor at work here too, one that can be called the infinite extensibility of guilt. This proceeds from a very different set of assumptions, and is a surprising byproduct of modernity’s proudest product: its ever-growing capacity to comprehend and control the physical world.

In a world in which the web of relationships between causes and effects becomes ever better understood, and in which individuals become ever more powerful and effective agents, the range of our potential moral responsibility, and therefore of our potential guilt, expands to literally infinite proportions. In such a world, where there are few intrinsic limits to what I can do, there is almost nothing for which I cannot be, in some way, held accountable. I can see pictures of a starving child in a remote corner of the world on my television, and know for a fact that I could travel to that remote place and relieve that child’s immediate suffering, if I cared to. Whatever donation I make to a charitable organization, it is never as much as I could have given. I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or support medical research enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless. The demands on an active conscience are literally as endless as an active imagination’s ability to conjure them.

So excessive is this propensity for guilt, particularly in the developed nations of the Western world, that the French writer Pascal Bruckner, in a brilliant study called *The Tyranny of Guilt*, has identified the problem as “Western masochism.” The lingering presence of “the old notion of original sin, the ancient poison of damnation,” Bruckner argues, holds even secular philosophers and sociologists captive to its logic, so that “the more [they] proclaim themselves to be agnostic, atheists, and free-thinkers, the more they take us back to the religious beliefs they are challenging.”

Bruckner’s analysis is right, so far as it goes. But the problem goes far deeper. It is, after all, not merely our pathologies that dispose us in this direction. The pathologies themselves have an anterior source in the very things of which we are most proud: our knowledge of the world, of its causes and effects, and of our power to shape and alter those causes and effect. The more we are empowered in the world, the more we
are responsible, either actually or potentially. This is not a product of neurosis. And it is inescapable.

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Such a state of affairs smothers the emergence of joy—or even the proper understanding of joy. For a large part of the release that joy entails is precisely a release from self-importance, from self-centeredness, self-engineering, self-construction—from the “agency” that has become such a god-term for our late-modern dispensation. How can joy ever creep in, when our lives our experienced as an endless self-construction (and deconstruction) site, at which one must always be arranging the details oneself, and wearing the orange hard hat required of the construction foreman, and surrounding oneself with orange cones and reflecting signs? What space is there for grace, if we treat ourselves and our lives as an endless project?

So much, too, for the claims that we live in a post-Christian world devoid of censorious public morality. Who could think such an absurd thing, given the atmosphere of constant and pervasive public moral accusation in which we now live? We in fact live in a world that carries around an enormous and growing burden of guilt, and yearns to be free of it. About this, Bruckner could not have been more right. And that burden is ever looking for an opportunity to discharge itself. Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate how many of the deeds of individual men and women can be traced back to the powerful and inextinguishable need of human beings to feel morally justified, to feel themselves to be “right with the world.” One would be right to expect that such a powerful need, nearly as powerful as the merely physical ones, would continue to find ways to manifest itself, even if it has to do so in odd and perverse ways, such as the pattern of routine moral accusation that has poisoned our political discourse. On in the rise of the extraordinary moral prestige of victims, as a category, in the contemporary world.

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We in the modern West live in a changed moral economy. But that moral economy remains deeply tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the fundamental truth about sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that sin must be paid for or otherwise discharged. It can neither be dissolved by divine fiat nor repressed nor borne forever nor simply “forgotten.” In the Jewish moral world in which Christianity originated, and without which it would have been unthinkable, sin was a debt and the debt had always to be paid for, generally by the sacrificial shedding of blood; its effects could never be ignored or willed away. Which is precisely why, in the Christian context,
forgiveness of sin was specifically related to Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice, his vicarious payment of the debt for all human sins, procured through his death on the cross, and made available freely to all who embraced him in faith. Forgiveness has an enormously high standing in the Christian faith. But it is grounded in fundamental theological and metaphysical beliefs about the person and work of Christ, which are in turn traceable back to Jewish notions of sin and how one pays for it. It makes little sense without them.

But how, in a society that retains its Judeo-Christian moral reflexes but has abandoned the corresponding metaphysics, can a credible means of discharging the weight of sin be found? This is the problem at the core of the pathologies described in Bruckner’s book, even if he misread their source (I believe) in a Nietzschean way. And it is the problem at the core of the disappearance of joy. The problem is that sin is the debt that must be paid, and if it is not paid directly, it will be paid indirectly, invisibly, and at a fatal cost to the very possibility of joy.

There is no doubt that none of this would have happened absent the influence of Christianity. Such a story would not have been credible in ancient Greece or Rome, for example, whose pagan virtues did not notably include compassion, humility, and willingness to forgive. There would be no moral status there to be drawn from identification with the victim. Indeed, such reflections cause one to remember the shocking contrast between the proud glories of the classical world and those of this strange emergent Jewish sect, which believed in an incognito God who came into the world as the least among us, emptied of all majesty, and submitted without resistance to a horrifying and humiliating death. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has insisted, the great moral reversal wrought by Christianity was the indispensable source of most of today’s commonplaces about universal human rights and human dignity, equality, sympathy, compassion, generosity, and much else that the secular world proudly claims for itself.

So this new sensibility is a product of Christianity, but one should quickly add that it is a perversion of Christianity, a religion that in its theologically orthodox form has no way of understanding forgiveness independent of sin, or of the earthly ministry of Christ, and our human response to it. It is not a coincidence that the rise of the cult of victimization in our culture corresponds fairly exactly with the decline of Christian orthodoxy. As Nietzsche predicted and Freud confirmed, the sense of guilt that Christianity sought to alleviate has not disappeared, only gone underground.

The loss of joy has many causes, but chief among them is a certain impotence in us, which derives from our inability to shed the guilt that plagues us, to discharge the debt we bear (whether we know it or not, and we mostly do not) on our hearts, an
incapacity that has arisen precisely because we have become too “advanced” in our power and knowledge to know what to do about the hard and immutable truths regarding sin, guilt, and atonement. It is a cruel but common illusion for us to think that joy is our natural state, and automatically results from the banishment of those alien and inhuman concepts of sin and guilt. Something closer to the opposite is true. Sin is the debt that must be paid. Our moral nature demands it. Which is why only the frank and humble acknowledgment of guilt, and a full embrace of the means available for our cleansing of it, can open us to the possibility of joy. That may be the one possibility that our secular age is unprepared, and unwilling, to admit.