Leisure as a Philosophical Act
Thinking, Acting, and Being

Annette M. Holba
Ph.D., is associate professor of rhetoric at Plymouth State University. Her books on leisure include Transformative Leisure: A Philosophy of Communication (2013) and Philosophical Leisure: Recuperative Praxis for Human Communication (2007). She has published in numerous scholarly journals and is the current editor of Qualitative Research Reports in Communication. (384 characters including spaces)

Abstract
Aristotle argued leisure was the first principle of all action; Thomas Hobbes suggested it was the mother of philosophy. Today leisure is more often associated with rest, relaxation, or idleness. These associations have contributed to a misunderstanding and lack of leisure. In our changing technological environment, leisure is overshadowed by a cult of speed where immediacy has replaced thoughtfulness and intentionality which poses communicative challenges to the human capacities of thinking, acting, and being. This essay suggests that reengaging leisure as a philosophical act, thus returning to its classical roots, provides recuperative possibilities for these challenges. Beginning with situating leisure as a philosophical act, then identifying the challenges that confront leisure, I demonstrate how leisure enables the necessary cultivation of thinking, acting, and being which provides recuperation of those human capacities even within our technological environment.

Keywords: leisure, play, thinking, acting, being, philosophical act
Leisure has a textured history in sociological and philosophical discourse (Goodale and Godbey 1988; Pieper 1998; Rojek 2010; Veblen 1953). In ancient western philosophy, leisure was argued to be the “first principle of all action” (Aristotle 2001b, 1307) and necessary for the cultivation of human virtue and political engagement (Aristotle 1998; 2001a). Leisure offered a recuperative retreat for the actively engaged citizen to reflect and contemplate on individual interests and ideas important to the polis (Seneca, 2001). In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes (1992) presented leisure as the “mother of philosophy” (1992, 455), the activity that prepares one for active intellectual engagement. In contemporary times however, leisure is more often associated with rest, relaxation, and idleness (Honore 2004), conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1953), and recreation (Holba 2007a; 2007b; 2013; 2014). The general misunderstanding of leisure within popular culture is overshadowed by a technological web of instant information that has replaced thoughtful interrogation and inquiry. This project offers a hermeneutical understanding of leisure that underscores its philosophical ground within the new media environment. Leisure, as an exercise of thought, still has much currency today. I argue that reengaging leisure as a philosophical act in a new media environment provides recuperative possibilities for deeper human communicative engagement that some scholars and philosophers suggest has spiraled into an existential malaise (Ramsey 1997; Arnett 1994; Haney 2010; Herbig, Hermann, and Tyma 2015).

First, I situate leisure as a philosophical act. Second, I describe how leisure is overshadowed by a cult of speed that has replaced thoughtfulness, thus creating challenges to the human capacities of thinking, acting, and being. Third, I demonstrate how leisure as a philosophical act provides for recuperation of those capacities especially within our evolving technological environment. By using the popular television program, *The Walking Dead*, I consider its engagement within the digital media environment as one example of how we might engage leisure in digital terrain. Finally, I end with the recuperative message that it is not the digital environment that is causing the challenges posed earlier in the essay but it is the approach in our thinking we take to our engagement that is problematic. I argue that if we engage the digital terrain as leisure, a philosophical act, we can provide a counterbalance to negative
consequences of these challenges. The first step is to define leisure as a philosophical act.

**Leisure as a Philosophical Act**

Josef Pieper (1998) situated leisure as a philosophical act when he argued that leisure is the basis of culture. Many people today might not agree with this claim; they also might not understand what he meant by a *philosophical act*. Understanding leisure as a philosophical act creates an opportunity for mental, intellectual, and spiritual development.

When Josef Pieper (1998) referred to “philosophical anthropology” as a necessary ingredient of the philosophical act, he meant that we must look at the nature of an act, the scope of an act, and any implications associated with an act (1998, 63). Pieper (1998) also suggested philosophical anthropology does not provide permanent or conclusive answers because it is actually a hermeneutical process that heralds ongoing response, and serendipitous outcomes.

From an anthropological perspective, a philosophical act transcends everydayness of our experiences, in other words, “a philosophical act is an act in which the work-a-day world is transcended” (Pieper 1998, 64). To transcend the everyday world of work there must be a sense of “not-belonging” or of being alienated from “the world of uses and efficiencies, [and] of needs and satisfactions” (Pieper 1998, 65). *Not-belonging* permits one to step beyond the work-a-day world and be liberated from its attachments. The nature and quality of this liberation require a “not-being-subservient-to” some particular purpose; this allows the philosopher anthropologist, the one engaging in a philosophical act, to be able “to observe, behold, [and] contemplate” (Pieper 1998, 77). Engaging in a philosophical act presupposes no strings attached and having an openness to what-might-be and what-might-become in the doing of the act. Attempting to define a philosophical act more concretely than this risks closing down interpretive possibilities. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, a philosophical act is an act in which we step beyond the work-a-day world and routine of our daily experiences to do what we love to do for its own sake, unconstrained from any expected outcome.
Ancient Leisure: Exercise of Thought

