



THE DISPOSITION OF ONE'S TIME

Mortimer Adler

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The reader may protest at once even when we make the assumption that eliminates subsistence-work as a compulsory form of activity using up a considerable portion of our waking life, the time of our lives is not wholly at our disposal. I have prepared for this objection by distinguishing between these activities, such as subsistence-work, which are compulsory only under certain conditions, and those that are unconditionally or absolutely compulsory. Whatever time is occupied by the latter is clearly not at our disposal.

What features of a human life are absolutely compulsory? A certain amount of time *must* be spent in sleeping, as anyone knows; and still other portions of one's span of time *must* be spent in eating, in cleansing one's body, in preserving one's health and one's vigor. The exact amount is not the same for every individual. The amount varies with individual differences in physique and temperament, with differences in physical environment, and even with differences in the culture of the society one lives in. Nevertheless, no human being can continue to live without some portion of his time being occupied with what I shall call biologically necessary

activities. My own rough guess is that such activities consume, on the average, about a third of our life's time. Unusual individuals or individuals living under unusual circumstances will vary from this average in either direction.

Permit me to use the verb "sleep" as the symbol for the whole set of activities that are biologically necessary, even though slumbering is actually only one member of this set. Eating is another, cleansing another, and so on. I hope my use of "sleep" as an omnibus term will not prove a stumbling block to some readers, who may find it difficult to overcome their habitual use of the word for only one of these diverse forms of activity. Sleeping (*i.e.*, slumbering) does, in fact, happen to consume the largest portion of the time we must devote to maintaining our health and vigor, and for that reason, I have chosen to use "Sleep" to name this group of activities instead of a more cumbersome, invented phrase.

I call attention to my use of "sleep" as a verb in order to stress the fact that such things as sleeping, eating, cleansing, and so on are activities. To say these things are biologically necessary activities is also to say that they are useful activities, serving ends or producing results. To name the end that such activities serve, it would be difficult to find better words than "health" and "vigor."

The fact that all the biologically necessary activities I have lumped together under the verb "sleep" are absolutely compulsory does not remove them entirely from the sphere of the voluntary. A certain minimum of these activities must be engaged in if we are to remain alive, but we are free to indulge them beyond the minimum and even to excess—for reasons of pleasure or indolence. We are also free to impair our health and reduce our vigor by the extent or manner in which we engage in these activities. It is only at the level of the bare minimums that we have no choice about such activities as sleeping, eating, and cleansing, and so on—no choice, that is, unless we include suicide as an alternative, or such impairment of our health and vigor that we could not make much use of the time left at our disposal. Above the level of the bare minimums, these activities may still retain their biological utility, but they may also take on another character because of the reasons we engage in them. They retain their biological utility to whatever extent we engage in them for reasons of health and vigor, but when we go beyond that and engage in them for reasons of pleasure or indolence, they pass over into other categories of activity.

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The word “pleasure” gives us the clue to one of these other categories. Just as I used the verb “sleep” as an omnibus term to cover all forms of activity that we engage in *either* because we cannot continue to live without doing so *or* because we wish to preserve or enhance our health and vigor, so I will now use the verb “play” as an omnibus term for all forms of activity that we engage in simply and purely for the pleasure experienced in the activity itself.

Just as I have used “sleep” to cover not only sleeping, but also eating, cleansing, exercising for reasons of health, and the like, so I will use “play” to cover not only playing games but also participating in sports, indulging in amusements of one sort or another, and even engaging in such things as sleeping, eating, and exercising when we engage in them, beyond biological need, for the pleasures that are intrinsic to these activities themselves.

The distinguishing characteristic of all purely playful activities, as contrasted with those that are biologically necessary (at the minimum) or biologically useful (beyond the minimum), lies in the fact that they are neither necessary nor useful. They serve no end and produce no result beyond the pleasure enjoyed in the performance itself. If pleasure be regarded as the objective of these activities, it is something intrinsic to them, not a result that lies beyond them.

When an intrinsically pleasurable activity is engaged in for some reason that goes beyond the pleasure intrinsic to it, the activity is no longer purely and simply play. It is, as many human activities are, a mixture of different types. We can easily think of many examples of activities that combine the features of sleep and play because they are done both for a biological result extrinsic to them and for the pleasure intrinsic to them. We often eat, or shower, or exercise, for both reasons; so, too, we often play games, engage in sports, indulge in amusements, not only for the pleasures involved but also because they help us to relax, to reduce tension, to wash away the fatigue engendered by other activities—in general, to restore or recreate our energies.

