The Sabbath: An Ethical Necessity for Humanity

In the critically acclaimed film *Ladri di Biciclette*, director Vittorio De Sica masterfully captures the life of Antonio Ricci and his son Bruno, living in fictional post-WWII Italy.¹ A great economic depression has cursed Rome and Antonio is out of employment when he is suddenly offered a job as a poster-man. There is one condition: he must have a bike to run his errands. Upon receiving a bicycle from a pawn shop, he immediately undergoes training for the job. On the first day of the job, in a moment of unintentional neglect, a thief swipes the bicycle and fades into the busy streets. In this unforgettable moment of panic, Antonio takes his son along with him to find this bicycle. He seeks out the police, stumbles upon a church, and finally faces his stealing counterpart in a crowd of people. But at each of these institutions, he is turned down: the police are worried about “bigger” crimes, the church is worried about the peace in their services, and the crowd is concerned with keeping the integrity of the thief because he is their own. It seems to be a revolving cycle of selfishness. But what is most fascinating is that as Antonio scavenges through the city with his son, he is more obsessed with the bicycle than his concerned son who is next to him the whole way. The bicycle is tied to not only his economic support, but his life. Without it, he himself is meaningless to both society and his own image.

Unfortunately, the world seems to operate this in manner. Our existential life is the sum of status and achievements. Black Lives Matter² is a recent movement within the decade that has stormed the nation by demanding justice for the black community. Muslims are defended across the country as not equal with Islamic terrorist groups. Equality for women, the LGBTQA+

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¹ *Ladri di Biciclette*. Directed by Vittorio De Sica. Italy: Criterion Collection, 1948. While I do not summarize the entire movie here, I highly recommend watching the film to amplify the impact of this paper.

community, and so many other minorities have faced discrimination and now cry out for equality. Homelessness in my home county has been such a delicate issue, specialized seminars have been called for the city and businesses alike to deal with it. Economic equality is an ever-growing topic in politics because so many are still without healthcare and adequate living standards. Why do racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic racism still exist in the post-modern world?

The problem lies not just in ignorance or bigotry- it is a problem of reflection converting to action. People may be educated, but they are not equipped to challenge the streamlined thoughts and consequences of society. In turn, all individuals succumb to the values of institutions with no real human emphasis. The ethical solution to the endless cycle of worthlessness and inaction is the Sabbath. The Sabbath, although generally looked upon as a spiritual formation practice, is the most powerful arsenal in the Christian’s pocket to combat social injustices and their laden ethos. The Sabbath’s capacity does not lie in what is to be done, but rather what comes out of its practice. Through passivity, activity is unlocked in the renewal of intent. Sabbath as an ethical practice comes to us in three stages: first presented as a gift, becoming a right, which then becomes a duty that must be upheld. Each stage is dependent on the one before and crucial to ending the cycle of societal sins. The Sabbath is a unifying principle that achieves the holistic goal of ethics- a progressive attitude with purposeful response.

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3 Sabbath is kept as a commandment within the Jewish traditions and certain denominations, some who call it “The Lord’s Day”. While this is true, it is only in recent developments that many Christians are beginning to return to the practice of the Sabbath, though mostly as rest. I will not argue for Sabbath as any specific day or period in this paper. See Keeping the Sabbath Wholly by Marva J. Dawn for Sabbath as spiritual formation. Also, see Felicia Williams Redmon’s dissertation: “Self Care in the Form of Sabbath”.

4 I cannot help but give credit to an author whom was being interviewed on NPR and gave me the framework for this paper. I never caught her name, but if she were reading, she should know I give her credit for this.
“Thus the heaven and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 2:1-3 [NIV]).

From the beginning of time, man has attempted to master the material world. As Abraham Heschel states, “It begins when man, dissatisfied with what is available in nature, becomes engaged in a struggle with the forces of nature in order to enhance his safety and to increase his comfort.” We adore all that which lusters before our eyes and towers over our presence. We are riveted by the physical realm because it is the only way we know how to interact with our world.

