The giver and the gift: A Christian's delight in things

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In choosing between meaning and pleasure we always make the wrong choice. Pleasure without meaning is vapid; meaning without pleasure is crushing. In its own way, each is nihilistic without the other. But we don’t need to choose. The unity of meaning and pleasure, which we experience as joy, is given with the God who is Love.

But how are meaning and pleasure united? Relationship to God belongs to the very makeup of human beings. Whether we are aware of it or not, in all our longings, in one way or another, we also long for God. Our lives are oriented toward the infinite God, and they find meaning in relation to the God who created the world and will bring it to consummation.

Apart from God, with the earth of our existence unchained from its sun, the deeper meaning of our lives, the kind that doesn’t subvert itself by its arbitrariness, eludes us. Parched for meaning, we then project the power to give meaning onto the finite goods that surround us—the muscle tone of our bodies, steamy sex, loads of money, success in work, fame, family, or nation. Looking for meaning in finite things is a bit—in one regard and to a degree only—like expecting sexual fulfillment from pornography: it isn’t just addictively unfulfilling; as a crass simulacrum of a genuine good, it eats away at our ability to enjoy actual sex.

When God gives meaning, doesn't God take away ordinary pleasure? When we embrace God, don't we drop our hold on the world and ourselves as beings whose senses are alive to the sounds and smells and textures and tastes of the world? But if God created the material world inhabited by sentient beings (Gen. 1:1), if God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14), if the bodies of those bound to God in faith and love are the temples of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), then claims that some people make about attachment to God being opposed to the enjoyment of the ordinary things of life must be false. More: not only is there no necessary opposition between them, but the two can be aligned: *attachment to God amplifies and deepens enjoyment of the world.* Let me explain, as the suggestion may be novel even to theologically trained readers.

Consider an ordinary object—a pen, for instance. You might think it's a mere material thing. It's not. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that all cultural objects are sediments of human activity and have around them an "atmosphere of humanity." In feeling my gold-nibbed Pelikan fountain pen between my fingers, I don't just touch an object, I relate to my father, who gave it to me. To a lesser degree and in a more diffuse way, this is true also of any of my ultra fine point gel ink pens. As I use them, I relate to myself and to others—for instance, by distinguishing myself, mostly subconsciously, from users of other kinds of pens: I am an ultra-fine-point-gel-ink-pen guy, as distinct from my good friend Skip, who is a blue-felt-pen guy; or I feel a light additional bond to two friends who, like me, write with Pilot G-Tec-C4 pens. If you listen carefully, a simple pen will tell you that most things we encounter aren't just things; they are also social relations.

If things are social relations, then we also take pleasure in them as social relations. In *How Pleasure Works*, Paul Bloom argues convincingly against the commonsense view of pleasure: "People insist that the pleasure that they get from wine is due to its taste and smell, or that music is pleasurable because of its sound, or that a movie is worth watching because of what's on the screen. And of course this is all true . . . but only partially true."

The other part of pleasure, the bigger and more significant part, has to do with social relations inhering in things (or with "essences" of things, as Bloom names what I think is largely the same social dimension of things). We derive a great deal of pleasure when we think a painting is an original, which dissipates if we discover that it is a reproduction. We immensely enjoy an object that otherwise would leave us cold (for example, a tape measure) by virtue of its relation to a famous person (John

F. Kennedy) and are willing, as Bloom reports, to pay good money for the pleasure ($48,875). What matters most for pleasure isn't the object "as it appears to our senses," but an experience of the object as a thing that is also a particular relationship to other persons.

To put it in theological language, we enjoy things the most when we experience them as sacraments—as carriers of the presence of another.

Now think of the world as a gift—the entirety of it and all individual things in it (though you may want, and have good reason, to leave out torture chambers, children's cancer wards, and the like).

To think of a gift, you must, of course, think of a giver. That would be God, the creator and sustainer of worlds (a statement in no way incompatible with the way the sciences describe the origin and evolution of the universe). And then there is you, the recipient. We have a giver (God), a recipient (you), and a gift (the world). A gift is not the object given as such. Little trinkets on the shelves of gift stores are not gifts; they become gifts when somebody gives them to somebody else. In other words, gifts are relations. If the world is a gift, then all things to which you relate—and many to which you don't—are also God's relation to you.

Now imagine that you feel a bond to the giver of the gift that is the world, that you are a good Christian (or a Jew or a Muslim) and that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind (Deut. 6:5; Luke 10:27). Imagine also that in response to the God you love, you also love your neighbor as your self (Lev. 19:18; Luke 10:27). Spread wide and boldly the wings of your fancy and imagine that all your neighbors do the same, which is, of course, exactly how Christians have for centuries imagined the world to come—as the world of love. Each thing in the world is now a relationship marked by love. Each distant star and every gentle touch, each face and every whiff of the freshly plowed earth, in sum, literally every good and beautiful thing shimmers with an aura both vibrantly real and undetectable to our five senses. Each thing in the world is more than itself and just so a source of deep and many-layered pleasure.

To return once more to the analogy between finite things and sex, from the vantage point of such sacramental experience of the world, looking for pleasure in finite goods by themselves is a bit like expecting great sex in loveless relationships: pleasure may be there, even excitement, but the rich texture, depth, and the

moment-surpassing quality of the enjoyment that love provides is missing. When we experience ordinary things as God’s gifts and when we rejoice in experiencing them as such, the world, in a sense, reaches its completion, for the duration of the experience at least. The world then becomes to us what God created it to be. According to my take on one Hasidic interpretation, just this kind of experience of the world in relation to God and of God in relation to the world is the meaning of the Shabbat.

On this one day of the week, a day toward which all days are aiming and from which they all gain meaning, human striving comes to an end, and the joy in the world as the gift and in God as the giver reigns supreme. On the seventh day of creation—make it the eighth day, if you are a Christian—we don’t go through the things of ordinary life to take delight in some deeper, eternal beauty and goodness in itself; we come to experience ordinary things as extraordinary—as the Lover’s gifts—and therefore rejoice in them all the more.

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