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### Josef Pieper and the Recovery of Leisure in the Workaday World

*“The term ‘philosophical’ by no means refers to a corpus of teachings or propositions, but rather to a way of looking at life” (Josef Pieper, *What Does “Academic” Mean?* 8).*

In the writings of Josef Pieper, he examines the modern world with the goal of identifying and solving social problems. One problem he identifies is the presence of what he calls “total work” and the subsequent disconnect with fundamental aspects of human nature. The aspect Pieper focuses on is the practice of leisure, which he defines as a space and time in which the human being is free to pursue the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. The pursuit of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful is equated by Pieper with the pursuit of happiness. However, in the world of total work, Pieper believes that the practice of leisure has become a rarity. In Pieper’s work, he explores the topic of leisure and how to re-establish the practice of it, therefore getting us closer to the fulfillment of human life. Returning to Plato’s theory of education presented in *The Republic*, the institution of the University can be seen as an ideal place to recover the practice of leisure. In this presentation, I will argue that the University should be separated from the workaday world as a space of leisure by re-introducing the study of theory and approaching the disciplines in a philosophical way. In doing so, the University can be restored as a place where one is free to pursue Truth and can cultivate a fully-human life.

In his writing, Pieper recognizes that there is something about the modern world that causes parts of human nature to be choked out. To remedy this problem, Pieper investigates into the human experience in an attempt to recover what he believes has been lost. In discussing the universals of the

human experience, what is common to all people, Pieper singles out happiness. In his book *Happiness and Contemplation*, Pieper declares the pursuit happiness to be the primary goal of all of humanity. Happiness' status as the primary human goal is evident, Pieper explains, from the fact that no one questions the pursuit of happiness; no one asks why one wishes to pursue happiness, and if they do, there is no substantial answer to give (*Happiness and Contemplation* 21). As all people are always craving happiness, and there is no justification that can be given for the desire for happiness, happiness must be an end in itself, something that is desired wholly for itself, and not for the purpose of achieving a later goal (Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* 22).

Pieper goes on to argue that the universal desire for happiness comes from our existential position in the world. As humans, who always move forward, Pieper describes us as always being "on the way" (*Happiness and Contemplation* 27). We are always seeking happiness and are forever "on the way" to attaining it. Happiness, for Pieper, is synonymous with the True and the Good. When one seeks happiness, what they seek to attain is Truth. Therefore, because we are always on the way to the True and the Good, we are always directed towards it. Happiness, which is likened by Pieper to the quenching of thirst, is that which all people forever strive for but, unlike thirst, it is never fully satisfied (*Happiness and Contemplation* 18). However, given that happiness's nature is like a quenching of thirst, happiness must be found outside of ourselves, just as we need water, something external to ourselves, to quench our thirst and satisfy us internally (*Happiness and Contemplation* 27). We cannot quench our own thirst, but rely on water for its satiation. Likewise, the craving for happiness means that we do not already possess, otherwise, Pieper argues, we would not need to search for it (*Happiness and Contemplation* 27). Pieper concludes that happiness, being that which all people always seek and what must be found outside ourselves, is a desire to possess the total Good, which is done through contemplation (*Happiness and Contemplation* 40).

According to Pieper, happiness is achieved through contemplation the True and the Good can only be possessed by the intellect (*Happiness and Contemplation* 42). When we contemplate the total Good, we hold it in our mind and possess it in the only way we are able. As stated by Pieper, to be happy is to see that which one loves (*Happiness and Contemplation* 70). As beings composed of both body and spirit, Pieper states that it is our spirit which inherently loves the total Good (*Happiness and Contemplation* 47). The way to possess the total good, that which we love, is through cognition of it (Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* 65). To know, to be cognizant of that which we love, is to have it (Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* 65). Since happiness, the True and the Good, is found in the realm of the infinite, it cannot be found in the material world, leaving all created happiness from the material realm ultimately unsatisfying. Because of happiness' nature, that it must be sought outside of the everyday world, it cannot be attained in the workaday. Happiness, Pieper maintains, cannot be found in the material workaday but only in contemplation (*Happiness and Contemplation* 64).

