Chapter 8

Recreation Rightly Understood

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In the novel *Catch-22*, Yossarian lay in a hospital with:

"...a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them."

The park and recreation profession faces a condition not unlike that of Yossarian. In our case the perplexity stems from just falling short of knowing whether some forms of recreation are better than others. If we could prove it, we could deal with the implications. If we could disprove it, we could deal with that as well. But this just falling short of knowing all the time confuses us.

The problem is that we have yet to come up with a standard against which we can measure the goodness of one form of recreation over another. In the absence of such a standard, we have fallen victim to what philosophers call the hedonist error, the equation of the good with pleasure. Since what pleases people varies from individual to individual, we assume that what is good for people varies similarly. It is up to each person, therefore, to pursue his or her own particular pleasures. And it is up to the park and recreation profession to facilitate that process. We proceed on the faith that the outcomes from this arrangement are bound to be good.

Exacerbating the situation is our inclination to equate freedom, as in “free time,” with being able to do whatever one pleases. But to understand freedom only as an opportunity is to misunderstand its full meaning. Freedom also demands a sense of obligation to do the right thing. To think otherwise, to embrace opportunity without obligation, is to mistake self-aggrandizement for self-fulfillment.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the misguided nature of these patterns of thought and then to replace them with a different orientation to service. We do this by first correcting the hedonist error. Then we outline a standard of moral philosophy against which we might measure the goodness of one form of recreation over another. Third, we discuss the implications of such an ordering for the obligations attached to individual recreational conduct. Finally, we consider the implications for the park and recreation profession as well. By then the confusion should begin to go away.
CORRECTING THE HEDONIST ERROR

The hedonist error rests in the equation of the good with pleasure and the associated mistake of assuming that if what pleases people varies from person to person then what is good for people must vary also. From this perspective the quality of goodness is subjective and relative. But this is clearly not the case.

In the tenth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that “the pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an unworthy activity is bad.” We need only think of the pleasures accompanying many self-destructive forms of human activity to appreciate this point. Drug-taking, excessive alcohol consumption, and smoking, to name but three, are all activities deemed unworthy by society, and their associated pleasures are considered bad as well.

A similar distinction can be drawn along a line from sensate pleasures to mental pleasures; or, put differently, along a line from the subhuman to the human. Immediate sensory pleasures are subhuman in origin. They characterize the animal kingdom. Longer-term emotional, spiritual, and intellectual pleasures characterize human beings. They are not found at the subhuman level. If park and recreation professionals are to nurture that which is most human in us, there is, then, a second dimension along which we must differentiate between the good and the bad, or, as the ancient sages defined it, between true and false pleasures.

The significance of these insights comes with the realization that there must be a standard of goodness external to pleasure in and of itself. Pleasures can thus be seen as more or less desirable based on some other criteria. But what are those criteria? On what bases can the goodness of our pleasures be ordered?

A STANDARD OF GOODNESS

According to the philosopher Mortimer Adler, the goodness of a particular pleasure can be ordered by the degree to which it accompanies right desire, the seeking of what we ought to seek. If we can prove what it is we ought to seek then we will have a standard against which we can weigh the goodness or badness of particular recreational pleasures.

Adler goes on to state as the first principle of moral philosophy that we ought to seek that which is really good for us and nothing else. He uses the word “really” to emphasize the distinction between those things that only appear good to us because we want them and those things that really are good for us because we need them to grow and develop fully as human beings. The task is to sort out the wants which differ from individual to individual from the needs which are universal to all people. In so doing, we should then be able to distinguish between real goods and apparent goods, or between those things we are obliged to seek and those we are not.
What things are really good for us? While this question has been debated throughout history, there does seem to be a general consensus among philosophers, social scientists, and lay people alike that we all have fundamental health-related needs followed by needs for love, belongingness, self-esteem, and ultimately needs related to personal growth and development. This hierarchy of human needs, popularized in the work of Abraham Maslow, provides the skeleton of a standard against which the goodness of specific recreational pleasures can be measured. Things that are really good for us contribute to our physical and mental health, our sense of being loved and loving, our feelings of belonging and self-esteem and ultimately our personal growth and development. Things that work against the fulfillment of these needs are bad for us no matter how pleasurable they may be.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, human fulfillment is not predicated on an autonomous progression upward through Maslow’s need hierarchy. This common misconception, decried by Daniel Yankelovich as the “me first” philosophy, fails to recognize that there is more to the human condition than the singular self. To paraphrase the systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo, physiologically we are individual wholes, whereas sociologically we are integrated (or reciprocal) parts. And since we are endowed with consciousness, psychologically we are both wholes and parts. To the extent that we are attuned only to the individualistic parts of our selves we are not following the path to human fulfillment in its larger sense. We cannot be fulfilled in life independent of the condition of those around us. Our self-fulfillment is wrapped up in the fulfillment of others.

