

The Courage to Rest: Thomas Aquinas on the Soul of Leisure¹

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WHENEVER THE TOPIC OF LEISURE is raised in conversation, whether in the classroom or among friends, inevitably someone will ask the question: “Have you read Pieper’s essay?” The question is inevitable because, in conversations about leisure, it is exactly the right question to ask. For seventy years now, Josef Pieper’s “Leisure: The Basis of Culture” has exemplified what discussion of leisure as a perfective human activity should be.² In order to clarify their thinking on the subject, professors, students, and the general reader still rely on Pieper’s succinct and compelling description of the nature of leisure, as well as his correction of any number of erroneous notions of human rest that we might entertain. With Thomas Aquinas as his guide, Pieper resists the modern tendency to regard leisure simply as the cessation of work or, worse, to equate leisure with sloth. Instead, Pieper emphasizes leisure’s nature as an activity rather than a lack of one, and as a joyful celebration of reality rather than a sorrowful retreat from it.

What I would like to do this evening, in celebration of the essay’s seventieth anniversary, is to review Pieper’s description of leisure, but with a view to expanding it. With Thomas Aquinas as our guide, I want to build on Pieper’s description of leisure by exploring

¹ I delivered this talk on January 31, 2017 at Hillsdale College’s Kirby Center in Washington, D.C. It was the first of a three-part series on “The Human Person” co-hosted by the Thomistic Institute and the Kirby Center.

² Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

in greater detail than he does the soul of leisure, or better, the soul capable of leisure. We will conclude that, in addition to being a soul receptive of reality, as Pieper notes the leisurely soul is, the soul of leisure courageously dreams big dreams, and it does so humbly.

I

When he wrote “Leisure: The Basis of Culture” in 1947, Pieper had a particular end in view. He recalled the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine of leisure in order to combat the modern, and what Pieper calls the totalitarian, view of work. This view exaggerates the importance of work in human life, making work, or labor, the whole for which and in which all human activity takes place. Max Weber describes the modern notion of work like this: “One does not work to live; one lives to work.”³ Pieper opposes this notion of work, noting that it corrupts not only our understanding of human industry but also our understanding of human epistemology and human morality. For example, in the realm of epistemology, Pieper observes how the totalitarian notion of work corrupts Emmanuel Kant’s theory of human knowing. For Kant, Pieper explains, reason is all work. It indulges in no play. All reasoning is striving. Nothing known, according to Kant, is received or gained by resting.⁴

Similarly, the totalitarian notion of work corrupts our understanding of morality. It turns all moral activity into pure striving. “It is normal and essential,” Pieper writes when articulating the totalitarian view of morality, “that the effort of will required in forcing oneself to perform some action should become the yardstick of the moral good: the more difficult a thing, the higher it is in the order of goodness.”⁵ In the realm of doing, as in the realm of knowing, all is work according to the totalitarian view. The moral man indulges in no play.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, the old adage says. The same holds true for the totalitarian view of work. All work and no play makes knowing and loving dull activities.

Pieper warns his reader that, when the totalitarian view of work exaggerates the importance of labor—and, by extension, reduces thinking and loving to pure striving—then something like leisure begins to appear as something vicious, if not completely monstrous. From the totalitarian point of view, Pieper writes, “leisure appears as

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 26–27.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

something wholly fortuitous and strange, without rhyme or reason, and, morally speaking, unseemly: [leisure becomes] another word for laziness, idleness, and sloth.”⁶

In his essay, Pieper employs the classical and medieval notion of leisure to rehabilitate our understanding of all three of these areas of human activity—labor, knowing, and loving.

Against the modern notion of labor, according to which “one does not work to live; one lives to work,” Pieper proposes Aristotle’s view that “we are unleisurely in order to have leisure.”⁷ Against the modern epistemology of Kant, which sees knowing as a “herculean” task, Pieper recalls the classical distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio* denotes our discursive thinking, in which we form knowledge through intellectual activity, through composing and dividing intellectual species and comparing and contrasting them. *Intellectus* denotes our understanding, which is a more passive activity, in which we grasp reality more by receiving forms than by producing thoughts. The human possession of *intellectus* means that the highest form of our knowing does not involve acting so much as it involves resting.⁸ Finally, against the modern notion of moral living as something strictly arduous, Pieper recalls Aquinas’s teaching that “the essence of virtue consists in the good rather than in the difficult” and says that “the sublime achievements of moral goodness are characterized by effortlessness—because it is of their essence to spring from love.”⁹ Here, Pieper recalls Aquinas’s teaching that virtuous action is not difficult, slow, and doleful, but rather easy, prompt, and joyful.

