

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Aug '10

Nº 581



THE PARTS OF LIFE

*A lecture given at The Aspen Institute
and St. John's College (1983-84)*

MORTIMER ADLER

2 OF 3

Work that is toil may, at one extreme, be mainly physical in character with little or no mental activity involved. This is what we call unskilled labor. At the other extreme, it may be work that is mainly or exclusively mental rather than physical in character. When that is the case, the leisure component in the mixed character of the work done predominates. Some knowledge is acquired, some skill is developed, and that perfects the individual as well as the materials on which he or she works.

This is especially true if the mental activity involved is to any degree creative, not the performance by rote memory of a repetitive routine. To the extent that anything is learned by the work done, it must be leisure-work that is mental rather than physical. When the work done is purely leisure-work, without any admixture of labor

or toil, it is always primarily mental in character, even though some physical motions and efforts may be involved in doing it.

Before we turn to play or amusement, one more point must be mentioned in our consideration of work in both of its forms—toiling and leisuring. The production of wealth being the purpose of toil, the results of such work are always possessions, either things possessed by the worker or things possessed by the company or corporation that employs the worker or by the community in which the worker lives.

In contrast, the results of work that is leisuring confer intrinsic perfections upon the worker even when, in addition, the work produces external goods—either economic goods or the cultural goods that perfect the community in which he or she lives.

Playing or amusing one's self. There can be no question that it is optional rather than biologically or economically necessary. But there is some question about whether it is morally obligatory. To answer that question, we must move on to the result at which play or amusement aims. The purpose of play being pleasure and pleasure being one of the real goods that enrich a human life and contribute to happiness, it would appear to follow that we are under some obligation to play and amuse ourselves in our pursuit of happiness or in our effort to make a good human life for ourselves.

That statement must be immediately qualified by a consideration of the limited value of pleasure as one of life's real goods. Some real goods are goods without limit. We cannot, for example, have too much knowledge or too much skill.

Other real goods, such as liberty, wealth, and pleasure are limited goods, of which we can have too much, more than is good for us to have or good for our fellow human beings in the community in which we live. Overindulgence in play or amusement is, therefore, not morally permissible, even if some enjoyment of the pleasure derived from play is morally obligatory for the sake of leading a good human life.

Two further questions remain, one about the pleasure that results from play and the other about the character of that activity. Of the four main categories under which our activities can be classified, only play produces a result that is entirely intrinsic to the activity itself.

When the activity is purely and simply play, no extrinsic conse-

quences follow upon doing it. We are playing or amusing ourselves purely and solely for the pleasure that is inherent in the activity performed. To whatever extent a given activity has some extrinsic result as its consequence, whether that be health, wealth, or the perfection of our minds and character, the activity ceases to be pure play and takes on another aspect.

Just as work may involve in varying degrees an admixture of labor and leisure, so an activity that is in one respect play may also in another respect fall under some other category. It then becomes utilitarian play.

Is playing or amusing ourselves ever purely physical or ever purely mental? Clearly, there are some forms of play that are purely mental or are for the most part so, involving little or no physical effort. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether any form of play can be purely physical, since playing usually involves some skill or know-how, which is a mental trait.

One fundamental problem in the classification of our activities under the four main categories has emerged in the preceding discussion. We have noted admixtures of toil and leisure in some kinds of work. We have observed that a given activity may be play in one aspect and something else in another. It is also the case that a given activity may, at different times, serve all the purposes so far mentioned: it may aim at enhancing our health, at increasing our possessions, at improving or perfecting ourselves, and at giving us pleasure. It may even achieve two or more of these results at one and the same time.

How, then, shall we characterize the diverse particular activities in which we engage to fill the time of our lives? Some may fall wholly under one of the four main categories. Some may fall under two or more of them, varying in the degree to which the differing aspects of the activity constitute an admixture of different categories.

Our main interest is in the spectrum of work—its pure forms of labor and of leisure, together with its mixed forms involving both. But before we come to that, let us consider illustrative examples of particular activities that must be classified under two or more of the four main categories, belonging under one in one respect or aspect, and belonging under some other in another respect or aspect.