For many ancient Greeks, philosophy was a way of life and a “mode of existing-in-the-world” that was to be practiced consistently and with an understanding that it could transform their individual lives (Hadot 2009, 265). A philosophical act was an exercise of thought, will, and the entirety of one’s being in a movement toward wisdom and spiritual progress which often involved a transformation of one’s way of being-in-the-world. This perspective intertwines our thinking, acting, and being. A philosophical act as an exercise of thought involves the entirety of one’s being including intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects; it is this involvement of entirety of being that enables one to develop a deeper understanding of and experience with leisure.

As a philosophical act, leisure involves a disinterestedness in the kinds of things that are important to the work-a-day world, such as, external time constraints, competition, what other people think about your actions, and social or professional status (Holba 2013; 2014b). Once one turns away from these external temptations, poiesis (a creative making) emerges because the experience opens to freely observe, stand and behold, and contemplate what comes into the field of experience. Bias, assumptions, and limitations are removed, leaving open the possibility of new thinking, new acting, and new ways of being. These things cannot be dictated or demanded; rather, they emerge in a playful serendipity that have the power to transcend beyond any preconceived expectations.

Contemporary Leisure: Exercise of Thought with The Walking Dead

In ancient times, some examples of leisure as a philosophical act might involve playing and studying an instrument, reading or writing poetry, or other practices that stimulate one’s aesthetic sensibilities. In a contemporary new media environment, these experiences still remain options, however, there are other new kinds of experiences that might also stimulate aesthetic sensibilities. One example of engaging leisure as a philosophical act might include full participation in new fan cultures that are cultivated by the interactions of new social and digital media technologies designed to provide digitally aesthetic enhancement of one’s experience with a particular aspect of popular culture (Barton and Lampley 2013). Leisure as an exercise of thought can be engaged in our digital media environ-
ment involving a popular television program. If we consider the popular television program, *The Walking Dead* (2010-to present), we can see how social and digital media technologies invite intertextual engagement between fans and the narrative itself.

Prior to the new media technological revolution, television programs became popular through high ratings, advertising, and geographically situated fan clubs managed by program insiders. In the new media environment, engaging *The Walking Dead* as a philosophical act that is removed from one’s work-a-day experience might include reading the comic book series, playing the video games (based on either the series or the comic book), or attending conventions. Other avenues of engagement that contribute to growing fan cultures of *The Walking Dead* would be to watch *The Talking Dead*, a one hour live talk show immediately following each new episode, or participating on twitter during the airing of each new episode and during *The Talking Dead* program. Fandom culture has its own conventions, publications, fan fictions, and pet names for fans, such as Walker Stalkers. While this kind of engagement is not new, it is by far more sophisticated in today’s new media environment than it was, for example, with *Star Wars* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) in their fan culture development. What is different in today’s fandom culture is the intellectual engagement of the fans themselves; they engage intellectually in a variety of ways that might change the stories, create new stories, cultivate new relationships, and consider narratival development in ways that are not static and preconditined by an external force (Booth 2010; Jenkins 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Hills 2002; Stuller 2013). Instead, the fan cultures open the possibilities of engagement and cultivate their sense of thinking, acting, and being through digital spaces.

Digital space and engagement in this new media environment has had its criticism. Some critics argue fan cultures are limiting and prison-like environments (Booth 2015; Jenkins 2012). Other fan cultures may be supported by latent or obvious commercial interests (Booth 2015). While this criticism is serious, there are also benefits to the digital landscape that have been shown to enhance fan culture experiences in new ways (Stuller 2013).

As these diverse opportunities for engagement increase, people can experience leisure as a philosophical act in a variety of ways. Of course, not everyone watching *The Walking Dead* or reading a book,
or playing an instrument are engaging these activities as leisure (a philosophical act). The essential feature that makes something leisure is that of free play. Free play is determined by one’s phenomenological focus of attention beginning with a disinterestedness and a letting go of attachments to external stimuli (Holba 2014a). This allows the phenomenological experience to be governed by poiesis where one freely observes, beholds the moment, and contemplates the experience. New media technologies open opportunity for continued experience of leisure as a philosophical act in the contemporary world but the individual must still engage with phenomenological depth, acuity, and liberation. Without this phenomenological focus of attention, leisure as a philosophical act cannot be experienced.