In contemplation, say Pieper, we remove ourselves fully from concerns of the everyday in order to ponder the totality of existence. Since contemplation is removed from the workaday, it cannot be done through everyday activity. Instead, contemplation must be done in a space of leisure, through an activity that is antithetical to the workaday. One activity that Pieper identifies as invoking contemplation is philosophy (*In Defense of Philosophy* 12). The practice of philosophy, therefore, must be wholly disconnected from the utilitarian goals of the workaday: "We cannot philosophize as long as our interests remain absorbed by the active pursuit of goals, when the "lens" of our soul is focused on a clearly circumscribed sector, on an objective here and now, on things that are presently "needed" – and explicitly *not* on anything else" (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* 24). Since happiness is the pursuit of all people, and happiness is only found in contemplation, and

contemplation can occur through philosophy, the act of philosophy is defended by Pieper as a wholly human act, it “flows from man’s basic existential disposition toward the world” (*In Defense of Philosophy*, 23). Philosophy, then, stands apart from the workaday and must necessarily be separate from the workaday in order to remain philosophy. However, this necessity becomes problematic when looking at the presence of philosophy in the modern world.

As previously stated, one of the problems that Pieper identifies with modern society, that disrupts leisure, is the notion of “total work”. “Total work,” according to Pieper, describes the reduction of human life to practical goals and the reduction of the human being into utilitarian value (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 25). Whereas the happiness is a goal pursued for itself, Pieper describes work as all that which is pursued “for something” (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 26). Work is not valuable in and of itself, but because of its ability to achieve something else. Although Pieper acknowledges that work is a necessary part of life, for man to “secure his daily bread,” he maintains that work is not all that a human life is: “But the question is:... can man develop to the full as a functionary and a “worker” and nothing else; can a full human existence be contained within an exclusively workaday existence?” (Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 39). Pieper’s answer to this question is “no”. The problem of total work, according to Pieper, is that it flattens all of human existence into the merely the workaday, rejecting the world beyond, the world of the True and the Good (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 34). In doing so, Pieper argues that we lose a fundamental part of our human existence (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 39). In a world of total work, the Good cannot be possessed through contemplation because contemplation must necessarily be separate from the workaday. In a world that has been flattened to daily toil, where all that matters is the practical concerns of the here and now, one cannot contemplate their existential position or the universal realities of existence and

therefore cannot find happiness. In not finding happiness, we fail to fulfill a fundamental part of our existence.

A solution to this problem, for Pieper, is to recultivate the practice of leisure, for in leisure, one has the space and time carved out from the workaday to contemplate. Closely related to leisure is the practice of philosophy. In practicing philosophy, one opens themselves up to the potential for contemplation. Being free from the absorption of daily, practical goals, one can reflect on the whole of existence and to do so is to engage in philosophy (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* 24). Pieper's account of philosophy furthers his defense of philosophy's value by demonstrating its necessity to the human experience. Philosophy, Pieper holds, is a wholly free endeavor, disconnected from the pursuit of all practical goals (*In Defense of Philosophy* 42). The incompatibility between philosophy and the everyday world allows humanity, as spiritual beings, to fulfill the spiritual aspect of themselves and is therefore a necessary part of the human experience and necessary in living a fully human life (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* 33).

Philosophy, Pieper argues, is a fundamentally human endeavor, where one looks out on their world and contemplates its goodness (*In Defense of Philosophy* 46). This act, reflection of the goodness of the world, Pieper argues is the fulfillment of human nature (*Happiness and Contemplation* 58). Since leisure and contemplation can only take place outside of the workaday, the philosophical must be pursued in a space that is separate from the workaday. However, the cultivation of leisure and philosophy in the world of total work poses a challenge. As the world becomes ever more consumed with utilitarian value, the possibility for leisure becomes more distant. As a fundamental part of human nature, arising out of our existential position, leisure can never be fully choked out by the world of total work. In order to secure a space and time for leisure, its practice must be re-established. One way to promote this is the presence of an institution dedicated

to such. Here, I propose the restoration of the University as a place for leisure as a way to re-establish the practice of contemplation and promote the realization of fully human lives.

