

Why We Need a Vacation

BY KARL AHO

When done well, personal and family vacations can be a corrective to both our overweening busyness and our fear of creaturely dependency. Moreover, Søren Kierkegaard suggests, they can be a joyful welcome of our grace-filled relationship with God.

At first glance, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) may seem like an unlikely advocate for personal and family vacationing. After all, this Christian philosopher and theologian did not marry and start his own family, and he rarely journeyed away from his native Copenhagen, Denmark. Despite these biographical disadvantages, however, Kierkegaard's status as a nineteenth-century thinker in the classical tradition of virtue ethics gives him a singular perspective on vacationing. That's because we tend to associate that tradition with ancient writers like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, or with medieval thinkers like Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, and we doubt that they have much to say about vacationing. By contrast, Kierkegaard reflects on work and leisure from a modern perspective, and so he engages practices like taking personal and family vacations that were largely foreign to those earlier authors.

Kierkegaard usually thinks about work and leisure from the perspective of "the common man" – that is, the sad rural and urban Danes rather than his own fairly well-off middle class.¹ The prosperous Copenhagen of his day offered significant new opportunities for personal and family leisure: for example, Tivoli, one of the oldest amusement parks in the world, opened there in 1843, the same year in which Kierkegaard began to publish. The park plays a critical role in his discussion of human finitude in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). So, Kierkegaard was well aware of the emergence of the middle class, the leisure opportunities that its wealth provided, and some of the challenges that the new modes of vacationing posed for

both lower- and middle-class families.

I will draw insights into the practice of taking vacations from three facets of Kierkegaard's thinking. First, his warning about the vice of busyness reminds us not only of how important vacations are, but of how easily they can become just another busy distraction from the most significant relationships in our lives. His account of a person worrying about whether to visit Tivoli can help us accept our need for vacations. Finally, his view of the sufficiency of grace will help us rejoice in life with family and friends, and by extension in the world we experience with them on vacation.

AVOIDING THE VICE OF BUSYNESS

Sometimes our moral vocabulary really goes wanting. The moral landscape surrounding work is a good case in point. For example, Kierkegaard admits we do not have a name for the virtue that encompasses being rightly related to our work. This unnamed virtue includes habitual patterns of understanding the meaning of our work, caring for the work we do, having the right feelings about it, and doing it for the proper reasons, in the best ways, at the appropriate times, and so on. In other words, this virtue represents the right way to relate to our work.

The virtue is poised between two tempting vices we must avoid. About one of these – the vice of deficiency – we are very worried, and so we have a name for it: we call it “sloth” when we do not do enough work, or do not care enough about the work we do, and so on. But about the vice at the other extreme – the vice of excess – we speak much less often. Kierkegaard calls this vice “busyness,” and cautioning us against it is one of his central tasks.

In his first published work, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1843), Kierkegaard showcases two characters who explain, through short writings, how they understand life. One character observes,

The most ludicrous of all ludicrous things, it seems to me, is to be busy in the world, to be a man who is brisk at his meals and brisk at his work.... What, after all, do these busy bustlers achieve? Are they not just like the woman who, in a flurry because the house was on fire, rescued the fire-tongs?²

What more important thing in life are these hurried people missing? Kierkegaard would say their daily bustling distracts them from our common human calling: to become who we are, to grow into the loving, productive selves that God intends for us to be. For Kierkegaard, this selfhood is both a gift and a task – something we receive from God and others, and something we achieve through our attentiveness to it as a project. When we are lazy or slothful, we do not pursue this calling because it seems difficult. When we are consumed by busyness, we pursue too many other, less important things instead. In other words, when we become preoccupied with mundane tasks, we fail to occupy our lives with what is truly important, which

Kierkegaard elsewhere calls “the idea for which I can live or die.”³

We may be inadvertently sidetracked by this sort of busyness due to the pressure of events, but sometimes we thoroughly intend and plan to be busily distracted. A clever example of such planning appears in the essay “Rotation of Crops” later in *Either/Or*. The character-author of this text, the Aesthete, claims to have developed a sure-fire method for avoiding boredom: he focuses only on the enjoyable aspects of each situation. For example, when attending a lecture that has become too boring, he makes a game of watching the beads of sweat that are dripping down the lecturer’s face. Today we have a new word for such gamesmanship: we call it “multi-tasking.” Instead of refocusing our attention on the lecture, we choose to do something else (just as trivial, perhaps, as cataloging curious features of the speaker).