What this means, ultimately, is that as long as even one person goes hungry in this world, as long as even one person goes without adequate housing, health care, or educational opportunity, as long as even one person goes unloved, each and every one of us goes unfulfilled. This is so because we are each part of the other. Their plight is our plight. Their struggle is our struggle. Their overcoming is our overcoming. Self-fulfillment, then, is akin to the stars. It appears beyond our reach. Yet we are obliged to try.

There remains the nagging question of, “Who says so?” After all is said and done, does it not still boil down to a matter of opinion? No it does not for the following reason. The prescriptive judgment that we ought to seek that which is really good for us and nothing else is a self-evident truth. “It is impossible to think the opposite. It is impossible to think that we ought to seek that which is really bad for us, or that we ought not seek that which is really good for us.” If we accept the premise that the fulfillment of our fundamental human needs is really good for us, then it follows that we are all morally obliged to seek only those things which contribute to the fulfillment of those needs—regardless of any personal inclination to do otherwise.
What we are driving at here is that recreation is not the laissez-faire issue we typically conceive it to be. It is not a case of whatever moves us. It is not anything goes. Recreation rightly understood is a matter virtuous conduct.\textsuperscript{13}

ETHICAL EXTENSIONS OUTWARD

Were we to stop at this point, our thinking would not differ significantly from that of many other leisure philosophers. But what gives our argument its flavor is the way in which we conceive the "we" and the "us" in the first principle of moral philosophy, the exhortation that we ought to seek only that which is good for us and nothing else. We do not limit the "we-ness" or the "us-ness" to each individual or the human family as a whole. We extend the meaning of the terms to include all living things. Consequently, our sense of the goodness or badness of specific recreational pleasures is tied to their effect on the larger community of life. In our thinking, we are morally obliged to seek out those recreational pleasures which contribute to the physical and mental health, the sense of being lover and loving, the feelings of belonging and self-esteem, and the growth and development of life in its entirety. (Granted there is plenty of room for debate here as to whether or not other life forms have the capacity to experience "mental health," "feelings of love and belongingness," and "self-esteem." Would we still owe them the same degree of moral consideration if they did not? Perhaps not. But it can also be argued that regardless of their capacity to feel these things we ought to treat them as if they did if only as an expression of our enhanced humanity. This is the stuff of which the current environmental ethics debate is made.\textsuperscript{14,15}

Our position is an outgrowth of the thinking of Albert Schweitzer. In his book *The Teaching of Reverence for Life*, Schweitzer describes the human condition thusly: "I am life that wills to live, in the midst of life that wills to live. The mysterious fact of my will to live is that I feel a mandate to behave with sympathetic concern toward all wills to live which exist side by side with my own."\textsuperscript{16} Accordingly, "ethics consist . . . in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all wills to live the same reverence as I do to my own."\textsuperscript{17}

Widespread adoption of Schweitzer's philosophy could have a tempering effect on human conduct. It does not imply that we must "stop at everything"\textsuperscript{18} in our interactions with the world around us. Obviously the land and its creatures play an instrumental role in our continued livelihood. But it does imply that we should place increasing emphasis on economizing. Sacrificing other life to sustain our life should be carried out with providential care reflecting our symbiotic relationship with all living things. The wanton destruction of life (referred to by Aldo Leopold as the "trophy mentality") should be diminished. Harvested resources should be stretched to their limits. These things should happen because of a universal understanding that one does not waste what is
inherently valuable. Indeed, we must remember that although other life forms have economic value, they are above all else meta-economic. They have not been created by humans. It is presumptuous to assume they have been created expressly for humans. They must, therefore, be viewed primarily as ends-in-themselves. Accordingly, they must be viewed with a good deal of respect and with a feeling for their intrinsic value.

