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The Death Knell for Joy?

Abstract

The essay explores the puzzling relationship between joy and the problems of postmodern culture, which affect the quality of our being in the world. Reflection on the precarious status of joy and its uncertain position in contemporary culture allows for a unique perspective on this relationship. The higher the political, economic and social stakes, the more the search for joy becomes a search for meaning, an essential nourishment for cultural forms. Such joy, filtered through our struggles with life's challenges, compels us to examine the consequences of its absence (pain, suffering, joyless existence) and its manifestations in art (music), religion (Christianity), and philosophy (freedom). The power of joy lies in recognizing the inevitable imperfection of all solutions to our problems that do not include it as a fundamental component of life.

Key words: joy, modernity, pain, suffering, pleasure, spirit, experience, music, art

Parole chiave: gioia, modernità, dolore, sofferenza, piacere, spirito, esperienza, musica, arte

How do you write about joy, which is surprisingly one of the feelings most challenging to articulate and one of the most desirable yet intangible states of mind, heart, and spirit to experience? A broad network of its synonyms, ultimately not interchangeable, includes but is not limited to pleasure, enjoyment, bliss, passion, and appetite. An equally long antonym list extends from sadness, misery, and sorrow to what the Desert Fathers called acedia, the opposite of spiritual joy and the most severe ailment of the soul, a sin against the joy born of charity, a passion proceeding from love, and its actions, as the wise St. Thomas Aquinas

sees it.[1] Not surprisingly, acedia made it (under the guise of sloth) into a list of seven deadly sins.

Many dramatic characters of Chekhov, Witkacy, and Beckett embody its modern iterations. No stimulus, no intensity of pleasure can dispel their boredom and the stasis, or paralysis, of action and bring them joy, a feeling lost to their withdrawal into the self (in Chekhov), performative excess (in Witkacy), and quiet despair of meaningless habit (in Beckett). Many of us can now identify with all these symptoms, having lived through Covid lockdowns and gradually narrowing life's relationships and options to ourselves, habits, and pleasures. But the latter, as C. S. Lewis asserts in *Surprised by Joy* (1955), are only "substitutes for joy," which in his case took the shape of, as Russell Kirk (1995: 126) puts it, "a sudden stab of intense consciousness," the ultimate Joy of conversion.[2] The Scriptures prove him right as "joy" and "rejoice" appear there five times more than "happiness."

As the highest human emotion one can experience encountering God, joy is also the most justified in music, religious art, and ceremonies in Christianity. There is a marked difference, however, in experiencing and expressing it. We may falsely believe that, if anything, music, the universal language of all, could be its most excellent conveyor, as St. Augustine assumed, elevating music to "the highest level of the activities of the human soul" and seeing it as "the only art to transcend the earthly and approach the heavenly kingdom," which words alone could not do (Perl 1955: 501). All aficionados of Bach's, Handel's, and Vivaldi's sacred music, not to mention gospel, would concur. And there is, of course, Beethoven and the best-known piece of music with "joy" in its title, the 1824 *Ode to Joy*, the final choral movement in his last and most famous Symphony No. 9. Inspired by Friedrich Schiller's 1785 poem, *An die Freude* (*To the Joy*, revised in 1803 and 1808), it borrows five stanzas from it to which the composer added a few lines: "Oh, friends, not these sounds! Let us instead strike up more pleasing and more joyful ones! Joy! Joy!"

Even cursory research in public domains reveals a densely contradictory story that this musical path of human triumph tells. Starting with the composer – ill, deaf, lonely, depressed, and close to his death, Beethoven created the most affirmative piece of European music expressing joy and jubilation, the hope of unity, and freedom's potentialities. Still, this musical genius of all times felt it necessary to revolutionize the orchestral form by adding words to it (hence its other title reads as

1 For an insightful and approachable text on acedia written from a Catholic perspective, see Nault (2004).

2 Lewis defines his Joy in the following way when he compares it with Happiness and Pleasure: "Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again… I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and Pleasure often is" (Lewis 1955).

Choral Symphony), as if not trusting the power of music alone to express and incite the emotion without the sound of the human voice. Why so? Cannot joy stand on the musical legs alone? Why does it need Schiller's text, which might have remained just an inspiration, and the composer's declaration of juxtaposing it with other, presumably sadder sounds? Is it always relational? In this essay, I make a separate point about such juxtapositions being central to our conscious experience of joy. From Antiquity, its relationality figures prominently when connections, whether personal (be it love, friendship, affection, caritas, or mercy) or cultural and societal (communal events, religious rites, or the arts), prove more important than outcomes.

