**Leisure and Work in Josef Pieper’s philosophical anthropology**

Ferenc Hörcher

Research Institute of Politics and Government, University of Public Service, Budapest

Institute of Philosophy, HUN-REN

**Abstract**

This chapter introduces Pieper’s concept of leisure (Musse) as an alternative to the work-ethic of Max Weber. While Weber tried to rely on the Protestant idea of the virtue of diligence and perseverance, Pieper, as a Catholic theorist, goes back to medieval Christian notions of contemplation. Of course, this idea was closely connected to ancient ideas of what was called the contemplative way of life, as opposed to the vita activa. Medieval Christianity showed that the human being can achieve much more than simply work to provide for existential needs. According to the Christian teaching, as understood by Aquinas and others, on the basis of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, we can reach a higher realm of our life if we are able to withdraw for some time (*Arbeitspause*) from the world of work (*Arbeitswelt*), and allow our spirit and mind (*Geist*) to work (*arbeit*), instead of our hands and body.

Beside this internal and implicit Christian debate with a Protestant idea of work-ethic, Pieper also intends to show us that not only the modern Totalitarian ideologies, but also the work-centred modern way of life, characteristic of the postwar West, in fact lead to a simplified form of existence, that he calls “*Entproletarisierung*”. In this respect he seems to agree with Ortega’s criticism of the revolt of the masses, and once again presents leisure as a way to break free from the grip of this way of life. In this respect two dimensions of a contemplative attitude is stressed: wonder and the festival. Finally, the essay takes stock of what we might call the tragic dimension of Pieper's idea.

Key terms: active life, contemplative life, Aristotle, Aqunas, Christianity, totalitarianism of work, wonder, festival

1. **Starting point: Holbein’s Erasmus**

In a footnote of the first of the two essays, which make up his book entitled *Leisure*, the German philosopher Josef Pieper (194-1997) mentions a painting by Hans Holbein.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is a portrait of the famous humanist scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam. It presents its hero as a mature thinker. He seems to be a well-established burgher, in posh garment, in a nice interior. His pose is still, calm and relaxed – he is not prepared to move, even if he pays careful attention to the events around him. An art historian describes what we see the following way: “an idealized picture of a sensitive, highly cultivated scholar, and this was precisely how Erasmus wanted to be remembered by future generations.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The attentive observer can discover, that the scholar’s skin around his finger nails is worn and dirty. For us, this detail is in agreement with the Greek words we read on the book: “The Herculean Labours of Erasmus of Rotterdam.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Although the posture he assumes suggests an elevated scholarly attitude, his fingers and the inscription on the book seem to be evidence of the manual work he was forced to do every day.

Piper’s line of argument is that there is an early modern philosophical context, from Erasmus to Kant to Carlyle, where Hercules counted as the embodiment of the heroic worker. This context seems to be a circumscription of Protestant ethics, as made memorable by Max Weber. Kant’s ethics of duty comes together in it with a Protestant work-ethics. Pieper, a Catholic, does engage in an outright polemic with Weber, however. The targets of his criticism are, instead, character traits and certain elements of the modern way of life, including “’enlightened’ wit”. As he points out, those who celebrated Hercules as their hero of hard work, were heirs to the Enlightenment. He mentions as the forerunner of the enlightened modern thinkers a certain Antisthenes, a Cynic philosopher and friend of Plato, who “extolled Hercules as the Accomplisher of Superhuman Actions.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Antisthenes and his modern, enlightened followers seem to Pieper “to illustrate the very “type” of the modern “workaholic”.

Josef Pieper (1904-1997), this German Catholic thinker, is certainly critical of this kind of exaggeration of the role of work in human life. His book is meant to be a detailed counterargument against this account, which he claims, was based on the underestimation of leisure. He proposes a retrial in this volume on the role of contemplation in a full human life. But why is it so important for a Catholic, and specifically for Pieper, to try to reassess the relevance of leisure in human life, both individually and in community? And why so then?