In order to correct the totalitarian notion of leisure as idleness or sloth, Pieper describes leisure not according to its external appearance, but according to its interior reality, or better, according to the interior qualities of the human soul necessary for man to be at leisure. These qualities could not be more removed from idleness and sloth. Rather than being merely physically at rest or spiritually immobile, as the idle and the slothful are, the man at leisure is, Pieper says, “at one with himself.” What Pieper means by this is that the leisurely man “acquiesces in his own being.” For Pieper, to acquiesce in one’s own being is not a physical activity as much as it is a spiritual one. Leisure therefore is not determined by material factors external to a person—

⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 28–33.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

like “spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation.” Instead, leisure results from the convergence of spiritual factors within a person. It is an “attitude of mind,” a “condition of soul,” a “form of silence” that is “not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation.”¹⁰ The leisurely man is not an idle machine, but a soul at rest in reality. More precisely, Pieper explains, the leisurely man is at rest interiorly—intellectually and appetitively—with the world around him.

Pieper is quick to clarify that the interior rest of leisure is not just any resting. For example, leisure is not a resting in which one turns inward in order to look after some need. To the contrary, leisure is a resting in which one turns outward in order to look with delight at the world. Leisure is a resting in which one takes contemplative delight at being and in being. “Leisure draws its vitality from affirmation,” Pieper writes, an affirmation of existence. Again, Pieper underscores that leisure is not “the same as non-activity, nor is it identical with tranquility.” Rather, Pieper continues, leisure is “like the tranquil silence of lovers, which draws its strength from concord.”¹¹ According to Pieper, one achieves the rest of leisure through entering into an intellectual and appetitive union with the world outside of the self. In leisure, man achieves a contemplative union with the whole of being. When at true rest, the human individual “celebrates the end of his work by allowing his inner eye to dwell for a while upon the reality of [God’s] creation.” Pieper says that man at leisure “looks [at] and affirms” the world, and like God man declares: “It is good.”¹²

For Pieper, then, leisure is the kind of rest proper to the rational animal. Leisure is not merely a physical resting from labor, as a dog may rest after chasing a squirrel. Leisure is an intellectual resting in reality. Accordingly, Pieper warns that “no one who looks to leisure simply to restore his working powers will ever discover the fruit of leisure.” In other words, the end of leisure is not the recuperation of one’s physical strength, though this may result from leisure. Pieper observes that when the rational animal rests his body from the toils of labor he still retains his intellectual powers, to which belongs an intellectual form of resting. This resting is not the cessation of reason and understanding as physical resting involves the cessation of movement. To the contrary, the intellect’s resting involves some

¹⁰ Ibid., 46–47.

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

¹² Ibid., 49.

activity that is contemplative in nature. When the intellect rests, it rests in the understanding of that which it naturally seeks—the whole of reality. For, when at rest man retains “the faculty of grasping the world as a whole,” then it is at leisure, when free of distraction, that man can actualize his “full potentialities as an entity meant to reach Wholeness.”¹³

For Pieper, the leisurely reach for wholeness includes the human reach for God. This is because man’s leisurely resting in reality, which reaches out intellectually for reality’s wholeness, includes an affirmation as well as a celebration of reality, which we have already mentioned. As affirming and celebrating reality, Pieper says, leisure seeks to affirm and celebrate also the divine origin of created reality. Thus, according to Pieper, does leisure find its perfection ultimately in divine worship. Leisure achieves its true purpose when it equips the human individual to fulfill the third commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”¹⁴

II

If we step back from Pieper’s argument in “Leisure: The Basis of Culture” and examine his logic apart from his polemic against the totalitarian view of work, we will recognize that Pieper describes leisure according to the perfections of man’s rational powers, both his intellect and his will. In other words, he describes leisure as an activity of the perfected intellect, since through the virtues of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, man grasps intellectually the whole of reality. He also describes leisure as an activity of the perfected will, since through the virtue of justice, especially religion, man renders God the worship that he is owed. Pieper argues beneath the surface of his text, therefore, that the leisurely man is the virtuous man. But the portrait he paints of the leisurely man, at least in terms of the leisurely man’s virtue, is incomplete. Pieper depicts leisure as an activity possible to one with a virtuously perfected intellect and will. But what of the virtuously perfected passions? Do courage and temperance, like justice, inform the activity of leisure? Pieper does not say. Pieper’s silence on this question does not mean that his description of leisure is wrong, of course. It just means that it is incomplete, at least in terms of describing how all of the moral virtues together contribute to rendering an individual capable of leisure. In what remains of this talk, I propose to indicate how Thomas

¹³ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴ Exod 20:8–10.

Aquinas's doctrine of courage and temperance can help us to complete the portrait of the leisurely man that Pieper began.

