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Joy and the Whole Truth about Man, by Clifford Staples

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The reality of joy provides, I think, the most obvious refutation of the ideology of materialism—the attempt to reduce human beings and human lives to the body, to matter and its effects. For joy is proper not to the body, but to the spirit. It is the soul that is joyful or joyless, not the body. Without the soul there can be only bodily effects, like pain or pleasure. Materialists want us to believe that there is nothing greater than pleasure and nothing worse than pain and suffering. For the materialists, increasingly dominant in our culture, even death is better than pain and suffering, although beyond the avoidance of pain and suffering there is nothing worth dying for. For materialists, hedonism is the only good life possible. Anything that does not look like hedonism—a life devoted to ideas, to honor, to God, even to philosophical materialism—must be ignored, explained away, or understood to be something other than what it clearly is. Are some people hedonists? Absolutely. Is that what we were made for? Absolutely not.

Collapsing the spirit into the body makes it difficult to make sense of human existence. If the materialists are right, the pleasure of casual sex should *never* be joyless. If there is nothing beyond the body and its pleasures, sex should never come with regret, emptiness, loneliness, anxiety, or despair. But we know otherwise. If the materialists are right, torture should *always* work because there can be nothing beyond bodily suffering, nothing worse than pain. People under torture should confess, recant, betray, deny, lie or otherwise do whatever they must do to avoid bodily and psychic harm. But we know this is not always how it goes. And it can only go otherwise because there is something in us that is beyond the reach of the torturers and executioners. Bodies and psyches can be brutalized and broken, but a soul at peace cannot be disturbed in this way. The martyrs testify most powerfully to this truth.

As Augustine and Aquinas taught, happiness is the joy produced in us by truth. Josef Pieper adds that the person incapable of love—unable, with God, to affirm *what is*, as Fr. Schall puts it, cannot experience true joy. To love is, for Pieper, to say “Amen” to God and his works (man and his works are another matter entirely). But, if materialism is true, our contact with reality

stops with the body, and so considerably short of all that is. But materialism is not true. Beyond the body there is the intellect—that part of us that knows and loves. Bodies, per se, are capable of neither knowing nor loving. It is the person who knows and loves. But for the materialist there is no person; there is only the body. How a materialist *knows* himself to be nothing more than a body is something of a mystery to the materialist. Or at least it should be.

Thus, any claim to happiness not grounded in what is real, as opposed to what we dream or wish, is false; it is just “wishful thinking.” Thus, we should—and if we have any common sense we do—take the prostitute’s or drug addict’s claim to be “happy” with a grain of salt. *No one* is truly joyful with such a life, regardless of what she says. She might claim to be content with what she is doing, but what she is doing is wrong. So long as it is, no joy will come from it, only misery. We were not made for this.

But it is not only the claims of prostitutes and drug addicts we should treat with suspicion. The broader culture is in important respects founded on lies. People who claim to be happy living such lives are, to a greater or lesser extent, fooling themselves. All the rankings of cities and societies based on surveys asking people how “happy” they are, independent of any reality but their own, only work to validate this foolishness.

No matter how hard we try to supplant reality with our imaginings, the ground of our being remains the real. What gets taught in the seminar room often fails to make it home to the wife and kids. A walk on the beach, a glimpse of the Northern Lights, a child’s trust, a dog’s delight when we walk through the door, all have the potential to move us toward love. We can always be, as C.S. Lewis wrote, surprised by joy. So long as we are what we are there is this hope.

Materialism is an anti-human philosophy because, like others of its kind, it involves denying the “whole truth about man,” as St. Pope John Paul II put it. The whole truth is that we were made by God in his image to above all know, love, and adore him and his Creation. Ideologies like materialism serve only to obscure this truth.