1. **The cultural aftermath of Nazism**

It was after the Second World War that Pieper has been accepted into academia. Through his Habilitation exam he was credited to teach at the philosophy faculty of the university of Münster. It was in that period of his life that he wrote both of the essays contained in the English edition of *Leisure*. As he explains it in the Author’s Preface to the English Edition in 1952, they were originally written separately, the second one first given as a lecture, in 1947. But both of them were built on the same foundation: on the author’s conviction that “Culture… is the quintessence of all the natural goods of the world”, and “Culture depends for its very existence on leisure”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

He wrote these essays in a period, when not only a whole nation, a whole continent, a whole world found itself in an urgency to build a new house, and for this “new beginning”, which was also a “re-foundation”. AS he saw it, in order to achieve this, people had to return to the foundations of their culture. And it is for this reason that Pieper turned towards leisure, to explain its crucial role in founding our culture.

There are two layers to his cultural historical archaeology. The first is ancient Athens, the second the Christian Middle Ages. In the first layer his hero is Aristotle who in his *Metaphysics* referred to leisure. But certainly, already his master, Plato had a lot to say about the contemplative life. Pieper recalls the Greek word, *scholé*, to make clear the real subject of his essays. He refers indirectly to Aristotle’s distinction between those who live a life of manual labour and those who are free from that. Yet this is not, as his critics claim, a questioning of the value of manual labour. It is rather, the reconstruction of the reason behind manual work: “We work in order to be at leisure.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This Aristotelian idea, that manual labour points towards a higher form of thought, leisure, is adopted by medieval Christian thought, which based its doctrine of contemplative life (vita contemplativa) on this foundation. The Middle Ages also contrasted conceptually the Liberal Arts that its universities teach, with the Servile Arts.

If leisure is so foundational in our culture, both in its ancient Greco-Roman and Medieval Christian phase, it needed to be recovered in the black night of a post-World War situation. Certainly after the physical destruction caused by the arms of war, work understood as a physical activity had to clear the ground before new houses could be built. But Pieper’s point is that the building of homes is partly an intellectual task, or at least it is impossible to turn a place into a home without intellectual underpinning. It is therefore the task of the philosopher to uncover the buried traces of the foundations of contemplation. It is exactly this work (and not simply to provide a phenomenology of leisure) that Pieper takes on his shoulder: to trace back the origins of ideas of leisure as a sort of intellectual underpinning which turns a human life worthwhile to live, and a human home a meaningful term.

Pieper’s project of writing these essays was meant as a kind of spiritual comfort as well as a way to pour spirit into his war-torn compatriots. His aim to look into the nuances of leisure was perhaps also meant as a response to the spiritual nightmare that was called Nazi propaganda, which did all it could to overturn traditional European values. Think about the slogan “*Arbeit macht frei*” (Work makes you free), which was infamously found as an inscription above the entrance gates of concentration camps and ghettos in Auschwitz, Dachau, and other places. Pieper does not address actual political issues concerning the German Totalitarian past, and does not spend much time recalling the memories of the absurd propaganda of the Nazi regime. What he does is a kind of therapeutic philosophy: he evokes themes from the history of philosophy that have the potential to reinvigorate the consciousness of ordinary readers in an intellectual climate of remorse, disillusionment and spiritual emptiness. Not as a kind of illusion to cover the hard facts of reality, but to show that behind the brute facts, or covered by them, there is a realm of clarity (*Lichtung*), which is available for each of us, if we learn the right way to pay attention to it.