A fabled replacement of freedom by joy in Schiller's title is also meaningful. Leonard Bernstein brought this legend to life in his historical performance of the Ninth as *Ode to Freedom* in Berlin on December 25, 1989, when the crumbling of the Berlin Wall promised a new, peaceful world, unfortunately never to come. Accompanying events of similar historical magnitude (the Tiananmen Square student protests among them), turning into a protest song of the Chilean women, and changing Japan's relationship to European music, including a 10,000 singers-strong choral performance of the *Ode* in 1983, the symphony's fourth movement gained devout admirers in all, often extreme, ideological options, spanning Freemasonry, Nazism, Communism, and the 21st-century Euro-enthusiasts, and entered the world of popular culture in the arts, sports, movies, and – my favourite – flash mobs.[3]

Finally, Schiller considered his text a poetic failure, an evaluation not difficult to concede to as it is unforgivably bombastic. In contrast, Beethoven's music does indeed "melt [y]our hearts," as Megan Garber (2012) puts it. Still, it does so to different, and sometimes opposite, ends, as Žižek assesses and our current experiences of it confirm. Hearing it at the lifeless ceremonies of the European Union that adopted its melody as its anthem and delivered in the city squares by people celebrating Beethoven's 250th birthday during global COVID-19 lockdowns in December 2020 evokes diverse reactions, from annoyance or indifference to exalted jubilation, depending on our memories, experiences, and sensitivities. But why is it so? Why would the same joyful piece of music annoy or sadden me in the European Parliament and bring me unquenched joy when performed in the streets? And why would it not excite me as much in its masterful digital form as *Global Ode to Joy* delivered for the same occasion under the baton of the American conductor Marin Alsop, despite the ingenuity of its conception and execution, whereas Facebook

3 For the global impact of Beethoven's final symphony, see Candaele (2019). For an examination of its disturbing ideological uses, see the excerpt by Slavoj Žižek from, *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (https://www.openculture.com/2013/11/slavoj-zizek-examines-the-perverse-ideology-of-beethovens-ode-to-joy.html#google_vignette) (Fiennes 2013). See also https://artsandculture.google.com/project/beethoven. For some flash mobs, check the YouTube recordings of those in Sabadell in 2012, Hong Kong in 2013, Nuremberg in 2014, Boston in 2019, and Bonn in 2020.

feeds of spontaneous singing from the balconies made my heart skip a beat at the same time, but not a few months later?

Much is at stake in understanding what brings us joy and what it means to our lives because even though we have trouble articulating joy, we dread a joyless existence. Aristotle, with his insistence on the embodied experience, "essential for the developed forms of disposition and judgment that enable one to practice the virtues and to live a good life" (Cairns 2021: 11); Spinoza's expert guidance in his *Ethics* on how to live joyous and loving lives in the pantheistic universe;[4] and Nietzsche's dangerously heroic life affirmation ideas all have something to offer and warn us against. When thinking about my reaction to Beethoven's Ninth, I see that the joy it incites is not a discrete and unchangeable emotion, like happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise in Paul Ekman's (1999) scheme of our basic and universal emotions. I am instead, as Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) claims, "an architect of [my] experience" (p. 152), having my brain compound my joy of many ingredients, like a cake, anew every time I hear this piece.[5] They include the music, the musicians, but also the social, cultural, and political circumstances, my past experiences and memories, my views and situation. Here is why even the always uplifting flash mobs elicit different kinds and levels of joy at each viewing. Some situations and performers bring more of it than others (and sometimes none). The same applies to theatre, dance, and opera, my lifelong, albeit not guaranteed, sources of joy. Not to mention teaching, a once powerful joy stimulant, or research and writing providing exquisite, yet varied, joys of discovery and illumination.

These differences also originate from joy's unquenchable love of life and freedom. Their union feeds on goodness, spontaneity, simplicity, lightness, openness, awe, dazzle, enchantment, and desire, among other ingredients. The latter opens a vast temporal space of memory and anticipation, for "All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be'," says C. S. Lewis (1955). It begets the zest for life and the bliss of being and doing, which we might have experienced in its unadulterated form, or so we later remember, in childhood, when riding a bike with no hands, smelling the air, jumping in the muddy puddles until breathless, climbing a tree as if there were no gravity, or making mischief. A snippet from *The Kite Runner* may remind us of joy's pure, unspoken, experiential, and unifying power, particularly when we recall what lies ahead for the novel's two characters. "When we were children," reminisces the narrator, "Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees in the driveway of my father's house and annoy our neighbors by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard

4 For an insightful study of Spinoza's *Ethics*, see Youpa (2019).

5 See also her TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them?language=en (2017).

of mirror. We would sit across from each other on a pair of high branches, our naked feet dangling, our trouser pockets filled with dried mulberries and walnuts. We took turns with the mirror as we ate mulberries, pelted each other with them, giggling, laughing" (Hosseini 2004: 3).

