

What Is the Difference Between Joy and Happiness?

The Crown of the Good Life: Joy, Happiness, and the Good Life, A Hypothesis[1]

“To miss the joy is to miss all,” wrote Robert Louis Stevenson in his essay “The Lantern-Bearers” (1887).

[2] No matter what we possess or experience and irrespective of how we act, if we miss joy we have missed all. Stevenson’s bold and perhaps exaggerated claim is a distant and garbled echo of the accolade the Master in one of Jesus’ parables gave to the good and trustworthy servant: “Enter into the joy of your Master!” (Matthew 25:22). Here joy is *the* reward for a job well done and a hefty return on investment achieved, which is to say, the reward for a life well lived. The best benefit the Master is able to bestow and the servant could hope to receive is *joy in a world of joy!*

Should joy, all its delights notwithstanding, get such a pride of place in human life? Can what seems like an elusive feeling pull toward itself the noblest human strivings? Might not joy be to a good life what sugar is to nutritious and richly flavored food? Isn’t joy rather much like what we today call happiness—a feeling of pleasure—and therefore a dubious candidate for the good life? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014) joy is just that, with some intensity added: “A feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” But defining joy as a “feeling of great pleasure and happiness” is like describing champagne as a bubbly liquid, but forgetting all about its golden color, whiffs of ripe pear and fresh baked bread in its aroma or traces of apple, vanilla, yeast, and nuts in its flavor, and, of course, its capacity to intoxicate.

What are some smells and flavors of joy? To spare you disappointment, I should note that I am not about to take you to a joy-tasting event. As it turns out, no such event can be set up. You can’t swish little sips of various joys on your emotional palate; as I will note later, when joy comes, it mostly supervenes on the complex system of thoughts, actions, dispositions, practices, situations, events, etc. that together can be summed up in two phrases: life being led well and life going well. Instead, I am taking you into a “laboratory” where I hope to identify and analyze joy’s component parts. For reasons that I don’t fully understand, joy, an emotion that ranks close to the top in the hierarchy of emotions, is also the least studied. Psychologists and philosophers don’t bother much about it; religious scholars, as distinct from preachers and spiritual masters, mention it in passing; even Wikipedia, which has entries on everything, has a disambiguation page instead of an article on joy. I trust that by the time our somewhat arduous lab work is done, you will be persuaded that joy is much richer than the feeling of happiness, even great happiness, and that the authentic joy, though not itself the good life, *is the emotional substance and manifestation of the good life.*

Sketching Joy

What is joy?

First of all, joy is an emotion, not a mere feeling. Feelings are bodily reactions, and they have causes: a feather under my nose causes a tickle, for instance. Emotions are active responses, and they have objects; a child is born, and I rejoice *over* the event. That said, joy certainly does involve positive feelings. It is a positive affective response to having something good happen to those for whom we care or, as Thomas Aquinas writes, joy is a response to having been “united” with what we love. Depending on the intensity of the feeling, joy can range from exuberance (say, over one’s team winning the World Cup) to calm delight (say, over a quietly sleeping child)

Joy involves the *construal* of the object of joy as good; it is tied to how I perceive things rather than to what things are in themselves. I can perceive an event—the birth of a child, for instance—as something good or as something unbearably burdensome. I will rejoice over it only if I perceive it as good. Equally importantly, joy construes its objects as wondrous, un-owed; joy wells up in me when I see myself or those for whom I care as having had a good fortune or having been blessed. For instance, I rejoice over a bonus but not over getting regular pay (unless I consider myself blessed to have a job at all), or I rejoice over creation if I construe it as a wonder and a gift but not if I think of it as mere nexus of causes and effects.

Related as it is to intentional objects, joy depends both on the more objective character of things and on my subjective construal of them. If I find a desirable item on my table and construe it as a gift, I will rejoice; if I construe it as a bribe, I will become disturbed. On the one hand, joy is not entirely self-generated; because it has an object and is a response, it comes partly from outside, from the character of the world I encounter. On the other hand, I can rob myself of joy by failing to perceive good things as good things and to respond to them properly. I can be in a perfect world with the fruit of all trees but one available to me, but if I construe it as not good enough because the fruit of that one tree is withheld from me, I will not rejoice.