1. **The new totalitarianism of work**

To be sure, with his book on *Leisure*, Pieper did not only address the cultural aftermath of the totalitarian political regime in Germany. A fundamental critique of one of the emerging problems of his time seemed to be also crucial for his endeavour. This was the problem he called the “totalitarian claims of the world of work”.[[7]](#footnote-7) He addresses the issue in what he calls an *Excursus* in his book.[[8]](#footnote-8) The topic of that part is what he calls the proletariat and how to fight against the phenomenon, or what he calls “*De-proletarianization*”. According to Pieper, not only the Führer, or the first secretary of the party, can have totalitarian demands. The world of work may impose demands that would be no less dangerous to the experience of our full humanity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Take the terminological innovation “intellectual worker”. According to Pieper, it is a false concept, a kind of social lie, in service of a deceptive ideology. Its function is to avoid a sharp social-political confrontation between students and manual workers. What the term should achieve is a pacification of the two, but according to the German thinker, this is impossible to achieve on the level of linguistic manipulation.

Interstingly, Piper makes use of the language of the communist teaching of class struggle. Pieper’s own thought on this theme is close enough to that teaching – he shares the critical view of the radical left that “being proletarian is being bound to the working-process.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This can remind one of Marx’s understanding of alienation, the unavoidable side-effect on human consciousness of monotonous industrialised labour. This theme was presented by Marx in his *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, as emphasized in the ‘60s by reform-communists, like Adam Schaff. The Polish thinker’s *Alienation As a Social Phenomenon* from 1980 famously analysed the difficulties resulting from degrading working conditions in a highly developed capitalist society. This is what Pieper himself realised, somewhat earlier. But his therapy as a Catholic, and as a special kind of very earnest Thomist, was very different from either Marx’s own or the Marxists’ solution. He, too, revealed the inhumanity of the sort of work Chaplin famously caricatured in *Modern Times*, claiming that it results in the loss of the human being’s real intellectual-spiritual perspective: ‘the whole life of the working human being is consumed.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He presented leisure as the solution to the threats of the “total-work state”, as a way of life opening up the realm of the metaphysical, as its alternative.

Certainly, Pieper is aware of the difficulties of his solution, which might seem to cause a kind of schism within society between those engaged in mean labour, and the highly intellectual elite, operating as a privileged class. But he does not look at this as a political problem, and therefore discounts the political solution. This is because his understanding of proletarianism is that it is a society-wide phenomenon, which affects everyone equally – a total submission to usefulness means the submission to what he calls “the servile arts”, “the inhumanity of the total world of work: the final binding of man to the process of production”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Pieper’s philosophically substantiated solution is to secure the possibility for everyone, including the working class, “making available for the working person a meaningful kind of activity that is not work – in other words, by opening up an area of true leisure.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. **Work and leisure**

But why does leisure have a “bad press” today, asks Roger Scruton in his Introduction.[[14]](#footnote-14) His answer to his own question is that leisure is attacked by the Puritan, as a “source of vice”, the egalitarian as a “sign of privilege”, and the Marxist as well, as the “unjust surplus”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Pieper aims to criticize this *Zeitgeist* which turns work into an idol. As leisure has a non-active character, it is by definition opposed to work, which is almost purely activity. This is why Pieper first has to deconstruct the notion of work, in order to be able to reconstruct leisure.

