

Art's Claim on Resources: Sabbath Ethics as a Framework for Value

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In a world burdened with economic strain and widespread hunger, does a “luxury” like art deserve our time, energy, and materials? While questions of relative worth are complex, they become doubly important when resources are under pressure. For reasons we will investigate, art in particular occupies a singular position among activities to which resources could be devoted. As a consequence of our frequent bewilderment about its role, art is continually on the defensive, called upon time and again to justify its existence. Art may be enjoyable—even fruitful for Christian life and worship, as a growing number of theologians have argued¹—but just how worthwhile is it when resources are desperately needed to meet basic needs for survival?

To defend art's value through its usefulness, many have shown how it can plead the cause of the suffering and poor, provide an income for needy artisans, or revitalize downtrodden communities.² In most instances when the role of art is considered side by side with the reality of poverty, the tendency is to position art as a direct part of the solution.

This article takes a different launching point, considering the essence of art as something *other* than its effectiveness in bringing about certain results. The value of art must be evaluated on the basis of its nature *as art*, independent of its ability to address poverty directly. I aim to suggest a framework Christians might use for discerning when to devote resources to the arts and when to devote resources directly to meeting the needs of the poor. I do not begin by assuming that the existence of poverty and suffering are results of the Fall and asking what art can do about it. Instead, I take the lead of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologians of the nineteenth century and begin at creation. To what end were human beings created, and for what purposes were they given resources to use?

Through this approach, I argue that a theology of the Sabbath serves as the best foundation for understanding the role of art among humans' created purposes. Rooting art in a theology of the Sabbath on the basis of God's intent for humans at creation will also provide a key to art's role in light of the Fall, and therefore also its place in the face of economic pressures.

¹ While Catholic and Orthodox theology had maintained a steady interest in aesthetics, evangelical theology (my tradition) had undergone a period of withdrawal from mainstream culture. In the 1970's, scholars such as Calvin Seerveld, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Francis Schaeffer, and Hans Rookmaaker led the evangelical re-entry into engagement with culture through the arts.

² Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto, 1979), and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), are examples of the attitude that art is done to raise awareness and empathy toward those who suffer. Fair trade enterprises such as Ten Thousand Villages make art itself a commodity that can provide for needy artisans. Examples of art initiatives to improve the living conditions of struggling communities include Tricia Tunstall, *Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) and the work of Free Street Theater in Chicago.

Creation Commandments

Abraham Kuyper, his nineteenth century successors, and a number of recent inheritors of their legacy have drawn attention to the legitimacy and importance of considering humans' prelapsarian purpose. Rather than beginning strictly with the assumption that the world is fallen, they argue that there is great value in devoting attention to the world as God made it to be. While it will likely never be determined conclusively just *what* is a good vestige of God's creational intent, and what is instead a distortion resulting from the Fall,³ the Kuyperians' commitment to a belief in God's faithfulness expressed in "common grace" nevertheless opens up avenues for clarity in ethics. One result is that discussions of the Christian life can still be based on a theology of creation instead of only a theology of redemption from sin. This is because there remains some resemblance between the world as it was created, the world now fallen, and, ultimately, the world as it *ought* to be today.

A further result of the Neo-Calvinists' emphasis on creation is the notion that all creatures, and not only Christian believers, have purposes for which they were created. All human activity, beyond those activities directly related to Jesus's commission to "make disciples," can be evaluated in terms of its place within God's intent for human life. "General calling" is the name for all activities in which human beings—believers and non-believers alike—are intended to take part. Abraham Kuyper lists a set of "spheres" which include all aspects of creation, such as family life, social life, science, and thought itself. Each of these spheres, he says, has its own particular laws given by God, and all of creation must conform to the laws of each sphere.⁴ Herman Dooyeweerd later arranges the activities of life into a complex taxonomy that spans from biological functions all the way up to the activities of culture and government.⁵

John G. Stackhouse, Jr. has helpfully distinguished between specific scriptural commands that apply to all people by virtue of their creation in God's image—which correspond to general calling—and those that apply specifically to followers of Jesus in light of the Fall. He provides the label "creation commandments" for the former and "redemption commandments" for the latter. The "creation commandments" he identifies are 1) the "cultural mandate" to care for and cultivate the earth as its gardeners, and 2) the "great commandments" to love God and neighbor.⁶

The category of "redemption commandments," in contrast, refers to things that fall under the older classification of "particular calling." In the wake of the Fall and Jesus's subsequent inauguration of the Church, there are certain injunctions which apply only at this point in salvation history as part of Jesus's particular offer of redemption. They act as complements to the creation commandments. For example, the commandment to love applies not only to loving God, but also Jesus, and not only our neighbors, but particularly one another within the Church.

³ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Toward a Theology of the Arts* (New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 81.

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James E. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 467.

⁵ Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 112.

⁶ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 205-216.

Similarly, not only must we work to cultivate and care for the earth and human culture, but we must also work to cultivate disciples of Jesus.⁷ Rookmaaker, in the same vein, adds that the cultural mandate for Christians now includes a strong injunction to act as “preservatives” of culture and creation against the effects of the Fall, and that we are not simply free to engage always in constructive work.⁸

Sabbath among the Creation Commandments

Neither the nineteenth century Dutch Reformed theologians nor more recent writers on vocation such as Stackhouse feature the command to observe the Sabbath as one of the central commandments—either creation or redemption—of the human vocation in general or the Christian vocation in particular. “Vocation” is often thought of as the set of activities which people were created to *do*, and thus it is natural that in the context of vocation, these thinkers should choose not to give pride of place to humans’ calling to *stop doing*. This does not mean that Sabbath values are completely neglected by thinkers in this tradition; on the contrary, it is precisely the framework of creation and redemption commandments that paves the way for the Sabbath to be rightly understood. Therefore, I suggest that in order for the most helpful framework of creation and redemption commandments to be complete—and particularly for it to allow us to examine adequately the place of the arts—observance of Sabbath must rise to a more prominent place in the ways we speak of human calling.

The callings to work and to rest both issue from God’s own display of love through creation. God created the universe, we must not forget, freely and under no constraint, with no ulterior motives and not as a means to some other end. The earth was created purely for God’s delight and so that God’s creatures might share in his delight as an overflow of love.⁹ Karl Barth explains how God’s free act of creation speaks to the value God places on what is created:

What was and is the will of God in doing this? We may reply that He does not will to be alone in His glory; that He desires something else besides Him. But this answer cannot mean that God either willed and did it for no purpose, or that He did so to satisfy a need.... There remains only the recollection that God is the One who is free in His love. In this case we can understand the positing of this reality—which otherwise is incomprehensible—only as the work of His love. ... Love wills to love.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 218.

⁸ Hans R. Rookmaaker, *The Creative Gift: Essays on Art and the Christian Life* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1981), 113-114.

⁹ According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “the chief end of man” is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Creation is “all very good” (Questions 1 and 9). The Roman Catholic Catechism tell us, “God had no other reason for creating than his love and goodness,” and God created “not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it” (Article 293).

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 150.

A conclusion we may draw from this truth is that the goodness of creation itself, and of the human vocation within it, is rooted in something deeper than efficacy. God's very act of creation anticipates the significance of the Sabbath, and by ceasing after creation to rest and enjoy what he made, God again signals the intrinsic goodness of creation. God vested creation itself with value simply by loving it into being, and on the seventh day of creation, God again acknowledged creation's value by ceasing activity simply to regard and enjoy it.

God finally confirms that a day of rest is part of his intent for human life when the command to observe Sabbath appears in the Law of Moses. On what basis is this command given? Unsurprisingly, it is on the basis of God's example *at creation*: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."¹¹ Sabbath-keeping is thus a "creation commandment," and it is not restricted to Christian believers.

The command to observe the Sabbath should be included among the creation commandments because it provides a component of the ethical framework for human life that is no less important than the active commandments. Humans *are* created for activity—work is, after all, not a curse but a blessing—but we are not created *only* to have an active role. Just as we are called to exert some constructive control over creation, participating as "co-creators," there is also a time when we are specifically called to cease and regard what is given. Kuyper's successor Herman Bavinck points toward this insight:

Man is not a machine which unconsciously moves on; he does not turn about in a treadmill with an unchangeable monotony. In his work too man is man, the image of God, a thinking, willing, acting being who seeks to create something, and who in the end looks back upon the work of his hands with approbation. As it does for God Himself, man's work ends in resting, enjoyment, pleasure.¹²

Human vocation, like creation itself, transcends instrumentality. Therefore, we have the best insight into our lives' callings when we understand the Sabbath to occupy a central place as a "creation commandment."

