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Introduction

In this paper I explore the analogs, antecedents, and natural conditions for joy—as far as they will take us—before turning to the theological features of joy that build upon, and eventually transcend, them. I am well aware that this project can draw the ire of both sides. Naturalists may call it a set-up job, since I will end with theological dimensions of joy that naturalists do not affirm. Theologians may be uncomfortable with the proposal that we can travel so many miles with the natural and social sciences, with artists and ethicists, with non-believers. Do we not thereby lose our unique identity as Christians? Must we not remain separate and distinct from the beginning?

Neither set of concerns should dissuade us. Instead, I suggest that taking this approach can bring a triple gain. For one, we already know that at the end of the day theological and non-theological views of the world diverge. It’s helpful if we can identify roughly where this happens: at which point and over what issues do we diverge, and why exactly there? Second, the approach expresses the conviction that theological virtues arise out of our created nature, not in opposition to it through a kind of negation of our createdness. The discussion of joy is one of the topics where this theology of creation is particularly evident.

Finally, there is apologetic value in telling the story of joy in this way. The story of joy may seem at first to be only the very particular story of a believer or a group of believers. But the story of joy, like the story of salvation, is an “intimation of transcendence” (Peter Berger)—a sacrament. By faith, we say that this moment of joy is not merely an idiosyncratic feature of my psyche; it is a sign of a cosmic truth, a promise of what is to come. Think for example of the book Surprised by Joy. Although it is purportedly only C.S. Lewis’s own autobiographical story, in fact it expresses his general position on the antecedents to joy, the failure of those antecedents by themselves to produce that which he seeks, then the moment of grace that is the sine qua non for Christian joy. The nature of the experience transcends the merely private and subjective; hence the phenomenology of the experience of joy is theologically significant as well.
The Natural History of Joy

Tracing the natural history of joy has the merit not only of adding clarity, but also of overcoming a sub-Christian dualism that treats joy like a lightening bolt, coming *senkrecht von oben* (vertically from above), without natural antecedents and conditions.

Of course, tracing the evolution of joy will require a model of evolution that is much broader than the reductionist, eliminativist picture offered to us by Richard Dawkins and friends. Fortunately, the evidence is increasingly on the side of this broader or “emergentist” reading of cosmic and biological evolution. For example, not all forms of dynamic systems in nature can be reduced to physics. Even physics offers us both Newtonian and quantum dynamics; and at present the laws of quantum and gravitational systems have not been unified. Even more clearly, the Darwinian possibility space through which life moves cannot be described in physical terms alone; in fact, Stuart Kauffman and I have argued, it cannot be prestated at all.ii

To each natural dynamic correspond certain natural structures and certain descriptions or predicates or experiences. Their description and explanation must be carried out at multiple levels. Let us call the position that goes only this far “weak emergence.” More controversially, it appears that emergent structures and their dynamics are in many cases different enough that we are justified in speaking of emergent agents and, with them, emergent types of causation. The unicellular organism becomes an actor in the world in its own right. What it does in the world is *agential causation*. This means that causal accounts given in terms of physical or chemical causes alone aren’t sufficient, even though they are *part* of what is happening when (for example) the simple organism moves toward a food source or away from a toxin. Let’s call this position *strong emergence*. In a recent book, *Beyond Mechanism*, we describe what biological evolution looks like when viewed as complex systems running on complex systems, producing vastly different types of agents across evolutionary time.iii

We will see that that without these assumptions the natural history of joy cannot be told—or cannot be told accurately. Instead, one is forced into a reductive framework that challenges the reality and causal impact of joy and closes the door to an adequate theological account of natural history and what it has produced.

The Preconditions for Joy

We were once taught that evolution requires us to tell the story of cosmic becoming as a linear building process, to be reconstructed in purely physical terms. The biological
part, it was held, is driven by the “selfish” genes, which are the only unit of selection in a competitive process “red in tooth and claw.”

