

Leisure and Play: The Way of A Hopeful Life
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Hope belongs to cultivators of leisure and people of play. Hope brings joy because it is substantive proof of one's dignity and importance in God's eyes. What makes for a hopeful life? I propose that leisure and play are the way of a hopeful life since both are receptive to reality's harmony, which reveals human dignity. Given the limited scope of an essay, this proposal is only introductory. All that is to be accomplished here is to point out the way of a hopeful life and give a few reasons for justifying this view. I will work through four stages in this proposal. First, I will give a definition of hope taken from Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*. Second, I will define leisure by referring to Josef Pieper (a 20th century Thomist) whose work, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, was written shortly after World War II when Europe was in the midst of rebuilding itself, and he asserted that leisure must be the foundation of this reconstruction. Third, I will define play by referring to Michael Oakeshott (a 20th century political philosopher at the London School of Economics) whose essay, "Work and Play," was published posthumously in June 1995 in which he calls for Western modernity to rediscover and retain play in its tradition. Finally, I will explain how both leisure and play are the way of a hopeful life.

What is hope? Human beings have hope when they experience a foretaste of their end: joy and God's grace. This is Pope Benedict XVI's description of hope, which he bases on Hebrews 11:1, "faith is the 'substance' of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen." To Benedict, we hope to be with God in the end even though we cannot see this end. Yet, Benedict explains that hope (interchangeable with faith in this verse) is a *habitus*, meaning, "a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to

what it does not see.”¹ Hope is a habit that allows human beings to experience the joy of being with God in the present even if it is difficult. The Divine substantively takes root in them when they receive God’s love and experience joy as a result; thus, they are certain of their end with God because they have this tangible experience to grasp.² This certainty is good news because men and women can live well in the present if they know that they are loved and their lives are not in vain.³ Human beings are not enslaved to an impersonal material universe; instead, a loving God who gazes upon them has given them meaning and dignity. As Benedict writes, “A personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love—a Person.”⁴ Therefore, hope affirms human dignity for it shows that ultimately human beings matter in the expansive universe, and such affirmation is cause for joy. And it is leisure that cultivates the space for this foretaste of the Divine.

What is leisure? To answer this question it is helpful to begin by describing what it is not. Josef Pieper states that leisure is not work. Work is effort and toil to achieve some exterior purpose or value.⁵ In a word, work is utilitarian (which is not bad *per se*). Leisure is neither vacation nor relaxation since both are commonly understood within the realm of work, i.e., they are done so that one may feel refreshed for work.⁶ To Pieper, leisure is simply being and receiving affirmation of one’s dignity from God: “[Leisure is] the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole, and of God – of Love.”⁷ In short, leisure is joyful

¹ Benedict XVI, “Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi,” *The Holy See* (website), The Vatican, accessed January 23, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html: paragraph 7.

² Ibid, paragraphs 1, 3.

³ Ibid, paragraph 2.

⁴ Ibid, paragraph 5.

⁵ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 19-27.

⁶ Ibid, 31.

⁷ Ibid, 29.

since it is a realization of one's harmony with the cosmos, i.e., God lovingly gives human beings a place within his creation. Pieper goes on to say, "[Leisure is] an inner absence of preoccupation, a calm, an ability to let things go, to be quiet...only the person who is still can hear, and whoever is not still, cannot hear...Leisure is the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real."⁸ Like Elijah on the mountain waiting to behold the Divine, a habit of stillness is required to be and to receive affirmation. And one is joyful in recognizing his or her dignity as given by the grace of God. As Pieper writes, "...leisure is the condition of considering things in a celebrating spirit...Leisure lives on affirmation...It is rather like the stillness in the conversation of lovers, which is fed by their oneness."⁹ In this last image, Pieper shows that leisure is the calm affirmation of being loved since, just like lovers in stillness, one simply is and knows that he or she has meaning because the steady gaze of God tells them so. They need do nothing to gain this love. It is freely given. All that is required is the stillness that is leisure. And what nourishes leisure is worship.

Worship nourishes leisure because it is time set aside for human beings to be with the Divine who gazes back at humanity and affirms their importance. Without this nourishment, leisure's receptivity dwindles. Pieper explains by comparing worship and time to temple and space. Temple stems from the Greek, *temnein*, meaning "to cut." So temples are areas cut away from the rest of the community's space so that a space is created to simply be with the Divine and be affirmed.¹⁰ Worship is similar since it is a defined period cut away from the rest of the time for its own sake. It has no utilitarian end. Its end is celebration.¹¹ Also, the Divine

⁸ Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 31.

⁹ Ibid, 33.

¹⁰ Ibid, 52.

¹¹ Ibid, 60.

establishes worship for human beings so that they might have space to remember their meaning given by the Divine (think of God establishing the Sabbath and Jesus establishing the Eucharist).¹² Thus, worship frees humans from the life of work—the time of utility and toil. It is celebratory in that it takes human beings from the cellars of labor to the reception hall of harmony where they experience “an endless day of celebration.”¹³

