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The Task and Gift of Life: Joy in the Context of Agent-Perfective Eudaimonism

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Like joy, *eudaimonia*, that key term in Greek moral thought, has been difficult to pin down. It is most commonly translated either as happiness or as flourishing, with both translations acknowledged to be inadequate: the former implies subjective feelings of pleasure or contentment, while the latter suggests an objective state of health. The Greeks typically viewed eudaimonia as a matter of actively living well, not just a life that objectively is going well. In part, this was because they refused to allow that a human life could go well unless it was also being lived well; they agreed that eudaimonia was not something that could simply be given to someone, even if they disagreed about whether the agent’s own living well—the agent’s virtue—was sufficient or only necessary for eudaimonia. All of this suggests that it could be fruitful to reflect on joy in connection with eudaimonia, particularly when it comes to puzzling through the questions of how joy is related to life going well, on the one hand, and to life being lived well, on the other.

Eudaimonism is most often taken to be the view that *eudaimonia* is humankind’s last end, where our last or final end is that, to echo a famous passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which we find desireable or choiceworthy for its own sake, and for the sake of which we desire all else that we desire (NE 1094a 18-24), and where developing the virtues is taken to be at least necessary, if not also sufficient, for eudaimonia. Eudaimonism so understood has been subjected to a variety of critiques. Among the most persistent is that it is improperly self-regarding, that it does not adequately capture the ways in which we are called to respond to and care for the good of others for their own sake, not because of the way that responding well to others contributes to or helps to constitute our own well-being. Might a similar worry haunt the pursuit of joy? Or can attention to the relation between eudaimonia and joy put such suspicions to rest?

Elsewhere I have defended a version of Christian eudaimonism, developed in close conversation with Aquinas as well as with contemporary Aristotelians, Thomists, and their critics. While space does not permit me to unpack the details here, I will offer a compressed
sketch in order then to say something about the relationship between eudaimonia, as I understand it, and joy. The form of eudaimonism I defend (which I call Agent-perfective eudaimonism and contrast with Reason-source eudaimonism), rejects the notion that rational agents always act for the sake of their own good, in other words, that their own good is the source of all of their normative reasons for action. Instead, while granting endemic human selfishness, it regards rational moral agency as directed toward and thus fulfilled in seeking goodness as such, rather than necessarily goodness for the agent.¹ So understood, eudaimonism is not self-regarding. Indeed, eudaimonia confronts the agent as a task, and a task that requires self-transcendence. Eudaimonia is thus better understood as the agent’s perfection, not as the agent’s happiness in any ordinary sense. And while eudaimonia is not joy, we will be better able to give an account of joy, and its relation to life’s going well and being lived well, if we first get clear about eudaimonia.

What sense might we make of Aquinas’s claim that both beatitudo (his translation for Aristotle’s eudaimonia) and God is our last end? Aquinas insists that God is the end of all created things, even as various creatures attain to their last end in specific ways that vary with their natural kinds: rational creatures by knowing and loving God, and non-rational creatures “insofar as they share in the Divine likeness, inasmuch as they are, or live, or even know” (S.T. I-II.2.1). All living things seek the particular things that are required by their natures in order to flourish. But to grasp something as an end, as worthy of pursuit, is precisely to grasp it as good or apparently good. This is constitutive of rational agency in particular; Aquinas says that rational agents are inclined to good “with a knowledge whereby they perceive the aspect of goodness” (i.e., “cum cognitione qua cognoscunt ipsam boni rationem” (S. T. I.59.1). He also puts this in terms of grasping “good in general” (“universale bonum”) and “the universal aspect of goodness” (“universalem rationem boni”). Further developing Aquinas’s account, we can note that this grasping of goodness as such is rarely explicit, but it is implicit in our practices of reason-giving. To exercise rational agency is to grasp the various things that are potentially worth pursuing in relation to one another, so as to determine which of these is actually worth pursuing, all things considered, here and now. This certainly does not mean that we always do a good job at deliberating, grasping which goods are at stake and how stringent the reasons in

¹ Christians regard human nature as perfected in Christ. Thus, the “virtuous agent” to which I refer throughout is Jesus Christ; I don’t mean to imply that rational moral agency is perfected as a matter of course through a normal path of development.
favor of various courses of action. Nor does it mean that we always act accordingly, since we may have desires that are not responsive to reason. But it does mean that we—and others—expect our actions to be expressive of reasons. The further notion that rational agents pursue a single final end, as opposed to simply pursuing various intrinsic goods, lies in the implicitly comparative character of all reason-giving. If I must choose between taking a walk on a crisp fall day and completing my grading, but I have no idea of how to compare these goods with one another, I will be dissatisfied. We must constantly coordinate, order, or choose between conflicting goods that present themselves for realization through our action. We do so by arriving at all-things-considered reasons for action.