Blessing though it is, a commitment to cease from work requires great faith for two reasons, both of which have economic implications. First, to devote a Sabbath to God means that one is choosing to be less productive than one could. The Old Testament provides numerous instances in which observing the Sabbath means self-limitation. In Exodus 16, the people are commanded not to gather manna on the Sabbath as a sign of their trust in God's provision. In Numbers 15, a man who gathered wood on the Sabbath is put to death. Those years during the exile, while the land lay empty, are considered the years of Sabbath rest which the land had been denied, cultivated to the very height of productivity under the Israelites' care. The theme of limited efficiency is reinforced in God's commands to refrain from picking up the fallen grain during harvest: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick

¹¹ Ex. 20:11, NIV.

¹² Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 216.

up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.”¹³

In his famous work, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel points out that becoming even more productive after a rest is not the motive in view here.¹⁴ In order to cease working for a day, a person must trust that God, and not one's own work or ingenuity, is ultimately the one who secures life. Another rabbi explains:

On the Sabbath...I must acknowledge God the Creator by resting from my acquisitiveness, because I have no real title to anything. The Sabbath is the day that fully shows God as creator. In it we add nothing to what he has done. For the first time in human history the Sabbath brought a cessation from human acquisitiveness.¹⁵

The second way in which observing Sabbath demands great faith is by requiring a person to stop working before a task is finished. Just as God rested after the six days of creation, we know instinctively that the concept of work points toward completion and rest:¹⁶ “The final purpose of man lay in the eternal blessedness, in the glorification of God in heaven and earth. But in order to arrive at this end man first had to fulfill his task on earth. In order to enter into the rest of God he first had to finish God's work.”¹⁷ But human work has never yet been totally finished. To observe the Sabbath points us forward to the hope of completion, while for now it requires great faith to rest *as if* our work is done. It is for this reason that Sabbath observance is an eschatological practice, reminding us that the hope we have of entering into God's rest is yet to come: “Each Sabbath is but an example and foretaste of it and at the same time also a prophecy and a guarantee of that rest (Heb. 4:9).”¹⁸ Heschel, writing for Jews in the decade after World War II, draws heavily on this eschatological orientation of Sabbath observance, calling the Sabbath “the example of eternity.”¹⁹

Zion is in ruins, Jerusalem lies in the dust. All week there is only hope of redemption. But when the Sabbath is entering the world, man is touched by a moment of actual

¹³ Lev. 19:9-10.

¹⁴ Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1951), 14.

¹⁵ Frank E. Gaebelien, “Old Testament Foundations for Living More Simply,” in *Living More Simply: Biblical Principles and Practical Models*, ed. Ronald Sider (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 32. This statement is by Dr. Joshua O. Haberman, then senior rabbi of the Washington Hebrew Congregation.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 216. Bavinck comments that any call to work implies the hope that a task will be completed, an object reached.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 216-17.

¹⁹ Heschel, *Sabbath*, 75.

redemption: as if for a moment the spirit of the Messiah moved over the face of the earth.²⁰

In his home, the glory of “the world to come” was put into practice on the Sabbath by refraining even from speaking of the many injustices waiting to be put right. They were to rest *as if* all were already well.²¹

Despite these stark contrasts between Sabbath rest and the demands of work, the call to rest does not in fact conflict with the call to work. In fact, Sabbath is a necessary counterpart to the work days, because it is the time of ceasing work that accords meaning and direction to work itself. In it we look back to the creation of the world and forward to its consummation, and we live by faith in the meantime. When we stop and regard who God is and who we are in relation to God, the work we do during the majority of our time is oriented and given meaning. Just as it is our knowledge of God through worship that sets the agenda for our service to God, it is this time we take to rest in God, in our relationships, and in the world around us that sets the agenda for all work we will do:

In the language of the Bible the world was brought into being in the six days of creation, yet its survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day. Great are the laws that govern the processes of nature. Yet without holiness there would be neither greatness nor nature.²²

Coming to Terms for Art

So far, nothing has been said about the place of art in all of this. Where does it fit among the purposes for which humans were created, if at all?