With its four structural elements (intentional object, perception of the object as good, experience of the object as un-owed, and a positive hedonic response), we can define joy as *emotional attunement between the self and the world—usually a small portion of it—experienced as blessing*. To complete the sketch of joy, I need add that for the most part we don’t experience joy as an all-or-nothing affair. It is neither a matter of having a perfect joy or no joy at all, nor is it a matter of joy either overriding all our emotions or of it being entirely absent. Whether joy is intense or gentle, simple or complex, episodic or enduring, joy is mostly partial and overlaps with other emotions. As the experience of joy at a funeral of one who lived life

well attests, we can rejoice and grieve at the same time.

We are now about half way into our joy lab work. By now we should be able to pick out joy from among other aspects of human life and experience. That suffices to establish that joy is an emotion much richer than happiness understood as feeling of pleasure. But to understand the connection between joy and the good life, we need to stay a bit longer in the laboratory and take a brief look at some additional and surprising features of joy.

Fleshing out Joy

The claim that it is possible to rejoice in the midst of suffering will surprise nobody. Some people rejoice while others suffer, even because they suffer, and some people suffer so that others can rejoice (J. S. Bach's of Jesus' passion: "Your bitter suffering brings thousands of joys"). Suffering and joy are here divided among different individuals. But can a person who suffers rejoice? Surprisingly, the answer is, yes: we can suffer and rejoice at the same time. Of course, we don't rejoice *because* of suffering, either of our own suffering or somebody else's; such joy would be either masochistic or mean. When we rejoice while suffering it is because of some good that is ours despite the suffering (for instance, God's character, deeds, and the promise of redemption) or because of a good the suffering will produce (for instance, a child for a mother in childbirth). Put more abstractly, "joy despite" is possible on account of "joy because."

Some joys are morally neutral, but many have a positive or negative *moral* valence. Joy can be corrupt (with eyes wide open I construe an object of joy as good, but it is in fact profoundly wicked); joy can be self-absorbed (I rejoice only in my own good); joy can be indifferent to others (I rejoice with gusto over my distant friend's fortune but am unmoved by the pain at my doorstep); joy can be perverse (I rejoice in the misfortune of others); joy can be generous (I rejoice in the good of others or, to quote New Testament, I "rejoice with those who rejoice"); joy can be attuned to the suffering of others (as when, in a period of intense joy, we continue to be mindful of those who grieve).

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Since joy has a moral dimension, rejoicing can be an obligation (for instance, a command of God, as in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament). True, we have little control over feelings of joy; as a rule, they simply well up inside us when we perceive that some un-owed good has happened to us or to those we care for. But we do have significant control over how we *construe* a situation and whether we are properly attentive to these un-owed goods. The command to rejoice presupposes a belief that objectively a given situation ought rightly be construed as good. Absence of joy can then amount to an untruthful rendering of that situation. Yet, though joy can be commanded, joy cannot be imposed. A person himself or herself must engage in a construal of a situation and positive feelings must well up inside them for there to be joy.

Joy is either free or it isn't joy—and that's true even of commanded joy.

Perhaps the most surprising, joy has an activist dimension. Surprising, because joy doesn't explicitly advocate any values or social ideals; it doesn't seek to persuade others and to embody those values and ideals in social institutions. But joy wants something; all emotions do. They project themselves into the future and motivate action. What kind of future does joy want? As it projects itself into the future, joy doesn't aim directly at changing the world; it simply delights in and celebrates the good that is and proclaims, implicitly, that it is good for that good to continue to be. "All joy wants eternity—wants deep, deep eternity," wrote Friedrich Nietzsche.[3] Like love, joy is one of the "eternity seeking" emotions. It wills itself as a permanent state. But just for that reason it also wills all the "objects" which give it rise. In this willing joy sets itself tacitly against features of the world over which one cannot or should not rejoice, and does so without resentment and judgment. As such, joy is both the beginning and the end of authentic personal, social, and political transformation.

Joy is best experienced in community. Joy seeks company ("come and rejoice with me") and the company of those who rejoice feeds the joy of each. Feasts and celebrations both express and nourish joy. As feasts and celebrations illustrate, though joy is irreducibly personal—nobody can rejoice in my place!—joyfulness can also be an aura of a social space, whether a household or a larger community, so that when we enter such a space, we enter into joy, and, often, joy enters into us.

Finally, joy is not a self-standing emotion, isolated from the character and circumstances of a person rejoicing. As a form of attunement between the self and the world perceived as blessing, joy is, ultimately, the emotional dimension of the good life, of a life that is both going well and is being lived well; complete and lasting joy is the emotional side of the ultimate good.