What is play? To answer this question, one must understand Michael Oakeshott’s philosophical anthropology. The human person—*homo sapiens*—is distinguished by intelligence (*sapiens*) defined as “the propensity to choose and to determine for ourselves what our relationship to the world shall be.”¹⁴ In this relationship, humans use the world’s material to meet their needs; once he or she meets these needs, then they seek to satisfy wants. Now needs are limited while wants are unlimited. Needs are required for existence while wants are desired for satisfaction.¹⁵ For Oakeshott, wants are “imagined, chosen, and pursued” and humans are “creatures of wants” seeking to satisfy such “imagined and chosen” desires.¹⁶ And to meet these wants, they work. Oakeshott defines work as, “a continuous and toilsome activity, unavoidable in creatures moved by wants, in which the natural world is made to supply satisfaction for those wants.”¹⁷ Thus, work is defined as the continued toil and labor for the satisfaction of wants. In Western modernity, according to Oakeshott, two dispositions have taken hold of many human beings. First, work is the “proper attitude and occupation” of humanity (even the exclusive occupation, according to some). Second, work will finally bring humanity the happiness of

¹² Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “Work and Play,” *First Things*, June, 1995, accessed January 21, 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/06/003-work-and-play>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

satisfying its wants. As Oakeshott summarizes these dispositions: “Wants might proliferate; indeed, they surely would. But if we worked hard enough and intelligently enough, they would all be certainly satisfied.”¹⁸ In short, Western modernity contends that the satisfaction of wants is humanity’s *summum bonum*. To Oakeshott, this view risks losing an essential aspect of the Western tradition: play.

What is play? Play is not concerned with satisfying wants. Play does not see the world as mere material to be used for personal satisfaction. Instead, play seeks to behold the world as it is, to understand the cosmos for its own sake.¹⁹ Philosophy, theology, history, poetry, the arts, and sciences all belong to play, not work. Certainly the knowledge of these activities can be used for work, but they are first and foremost done as ends in themselves.²⁰ Play is what the free and dignified do because it engages the world as it is, and this engagement is joyful. As Oakeshott summarizes the activity of play: “It is in these activities that human beings have believed themselves to enjoy a freedom and an illumination that the satisfaction of wants can never supply.”²¹ Play makes human beings free because it is done just to do it. This freedom brings joy that the satisfaction of wants cannot replicate. For example, a 6th grade student is mesmerized by hearing the story of Alexander the Great building his expansive empire or by learning how plate tectonics causes earthquakes. This student experiences joy in this knowledge simply because it is good and joyful just to know. That joy, however, is killed when such knowledge is framed in terms of satisfying wants such as when a teacher says, “Learn this material so that you can do well on the test which will give you a good grade this year.” This exclusively utilitarian

¹⁸ Oakeshott, “Work and Play.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

explanation of knowledge brings hopelessness since the student only experiences short-term satisfaction—a good grade—and not the joy of simply learning more. Thus, it is the joy of play that brings hope.

People of play have hope while people of exclusive work do not. Once again, work is not bad *per se*. It is necessary in fact to meet one's needs and wants. But work's exclusivity brings human beings anxiety and despair. For as soon as one want is satisfied, more spring up endlessly.²² There is only temporary satisfaction and no genuine joy. Oakeshott describes a human being whose disposition is exclusively work as “a creature of unavoidable anxieties...a curse, a condemnation to a life in which every achievement is also a frustration.”²³ For when one satisfies a want, the satisfaction soon vanishes and frustration appears because other new wants wrench forth. Think of the purchase of a new iPhone, for example. The satisfaction of this want is often not enough for some since new wants stem from it: a stylish protective cover, an extensive data plan, noise-cancelling headphones, music, movies, apps, e-books, and eventually the next version of the iPhone they do not own. Or think of a high school student who must study to get an “A” on a test in order to have a good transcript so that she may get into a great college and then have a great career which will allow her to have a good material standard of living, and so on. In brief, the exclusivity of work is like the mythical Hydra: as soon as one experiences the satisfaction of chopping off one head (that is, satisfying a want), anxiety and frustration abound as more heads spring forth, and more work and toil are required. Thus, in the world of exclusive work, one is left with despair and hopelessness.

²² Oakeshott, “Work and Play.”

²³ Ibid.

So, why does play give people hope? Play allows human beings to gaze upon reality and understand for its own sake. In play, one is free and joyful in response to the reality of the universe. When one lives freely and joyfully, one experiences a foretaste of what it is like to be with God in the end since joy and freedom encompass God's essence. Thus, play fosters the habit of hope, which is the substantive and tangible presence of God's love for human beings. Now play does not necessarily lead one to acknowledge God's love for humanity since atheists can also gaze upon reality and experience the joy of knowing for its own sake. But at the very least, being receptive to the universe in its grandeur gives one a habit of receptivity that allows one to potentially experience the Divine as done in leisure.

How does leisure give one hope? Pieper, along with Oakeshott, states that leisure's absence due to exclusive work dooms human beings to endless toil. It is an existence empty of true affirmation and happiness like Sisyphus continually pushing a boulder up a hill, yet never experiencing true fulfillment. As Pieper warns ominously, "[work] may, whether endured silently or 'heroically,' become a bare, hopeless, effort, resembling the labor of Sisyphus, who in fact is the mythical paradigm of the 'Worker' chained to his labor without rest, and without inner satisfaction."²⁴ Humans are blind to their dignity when they are solely attached to work. They are in despair and hopelessness since they experience the painful dissatisfaction of their constant labor instead of the joyful affirmation of their enduring dignity. Or in Benedict's terms, their constant labor prevents hope taking root in them. Leisure affirms human dignity in the universe by being receptive to the loving Creator. This reception gives something tangible of God's love

²⁴ Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 54-55.

in worship and stillness that allows human beings to live the good news certainly. The good news is that humans are not slaves to an impersonal universe. Instead, they are meaningful beings created by God. In brief, the stillness of reception to the universe lets one experience God's loving gaze. And together with play, the way of hope is prepared, and this is cause for celebration.