

# ESSAYS

## FINDING TIME FOR FUN WITH THE VIRTUE OF EUTRAPELIA

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Rest is hard work. Getting the right amount in the right way is easier said than done. The workaholic has a hard time resting because he cannot put aside his preoccupation with productivity, and so he takes as his rule of life a prohibition of respite. The professional party-goer—one thinks of the archetype portrayed in a thousand pop songs—loves to let go, but sooner or later responsibilities put a damper on his reveling. Both of these characters have found a rule to guide them, but experience shows each rule to be a poor one. Nonetheless, it seems impossible to live well without some amount of rest, and the good Christian—or any virtuous person, for that matter—must contend with this reality.

Common wisdom holds that virtue lies in the mean. One study estimates that for average working people, 2.75 hours is an ideal amount of free time; less than that, and one tends to feel stressed; more, and one tends to feel idle.<sup>1</sup> But there is a problem with merely counting time. Simply mixing together workaholism with reckless abandon only yields the “Work Hard-Play Hard” lifestyle, where one works diligently for the sake of later exhausting oneself in festal decadence. Moreover, different people require

different amounts of rest. Some have energy to spare at the end of a workday, while others begin fighting off naps at mid-afternoon. Since schedules, lifestyles, and temperaments differ, we cannot prescribe the universal ideal for recreation time.

Time is often an impractical question, anyway. Not everyone has the luxury just to add more free time in order to feel less stress—many parents of young children would include themselves in this category. Others, such as the retired or the unemployed, may find themselves with too much spare time and unable to fill the day with meaningful work. Real life does not bend to our recreative needs.

We must begin instead with a more fundamental question: why do we need fun in the first place? Only after asking “why” can we make sense of “how” and “how much.” We will begin our investigation with a general discussion of virtue and the ways it guides us to our final goal as human beings. Then we will be able to understand how a particular virtue—*eutrapelia*, the virtue of playfulness—helps us to have fun without losing track of this ultimate goal. We take as our guide St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican theologian who left us a treasury of teaching on the virtues. By exploring St. Thomas’s doctrine, we can make sense of the place of rest and relaxation in our own lives as we make our way toward heaven.

#### VIRTUES FOR THE WEARY

Not everyone can play the piano. Nearly all humans have the ability to depress various keys in whatever combination, but to actually perform a particular piece of music in a pleasant way requires a great deal of practice. The power to play the piano must be trained. A habit must be formed. The fingers of a pianist have the same muscles as anyone else’s fingers, but those muscles have years of habit ingrained into them.

Saint Thomas recognized that living life well is like playing the piano. Consider an activity like eating. Ordinarily, all humans

have the ability to eat and digest food; it is not very difficult. Yet that power is not sufficient to truly nourish us. We need to choose the right amount of reasonably healthy food and develop some facility for identifying and preparing such food. This form of life requires the building up of a habit more sophisticated than chewing and swallowing. Building such a habit takes time and practice, like playing the piano. The habits that help us to moderate our actions and live life well are called virtues.

The Ancient Greek philosophers, most famously Aristotle, elaborated the standard list of human virtues that was taken up by Thomas Aquinas centuries later: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The prudent man knows what to do in concrete situations. Justice perfects our will to render to others what we owe to them. Fortitude helps us to overcome obstacles. Finally, temperance helps to moderate our natural desires for pleasure. These four virtues are the integral qualities—the *sine qua non*—of a good man or woman. We need all of them to live well, and without them life would quickly dissolve into chaos.

Our ultimate destiny, however, is something beyond any human power: union with God in heaven. This union with God begins here on earth as we direct our minds more and more to him; thus St. Paul tells us to pray constantly (1 Thess 5:17). This continual prayer entails finding God in all things. All that is good in creation points to the first and highest good. All that is not good, even the worst of evils, reminds the saints of the eternal good that we so sorely need. Such a theological approach to reality is beyond the powers of our unaided nature, and so we require the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which God gives us as gifts of grace.