The University as an institution has its origins in Antiquity, with the word “academic” deriving from Plato’s Academy. To restore the essence of the University, as a place to pursue the True and the Good, one can look back to Plato’s Academy as a model. Plato’s ideas on education and the aim of the University can be seen in *The Republic* in the Allegory of the Cave. Through presenting the Allegory of the Cave, Plato demonstrates what he believes to be the aim of education: to turn one towards the Good. In the text, Socrates is discussing with some companions how to build a Just city (Plato 368b). In order to have a Just city, Socrates states that the individuals must be Just for the city as a whole to be Just as well (Plato 369a). Shifting focus to how to create Just individuals, Socrates turns to the question of education (Plato 376b). To have Just individuals, Socrates argues that they must be properly brought up and educated in a way that will make them so (Plato 376b). After explaining education involving music and gymnastics, Socrates reveals the Allegory of the Cave. In the Allegory of the Cave, the reader receives insight into Plato’s attitude towards education. In the cave, the individuals within find themselves chained in the bottom of the cave looking at shadows on the wall (Plato 514a). As one of the prisoners is forced to leave the cave, they learn that the shadows were not the Truth, but were caused by objects being held in front of a fire behind them (Plato 516a). As they are eventually dragged out of the cave, they are brought out into the world and see the sun, recognizing it as the True and the Good, the source of all that is true (Plato 516a). The Allegory of the Cave represents the purpose of education as students are brought through the various levels out of the cave as they approach understanding. In Plato’s conception of education, the goal of education is to direct one towards the True and the Good, being the Sun: “in the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the *idea* of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded

that this is in fact the cause of all that is right and fair in everything” (Plato 517c). In the Allegory of the Cave, the role of the educator is to effectively turn people around so that they may see the Form of the Good. Although all people possess the ability to see, they must be turned toward the light to begin their ascent out of the cave and towards understanding of the Good. Therefore, for Plato, the role of education is to be this turning: ““There would, therefore,’ I said, ‘be an art of this turning around, concerned with the way in which this power can most easily and efficiently be turned around, not an art of producing sight in it. Rather, this art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object’” (Plato 518d).

From this picture of education, we can see that the University is meant to be a place for apprehending the Good, for attaining happiness, and realizing our full nature. For Plato, the purpose of education was to direct one toward the Good. This belief provided the basis for Plato’s Academy where philosophy was pursued with the intention of achieving the Good. Pieper notes that “Plato’s school in Athens was a *philosophical* school, a community of people philosophizing, so that its intrinsic characteristic is philosophy, the philosophical way of looking at the world” (*What Does “Academic” Mean?* 7). Plato’s Academy, which is understood to be the basis for contemporary academia, was founded on the pursuit of the Good, the practice of philosophy, and the fulfillment of the human being. In Plato’s allegory, as well, we see the universal pursuit of happiness, of the Good, when Socrates tells Glaucon “don’t be surprised that the men who get to that point aren’t willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather that their souls are always eager to spend their time above” (Plato 517d). When one reads Plato’s Allegory of the Cave with Pieper’s understanding of happiness, we see that all people search for the True and the Good, and it is the role of the Academy to guide them towards it. Although those in the cave must be forcibly turned toward the Good, they come to realize that the Good is what they have been seeking. The University, therefore, as an

institution of education, is meant to be a space and time dedicated to the intellectual apprehension of the True and the Good.

In modern times, however, Pieper believes that the university has fallen victim to the world of “total work”. By using education for utilitarian ends rather than for the attainment of truth, Pieper believes that the essence of the university, and the fulfillment of human nature that it facilitates, is being lost. In Pieper’s book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, he explains that there are two types of knowing: *ratio* and *intellectus*. In *ratio*, one apprehends the truth through strain and hard work (Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 28). *Intellectus*, however, is an easy and full understanding where the truth comes to you through insight (Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 28). In the world of total work, education has been flattened into only *ratio* as a form of intellectual work (Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 29). When one considers knowledge to be merely work, they reject knowledge that is contemplative and received through receptivity, *intellectus*. Although the world of total work prioritizes *ratio*, Antiquity views them as complimentary, with *intellectus* being the higher, intuitive understanding (Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 28). In order to rescue leisure in the world of total work, we must also cultivate *intellectus* rather than only *ratio*. In a world that prioritizes *ratio* and its contribution to total work, the individual becomes reduced to their utilitarian ability to contribute practically to the social good; the individual becomes a tool for utility.

