



Josef Pieper, a philosophical style

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Josef Pieper is probably well-known for his book on *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, and is probably well-read by those in search of contemporary illustrations of the relevance of St. Thomas Aquinas in the teaching of personal and social ethics. There is much more to J. Pieper than this and I would like to show in what follows how this German philosopher rediscovers the real nature of philosophical reflection, as also philosophy's essential relation to theology, an authentic and independent interpretation of Aquinas, and the philosophical style of this very literate philosopher, Josef Pieper¹.

I

Philosophy today is normally thought of as a particular area of technical academic endeavour. For J. Pieper, however, this popular conception of the nature of philosophical reflection is wrong on two counts.

First of all, for Pieper, the philosophical perspective has much more to do with the simplicity of seeing rather than with laborious mental constructions of reason. Without denying the necessary work of reasoning, in its various forms, 'searching and re-searching, ab-

¹ I would like to thank the students of a recent seminar on the writings of J. Pieper for their insights and explanations.

stracting, refining, and concluding (cf. Latin *dis-currere*, 'to run to and fro'), there is a prior receptive capacity of the intellect of 'simply looking (*simplex intuitus*), to which the truth presents itself as a landscape presents itself to the eye'². It is this 'simply looking' that is 'is the first step toward that primordial and basic mental grasping of reality, which constitutes the essence of man as a spiritual being'³.

In this sense the philosophical perspective is not something particular to technical philosophers but implies the basic search to see things, persons, and all of reality as they are, something that is within everyone's grasp.

It is for this reason that in much of his writings Pieper refers to 'the philosophising person' (*der Philosophiernder*) rather than to 'the philosopher' (*der Philosoph*). This is Pieper's way of underlining the simple receptiveness to the widest perception of reality which is the real disposition required for philosophical perception and reflection.

What Pieper means by 'seeing' is not just reading or the mental abstraction of concepts, but the openness to the experience of reality in all its varying modes of presence.

Pieper also contradicts the notion that philosophy is a limited area of study and research. Instead, he refers to the philosophical perspective as the one that is determined 'not to allow any element of the totality of the truth to escape us, and consequently to accept a less exact method of verifying results rather than to risk losing contact with some portion of reality'⁴. In this sense the philosophising person is one who, however cautiously, attempts to bring together and hold in unity different and divergent elements of experience.

This unifying effort is something we tend to do spontaneously, if not deliberately. Unfortunately, our spontaneous synthesis of experience (the meaning we give to our lives) is often selective of experience and short-term in extension. Life teaches us that breaking open our narrow world views and the bringing together of all elements of our experience is not something easy to do. It is this openness to all

² J. PIEPER, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, St. Augustine's Press, Indiana, 1998, 11. Pieper explains the etymology of intellect as the reading into reality (*intus legere*) of the mind.

³ J. PIEPER, *Only the Lover Sings*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990, 34.

⁴ J. PIEPER, *Problems of Modern Faith: Essays and Addresses*, Franciscans Herald Press, Chicago 1985, 4.

dimensions of experience and the ability to grasp in some limited way all these dimensions in unity that constitutes the hallmark of the genuine philosopher.

There seems today to be a great difficulty in accepting perspectives other than one's own. At the same time, a truly philosophical (and 'scientific') attitude recognises one's own field of study as part of a greater whole, to which other disciplines contribute. The effort required to broaden one's perspective and bring into a greater unity different elements of experience is considerable. It is far from a mere live and let live consensus and the acquiescence to different disciplines living in relative isolation to each other.

Pieper is particularly moderate in his philosophical aims. The effort to bring into unity different modes of experience is something always unfinished. He recalls that, according to a Platonic tradition, the philosopher is one who loves this unifying, universal knowledge ('a wisdom-loving seeker after truth'), not one who possesses it.⁵ Pieper rejects the ideologies that see too much and too clearly, as something unrealistic and presumptuous for man. Quoting from Goethe, Pieper refers to such thinkers as 'these men who believe themselves capable of mastering God, the soul, and the world (and whatever other names might exist for what no one comprehends)'.⁶ A little learning is indeed a dangerous thing.

At the same time, the necessary modesty of our answers to the unity of life and reality is not due fundamentally to the obscurity of our experience and the consequent doubt as to the existence of anything or anyone beyond our own narrow perspective, but precisely the opposite, because of the excess of light that overwhelms our capacity for comprehension. The experience of something greater than our ordinary perspective, discovering unequivocal signs of a greater reality than our own limited viewpoint, 'the experience that the world is more profound, more commodious, more mysterious than it appears to our everyday understanding', is the genuine attribute of the philosophising person⁷. This experience implies both a sense of wonder and the confusion of something new breaking into my horizon of perception.

