

JOY, HEDONISM, AND SCIENTIFIC UTOPIA

Jason Monroe on a Truly Good Life

It is easy to conflate the concepts of joy and happiness, but C.S. Lewis defines joy as a unique phenomenon: “[A]n unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is . . . distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure.”¹ The confusion of joy with happiness (and pleasure) combined with society’s general goal of a happy life often means forgetting Lewis’s Joy. Joy is beyond our direct control — like the unexpected scent of a rose on a morning stroll. We cannot manipulate the world so as to arouse it, so we tend to neglect it, preferring controllable physical pleasures. It would be a good consolation if popular sentiment adopted Aristotle’s formula of virtue leading to happiness, but it seems that Epicurus is more in vogue: “Epicurus agrees with Aristotle that happiness is the highest good. However, he disagrees with Aristotle by identifying happiness with pleasure.”² A few growing movements, Transhumanism and the Hedonistic Imperative, claim the keys to “the good life” and rest them on an Epicurean platform. We will show that these

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 17-18.

² Tim O’Keefe, “Epicurus,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur/>.

keys fail to unlock the door to true happiness, and suggest a different set of keys — those that unlock the truths of original sin and the supernatural.

The general movement of Transhumanism (“H+” for “Humanity +”) comprises the Hedonistic Imperative (“H.I.”) and other progressive and scientific views that are supposed to usher humanity into a utopic, post-human future. H+, according to evangelical scholar Nancy Pearcey, “urges society to take charge of evolution through gene modification.”³ H+ serves our science-enamored epoch well, with its faith in the ability of Human Enhancement to provide a shiny future of happiness and thriving. After all, science is thought to ‘prove’ things, unlike the speculations and imaginings of religion, art, literature, etc. Of course, mostly founded on the assumptions of scientific materialism, H+ sets out to achieve not Lewis’s mystical sort of joy, but a mere neurochemical state of happiness (indistinguishable from pleasure). H+ “suggests that if there is no author of the book of life, then there is no basis for regarding organisms as integrated wholes,” thus rejecting fixed forms in favor of a malleable flux in nature to be tinkered with to suit its ends.⁴

More specifically, the Hedonistic Imperative says science, if given free rein and the right resources, can achieve a virtually pain-free reality for all people. One would think the combination of Darwin and Nietzsche has demonstrated that the painful struggle in this competitive world builds strength and refines the intellect. Perfect happiness is not really an evolutionary

³ Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*

advantage. But H.I.'s view is that it is "misleading to contrast social and intellectual development with perpetual happiness. There need be no such trade-off." David Pearce, H.I.'s founder, says the, "Life-long happiness of an intensity now physiologically unimaginable can become the heritable norm of mental health."⁵ To the majority — often wiser than we give it credit — such a wonderful vision of heaven on earth is still generally accepted as the fancy of a few. One needs only recall the enduring popularity of *Brave New World* for a scathing critique of a State-and-Lab collaboration to dream up utopia. Or even the peril of the Eloi in *The Time Machine* is a telling study in how perpetual leisure soon results in atrophied minds and over-simplified civilization. True joy is of a nature that it springs from good character, built by enduring pain and suffering in the proper way. Pain is as part and parcel to human existence as joy, and when someone grows in virtue by reacting well to suffering, joy can more easily grow in the fertile soil of virtue.

G.K. Chesterton reveals another reason why a utopia of all-pervading happiness is only a pipe dream. H+ and H.I. submit that scientists can concoct happiness as one mixes elements for the perfect potion. The problem overzealous scientists tend to miss is the complex and ultimately incomprehensible nature of a mental health necessary for true Joy. Chesterton summarizes the issue in his prescient book, *Eugenics and Other Evils*:

But if he [the eugenicist] says he understands
the sane man, then he says he has the secret of

⁵ David Pearce, "The Hedonistic Imperative: Abstract," *HEDWEB*, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.hedweb.com/hedab.htm>.

the Creator. . . . We can no more analyse such peace in the soul than we can conceive in our heads the whole enormous and dizzy equilibrium by which, out of suns roaring like infernos and heaven toppling like precipices, He has hanged the world upon nothing.⁶

Fully understanding human joy exceeds the intellect's scope, so it is futile to attempt a fully man-made panacea. Of course, specialists can command narrower fields, such as the effects of one disease or the corpus of one writer; but again Chesterton indicates the folly of claiming mastery of something as general as health. No one can be a "general specialist . . . because there cannot be such a thing as one who specialises in the universe."⁷

Further, an immovable obstacle to the achieving of utopia via science is the reality of original sin. Theologian Thomas Oden argues that

The consequences of sin, like all self-determined historical acts, become locked into causal chains. These consequences cannot be simply stopped. It does no good to say: "Stop the world, I want to get off. . . . To change that would require the redesigning of the world totally, and no one is up to that."⁸

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922; repr., Project Gutenberg, 2008), chap. 2, Digital edition.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 438.

This is not mere spiritual pessimism: the task of reversing the Fall (as described in Genesis) is in an essentially different category than, say, putting right a broken leg. The bent character transmitted by the parents of the human race is not simply surpassed by growing more brains and brawn, since those very tools are now twisted. Humanity overcoming the obstacle of sin with its own natural powers is like someone leaping to the moon, unaided, or an eye seeing its own malady (which only another eye can). Therefore, only a power higher than humanity can straighten out its ingrained bentness.

Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck further elucidates the Christian view of original sin by contrasting it with two secular views. He writes, “Kant and Schopenhauer both perceive [that] human nature’s deep moral decay . . . rests *in* rather than simply *on* the human being.”⁹ So far so good. But atheistic thought, even if it begins with fallen human nature, can only provide a humanistic solution. Bavinck continues, “And yet they both became unfaithful to their starting point . . . they . . . hold fast to the possibility of salvation.”¹⁰ In context, Bavinck means Kant and Schopenhauer posit a secular salvation — one attained wholly by natural reason. They fail to attach proper gravity to the Fall. These colossal minds build castles in the air, believing the unchangeable can be changed. Again, Chesterton hammers home the truth:

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview* (1904; repr., Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin — a fact as practical as potatoes. Whether or no man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing. But certain religious leaders in London, not mere materialists, have begun in our day not to deny the highly disputable water, but to deny the indisputable dirt.¹¹

If H+ and H.I. want to be scientific and start with fact, they should start with the Fall, as most of humanity has. To deny it introduces a dead-end philosophy that promises happiness but can only result in misery (like the failed promises of many political ideologies). A Band-Aid on a hemorrhaging wound will not do much good regardless of optimism.

The Christian idea is that original sin results in human suffering and cannot be blotted out by a humanistic utopia. But it does not end with this idea. What if there were some purpose, some higher plan for pressing into suffering after accepting it as an unalterable aspect of human existence? Some thinkers say suffering reveals healthy limits or boundaries from which we can learn to live a better life. Thomas Aquinas assumes as much, saying, “If evil were completely excluded from things, much good would be rendered impossible. Consequently it is the concern of divine providence, not to safeguard all being from evil, but to

¹¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 18.

see to it that the evil which arises is ordained to some good.”¹² In step with the theme of joy, St. Thomas reminds us of the theological concept *O Felix Culpa*, “O Happy Fault,” which proposes that from the first human failing, eventually something better unfolded than the first human pair had before they were sundered from Eden by angels and a fiery sword.

The idea that life could be better after a Fall feels scandalous because it seems natural to assume a pain-free existence is superior to a painful one. This is perhaps one of the great paradoxes of life, like Free Will or Love or Redemption, but it is a mystery that need not be irrational or baseless. We are reminded by Oden that “God permits freedom to fall in order that we may arrive at a deeper consciousness of our own finitude and our own inability to attain righteousness on our own.”¹³ By denying the necessity of human limits, their benefits are overlooked, thus H+ and H.I. enter the wild, unattainable speculations of the post-human, Nietzschean Superman, albeit one brought up-to-date with contemporary science. The innermost seed of man’s psyche, the will turned black by disobedience, is ignored and whitewashed by supporters of the scientific Superman. Understandably so, since no one really wants to focus on the negative (suffering). The problem is that by dismissing it, we blind ourselves to the maturity (many times joy) that results from patiently responding to suffering.

12 *Calibre Library*, “Compendium Theologiae,” chap. 142, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Compendium.htm>.

13 Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 157.

As touched on above, one way to find joy in suffering is to allow virtue to take root and grow amid the thorns of pain and suffering. Naturally, the joy that arises in such circumstances is the desire mentioned by Lewis. He argues that the desire-greater-than-any-satisfaction must point to a satisfaction of its own. Connecting this with the Christian vision, the apostle Peter calls attention to perhaps what Lewis was driving at: “Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, as you attain the goal of [your] faith, the salvation of your souls.”¹⁴ Following common sense, the idea of joy-as-desire implies a satisfaction for such joy, just as thirst implies an object to slake it. If a longing still endures after having sought all possible natural ends, logic would suggest a supernatural fulfillment. Creation teaches that human yearnings do not exist in a vacuum, but in a context where satisfaction, even if not obvious or available, exists. And St. Peter does in fact name that supernatural satisfaction — “the salvation of your souls.”

Instead of a mechanistic cosmos, with neurochemically-defined pleasure as mankind’s highest end, the loftier, spiritual aim of joy is more consonant with human nature. This is because it is a mystical reality more in line with our experience of human emotions that exceed the mere chemical. Selfless love, for example, is one of the greatest passions and is not reducible to mathematics as some kind of zero-sum game. It is like divine grace in that, when properly practiced, is freely given as a gift. Further, this is when it is most fulfilling,

¹⁴ 1 Peter 1:8-9 (NABRE).

or joyful. Free will is another case: to account for morality or responsibility before the law, something within man must exist that is free and outside of the causal chain of nature. Aside from being less true, it is less joyful to consider free will as an illusion and man as a deterministic robot. As Chesterton says in his typically aphoristic manner, “Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity.”¹⁵ The metaphysical morbidity made by H+ and H.I. straightjackets minds into a hard cell of physicalism and shuts the window to the refreshing breeze of spiritual possibilities. The highest of those possibilities is finally resting in God, as Augustine famously said, “[O]ur heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”¹⁶

The post-human utopian could argue that the joy-as-longing is reducible to one of the many shades of neurochemical pleasure. But we have seen this gratuitous joy to be a phenomenon out of our direct control and somehow transcendent. The sweet sound of the struck bell or plucked string that gives John the profoundly joyful longing in *The Pilgrim's Regress* is strong enough to call him away from home and family on an unpredictable adventure. He desires again a longing so piercing and of a quality so existentially unique and meaningful that he spontaneously makes searching for it his life's pursuit: “I know now what I want.”¹⁷ John's journey precipitates — leaving behind all other pursuits

¹⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 35.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933; repr., Grand Rapids: Bantam, 1981), 8.

— due to acknowledging what is best and most noble in human nature. He receives a grace, a grace that, albeit mysterious, is most joyful because of its supernatural nature.

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