

A Transparent Philosopher

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Were he still alive to celebrate his 100th birthday this year, Josef Pieper would probably be surprised to see that today there is greater need than ever for some of his major insights. In today's workaholic culture, Pieper's small masterpiece *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* remains an antidote to the compulsive busyness of our materialist culture. At a time when love has fallen out of fashion and young people simply "hook up," his books *On Love* and *Happiness and Contemplation* show the true path to human fulfillment. And while his studies of virtue are popular in evangelical and conservative Catholic circles, *The Silence of Saint Thomas* and other metaphysical works, with their attention to "the sacred" and the continuity of nature and grace, are a challenge to both the new fundamentalism and Radical Orthodoxy (a sophisticated countercultural theology centered in Britain). This centennial year is a time to renew and deepen our acquaintance with one of the 20th century's outstanding Christian philosophers.

Clarity of Thought and Expression

Pieper's philosophy is like a windowpane. It does not draw attention to itself, but lets the reader see the world as it is, without noticing that there is a sheet of glass interposed. Pieper's attention was riveted first of all on the real and then on making the truth of reality transparent through language. Originality was thus more a hindrance than a goal. Pieper embodied the Socratic ideal of how a true philosopher, as contrasted with the typical academic philosopher, should live.

He devoted an enormous amount of time to drafting his manuscripts. His books were normally written by hand from beginning to end at least two or three times, generally becoming shorter each time. To make his texts transparent, Pieper worked hard, much harder than the reader would imagine. His manuscripts often look like jungle growth. The final, printed version owes its clarity to the fact that instead of attending to style, he kept his object clearly in view and thus achieved a lucidity that earned the praise of no less a stylist than T. S. Eliot.

The Turn to Social Philosophy

Born in Elte, Westphalia, on May 4, 1904, Pieper studied at the Gymnasium Paulinum in Münster and at the state universities in Münster and Berlin. After a period of youthful fascination with Søren Kierkegaard, "a paternal friend and teacher" recommended that he read

Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on the Prologue of Saint John's Gospel*. This led to a lifelong engagement with the writings of the Angelic Doctor. A lecture by the theologian Romano Guardini, "About Classical Spirit," on Goethe and Aquinas, inspired Pieper's dissertation and first book, *Reality and the Good* (1931; Eng. tr. 1967). There he argued that "the good is nothing but what is in accordance with the reality of things."

While Pieper first hoped to follow a career in "pure philosophy," both his own humane nature and the needs of the times drew him increasingly to social philosophy. For a time he even held a position as a teaching fellow in sociology and law at Münster. Toward the end of World War II, he spent most of the day hidden in a storage room with a table, on which he continued with his writing projects. In his autobiography he related that he had been unaware of a 1943 document in which the district administrator for the Nazi Party evaluated him as being "in his deepest heart an opponent of National Socialism." The party official interpreted Pieper's rejection of National Socialism, including the race question, to be a consequence of his strong attachment to the Catholic Church.

While the Nazis' rise to power prevented him from dealing openly with social questions, it gave him the opportunity to develop a philosophy of human nature out of elements of the classic Western tradition, particularly from Aquinas and Plato. The first fruit of this work was an essay on fortitude, the first of several essays that were later published together as *Four Cardinal Virtues* (1934 to 1953) and *Three Theological Virtues* (between 1935 and 1972). Writing in the 1930's about love, he confessed, was just as difficult as writing about justice, and he did not attempt either for some years.

Even during his military service in World War II, Pieper continued his research. Out of his wartime study, he produced two collections of sayings from St. Thomas. One was published in English as *The Human Wisdom of Saint Thomas* (1948). From this wartime research, he also produced *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (1952) and *What Is Philosophy?* (published in English as *In Defense of Philosophy*, 1992). These publications assured his appointment to a teaching position at Münster in 1946.

Work and Leisure

Leisure: The Basis of Culture, probably his best-known work in the United States, argued that culture arises from leisure and that leisure has its original (and proper) context in religious cult. As relevant as the essay was in the postwar years, it is probably even more instructive today, after years in which business has dominated world culture.

Without denying the necessity and value of work, Pieper pointedly criticized absolutizing it—that is, viewing the whole of human life primarily from the point of view of work. He resisted the idea that reality offers nothing but material for human action. Against this work ideology, Pieper plead time and again, as in *Happiness and Contemplation* (1958), for a radically different stance toward reality. Happiness, he believed, arises from experiencing reality, not from making use of it, as work ideology would have it.

Leisure, properly understood, is not simply the absence of work. It is a self-opening, contemplative encounter with the reality around us, often assuming the form of amazement, a neglected essential of human existence. Happiness is bound up with this kind of experience. A good sign of this is the human need to celebrate. Festivity, as Pieper proposed in his *In Tune With the World: A Theory of Festivity* (1965), rests on a fundamental affirmation of the world as a whole. “Celebrating a festivity means that our general and constant approval of the world is realized in an exceptional way.... The total dominance of the work culture makes festivities impossible.” Ultimately, celebration signifies the realization of what he referred to as the truth of things, that is, the religious transcendence that comes into view when realities themselves become transparent.