IV. *IS A PARTICULAR ACTIVITY SLEEP, TOIL, LEISURE,*

PLAY, OR SOME MIXTURE OF THESE?

A particular activity may fall solely under one of these categories; for example, ditch-digging or feeding an assembly line is sheer toil. It may fall primarily under one of these categories, but have an additional aspect that is subordinate to its primary character; for example, a person employed gainfully as a gardener may, in addition to earning his living by that activity, enjoy the work he does as much as he would any other form of play.

Sometimes, however, an activity of one kind is transformed into a different kind of activity. For example, at one time, tennis was entirely a sport of amateurs. It subsequently became a professional sport. Here a particular activity, engaged in one way by amateurs is play; but when it is engaged in another way by professionals (whose only interest in the game is the money and fame they acquire), it is toil. It can, of course, be some mixture of toil and play.

There is still one more alternative. A particular activity may fall under two or more categories where neither aspect of the activity is primary or subordinate. The individual engaged in the activity would continue doing it if either one of its two aspects were absent. The individual may be equally motivated in either direction. Professional musicians who earn their living by the performance of their art are workers whose work involves an admixture of toil and leisure. They would continue to exercise their skill and try to improve it even if they were no longer employed in an orchestra or no longer had to earn a living by such employment. If that is not the case, then working in an orchestra is simply toil for them.

Another example of double motivation is to be found in an activity that aims at both health and pleasure. A physician may recommend to a patient that for his health's sake he swim a certain amount of time each day. The patient who follows that recommendation may be one who enjoys swimming as a playful exercise, but now engages in it with the regularity prescribed for therapeutic purposes.

Swimming thus becomes for the patient both sleep and play. By calling the patient's swimming therapeutic or utilitarian play, we indicate its double motivation. If an exercise prescribed by a physician were performed by a patient who abhorred that activity, it would be pure sleep for that person, though for some other individual who engaged in that activity solely for pleasure and not for the sake of health, it would be pure play.

Eating and drinking, activities which for many individuals are

nothing but biological refueling, and so fall entirely under the category of sleep, can be for other individuals who take sensuous delight in fine foods and excellent wines a playful indulgence as well. They eat and drink not only to refuel their energies but, whenever they can, they do so also for the pleasure inherent in the process.

For a rare few, entitled to be regarded as gourmets, eating and drinking beyond the calls of hunger and thirst, are purely playful activities. Just as we called an exercise prescribed by a physician, one that is also enjoyable to the patient, therapeutic or utilitarian play, so we might call a gourmet's eating and drinking playful or sensuously delightful sleep.

I have so far called attention to activities that have double or triple motivations, requiring us to classify them under two or three of the main categories.

I turn now to activities that, at first blush, appear to be pure instances of leisuring. I have in mind such activities as teaching, producing any work of art, giving lectures, writing books, engaging in political life, or for that matter practicing any of the learned professions that serve the well-being of others and the welfare of society. All of these would appear to be prime examples of pure leisuring, especially if their performance involves some learning—some increment of knowledge or skill—on the part of the performer and some contribution to society as well. They remain pure leisuring if the performing agent has no other motivation than self-improvement or the social benefits conferred, or both.

However, that “if,” italicized in the preceding statement, introduces a supposition that is usually contrary to fact. Many practitioners in the learned professions and many creative artists work for some extrinsic compensation as well as for the rewards of leisuring. For them, the activity in which they engage is work that can be called compensated leisure. We dare not overlook the fact that for many others (one dare not say how many), the extrinsic compensation, the money they earn, is their only motivation. Then it is toil for them, not compensated leisure.

By their very nature, the aforementioned activities are such that one can learn and benefit others. They should, therefore, have the aspect of leisure, even if they are activities that earn a living. What for some individuals is pure leisuring and for others compensated leisuring can become for still others work that is toil without a scintilla of leisuring in it. Monetary gain is their only interest. They

would turn to something else if they could earn more money by doing it.