In addition to such mixed activities, combining the characteristics of different pure types of activity, we have, of course, the pure types themselves—sleep that is purely sleep because solely for reasons of health or vigor, and play that is purely play because solely for reasons of intrinsic pleasure. And still further, we are also acquainted in our experience with activities that normally belong to one category or type but that, on occasion, take on the character of

a different type. Thus, for example, we sometimes eat, drink, or shower purely for the pleasure of doing so; and we sometimes play games, engage in sports, indulge in amusements, purely for recreational purposes, that is, to remove fatigue or tension or to recoup our energies. When, in any of its modes, play is thus transformed into a biologically useful activity, it can be called “therapeutic” or “utilitarian” play. When sleep, in any of its modes, is thus transformed into an intrinsically enjoyable activity, it can be called “unuseful” or “sensuous” or perhaps even “playful” sleep.

One further example may help us to remember this threefold differentiation of activities into the pure, the mixed, and the transformed. Sexual activity is a mixed activity when it is engaged in both for its biological utility (which includes more than reproductive results) and also for the sensuous pleasure it provides. It is purely a form of sleep when it is engaged in for biological reasons alone. And since its primary location is in the category of biologically necessary activities, it is a transformed activity when it is motivated only by the sensuous pleasure to be experienced. As a transformed activity, it may become, just as sleeping or eating when done to excess may become, biologically injurious.

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At the beginning of this chapter I posed a question to be answered on the basis of the two provisional assumptions we have tentatively adopted. Assuming that we did not have to spend any time working for a living and assuming that our lives were unaffected by the extremes of either good or bad fortune, how would we spend the time at our disposal? What would we do with the time of our lives? To help us toward an answer to this question, I began exploring the generic categories of human activity. We temporarily tabled one of them for later consideration—subsistence-work. But before we put it aside, we did note two of its fundamental characteristics. Subsistence-work is, under certain circumstances, compulsory. It is like sleep in being compulsory, but it differs from sleep in that the circumstances of a human life can be such that it is not always compulsory, as sleep always is. Like sleep, it is a useful activity serving an extrinsic end, producing a desired result beyond itself. Just as the result aimed at by sleep can be summed up in the words “health” and “vigor,” so the end aimed at by work can be summed up in the word “wealth,” standing for all the means of subsistence, the comforts and conveniences of life.

I have also referred to a way of consuming time by doing nothing or as little as possible beyond the involuntary or autonomic actions

of the body itself. I used the word “idling” for such minimal activity. I then added sleep and play, generically considered in their pure forms, and observed how each of these could be mixed with the other. We shall subsequently consider whether subsistence-work is ever mixed with play or with idling.

We now have before us four basic types of human activity—sleep, play, subsistence-work, and idling—activities that consume time, activities we can voluntarily engage in or avoid in varying degrees as, from day to day, we use up the time of our lives. Do these four types exhaust the possibilities? Have we overlooked any basic form of human activity that should be mentioned before we take up our guiding question again?

There is at least one other form of activity that must be considered, though it may not be the only one that is left before all possibilities are exhausted. I am going to try to characterize it before I name it. Unlike sleep, it is not absolutely compulsory or biologically useful. It does not contribute to health. Unlike subsistence-work, it is not even circumstantially compulsory. Even when the circumstances are such that subsistence-work is necessary, this type of activity, in its pure form, does not contribute to the production of consumable wealth. Unlike idling and play, and like sleep and subsistence-work, it is a useful activity, serving an end beyond itself, producing an extrinsic result that is desirable.

This last point places it on the side of sleep and subsistence-work and separates it from idling and play, by virtue of one characteristic that it shares in common with sleep and subsistence-work—its usefulness, its having an extrinsic end, its being aimed at a result beyond itself. So in order to distinguish it from sleep and subsistence-work, we need only to identify the extrinsic end or result that is served or produced by this activity in its pure form.

Not health and vigor, nor wealth produced and wealth consumed, but human improvement, individual and social, is the end this activity aims at. Learning in all its forms is the most obvious example of it, since without learning the individual cannot improve himself and with learning he cannot help but do so. In this respect, all learning is useful whether or not it is also useful in serving ends beyond self-improvement or personal growth. Anything that contributes to the growth of the individual as a person, not just as a biological organism, belongs in this category, as does anything the individual does that contributes to the improvement of his society—its component institutions and the elements of its culture, its arts and sciences.

Still one other way of characterizing this type of activity is to call it creative. In a sense, any activity that produces a result can be called creative; thus sleep is creative of health, subsistence-work of wealth. The result produced by a productive activity may be either an extrinsic product, such as wealth, or an immanent condition of the agent, such as health. But it is possible for wealth to be produced by an individual without any improvement resulting in his own person; and it is possible for health to be preserved by an individual without any change in his personality, for better or for worse. In contrast, the type of activity that we are here trying to distinguish from sleep and subsistence-work always produces an immanent result—an improvement in the person who is the agent, over and above any extrinsic product it may result in or any contribution it may make to the improvement of society.

To sum this up, the activity with which we are concerned is creative in the very special sense of being self-creative, because it always involves personal growth or self-improvement.