Joy is imperfection, living somewhere between a yet unnoticeable speck of pleasure and unbearable ecstasy, between what may yet be too little to elevate us from what is ordinary and experiencing too much of it, needing, like St. Teresa of Ávila, to be held down. This dynamic of the sense of liberation and the need for containment captures something of joy's peculiarity. It recalls a measured and yet not restricted sensation, a feeling of proportion but not of prescription, a sense of the world ready to change and yet staying its course. Nietzsche's Zarathustra wants it solitary, but I leave it to Nietzsche to experience it this way.[6] It is relational, springing from personal and social relationships and encounters, but also, as the Stoics knew, from its complex relationship to its opposites.

Christianity has a lot to say about their perplexing affair. Despite being among the most joy-aspiring religions, it testifies to its mission's many challenges. Yes, still every year, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!," the 18th-century Isaak Watt's Christian rendition of Psalm 98 (in itself, of moving beauty speaking to the joy of God's salvation and righteousness), set to Lowell Mason's 19th-century music, exalts Christ's birthday to 72.1% (Johnson 2020) of the English-speaking world believing God's Word has become flesh.[7] So do Mary's words, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness" (Luke 1:46–48), to all 2.4 billion Christians around the globe. And there should be no happier time in the year than Easter when the incarnate God, a kenotic and final propitiatory sacrifice, who died a brutally painful and shameful human death raises from the dead proclaiming ultimate joy of eternal life and salvation. And yet, even for the faithful, this joy born on the cross, and from the Annunciation always carrying its shadow, is bewildering and difficult to attain. As is St. Paul's teaching to "Rejoice always / Pray without ceasing / In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18), known to us also from his "Epistle of Joy" to the Philippians written in prison, of all places, and the Psalms.[8] Many testimonies to complicated spiritual and very earthly journeys, from St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Ávila, and St. John of the Cross, to Kierkegaard and

6 For recent interpretations of Nietzsche's take on joy, see Kirkland and McNeal (2022).

7 Psalm 98:4–6 invites us to, "Shout with joy to the LORD, all the earth; break into song, sing praise. Sing praise to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and melodious song. With trumpets and the sound of the horn shout with joy to the king, the LORD."

8 See also Psalm 37:4, "Find your delight in the LORD who will give you your heart's desire" and Psalm 96:11–13, "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, let the sea and what fills it resound; let the plains be joyful and all that is in them. Then let all the trees of the forest rejoice

Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) testify to the gravity and the yield of these difficulties.

In our Western post-civilization, the unease regarding the bewildering connection between joy and life's sorrowful trials and tribulations has only intensified. Kierkegaard's idea of finding joy in turning adversity into prosperity by seeing its connection to eternity causes trepidation of a very different kind he once had in mind. Sylvia Walsh's summary of his dialectic, in which "suffering contains prospects of joy, but joy elicits suffering in turn" (2005: 122), nails the reason for our growing disquiet with both. For us, suffering, pain, and sorrow have become an existential outrage in an intense search for anesthetized, aestheticized, and immanently eternal life amidst the increasingly more arduous experience of the world. Medical advances allow us to imagine life without pain, no matter the long-term price for such relief.[9] Suffering, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, is high up on the waitlist for final cures (or at least improved management) with the array of medications, therapies, self-help guides, government policies, and discursive strategies.[10] On the other hand, we medicalize much of what was once expected and considered normal in the human experience of exuberance, sadness, confusion, fear or anxiety, and we treat it as a disorder.[11] During the last two centuries, the list of such conditions and psychiatric and pharmacological treatments has expanded manifold. Meanwhile, mass suffering caused in the modern global world by (neo)colonial, autocratic, and (neo)totalitarian ideologies and by rapid technological advances, which we utilize ever more and understand little, has reached unprecedented proportions.

All these perplexing developments, with their inconsistencies and contradictions, leave us lost, fearful, and restless. We may be more efficient in remedying pain and suffering, and pleasures are on the remedy list. Still, we cannot make sense of these experiences and imagine their meaningful horizon. What was once considered helpful – a recourse to spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual consolation in religion, art, and philosophy – seems no longer adequate in helping us navigate the troubling par-

before the LORD who comes, who comes to govern the earth, To govern the world with justice and the peoples with faithfulness."

