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Joy in Time: Augustinian Reflections

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The blurriness of joy and the precision of pain—
I want to describe, with a sharp pain’s precision, happiness
and blurry joy. I learned to speak among the pains.

Yehuda Amichai, *The Precision of Pain*

Whether man can be both blessed and mortal is a great question.

Augustine, *City of God*, 9.14

Discourse on happiness is an ancient trope. But it is a remarkable, perhaps revealing, feature of our age. The desire for happiness is hard to escape. I suppose sociologists have long stories to tell about what its hold on our imagination tells us about the distinctiveness of our cultural condition. Part of that story may involve the near epidemic diagnosis of depression among adults, and increasing numbers of diagnoses in children and adolescents. Anyone who teaches undergraduates regularly is confronted with this reality, not to mention the various pathologies of higher education that conspire against happiness.

Nevertheless, careerist students—said to be uninterested in “big questions” about a life worth living—flock to courses on happiness even as they fill their resumes with the remarkably strenuous (shall I say, Pelagian?) activity of earnest liberal reformism. Happiness seems for many of them not so much a right, but a duty. Future intellectual historians, no doubt, will locate this preoccupation within broader social imaginaries and a “feel of the world” that Charles Taylor and others have described with respect to changing religious and non-religious “options” in the wake of the grip of classical theism and the rise of humanitarianism.¹ The revival of virtue ethics and the turn to cognitive understanding of emotions would also play an important role in such a story. Still others may suggest interest in happiness is a product of the relative peace and

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard 2007), 325. More than his other writings, Taylor here laments a cramped yet demanding moral universe that renders difficult a religious conception of “fullness” beyond human flourishing.

prosperity that affords the bourgeois luxuries of searching for personal fulfillment or disenchanting denial of its possibility.

What is striking is how this discourse cuts across usual divisions between the humanities, social science, and the natural sciences. Despite resistance in many quarters to “human nature” and “human destiny,” academic disciplines are littered with efforts to define, measure, and coordinate diverse accounts of happiness—and related terms like human flourishing, well-being, virtue, and the good life. The rise of neuropsychology, “positive psychology,” and renewed philosophical interest in Greek *eudaimonia* are but three examples. Even some Protestant theologians, typically resistant to eudaimonism, have dared to embrace the language of “happiness.”² In fact, classical eudaimonism strikes me as undergoing a major reconstruction in Christian theology, stripped of strong contrastive interpretations of the “natural” and “supernatural.”³

This resurgent interest in happiness also finds its way into popular writing and journalism, though unlikely driven by such scholarship. It seems natural to us that writing about happiness has a general audience. I confess a certain skepticism about this literature, with its penchant for kitsch and sentimentality, but there is enough there to sustain serious interest.

Some of this literature already tracks our consultation’s interest in the theme of joy, especially among those critical of “thin” accounts of happiness. Given recent interest in affect theory, anthropologists and philosophical distinction-makers have (again?) turned our attention to the many faceted dimensions of the experience of happiness. Popular works in theodicy also

² Ellen Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Eerdmans 2010).

³ Henri de Lubac’s influential challenge to certain neo-Thomist understandings of the natural and supernatural seem relevant to a Christian account of joy, especially one that responds to empirical research. Does nature dispose us to supernatural ends, or is that bad way of framing the question?

adopt the language of joy.⁴ Pope Francis’s recent apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, binds joy to missionary activity and economic analysis. A recent work in political theology makes joy central to renewing civic participation in diverse political communities.⁵ And the hot book among my cohort of parents is the aptly titled, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*, a well-written account that draws on interviews and recent social science. It tries to capture the joyful ordinary with neither romanticism nor nostalgia. Yet, discrete attention to joy has not generated the same attention as other phenomenon in “happiness studies.”

