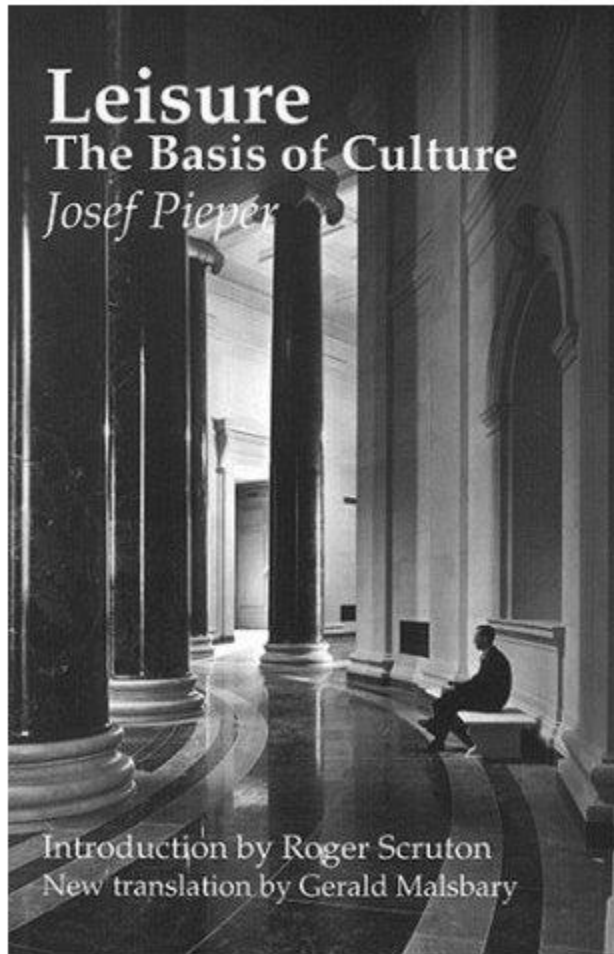


A Summary of Leisure the Basis of Culture by Josef Pieper



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About the Author

Josef Pieper was born on May 4, 1905, in Westphalia, Germany. He grew up learning Thomistic thought and continued as a Thomist philosopher his entire life. He was involved in the liturgical renewal of the 1920's and upheld Catholic belief during the turmoil of the Second World War.

After the war, he taught at the University of Munster in Westphalia, from 1946 until his retirement. He died in 1997. His mind remained sharp throughout his entire life, and he wrote around fifty-books all in line with Thomistic principles.

General Overview

In his book, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, Pieper makes the claim that the reconstruction of Western Culture demands a rebirth of the notion of leisure. Leisure is distinctive from the state of inactivity or acedia, because it is based in festival and an affirmation of the world for what the world truly is (i.e. a creation). This takes place most distinctively in the festival which is founded on the concept of worship, which is recognition that man is dependent on God. What then does it mean to be at leisure, and what is the “act” that is most appropriate to leisure? Contemplation.

The second article in the book, *The Philosophical Act*, attempts to go more deeply into the notion of just what the concept of contemplation entails. After leaving behind the work-a-day world, man has to ask the philosophical question in relation to the totality of existence, God and the world. This isn't simply to leave behind the world as if there was a world different from the one we perceive, it is to look at this world in a state of wonder that becomes ever deeper against the backdrop of the Christian theological tradition.

Essay One: Leisure the Basis of Culture

Chapter One

In the period of reconstruction after the end of the Second World War, the acclaimed goal was a restoration of Western Civilization. Pieper makes the startling assertion that to truly rebuild the western culture one must rebuild it on the foundation of leisure. This seems almost absurd in a world where the very concept of leisure has been destroyed by our utilitarian oriented society. It would almost seem that we live to work rather than working to live. In part, our very notion of leisure has been replaced by the notion of a break from the working world.

The Greek writer Aristotle clearly understood that the entire focus of man's existence was leisure. It is he who states that man is *not-at-leisure* in order to be *at-leisure*. That is, the purpose for which man works is that he might be *at-leisure*. This appears so contrary to our very notion of daily living and the *rest-from-work* that we are tempted to wonder whether or not this is not merely something that an ancient writer stated, but which has no relevance in modern times. Pieper says that this idea points to misunderstanding of the very notion of leisure.