Challenging Assumptions of New Media Technologies
The assumption that a proliferation of new media technologies would transform our daily practices into more efficient communication might have some truth to it. Yet, we know that there are many unanticipated disadvantages that made this challenging. Some of these challenges involve the ability to focus our attention such as, development of shortened attention spans (Jackson 2009), increasing a culture of impatience (Honore 2004), addiction to the cult of speed (Honore 2004), and a lack of interest in the long-term while privileging fads and experiencing the immediate (Jackson 2009). Some scholars suggest that disadvantages from new media technologies may outweigh the advantages, especially when it comes to the effect on human communication (Jackson 2009). Instead of creating a communicative environment of textured, clear, and accurate communication, our capacity to communicate effectively is rendered ineffective. Ambiguity and miscommunication thrive in email and other electronic forms of communication (Kelly, Keaton, Becker, Cole, Littleford, Rothe 2012); diminishing language skills from tweets to texts have become common in professional contexts (Decarie 2010); increasing confusion between public and private messages (Arendt 1998; Holba 2011), and fatal consequences of immediacy as people text while driving (Cook and Jones 2011).

This all seems absurd but as Maggie Jackson (2009) explains, our communicative practices have changed and the new media terrain has rendered our attention spans weak and distracted. She argues
this is leading us into a new dark age. Jackson (2009) describes a
dark age as a strict turning point or demarcation shift marked by a
period of uncertainty and change; it is also a time of great techno-
logical advancements. These junctures result in a “decline in civiliza-
tion” and a “collective forgetting” (Jackson 2009, 15). A new dark
age is characterized by a splintered attention span, the most crucial
and critical tool human beings have to engage in their world (Jack-
sen 2009). Jackson illuminates a path that she refers to as a “rena-
sance of attention” (2009, 235) which offers mindfulness as a re-
cuperative measure for those splintered attention spans. Leisure,
which is essentially a practice of mindfulness, is one way to offset
the impact of this new dark age. For Jackson, it comes down to a
choice; we must choose to re-cultivate our attention spans.

Leisure as a philosophical act is one way to counterbalance these
challenges. Before the proliferation of new media technologies
there was philosophical support relative to continued care, cultiva-
tion, and attention to our thinking, acting, and being. Martin Hei-
degger (1966) found meditative thinking essential for being and
Hannah Arendt (1998) found the contemplative life essential for
the active political agent. We can use our new media landscape as
an opportunity to reinitiate a commitment to leisure as a philo-
sophical act. With this in mind, engaging new media technologies,
such as with The Walking Dead, as leisure can cultivate our think-
ing, acting, and being.

Cultivating Thinking, Acting, and Being
Leisure cultivates the human capacity to engage higher level think-
ing as well as one’s aesthetic sensibilities (Blanco and Robinette
2014). Leisure also enables us to be in present moment awareness
because of the phenomenological focus of attention required for a
philosophical act. This awareness enables a deeper engagement
with ideas and with others as we collaborate and engage civic live.
Leisure impacts our capacity to think, act, and be with others in
productive and compassionate ways. In a practice of leisure we cul-
tivate our sense of play which helps us to engage ideas, people, and
problems in meaningful ways. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2002) situat-
ed play as separate from work and working for a living in that he
suggested that the structure of play “absorbs the player into itself,
and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which
constitutes the actual strain of existence” (2002, 105). This notion of play involves a creative making situated in a disinterestedness of unrestrained intellectual and physical engagement within the individual and between persons. Specific to this kind of play is the experience of *akroatic* listening that links listening, thinking, and being to one’s sensibility of attunement – being attuned to the present as a moral mode of being in the world (Lipari 2014).

This moral mode of being in the world points to a perspective grounded in communication philosophy and Eastern religious philosophy. Lisbeth Lipari’s ground breaking work on *listening being* states, “[a]s a dwelling place for human being, *listening being* can reveal the ethical possibilities that arise when listening begins not from a speaking, but from the emptiness of awareness itself – a place from which human beings can both be and become” (2010, 348). *Listening being* begins from an emptiness of deep awareness of itself rather than from a fullness of ego/speaker driven point of view. This approach allows us to deeply see and acknowledge the other with an attuned listening openness. *Akroatic* listening in our *listening being* permits a habit of play that prepares one for deeper, reflective engagements that are often limited as we navigate the rapid pace of new media technologies. Play, in this sense as a practice, prepares one for engagement in the world that sees potential and is open to learning in the experience. The idea of *akroatic* listening enables a deep reflective kind of thinking and engagement cultivates and attunes our thinking, acting, and being.

