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Joy and Human Well-Being

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The organizers of the *Theology of Joy Project* make the following observation in their "Funding Request" document:

Notwithstanding the importance of joy to human well-being and the deep, ancient religious foundations for understanding and cultivating joy, the very idea of joy has all but disappeared from modern theological reflection, is all but ignored by the social sciences, and is increasingly absent from lived experience.

I confess to contributing to the oblivion of reflection on joy. Never before have I thought about joy in any sustained way. What follows are thus initial reflections.

*What is joy?*

Joy is an emotion. I would not be surprised if this declaration, that joy belongs within the genus *emotions*, makes some members of this consultation feel uneasy. It feels like a put-down of joy to group it with envy, fear, worry, and the like, a diminishing of joy's importance. I think that once we gain some insight into what emotions in general are, and then into the particular species of emotion that joy is, it will be clear that it is not a put-down of joy to declare that joy is an emotion.

I judge that the best philosophical account of emotion currently available is that by Robert C. Roberts in his 2003 treatise, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. Let me present the core of Roberts' theory without, on this occasion, defending it.

Emotions always have an object: if one fears, there is something that one fears; if one envies, there is someone that one envies for something; if one grieves, one grieves over something that happened; and so forth. Emotions are in this way different from sensations: a

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1 Cambridge University Press
tingling sensation in one's finger has no object, nor does a burning sensation on one's tongue. Sensations are, as it were, non-referential.

Roberts' central claim is that emotions are concern-imbued construals. Here's the idea. An emotion incorporates a certain construal or interpretation of some segment of reality; if I construed that segment of reality differently, or not at all, I would not have the emotion in question. When I fear, I construe something as threatening my life or well-being; when I envy, I construe someone as superior to me in some way.

Construals are not sufficient for emotions, however; what is also required is concern. What one construes as so-and-so must concern one. My construal of something as threatening my life must concern me or I won't feel fear; my construal of Michael as superior to me in a certain way must concern me or I won't feel envy.

Concerns vary in how important they are to one -- to put the same point in other words, they differ with respect to the depth of their ingression into one's personality. Some are so important to one that one cannot imagine oneself not having that concern; they are constitutive of one's identity. Relative importance is determined by which member of some pair one would choose to give up, if one could choose and had to choose.

Concerns also typically vary with respect to intensity, with the result that emotions typically vary with respect to intensity. Depending on the intensity of my concern over Michael's perceived superiority to me, I may feel intensely envious of him or only mildly envious.

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2 The description that Roberts most often uses is "concern-based construals." His thought is not, however, that the construal is somehow based on the concern but that it is imbued or infused with the concern. He himself sometimes uses the term "imbued."
Where, within the panoply of concern-imbued construals of reality, is joy located? Joy, I would say, occurs when it's important to one that things be a certain way and one construes them as being that way. Roberts gives a nice example of joy; let me quote what he says.

I am surrounded by my children, who are playing happily,... showing signs of flourishing, of growing well in body, mind, and spirit. As I contemplate this goodly scene, I am filled with joy. On my analysis of emotion, my joy amounts to a concern-based construal of my children: I "see" them in terms of their well-being, and this term impinges satisfyingly on my concern for their well-being. If I do not see them in terms of this or some similar aspect of the scene (let us say I merely perceive the noise and motion as an impediment to my reading), then I will not feel joy; or if I perceive them in terms of their flourishing but without this perception impinging on my concern (I am assessing them clinically, with perfect detachment, and give them a high grade), then likewise I do not feel joy. (279)

The linguistic connection between the English terms "joy" and "enjoyment" lead one to think that these are basically the same phenomenon. If I (and Roberts) are right in holding that joy is an emotion, then clearly they are not the same. Enjoying something -- enjoying the taste of the ice cream, enjoying the display of aurora borealis -- is not having an emotion. One "feels" joy, grief, pride, guilt, and so forth; one does not "feel" enjoyment. So, too, one does not "feel" happiness. One can, of course, feel happy. But happiness is unlike joy in that often it has no object. One just feels happy.

The fact that joy always has an object explains something that is of fundamental importance in our thinking about joy: one can experience joy without feeling (being) happy. One may in fact be miserable. A passage in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians offers a vivid example of the point:

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3 The passage continues: "Let us say, then, that joy is a construal of something in terms that satisfy one or more of one's concerns." Thus joy, as Roberts understands it, does not require that the concern in question be important to one. I doubt that one would naturally call it "joy" if the concern in question was unimportant to one; calling it "joy" would seem excessive. But whether or not that is correct, the sort of joy that the Theology of Joy Project has its eye on is clearly the joy that ensues on concerns that are important to one.
As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see -- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. (6:40-10)

Often miserable -- hungry, beaten, sleep-deprived, imprisoned, maligned -- yet always rejoicing.