Let us begin with the virtue of courage. Courage equips a man for leisure in a very particular way. It equips a man for leisure by making him magnanimous, which means, literally, big-souled. According to Aquinas, magnanimity is that virtuous quality of soul by which the soul stretches itself out to great and difficult things. As a part of courage, magnanimity contributes to the attaining of great things by fortifying the passion of hope, which passion stirs when a future good becomes visible to us but remains difficult to attain. Magnanimity is that virtue we require in order to strive for great things even after the difficulty of their attainment becomes apparent to us. Aquinas explains that the great things that magnanimity seeks are the great deeds made possible by the virtues.¹⁵ These great deeds require great attention, and our performance of them is slow and deliberate.¹⁶ Magnanimity strives, therefore, not just for what is good and virtuous, but for what is excellent and virtuous.¹⁷ The magnanimous man seeks to know not just the truth, but the highest truths. The magnanimous man seeks to love not just the good, but the highest goods. As a form of courage, magnanimity guards the passion of hope for the highest and best things and keeps it virtuous. Magnanimity holds hope firmly within the rule of reason so that it does not turn vicious and become presumptuous, ambitious, or vainglorious.¹⁸

In terms of leisure, magnanimity becomes a prerequisite virtue insofar as leisure rests in the understanding of the highest things knowable and in the love of the highest things loveable. To know the highest thing—namely, the whole of being—is difficult. To love the highest reality—namely, God—is difficult. Courage is required to strive for this knowledge and love. Magnanimity is the particular form of courage necessary to pursue and rest in the highest truth accessible to human wisdom and the highest good accessible to human justice. Magnanimity renders the pursuit of these difficult goods easy, prompt, and joyful.

As a form of courage, magnanimity is assisted in its pursuit of leisure by the virtue of temperance, particularly in the form of humility. Pieper makes this observation in his famous essay on temperance.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 129, a. 4, ad 1.

¹⁶ ST II-II, a. 129, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁷ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 4, ad 2.

¹⁸ ST II-II, qq. 130–32.

“Humility and magnanimity,” he writes, “not only are not mutually exclusive, they actually are neighbors and akin to each other.”¹⁹ This is St. Thomas’s own view. Aquinas writes in the *Summa theologiae* that, in regard to the difficult good, two virtues are needed. Magnanimity, as a form of courage, strengthens the passions, particularly hope, in the pursuit of great things. But in the pursuit of great things, another virtue becomes necessary: temperance in the form of modesty, in order “to temper and restrain the mind,” St. Thomas says, “lest the mind tend to high things immoderately.”²⁰ This tempering and restraining of the mind is the work of a particular form of modesty, which is humility. For St. Thomas, therefore, magnanimity and humility each have their part to play in keeping the human pursuit of great things reasonable. He writes: “Humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason: while magnanimity urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason. Hence it is clear that magnanimity is not opposed to humility: indeed they concur in this, that each is according to right reason.”²¹ Humility, as a virtue shaping the concupiscible appetite, puts a check on the irascible passion of hope, which itself is perfected by magnanimity, so that magnanimous hope, which undergirds the activity of leisure, does not veer into the realm of pride. Accordingly, humility inserts reason into appetite by maintaining in the magnanimous individual a proper reverence both for God and for his providence for man. Humility ensures that the hopeful man does not, in the words of Aquinas, “ascribe to himself more than is competent to him according to the position in which God has placed him.”²² Humility therefore keeps the magnanimous striving after great things from becoming impetuous. Humility ensures that the magnanimous man does not foolishly reach beyond the limits of his nature and seek after, in the words of the Psalmist, “things too great,” or “marvels beyond us.”²³ Humility directs the striving of magnanimity toward the great things to which man is actually made to attain, which include a grasping of the whole of reality and a peaceful and festive resting within it. Like magnanimity, humility is a prerequisite virtue for leisure.

¹⁹ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, trans. Richard Winston (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 189. See *ST* II-II, q. 129, a. 3, ad 4.

²⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 161, a. 1, corp.

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 161, a. 1, ad 3.

²² *ST* II-II, q. 161, a. 2, ad 3.

²³ Ps 131:1.

III

With St. Thomas as our guide, we have expanded on Pieper's description of leisure. To Pieper's explanation that leisure involves the perfection of the intellectual virtues, especially wisdom, and of the moral virtue of justice—namely, religion—we have added how the other two moral virtues—courage and temperance, particularly through magnanimity and humility—also contribute to the activity of leisure. Magnanimity gives man the courage to strive after the highest things, to apply his mind to the difficult task of knowing the whole of reality, and it is humility that keeps man receptive in his striving. Humility keeps the magnanimous man open to the whole of reality, to rest finally in what is, as a gift, not supplanting God's providence with his own. The soul of leisure, therefore, is not only wise and religious, as Pieper says, but also, as Aquinas helps us to see, magnanimous and humble. N V