In order to approach this question, it will first be necessary to take a moment to explore what art is at its essence. The search for a definition of “art” fell out of fashion in the early 20th century, as it had already taken so many forms by that point that it began to seem as though no common thread could be found. In this article, however, I will aim to establish a broad working definition of art. A brief survey of the wide-ranging history of aesthetics reveals a set of shared characteristics that not only *may* be present in art, but in fact are present in *all* art. This approach to defining art on the basis of a chronology of aesthetics is similar to that undertaken by leading art critic and theorist Arthur Danto in his recent book, *What Art Is*. At its core, this tactic, used by both Danto and the present project, relies on the conviction that a conglomerate definition of art, rather than having been rendered impossible by diversity across time, has gained in both richness and accuracy. In Danto’s words, “It is as though the history of art, after centuries of progress, finally began to disclose its nature.”²³

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

²¹ This memory is recounted by Susannah Heschel, Heschel’s daughter, in her 2005 introduction to the book (*Sabbath*, xiv).

²² Heschel, *Sabbath*, 76.

²³ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 23.

The most ancient form of art in virtually every culture is craft.²⁴ Craft has been valued primarily for its ability to serve a useful purpose, and the quality of the work is judged by how well it does so. The purpose it serves can range from something as basic as containing a liquid without leaking, as in the case of a bowl, to developing good character in the citizens of a state, as in the case of a theater piece for the ancient Greeks. In the ancient world, even when the pottery was decorative or the drama expressive, the work occupied the same economic niche as other types of manufacture. The artist took pride in his work for the same reasons for which any good craftsman might value his work.

Art valued primarily as “craft” remains an important segment of the art world today, and it highlights a few characteristics that apply to all art. First, like craft, art is human work. Second, art must conform to standards of excellence, depending on its goals. For most art, the goals are related strictly to perception rather than to some practical purpose.²⁵ On the other hand, viewing art as “craft” also makes us aware of the ways in which art differs from basic manufacture. Why would a hand-crafted bowl be considered “art” when a plastic, factory manufactured bowl almost certainly would not be? The answer seems to be in the fact that the work of the careful craftsman, though useful, is not merely the most efficient way to accomplish the task. The work of craft goes beyond the basic requirements of the task and makes a statement about the basic value of human experience.²⁶

Between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE around the Mediterranean, art began to appear that was prized mainly for its value as representation. The quality of the work was determined by the degree to which it achieved “illusionistic verisimilitude” to whatever object it was meant to represent.²⁷ Representational art, while not the whole of what art can be, reveals another important aspect that *is* true of all art, which Nicholas Wolterstorff calls “cross-modal resonance.”²⁸ A creation in one medium can refer—or, as Calvin Seerveld might say, “allude”—to something we ordinarily experience in another mode.²⁹ This is what happens when someone hears music and intuitively links the sounds to colors. Wolterstorff argues that all art, by extension, takes advantage of this phenomenon of synesthesia. Color and form can be arranged

²⁴ The following survey of art history depends on Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), and Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2005).

²⁵ The word “aesthetic” itself means “related to sense perception,” both in its etymology and in its more basic sense in contemporary usage.

²⁶ Paul Wingert points out that even the most primitive craft gave attention to decoration, adding a sense of worth to the ordinary tasks (*Primitive Art: Its Traditions and Styles* [New York: New American Library, 1962]).

²⁷ Osborne, 56.

²⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 96-110.