Human life, though, is complicated by original sin. We are broken and no longer have the original and complete integrity of body and soul that once enabled constant dedication to spiritual things. Our fallen minds are quickly exhausted by continuous application to higher things, just as our fallen bodies are exhausted by daily labor. We especially need those four human virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—to carry us through

the concrete challenges of life. Putting fun in its rightful place is one such challenge.

#### THE VIRTUE OF FUN AND GAMES

**E**utrapelia, with which we are concerned, is connected to the virtue of temperance. Temperance primarily moderates natural desires for food, drink, and sex, which are goods needed for our survival as individuals (food and drink) and as a species (sex). Thus, our creator, in his wisdom, has given us powerful inclinations to pursue these goods. The risk, however, is that we seek our ultimate good in the pleasures themselves. Some food is healthy, but eating all the desserts that tickle our fancy is not. The virtue of temperance helps us to seek basic, pleasurable goods without becoming slaves of that pleasure.

We are rational creatures possessed of spiritual souls, but we also have bodies that are bound to the world of the senses. When we rise above the realm of the senses to use our reason—whether to contemplate eternal truths or to do taxes—we draw ourselves up and away from what is most congenial, or connatural, to us. This work strains and wearies the soul. Virtuous men and women must take account of their inability to strain the mind constantly. Athletes often take naps before a big game, not out of laziness, but because rest is good for the health of the body. Christians, who are athletes of the soul, must also allow the soul its due respite.

Saint Thomas observes that mental rest is found in activities that are enjoyable in and of themselves and that do not require us to strain our attention (*ST II-II*, q. 168, aa. 2–4). Such delights may be found in games, jokes, or general play. Even sports, which exhaust the body, can refresh the mind. The Latin term that encompasses all of these is *ludus*. If we want to use our minds well as Christians, whether directly raising our thoughts to God or conducting our practical lives in accord with the truth, we must take time for rest.

*Ludus*, delightful in itself, nevertheless presents an opportunity for real danger. We may forget that the passing rest

provided by playful diversions is ordered to our ultimate rest in God. In our confusion, we look for *ludus* as if it were an end in itself. Fun is still fun even when it is no longer good for us. A gambling addict, for example, might destroy his entire life for the sake of something he perceives as fun. If a diversion from the toil of life gets out of hand, it can completely divert us from our final end. The virtue that guards against this is called eutrapelia. By cultivating this virtue, then, we are better able to reach our final goal—union with God—in and through the *ludus* that we need in this life.

#### THE RIGHT KIND OF FUN

For much of human history, thinkers pagan and Christian alike have been suspicious of fun. When Aristotle first articulated the virtue of eutrapelia in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he warned against both the buffoon who continually makes a fool of himself and the boor who is drab in conversation. Neither is fun for anyone. For Aristotle, eutrapelia was not so much about having fun in the first place (he assumed a place for leisure and enjoyment) but rather about being sociable—the good-humored man who puts a positive turn on conversation (eutrapelia literally means “turning well” in Greek).

Unfortunately, by the first century AD, the word eutrapelia came to be associated with the buffoonery decried by Aristotle. Saint Paul, understanding the term in this negative way, specifically cautions against it (Eph 5:4). Toward the end of the second century, St. Clement of Alexandria uses the word to describe the unbecoming conduct Christians should avoid in social settings. Even without using the word, St. Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century warned the clergy in particular against such behavior, especially in their preaching.

Saint John Chrysostom is perhaps the most forceful. He warned, “It is not God who gives us to play, but the devil.”<sup>22</sup> In one homily he informed his congregation, “If anyone . . . deserts back

to the unlawful disgrace of the theater, I shall not receive him within these precincts, I will not let him share in the sacraments, I will not let him touch the sacred table.”<sup>3</sup> He had good reasons to be so critical. Many of his flock were choosing to go to the theater rather than to church. Moreover, the gladiatorial games and other lewd public spectacles which they witnessed were morally reprehensible and had no place in the Christian life.