9 The opioid crisis claiming hundreds of victims in North America is an unfortunate example of such a price.

10 In recent years, mental health issues afflicting Western societies have garnered much attention. In Canada, MAID (medically assisted suicide) may soon become a part of health care for people suffering from mental disorders. The media's discursive offensive leading to mandating COVID-19 vaccines provides an example of powerful discursive strategies in health management.

11 The list of drugs used to treat such disorders seems endless, even on such sites as Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_psychotropic_medications. One of the reasons is that the diagnostic tools have been limited to symptoms, leaving the context of such experiences aside. See Davies (2012: 1–2). The World Health Organization's statistics report that 350 million people suffer from depression and psychological dysfunctions alone in the world.

adoxes of pain and suffering, particularly when our trust in their imminent eradication meets the evidence of their obstinate permanency, if not ever-increasing intensity. Our hope that modern advances will help us manage pain and suffering collides with their role in aggravating both. Our exhibitionist culture de-mythicizes pain but commodifies it at the same time. When the isolationist effect of pain encounters transparent modes of living, its sadness comes against the culture of permanent overstimulation and compulsory excitement that has little in common with joy. Fearful of suffering and deprived of the old-fashioned tools to make sense of it, we view it as a purely negative, traumatic experience that has debilitating effects on our bodies and minds.[12] The more negative, the more extensively theorized.[13] When everything else fails, we eradicate pain by lawfully eliminating the sufferer.

Pain and suffering are at the core of human experience, epitomizing its most violent modern convulsions and the most spectacular escapes from their stubborn pervasiveness. The heart of their relevance beats in two places. One is the intolerable absurdity of our existence's finitude, and the other is the perturbing persistence of evil. Giving sense (that is both significance and direction) to both has been the calling of religion, philosophy, and art for centuries. Notwithstanding our civilizational advances, questions about the meaning of life and the sources of evil (*unde malum*) are still as pertinent now as they were to our premodern forebearers. We find it more challenging to answer them persuasively.

On the one hand, modernity has trivialized the mortal dangers of eating the fruit from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9), as the bitten apple on our Mac computers and iPhones attests, leaving us with little recourse to make sense of this irresistible temptation and to assess its consequences. On the other, as Susan Neiman proposes in her *Alternative History of Modern Philosophy*, "the problem of evil […] is fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a whole" (2015: 7–8), forming a link between ethics and metaphysics, and as such keeps weighing heavily on our ability to live meaningfully. It is difficult to fathom joy without such an ability, although James Tartaglia and Tracy Llanera, two passionate defenders of nihilism, did just that. In their brief, barely 70-page long *A Defence of Nihilism*, they offer a view that life can do without meaning and still maintain a sense of morality and *joie de vivre*. As I ponder on how this *joie* infuses a meaningless life, the following assessment of its public consequences makes all the sense to me:

12 The COVID-19 pandemic is a telling example of the counterintuitive undermining of religious practice as spiritually and emotionally therapeutic. The closures of the places of worship did much to exacerbate the consequences of mandatory social isolation.

13 Such excessive theorizing as a neurotic reaction to loss is shared with studies theorizing memory amidst growing cultural amnesia.

> most people get along just fine with their personal beliefs in a meaning of life, secular or religious. The secular ones become more concerning, however, when they leave the personal sphere to try to emulate the religious ones more exactly, becoming beliefs in a destiny of mankind. This can take the form of a worldwide communist revolution, the perfecting of our species through eugenics, our supposedly inevitable future of merging with technology, or our need to create superior artificial intelligences to replace us. When science and politics get hold of the meaning of life in a secular context, it's at least as scary as the Spanish Inquisition. (Tartaglia and Llanera 2020: 8)

When considering the perplexing volatility of joy, it should come as no surprise that our perplexingly volatile time witnesses a dizzying academic investment in emotions. In the introduction to their co-edited volume, *From the Modern to the Digital World: New Order, New Emotions*, Jane W. Davidson and Joy Damousi write: "During the course of the century, theories of emotion responded to the new technologies and practices, and revolutionized ideas of the place of emotions in all spheres covering medicine and science, philosophy, politics and economics, religion, education, and artistic endeavors. This change is captured particularly in the rise of the history of emotions as a field of academic inquiry, which has provided new scholarly bases for exploring the role and impact of emotions in our lives" (2019: 1).[14]

This growing interdisciplinary interest in the complexity of human emotions (and the "illusion of reason") speaks to our embodied understanding that "while we live in a period that thrives on rational and technocratic principles – where there is more education, surveillance, (digital) information, measurement, calculation and expert-driven decision making than ever before – we also live in a world teeming with displays of emotion in everyday communication, interaction and decision making" (Patulny et al. 2019: 1). Not surprisingly, new affect studies and emotionology disciplines have elbowed their place in the crowded academic market. Even political science makes use of some of their findings. Miguel E. Basáñez's 2016 book, *A World of Three Cultures: Honor, Achievement and Joy*, brings quantitative survey data to weigh on the three titular cultural models, one prioritizing political authority, the other economic advancement, and the last social interactions.