As mentioned, Pieper’s understanding of the modern notion of work is based on the notion of servile arts in Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “Every art is called *liberal* which is ordered to knowing; those which are ordered to some utility to be attained though action are called *servile arts*.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Obviously, this is the philosopher’s own perspective. Philosophy, as a special realm of thought, is concerned with the essence of the liberal arts. From a philosopher’s job, the servile arts are far away. But this does not mean that Pieper would look down on and regard as inferior the activity of the worker, manual labour, as a servile art. He makes it obvious that according to the philosophical anthropology which he follows, and which was based on Aristotle and Aquinas, work is not a shame, in fact it is a must for human beings. After all, since the expulsion from paradise, human survival depends on the daily labour of humans: “what is normal is work, and the normal day is a working day.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The deconstruction of the working activity that Pieper is engaged in does not want to deny the use, function and even the dignity of work in human life. Pieper’s effort to redefine work is a cultural criticism of his own time, a powerful expression of disagreement with a work-concept that proclaims the glory of useful work in an un-enchanted world. He wants to express his dissatisfaction with the prospects of a life which only offers the hope to have some more work after the long hours of daily labour. This is why he bravely state the following paradox: “the restlessness of work-for-work’s-sake arose from nothing other than idleness.”[[18]](#footnote-18) By idleness, of course, he means *acedia*, sometimes referred to as sloth or laziness. For the first sight, it seems to be the opposite of being industrious. However, Pieper moves the concept out of its original context, and shows that in fact, its opposite is not sweaty, busy activity but “rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole and of God.”[[19]](#footnote-19) If we accept this explanation, than we have to reinterpret idleness, as well. It turns out to be one of the seven capital sins, and it leads to nothing else but a “Restlessness and Inability-for-Leisure”.[[20]](#footnote-20) In other words, it means the “lack of leisure”, and as such, it puts all the three aspects of work that Pieper is dealing with, on its proper place. Neither as activity nor as effort or as social function can work enable the human being to “realize himself as a being who is oriented toward the whole of existence.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In fact, with work, humans can secure things useful, but it is a waste of opportunity concerning things of primary importance, like intellectual peace or simple repose to reflect on the final meaning of one’s life.

This positioning of work as necessary but always secondary beyond the spiritually significant part of life is an indirect response to the narrative of disenchantment, crucial for Max Weber’s own story. But Pieper does not care about answering Weber. It is also a reflection on the narrative of the rise of the mass man, as presented by his Spanish contemporary thinker, Ortega y Gasset. But neither does he do here a kind of social history or sociography. Rather, he offers a defence of culture as the central asset of human life, just like Huizinga or Gehlen, but his reference point is a more traditional account of culture, where it is directly dependent on *cultus*. So now, after recapitulating his critical account of contemporary workaholism, let us turn to the positive side of his story, which gives a metaphysically sound account of leisure as confronting what is beyond the ordinary and the useful in human life understood as Being, in Heidegger’s sense of the term.

1. **Wonder**

To be sure, Pieper’s essays are not calm and emotionless antiquarian argumentations of the professional academic philosopher in defence of outdated ideas. On the contrary, the language he uses is meant to help the reader to vividly imagine the theme of the essays. Pieper never identified himself with the role of the institutionalised German philosophy professor. For him, philosophy always preserved an element of the wonderful, of the miraculous. In this sense, it remained close to poetry and rhetoric - important connections for the ancient Greek philosophers, too, especially for Plato.

What really frees you from the yoke of everyday needs is not work, on the contrary, it is culture. And culture is the result of the contemplative way of life. Contemplation is the gateway to achieve leisure, a sort of attunement or attention to the world, which allows one to catch sight of aspects of the world which are not visible when viewed from the perspective of the useful and the efficient. Contemplation is another word for what Pieper calls in the second essay the philosophical act. While the first essay refers to leisure as the basis of culture in its title, the second essay addresses the philosophical act, according to its title. In other words, in order to highlight his tradition-based concept of a culturally fruitful contemplation, Pieper works out something close to a metanarrative, a philosophy of philosophy.

Following Plato’s philosophical dissection of philosophy in the *Theaetetus*, Pieper’s starting point here is this: “philosophy has its beginning in the experience of wonder.”[[22]](#footnote-22) According to Pieper, wonder astounds the thinker, and thereby makes her deaf to the demanding noise of the world. This is an effect which is close to such ancient emotional complexes, as Longinus’s sublime or Aristotle’s catharsis. Plato deals with poetry un detail, and Aristotle’s notion of catharsis is, also, from the *Poetics*.[[23]](#footnote-23) No wonder, that Pieper discusses the wonder of philosophy in conjunction with the way poetry affects us, which he describes as “astonishment”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Pieper’s main reference point concerning wonder in poetry is Goethe, probably the most important poet beside Hölderlin (whom Pieper will also quote) and Rilke for German philosophers. He quotes a line of a poem by Goethe, where he writes: “*Zum Erstaunen bin ich da*” (“I exist for wonder”), and he also recalls a sentence addressed by Goethe to Eckermann: “The highest state to which humanity can aspire is wonder.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

