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### Finding Meaning via Contemplative Leisure

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**Find Meaning via Contemplative Leisure****James B. Wise****ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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**Volume:** 5, No: 1**Pages:** 113-120**ABSTRACT**

The relationship between leisure and meaning lacks a clear, well-developed, philosophical underpinning. To address the situation, this article reports the results of a qualitative investigation aimed at formulating and articulating such a foundation. Hermeneutics, the investigation's guiding methodology, involved the researcher reading multiple works authored by two prominent philosophers who studied meaning, Viktor Frankl and Martin Heidegger, as well as two works authored by Josef Pieper, a philosopher who extensively studied meaning and leisure. Based on his interpretation of the texts, the present author generated a philosophically based foundation conveying the importance of finding meanings, outlining how meanings come about, and describing contemplative leisure's role in discovering meanings. The article concludes with two practical applications aimed at helping recreation practitioners support people's pursuit of meaningful lives.

**Keywords:** Josef Pieper, Leisure, Martin Heidegger, Recreation, Viktor Frankl

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## INTRODUCTION

A common definition of leisure is free time during which people engage in freely-chosen recreation activities (e.g., McLean et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this simple conceptualization fails to capture and convey the role leisure plays in helping people find meaning in their lives. Iwasaki and his colleagues conclusively verified a connection between the two concepts based on a series of conceptual and empirical research studies emanating from diverse populations such as older adults, people living with mental illness or physical disabilities, and people from a variety of cultures (Hopper et al., 2020; Iwasaki, 2008, 2017; Iwasaki et al., 2013, 2015, 2018). Though extensive, the assemblage of studies demonstrates two shortcomings. First, the studies failed to articulate an explicit, comprehensive, philosophical foundation for the link. Second, the investigations exhibit an almost exclusive concentration on meanings generated by particular leisure activities while largely ignoring leisure conceived as a contemplative activity people engage in to discover the meanings of activities and entities. The present study addressed both shortcomings by developing a foundation that communicates the importance of finding meanings, how meanings form, and leisure's role in revealing meanings. The article concludes with preliminary explorations of two potential practical applications derived from the foundation.

## METHOD

This qualitative study employed hermeneutic methodology which nurtures deeper understanding of written texts through interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/1975; Laverly, 2003). Hermeneutics is not a particular method or technique nor a system of strict rules. It is a "creative approach to [gaining] understanding, using ... good judgement and responsible principles rather than rules" (Laverly, 2003, p. 28). Simplistically, a researcher reads selected texts and interprets the contents based on his/her pre-understandings. Pre-understandings include what the researcher knows of the topic, and particular authors and their texts.

With this approach, a researcher reviews a text from two perspectives, moving back and forth from one perspective to another, gaining insights on the text's meaning. One perspective considers the *individual details* while the second perspective considers the *whole* created by the details. Initially, the researcher concentrates on discovering meaning in sentences, paragraphs, and sections. Then the discovered meaning directs deliberation of the corresponding text in its entirety. Next, the process reverses direction. The researcher considers the meaning derived from the entire text when rereading individual sentences, paragraphs, and sections. The reciprocal process continues until the researcher and text "co-create" a coherent understanding (Laverly, 2003, p. 28).

In the present study, the researcher selected several germane texts from each of three philosophers, Viktor Frankl (1959/1992, 1969/2014), Martin Heidegger (1927/1962, 1961/2008, 1984), and Josef Pieper (1952, 1990), who resolutely believed finding meaning is a central task of living and that meditative thinking or contemplative leisure serves as an illuminative environment where people can more readily see meanings. The researcher's pre-understanding stemmed from teaching university level courses on leisure for more than two decades, spending considerable time prior to the present study reading and ruminating on each of the consulted texts, and reflecting on his goal of fusing aspects from each author's works into a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leisure and meaning.

## FINDINGS

This article proceeds by summarizing the researcher's interpretation of each philosopher's applicable works. The procession begins with establishing the importance of finding meaning via Frankl's core tenets. Then it transitions to Heidegger's explanation of meaning formation and his notion of *aletheia* as a means for discovering meaning. The sequence culminates with purporting Pieper's version of contemplative leisure as well-suited for revealing meanings because it fosters *Aletheia*.