I contend that only ideological prejudice could hold one to this picture today. Strong emergence offers a very different picture:

- Any organism on which natural selection operates, no matter how simple, already has a purpose, in a sense that no chemical compound does. As Stuart Kauffman puts it, it’s “out to make a living in the world.”

- The school of biosemiotics (Jesper Hoffmeyer) makes the point even more strongly: every organism is involved as an interpreter, interpreting the “text” of its environment; and every action is an interpretation, which will be supported or undercut by its environment and future events. Put differently: to be a living being is to do hermeneutics, to be enmeshed in a web of evolving meaning.

- Evolution in this sense is not just about physical laws or chemicals or even the just the biological structures. It necessarily also includes the functions served by these structures. Functions are teleological; they are defined by the goals that are intrinsic to a particular organism in a particular environment. One cannot describe a living being without reference to purposes. The simplest purpose, of course, is to survive. Individual organisms serve not only their own goal of survival, but also the prospering of their species. But most living systems are also symbiotic, with species serving the goals of other species. Life, then, is a web of interlocking purposes—goals within goals.

- Particularly important for the natural account of joy, purposes are as much expressed through behaviors as they are through physical structures. Behaviors are far more ephemeral than structures, which (for example) may be preserved for millions of years in fossil form. This result, if you think about it, is the opposite of reduction. The meaning of the evolutionary process is not the reduction backwards through the structures to physics alone; explanations are given in terms of the highly specific structures and functions that emerge along the way.

- Indeed, as organisms become more complex, it’s not just the external behaviors but also the emergent mental states that help to explain. Brains allow animals to construct a mental map of the world, to test possible behaviors against this map, and to pre-select behaviors based on the results of this inner process. Byrne’s work on deception behaviors in baboons demonstrate that the baboon has a
“theory of other minds”; he can distinguish between what he sees and what he would see if he stood where another is standing, and he can use this knowledge to his advantage.⁴

- *Homo sapiens’* evolutionary investment in a massive brain was in effect an investment in the construction of mental worlds. We live in socially invented worlds, in vast and complex structures of ideas (cultures, philosophies, possible worlds). Building, adapting, and transmitting these worlds is our primary survival strategy. To say this is not to negate evolution; it’s to acknowledge what evolution means in the human case. (It’s interested to ask whether animals can experience joy, or whether joy requires a certain level of cognitive awareness. If it does, what are its cognitive preconditions? Knowing these answers would also be helpful for a theology of joy.)

- Philosophers may single out the propositional content and logic of these mental worlds, but the human brain does not do so. As much as we value conscious awareness, consciousness accompanies only a small portion of what our brain does. Our bodies are awash in hormones and our brains in neurotransmitters, and the affects they produce play a huge role in decision making and acting. For example, numerous neurons carry messages from the amygdala (the brain’s fear center) to the frontal cortex (associated with reasoning), but the brain’s architecture allows for few messages to make it through in the opposite direction. We remember our affective responses as well as we remember content, and often more so; and we are guided by them far more than we wish to acknowledge. This realization is fundamental to the theology of joy.

**Joy: The State, Its Causes, and Its Object**

What about joy and the brain; what can we say about the neural correlates of joy? Among other things, researchers can note what kinds of brain activities are occurring and what neurotransmitters are being produced when experimental subjects report feeling joy. Off course, such neural correlates of consciousness do not tell us what it’s like to experience joy (the “quale” of joy, its phenomenological features), nor do they by themselves specify what in this correlation is cause and what is effect.

Still, the science does allow us to say a few things.⁵ Physiologically, joy is similar to certain other affective states: enjoyment, happiness or eudaimonia, bliss, euphoria, enthusiasm, passion. We know that the subjective experience of joy correlates with significant releases of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is also linked to the feeling of love and with sexual arousal, but also with attention, intuition,
and addiction. These links are crucial to the neurophenomenology of joy. Interestingly, finally, dopamine is the great motivator. As Dr. Breuning writes, “Without dopamine, we don’t care about anything. With dopamine, we move mountains to get at things.” That insight is theologically significant.