If one is tempted to dismiss the saying of Aristotle that we are *not-at-leisure* in order to be *at-leisure*, they might be shocked to find that the notion of the *vita contemplativa* in Christian doctrine is based on the Aristotelian notion of leisure. Indeed our understanding of the human person as such has been altered to such a degree that to get a glimpse of what it meant by leisure and the values that antiquity and the middle ages placed on such a state, we must attempt to penetrate the notions of “work” and “worker” that have become so prevalent in the modern world.

Chapter Two

The original thought held by those who worked with their hands was that the intellectual enterprise was one which required no work. The idea that work was a part of the intellectual process arose with a greater understanding of man's act of knowing. In sense perception, as in gazing at a rose, the question is asked as to what man *does* in seeing the rose. There certainly seems to be a kind of passivity in such a state where man merely gazes upon the beauty inherent in the object. But when the bar is raised to the activity of knowing, man seems to take on an active role which requires effort and work on the part of the knower.

The question boils down to, is it possible when man knows that a mere looking is going on, that it is an intellectual vision? For Kant the answer is clearly no. Knowing for Kant is a discursive act. Man gathers data, creates distinctions and comes up with solutions. Such knowing requires mental exertion, and when knowing is reduced to activity, it easily becomes just another form of work.

For ancient and medieval philosophy a distinction must be made between the *ratio* and the *intellectus*. The discursive intellect is *ratio*, whereas intellectual vision is the *intellectus*. Man's single power of knowing encompasses both the *ratio* and the *intellectus*. For them, the ratio is a form of work, one that demands effort, but this does not eliminate the possibility that the *intellectus* is not work at all. There is a non-active component of it which comprises the *vita contemplativa* as man's highest achievement.

Understanding knowing as work is to say that there is a claim on man to exercise the ratio anytime he desire to know. But to assert that knowing is work is also for man to make a claim. That is, anything that man knows is brought about by his own efforts. This presupposes a stance wherein man refuses to acknowledge receptivity in the intellect, for if all knowledge is a fruit of his own work, then there is nothing he knows which he has not achieved by his own effort.

The idea of simple seeing and discursive thinking is not as opposed as the moderns would have us believe. The underlying current of thought states that nothing good is achieved without effort. Thus, the very idea of receiving something in a passive receptivity is foreign to the concept of good that the modern world imposes upon man. Nothing good, they say, is achieved without effort.

Yet St. Thomas Aquinas objects, stating that virtue consists more in the good than in effort. It is not effort which determines the moral value of an action, but the intrinsic goodness of that action. Kant would have man believe that the path to goodness is difficult and virtue is the tool which enables us to put forth the effort to work through the difficulty and conquer our natural inclinations. Thomas describes virtue as that which *enables* us to pursue our natural inclinations. It is not in the difficulty that the virtue consists, but virtue is only truly called such when the very action becomes effortless. The true foundation of Kantian ethics then, rests in man's refusal to accept a gift, trusting that goodness can only be achieved by his own efforts.

In summary, the thoughts underlying the notion of intellectual activity as work are: first, that all man's knowing is discursive, and secondly, that for anything to be true, effort must have been behind its coming to be known. Work, then, is understood to be a "contribution to society" whether through manual or intellectual labor. That is, it is all for the sake of advancing society.

Pieper claims, however that there is a need for a type of intellectual activity that is not at all about serving the community. Without this, the very humanness of humanity disappears. Is the life of man, he demands, reduced to a constant effort to provide society with more progress? Pieper compares the problem with the distinction between the liberal and the servile arts. Servile arts are about training man to serve a function within society. Liberal arts are about bettering man as man. Can man be satisfied with being merely a functionary within the whole? Can his existence have sufficient meaning in a world of total work? To answer yes is to deny the genuine existence of arts of a non-utilitarian essence. Pieper's claim is that it must be absolutely necessary for

the perfection of the entire community that such arts not only exist, but that there be those who are completely devoted to the “use-less” life of contemplation.

The modern world has lost much of what is contained in the notion of leisure. It is strictly opposed to what the ancients called *acedia*. The worker type, who finds his very meaning in the usefulness he serves to society, can only identify leisure with a sense of idleness and inactivity. *Acedia* is precisely this lack of doing, but the notion goes deeper still. *Acedia* is fundamentally a despair of ever accomplishing that which one is meant to be. It is a giving up in the effort to be who one is. This can lurk behind even in the most physically satisfying of exertions.