²⁹ Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 127-128. It is worth pointing out that, while Seerveld and Wolterstorff differed widely in their acceptance of “the institution of high art”—Seerveld praising and Wolterstorff rejecting it—both developed similar, contemporaneous theories of how art interacts with perception. It is this common thread that concerns us here.

in a way such that they directly represent an object or event, always offering an interpretation. Elsewhere, the elements of art allude to more abstract parts of life, such as tension and resolution or musical dynamics. Bodily movement can be choreographed in such a way that it is “fitting” as an allusive parallel to emotion. All art, it seems, makes use of such cross-modal resonances to create interpretive models of parts of reality. This process of using the elements of one mode to conjure up an imaginative allusion to some reality in another mode, like using contemporary language to call to mind other worlds in fantasy novels, Wolterstorff calls “world-projecting.”³⁰

The medieval imagination reveals an even more profound way in which cross-modal resonance can operate. Harold Osborne calls the particular form of all-encompassing representation that was prevalent in the Middle Ages “metaphysical idealism.” Not only could a particular physical object or historical event be represented, but a coherent interpretive model could be created that claimed to portray the harmony of the cosmos itself. While an ancient Greek painting might compose an internally coherent model of a particular scene, the Middle Ages saw an era in history in which the majority of society took for granted one internally coherent theological model of the entire universe. Paintings themselves were needed for nothing more than religious instruction; theology itself did the work of aesthetic world-projecting. C.S. Lewis proposes “not only that this Model of the Universe is a supreme Medieval work of art but that it is in a sense the central work, that in which most particular works were embedded, to which they constantly referred, from which they drew a great deal of their strength.”³¹ Music, architecture, liturgy, and even the hierarchy of the Church all alluded to this overarching model of the cosmos, all echoing the well-ordered music of the spheres.

The metaphysical idealism of the Middle Ages clearly illuminates what Wolterstorff means by the action of “world-projecting,” though world-projecting is not exclusive to metaphysical idealism or even representational art. Wittingly or not, according to this theory, all art creates an interpretive model of some sliver of reality, using color, movement, form, sound, and so forth to weave a world of its own through cross-modal resonances. Aesthetic theology and art of the Middle Ages happened to provide a comprehensive model of the cosmos, but art of all kinds—from advertising to furniture—presents a vision of reality. Reconciling different parts aesthetically within the same work creates a vision of harmony, suggesting one way in which we can understand the world—or part of the world—to cohere. Various techniques in different genres exist which manage to bring even what is ugly or senseless into a meaningful model of reality. The narrative arc so prevalent in storytelling, metrical “waves” that incorporate dissonance into an overarching harmony in music, and the practice of “reincorporating” dropped

³⁰ Ibid., 96-110.

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 12.

themes in theatrical improvisation are various devices art uses to create an imagined world that even includes a place for the deep wrongs of the world.³²

The shift toward Romanticism revealed new capacities of art. In the wake of the Reformation, despite doubt that art could capture eternal theological truths, European culture had nonetheless discovered that art could deal with invisible ideas rather than simply represent physical things.³³ In place of eternal religious truth, what eventually became the focus of art was the artist's own emotions. Art became known as a language for emotional communication or expression, an idea that remains prevalent today. While certainly not encompassing all of art, the view of art as emotional language again revealed the cross-modal allusive power of art, pushing it into the new territory of the individual's emotional life.

A trademark of the Romantic era's philosophy of art is the notion that art must be original creation. The artist is seen not as an ordinary craftsman, simply doing his or her job, but as a demigod creating new worlds with an almost divine power. While this movement, which has also permanently impacted the world of art, certainly exaggerates the role of the artist, it also reveals a valuable aspect of the artist's work. The artist is in fact doing more than simply recreating what is old or rearranging pre-existing things. The artist is participating in the "cultural mandate," one of the creation commandments. Dooyeweerd calls all human work to participate with God in the ongoing work of creation the "opening" of creation, and Rookmaaker uses this concept as the basis for the artist's calling.³⁴ Indeed, art includes the essential human work of drawing out creation's latent possibilities into new forms that bring glory to God.

The next form art took—that we will consider here, at any rate—is that of the naked object. The twentieth century, particularly in the wake of the World Wars, saw a wave of skepticism surrounding ultimate meaning. The Reformation had already weakened the link between the perceptible, physical world and faith; the Enlightenment had introduced doubt regarding whether the perceptible world even was the way it was perceived; Darwin's *Origin of Species* removed the Romantic hope that some transcendent meaning could be preserved in nature; and Nietzsche had reduced "art" to humanity's forceful imposition of self on the world.³⁵ By the middle of the twentieth century, after the devastation of war had rewarded this Nietzschean "will to power" with profound disillusionment, it seemed as if the only thing to which art could still presume was the simple act of singling out an object for consideration by

³² See, for instance, J.R.R. Tolkien's description of the narrative device he calls "eu-catastrophe" ("On Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966]). Jeremy Begbie describes the eschatological hope of metrical "waves" in *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 99-110. Begbie also speaks of music as an art form that has a unique capability to portray and enact redemption in time in *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 219-225. Samuel Wells describes improvisational "reincorporation" in, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 147-53.

