

Work, Leisure, and Despair:  
Levi and Pieper on Purpose-Driven Activity

Primo Levi, Auschwitz survivor and author of *If This is a Man*, said shortly before his death that he was “persuaded that human beings are biologically built for an activity that is aimed toward a goal and that idleness, or aimless work . . . gives rise to suffering and to atrophy.” Josef Pieper, on the other hand, argues in *Leisure—The Basis of Culture* that humanity fulfills its nature most abundantly in a mode of leisure that “cannot be put at the disposal of useful ends.” The aim of this paper will be to examine the apparent disparity between these two insights, both of which are (in part) reactions to the ethical and spiritual devastation of the Second World War.

Both Levi and Pieper were acute diagnosticians of the state of modernity following this quintessentially modern war. One might assume that they offer these apparently contradictory analyses of humanity—that it is built for work or designed for leisure—simply because of their contradictory theological commitments. Levi is a secular Jew; Pieper is a devout Catholic. Alternatively, we might think that the apparent contradiction results simply from a difference in project. In *If This is a Man*, Levi describes in detail the Nazi attempt to dehumanize its victims; therefore, a primary aim of his project is to identify the minimal conditions of humanity that the Nazis attempt—often unsuccessfully—to strip away. Among these minimal conditions is the drive to engage in ends-directed activity. Pieper, on the other hand, seeks to describe a life “not really human but superhuman, although it is the noblest form of human life.” Both of these hypotheses are correct and partly explain the apparent tension between the insights of these two authors.

Nonetheless, I will argue that neither hypothesis is sufficient. Indeed, because both of these insights are truly insightful, there must be some way of reconciling them with one another. Seeing past modernity’s insistence on an “ideal of the world of ‘total work,’” as Pieper calls it, requires both Levi’s insights as well as Pieper’s. Both authors seek to overcome the threat of purposeless existence in a social setting characterized by a tendency to despair.