A Christian philosopher with pastoral interests, Pieper presented rich interpretations of specifically Catholic themes like priesthood, Eucharist, liturgy and sacral language. He was a regular contributor to the periodical *Orate Fratres*, now called *Worship*. When World War II was over, he found himself interned in a hospital where there was an idle printing shop. There he managed to get an allotment of paper, which was scarce, and having convinced the unoccupied workers in the printing shop to help, printed and distributed 50,000 copies of his catechism of the Catholic faith, *What Catholics Believe*. Originally published in 1936 for soldiers, this book seems to have satisfied an extraordinary thirst in the period following the war, with 500,000 copies printed.

Ethics of Virtue

For Pieper, morality centers around the idea of virtue and addresses the question, what makes a human a good person? It is not primarily a matter of doing good, but of becoming good. In many ways, Pieper anticipated the turn to virtue ethics in philosophy and theology that arose in the 1980's. Unlike much of the later movement, however, which identified virtue with the distinctiveness of Christian character, Pieper drew on “the perennial philosophy” of the West rooted in Plato and Aristotle. Accordingly, he worked outside the duty-centered, Kantian assumptions of modern ethics, and tied virtue to human happiness and contemplation of the

divine. Thus, virtue and happiness, as the ancients understood, are intertwined; hence Aristotle's definition of happiness as "activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue."

For Pieper, as for Thomas Aquinas, the criterion of morality does not consist in the degree of difficulty, but in truth, truth being the transparency of reality to consciousness. Pieper worked this fundamental principle through a plethora of questions with many surprising insights. To cite one example: he shows how temperance enables one to appreciate and enjoy physical beauty better. Sustained appreciation for Pieper's ethics in present-day Germany is demonstrated by the fact that the latest German edition of *Four Cardinal Virtues* includes a foreword by the recently retired president of Germany, Johannes Rau. Pieper taught for 50 years at the University of Münster, his lectures being attended by as many as 1,500 students at one time.

While the philosopher was still living, the Josef Pieper Foundation was established to propagate his thought. Symposiums and individual lectures have since been presented regularly. Various publications appear regularly, including the definitive 10-volume edition of Pieper's collected works. On the 100th anniversary of his birth, the newly founded Josef Pieper Prize was bestowed on the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.

Love and Fulfillment

Love is conceivably the topic on which Pieper offers potential readers the greatest philosophical enlightenment. He was a philosopher who always kept his feet on the ground. He was a dedicated husband and father of three children. Perhaps the greatest tragedy in his life was the unexpected death of his older son in the United States. He was greatly admired for the way he cared for his dying wife. His loves included such commonplace things as his house, garden and hometown, Münster in Westphalia. In fact, so dearly did he love home that he remained there, in the same house, until his death on Nov. 6, 1997, having rejected several enticing offers for teaching positions elsewhere in Germany and the United States. "One does not easily leave a garden," as he put it, "in which one has planted trees with his own hands."

In *On Love*, Pieper attacked the common belief that selflessness is a characteristic of true love. This is a view held in Pieper's day by such neo-orthodox Protestant theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren and today by virtue theorists like Gilbert Meilaender. By contrast, he argued that human nature, which he regarded as essentially good and the presupposition for all anthropology, even that of Christian revelation, is a dynamic striving for fulfillment. (Pieper consistently upheld the principle that the supernatural presupposes the natural.) Friendship is not the opposite of self-centered love, but rather its extension, a friend being a second self.

In particular, he showed how Eros is the link holding sex and charity together. It is no accident, he suggested, that traditional religious language, that of certain mystics in particular, employs erotic metaphors, while erotic language, in turn, uses religious metaphors. Pieper's Platonic study on *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness* (1964) goes on to depict the role of erotic ecstasy and similar phenomena in human existence. It fascinated Pieper that for Plato erotic mania opened humans up to the divine movement in their lives. "The erotic jolting," as Pieper expressed it, "looks like foolishness and irrationality, even sickness" (Song of Songs, 2,5; 5,8). Existential experiences of this kind are usually "evaded by a planned life that is programmed for success." 'Bother About the Truth'

Being himself a philosopher in the classical tradition, Josef Pieper consistently denied being wise. Instead, he sought wisdom, taking this ideal from Socrates. Characteristically, he did not speak of his own philosophy, nor was he primarily interested in other philosophers as such. To his eyes, the Socratic exhortation, "Don't bother about Socrates! Bother about the truth!" was a guiding maxim. He studied the classical authors neither for their own sake nor for the sake of erudition, but in order to see the reality around him more clearly. With this approach, he succeeded in rendering some of the great European thinkers transparent for other lovers of wisdom today.