³³ Roger Lundin describes this version of the shift in "The Beauty of Belief," in Treier, 184-208; Edward T. Oakes, S.J. recounts the story as Balthasar interprets it in "The Apologetics of Beauty," in Treier, 211-220.

³⁴ Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 114.

³⁵ Lundin, "Beauty of Belief," 201-204.

calling it “art.” There remained little attempt to link physical and spiritual realities, to assign meaning, to seek out beauty, to express emotion, or even to honor a subject sincerely by representing it. The artist merely selected an object and asked, “Have you seen this?” or “What do you make of it?” What could be shared between the artist and her viewers was no longer a system of meaning, a sincere emotion, or an interpretation of reality, but only a moment of perception.

As Hans K ung tells us, Theodore Adorno concluded that while art continued to speak meaningfully, the only meaning it could articulate was meaninglessness itself. Why might this be the case? When set apart and called “art,” an object asks to be regarded. It promises to reward perception, we expect, with an allusion to something meaningful. When the object is intentionally left naked like Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel (1913), devoid of resonance to cultural history or the spiritual realm, it is this absence that immediately captures our attention. By being “art,” it makes a claim to meaning; by failing to offer meaning, it says that there is no meaning to be found. In a culture devoid of meaning, art can only “mean” meaninglessness.³⁶

We begin to see another defining feature of art emerging at this point. In light of K ung’s assessment, we recognize that even when art tries to be only an object, it relies on the viewers’ assumptions that “art” is something more. The mere labeling of an object as “art” transforms the object. Why? Art begins, in the words of Robert Farrar Capon, with the simple act of “lifting into history.”³⁷ Like lifting a perfect stone from a beach and calling attention to it, artists perceive something and acknowledge it, adding it to human history as an “oblation.” The same thing happens when a child is named and is thereby recognized and welcomed into society. A face can be “lifted into history” by being painted, and a painting by being framed and hung. The very borders of the canvas call the painting into existence *as a painting* by setting it apart. A theater piece, similarly, is recognized as what it is because it occupies a set-apart time and place. To lift something into history, however, honors it only if one sees human history as having God-given worth, and not against a background of empty economic transactions such as Adorno saw.

Art has also been understood as “play.” Ever since the duo of Enlightenment and Romanticism set up a sharp distinction between freedom and constraint, art has tended to be identified with freedom and seen in opposition to necessity. While most human activity aims to accomplish what is necessary for survival in society—food production, trade, financial management, maintenance of property, and so on—art can be seen as an escape for the human spirit into an activity in which it can delight in reaching for its potential. Edmond Spencer considers art and play to be the only exceptions to evolutionary necessity, while Karl Groos considers play to be practice for adult responsibilities.³⁸ Stephen Nachmanovich, a contemporary performing artist and writer on creativity, describes the element of play in human life as “galumphing”:

³⁶ Hans K ung, *Art and the Question of Meaning* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 30; Lambert Zuidervart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), xx.

³⁷ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Romance of the Word: One Man’s Love Affair with Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 90-91.

³⁸ See Osborne, *Aesthetics*, 300-303.

Galumphing is the seemingly useless elaboration and ornamentation of activity. It is profligate, excessive, exaggerated, uneconomical. We galumph when we hop instead of walk, when we take the scenic route instead of the efficient one, when we play a game whose rules demand a limitation of our powers, when we are interested in means rather than ends. We voluntarily create obstacles in our path and then enjoy overcoming them.³⁹

By this point, we have already identified certain traits that run throughout art of all kinds. These include “cross-modal resonance,” “world-projecting,” human creation according to some standards of craftsmanship, and the state of having being “lifted into history” as an object to be regarded. A further theme, which can be detectable in the art of each era, is that while art does not exclude what is necessary for survival, it certainly transcends it.

