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Economic and Theological Impossibility of Joy

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Joy is a curious state, if it can be called a state at all (and not rather a process – we seem to notice changes in our utility but not the state of utility itself, furthermore research shows that there is asymmetry, we seem to notice loss more painfully than gain). Joy seems to come from comparison – either when an increase in joy happens or when we remind ourselves of others – joy seems to be comparative (either self- or other-).

There has been a surge in recent years among economists vis-a-vis this subject. Skidelsky for example wrote How Much is Enough? I will come to the economic thought on this shortly; first I want to analyze the theological implications.

For me as an economist (who are largely in charge of making people happy) a question arises: is there even in the abstract world of phantasy, religion, imagination, in the most perfect states (gardens of creation) was there joy? And if so, why – according to these stories – did people leave the State of Joy? (As this is Economic Theology, not religious studies, I will restrict myself to Christianity, although in other beliefs the story is similar).

1. Theology: Joy in the State of Joy?

First, in the God-created Garden, Adam, in the perfection of creation (both internal and external), before sin(!) did not feel joy (or it has not been recorded), he felt alone.\(^1\) In fact alone is the first recorded emotion, according to Genesis, that human beings felt. In the material and spiritual perfection, Adam was not happy, he was lacking something. Even in the presence of God, when Adam walked and talked with God (had the most direct access and contact to Him from all the created people) he did not feel complete. This relationship (God-Adam) did not satisfy him. He felt alone. How much joy can one feel when one feels alone? (Joy of all emotions wants to be, in the first place, shared.)

\(^1\) Gen 2:18 “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”
Secondly, also mark, that while Adam was alone, as a response a helper was created.\(^2\) This is a strange response to loneliness. And one must immediately ask the question: what did Adam need help with? Was he too small for the task? What task? In other words, even God acknowledges that Adam (again, this was before the fall) needed help, that he himself was not enough (for whatever the task was) to do the job, his work, his calling – to be what he was meant to be. The first situation of a human being was not unemployment or underemployment, but over-employment, inability to cope, work-castration stemming from the impotence of fulfilling the work that one was called to do. It is impossible to imagine that such an unfulfillable task would bring man a state of joy. Rather, guilt should be expected (“I am unfit for the task”). But this guilt is of strange character, it is, in this case, guilt without fault.\(^3\) (Adam did nothing wrong, he was just created so as to need a helper, created unfinished, undone, created helpless\(^4\)). And as we know, guilt leads to fear\(^5\); and this fear itself arises from the possible consequences of not complying with the role (rule?) in question.\(^6\)

These two small hints reveal a lot. Let me stress again that these lacks (or faults in creation) happened before the fall, i.e. the “human error” cannot be blamed. As far as I know, these two occurrences have completely escaped the attention of theologians, who are rather in line of the theologically comfortable thinking that all imperfections occurred after the fall.

\(^2\) Gen 2:18
\(^3\) In a similar fashion, Job is punished without doing anything wrong – he is guilty without blame. As a response to God's monologue he “despises himself and repents” (Job 42:6), although he has done nothing wrong, for he is, in God's own words, “blameless and upright” (Job 1:8; also see Job 1:1).
\(^4\) Adam's help was disjointed from him, his help was not in himself (God did not upgrade Adam, instead He created another “external unit” to complement Adam) – nor was Adam’s help in God.
\(^5\) The mere presence of the second person – woman in this case – is then an external reminder to Adam that he is unfit. Thus this castration is primarily work-related, not sex related. First there was work-castration (unfit for the task) and secondly perhaps sex-castration (which reminds us of our ontological insufficiency) – the psychoanalytical logic is reversed here.
\(^6\) Why not quote the whole progression? “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering” stated by Master Yoda in a famous quote to Anakin Skywalker the first time they met in Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace.
We do not know how long people stayed in the blessed state of Eden and whether they were happy or not, we only know that nothing happened during this time (nothing worth noting, no historical event, nothing formational, nothing historical), except for naming the animals\(^8\) and the “foreplay to Fall”. Real history started after the Fall – and it was a history (largely and mostly) of suffering, pain and guilt.

**Third**, the only story that reveals a bit how human beings feel in prolonged states of joy is the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son\(^9\), the one who *stayed* in his father's heaven (which could be read as a continuation of the Eden story – the prodigal son not only leaves the heaven but also returns forgiven). Here the brother that stayed in the heaven is the most bitter of all. Not only did he never celebrate with his friends, he feels no joy when his lost brother returns (on the contrary he feels anger). Not only this, he cannot even rejoice in the joy of his father when his son returns. He had all the context to be joyful, but he was not.

The only happy characters in this story are the prodigal, who left the garden to “come to himself”\(^10\) and the father, who too, actually, left the garden (just like God in Christ) to run to meet the prodigal.

**Fourth** and last, one must ask the ultimate question, Is God happy? Here I rely on Kolakowski and on his brilliant essay “Is God Happy?” No need to repeat this famous essay, just the conclusion, which is clear: no. He cannot be. Vis-à-vis the suffering of his creation which he loves, He cannot be.

## 2. The Economy: Joy in the State of Joy?

Many economists of the past have devoted significant thought to the idea of Stationary state. This is a social condition which comes closest to the “State of Joy”, where we will no longer feel the urge (or even imperative) to *grow* (as one painfully hears from economists today), i.e. to *progress*, to *improve*, to *better*, to be closer to (some

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\(^8\) Mark that Eve was created *after* naming the animals, a task – an intellectual task of creating aristotelian categories – that Adam managed perfectly fine alone and needed no help.

