

A Meaningful Waste of Time: The Theology of Play

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If the very best human attributes of courage, justice, and compassion are directed toward their perfection in God, then so too must play, in some way, be an imitation of the divine. Despite my constant exhortation to my boys to stop horsing around, play is an essential good, and necessary part of life. Yes, play is inefficient, often seemingly arbitrary and is the opposite of work, but it is not insignificant nor inconsequential. We revel in play, re-live moments of past greatness of our own play. We even spend money to watch professional athletes hit small leather balls with wooden sticks, or even smaller balls with precisely engineered clubs. In fact, research consistently shows the importance and centrality of play, not just in terms of human development but as necessary for human flourishing. Ends up that “all work and no play” does indeed “make Jack a dull boy.” And according to most research it also makes Jack a jerk. We feel refreshed when we play, whether it is just horsing around, or the more serious playfulness that fills our traditions and even our worship. Play gives our human lives context and direction and is perhaps the last standing and universally appreciated bastion of authentic humanity that can’t be forced, faked, or sneered at without at least a little contempt. Christians, and particularly, Christian men, must rediscover the joy of authentic play and forcefully defend it. What follows is a brief reflection on the theology of play, in other words what play reveals about us and about God.

What is play?

Have you ever wondered why children play, probably not, it is what children do. And there are myriad cognitive, physiological, behavioral, and inter-personal things learned through play. But why, after we have developed these things, do we still play? Why do grown men join softball leagues, play pick-up games in the park, spend money on golf only to curse the laws of physics and fault golf balls in front of their friends? For that matter, why did I cry when the Cubs won the pennant in 2016, I’m not even from Chicago. Or got so frustrated the last time I played sand volleyball? It is not as if I had money riding on it, or that I thought my 40 year old body could perform in the same way I did when I played in college. We know that these things don’t matter, but they do matter. We know that there is nothing essentially productive in these activities, but we also know, deep-down, that these things are important. There is something deeper going on.

For some, play is limited to its pedagogical aspects. What it teaches the person in terms of following rules and building character, especially at a young age. They see “game” as models of learning that have enforced, yet less significant, consequences for failure. Others focus on the physiological and psychological benefits of training the body and the mind, also the important lessons about pain, endurance, trust, sportsmanship, and teamwork etc. These views of play are not wrong, but they are insufficient. Play is not limited to just our physiological and mental development. That is just the biological component of how mammals in general learn. But for us humans, who are made in God’s image and likeness, play is not just written in our flesh, it is also written into our hearts and souls. Despite what developmental psychologists, or evolutionary biologists tell us, play is much deeper than just our biology. And despite what Pastor Moore explained in *Footloose*, play is not part of our fallen nature—though we often have to recover and protect its sanctity—it is part of what makes us like God.

We can describe play as wasting time on purpose-less activity. Or, said in the positive, as spending time on meaningful activity. Sport, art and music are all forms of creative play. They are not biologically necessary, like food, water, shelter, education, etc. And they do not have a practical or an immediately productive purpose as does our work. But these unnecessary embellishments of life make life worth living. When we spend time playing with our friends, our family, and most importantly our children we are focusing on the goodness of *being* with one another. A goodness that is not based on *doing* some productive task, like building a shed or helping a friend move, but of literally wasting time together. Building a shed and helping a friend move are not bad things, it is good to work together. But these things are different from play, and we know it. This is why the momentary breaks, conversations, laughter and post project meal are so sought after and often the most meaningful part of spending time together.

Play communicates the goodness of being with one another, and the inherent goodness of those we are with. If I spend an hour playing catch with my sons, or jumping on the trampoline with my daughter, it is not only for the reasons of pedagogical development, or character building (as important as these things may be). Rather, I spend that time, or as more commonly expressed into today’s hyperproductive world, I waste that time not working, specifically to be with my kids and delight in them because they are good, and it is good that we are together.

Theology of Play

Believe it or not, there are significant studies on the theology of play. Christians have been debating the nature of play, its purpose, and what it reveals about how God made us and who God is for millennia. St. Paul used sport and particularly the Isthmian games in Corinth to provide an analogy between training for a game, and persevering in the Christian life. (1 Cor 9:24-27). He reminds Timothy that an athlete cannot win unless he plays by the rules (2 Tim 2:5) and he exhorts the Philippians to run

the race so as to win (Phil 3:12-14). Great Catholic philosophers and theologians have spent their fair share of ink on the topic extolling the importance of sport, art, music, as the creative means to express what is most good, beautiful and true in our lives. The way that one thinks about play determines a lot about how they see world, and our role with in it.