The only single English word available to name this type of activity is the equivalent of the word employed by the ancient Greeks for it. Unfortunately, that word—"leisure"—is currently so misused that great effort must be made to overcome the wrong connotations now almost universally attached to it. I am going to ask my readers to make that effort, so that we can use "leisure" to name a type of activity that is clearly distinct from the other four types we have so far considered. Since we are naming an activity, think of "leisure" primarily as a verb, not a noun, and never as an adjective. Like sleeping, working, playing, and idling, leisuring is something we do with our time.

One way to safeguard against falling into the current misuse of the term is never to employ it as an adjective. Let us never say "leisure time" when we mean free time, that is, the time that is left over after compulsory activities have consumed the rest. Another abominable adjectival use occurs in the phrase "leisure class," when that is used to refer to the class of persons who possess sufficient wealth or property to exempt them from the compulsion of having to work for a living. The members of the so-called leisure class often consume their free time in playing and idling rather than in leisuring, though the exceptions are many and significant. Still another egregious misuse of the term derives from the confusion of leisuring with playing, whether it is pure play or therapeutic and recreational play. As a safeguard against this misuse, I am going to add a suffix to "leisure," as I previously added a prefix to "work." I

am going to speak of “leisure-work” to indicate that leisuring in its pure form is never to be confused with playing in its pure form, though some activities are mixed, involving aspects of both leisure-work and play.

Finally, to reinforce all these safeguards against being misunderstood when I speak of leisuring or of leisure-work, I must call attention to the etymology of the English word and also to its Greek counterpart. The English word “leisure” comes from the French verb “loisir” and from the Latin “licere”—both of which signify that which is permissible rather than compulsory. Leisuring is something we can do, but are under no biological or economic compulsion to do. Whether or not we are under a moral obligation to engage in leisuring is something we shall consider later, but for the moment it is enough to point out that leisuring is one of the ways of using whatever free time we have—time free from activities we are compelled to engage in. In this respect, leisuring stands on the side of playing and idling, as against sleeping and working. The Greek word that we translate by “leisure” is “scholé,” the Latin of which is “schola” and the English of which is “school”—the significance of which is learning. Remembering this should confirm us in the use of the English word “leisure” or “leisure-work” for any mode of useful and productive activity that is not biologically or economically necessary and that, since it always involves learning, is self-creative or self-improving.


To define leisuring by reference to self-improvement as the result it aims to produce appears to carry with it the implication that this type of activity is always good for us; for how could any form of self-improvement harm us or be detrimental to us? The definitions of the other basic types of activity leave open the question of whether we can engage in them to our disadvantage as well as to our advantage. For example, the definition of play by reference to the pleasure intrinsic to that activity allows us to ask whether it may be detrimental to us to indulge excessively in play. The same question can be asked about the forms of sleep, and in the case of subsistence-work, I have already intimated that we might be better off if our circumstances were such that we did not have to do any of it at all.

Let it be granted, then, that the definition of leisuring in terms of self-improvement excludes the possibility of its ever being injurious or detrimental. This provides us with an additional distinction between leisuring and all the other basic types of human activity. But in order to understand this definition of leisuring, must we not first know what self-improvement consists in? May not individuals

differ in their conceptions of self-improvement? These questions may appear to be troublesome, but I do not think they really are. I would be quite content with any common-sense answer to them. Accepting anyone's conception of the things that contribute to his personal growth or to his improvement as a human being, I would then add that whatever activity produces such results is leisuring. That cannot be said of sleep, play, subsistence-work, or idling; none of these in its pure form results in self-improvement, *however that is conceived*.

One further consideration remains with regard to leisure-work, and that is its mixture with subsistence-work and with play. I will have much more to say about this in the next chapter when I explore all the modes and grades of work. For the present I need say only that many of our activities involve admixtures of leisure with play, or of leisure with subsistence-work, or of all three together.

In its pure form, leisure-work may be no more intrinsically pleasurable than subsistence-work is. We do both, in their pure forms, for the results they produce. Subsistence-work is often painful and, for that reason, something we try to avoid or cut down. The same is true of leisure-work. We often try to avoid it and turn to playing or idling instead when we have free time at our disposal. Another indication of the same point is that we often resort to recreational or therapeutic play in order to reduce the tensions and fatigues engendered by leisure-work, just as we resort to play to get over the effects of subsistence-work. On the other hand, there is no intrinsic reason why leisure-work cannot become as pleasurable as play, and the more one enjoys leisuring, the better.

Is leisuring ever admixed with idling? I do not think so. With sleeping in any of its many modes? Not for the most part. The one possible exception is sexual activity. When sexual activity is engaged in as an aspect of human love or friendship, conjugal or otherwise, the aspect of leisuring may be added to its biological utility and to its pleasurable aspect as play. Quite apart from sex, acts of love and friendship are eminent among the modes of leisure activity. While it may be jarring at first to consider love and friendship as forms of leisure-work, it should be remembered that one seldom succeeds in the sphere of love or friendship unless one seriously works at it and unless one learns in the process. 

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