⁵ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...296.

⁶ J. GOETHE, In a letter to Zelter, October 27th, 1827, in J. Pieper, *For the Love of Wisdom*...66.

⁷ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...59.

Pieper is struck by the fact that much of modern philosophy recognises only the confusion, the uncertainty, the doubt, in this new experience, and not the wonder of the new experience of being.

By the way, Pieper's understanding of the philosophical perspective was not just an academic approach. When asked in Nazi Germany about his view of the Jewish question, and whether he agreed that by eliminating the Jews the world would then be at peace and rest, his answer was a categorical no, because 'The world is simply not like that. You cannot get rest and peace simply by excluding some factor or other'⁸. This suggests that the philosophical perspective is not only an academic prerequisite, but a matter of life or death when dealing with the common good of society. It is not difficult to think of practical examples today of the imposition of partial perspectives on vulnerable sections of society.

II

It is this understanding of the openness to and search for the universal perspective that provides Pieper with what is perhaps the fundamental leitmotif that runs through almost all of his written work. Basically he argues that if the philosophical perspective is to disregard no element of human experience, then it may not exclude from its perspective the religious experience of man, not only the experience of man's natural openness to a transcendent God, but also the claim that such a God has in historical fact communicated with man.

This may sound tendentious to many today, a dangerous confusion of mutually autonomous areas. Surely philosophy and theology are two different domains, mutually (and happily) exclusive? Reason may or may not lead to the affirmation of a transcendent God, but is it not presumptuous, to say the least, to hold that reason itself is infested with supernatural experience?

Unfortunately, this is exactly what Pieper *is* saying, and his claim to the truth of what he says rests on two fundamental approaches. His first approach is to take the historical account of what philosophy was

⁸ J. PIEPER, *No One Could Have Known*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, location 2298 (Kindle).

originally considered to be. Plato is his point of reference. For example, in the Platonic myths, Pieper shows that Plato meant certain myths to be taken as conveyors of truth, and that while the myths are received from the ancients, it is not the ancients who are their originators; these myths are a 'gift from the gods to mankind'⁹. Pieper's conclusion is that 'the primary element in the original conception of philosophy consists of nothing other than an uninhibited relation to theology, a methodical openness in relation to theology'¹⁰. He concludes with this neatly expressed bombshell: 'At the beginning of human history, as well as at the beginning of each individual biography, philosophy and theology are undivided, one. Every person who inquires after the meaning of the totality of world and existence begins as a believer'¹¹.

Pieper's second approach is to argue, not from the original tradition of the philosophers, but from first principles, in a manner of speaking. He finds the supernatural in human experience, in a way similar to the ontological demonstration of God's presence in the soul. In many of Pieper's works that have to do with man and with fundamental human experiences, the philosophical discernment of human experience reveals a supernatural dimension. This is evident, for example, in his work on hope as 'the only answer that corresponds to man's actual existential situation'. He claims that the true nature of the experience of human hope is one that draws us to fulfilment beyond the limit of death: 'the way of man leads to death as its end but not as its meaning'¹².

Pieper also uncovers hidden supernatural aspirations in those who would apparently deny them, at least as philosophers. On the subject of history, Pieper claims that the very concept of historical meaning necessarily includes theological belief. In Pieper's *The End of Time*, there is a subtitle of a chapter that reads: *A philosophy of history that is severed from theology does not perceive its subject matter*¹³. Pieper goes on later to show how Enlightenment doctrines of historical pro-

⁹ Plato, *Philebus* 16c5, as quoted in J. PIEPER, *The Platonic Myths*, St. Augustine's Press, Indiana, 2011, 59.

¹⁰ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...296-297.

¹¹ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...313.

¹² J. PIEPER, *Faith.Hope.Love*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1997, 94.

¹³ J. PIEPER, *The End of Time*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1999, 24.

gress necessarily imply a theological belief in the advancement of the world, with disastrous consequences.

Pieper shows in his work on human festivity that human celebration and festivity is either based on theological grounds or is not ultimately justified at all. Writing against the background atheist, non-cultic holidays, Pieper concludes that 'there can be no festivity when man, imagining himself self-sufficient, refuses to recognise that Goodness of things, which goes far beyond any conceivable utility...He truly receives it only when he accepts it as pure gift. The only fitting way to respond to such a gift is: by praise of God in ritual worship',¹⁴.