The author of Genesis, however, rejects our worldview. The Creator’s last act of seal is the Sabbath. But, the Sabbath is created with a unique new property- holiness. In fact, this is the first mention of holiness in the Torah. Time itself is labeled holy. God creates the world in chapter one and immortalizes his work through time. When Adam appears later in Genesis 2, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden to tend to it. While the Sabbath is not mentioned right away, man is not constrained by the amount of work he must do. Rather, time has become his guide and value. This is a great departure from the great economic theories of today, which drive us toward an existential worth. In society, we are the accumulation of our performance. This is true of all of us: while humans attempt to master the material world, it is time that masters us all.

No wonder Jean-Paul Sartre, when speaking of atheistic existentialism as quoted by Walter Kaufmann, observes “We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the

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5 I will be quoting from the New International Version throughout this paper.
world—and defines himself afterward… Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.”

Our status among the community is defined by our titles, our jobs, our accomplishments, and goals. But the Sabbath is a complete removal of that process. The Creator deems us worthy through His own work and designates time as our marker. Sabbath is, first and foremost, a gift.

Sabbath-keepers, however, cannot merely ascribe it to restful periods from the chaotic world order. The Sabbath becomes the climax of our society. Heschel describes this as “the art of surpassing civilization.”

Exodus 20:8-11 states “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 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.” While this commandment compels rest, the latter part of it leads to contemplate the works of the Creator. Our thoughts are directed toward the majesty of God, which guide us to our standing with the Almighty. This introspection is a constant process through each Sabbath. Sabbath renews not only our relationship to God, but obligates us to reframe our place in society.

Deuteronomy 5:15 makes this even more clear when repeating the commandment: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to

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7 Walter Kaufmann, “Existentialism” in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016) Kindle. Sartre is often misquoted for a definitive statement in this lecture. For further exposition on Sartre’s view, see Kaufman’s chapter “Kaufmann: Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre.”

8 Heschel, 27.
observe the Sabbath day.” Introspection can help prevent ethical stagnation. The reflection in Sabbath causes us to question where and how we belong in the world. Ethics must be a constant renewal of what the world is and how we must interact with it. The Sabbath does this without forcibly penetrating the world, but steps aside to deal with it gently. It does not negate the current world affairs, rather it engages what should always be at the heart of all human transactions. The Sabbath gives us meaning because we are bestowed with holiness. Heschel describes this as “holy not away from us. It is holy unto us.”9 Because it is a timeless gift, it adapts to our current situations. Walter Brueggemann comments on the Deuteronomy version of Sabbath, saying, “This is the core argument of the book of Deuteronomy, the center of covenantal teaching in the Bible. The economy is not a rat race in which people remain exhausted from coercive goals; it is, rather, a covenantal enterprise for the sake of the whole community.”10

The economy and social institutions must work in favor for the community through the Sabbath for equality. Jesus answers this succinctly: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Because humanity is bestowed upon with holiness, all humans are equal in the eyes of God. “Sabbath is the great day of equality when all are equally at rest.”11 It is this rest and holiness that levels the playing field for all humans alike: No human is less than another. The premise of the Sabbath, equality, lays the groundwork for ethical action. It precedes our function in society and informs how we deal with our communities and societies. The goal of

9 Heschel, 87.
11 Bruggemann, 40.
ethical behavior out of the Sabbath is to restore equality to all of humanity. The Sabbath cannot help but create a moral atmosphere because of its endowing nature.

Sabbath as an ethical principle now immerses itself in establishing the right to rest and freedom from cycle of selfishness. This can only be done when Sabbath-keepers meet the marginalized communities and invite them into the power of the Sabbath. When we are liberated from societal pressures, we cannot help but engage all individuals with us because we see equality in all people. In Isaiah 56:1-8, God states that He will not withhold neither the eunuch nor the foreigner from joining in the Sabbath; He will give an everlasting name to the eunuchs who keep the Sabbath and to the foreigners bring them to His holy mountain.

The Creator uses the Sabbath as a medium to draw all people towards Himself. The Sabbath is a haven where all are invited. It draws from the ethical premise of equality and becomes the attitude of equality. Brueggemann comments on the Isaiah passage, saying the “Sabbath represents a radical disengagement from the producer-consumer rat race of the empire. The community welcomes the members of any race or nation, any gender or social condition, so long as that person is defined by justice, mercy, and compassion[.]”\(^{12}\) This attitude can only be fostered under the renewal of the Sabbath. Without emotional response, ethical action is useless. It is not enough to be convinced of morality; we must *experience* morality deep in our hearts. Humans are not calculable beings- we flow with overwhelming passion and desire for connection. Then ethics cannot merely be a logical proposition, but an attitude that encompasses emotions to live consciously and freely.

