

Eucatastrophe: On the Necessity of Sorrow for the Human Person

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Sorrow, loss, sadness, grief; trial and tribulation, are all aspects of the human nature we instantiate and the world we inhabit. To inoculate man against them is to inoculate man from himself. Chesterton observes in his essay “12 Men”, that while hearing the case of “a woman who neglected her children, and who looks rather as if somebody or something neglected her” (49):

There was in this heart a barbaric pity and fear which men have never been able to utter from the beginning, but which is the power behind half the poems of the world. The mood cannot even inadequately be suggested, except faintly by this statement that tragedy is the highest expression of the infinite value of human life. (49)

Tragedy cuts to the heart of things in a way that naught else can; it cuts and convicts us of the sacrosanctity of the human person and shows us truth that cannot be communicated in the same way by any other expression, for with it we can see what is truly good apart from our pettiness and subjectivity. Mere happiness as pleasure and comfort—the “maintenance of well-being” as Mustapha Mond of *Brave New World* declares the “Sovereign Good,” (Huxley 177)—cannot compare. And Mond admits it. “Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the over-compensations for misery ... Happiness is never grand” (221). But is this even happiness? Are *panem et circenses* the final end of humanity? On the contrary, this extremity of pleasure and comfort that leaves no room whatever for displeasure or discomfort is a nearly insurmountable obstacle to true joy, for it denies the reality of man and the world in which he exists. Both man and his world are broken and tragic, and to deny this is to deny man. Even *A Brave New World* shows this greater sense of happiness or fulfillment when he tells of the parting of ways of Helmholtz, Bernard and the Savage.

There was a silence. In spite of their sadness—because of it, even; for their sadness was the symptom of their love for one another—the three young men were happy. (242)

The beauty and reality of friendship, even in the sadness of the parting of ways, strengthens the love of that friendship, making it something not just enjoyed, but something suffered for.

It is eminently apparent that mere pleasure and creature comfort become boring all too quickly. As shown in the *Twilight Zone* episode “A Nice Place to Visit”, being instantly gratified with whatever titillation one imagines is quite literally hell. A fantastic example of this is the murderous, child-molesting, rapist-thief Alex from Anthony Burgess’

A Clockwork Orange. Alex murders, rapes and pillages simply because he “likes to” (40), but come the controversial 21st chapter, Alex grows rather tired of it. His depraved debauchery is just not as titillating anymore. Even such drastic pleasure as unrestrained violence and sex proves ephemeral and eventually fails to satisfy. Oh, we may continue in our old ways, trying to convince ourselves of our unsatisfactory or nonexistent enjoyment, but eventually, if we are honest with ourselves, we face the fact that rape and pillage just ain’t doing it anymore. In G.K. Chesterton’s *The Ballad of the White Horse*, the Danes sing praise of the lust for women and wine, and fury and hate, but Guthrum, the chief of the Danes, sings in honesty of the futility of these pursuits, for the universe is bereft of meaning, and someday the gods will die. The only comfort is to forget the frigid meaninglessness of the universe in the feverish heat of battle (Bk III), to distract oneself, whether by pleasure or battle, from the omnipotent entropy. But Albert the Great denounces this defeatism, saying he “would rather fall with Adam / [t]han rise with all your gods” (Bk III 13-14):

Our monks go robed in rain and snow,
But the heart of flame therein,
But you go clothed in feasts and flames,
When all is ice within; (Bk III 349-53)

Such hedonistic escapism is ultimately futile and hopeless. Is it not preferable to happily suffer than to suffer happiness? Human beings are made for more than rape and pillage and popcorn and Netflix. But that is precisely what Mustapha Mond must condition their *Brave New People* for. They must remake man to be sated by the Hell of instant gratification and hedonism. All in man that is high and heavenly must be reduced out, leaving man a creature of Hell.

This reduction is to accomplish what C.S. Lewis calls “the Abolition of Man” (*The Abolition of Man* 53). Lewis describes the final victory of man over Nature in his victory of his own human nature, creating “Men without Chests,” that is, without moral sentiments that are conformed to real, objective value and truth (24-5, 59).

Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. ... We shall ... be henceforth free to make our species whatever we wish it to be. The battle will indeed be won. But who, precisely, will have won it? (59)

The result is that without the formation of the chest—without grounding in objective goodness and truth—man is left at the mercy of his base appetites (71), made into a subhuman creatures of the hellish “*Brave New World*” who can aspire to nothing more than endless, hedonistic

appeasement of their animal appetites.

What's largely missing from this ideology is *Sorrow*. Sorrow is essential to true human flourishing because it is a truth of the broken nature of man and the world he inhabits, and so it must be caught up in man's final end, and cannot be ignored in search of that end. J.R.R. Tolkien coins the term "eucatastrophe" to refer to the "sudden and joyous 'turn' in a fairy story. "It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary for the joy of deliverance. It denies . . . universal final defeat . . . giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy. Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" ("On Fairy-stories" 85-6). This cuts to the heart of the matter—joy as poignant as grief, and I would take it the one step further: Grief as precious as joy. Eucatastrophe is larger than the sentiment it inspires, but the sentiment itself is immensely important. Lewis talks of the chest as the seat of rightly ordered emotions and the convergence of the head and the belly, of intellect and appetite (*The Abolition of Man* 24-5). This centrality of the chest is a microcosm of man's place in the universe as the convergence of spirit and matter, and the chest lies at the center of man and his nature. Lacking this all-important sentiment of the consolation arising from the reconciliation of Joy and Sorrow, man is denied the piercing glance of truth that it enables, as well as the hope that it supplies.

One may rightly argue that sorrow cannot finally be its own end, that humans are meant to seek happiness and joy, and this is quite right, but sorrow is so intimately wedded to joy in this world that to abolish the former is to irrevocably damage the latter. Why else should we have the wholly peculiar habit of crying when we are happy? The consolation at the end of Pixar's *UP* is not so because it stands in contradiction over the tragedy of the first act, but because the joy and sorrow therein are wedded, mingled the joy of a new life and a new hope in Carl's fatherhood to Russell with the sorrow of the completion and fulfillment of his life with Ellie. Pixar's *Inside Out* hones this theme by depicting the literal struggle between the personified Sadness and Joy. In the end, Joy is not enough; it is only through the recognition of the unity and necessity of Sadness and Joy that consolation and hope are found. Sorrow is like the sharp lance that wounds us so that joy and hope can enter to heal and console us. As Tolkien writes in *The Return of the King*, "all the host laughed and wept . . . their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness" (232). We are so hardened by mere "happiness," the pursuit of pleasure and comfort and the reduction of all displeasure and discomfort, that sorrow is needed to wound us, to cut through our stony hearts so that truth, hope, and joy may enter.

This understanding of joy as being intimately tied up with sorrow can be traced back to as early as the Book of Job. Chesterton says that when—in one of the most dramatic moments of the whole Bible—God answers Job's questioning of the Divine Will with more questions,

He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man. (99)

"Job is tormented, not because he is the worst of men, but because he is the best. . . . This paradox of the best man in the worst fortune" makes Job the truest type of Christ, whose wounds Job prefigures. "It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes" (102). And so this paradox points forwards to what is the central paradox of Christianity, the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Christ. This is the supreme example of eucatastrophe, as Tolkien says: "the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation." Each eucatastrophe looks to this "Great Eucatastrophe" ("On Fairy-stories" 88-9). From Job to *Inside Out* to *The Lord of the Rings*, each images the eschatological Joy of the Resurrection that is wedded so completely to the catastrophe of the Crucifixion. This supreme paradox gives rise to Augustine's supreme eucatastrophic exclamation: "O felix culpa," "O, happy fault, that gained for us so glorious a redeemer." In these short lines are contained all the numinous depth of this broken world, and all the heartbreaking joy of its beauty and redemption. Here at last, man finds purpose, consolation, and hope in his brokenness, whether within Christianity or without, whether in Creation or in Fantasy. Here, in the marriage of Sorrow and Joy, man catches a glimpse of the mystery of God, "like light seen for an instant through the cracks of a closed door" (Chesterton, "The Book of Job," 102).

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