Joy and the Good Life

With our lab work completed and the key features of joy identified, we can return to the relation between joy and the good life. In contemporary, late modern cultures, many define the good life as a life that *feels good*, in which pleasure overshadows the pain (happiness as pleasure). Others think of the good life as life that *goes well*, a life marked either by some objective indicators of well-being or by a more subjective assessment that life is satisfying (happiness as well-being or life-satisfaction). Still others, today perhaps a minority, think of the good life as the life that is *lived well*, in accordance with our nature or following divine commandments (happiness as excellent life). Advocates of these three basic ways of understanding the good life debate their positions intensely. I don't need to wade into this debate here, except to note that in my judgment, any plausible candidate for the good life has to incorporate all three: life is truly and

fully good when (1) it goes well, (2) we lead it well, and (3) when it is pleasurable. Of course, to be a plausible candidate for the good life isn't yet to be a compelling one. How compelling a plausible candidate for the good life is will depend on how each of its three dimensions are construed and related to one another.

A remarkable thing about joy is that, as a single emotion, it integrates all three essential dimensions of the good life. How does it accomplish this extraordinary feat? Though in no way reducible to "pleasurable feeling," joy, one of the most pleasurable emotions, arises when a portion of our life goes well (some good has happened to us) and when we relate well to ourselves and to that portion of our lives (we perceive it as a blessing and are grateful, and, for the moment at least, content). Note that joy isn't a mere affective add-on to having led our lives well and to something good having happened to us, like a cold beer at the end of a successful hard day or a blissful spa weekend at the end of good month. As I have noted earlier, joy isn't a self-standing emotion; it is even less a self-standing feeling. It is integrally related to (a portion of our) life going well and our life being lived well—and, as I have noted earlier, it is so even when we rejoice in the midst of suffering and in response to a command. We receive a clean bill of health (or are offered a dream job offered, or our marriage proposal is accepted), we experience ourselves as blessed, we feel pleasure over these things—that's joy. Of course, the doctors may have failed to detect some life threatening illness or the job may turn out to be a nightmare or our partner may walk away a week before the wedding, and then our joy will have proven to have been false. But in all true joy, the three dimensions of the good life are integrated.

Could joy, then, be a candidate for a one-word definition of the good life, perhaps in the way some people think happiness is? Indeed, could it be better able to integrate in itself the requisite conditions for our thriving and our responsibility for it? Could the good life be described as the life of joy, as the Parable of the talents might be read to suggest? Not quite. Joy is a bit like a crown. Wearing a crown won't make you into a monarch; a child can wear one, as can a usurper. If you aren't a monarch already, even if what is set on your head looks like a crown, it isn't actually a crown. For the crown is a symbol of royal authority. It is similar with joy. Joy isn't the good life; it is one part of it, the one dependent on the other two. If there isn't any good, either perceived or actual, to rejoice over—no good circumstances or active stances—happy feelings you might have may look and feel like joy, but they will not be joy. As an emotion, joy is always *over* something (perceived) as good, and it presumes proper relation to some (perceived) good—which means that *true* joy presumes proper relation to some *actual* good. At the same time, the crown is not merely external to royal authority. In a crown, royal authority comes to expression; wearing it, a monarch is publicly manifest as monarch. It is similar with joy. Joy is not merely external to the good life, a mint leaf on the cake's whipped cream. Rather, the good life expresses and manifests itself in joy. Joy is the

emotional dimension of life that goes well and that is led well, a positive affective response to life going well and life being led well; all three in their interpenetrating unity—life going well, life being led well, and joy—are the good life.

For the most part, segments of our life, often entire chunks of it, aren't going well and much of it we don't live well. Given that joy attaches to life going well and being led well, must joy be lost to us? It need not be. We can rejoice over the many small goods we experience, and for those of us who are religious, we can find joy in the One Good that is both the source and the goal of our existence. Though fragmentary, all small joys celebrate goods in our lives that are and remain wonderful, at times no more than tender plants in the cracks of our otherwise heavily cemented and gray lives. And in all true joys we yearn for, and perhaps also faintly experience, a world in which all things and all manner of things shall be well.

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[2] Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Lantern-Bearers," in *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, ed. Jeremy Traglown (New York: First Cooper Square Press, 1999), 234. In "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (in *On Some of Life's Ideals* [New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1912], 16) William James quotes from Stevenson's essay extensively and with approval.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, translated by Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 264.

Discussion Questions

1. What are enhancers of joy?
2. What are inhibitors of joy?
3. Do we live today in societies in which there is more fun but less joy?