\(^{12}\)Brueggemann, 54-55. The idea of eunuchs and foreigners integrating into the Israelite community was challenging at the time. See Brueggemann’s chapter “Resistance to Exclusivism”.
This past summer, I flew to Israel for six weeks to study biblical Hebrew in an intensive study program. Our temporary abode was in the heart of East Jerusalem, just a ten-minute walk from Old City Jerusalem. Our first week there, a group of us students decided to walk to the Wailing Wall on Friday evening, as we had heard so much about the Jewish people’s Sabbath practices. Now, I had grown up in a Seventh-day Adventist home, which keeps the Saturday Sabbath and receives the Sabbath at sundown on Friday, but I had never witnessed anything as enchanting. Hasidic men would be singing gorgeous tunes, all while smiling. Young Jewish men formed circles and danced, jovially running circles. Women on their side of the wall reflected the merry atmosphere. While the Sabbath is a serious practice in Jewish tradition, it is, nevertheless, welcomed with a lighthearted attitude. Humanitarian rights remain guarded because others must be moved in their souls to uphold them. The Sabbath is a right-it replicates rest through equality and freedom through emotion. Sabbath ends the attitude of selfishness through its own powerful sentiments.

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The Sabbath, no matter how ethically principled, cannot negate the current individual and societal plights. The Sabbath, in its final form, mobilizes the ethical action as a duty against inequality and justice. Our stream of thoughts manifest into tangible servitude and focuses our attention on the marginalized. The attitude of Sabbath does not remain in our heart, but seeks to be actualized in our hands. While we rest during and in the Sabbath, we work to bring rest to others. Jesus exemplifies this in Matthew 12:9-13: “Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they [the Pharisees] asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it
and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.” Jesus offers a paradigm shift- the Sabbath is not just a rest, but a command to rest. Because Sabbath entails all of humanity, we must seek those who are not in rest and give them the rest they deserve.

Another passage zeroes in on the Sabbath’s ethical groundwork. Amos 8:4-6 declares, “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath ended that we may market wheat?”—skimping on the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweeping with the wheat.” Sabbath does not merely end the cycle of selfishness- it is a measure to prevent the cycle of selfishness. When we are fully consumed by the passion of the Sabbath, we cannot oppress our neighbors. We are remolded, not as individuals, but as a community of ethical standards, drawing out the Sabbath’s influence. Sabbath is more than an individualistic ethic principle- it summons our communities to alleviate the oppression of humans because we are all equal. It becomes the progressive tradition of the community- protecting the present and defending the future. The Sabbath cries out for justice because it is the model of perfection. In Genesis, the perfect world is created with the Sabbath in mind. Now that our world is blemished with evil and corruption, the Sabbath emerges as more than resistance- it is an alternative. The whole point of ethics is to bestow upon the world a working model that produces universal harmony. The Sabbath completes this model as a duty.

13 Brueggemann, xiv.
The Sabbath does not end here. It is continually recharging and reinvigorating. Because of our ethical duty to restore equality, we must be aware of the effects on our well-being. Corruption is everywhere- no matter how much light is shone, the casting shadow is darker. We could be trapped in the cycle of endlessness- we see how much work is left in the world and we become overwhelmed. Therefore, ethics relies on the community to support each other in addition to the resting power of the Sabbath. Ethics relies often on either the means or the ends, but doesn’t balance the two carefully. There is always more to do, but we cannot be swallowed up in the vacuum of our own destitute. Our duty lies beyond the reach of our immediate knowledge; we must be loyal to the cause of the Sabbath, which asks us face our Creator. Our merits will never be enough, but we continue the work as fruits of gratefulness for the bestowing of the Sabbath- the ultimate monument of God’s grace and humanity’s worth.

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The Sabbath is the ethical solution to the cycle of selfishness. As a gift, it gives us equality. As a right, we experience its morality. As a duty, we serve to restore equality to all. While the Sabbath is probably the most passive form of ethics, it encompasses a holistic approach to solving societal sins. We are nothing without emotion and we cannot move forward without a plan. The Sabbath is and will always be the solution.