Insofar as we do actually respond well to the goods we encounter (including caring for other persons for their own sake) we are being perfected as the kind of creatures we are. Drawing on the rich theological conception of creation as an exitus from and reditus to God, we can understand this as a participation in the fulfillment of God’s end in creating. This reditus refers not to a physical reabsorption, nor merely to mystical contemplation, as on a Neoplatonist conception, but rather to an active relating of ourselves and of all things to God. Other creatures, simply by virtue of being what they are, and of behaving as they do, make the glory of their creator manifest and thus reflect God in myriad finite ways. But creatures who are moral agents participate in a reditus of a different order. We are, as Aquinas puts it, “principles of our own actions.” In the perfecting of their agency, of their responsiveness to all the various goods they encounter, such creatures are being responsive to God’s goodness as reflected in creation. They are, that is, relating all that they perceive, through their actions and affections, their loving attention, to the absolute goodness that is God. In this perfecting of their responsiveness to goodness, they participate in a process that reveals God’s character as a God who creates in order that God’s inner identity be revealed and expressed ad extra, in friendship with what is not-God, in a shared partnership in being for the good.

To love the universe of creatures in this way is to respond appropriately to their worth and to foster their potential flourishing in relationship with one another, that is, to act in ways that are responsive to the worth of created things and their interrelationships, and it is in and through this to choose and act for God’s sake. So we have here an account that can make sense both of love of creatures for their own sake, that is, their good and flourishing as end in itself, together with love of them for the sake of their final end, that is, for God’s sake.
What of self-love? Is there something troublingly self-regarding in this picture? Thomas says that we properly love both ourselves and others as that for which good is desired (S. T. I-II.7.ad 2); there is no principled difference. In both cases, we properly love toward a fuller resemblance to God of the sort particular to the kind of creatures we are and toward the realization of the individual’s relation to God. And that is as creatures who are moral agents, who are principles of our own actions, capable of responding to all of creation in terms of its present and potential relation to God. Precisely for that reason, however, we are responsible for our own agency in a way that we are not responsible for the agency of others. It is in this sense that we rightly act for our own perfection in a way that we do not act for the perfection of others. I must strive to act for sufficient reason; I must seek to respond to other agents who require from me an account of why it was right to pursue this good in this way at this time. Of course I may and must seek to bring it about that other agents respond appropriately to the goods they encounter in their agency, but there are limits to how I may go about doing so; I must respect the fact that they are principles of their own actions, givers of their own reasons. It is up to me to attend to how I as principle of my own actions respond to the various goods I encounter in a way it cannot be up to me to attend to how others do so. It is not because the virtuous agent cares, as a matter of motivational necessity, more about herself and her welfare that she refuses to sin in order to free her neighbor from sin; it is because she cannot free her neighbor from sin, a fortiori not by sinning herself.\footnote{Nor is it the case that we start out as pure egoists and need somehow to overcome that in order to begin to care for others; post-Kohlbergian empirical psychology has in a host of ways revealed us as pro-social creatures all the way down. Indeed, it takes time even to develop a sense of oneself as a distinct center of agency. Colin Trevarthen, “Communication and cooperation in early infancy: a description of primary intersubjectivity,” \textit{Before Speech: The Beginning of Interpersonal Communication}, ed. M. Bullowa (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 321-347. G. Kochanska, N. Aksan, A. Knaack, and H. M. Rhines, “Maternal Parenting and Children’s Conscience: Early Security as Moderator, Child Development,” \textit{75.4} (2004):1229 – 1242; Robert Emde, “Social referencing research: Uncertainty, self, and the search for meaning,” In \textit{Social referencing and the social construction of reality in infancy}, ed. S. Feinman (New York: Plenum Press 1992, 79-94); R. N. Emde, Z. Biringen, R. B. Clyman, and D. Oppenheim, “The moral self of infancy: Affective core and procedural knowledge. Developmental Review 11 (1991): 251-270.} If responding to your claims on me requires that I do something wrong, then your claims cannot be more than prima facie justified; they cannot be all-things-considered justified demands. So, failing in this instance to respond to your demands does not mean that I am more concerned about my own perfection than I am about you; it means only that I must be responsive to all of the normatively salient features of the situation in order to act well. Our special concern for the quality of our own agency can, then, be a proper concern that we
adequately discharge our responsibility to respond appropriately to all of the various goods that we encounter. There is nothing here that is necessarily improperly agent-centered or inadequately focused on the neighbor or her need.