### Frankl

Frankl's philosophy rests on three tenets (Frankl, 1959/1992, 1969/2014). First, people are not wholly pre-determined by instincts or innate drives. They are free to exist, and a distinguishing feature of human existence consists of finding and fulfilling meanings. Second, *human beings' primary motivation is finding meaning* in their actions and projects, and the situations they encounter. Furthermore, over time, these discrete, individual meanings can coalesce into an overarching, supra-meaning that guides the person through life, influencing his/her decisions and the contents of discovered meanings. Finally, life has meaning even under the most horrific conditions as amply demonstrated by Frankl's (1959/1992) account of his internment in Nazi concentration camps which he recounted in the book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Frankl (1969/2014) emphasized meaning not leisure, so he literally only penned a couple of lines on leisure, distinguishing two types: centrifugal and centripetal. Centrifugal leisure consists of participating in free time activities such as playing trivial games and watching inconsequential videos because doing so keeps people from fixating on the absence of and associated struggle to find meaning in their lives. In sharp contrast, centripetal leisure consists of free time activities that contain a contemplative element encouraging the discovery of meaning. Frankl's recognition of an association between leisure and meaning supplies a starting point for ascertaining meaning formation and discovery. The discussion now turns to Heidegger and Pieper who furnish enlightenment on these points.

### Heidegger

Meanings arise from people interacting with entities which include all existing things (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Interactions that lead to achieving personally relevant and desired goals imbue the corresponding entities with significance, value, and meaningfulness. Similarly, Frankl (1959/1992) listed three categories of interactions leading to meaning. Specifically, 1) creating a work or performing a deed, 2) directly experiencing truth, nature, and beauty or loving someone, and 3) choosing a stance or attitude toward life situations, especially those involving unavoidable suffering. The third manner of interaction calls for elaboration. Deciding how to perceive and interpret horrendous situations is the only freedom external forces cannot involuntarily take from people. In every such situation, people are free to acquiesce to environmental conditions or see the possibility of demonstrating his/her worthiness to bear the suffering.

According to Heidegger (1927/1962), once formed, meanings require discovery due to natural concealment. A transcendent structure he called *aletheia* enables people to uncover, discover, or reveal meanings of entities (Heidegger, 1927/1962, 1961/2008, 1984). Envision the discovery process metaphorically as walking in a dense stand of trees and coming upon "an opening, a clearing" containing the entity of interest (King, 2015, p. 108). Compared to the surrounding forest, people can more easily see the entity and concomitant meaning because fewer items obstruct their view, and the sparse canopy admits additional sunlight. A

constellation of cognitive attributes foster aletheia by creating a clearing (Heidegger, 1961/2008, 1984). Attributes include a sense of wonder, openness to thinking about entities differently, and suspension of judgment regarding discovered meanings.

### **Pieper**

The contemplative form of leisure forwarded by Josef Pieper (1952) facilitates aletheia, acting as a clearing where people can ‘see’ meanings. As identified previously by Heidegger, a clearing results from a constellation of mental characteristics. Namely, people engaging in contemplative leisure adopt an attitude of “non-activity, of inward calm, of silence” (Pieper, 1952, pp. 26-27) which serves as “the prerequisite of the apprehension of” meaning (p. 27), helping people open their “eyes receptively to ... [meaning which] offers itself to one’s vision” (p. 7). They wait patiently to see an entity’s meaning which “offers itself like a landscape to the eye” (p. 9) and do not force meaning upon nor wrestle it from an entity.

Contemporary philosophers support Pieper’s claim regarding contemplative leisure’s role in finding meaning. Blackshaw (2010) asserted leisure performs “the function of rendering meaning” (p. 141) while Bouwer and Van Leeuwen (2017) declared leisure is “fundamentally ... the search for the *important*, for meaning in and of life” (p. 230).

## **DISCUSSION of PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

The researcher’s interpretation of selected philosophical texts established the importance of finding meanings, how meanings come about, and the manner of discovering meanings. Now, attention turns toward translating the philosophical foundation’s contents into two practical applications for recreation practitioners. Please note the application descriptions are preliminary and require substantial development, formal implementation, and efficacy testing.