If self-perfection and social service are no part of their aim, we are entitled to ask whether they have not violated the ethics of their profession. Can they be regarded as true practitioners of a learned profession or of one of the fine arts if the work they do is nothing but toil for them? It makes no difference whether the compensation received is large or small.

A large part of our population today consists of employees of government, from the president, justices of the Supreme Court, members of the cabinet, senators and congressmen down to the clerks in government bureaus, police officers, and so on. Let us call all of them citizens who are also office-holders, whether elected or appointed. The rest of us are citizens not in public office,

Non-office-holding citizens who perform their duties as citizens by engaging in political action of one sort or another do so as forms of leisuring. How about the others—the citizens who are also office-holders? We know that the work they do for compensation is in that respect highly or slightly compensated toil for them. But does it also have the aspect of leisuring, as it should *for them as well as for ordinary citizens* ?

I need not pause to comment on what a negative answer means for the general welfare of the state, for the integrity of government, and for the prospects of a democratic form of government.

Work that is sheer toil seldom has any playful aspect. Done by those who have to earn a living, it is done solely for that purpose. Work that is pure leisuring or leisuring in part may also be just as devoid of any inherent pleasure as the drudgery of sheer toil is. When we understand that leisuring as well as toiling is work in the full sense of that term and when we understand that leisuring is never to be confused with play, we should not be surprised by the statement that leisure activities or activities that have a leisuring component may be just as painful and just as fatiguing as work that is toil.

It follows that both forms of work, whether in separation or in combination, may require us to resort to play for its relaxing and recreational effects—removing the strains and tensions of work and refreshing our energies. The playing we do for this purpose then becomes therapeutic or utilitarian play. Nevertheless, it is also possible for leisure work, or work that has an aspect of leisuring in

it, to also have an aspect of playfulness, because the worker genuinely enjoys the work while doing it. This is not true of what I have called sheer toil and may also be called, for that reason, drudgery.

No housewife, as contrasted with women employed in other occupations, would fail to recognize that they also are engaged in work. Domestic work, the doing of household chores, is certainly work, not play. Much of it is sheer toil, as much for the housewife who does not receive an hourly or weekly payment for it, as it is for the domestic servant or hired hand who engages in such work to earn a living.

The tasks performed, whether by the housewife or by a hired hand, consist of repetitive chores, from the doing of which nothing is learned and in the doing of which little pleasure is found. The work is for the most part manual rather than mental; its repetitiveness makes it stultifying; having nothing creative about it, it yields no self-improvement. The sheerness of the toil is alleviated only if an element of leisuring enters into the work for the housewife because she does it as an act of love and for the good of the family. Then it differs from the same work performed by a domestic servant solely for the money to be earned.

In contrast to such domestic work, which is largely manual rather than mental, repetitive rather than creative, such activities as gardening, carpentry, repairing plumbing or electrical gadgets, and the use of other skills to improve the household, are work that is leisuring rather than toiling. They can also be play to whatever extent the doing of them is enjoyed.

I have left to the last the most interesting example of an activity that can fall under all four of our main categories, either entirely under one or another, or involve some admixture of several at the same time.

Consider sexual activity. If its motivation is purely biological, it belongs in the category of sleep. If it has no other motivation than financial gain, then it is toil. If it is indulged in solely for the inherent pleasure in the process, it is sheer play. Is it ever leisuring? Does it ever have an aspect of leisuring combined with some other aspects? Yes, if the sexual union of two persons is an act of benevolent love on their part, an act that confers mutual benefits.

We know that the sexual act may be performed by one of the partners without pleasure. Then, if it is an act of love, it is leisure-work without any aspect of play. When it is performed with pleasure, it

is erotic love as distinguished from other forms of benevolent love that do not involve any sexuality whatsoever. When the sexual act is performed without love, it may be sleep, toil, or play, but there is nothing leisurely about it.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Benjamin Aaronson

Gellert Dornay

Laura Hammons

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.