There is, then, a perfecting of agency that supervenes on respecting well, indeed, caring for, all the various goods one encounters. If this is the final end sought in action, then it—this responding well to goods, which perfects agency—is eudaimonia; it is this that fills the structural place held in ancient thought by “eudaimonia.” Eudaimonia is, then, a task that confronts the agent. Like ancient eudaimonia, this is not “happiness” in any ordinary sense; common-sensical views have been transformed quite radically in the process of reflection. It may involve the sacrifice of many elements of our natural well-being, of our life going well, in its pursuit of the life that is lived well. It is a call to self-transcendence, not in any direct way a call to self-cultivation, a call to form of “eccentric existence.”

Moreover, we can distinguish between the perfecting of one’s agency in responding to goods and the fruition or enjoyment of that perfection. Those who love God for God’s own sake seek to bring all that is within their sphere of agency into proper relationship with God; they seek to love all the goods they encounter in relation to God. They would love God in this way even if the fulfillment of the task comprised in being a rational moral agent, in relating all goods to God, did not bring them to fruition of that relationship; i.e., they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of self. The task imposes an obligation the validity of which is not contingent on the agent’s coming to participate in the divine good. Surely, though, they do desire the fruition of that relationship, and would not be virtuous if they did not. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” cries Jesus from the cross. Further, for the most part there is some fruition that supervenes even on our very imperfect efforts to execute well the task that is our life. We are capable of taking some satisfaction, at least, in having acted well.

Eudaimonia, then, is not joy. It is not “the summit of integral well-being.” It does not fulfill all desire. For we can intelligibly desire what we cannot intelligibly intend, what we cannot bring about through our agency. One of the ways in which Christianity upended pagan

5 We can go even further than this: possession of the virtues is the most likely path even to happiness in a more ordinary sense—not a guarantee, but our best bet. Hursthouse’s discussion of this point is illuminating; see On Virtue Ethics, 170-174.
thought was in elevating receptivity over activity; if God is our final good, that good is not, contra standard pagan thought “something we can achieve for ourselves.” God is the ultimate, if imperfectly known, object of desire. What we desire is not simply that we be properly responsive to God in and through our agency. More than this, we desire fellowship with God, a participation in perfected relationship with God, one aspect of which is its fruition: the enjoyment of God. Joy is not simply a matter of objective relations; it is intrinsically experiential, an experience of fellowship, of finding fulfillment in God.

Both eudaimonia and joy can be either implicit or explicit, and indeed, becoming explicit is a process and a matter of degrees. The activity of properly responding to all of the goods we encounter is capable of being made explicit as a responding to God, a relating of ourselves and all things to God through our agency—but it is not always explicit in this way. Similarly, joy as fruition can be more or less explicit as the enjoyment of participation in the fellowship of the divine life.

Karl Barth’s understanding of joy is helpful here. Joy for Barth has an eschatological character, insofar as it is fully achieved “only in the case of what is called in Holy Scripture eternal joy and felicity in perfect fellowship with God” (CD III/4, 377). But joy is for Barth most simply “gratitude for an effected fulfillment,” and he stresses that this is, or can be, experienced in small ways all the time: “man (sic) has joy when there is in his life great or small fulfillment of his conscious or unconscious desires, cravings and strivings, when an event or change occurs or a state is achieved which he can greet and welcome because openly or secretly he had been waiting for it” (III/4, 376). This is an account of what I would term implicit joy, and one that draws fruitfully on our experiences as timeful, embodied creatures. Joy is not a matter of turning away from natural life or even of looking above natural life; it is found within its structures and limits, and is made explicit insofar as we grasp these as a gift from God.