In his phenomenologically inspired account of wonder, Pieper refers to the fact that wonder brings with itself a sense of disturbance, as if, all of a sudden, one had to leave his own comfort zone, “losing, in a flash, the compact, comfortable sense of obviousness.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Apparently, both poetry and philosophy starts out of this disturbance or confusion, as the philosopher calls the state of mind at a later point. Through a short reference to how Windelband handles the issue he recalls the Greek original of the German term of wonder, which is “*thaumazein*”.[[27]](#footnote-27) The interesting claim, however, is that unlike in artistic experience, where the originality of the work of art provokes astonishment, in Pieper’s own account in philosophy it is the philosopher’s ability to preserve an openness to wonder when thinking about “the wonderful fact that something exist.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In fact, Pieper here is quite close to Heidegger’s own account of philosophical wonder, which is raised by the fact of Being. Even the closeness between poetry and philosophy is close to Heidegger’s own position in the *Origins of the Work of Art*. In fact, Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the artistic experience serves the same function as in Pieper’s case the reference to the affinity between poetry and philosophy: to refer to the original wonder that is inherent in the philosophical act. The novelty of Pieper’s own view, built on the foundations provided by Aristotle and Aquinas, is that the *mirandum* is not something exceptional, original or extraordinary. On the contrary. “To find the truly unusual and extraordinary, the real *mirandum*, within the usual and the ordinary, is the beginning of philosophy.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

The implicit claim here concerns the nature of the usual and the ordinary in the external world. Pieper’ claim here is an indirect ontological one: the usual and the ordinary turn out to be – not as a result of the observer’s sight, but by their very nature – unusual and extraordinary. This is indeed a *mirandum*. How could the usual be unusual, and the ordinary extraordinary? This seems to be a logical contradiction in the very structure of what exists out there. If true, the explanation of this phenomenon is not available for human reason, it is a miracle. Pieper here shares with his readers that secret of the nature of being, which contradicts what people who are immersed in the shallow, yet bottomless world of work, with their habit-oriented eyes can catch sight of. If philosophy has something special about it, it is to help us see things in a different light. It can change the focus of our attention – to focus on the substantially miraculous nature of reality. We do not see that usually, according to Pieper’s argument, because we are engaged in our ordinary routine, with useful activity, with work. To achieve success in the world of work, we need to lower our gaze. When we act in our active life, our gaze will not see the duality of being, we cannot discover the unusual, the miraculous in the depths of the habitual.

To be sure, the change from one perspective to the other, is not always painless – often, you have to pay its price. After all, to break through your usual borders, you have to step out of your comfort zone. Your initial reaction is confusion. Pieper also calls this mental state doubt, which is, of course, in philosophy a somewhat ambiguous term, as it is the key term in Decartes’ concept of philosophy. The important thing is that you will feel up-rooted, anyhow. But this is not by chance – you need to change your position in order to see the world in a different light, and that requires to change the position of your rootedness as well – which is often painful.

When we talk about Pieper’s views of wonder and astonishment, in the moment of confronting real reality, Pieper’s Thomism turns out to be somewhat special. Certainly, Neo-Thomism often focuses on the element of wonder in philosophy. Think about James Joyce’s early *A Portrait of the Artist*, in which his hero, Stephan Daedalus explains his philosophy of “applied Aquinas”, where again the shock caused by the idea of the artwork, which he calls epiphany plays an important role.[[30]](#footnote-30) Both Joyce’s young hero, a kind of self-portrait himself, and Pieper’s own narrative follows this modernist interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics, which otherwise is understood as fully rationalist and realist. But with Joyce and Pieper, it is ready to admit that life is “full of mystery”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

One can recall yet another contemporary philosophical context. It is Gadamer’s hermeneutics, where again, the artistic experience of a great work of art first of all moves the observer out of her resting place when it touches her existentially. So there is an active, if not voluntarily chosen dimension to contemplation – when she recognize truth, it is, in fact, an eventm something which is ready to change one’s life, as Rilke proposes. The chances of such a life-changing event is opened up in the contemplative phase, with wonder. On the other hand, a contrary phenomenon characterizes the passivity inherent, according to Pieper, in active life: you will never be able to break out from your yoke of the everyday-like, in that mode of being.