In Pieper's book on love, that was his hardest to write, he takes the valuable insights of Freud as to the part played by love in the genesis of consciousness, the fear of the loss of love by a 'supreme power', etc, but reverses Freud's conclusion. Instead of trying to emancipate man from his dependence on his desire for love, Pieper asks 'What if our existence itself really depended upon being wanted and being loved, not by an imaginary prehistoric father figure, but by an extremely real, absolute Someone, by the Creator himself'?¹⁵ If that were the case, then all that Freud writes about the need for love 'suddenly acquires a remarkable pertinacity within this framework',¹⁶.

It is this fundamental openness to and acceptance of the divine, the supernatural in the human and natural that permits Pieper to discover the religious dimension and presence in reality, and to treat themes of a distinctly theological nature from a philosophical perspective. Such is the case in his book on *The Concept of Sin*, and this perspective permits Pieper to discover a transcendent reality in human experience. Pieper is convinced that reason necessarily contains 'a kind of participation in the divine Logos' which permits us to 'grasp the truth, known *or* believed'¹⁷. In affirming the fundamental religious dimension of reality, whether it be sacred (pertaining exclusively to God, that is, within the temple or *fanum*) or profane (what is of God in all of reality, outside the temple, or *pro-fanum*), Pieper rejects the

¹⁴ J. PIEPER, *In Tune with the World. A Theory of Festivity*, St. Augustine's Press, Indiana, 1999, 71.

¹⁵ J. PIEPER, *Faith.Hope.Love...*185.

¹⁶ J. PIEPER, *Faith.Hope.Love...*185.

¹⁷ J. PIEPER, *The Concept of Sin*, St. Augustine's Press, Indiana, 2001, 46.

false modern dichotomy of religious (related to God) or secular (of no relation to God)¹⁸.

Pieper's fundamental perspective of finding the transcendent in the immanent is perhaps summed up in a short essay entitled 'On the Dilemma Posed by a Non-Christian Philosophy'¹⁹. The dilemma, according to Pieper, is that *either* philosophical reflection include religious experience and the possibility of supernatural revelation, such as philosophy in the Christian tradition, *or* it cease to be philosophy. In another short essay on the theme, Pieper concurs with T.S. Eliot in saying that 'the future of philosophy will rest on whether its isolation from theology can be overcome in a nontendentious manner'²⁰.

III

Pieper is known as a Thomist. As a student, he came upon the work of St. Thomas by chance. At High School it was a teacher with little official reputation who weaned Pieper and his friends off the fashionable intellectual conceits of their youth (such as the sarcastic forms of Kierkegaard) and demanded that they express themselves in clear language: 'Not bad (referring to Kierkegaard), but that's confectioner's stuff. What you want is bread, and black bread best of all'²¹. The teacher was referring to St. Thomas, and told Pieper to read first of all St. Thomas' Commentary on St. John's Gospel. Pieper was immediately struck by the 'marvellously pithy lucidity of these texts', although recognising that he and his friends did not grasp all they read²². Pieper's further study of St. Thomas was largely personally inspired, starting on his own with 'the stern architecture' of St. Thomas' Summa, having dismissed his university philosophy and official lecture schedule as 'an utter disappointment'²³.

¹⁸ This is developed in Pieper's *In Search of the Sacred. Contributions to an Answer*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1991.

¹⁹ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...295-301.

²⁰ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...311. T. S. Eliot made the remark in his introduction to the first English edition of Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*.

²¹ J. PIEPER, *No One Could Have Known*...597.

²² J. PIEPER, *No One Could Have Known*...597.

²³ J. PIEPER, *No One Could Have Known*...791.

What type of Thomist is he? He takes great care to correct misinterpretations of St. Thomas, including the well-intentioned ones. In his *The Truth of All Things* he explains the historical German misinterpretation of the work, chiefly at the hands of C. Wolff: 'the attempt to re-interpret Thomas Aquinas in such a way as to attribute to this prophet of the old ontology a position quite clearly stemming from the rationalism of the enlightenment'²⁴. For this reason, Kant's critique of the truth of all things was valid; the Wolffian interpretation had no resemblance to 'the powerful original river of the old ontology, a river as limpid as it is profound, carrying in its swell even the sacred realities of mystery and dream'²⁵. What follows in *The Truth of All Things* is an explanation of the title within the ontology of the Scholastic period, especially with reference to St. Thomas.