In order to understand leisure then, Pieper asks what is diametrically opposed to *acedia*. The modern man would have us believe that it is the industriousness of the worker contributing to the good of the society. But if *acedia* is fundamentally a denial of man’s existence as man, then its opposite must be a fundamental affirmation of who man is. Pieper turns to Thomas for the startling statement that *acedia*, so often understood as the man who fails to do any work, is not a resting per se, but is a very sin against the command of rest. *Acedia* then is a restlessness that is opposed to the very spirit of leisure.

After this contrast, Pieper attempts to provide a concept of leisure to the reader. Leisure then, in the first place is a stillness of spirit, an opening of the mind to receive. It is secondly, opposed to the idea of work as effort, for it takes place in a sense of celebration, of approval of the world. The highest expression of this celebration is the festival. Thirdly, leisure must be understood as opposed to the concept of break-from-work. A break is meant to afford man the ability to continue working. The break is fundamentally for the sake of work. Leisure, though truly refreshing, derives this freshness from the very fact that it is for its own sake. It is only accidental that man is better able to work after being *at-leisure*. Leisure is not about making the worker a better functionary, but about making him more human. In participating in leisure, something of the human is left behind and a spark of the divine is achieved.

Chapter Four

After discussing what leisure is, Pieper then asks whether or not there is a possibility of maintaining leisure in a world where the advancement of total work is progressing more and more each day. In order to understand the efforts in this area, he enters into a discussion of the proletariat and de-proletarianization. In the Greek world the *banausos*, the hand-worker, was opposed to the student who was brought up as a master in comparison to slaves. Is the solution then to equalize their status by making the student share the role of the *banausos*? No. Being proletarian is not equivalent to being poor, but to being engulfed by the world of total work. Thus, the negation that belongs to the proletariat cannot be overcome by making everyone a part of this world of total work. Something else is necessary.

To belong to the proletariat means that one is bound to the world of useful work. Useful work is that which has a social purpose; it is for the sake of society. As such the one performing work acts as a functionary. Such work is the realm of the servile arts. To expand man’s horizons beyond the world of total work and effect a deproletarianization of man, Pieper suggests that a renewal of the liberal arts is necessary. One needs to acknowledge then, a clear distinction between the useful arts and the free arts.

The distinction between the servile and liberal arts is related to the distinction between the wage and the honorarium. The wage is that given in compensation for labor. Honorarium on the other hand presupposes that the action cannot be truly compensated. There is not an equivalent measure which can be used to balance the scales between what was done and what was owed. For the worker, there only exists the concept of wage which is to say that there is only intellectual labor for man; he can only be an intellectual “worker”. For the Christian thinker however, the servile arts themselves only have their place insofar as they participate in the idea of honorarium, for included in the notion of honorarium is the notion of an action as truly human. Thus,

deproletarianization would mean making available to the working man, something that is clearly *not-work* (i.e. leisure).

For Pieper, the heart of leisure lies in an affirmation of the world. There is no more solid affirmation of the meaning of the world to be found than that present in festival and this affirmation is the praise of God, the Creator. The festival derives its entire meaning from the aspect of worship present in it. Thus, leisure too is based primarily in worship. There has undoubtedly been attempts to divorce celebration from its divine origins, but they are, as of the present, all empty of real meaning, except insofar as they steal from some previous religious cult.

It is in the spirit of festivity that the great gulf between work and leisure is seen. Work is always about production and the advancement of society marked by compensation. Festivity on the other hand is marked by sacrifice, where one gives not from surplus, but even a lack. This is fundamentally opposed to the notion of useful endeavors.

The question of what one is to do is then posed, and Pieper replies more along the lines of what not to do than what to do. Leisure certainly then, with its greatest expression in worshipful celebration, arises in a Catholic culture, but Pieper warns that trying to reestablish leisure as a method for restoring culture, is to defeat the very purpose of leisure. Leisure must truly be for its own sake. It can never be a means to an end, and thus it can never be done for the sake of restoring culture.

So, again, what exactly is leisure? The sketch presented in the previous pages is developed further in Pieper's second article, *The Philosophical Act*.