**Thinking**

To cultivate human thinking, contemplative engagement as a productive kind of quiet has a spiritual connotation. Pierre Hadot’s (2009) spiritual exercises are one kind of thinking that models leisure as a philosophical act. Hadot (2009) referred to spiritual exercises as “thought exercises” that engage imagination and aesthetic sensibilities (82). These kinds of thinking exercises are not merely on a cognitive level but more specifically on the spiritual level of self and of being. Thought exercises involve practice of hard thinking and reflective thinking that opens potential for conversion, transcendence, and “an authentic state of life” (Hadot 2009, 83). Thought exercises cultivate how we think and tend to ideas and “little by little they
make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self” (Hadot 2009, 83). Thought exercises require akroatic listening.

Hadot (2009) suggested that thinking exercises help human beings to engage in the present as our phenomenological focus of attention is directed to what is before us, unhampered by external conditions leaving one free to learn, see, understand in ways that might not be foreseeable without the deep thinking first. Since these are exercises, Hadot also suggested that we engage these kind of thought exercises as a practice that can cultivate our everyday way of thinking, which teaches us to live in the practice of deep level thinking as a way of being in the world. Hadot is not the first philosopher to presuppose these conditions on our thinking. We can point to Hannah Arendt’s vita contemplativa as a prerequisite for an active life and the mark of a morally responsible public citizen. Acting
Leisure begins in contemplation—teaching us to contemplate and be with ideas before we act. Hannah Arendt’s vita contemplativa is a precondition for the active political life and it is every human being’s moral responsibility to participate in an active political life (1998; 2007). There is a strong link between thinking and acting. Praxis as theory informed action and phronesis as practical wisdom requires self-reflection of our experiences resulting in opportunities for a more sophisticated understanding of previous actions that might have resulted in good or not so good consequences. In other words, we learn from our past actions, including our mistakes but in order to experience the learning, we have to undergo self-reflection guided by deep and thoughtful attention.

Our actions should not be knee-jerk reactions that are sometimes guided by emotional responses because we realize these kinds of actions have unintended consequences or consequences that we later regret. All actions necessarily have consequences that we can expect or plan on as well as unanticipated outcomes. This is why it is so important to develop thinking exercises that can underscore our actions so that they are appropriate, effective, and attentive to the circumstances and conditions in which we are situated. Our acting requires akroatic listening as a precondition for our engagement. Leisure can help us be thoughtful about our actions because we
have learned how to think deeply, carefully, and responsibly. Together, our thoughts and actions shape our being.

**Being**

Martin Heidegger (1966) compared and contrasted calculative thinking to meditative thinking when he described human beings as “thinking...meditating beings” (47). In his *Memorial Address*, Heidegger (1966) argued that human beings are in a natural state of being “thought-poor” and are “far too easily thoughtless” (44-45). Heidegger suggested that there is a way to be released from this condition, which he said makes human beings shallow and enslaved to thoughtlessness. Once liberated, humans can become more acutely aware and reawakened. Heidegger (1966) suggested that these are two different ways of thinking which yield two different kinds of knowledge and self-discovery. Calculative thinking yields particular data but the structure of this kind of thinking is often scripted by a frame that constricts outcome and creates limits, leaving little room for the unanticipated. On the other hand, meditative thinking requires a greater effort than calculative thinking because it is not scripted. In meditative thinking, one “follow[s] the path . . . in his own manner and within his own limits” (Heidegger 1966, 47). There is a freedom in meditative thinking that allows *akratic* listening which prepares us to see our path and consider our engagement as we are on the path.

Meditative thinking cultivates one’s original rootedness. Heidegger (1966) argued that our autochthony (original rootedness) is what makes the human being a thinking being as we are; how we think necessarily shapes our being into a thinking being or a non-thinking being or a scripted thinking being. In meditative thinking, we are permitted to ponder, think, wait, and to think again. Heidegger suggested that without being a thinking being, human beings can lose the capacity to make decisions. In other words, without the opportunity and ability to ponder, the capacity for decision-making is severely limited. Leisure is the activity that allows human beings to be present and active in their being and it is through the engagement of leisure that being is cultivated.
Conclusion
Our dynamic digital environment receives much criticism from the skeptics who believe we are being irreparably damaged by quick, short, and superficial communication that it often creates. While some of this criticism is necessary and helpful, we can also see that the way human beings use the tools and technologies in the digital environment might also contribute to deeper engagements, learning, and community involvement. Imagine if we engaged fandom and fan cultures as the ancients engaged leisure, as an exercise of thought. Approaching our engagement in the digital environment while recognizing we can still experience this new terrain as leisure, an exercise of thought linked to action and our being, puts the responsibility on us, the participators and collaborators in this new narratival space. We must keep our focus of attention on how we think and allow our engagement to be an exercise of thought.

Leisure cultivates our ability and capacity for thinking, acting, and being. Understanding leisure as a philosophical act offers an alternative to how human beings engage their time away from working-for-a-living. The new media technological explosion can present many challenges to our communicative landscape but we can become attuned through leisure and once attuned, transform our lives in unexpected ways.

References


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