1. **Festival**

For Pieper, it is not Gadamer’s artwork, but the philosophical act, itself, which helps you enter a contemplative mode of being. Philosophy is not a denigration of the ordinary way of being, but rather a reminder that there is yet another, more privileged way of being available for us human beings. When you work, you do not care about that dimension. When you enter the mode of contemplation, you slow down to be able to observe what cannot be seen from that lower level of self-realisation.

Pieper shares another context with Gadamer. This is the concept of festival, also of ancient Greek origin, which captures the exceptional nature of the contemplative mode in the centre of leisure. A festival is to be contrasted to the workdays: it gives people a freedom, which is not available on the workdays. The term festival was originally used in a religious context, describing a ritual event, but later it was transformed into a general term, denoting a public event of high culture and a widely held custom. Yet, according to Pieper, festival, and in fact its synonym, celebration as well, are derived from worship. Festival, as originally understood, meant a harmony with the world, “in a manner quite different from that of everyday life.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The everyday-like of the world of work and the exceptional, covered by the term festival, cannot be conceptually reconciled. On the other hand, religion and culture are etymologically connected: the term “cult” belongs to both realms, on the one side, it is the root of the term cultivate, culture, and on the other one, it describes the active side of religious worship.

Of course, what is called festival has also been subject to the so-called process of secularisation. Pieper mentions the French Revolution, as the first major historical period, brave enough to introduce an artificial, secular version of festival. Its example has been followed by the establishment of public holidays all around Europe and the Western world in the 19th and 20th centuries, among which Pieper mentions “Labour Day”.[[33]](#footnote-33) And the result? They proved to be a failure, because they lack the most important components of festivity: they lack that elevated element which would raise people’s spirits. This is why Pieper is ready to state: genuine festivity is only to be seen where there is still some living relationship with religious “cult”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

To celebrate labour is too far from the cult, whereas “a rest from labour is cultic”, because our yearly calendar is largely built up of workdays, and cultic festivals are by definition rare. Leisure, which is “rest from labour”, is so much more closer to the cultic festival, than an exclusive focus on work.[[35]](#footnote-35) Rest from labour means a temporal shelter or refuge in the stream of life of an individual or of a community. What is cut off in temporal terms from the stream of life, parallels what is cut off from our spatial environment by the temple. Pieper provides an analysis of what a temple is, which can remind the reader of Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the ancient Greek temple, once again in the *Origin of the Work of Art*. Yet Pieper’s focus is on the parallels between the spatial and the temporal. “’Temple’ has a certain meaning (reflected also in its etymology, cf. Greek *temenos*, from *temnein*, to cut; Latin *templum*): a definite physical space has been ”cut off” by enclosure or fencing from the rest of the land, whose surface was divided up for farming or other uses. These sectioned-off spaces were handed over to the possession of the gods and were not inhabited or planted but were removed from all practical use.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This spatial „cut off” helps to make sense of the temporal „cut off”, the cultic festival, which belongs to the contemplative way of life. Think about the religious meaning of the Sabbath, both for Jews and Christians. In both cases, what is distinguished, is something temporally exceptional.