The Aesthete says he is ‘rotating his crops’ by constantly shifting his attention to whatever does not bore him. We might think that this rotation method is great – after all, who wants to focus on a boring lecture? But as the essay continues, we glimpse some disturbing consequences of this stratagem. For example, the Aesthete warns us against committing to friendship or marriage, because caring too strongly about individual persons entails paying attention to them even when, like the lecture, their lives become unexciting or difficult to follow. There will be many times, he predicts, that we will prefer to be preoccupied with other persons or activities, that we will enjoy being too busy for our friends or spouses. We will want the freedom to ‘rotate our crops.’

Of course, Kierkegaard fully expects us to see through the Aesthete’s perspective because we value the great goods of friendship and marriage. Through this episode, Kierkegaard is warning us away from the vice of busyness for this reason: being overly busy with our own pleasure and concerns makes us less open to and caring towards the people around us, especially those close friends and family members with whom we share life.

Now one insight we might draw from Kierkegaard’s counsel is that if we find ourselves becoming too busily preoccupied with work, we should take a vacation. That’s probably true. But let’s think harder about what we do on that vacation: busy people tend to fill their leisure with distracting busyness too. I confess that I struggle with doing too much during vacations: I want to see too many sights or visit too many people. That is a recipe for

For Kierkegaard, selfhood is a gift and a task—something we receive from God and others, and something we achieve through our attentiveness to it as a project. When we are consumed by busyness, we pursue other, less important things instead.

avoiding true, lasting connections with my fellow travelers, the places we go, and the new people we meet there. Furthermore, when my wife tries to curb my tendency toward busyness on vacation, I sometimes drift into the opposite extreme of not trying hard enough to connect with family and friends or to enjoy our time traveling together. If we really hear what Kierkegaard is saying, we will try to avoid distracting busyness during our vacations. It would be spiritually foolish to avoid busyness at work only to succumb to it while we are at leisure.

WISELY WELCOMING OUR DEPENDENCE ON DIVERSIONS

Kierkegaard addresses the modern vacation most directly through his discussion of Tivoli in his curiously titled work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. This title makes a joke on several levels, and deciphering it helps us understand Kierkegaard's approach to our topic.

Of course, a postscript is usually just a short note at the end of a letter or a book, but Kierkegaard's *Postscript* is several times longer than the *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) that came before. Furthermore, in no sense is the *Postscript* "concluding": it is not the last book Kierkegaard wrote (as he originally planned for it to be), nor does it answer the questions posed in or tie up the loose ends left dangling in the *Philosophical Fragments*. These incongruities in the title – that *Postscript* is actually a very big book and not a conclusion – are just two indications of the humorous yet serious authorial voice that Kierkegaard adopts throughout the work. He uses this voice to de-emphasize his authority as its writer, and thus to force his readers to pursue the fundamental truths – namely, the ones that a person might live or die for – as individuals.

Kierkegaard calls the *Postscript* "unscientific" to draw attention to the difference between scientific and unscientific approaches to fundamental truths. From a "scientific" – that is, a systematic and purely objective – perspective, the primary goal of inquiry is to determine what is true. By contrast, the central issue of the *Postscript* is to establish the individual's relationship to particular fundamentally important truths.⁴ This distinction is not meant to undermine the value of scientific inquiry, but to highlight the individual response required to our common human calling. Kierkegaard's approach is "unscientific" insofar as he insists each individual must come to a life decision about really fundamental truths.⁵ His emphasis here on truth being "subjective" for each individual is not, however, a kind of relativism. "Kierkegaard's claim that truth is subjectivity," M. G. Piety explains, "means no more than that when 'truth' is prescriptive of an individual's existence, the substance of the prescription ought to be expressed in that existence."⁶ In other words, the truths that are most significant for human beings are like medical prescriptions for a deathly ill patient: they should not just be recognized or acknowledged, but immediately and consistently reflected in the patient's life. The fundamental truths that Kierke-

gaard has in mind are religious – not merely the truth of Christianity, but also our relationship to that truth.