To rejoice is to express one's joy. No matter how miserable he often was, joy was a constant in Paul's life. In the passage quoted he does not say what it was that gave him joy no matter what his condition. We know from other passages what it was; he found joy in the salvation that had come to humanity and the cosmos in the fidelity of Jesus Christ.

Joy and human well-being

The fact that one can find joy in something while at the same time being miserable and unhappy indicates that the relation between joy and well-being is complex. Let me approach what I have to say on the matter with some brief comments on the place of joy in the thought of the ancient eudaimonists. I am not aware that the ancient peripatetic (Aristotelian) eudaimonists said much about joy; the ancient Stoic eudaimoists said quite a bit about it.

The Greek *eudaimonia* is usually translated into English as "happiness." Given the meaning of the term "happiness" in present-day English, I judge that this is a mis-translation. The concept of the *eudaimôn* life was the concept of the estimable life, the admirable life, the good life. That leaves open the question, what sort of life fits the concept? What sort of life is the estimable life?

The prospectus for our consultation rightly distinguishes between *doing well* and *going well*. The ancient eudaimonists all shared the conviction that the estimability of one's life is
determined entirely by how well one is doing, not at all by how well or ill one's life is going. And they all held that the well-lived life is the life lived according to virtue.

The eudaimonists held that each of us is confronted in our lives with an array of natural goods and that these goods bear the relation of preferability to each other. The challenge facing each of us is to determine the correct order of priority among the natural goods that present themselves to us, and then to cultivate the relevant habits, or virtues, for the pursuit of those ordered goods.

It was characteristic of the Stoics to insist that prominent among the natural evils to be avoided were negative emotions -- grief, fear, regret, frustration, and the like. And they argued that the way to forestall or eliminate such emotions was to eliminate from one's life all care or concern for anything that one was not assured of attaining or experiencing. The way to forestall or eliminate grief over the death of a child is to eliminate care or concern for the continued life of the child.

The Stoics further held that the only thing one could be assured of attaining or experiencing -- the only thing entirely in one's own power -- was one's own virtuous activity. (In Book X of the Confessions Augustine vigorously disputed the assumption that virtuous activity was in one's own power.) That, then, should be one's sole concern: in all situations, to act virtuously. Those who did manage to live in this way were called sages by the Stoics. The sage will find joy in one thing and one thing only, namely, his own virtuous activity. Since the sage's virtuous activity was held to be entirely within his own power to bring about, albeit at the cost of long and strenuous self-discipline, the sage will feel no gratitude for the joy he experiences; or if, quixotically, he does feel gratitude, it will be gratitude to himself.
The Stoics were infamous in antiquity for holding that a sage would be happy (*eudaimôn*) on the torture rack. Startling though this claim is, this follows straightforwardly from what has been said. Even on the torture rack the sage will conduct himself virtuously and find joy in that.

The understanding of the estimable life that we find in Hebrew and Christian scripture is profoundly different from that of the ancient eudaimonists. The estimable life is not just the life of doing well but the life in which things go well.

Job was a righteous man, "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). In all things he conducted himself virtuously. But he was miserable. Though he was doing well, his life was far from going well. It was far from estimable. In the book of Job there is no suggestion whatsoever that he should try to execute the Stoic strategy of caring only about what lay in his power to bring about: not caring about the death of his children, not caring about his boils, not caring about his impoverishment, not caring about the hurtful things that friends were saying to him. Rather than not caring about these things, Job petitions God to relieve him from his misery and restore him to well-being. In the worldview of the ancient eudaimonists there was no room for petition.

Paul was like Job in that he did not say or suggest that the beatings he had experienced, the imprisonments, the bad-mouthing, were all of no concern to him. What he said was that, miserable though he often was, he always found cause for rejoicing. That cause for rejoicing was not something that he had achieved; it was the salvation bequeathed to him and to all humankind by the fidelity of Jesus Christ. In Paul, the emotion of joy was accordingly mingled with the emotion of gratitude.
In finding cause for rejoicing in the midst of his misery, Paul went beyond Job. Job did not speak of finding cause for joy in the midst of his suffering. The closest he ever came to rejoicing was when he declared,

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;  
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
then in my flesh shall I see God. (19:25-26).