The beginning of joy may be linked to a specific thought or event. But it can also arise as a more general sense, without a specific stimulus that the individual or researcher can identify. Joy can be experienced over minutes, or it can characterize a broader period or season of one’s life. Indeed, some individuals so regularly report being joyful that it seems to have become a character trait for them. There is no contradiction here. Although dopamine by itself creates arousal and adds urgency to impulses, an individual person can over time develop habits (character traits) that strongly influence which impulses she acts on. (What is the relationship between rejoicing and being joyful?)

In an interesting article, the Buddhist neuroscientist Rick Hanson of the Wellspring Institute argues that “the mind is inclined to joy.” Dopamine is an incredibly strong motivator, such that we are highly inclined to repeat actions that increase dopamine release. (Could one become “addicted to joy”? ) Many systems in the brain work by negative reinforcement, driving us to avoid painful or unpleasurable sensations and experiences. Dopamine-based responses such as joy, by contrast, provide strong positive reinforcements that motivate individuals to repeat the actions and attitudes that produce joy.

**Christian Joy**

Christian teaching takes the positive and negative reinforcements that help our bodies to learn, remember and adapt, and it puts them to work to build lives devoted to the service of God and Christian discipleship. Neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and secular systems of value do not tend to single out joy from among the other affective states, but Christian teaching does. Interestingly, Hindu and Buddhist systems place more emphasis on bliss (ananda) than on joy. So why is it that joy plays such a central role in Christian teaching? And what is this role?

Jesus identified the values, actions, and attitudes associated with the kingdom of God. The New Testament epistles add further detail to Jesus’ description (and example) of a life lived with and in the Divine. Remarkably, Paul mentions joy second in his list of the fruits of the Spirit, preceded only by love (Gal. 5:22). The fact that most of the nine fruits of the Spirit are practices that become habits and eventually character traits (patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) speaks volumes about the
NT understanding of joy. Similarly, in contrast to pop psychology treatments, enduring states of joy (“rejoice always”) are predicted not when things are going well but during periods of sustained adversity (Phil. 2:17-18; 4:4; James 1:2-4).

Clearly, rejoicing—the state of living in joy—is one of the prime byproducts of a life suffused with the Spirit of God:

- The desire for a joyful life helps motivate growth in holiness (John Wesley).
- Genuine joy indicates genuine encounter with God (Psalm 16:11, Psalm 100:2).
- Specific experiences of joy reinforce the practices of discipleship and serve as signs that one is genuinely “walking in the Spirit.”
- The ability to “rejoice in all things” is a clear indication of a life lived in regular, ongoing communion with God. One can “fake” the bodily expressions of joy (which, by the way, are fundamentally the same across all human cultures), but the experience of joy itself comes as it were unbidden in the presence of God.

In September we will certainly discuss the fact that the Bible commands us to rejoice (e.g., Phil. 4:4). Some hold the view that people can directly achieve the state of joy by seeking it, by willing or deciding to be joyful. I am skeptical of this claim. Following the lead of Gal. 5:22, in connection with other biblical passages, I interpret joy as a byproduct of a life lived in harmony with God and in the conscious presence of the Spirit of God. It’s true that this experience of joy is so highly motivating that one may consciously seek after this particular experience, just as believers consciously seek to experience God’s glory and grace. But it’s not as though we can grit our teeth and scrunch up our eyes and by sheer will power feel joy. Joy is a byproduct of other actions and practices, some of them not private but rather communal, which we can consciously pursue and practice.

**Nine Core Principles of a Theology of Joy**

I’ve never read a biblical theology of joy; it would be interesting to know whether one has ever been written. But it’s not difficult to list a few of its core tenets:

1. Deep, abiding joy (χαρά) is a strong indicator of life lived in the Spirit and in conformity with the teachings of Christ. Joy thus deserves inclusion within any complete theological anthropology.