Kierkegaard uses Tivoli to illustrate how truths might be reflected in a person's life. His example is of a rather self-sufficient, prosperous man who has finally come to admit (as an objective, scientific fact) that diversions are necessary for human life, but is unsure whether he should pursue on this particular day the pleasant distractions that Tivoli offers. First, the man acknowledges that his needful desire for diversion is not a mere momentary inclination. But recognizing his own neediness leads him to experience "the human irritability that really feels the sting of being dependent in this way."⁷ We might describe this man as stung by a certain fear of traveling. He is simultaneously irritated about really needing a vacation, and afraid that taking this particular trip to the park rather than going to work will display his shameful human finitude to himself and others.

Now the more faithful way to respond to this irritability would be to give way to one's need for diversions and acknowledge one's dependence on them – and on the God who created human beings with such needs and who makes such diversions available.⁸ A faithful person, T. F. Morris imagines, might say, "I can still enjoy [Tivoli] as I desire it on the religious grounds of expressing to God that I have a human need to desire diversion."⁹ So, the faithful person could visit Tivoli and relish its diversions not because visiting the amusement park is a way to cultivate one's relationship with God, but because "it is the relationship with God that itself

bids the religious person to seek elsewhere for a moment."¹⁰ For Kierkegaard, our human need for diversion is nothing to be ashamed of, because it expresses how we all stand equally in need of God. He explains, "he who actually was a religious person of such a kind that he could decide before God to go out to the amusement park will not be put to shame alongside any imperial highness."¹¹

Kierkegaard depicts a self-sufficient, prosperous man as stung by a certain fear of traveling. He is irritated about needing a vacation, and afraid this particular trip to the park will display his shameful human finitude to himself and others.

Kierkegaard expects us, his readers, to see ourselves in the character of the man deciding to visit Tivoli, and to judge for ourselves whether visiting the park is permissible. So, if diversions are necessary at some times but not every time, how are we to know when we should take a personal or family vacation? Like the man contemplating Tivoli, we might ask ourselves whether we, our friends, and family members really need a vacation, or

merely have a passing inclination for its diversions. This might seem like excessive reserve on Kierkegaard's part, especially if it rules out every spur-of-the-moment vacation. However, I think Kierkegaard's point is that we should evaluate potential vacations according to the real needs and lasting desires of all concerned, rather than their whims or inclinations. Thus if a spur-of-the-moment vacation promises to satisfy deep needs and desires, we should feel confident to take just such a vacation. My wife and I were fortunate to take this sort of trip last summer. Garth Brooks — her favorite musician since childhood — was playing a concert in Houston (which satisfied her desires), the Astros were playing the Yankees (which satisfied mine), and we were both enchanted by touring NASA's Johnson Space Center. By choosing a vacation which spoke to each of our desires, we were able to enjoy a better trip than we would have if we had only gone to the concert or the ballpark, or had only followed a momentary whim to get out of town and avoid some less pleasant duties at home.