Schweitzer’s philosophy has important implications for our profession because it makes the nature of ethical recreational conduct explicit. “The essence of goodness,” he says, “is: preserve life, promote life, help life achieve its highest destiny. The essence of evil is destroy life, harm life, hamper the development of life.” Those recreational pastimes which preserve life, promote life, and help life achieve its highest destiny are morally superior to those that don’t.

From this perspective any recreational pursuits that are carried out with disregard for their effect on other people, or on other living things, are less good, even if they are highly pleasurable to the individual. This is so because what is ultimately good for the individual cannot be separated from what is ultimately good for the larger community of life.

TEACHING RIGHT DESIRE

Were we to apply this standard of goodness to the spectrum of recreation activities currently enjoyed by the American public, and were we to develop an ordering of them ranging from good to bad, what would it mean for individual recreational conduct? Would the individual be obliged to pursue only the good activities? In a moral sense the answer is clearly yes. The individual would be morally obliged to seek out those recreation activities that are really good for life in its entirety and nothing else. (This moral dictum allows an individual member of our species to act on the instrumental value of another as long as the action is based on a sense of respect for that species and does not jeopardize the existence of the species itself. The moral question would turn on the degree of wantonness accompanying any such act.)

Does it then follow that the park and recreation profession is also obliged to offer only those recreation opportunities that have been deemed morally good? The answer here is less clear. The essence of recreation has always been rooted in individual choice. To take that away, however good the rationale, would exact a heavy price. For our profession to dictate what is good and bad for people, no matter how strong the evidence, would be to deny the individual the freedom to choose. It would strike at the heart of what makes recreation special. Moreover, it would remove the question of virtue from recreation conduct. As Aristotle would remind us, only a freely chosen act can be virtuous. We cannot force people to behave virtuously.
This is not to say that the park and recreation profession has no leadership role to play. On the contrary, we believe the profession ought to embrace as its fundamental charge the enhancement of recreationists' moral development. We ought to be encouraging recreational conduct that is compatible with the dynamic structure of the whole. This does not mean that we make choices for people. It means that we do whatever we can to prod recreationists upward in their moral reasoning power, that we help equip recreationists with the cognitive and emotional tools to make responsible recreational choices, regardless of the choices themselves. It means we try our best to extinguish careless, thoughtless, irresponsible behaviors and replace them with careful, thoughtful, responsible alternatives. It means we have a duty to educate people, to teach them right desire.

What, then, does all of this mean for recreational pastimes that are highly consumptive of limited non-renewable resources? What does this mean for driving for pleasure? What does this mean for recreational pursuits that tend to be destructive of other life forms? What does this mean for off-road vehicle use of the desert? For trophy hunting? And what does this mean for recreational activities that are pursued to the detriment of other people? What does this mean for boxing? For other combative sports?

The standard of goodness must be applied to each case. To what extent does this activity contribute to the physical and mental health, the sense of being loved and loving, the feelings of belonging and self-esteem, and the growth and development of life in its entirety? To what extent does it detract? To what extent does participation in this activity promote life, preserve life, and help life achieve its highest destiny? To what extent does it destroy life, harm life, hamper the development of life? To what extent, then, is this recreation activity morally good or bad?

Involvement in those activities deemed morally good should be encouraged, indeed celebrated by park and recreation professionals. Those deemed morally bad should be shown for what they are, and offered with an explanation of their moral deficiency. The individual should then be allowed to decide.

THE BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY

To suggest that it is our professional responsibility to influence recreationists' decisionmaking processes has not come easily to us. Not only do we prize the individual's right to decide, but we also are reluctant to impose our values on others. We recognize that recreation may be one of the last bastions of choice in this increasingly regulated world. To interfere with those choices, even in the context of education, is not something we take lightly.
Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to adopt a more pro-active professional posture. Foremost among them is the fact that no matter what we do as park and recreation professionals we will have an impact on the future. As the futurist Arthur Harkins reminds us, "inaction is a form of action, a sin of omission so to speak." By simply serving up for people what they want, we are making history. Even though we are assuming a passive stance, we are still accomplices to whatever unfolds. What we are saying, in effect, is that we value the individual’s right to decide more than we value what is harmed by the decision. That's okay as long as we recognize our position for what it is. But to leave the choice entirely up to the individual so that later on, if things turn sour, we can say, "It's not our fault," is not okay. We cannot shirk responsibility for the future. The question is what do we want to be responsible for?