His other short books on St. Thomas, for example, his *Guide to St. Thomas Aquinas*, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, and *Scholasticism. Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy*, not only explain in terse form the fundamental principles of St. Thomas and other Scholastics, but explain why they held what they held. In this ability to understand St. Thomas lies Pieper's faithful interpretation of his work.

This sense of understanding an author in order to translate and interpret is very clear in Pieper's own essay on interpretation. Pieper quotes B. Lonergan's succinct definition of interpretation as precise: 'An interpretation is the expression of the meaning of another expression'²⁶. This means, among other things, that the interpreter has to see beyond the literal expression of the author to what the author sees and is describing, that is, the author's relation to reality. Pieper says that 'The interpreter must, then, focus his attention primarily on this connection with reality and must seek to understand it...he must consider the claim to truth raised by the expression to be interpreted...Simply stated, the interpreter must truly 'listen' to the expression to be interpreted and what is expressed therein'²⁷.

This is the genius of J. Pieper. Pieper's profound understanding of the meaning of what St. Thomas says provides the basis for the in-

²⁴ J. PIEPER, *Living the Truth*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1989, location 251 (Kindle).

²⁵ J. PIEPER, *The Truth of All Things*...231.

²⁶ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...209.

²⁷ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...218-219.

telligent reworking of Thomistic principles and insights into very modern problems and authors. Often Pieper analyses particular themes and only as the result of his own ability to see an issue does he then refer to an idea of St. Thomas that coincides with his own or of someone else. For example, in Pieper's critical essay on J. P. Sartre, Pieper uncovers the fundamental truth of Sartre's premise: 'One cannot legitimately speak of a 'human nature' unless one is willing to acknowledge that there is a God who, as Creator, imagined and designed it'²⁸. Pieper continues: 'Might one not also express it this way: There is no human nature unless there is a Creator who could have designed it (or, rather, who actually designed it)? Astonishingly, this fundamental conviction is shared by both Jean-Paul Sartre and Saint Thomas Aquinas'²⁹. As an interpreter of St. Thomas, Pieper sees what Thomas saw (the meaning of the expression) rather than citing what Thomas said (the mere expression of the idea).

On the question of literary style, Pieper also resembles St. Thomas, in his own distinct way. Philosophical reflection is often written in technical language, at times with the use of constructed terminology, or the straining of the common meaning of words. It is probably not necessary to mention examples of modern and contemporary jargon-laden philosophers. There are no invented words in Pieper's writing, there is no philosophical jargon, as there is no 'univocally defined jargon' in Aquinas. A goal of good philosophical writing is clarity, that is, the expression of truth in common language, which is not the same as precision, which implies a presumptuous exactitude in relation to knowledge of truth. Pieper likes to remind us that Aquinas was very aware of the mystery of being and the limits of our understanding. Nor does good philosophical clarity imply a necessary easiness of understanding. What Pieper and Aquinas say is clear; the meaning of what they say requires a patient concentration to see what they see. Pieper ends his essay on language and the philosophizing person in this way: 'For utterances to emerge as genuinely philosophical, they must in careful collusion with language make its powers of expression – those that arise from the natural evolution of words and with which everyone is basically already familiar – palpable to such a degree that

²⁸ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...179.

²⁹ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom*...179.

the truth sought by every man is brought before his eyes and not allowed to disappear from view'³⁰.

One of the impressions after reading Pieper's work is of seeing certain things for the first time, truths that were always there but rushed over, misinterpreted, or ignored. What Pieper enlightens are not minor truths but fundamental and universal perspectives on reality. His ability to understand what ancient and contemporary thinkers say gives him the capacity to move between centuries and compare and contrast the ancient and the new, always based on Pieper's own ability to see. But there is more, there is the simplicity of communication in Pieper. In this simplicity, there is something that Pieper writes about Aquinas that, I suggest, can equally be applied to Pieper himself: '...the teacher, insofar as he succeeds in lovingly identifying himself with the beginner, partakes of something that in the ordinary course of nature is denied to mature men: he sees the reality just as a beginner can see it, with all the innocence of a first encounter, and yet at the same time with the matured powers of comprehension and penetration that the cultivated mind possesses'³¹.

³⁰ J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom...*208.

³¹ J. PIEPER, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1991, 95.