We can draw another lesson from Kierkegaard's discussion of the independent man contemplating a trip to Tivoli: we should learn to welcome our vacations as expressions of our human dependence on God. We really want to be self-sufficient and in control of our lives. For this reason, overcoming our irritability about being dependent on God is easier described than done. Perhaps that is why we imagine that acknowledging our need for God will require a huge struggle culminating in some great feat, personal heroism, or religious experience. For Kierkegaard, however, acknowledging our human dependence is an action that anyone can do on a daily basis and through simple means. Yes, it is a significant deal, for "The highest His Imperial Highness is able to do, however, is to make his decision before God," he explains, but "the acting can be done...fully as well when the person acting is a very simple person and the feat is to go out to the amusement park."¹²

Thus for Kierkegaard, acknowledging our dependence and need for diversions is difficult not because it requires heroism, but because acknowledging our dependence can occur even in the context of the humble vacation. Perhaps this is why he elsewhere criticizes those whose travels emphasize the destination rather than the needs and desires of those traveling:

Generally, people travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, colorful birds, freakish fish, preposterous races of mankind; they indulge in the brutish stupor that gawks at life and thinks it has seen something. That does not occupy me.¹³

Having considered Kierkegaard's discussion of visiting the amusement park, we can understand why he is not occupied by this sort of grand-sight-seeing, world travel. Such travel objectively serves as a splendid diversion, but fails in the more important inward movement of acknowledging one's dependence.

EXPERIENCING THE JOY OF VACATIONING

While William Shakespeare's character Hamlet clearly has earned the title "the melancholy Dane," the label is sometimes applied to Søren Kierkegaard as well.¹⁴ And we might think that Kierkegaard is, on this topic, deserving of this dubious title if he had said no more about vacationing than this: when done well, vacations can be a corrective to our overweening busyness and our fear of creaturely dependency. These features may show why vacationing is spiritually *important* for creatures like us, but it hardly explains why it is *fun*.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard does give us a reason to think vacations can be filled with joy. This reason is developed in *Practice in Christianity* (1850) in the context of the theme of equality before God. Humans are equal before God in the sense that divine grace is offered to every imperfect person—"that is, to everyone." Beyond worthily accepting God's grace, nothing further is required of us for salvation. And if God does have a special calling for anyone to follow as an individual, God will surely communicate it to the person.

The sufficiency of God's grace frees us and empowers us to pursue relationships besides our relationship with God. Since we need not earn our salvation, Kierkegaard writes, "as for the rest, let him do his work and rejoice in it, love his wife and rejoice in her, joyfully bring up his children, love his fellow beings, and rejoice in life."¹⁵ When we accept God's gracious welcome,

the great pressure to make ourselves happy by ourselves is removed. Relieved of this onerous chore, we can finally relax and rejoice in the world in general, and in the love of friends and family in particular. Kierkegaard is not always so sanguine about the possibilities of a joyful family life. But at least in this passage, he thinks we may enjoy such deeply personal relationships because of our grace-filled relationship with God.

When we accept God's gracious welcome, the pressure to make ourselves happy by ourselves is removed. Relieved of this onerous chore, we can relax and rejoice in the world in general, and in the love of friends and family in particular.

Thus, for Kierkegaard, we should vacation with family and friends not only because vacations provide a counterbalance to the busyness of our lives and because our human finitude requires us to pursue diversions, but because our God-relationship frees us to enjoy God's good creation with them. To rejoice in our families and friends and, through their companionship, in the wonders of creation is a deep gladness that God intends for us.

NOTES

1 Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 88-89.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I*, Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume III, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 25.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper, 1958), 44.

4 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, Volume I*, Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume XII.I, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.

5 In fact, Kierkegaard titles one of his later books *Judge for Yourself!*

6 M. G. Piety, "The Epistemology of the *Postscript*," in *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, edited by Rick Anthony Furtak (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190-202, here citing 201.

7 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 496.

8 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 494-497.

9 T. F. Morris, "Kierkegaard on Taking an Outing to Deer Park," *The Heythrop Journal*, 48:3 (May 2007), 371-383, here citing 380.

10 Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 497.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume VI, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 38.

14 Thus, one of the early English studies of the philosopher, by H. V. Martin, was ominously titled *Kierkegaard: The Melancholy Dane*, Philosophers' Library Series, 3 (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1950).

15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume XX, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 67.

**KARL AHO**

is a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy at Baylor University.