Essay 2: The Philosophical Act

Chapter One

In asking what philosophy is, we are beginning to do philosophy. This is because philosophy is not about a doing of something practical. It is a transcending of the work-a-day existence of man. The work-a-day world is one where anything which is done is for the sake of the common utility. That is, it is done to satisfy man's basic needs or to achieve some greater good for the community. Common utility is not the same as common good. There are those whose actions which, while not useful, are part of the common good. To philosophize belongs to the common good, while it is not at all about serving some useful end. How is this possible?

In the everyday world of work, we are constantly searching to achieve a further goal, whether it is the daily needs of life, as food, clothing and shelter or some form of social advancement. There is a general bustle to *do*. But every now and then the question arises which seeks an explanation for all of man's activities and needs. What is all this about? The answer belongs in the domain of philosophy. There is a clear incommensurability between philosophy and the work-a-day world.

There are more ways than just that of philosophy which question the meaning of the daily toil of existence. Poetry too is clearly not in its essence about achieving some useful purpose. Love and death intrude upon the daily life of man. Prayer is another of those events that means more than work. There is something disturbing about these events. They remind man that there is something beyond the life of utility that he lives. In their ability to disturb man's life of work, they share the aspect of the wonderful which is essential to philosophy. When these are silenced, philosophy too is silenced.

Even worse than the elimination of wonder from these arts is a distortion of that very wonder. Such arts can be bent to serve the life of utility. Prayer can be replaced with a deception. When the divine becomes that which serves man's goal-orientation, love becomes about serving oneself, and poetry serves the agenda of the state,

then philosophy is in danger. There is a way in which philosophy itself is replaced with a training of man to work well. In Plato's character, Apollodorus, the incommensurability of the philosophical act and the work world is expressed by the way in which the former friends of Apollodorus, now focused on advancement in life, can no longer listen to his love poems with any real interest.

From here, Pieper enters into a discussion of the freedom of philosophy. Philosophy cannot be used for the sake of anything else; it, in and of itself, is a goal. It is knowledge which is for its own sake, which is to say that it is a *liberal* art. In so far as the academy has become a place to train for a career, just so far has academic freedom been lost, and thus far has philosophy too disappeared from the university. It is the attribute of the other sciences that they are meant to be subordinated to purposes. It is the distinctive mark of philosophy that this cannot be so. It seems to be the tendency of the work world to say that we need a physician or lawyer for some goal that needs to be achieved, but when this is asked about the philosopher, the philosopher has been destroyed.

This is not to say that the philosopher is worthless in the community. There is a relationship between the philosopher and the common good, but it is not for the administrators of the common good to determine this relationship. This freedom is related to the theoretical character of philosophy. Philosophy has an aspect of seeing that is connected to its freedom from service. This *theorein* is about seeing, a gazing into the meaning of things. It is not about a leaving the world behind as it leaves the practical world of work behind. Rather, it affirms the world for what it truly is – a creation.

When the world is no longer seen as a creation, but a mere raw material, then true *theorein*, can no longer occur. With the destruction of *theorein*, philosophy itself ceases. For without a seeing, there is no freedom for philosophy, since all things become merely functionary in the whole. Philosophy is not about a practical functioning in the whole, it is about a seeing into what is.

Chapter Two

It is clear then, that to philosophize, one steps out of the work-a-day world, but this is the mere starting point of philosophy. If one speaks of a leaving behind, then there must be something towards which one is going. So where does philosophy lead to? Are there then two worlds, the one that is left behind and another which is achieved in philosophy? They are both dimensions of man's world, which is a complex reality that needs explanation.

To explain this, Pieper starts at the very beginning. To live, he says, is to be in a world. To be in a world means to have a relation between the internal and the external reality. Internal here does not mean merely the inside of a thing, but the ability to have a relation with the exterior. Pieper uses the example of a plant and a rock to illustrate the difference. A plant has an interior that enters into a relationship with the external. That is, it absorbs nutrients which become a part of its internality. A rock, by contrast, is incapable of such relations.