Art goes beyond necessity to abundance. Jeremy Begbie calls art “expansive” not only because it alludes to more than what it says at surface value, but also because it is a biological excess, by which he means that it is not designed to meet our needs of physical survival.⁴⁰ To return to an earlier term, we may say that art is not primarily instrumental. Art exists in the space and time where humans have stopped to perceive, enjoy, and contemplate life. Even when art belongs to the category of craft, which is functional, what makes it “art” is not its functionality but its “galumphing” beyond what is strictly economical.

A final trait that all art shares deals not with the artwork itself or the process of making it, but with the means by which the art is received by its audience. Heavily influenced by medieval anthropology, C.S. Lewis offers a description of the imagination as “the organ of meaning.”⁴¹ By this he means that it is the faculty of the intellect that forms memories, ideas, or words into meaningful images. *Before* an idea can be judged true or false by a person’s reason, in fact, it must exist meaningfully in the imagination. By aiding in the formation of images in our minds, art functions powerfully in the process by which we conceive of any framework of meaning. Any idea or thought captures our imagination before it even wins our assent.

To bring these various elements together, we can say that art is *something made by humans, for perception by the senses and engagement with the imagination, which uses world-projection through allusiveness to explore meaning rather than, primarily, to sustain physical life.*

Art as Sabbath-Keeping

What, then, is the role of art in the human life? Where does the human impulse to make art find a home among the vocations for which humanity was created?

This question is complicated by the fact that the economy of an individual’s time is usually not distributed along the same lines as the economy of human society in general. Society

³⁹ Stephen Nachmanovich, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Putnam, 1990), 44.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Begbie, “The Future: Looking to the Future: A Hopeful Subversion,” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 173.

⁴¹ C.S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalanspheres: A Semantic Nightmare,” in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 265.

as a whole must “work” by providing food and shelter, educating its young people, and caring for its environment; it “rests” on holidays and at night; it “plays” in sports and entertainment; and it “worships” in religious bodies and other spiritual practices. An individual, on the other hand, may “work” in any of these sectors of society: as a farmer, a hotel manager, an athlete, or a church choir director. Art or art-making can thus have a position at the level of an individual’s life that is different from the position it has at the level of society.

On the level of society’s economy, art can belong in a variety of places on the basis of its theoretical identity. Art is often “work” because work includes not only attending to one’s own and others’ material needs, but also bringing out the possibilities of and caring for the earth. Someone who arranges music a certain way because “it just fits” or someone who designs a house to combine beauty and functionality can be said to be “working” in the very same sense, theologically, as those who monitor the ecological balance in a forest preserve. They see the inherent possibilities in the material world, and as if from duty to the glory of God and the beauty of the world, they finish a job they believe must be done. Art can fill the place of “rest” as well, however, when it is intended for reflection upon the world rather than development of it, when it stands as a pause. It can be “play” when its goal is active enjoyment of excess energy, like Nachmanovich’s “galumphing.” It can be worship when it is offered primarily as “oblation,” as Capon describes.

The place of art in an individual’s life may be quite different. A professional artist can “work” in any of these kinds of art, if that is how he will provide for his own and others’ basic needs. A director of worship arts can “work” to create art that becomes a community’s “worship,” and a landscape painter may “work” at art that allows others to “rest.” An amateur artist can, on the other hand, “play” at any kind of art, whether the art belongs to the broader category of work, play, rest, or worship.

Now, however, we must return to the characteristics that give art its special character. We examined in the previous section whether art could be defined as work, play, or oblation, and we observed that while each of these categories had something to offer, none was quite sufficient. We have said that art, in different times and forms, can belong to any of these places in an individual’s or society’s life. We have not discussed what it is that sets art in each of these categories apart from other activities of the same category, and whether these defining characteristics have a particular place in the mandate for humanity.