In the Stoic sage, joy comes together with what the Stoic understands by well-being. The sage cares only about his own well-doing; he takes joy in that and only that. And since the sage, by definition, is one who consistently acts well, his life is suffused by joy. Such misery as he experiences is of no concern to him; it's a matter of indifference. He has no negative emotions; his joy is complete. The would-be sage is different, of course. There is grief in his life, grief over the fact that he is not yet a sage.

Given the biblical understanding of well-being as including going well along with doing well, there can be joy in one's life even though, overall, one's life falls far short of well-being. We would not understand those whose lives are shaped by Hebrew and Christian scripture if we did not recognize this point, that even when their life overall is going badly, even in the midst of misery, they will experience joy. But more has to be said about the relation between joy and well-being than just this.

In the biblical understanding of things, not only does well-being incorporate going well along with doing well. As I noted when describing Paul and Job, one is invested in one's life going well; one cares that it go well. One is not indifferent to misery but longs for release from misery.

And not only does one care that one's life go well religiously; one cares that one's life go well in all dimensions -- socially, bodily, psychologically, whatever. Job lamented the bodily
and social misery that had befallen him, and petitioned God to cause his life once again to go
well. Paul recited the many forms of social and bodily suffering to which he had been subjected,
not to go on to declare that they were a matter of indifference to him, but to say that in the midst
of longing for release from them, he found cause for abiding joy.

For most of his career, Augustine held that we should grieve and rejoice only over the
religious condition of ourselves and others. By the time he wrote his late book, City of God, he
had changed his mind. Now he says that we are "anxious lest [our friends] be afflicted by
famine, war, pestilence, or captivity, fearing that in slavery they may suffer evils beyond what
we can conceive" (XIX, 8). Now he says that we grieve over the loss of "solace" that the death
of a friend represents: "for if their life delighted us with the solace of friendship, how could it be
that their death should not bring us grief?" (XIX, 8).

It turns out, then, that in spite of the very different understanding of human well-being
that we find in the Stoic writers and the biblical writers, there is one respect in which the relation
between joy and human well-being is strikingly similar: only when one's well-being is complete
is one's joy complete. On the biblical account, however, our well-being to a considerable extent
is not in our own power to bring about. So we petition God for the well-being of ourselves and
our neighbors, and we express our gratitude to God for such well-being as comes our way. In
this world of ours, our well-being is never complete, however, and hence our joy is never
complete. So we look forward to a new day of no tears, no death, no mourning, no crying, no
pain (Revelation 21:4).

Joy in the contemporary world

Let me close with a very brief and inadequate comment about joy in the contemporary
world. Perhaps some of our contemporaries don't care much about anything at all. Such people,
if there are such, will experience no joy, or the joy they experience will be weak and diminished. It is my impression, however, that most of our contemporaries do care quite deeply about certain things and that they are, accordingly, susceptible to intense joy. Witness the wave of euphoria that swept over the German people when their team won the World Cup.

That euphoria proved relatively short-lived, however. Here today and gone next week, or if not next week, then next year. It was nothing like the abiding joy that sustained Paul through his many tribulations. And that's how it is for most of those among us who are secularists, or in whom confidence in God is weak or non-existent: their joys are transitory, and hence not of a sort to sustain them in times of trial. Few if any of those Germans who find themselves in troubled circumstances ten years from now will be sustained by the joy they felt when Germany won the 2014 World Cup.

Perhaps there are some secularists in whose lives there is an enduring joy. There may be some secular Jews, for example, who find joy in the continued existence since 1948 of Israel as a Jewish state; if so, that joy will be a constant in their lives. So too there may be some people who are born into wealth, who are attached to wealth, and who manage to remain wealthy their entire lives; joy in their wealth will be a constant in their lives.

Such joys are precarious, however, in a way that the joy in God of the religious person is not precarious. And about such joys as these one has to raise a moral question. Is it right to take joy in the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state, given the oppression of others that that continued existence has proved to require? Is it right to be attached to wealth?

Joy, and the care or concern of which it is the expression, is always susceptible to moral appraisal. It's an important point that I have not previously made. It's true that one cannot cease caring about something by deciding to do so, nor can one begin caring about something by
deciding to do so. But that we can cultivate cares and the elimination of cares has been recognized since antiquity by religious and secular writers alike.