The world then is the set of relations, and to have a world is to have this set of relations. Even more, the greater degree of inwardness, or capacity for relationship that one possesses, the greater the world is in which he lives. The lowest world is that of the plant, which is restricted to the immediate vicinity in which the plants come into contact with things other than themselves. An animal lives in the world of its sense perception. Here Pieper distinguishes between environment and world. An animal is limited by biological conditions to a specific set of relations with the "world". This limited range is more properly called its environment, beyond which it cannot escape and which is only a rather narrow glimpse at the entirety of nature.

What does this have to do with the question of philosophy? Pieper explains that man, by contrast to all other creatures, is not limited by a biological scope, to an environment. Man transcends the environment, becoming capable of living in the whole field of reality. Spirit or intellect is marked by a capacity to be in relation to the

whole, and to transcend the whole. It is not possible to speak of the world and a relation to the entirety of being without also speaking of spirit, for spirit in some sense is the whole of being. In being, truth includes the idea of able to be understood, or grasped by a spirit. So much so that “to be” is “to be in relation to spirit”.

Man is not just spirit. An absolutely essential component of being man is to have a body. Man lives in a body, and as such, his world contains an environment as well as the entirety of reality. He must have a roof over his head, while still possessing the capacity to transcend that environment. It is precisely this aspect of transcendence that points back to the philosophical act. Man lives in this environment, while realizing that there must be something more.

The philosophical question then, is only philosophical when it considers the world in relation to the totality of being. That is, when the philosophical question is asked it demands to know in relation to the totality of existence, God and the World.

Chapter Three

In philosophizing then, it is not that there exist two different worlds, but that there is a deeper dimension to the world we experience around us. The philosopher looks at this world and wonders what it truly is. He recognizes that there is something deeply mysterious and unfathomable about the very existence that goes on around him. It is not that this “mirandum,” this wonderful depth, is not there in the work world, but it is precisely the stance of wonder in face of this overpowering reality that truly characterizes the beginning of philosophy.

There is a distinctive non-bourgeois character to philosophy. By bourgeois, Pieper means a numbness that is not the numbness of wonder, but a numbness that locks the person in the daily world, so that he cannot, *cannot*, see the world of wonder.

Though philosophy begins in wonder, wonder is never really left behind. It is a mark of philosophy that it can never attain that for which it reaches. “To see” in the ultimate sense is to lose the wonderful, the incomprehensibility springing from an ever richer horizon of reality in that which one gazes upon. This is not to say that there is hopelessness to philosophy’s search. While recognizing that philosophy ceases to be such when wonder disappears, philosophy is marked by a search in hope for the vision of reality. It is the true profundity of reality that enables this ever-deepening wonder to abide in philosophy.

It is the wonder of philosophy that makes it so distinctly human. In the divine, there is no need for wonder, because understanding is present, and in bestiality, animals are never seized by the hunger to “know”. Philosophy, then, paves the way into Theology, for it is a loving search of truth, a truth that can never be had in philosophy, but which truly exists.

Chapter Four

Before philosophy, man lives within a tradition that has relatedness to the whole already. There is always this sense of some prior interpretation of reality from which springs the philosophical wonder. Tradition, as Aristotle and Plato would have us believe, is handed down from the ancients since the very beginning of time. It is ultimately of divine origin. This is where Pieper talks of the essential relation of philosophy to Theology.

Despite the relatedness that theology has with the world, this is not to say that the end of philosophy is found in Theology. For the end that theology has is essentially prior to any experience of the world. Philosophy, by contrast, starts in the experience and rises to wonder. Theology profoundly influences the way we think about reality, but this is because Theology, when truly so and since the birth of Christ, this means Christian theology, forms who we are and how we look at reality.

Theology does not provide the answers to philosophy. It provokes the mind to see the ever deeper mystery and incomprehensibility of being. It does not restrict philosophy but provides a deep insight into being which challenges philosophy to a deeper level of understanding. It is a rock of truth which prevents philosophy from shaking off the burden of being face to face with reality.

The last point Pieper makes is to distinguish between two ways of knowing. One way we know is in a detached mode, as one who knows a doctrine, or the ethicist knows ethics. The other mode of knowing is one of relatedness, as the good man knows ethics by the desire he feels to do the right thing. In philosophy, then to know the truth about the totality of being, one needs not only to know it as a doctrine, but to know it with a kind of connaturality. To see the Christian truth as true, the philosopher must *live* it.