In prioritizing *ratio* over *intellectus*, instead of seeing them as counterparts, an essential aspect of what it means to understand is omitted. However, I argue that *intellectus* can be re-introduced to through emphasizing a study of theory in all disciplines. As Pieper explains, “*Theoria* and “theoretical” are words that, in the understanding of the ancients, mean precisely this: a relationship to the world, and orientation to reality characterized entirely by the desire that this same reality may reveal itself in its true being” (*In Defense of Philosophy* 45). Theory, therefore, allows one to study



freely with the aim of having the truth be revealed rather than with the aim of achieving workaday goals: “Thus we may state that the contemplation of reality is properly called “theoretical” whenever the aim is to discover the truth and nothing else” (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* 46). In the world of total work, Pieper believes that the University has become an institution that creates only workers rather than an institution that facilitates the universal pursuit of the True and the Good. However, by shifting the study of disciplines from practical ends to theoretical, it can become a place of leisure where one is free to contemplate and pursue the True and the Good.

By reconnecting the university with its origins in the practice of philosophy, the practice of leisure can also be recultivated. Plato’s understanding of education included a turning of one’s soul towards the good. Although Plato’s description of education comes from the desire to make a Just city by creating Just individuals, the aim is aligned with Pieper’s. For Pieper, he desires to see a well-ordered world that comes from the fulfillment of human nature, a world where one is encouraged to live a fully human life, and the value of a human being is not reducible to their utility. In the allegory of the cave, education is the soul turning away from the shadows on the wall of the cave and turning towards the True. Philosophy, as well, turns people toward the True. So, all education, at its heart, must be philosophical, must be aimed at the truth and nothing else. To re-establish what Pieper believes has been lost, the fulfillment of human nature, the University must be reconnected to its foundation which comes from Plato’s Academy, a school of philosophy. In re-introducing the value and study of theory into disciplines, the University can adopt a philosophical approach separated from utilitarian aims and become a place for freely pursuing the True and the Good.

To further demonstrate the integral connection between the University and leisure, in Pieper’s book *What Does “Academic” Mean?*, he explains how academic means philosophical, and

philosophical means theoretical (*What Does "Academic" Mean?* 7). By introducing theoretical knowledge back into the University, rather than knowledge that is used "for something", the University can be reunited with its essence as a place to study wisdom. To be directed towards to True and the Good, the University must retain an aspect of uselessness, where "useless" does not mean "worthless". In emphasizing the practical value of a university education, Pieper argues that we have created what is called an Intellectual worker; one who acquires knowledge through effort and *ratio* in order to use that knowledge for practical ends and is subsumed into the world of Total Work (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture* 29). In introducing theory back into academia, we recover the meaning of the word academia as it relates to and arises out of from philosophy: "To pursue a branch of knowledge in an academic way means to pursue it philosophically. And consequently, an education that is not philosophically based and not shaped on philosophical principles cannot properly be called academic" (*What Does "Academic" Mean?* 8).

Although disciplines can be utilized for workaday means, they should not lose their connection with the essence of academia. In Plato's Academy, philosophy was studied with the aim of discovering the True and the Good without practical ends in mind. As the foundation of academia, this root should permeate all disciplines through asking philosophical questions. The primary goal of the University should be the pursuit of the truth rather than service. Stemming from Plato's philosophical school, the academy must be grounded in wonder; the University should be a place where one receives the truth. In making the University a place of leisure, we open up the possibility for contemplation and give people a space where they can come and be fully human.

Throughout Pieper's works, the question of how to live a fully human existence permeates many of his texts. In the texts I have focused on here, Pieper primarily concerns himself with the question of leisure and the world of total work. Although Pieper admits that there is a place in life for the

workaday, he defends the belief that human existence cannot be reduced to merely the workaday. This can be seen in the universal pursuit of happiness, understood as the pursuit for the True and the Good. This fundamental aspect of humanity can only be found through contemplation, which can only be possible if there is space and time to practice leisure. As leisure must be fundamentally separated from the workaday, a space must be carved out to practice leisure. As the University is rooted in Plato's philosophical Academy, the University should be a place separated from the workaday world and dedicated to the cultivation of humanity through the pursuit of truth for itself. In bringing the study of theory back to the University, the institution is reconnected with its origins as a space to freely pursue one's essential human nature. By approaching education in a philosophical way, by asking philosophical questions and pursuing the True and the Good, the University can become a place dedicated to the fulfillment of a fully lived and fully human life.

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