Then, the fascinating scientific *tour de force* of the already-mentioned Lisa Feldman Barrett's *How Emotions Are Made* explores the new neuroscience of emotion and explains that emotions are our brains' guesses. Those interested in the historical context of emotions can pursue six outstanding volumes of *A Cultural History of the Emotions* (2019–2020) in addition to Rob Boddice's *A History*

14 When referencing the new scholarship, they list Plamper (2015), Reddy (2001), Rosenwein (2006), Scheer (2012), and Stearns and Stearns (1985).

of Feelings (2019). Interestingly, the 20th-century volume of the former analyzes the impact of the two world wars and the Cold War on the history of emotions but somehow ignores the Bolshevik Revolution and Communism as formative for a few generations of Europeans. I belong to one of them, and when looking back at my initial twenty-seven years in the Polish People's Republic, I wonder what its pervading greyness, cumbersome shortages, wasted efforts, and emptied prospects, not to mention political oppression, did to joy. Around the time of my youth, filled with the excitement of the student life flourishing during the Solidarity carnival and wilting in the dreadful winter of the Martial Law, Zbigniew Herbert mourned joy's disappearance in his poetic letter *To Ryszard Krynicki*, a younger poet, and a friend, who many decades later became a patient and loyal editor of Herbert's works:

> in our poems Ryszard there is so little joy—daughter of the gods
> too few luminous dusks mirrors wreaths of rapture
> nothing but dark psalmodies stammering of animulae
> urns of ashes in the burned garden (1985: 21)

His admission to not knowing what strengths may bring it back sends a warning signal across generations.

Let us read this signal now. In the current public discourse dominated by social and political ideals of equity, diversity, and inclusion, Schiller's Enlightenment-inspired words spinning the French Revolution's triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity sound strangely out of place on account of their religious references to God, angels, sinners, and hell (never mind how far removed from the earthly affairs of humans), exclusionary propositions, and the gendered humanistic message of universal brotherhood above and beyond all (now admittedly unsurpassable) divisions and differences, and – horror of horrors – the value of sacrifice, mercy, and the hope of redemption. In our world of all-embracing trauma and competing claims to victimhood, such usurpations of communal, universal joy appear as a blind, naïve, and frivolous expression of privilege, lacking social and political commitment to prescribed rather than general utopian changes. Considering the breadth, weight, and urgency of such changes in the second decade of the 21st century, joy seems unacceptable not only as their agent but also as their outcome. The recent engaged, enraged, and activist climate not only sees every reason to frown upon it but should also see its potential danger to the progressivist agenda, for joy affirms life in its unpredictability, spontaneity, and mystery, and is also contagious. As we remember, all regimes resenting it end up hopelessly joyless, oppressively spiritless, and irritatingly self-righteous. We should all keep our eyes open to such resentment. Otherwise, we may soon hear the death knell for joy.

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Abstrakt

Podzwonne dla radości?

Esej zgłębia zagadkowe relacje między radością i problemami ponowoczesnej kultury, które wpływają na jakość naszego bycia w świecie. Refleksja nad niejasnym statusem radości i jej niepewną pozycja we współczesnej kulturze pozwala na szczególną optykę oglądu tych relacji. Im wyższa stawka polityczna, ekonomiczna i społeczna, tym bardziej poszukiwanie radości staje się poszukiwaniem sensu, istotnego pożywienia dla form kulturowych. Taka radość, przefiltrowana przez nasze zmagania z wyzwaniami życia, przynagla nas do zbadania konsekwencji jej nieobecności (bólu, cierpienia, egzystencji pozbawionej radości) i jej przejawów w sztuce (muzyka), religii (chrześcijaństwo) i filozofii (wolność). Siła radości polega na rozpoznaniu nieuniknionej niedoskonałości wszystkich rozwiązań naszych problemów, które nie uwzględniają jej jako podstawowego komponentu życia.

Słowa kluczowe: radość, nowoczesność, ból, cierpienie, przyjemność, duch, doświadczenie, muzyka