I now propose that art has an orientation toward the Sabbath that accompanies its appearance in all other parts of life. While Begbie calls art “expansive,” Maritain says art pieces can “give more than they have.”⁴² There is always something below the surface level that draws our focus to a richness of perceivable phenomena that is even greater than that which ordinary language can capture. In this way art reflects God’s extravagance, beginning at creation, which is given as a gift to his creatures and not ultimately earned. Art deals in identity, reminding humans of the goodness of the material world and their role as its caretakers and beautifiers. By operating through the imagination—the “organ of meaning”—art projects various “worlds” through its allusive quality. It is, like the Sabbath, meaning-oriented. Because it is not survival-oriented, it requires artists and viewers alike to cease their economic productivity and perceive the world as

⁴² Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon), 127.

a gift. It requires trust in God's provision for its existence, and to participate in art with joy and faithfulness is the proper response of gratitude for this provision. These characteristics of art are closely reminiscent of the purposes of the Sabbath that we have already uncovered, and it is this link between art and the Sabbath that will provide a key to discovering art's ongoing place in a troubled world.

Judging Priorities: Art as Sabbath in a World of Need

Having laid out the role for art among the creation commandments, we are now compelled to acknowledge that all created goods must now grapple with the effects of the Fall. In other words, we must ask: When resources are under pressure, what is art's value relative to other worthy pursuits?

To see art as rooted in a theology of the Sabbath is vital when answering the question of its worth. It may be sorely tempting, in the face of poverty and other needs in the world, to dispense with all activities that are not obviously productive. On the other hand, if we recall that both art and the Sabbath are meaning-oriented and not productivity-oriented spaces, then we must admit that the question of whether art can be eliminated for greater productivity is similar to asking whether it would be theologically consistent to give up attending worship services in order to volunteer at a local soup kitchen. If the Sabbath space is what we intend to sacrifice in order to serve people in need, we must ask what has in fact been gained, and whether something more vital has been lost.

The Sabbath—and, similarly, art—is the space in time that orients all the other work we do. It reminds us that creation, and human life with it, is not simply a means to an end. We live not to pursue goals endlessly but ultimately “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁴³ Certainly the majority of the days are *not* the Sabbath, just as the majority of our activities must be productive and not specifically devoted to meaning-making. All our productive work, nonetheless, must be oriented by the sense of ultimate worth that arises from the Sabbath. Just as it is our knowledge of God through worship that sets the agenda for our service to God, it is the time we take to rest in God, our relationships, and in the world around us that sets the agenda for the work we will do.

Jesus said nothing directly about art, as far as we know. He did, however, offer teachings regarding the seeming conflict between the Sabbath and care for those in need. In fact, he allowed laws of Sabbath observance to be broken for the sake of meeting people's needs, saying, “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere, he establishes the priorities of the Sabbath by saying, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.”⁴⁵ Does this mean, as it may appear, that Jesus dispenses with the Sabbath and considers a reflective pause to be, in principle, unimportant in the face of human needs?

Certainly not. When Jesus went on to say, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,” he indicated that he, by virtue of his role in God's mission, had the authority to determine what was

⁴³ See note 9, above.

⁴⁴ Matt. 12:12, TNIV.

⁴⁵ Mark 2:27, TNIV.

important about the Sabbath. He was not dismissing it outright.⁴⁶ What he then insisted was the main value of the Sabbath in Mosaic Law was human life itself. Recall that throughout the entire Old Testament, the Sabbath had been a gift intended for the very relief of the poor. Its observance was never in conflict with humanitarian concerns. The wealthy displayed their greed not by ceasing their own work on the Sabbath, but by continuing to conduct business on the Sabbath, amassing greater wealth and presumably also denying their servants rest in the process.⁴⁷ Jesus was recalling the religious leaders to this historic humanitarian focus of the Sabbath.

What bearing might this teaching have on twenty-first century choices? The first century Jewish leaders whom Jesus encountered needed to remember that the Sabbath should not undermine the humanitarian good for which it was intended. Today, in a culture that prides itself for its attention to humanitarian concerns, the greater need is to remember that if we truly care about the value of people, we must in fact rediscover the Sabbath. To cease our harried, though often altruistic, productivity for a time—whether it is to rest, worship, or to engage with art—is how we can rediscover the true, non-instrumental value in human life. It is how we learn from God, who not only created in love, free from necessity, but also ceased from this work to regard it.

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⁴⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 149; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 129.

⁴⁷ Neh. 13 condemns the Israelites for carrying on business on the Sabbath; see also Neh. 10:31.