\(^9\) Luke 15:11-32

\(^10\) Luke 15:17 (KJV) What is the distance between self and self that he had to transcend? What self came to what self? Whence the gap? What matter is this gap made of?

And could we say that the non-prodigal brother was truly himself, that his self was not disjointed from himself (“I am the one who I am not” – this seems to be the only appropriate reaction to God’s “I am who I am”)? No, not at all. On the contrary, the constant presence in the Garden made him incurably non-himself. The prodigal at least returned, came to himself. The non-prodigal could not return.
Famously, John Maynard Keynes expressed (in 1930s) the hope that such a heaven on Earth would be within reach in the coming hundred years. Then the “greatest change our material development has ever had” would take place: The greatest change in man’s material (and, as it would appear below, not only in material) development would occur and a new man would arise—a new, different Adam, who would lie back and not have to constantly hurry.\footnote{The notion that \textit{progress can save the world} has taken a form of social hope par excellence. David Hume believed that “if nature gifted us with a surplus of material possessions and everyone had enough of everything, then it would be certain that every virtue would blossom in that blessed state.” Injustice would disappear and “judicature would henceforth be unnecessary.” John Stuart Mill, one of the fathers of economics, believed that “mutual trampling, destruction, pressing with sharp elbows and stepping on heels” are only the syndrome of a transitional era. When it ends, we will achieve a \textit{steady age}, when “no one desires to be richer.”}

As we see and feel around and in us, this has not been the case. As Skiledsky notices in his \textit{How much is Enough}, nothing is enough. The more we have, the more we want. Here it is appropriate to quote the economist George Stigler, who was aware of this human unsaturatedness. “The chief thing which the common-sense individual wants is not satisfactions for the wants he had, but more, and better wants.” Don Patinkin argues, “history has shown that Western society created new wants just as fast as [if not faster than]! it expanded the means of satisfying them.”\footnote{I draw the conclusion that … the economic problem may be solved, or be at least within sight of a solution, within a hundred years … the struggle for subsistence, always has been hitherto the primary, most pressing problem of the human race—not only of the human race, but of the whole of the biological kingdom from the beginnings of life in its most primitive forms. Thus we have been expressly evolved by nature—with all our impulses and deepest instincts—for the purpose of solving the economic problem. If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose … For many ages to come, the old Adam will be so strong in us that everybody will need to do some work if he is to be contented … for three hours a day [of work] is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!” Keynes, \textit{Essays in Persuasion}, 358-373. Also, for our purposes, mark how Keynes uses the religious language of new and old Adam.}

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3. Way out?

It is interesting to note that the main desired direction in the Bible is not forward as it is back. (It is not come forward to me, but come back to me, it is not forward to the promised land, but back to the promised land, etc.)

Kingdom here?

Ironically, one of the most horrible things to realize is that the state of joy is right now, for those who have time to read these lines, definitely (why not? We have food, water, shelter, safety). That things will never be better, and that they are – by and large – as good as they can be at the given state. That the economy is grown enough, that capitalism has brought us all it could. Even in a situation of perfect bliss, we would find symbolic things that are lacking, we are not loved enough, not wealthy enough, the cake is not sweet enough, I am not paid enough etc.

Stop milking discontent

This is a retake of the old debate between Stoics and Hedonists: both observed the discontent that prevents us from the state of joy, I demand more than I have. There seem to be two ways to minimize the discrepancy between demand and supply. One is to increase the supply of goods (in personal lives as well as in permanent GDP increase) until it satisfies our demand—to have, so to speak, all that we want to have. This is the Hedonist program: Find out what you want (this itself is a difficult exercise) and then strive toward it. This is a never-ending story, as is the case of a carrot on a stick. However, this is the program that we have chosen from the Greek era until today. That is one reason why our GDP has grown as it has—because we wanted it very, very much.

The other reply to the problem of demand versus supply is an opposite one, and it can be found in the ideas of the Stoics: If there is a mismatch, a gap between demand and supply, then decrease demand to meet your existing supply. While it looks easy on paper, this is a tough psychological exercise that the Stoics had to train a lifetime for.

If we have chosen discontent to be the engine of our progress then fine, but we should not complain that we are not content.

Good and Evil

What seems to compromise the feeling of joy the most is not evil per se, but the idea of better. Eve and Adam wanted to know more (a state that God seemed to have prevented us from having. He created us in His image, but when the image was too much like Him, he disliked that image: men were now both good and evil, just like He was Himself). We see the motif of “over-creation” (the too much) appear again in the flood story and every time when the words too much appear. God creates a complex world, but when it has gone too high in the level of complexity, he decreases it (be de-
creating it) by destruction.

It is often said that Good is the best enemy of The Best. If this is so, then the reversal must be true as well: The idea of The Best is the cruelest enemy of the Good.

In this context mark that it is never stated that the Creation was “perfect” it is merely said that it was “good” and “very good”. Also, according to one way of reading, the name for devil in the book of Job means “perfecter”. And, practically, it is not our poverty or low levels of GDP that tortures us in our political predicament today, but the fact that it is not getting better (it is not growing!).

We seem to do whatever we can to be in a state of joy, the garden of peace and harmony of paradise – and when we achieve it, we seem to do anything we can to leave it. And to look for it again. And leave it again.