Also connected to the Jewish and the Christian tradition is Pieper’s reference to sacrifice, in this context. His claim is that sacrifice is also among the defining features of a festival. This is how he identifies sacrifice: „It is voluntary, a gift that is offered, and certainly not usefulness, but the very opposite of usefulness.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This is an important moment in Pieper’s account of leisure. Starting out from the Mosaic and Christian teaching of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, his line of thought foreshadows such modern social philosophers, as René Girard or Roger Scruton. Girard focuses on the communal function of sacrifice, which he interprets as a kind of scapegoat-mechanism, which serves to take away the sins, and this way to internally pacify the community. On the other hand, Roger Scruton dealt with sacrifice, as an act of love, which makes it possible to humans to transcend their own inner limitations and reach out to the other.[[38]](#footnote-38) Scruton, in his introduction to the English language edition of *Leisure* also refers to sacrifice. This is, how he relates to this important moment in Pieper’s thought, starting out from his description of how meaning is attributed to meals in our way of thought, especially if we are Jews or Christians: „The meal, as Pieper puts it, has a ”spiritual or even a religious character”. That is to say, it is an offering, a sacrifice, and also - in the highest instance — a sacrament, something offered to us from on high, by the very Being to whom we offer it.”[[39]](#footnote-39) In other words, Scruton, too, reconnects Pieper’s language on leisure to religion.

The festival, as an exceptional moment „cut off from the normal flow of time”, in other words as an event capable of conveying specific meanings, also recalls Cassirer's influential theory that man is a "symbolic animal". „The conception of human beings as most fundamentally “symbolic animals,” interposing systems of signs or systems of expression between themselves and the world” was a key insight of Cassirer, establishing his own philosophy of culture.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Pieper, however, unlike Cassirer, but as explained by Scruton, was primarily interested in the Christian context. For Cassirer, the brutal inhumanity of the 20th century led to a turnaway from religion, in order to push art into the prime position: he „ranks art rather than religion as the highest development of the expressive function of symbolic meaning.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Scruton also puts art in a primary role, after the decline of religion, yet keeps the connection between art and religion in focus. Pieper chooses another solution. He preserves the prior position for religion (and the philosophy of religion) as a source of meaning for human life, but he wants us to see the tragic dimension of leisure as well, beyond the bucolic and the glorifying.

1. **The tragic turn**

In the final chapter of his analysis of philosophy, Pieper once again starts out from Plato and Aristotle, who both looked at themselves and their respective philosophy, as representatives of an old teaching. Later, however, he admits, philosophy came to be seen as a critical rebellion against tradition. Yet philosophy still today to a large extent depends on theology, as preserved in the Platonic tradition. When taken over by Christianity, it continued, but revised the tradition. In medieval Christianity, religion was the backdrop for philosophy (as well as for art). Since its academic specialization, however, philosophy by definition lost its direct contact with the religious tradition. But it had to pay high price for that. This is the reason, why Heidegger was able to regenerate once again such interest in the theological aspects of philosophy. And this is, why even the negative theology of Sartre could be understood in the same framework: the French philosopher’s teaching became a subject of an anti-religious religiosity, in other words it invited a commitment turned into a political conviction.

It is the interaction between religion and philosophy, that explains Pieper’s focus on what he calls philosophical wonder, and the mystery of not-knowing, in a Christian philosophical context as well.[[42]](#footnote-42) He is ready to admit that a reference to philosophy’s religious roots does not give a secret clue in the hands of the philosopher to make sense of all the puzzles of human existence. On the contrary, it reveals the fact that we in fact cannot solve those riddles – which is just as tragic, as human life is, if it is understood in the light of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Pieper quotes Hölderlin, when pointing out that we cannot win against (our) destiny, and the theologically rooted philosophy must also reckon with this. In this sense, Christian philosophy is not more effective than a secularly founded one.

Yet effectiveness should not be the aim of philosophy. Instead, it should aim at being true to religions’ original teaching. He himself remains loyal to the religion which is based on the teaching of Christ, who suffered a violent death on the cross, even if that narrative does not sound too optimistic as a program. But how should we explain that Aquinas is presented by Pieper as one in whose thought one can find a “sense of humour”, and an attitude of “cheerfulness, about not-being- able-to-understand.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Christian philosophy is not simply a theory. Pieper quotes Aquinas, who distinguished between “knowing (*per cognitionem*)” and “knowing on the basis of an essential related-ness (*per connaturalitatem*).”[[44]](#footnote-44) The quotation serves to show that philosophy is not a neutral activity, as science. The wonder of the philosophical act shakes our whole personality, this way reminding us of the crucial aspects of human life that we shoud focus on.