When Thomas encountered these works of the Fathers, he did not abandon the insights of Aristotle. He pointed out that even the austere Desert Fathers understood the need for relaxation (ST II-II, q. 168, a. 2). The Angelic Doctor restated the cautions of his forebears in light of this. Our recreation must avoid damaging words or deeds; we must not lose our self-possession; and we must take care to observe due circumstances. Paul and the other Church Fathers never meant to claim that fun or relaxation is always evil. They warn only against sinful fun, of which there are innumerable examples.

In our own day, plenty of unsalutary fun is at our disposal. We have already discussed excessive partying. The misuse of humor is another abuse of *ludus* that can involve many kinds of sin. Consider the crude and unchaste jokes made either in conversation or in entertainment media. Even worse, jokes can be used to insult or mock others. Sometimes this is done under the guise of good fun, blurring the line between diversion and derision. In



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short, plenty of fun is simply disrespectful and sinful and ought to be judiciously avoided.

In addition to such sinful diversions, we can consider two further dangers. First, not all fun is truly restful. For example, staying up late for *ludus* has consequences for the body and the mind the next day. Likewise, some hobbies can create more stress than they relieve—think of the angry golfer. Second, our unbri-dled desire for fun can distract us from what is truly good and necessary for our lives. Parties on Saturday cannot be allowed to keep us from Mass on Sunday. Streaming or scrolling should not cause us to forget to put the kids to bed. It is no surprise, then, that so many Church Fathers were suspicious. The wrong kind of fun causes many problems.

We should not think, however, that fun is merely a necessary evil to be viewed with extreme caution. Wholesome fun is indeed good, as Aristotle first pointed out. We make life more pleasant for those around us if we develop a good sense of humor. We watch movies as families because we recognize that relaxation together builds strong relationships. We read good novels because we can learn something about being human. When we exercise, we train the body and give the mind a break at the same time. The virtue of eutrapelia, then, serves a twofold purpose: first, to help us take the rest we need, and second, to ensure our diversions lead us not into temptation. Thus, even when we take a break, virtue helps us on the way to our eternal rest in heaven.

#### THE MEAN, THE MEDIAN, OR THE MODE?

**W**e can now see why asking “how much time” is not the most illuminating question when it comes to fun. Time is not the issue. The real question is the place of fun in the hierarchy of human needs. Fun is in itself a reprieve from hard work, and different people need different amounts of reprieve. Moreover, fun has to fit into the larger picture of life, full of its own demands. The mean of the virtue of eutrapelia is not the same for everyone: just

as some must eat more than others to maintain the health of the body, some must rest more than others to maintain the health of the soul. Yet all must play and rest in due measure.

Secondarily, *ludus* admits of quality. Some fun is truly restful; some is not. Wit can enliven, but it can also destroy. Fun does not always lead to rest, and it sometimes leads to sin. This is why Paul and the Church Fathers were reticent to think of eutrapelia as virtuous—generally the more important issue was leading the flock away from sinful pastimes. We do well to take their admonitions to heart. If we do, we can find true good in our respite, so that even when we withdraw from direct contact with higher things, we can paradoxically grow closer to God.

Whether we are attending to the practical elements of life or raising our minds to the heavens, we function best when we get adequate rest. The virtue of eutrapelia helps us to do this well. It restrains us from becoming enslaved to mere diversions and perfects us so that we are better able to enjoy our free time—alone and with others. The key to human flourishing is not necessarily to recreate more, but rather to recreate better and more effectively. Rest is hard work, but God has given us a virtue to do it well.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Marissa Sharif, Cassie Mogilner, and Hal Hershfield, “The Effects of Being Time Poor and Time Rich on Life Satisfaction,” SSRN, November 15, 2018, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3285436>.

<sup>2</sup>John Chrysostom, “Homily 6 on Matthew,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), 10:100–114. Cited by St. Thomas in *ST II-II*, q. 168, a. 2, obj. 2.

<sup>3</sup>John Chrysostom, “Contra Ludos et Theatra” in *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris, France: J.-P. Migne, 1859), 56:263–70.