2. Beyond its role as indicator, joy is both an intrinsic good and a motivator to continue to walk in the Spirit. It is both a subjective state and a character trait. (It would be interesting to reflect more on how these work together and what is their significance for a theology of religious experience and for a Christian meta-
ethic. Are there analogs in secular ethics?) The noun, the verb, and the adjective (joy, rejoicing, being joyful) are connected in ways we still need to explore.

3. Joy is manifested within an individual as, for example, perseverance is. But the telos or goal of joy is not individual liberation, escape from the world into some sort of mystical union with God. (It is less like the Hindu ananada or bliss, and more like the compassion of the Mahayana Buddhist Bodhisattva). Rejoicing is a state of being in the world in God. It represents the immanence of the divine Spirit, incarnated in a person and working for the kingdom of God.

4. Joy reached out toward the category of incarnation. It is what happens when the Spirit of God infuses a human body. It does not negate the body but completes physical and biological existence. In this sense we should look for the roots of joy all the way back to the moment of creation. In a (non-Manichean) Christian theology, joy does not negate the created order; it arises when the creation is rightly ordered. By contrast, the negative affective states that are antonyms to joy (depression, melancholy, misery, sadness, sorrow, unhappiness, discouragement, mourning) reflect a dis-ordered creation, a creation not in right relation to God.

5. Paul uses the 2nd person plural imperative in his call to “Rejoice!” (Χαίρετε, Phil 4:4). Joy, it seems, is a public quality of the church, a state we are called to strive after and to achieve. What would it mean to think its significance at a level similar to “By their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7:16) or “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35, ISV).

6. A healthy church is a rejoicing community, which means that joy can be a corporate state. That is, the community rejoices, the community is in a state of joy—even though it’s always an individual who experiences the feeling of joy. Why do we not write joy into the heart of our ecclesiologies?

7. Joy does not have to be the product of reflecting or meditating on the nature of God or salvation history; it can arise unbidden as one walks in the Spirit or serves others. But Christian joy still presupposes God and God’s works; they are the water in which it swims. Two things, I think, are true: joy is the natural reaction of created beings to the presence of their Creator and to knowledge of the nature of God. And joy, like gratitude, is the quintessential response to the manifestation of God’s grace. We can expect joy to arise when we reflect on God’s gracious acts in history and within the church, but we cannot imagine that an individual would know her life to have been transformed by God’s unmerited
favor without the response of joy in return.

8. Crucially, joy includes an irreducibly eschatological dimension. Consider the phrase, “that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). Nothing less than the final Sabbath rest can make joy complete. This eschatological vision of the reconciliation of all things with each other and with God again contrasts Christian joy with the “bliss” of escaping samsara, the cycle of birth and rebirth, in Hindu traditions. We look forward to the time when “all shall be well … and all manner of thing shall be well” (Julian of Norwich), the time when “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:4, RSV). Our joy today is in some sense an anticipation (prolepsis) of that longed-for final state—which again makes joy a corporate and theological quality, not just an individual, subjective state.

9. Of course, that final state is not yet present. We experience joy through concrete signs, symbols, and moments, which in some sense make present that which they symbolize, even though its consummation is still future. Joy, then, is sacramental. It is a real byproduct of a real encounter, as the lover’s beating heart and blushed face are the real manifestations of the presence of his beloved. But joy is never only about this moment, this experience, this worship service. Its sacredness lies also in the miracle that what we experience here and now is at the same time the God of all things, the One who will eventually “make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

Endnotes

1 I happily express my gratitude to my research assistant, Mr. Dongwoo Lee, for his research assistance as I prepared this paper.


Rick Hanson, “Seven Facts about the Brain that Incline the Mind to Joy,” <http://media.rickhanson.net/home/files/7FactsforJoy.pdf>.