To be capable of grasping and relating ourselves to goodness as such is to be confronted with a task. However, life is not solely task. It is also gift. As Barth reminds us, “it is a gift of His grace and benevolence and glorious purpose for man. How can man live it in obedience if his only desire is as it were to roll it off, if he merely tries to execute it as that movement in time,

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6 Julia Annas, The Morality of Happiness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36. We cannot attain this good in two senses: first, because we are in fact incapable of perfecting our agency, our responding to God in and through our response to all the finite goods we encounter, and, second, because what we desire exceeds the perfecting of our own responding to God—we desire fellowship. Thus, God is not simply the final end of our activity, not just a goal we intentionally seek, but a goal we desire beyond our capacity to seek.
if he is not prepared that it should reveal and confirm and present and offer itself as the divine
gift of grace which it always is, if he is not able continually to rejoice in anticipation of
something?” (III/4, 378). So joy is a Sabbath, and like the Sabbath, itself also commanded. We
cannot, to be sure, make ourselves joyful, but we can seek to hold ourselves in readiness for joy
(III/4, 377). To be sure, the will to joy as a will to fulfillment is a natural desire (III/4, 375). But
the pursuit of joy is self-defeating if taken up in a self-regarding way, as if joy were a possession
to be grasped. And insofar as the task of eudaimonia has become explicit to us as the task of
relating ourselves and all things well to God, it becomes explicit as well that joy itself is
commanded, and this lends joy a new character. No longer does it lie outside the task of living
well, but it is taken up into that task, such that in self-transcendence, in obedience, we find self-
fulfillment. We fail finally to relate well to God unless we do so in joy, rejoicing and not just
dutifully toiling, even as the command to joy includes a command to “the small and smallest
joys,” to “material joys,” aesthetic joys, social joys and joy in nature, even joy in work (III/4,
381). Joy is “an intensification, strengthening, deepening and elevation of the whole awareness
of life” (382). Wherever joy is found, there is an anticipation of the revelation of the union of
our life with God’s eternal life, which has already been fulfilled, but not yet revealed (384-5). It
is, in my terms, an anticipation of the reditus of creation to God that is fulfilled in the expanded
fellowship of the divine life. And this anticipation can be more or less explicit.

How does joy, so understood, relate to life going well and to life lived well? In joy, there
is an awareness that in a most significant sense, life is going well. The gift that God is offering
has been accepted in gratitude; the reditus is being performed. In its implicit form, there is the
experience of the realization of honest effort and the enjoyment of that fulfillment. However,
joy, both implicit and explicit, is compatible with life’s not going well in a host of ways: I may
be sick, or dying, a failure, an outsider, alone; the world may be at war, or in famine; injustices
may be rampant. This underscores joy’s eschatological character; joy can exist under such
circumstances, but it is incomplete. It is anticipation of fulfillment, but not completed
fulfillment.

It is tempting to say that joy supervenes on eudaimonia, on the perfection of our agency,
of our response to all of the various goods we encounter, and thus, also to God. This would
mean that joy exists only where life is lived well, where we have been perfected as the kind of
creatures we are. Certainly, insofar as joy is seen as commanded (even if only paradoxically,
since it is not effort but a fruition, a form of rest), it is seen as an integral aspect of living well. However, joy is available to the imperfect; it does not wait upon our perfection. Even when we fail to relate all things to God, fail to respond well to all the various goods we encounter—which we always do, fallen creatures that we are—we remain capable of joy. Imperfect, fragmentary, fleeting joy, but joy nonetheless.

Further, the joy that grasps creation as gift is not passive. While joy is certainly a form of deep contentment, it also situates one to grasp the outrage of the defacing and rejection of creation and its creatures. Joy, then, can prepare the way for righteous anger, for prophetic condemnation, for opposition to all the forces that impede the reditus of creation to God.

Joy, then, is itself an aspect of the living well of life, but it does not wait upon the perfection of living well. In fact, to some extent it can also run the other way: where joy is present, conditions for the cultivation of virtuous agency also exist. Grasping creation as gift, we are oriented to life in a receptive stance, a rest, a form of prayer, which nourishes activity, effort. Where we have grasped our very being as gift, we can approach the task that is our lives in and with joy.