1. **Conclusion**

In his final account, Pieper takes as his starting point what Fichte has formulated the following way: “The kind of philosophy a man chooses depends on the kind of man he is .”[[45]](#footnote-45) This is, indeed, a reference to the relationship of the philosopher as a private person, to his own teaching, as something which has become public by the simple act of publication. This connection can be partly explained by the nature of philosophy, and partly by the Greco-Jewish-Christian roots of philosophy, which looked at religion as „a reality that will form and mold the person…”[[46]](#footnote-46)

This is the basic difference, Pieper claims, between the mode of consciousness of the philosopher and that of the worker. The work of the worker, as understood in the age of postwar capitalist consumer societies, is an activity in which the human personality is not only unable to fulfil itself, but is characterised by a kind of philosophical dispersion, a loss of focus and self-reflection. This is because the stress of ordinary life, which motivates people in the world of work, does not make it possible for them to see beyond the moment. On the other hand, leisure liberates the soul, and enables the mind to focus on itself, this way creating a situation in which the individual can learn, even if through suffering. This thought is, according to Pieper, an idea of Dionysius the Areopagite, who wanted us not only “learning the divine, but *suffering* it as well.” This is certainly not an optimistic final note in a book on leisure, but it borrows a true depth to the philosophical anthropology that Pieper wanted to work out in connection with work and leisure.

1. I use the following edition: Josef Pieper: Leisure. The Basis of Culture, Introduction by Roger Scruton, New translation by Gerald Malsbary, St. Augustine’s Press, Sount Bend, Indiana, 1998. The reference to Holbein is on page 36, in note 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Buck, Stephanie. Hans Holbein. Cologne: Könemann, 1999, ISBN 3829025831, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Herakleou Ponoi – Erasmi Rotterdami. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leisure, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Leisure, 18., 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nicomachean Ethics, X.7. 1177b4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Leisure, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Excursus on „Proletariat” and „De-proletarianization”, Leisure, 59-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This theme in Pieper’s work is mentioned in Bernard N. Schumacher: A Cosmopolitan Hermit. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Josef Pieper, in: A Cosmopolitan hermit. Modernity and Tradition in the Philosophy of Josef Pieper, edited by Bernard N. Schumacher, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D. C., 1-23., 16. A detailed examination of the problem is to be found in Frank Töpfer: Josef Pieper on the Intellectual Foundations of Totalitarianism, in: ibid, 63-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Leisure, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Leisure, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Leisure, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Leisure, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Roger Scruton: Introduction, in ibid., 13-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Scruton: Introduction, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, I.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Leisure, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Leisure, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leisure, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Leisure, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Leisure, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Leisure, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One should not forget, however, that Plato in *The Republic* is quite hostile to poets, because he fears they are lying. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Leisure, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Leisure, 119., referring to *Conversations with Eckermann*, Feb. 18, 1829. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leisure, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Leisure, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Leisure, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Leisure, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. James Joyce: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, W. Huebsch, New York, 1916. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Leisure, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Leisure, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Leisure, 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Leisure, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Both the above qquotes are from Leisure, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Leisure, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Leisure, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For his discussion on sacrifice, see for example Scruton’s posthumous work, Wagner’s Parsifal: The Music of Redemption, Allen Lane, London, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Roger Scruton: Introduction, in Leisure, 13-15, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Friedman, Michael, "Ernst Cassirer", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/cassirer/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Friedman, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Pieper refers to Garrigou-Lagrange’s notion, the sense of mystery. Der Sinn für das Geheimnis und das Hell-Dunkel des Geistes, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1937, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Leisure, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Leisure, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Quoted in Leisure, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Leisure, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)