“Joy” strikes me as one helpful—and neglected—route into a better way of accounting for human nature and human destiny beyond subjective well-being. Like a shift to talking about “flourishing” rather than “nature,” it may be a salutary semantic move with helpful consequences for theory and practice.⁶

I don’t know the relevant fields and histories well enough to know the fate of joy in Western thought and practice, let alone scriptural interpretation (i.e., Wisdom literature vs. the New Testament). A genealogy of joy, and its difference from pleasure, play, or the sublime, would help to illuminate what issues are at stake in competing descriptions. But it would not explain (or better yet) show how joy is related to human nature and human destiny.

My brief reflections take a different tack, motivated in part by my experience in teaching extremely morally serious undergraduates, but also by my wrestling with a master psychologist of the Christian tradition often credited with making our experience of the world joyless. Part of

⁴ Sydney Callhan, *Created for Joy: A Christian View of Suffering* (Crossroad 2007), and C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harcourt 1955).

⁵ Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (Oxford 2012). Hordern highlights the “earthy festivals of Israel’s life” in critical conversation with Martha Nussbaum and Jurgen Habermas (thought to underplay the role of joy in politics).

⁶ Discussions in environmental ethics, for example, are framed differently by the fear of danger and the joy of new lifestyles.

the pleasure of reading Augustine with undergraduates is the way he speaks to their addiction to prestige and attendant melancholy, as well as their coincident moral rigorism. He had his own experience to tell about adaptations on a hedonic treadmill and the drive for moral purity, stealing joy by imagining it belongs only to oneself or is, ultimately, under our control. But experience would always exceed his effort to narrate a self. One of his early dialogues, “On the Happy Life,” imagined philosophy and the liberal arts as the best boats for our difficult journey to happiness. But he would abandon this project in that form, accusing his teachers of seducing with “smoke and wind” that never got beneath the surface of experience. With some levity, he would reject the 288 theories of happiness outlined by Marcus Varro. As Peter Brown puts it, the once promising professor would become “a man acutely aware of being caught in an existence that denies him the fullness for which he craves...but made ever-present to him by the quality of the love that ‘groans’ for it.”⁷ His restless heart yearned for more than the vulnerable beauty of Virgil, the moral self-mastery of the Stoic sage, or even the delights of Christian monasticism. He wanted a joy that can not be lost.

Augustine is probably not on most people’s list of festive theologians of joy. Almost the opposite is a common reading, risking the tragic. John Rawls called him one of the two darkest minds of Western thought. Henry Kissinger is said to have quipped that the secret of success in life is low expectations, something my colleagues in psychology label “defensive pessimism,” a strategy to manage anxiety and despair. Things can always get worse, but they are always better than we deserve. Augustine is capable of praising the goods of the world, especially friendship and the intricate beauty of nature, but joy always appears as only a promise.⁸

⁷ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (California 1967), 150.

⁸ Cf. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton 2007).

Life is pilgrimage. Like the beatitudes, his writing is consolatory in tone. We are never fully at home in this shattered world. All temporal goods are to be *referred* to eternal goods, where they will find rest and consummation. Plenty of ink, including my own, has been spent interpreting his infamous distinction between *using the world* and *enjoying God*.⁹ The way it funds Augustine's pessimism and inwardness is true enough to have heuristic utility. But it also distracts with its supposed Platonism that sees earthly goods as a means to an ultimate, solipsistic, good. I have tried to make it problematic by locating Augustine's practical intellectual orientation within a broadly sacramental vision and complex moral psychology of ordering loves rather than a dualist metaphysics and dour anthropology. His erotic theology is nothing if not eschatological (rather than primarily apocalyptic). Eschatology frames his laser-like focus on pride, imperial conceits of worldly folly, and mistaken objects of joy. Even our virtues, he fears, are "the slaves of human glory" (*City of God*, V.20). Sacrifice, confession, and lament dominate. Joy is always to come, seemingly unrelated to fragile things of time, trapped in Zarathustra's chorus: "All joy longs for eternity."¹⁰

Time is grief stricken, marked by distension and dispersion of anticipation. Against the philosophers, Augustine boldly declares human life is "happy in the hope of the world to come, and in the hope of salvation" (*City of God* 19.5). This looking forward to our perfection can give rise to familiar hyper-spiritual Augustinianisms that pit love of God against love of the world. "Supreme joy," Augustine tells us, "is found where we delight in God, where free from all anxiety, we live in united fellowship with our brothers and sisters and our true companions in that city" (*en. Ps.* 136.7). Despair, as later Augustinians like Kierkegaard observe, may be a true sign of God-relatedness in time.