In the Summa, St. Thomas speaks of the virtues of play, and the sinfulness of too much play or, no less serious, too little. (II, II, Q 268). He explains that play is the activity of the contemplative heart. The games we play have no other purpose than the games themselves, and they provide us with pleasure and refresh and re-enliven our souls. To understand this better we can examine the work of Romano Guardini, one of the great theologians of the 20th century. He carefully explains the difference between *purpose* and *meaning*, which are not in conflict but held in distinctive and complementary relationship. *Purpose* is the reason, or the organizing principle which directs and subordinates our actions towards some external goal. We can think of projects, tasks, certain professions as being understood by their purpose, outcomes, their stated and intended goals. But there are other things which unlike projects and tasks, lack a clear purpose. We can say they are purpose-less. Their importance and necessity comes not from their functionality, but from their *meaning*. Guardini delights in the many examples of complexity in the natural world, the shapes, colors, sounds, etc. that are "purposeless but still full of meaning." (Spirit of the Liturgy 63) Art, sport etc. have no practical purpose nor produce some immediate end, but are still full of meaning.

For St. Thomas, play is the purpose-less but meaningful activity by which the soul seeks to find fulfillment not solely in work, but in what work provides: time for leisure. That rest in which one enters most fully into who they are and is free to contemplate and celebrate the reality of the world and their place within it. You may wonder how this relates to baseball, but if you follow Thomas, Guardini and others, it is really amazing how much play cannot be defined solely by it's functions, but rather the meaning it provides to our existence.

Since play is such an important aspect of our being human, it must conform to what it is and reject what it is not. St. Thomas provides two criteria for when play becomes a vice of excess. One, when the form of play is vicious (i.e. harmful or injurious to one- self or others). Second, when the play is done at inappropriate times, or prevents one from fulfilling their obligations or duties. Both of these criteria are met by much of what today's world sells us as "play." When the average American teen plays 2.5 hours of video games/day, which is more time than doing homework, reading, and chores combined, something is wrong. And when many of those games are excessively and arbitrarily violent, we are likely traversing into what St. Thomas would consider a form of gluttony and sloth, and what some modern researchers are likening to other forms of addiction. The other is the vice of deficiency. Which is an insensibility, and inability to have fun, or to ruin fun by demanding it provide some

definitive purpose. In other words relegating every and all human activity to it's purpose and stripping it of its meaning.

Josef Pieper a Thomist, and student of Guardini builds upon these insights in his book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. In his book he makes an important pivot that reveals the nature and importance of play. Philosophy and Theology, properly understood, are play. Liturgy, our worship of God, is play. Even God's very act of creation is a form of divine play which comes not from God's need for anything, but out of His sheer love and goodness. Not arbitrary nor unserious play but play none-the-less. Philosophy and Theology contemplate God not for an immediately practical purpose, but for contemplation itself. The liturgy is not a means to an end—if it were 2000 years of impatient parishioners would have likely found more efficient and less elaborate ways to celebrate the eucharist—but an end in itself: the very act of worshiping God. We use symbols and rituals, and follow rules and customs, to express our love for God and participate in His love for us. **This is hard to understand in a world and time in which everything we do is subjugated for the purpose of something else. But somethings in life are done not for the functional purpose they provide, but rather for the goodness and meaning they bring into our lives.** Play doesn't really make sense in world that requires so much work to be done, but we work precisely so that we have time to play and to enter into those moments of authentic leisure which make life meaningful. Pieper explains the heresy of our age. All too often we subjugate our leisure (that is rest; our play and our worship) for the sake of work. But we have it all backwards. We don't leisure for the sake of work, we work for the sake of leisure. So that at the end of the day we can enter into those things that give meaning to life, what Aristotle called "those productive activities that are enjoyed for their own sake."

Play is good. And play in its serious and less-serious forms reveal a loving Father who delights in us, and wants us to spend time being with Him, and with the people and things that He has given to us. When we play virtuously, we don't waste time, rather we spend time elevating those things that are most important in our lives.

Fatherhood and Play

I could write a paragraph about the stats of absentee fathers, or the impact that quality time can have on a child's life. I could extol all men to more seriously consider play and ensure that we spend time with one another not as some means to an end, but because it is good that we are together. I could dive deep into the etymology of the words "spend" and "waste" when it comes to how we talk about giving time and sharing life with one another. I could share some sappy story of playing catch with my Dad in the backyard and feeling that I was loved. But I won't. I will simply say that there is no greater way for a father to show a child that they love them than by spending their valuable time with them. Our children pick up on the cues of the world we live in, and we often reinforce those cues without the nuances needed to communicate the

truth about the purpose of life. Our children and the time we spend with them cannot feel as if it is only a means to an end. As if our children's value only comes by what they do, or how they can be of some purpose to us. Playing with our children communicates that they are good, and worthy of our time. In this way, playing with our children is as important as working with them. We need both. But work and play are distinct. Work says, "It is good that you are here *because* you are helpful to me and serve a purpose" and fathers must train up their children so that they can help and serve the family and others. Play on the other hand says, "It is good that you are here. Period. Full stop." Fathers must rediscover for themselves the joy of play, and authentically share that joy with their wives, co-workers and children.