Wallace Stegner puts the question to recreation land managers thusly:

Do they exist to provide bargain-basement grass to favored stockmen whose grazing privileges have become all but hereditary, assumed and bought and sold along with the title to the home spread? Are they hired exterminators of wildlife? Is it their function to negotiate loss-leader coal leases with energy conglomerates, and to sell timber below cost to Louisiana Pacific? Or should they be serving the much larger public whose outdoor recreations of backpacking, camping, fishing, hunting, river running, mountain climbing, hang gliding, and, God help us, dirt biking are incompatible with clear-cut forests and overgrazed, poison-baited, and strip-mined grasslands? Or is there a still higher duty—to maintain the health and beauty of the lands they manage, protecting from everybody, including such destructive segments of the public as dirt bikers and pothunters, the watersheds and spawning streams, forests and grasslands, geological and scenic splendors, historical and archaeological remains, air and water and serene space, that once led me, in a reckless moment, to call the western public lands part of the geography of hope?²⁴

Stegner speaks of a progression of responsibility, of movement toward a higher duty. Is this the way we see our professional calling? Are we, too, committed to moving people toward more desirable states of being through our professional practices? Or, as public servants, do we interpret our role simply as one of satisfying our constituencies' wants? Much like the politician who must decide whether he or she was elected to be a mirror of public opinion or to exercise his or her own special judgment and expertise in working for the public good, we park and recreation professionals must assess our own motives and responsibilities.³¹
We must also examine what a more active professional role means in the context of a democratic political philosophy. We must understand that:

Aspiration and conventional behavior are in a continual battle. We are willing to impose coercion on ourselves to some degree... precisely because we recognize that left wholly to pursuit of our routine preferences we are not likely to do and be all that we want. A mixture of autonomy and self-imposed discipline is something we know very well.²⁶

Without the discipline we would likely be involved in a free-for-all, each of us pursuing the object of our own desire. In a world of limited resources, such freedom would lead not to the good life, but to ruin.²⁷ Under the circumstances, a concern for the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run demands that we place limits on our individual freedoms for the sake of the group. In America, of course, this is a particularly bitter pill to swallow.

We are so accustomed to living in a society that stresses individualism that we need to be reminded that 'collectivism' in a broad sense has always been the more usual lot of mankind, as well as of most other species. Most people in most societies have been born into and died in stable communities in which the subordination of the individual to the welfare of the group was taken for granted, while the aggrandizement of the individual at the expense of his fellows was simply a crime.²⁸

In a democracy, the critical concern is how we go about reaching decisions to impose limits on our individual freedoms. Due process matters greatly to us. But if we arrive at our decisions through a democratic process, what, if anything, is lost?

Some would say our individualism. But is that really the case? As Nathan Glazer reminds us:

It is clear that some part of American individualism, whether we consider it 'rampant' or 'rugged,' is under severe restraint, and there is no hope that the restraints will become anything but more severe as time goes on. But it is necessary to point out that some kinds of individualism are under restraint only because another aspect of individualism is doing quite well. This is the political aspect of individualism, in which the single individual or individuals organized in private groupings battle for what they conceive to be their rights or a better condition.²⁹

There are, Glazer continues, "Two faces of individualism: the more rugged economic and institutional individualism of the United States, hampered and hobbled by a new kind of individualism devoted to self-realization, to the protection for the environment, (etc.)."³⁰
Thus, there is nothing inherently wrong with our profession drawing on its body of knowledge to nudge people toward a more desirable future. Indeed, to choose not to act in the light of our knowledge is reprehensible. In the final analysis, it is not a matter of whether or not we should become involved. It is a matter of what form our involvement should take.

We park and recreation professionals must decide whether our mission is to serve popular tastes for recreation or to elevate them.24 The three of us are committed to elevation. The challenge is to cultivate a growing awareness that our human fulfillment is inextricably intertwined with the fulfillment of this larger organism that is the Earth itself. Such awareness is marked by ethical extensions outward from ourselves to other people, to the land and its creatures. To borrow once more from Aldo Leopold, our orientation to service should be to help recreationists:

"... examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is ... (personally) expedient. A thing is right when it intends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the ... community (of life). It is wrong when it tends otherwise."25

REFERENCES

31. Sax, p. 61.