⁹ Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago 2008), especially chapter 5.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 47.3

But, like Amichai's poem and the Psalms, Augustine's reflections on joy and sorrow are bound together, both rhetorically and conceptually. His fondness for the beautiful patterns of mosaics is a helpful analogy. He takes delight in strong contrasts to dramatize the wonder of creation and the joy that is human destiny in God. The playful relation between freedom and constraint, between action and passion, is part of human nature. Caught between time and eternity, our joy is "blurry," frustrated by disappointment. We bundles of loves are tempted to elevate certain aspects of the good as if they were the whole. We do not see the whole. But wholeness is not fully opaque. We are not simply victims. Humans remain wooed by the magnetism of the good, rather than simply broken by awareness of sin.

Augustine's account of joy is no less intellectualist than Aquinas's. The "direct sight of God" is the "eternal perfection of all joys" (*Trin.* 1.16-17). Despite his diagnoses of the difficulties of knowing and willing, he is moved by the fact that the world is intelligible. The wonder of its intelligibility is rooted in an eternal love abiding in time, a God in solidarity with humanity, a God both parent and child. It can be known as gift, a gift that includes us, under God's providential care and susceptible to our moral agency through a kind of therapy in our way of feeling and thinking. This reaches beyond the speculative intellect and includes the will, the how of relating to the circumstance of life. Indeed, joy is an "act of the will in agreement with what we wish for" (*City of God* 14.6). We should be careful what we wish for, but wishes are not simply illusions or rewards; to deny them is to diminish our humanity. Augustine's letters and sermons are replete with practical examples of virtue transformed by joy in time, and of hearts broken by joy not abandonment.

The accent of this contribution to the Christian tradition falls on the "felt" participation in relationship to God and creation. Proper perception of reality is trained in prayer, praise,

compassion, and thanksgiving. Augustine's torrent of restless emotions suggests participation is not simply a transcendent summons reflecting a desire to get out of time and out of the body. He could not imagine a common good that did not include his happiness, structurally similar to American dreams of reconciling self-realization and democratic faith. Creation is deeper than the fall, and his teleology requires resurrection joy presupposes reverence for creation. Joy may arise in a present moment, attuned to the divine spirit, imperfectly but not merely apparent. Augustine's joy is ecstatic and enduring because it remembers a lost joy (*gaudium pristinum*) and hopes for a promised renewal. This patient longing can be dangerous, refusing to accept the world on its own terms. The joy acknowledged in any good thing, for Augustine, is an acknowledgment of the highest good, of a relation between proximate and final ends. God is goodness, the destiny of all that is. As deferred, the heavenly city cannot erase the joy of time, but as a matter of hope, it displays its imperfection.

This side of modernity, most of our best secular literature and philosophy, even while defending objectivity in aesthetics and ethics, denies such hope. To a greater or lesser extent, some seek to persuade us of its pernicious alienation. Others seek a less combative détente. In *Religion without God*, for example, Ronald Dworkin offers a defense of "religious" values without Augustinian divinity or destiny beyond time.¹¹ He speaks of a satisfaction, even immortality, in a life well lived apart from the hope of redemption. Other examples of secular piety abound.¹² What might they offer Abrahamic religions in the cultivation of joy?

¹¹ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Harvard 2013)

¹² I am thinking of Thomas Nagel, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Jeffrey Stout.