The first application involves recreation professionals creating and delivering a multiple session program based on the generated philosophical foundation and works of experts in contemplative seeing (Dustin & Ziegler, 2007; Gradle, 2011, 2012). Contemplative seeing consists of behaviors that increase the likelihood of finding deep, personally relevant meanings of an entity. These behaviors include people slowing down, opening up, and gazing in wonder at the entity. The sequence of sessions begins with instructors teaching that the human condition entails people finding meanings, that meanings are naturally hidden, and employing contemplative seeing during leisure leads to revealing those meanings. Once participants gain requisite knowledge, they learn the steps of and practice contemplative seeing with works of art, nature-based entities, or objects of their choice. These interactions follow an established schedule and take place in tranquil settings. After each interaction, the instructor asks participants to describe what they saw, thought, and felt. As they become more competent, participants also discuss their evolving ability to see meanings. During the last few sessions, they individually contemplate the same entity and then, as a group, they present their perspectives of the entity, and listen to others’ perspectives in order to gain insights into various meanings associated with the entity.

Limited empirical evidence indicates the efficacy of contemplative seeing. Gradle (2011) reported the impacts of a university art course designed to encourage contemplative seeing among undergraduate and graduate students. Students spent a semester following the aforementioned guidelines. At the end of the semester, they reported increased competency with contemplatively seeing. They also disclosed they increased their ability to find meanings; and learned that the meaning of an entity can change, contemplative seeing works with non-art entities, and discovering meaning is what makes us human. Overall, students acquired “a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning

understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked” (Pieper, 1990, p. 36).

The second application calls on practitioners to provide community members with opportunities for accessing environments that foster contemplative leisure and stimulate contemplative seeing (Wise, 2023). A suggested resource is the book *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation* (Krinke, 2005). Drawing upon empirical studies and architects’ firsthand experiences, each chapter presents detailed examples of blending natural and built elements to promote contemplation. To illustrate, Hermann (2005), who authored a chapter, described several “environments ... with poetic/spiritual, contemplation-inducing qualities” (p. 70). Specifically, he explained how selecting and combining various elements such as paths, buildings, vegetation, natural light, water, and topography trigger “insights of subtle or deep meaning” (Hermann, 2005, p. 69).

## Conclusion

Viktor Frankl, Martin Heidegger, and Josef Pieper believed finding meaning is a, if not *the*, fundamental task of human beings and contemplative leisure serves as a luminous environment where people can more easily see meaning. Beginning with these commonalities, the current author integrated selected elements from the different philosophical frameworks into a straight-forward, non-esoteric exposition on the relationship between meaning and leisure. In addition, heeding the words of Kurt Lewin, a famous psychologist in the 1950s, who said, “There is nothing more practical than a good theory,” led to two professional applications. The applications exemplify praxis or using theory “as a *tool* for action” (Barker, 2006, pp. 491-492). In this case, the philosophical foundation guides recreation practitioners’ efforts aimed at helping people discover meanings through leisure and maximizes existing resources because practitioners know with certainty what they are doing, why they are doing it, and the consequences of their actions.

## Limitations

The contents of this study hold promise for helping people live meaningful lives but there are two limitations. First, the researcher and reader must exhibit a relatively high degree of commitment because understanding via interpretation is an ongoing process due to changes in pre-understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1975). To illustrate, as the current author continues studying leisure, teaching, and reading pertinent texts, his understanding of the consulted texts likely changes. Thus, he needs to periodically interpret the texts and alter the foundation. Relatedly, readers must stay connected with the topical literature in order to keep abreast of alterations to the foundation. A waning commitment of either party can be problematic, leading to arrested development of the foundation and dated knowledge possessed by readers.

Second, this author is unaware of a currently existing curriculum designed to enhance people’s ability to employ contemplative leisure. Constructing such a document and empirically demonstrating its validity increases the practical value of the foundation by bolstering practitioners’ ability and confidence toward helping people find meanings and live meaningful lives.

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**Ethics statement:** I hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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