



WHAT SHOULD ONE DO ABOUT EARNING A LIVING?

Mortimer Adler

(1)

Instead of imagining a life free from the necessity of earning a living, let us deal with the reality that confronts most of us. During some period of our lives, and probably throughout a large part of our years, we have to work for a living. How does this fact affect the general outlines of anyone's plan for making a good life for himself—not *just* a living, even a good living?

In considering a life exempt from the need to work, we have seen that sleep and play should be kept to reasonable minimums. In the case of sleep, only a little more than is necessary, but no more than is useful. More than is useful becomes converted into play—because beyond need and utility, such things as sleeping, eating, and bathing are done only for the pleasure the doing affords. In the case of play, only a modicum over and above what is recreational or therapeutic; although pleasures enrich or enhance a life, the pursuit of them consumes time, and too much time consumed in play leaves too little time for what, upon closer examination, may prove to be more important pursuits.

When the man of common sense says that in the overall economy of our life's time, sleep and play should be kept to reasonable minimums, his common sense leads him to acknowledge that the standard of a reasonable minimum varies with differences in individual make-up, with differences in external circumstances, and above all with differences in age. There can be no hard and fixed rules about the proportion of one's time to be devoted to sleep and play. To say this is not to say that anything goes—that any and every use of one's time is equally reasonable. It is only to say that the standard of a reasonable minimum must be applied by individual judgment in the individual case. When we use the term “play-boy” or “wastrel” derogatorily—as most of us do—we are calling attention to the violation of this standard, for no peculiarity of individual temperament or circumstance can condone the excess of consuming all of one's time in sleep, play, and idling. Differences in age do call for different applications of the standard. The amount of time devoted to sleep and play should diminish as one passes from infancy and childhood to youth, and from youth to middle age and full maturity. In the case of sleep, the decrease is owing to a diminution of need (until old age, when one needs more). In the case of play, the reasons are a little more difficult to state, but I can indicate them by saying that the variety of pleasures is not infinite and after we have explored them in our earlier years, and have repeated again and again the experience of those we have enjoyed most, the lure of novelty diminishes and the luster of the repeated pleasure wears off.

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The standard of a reasonable minimum, particularly as applied to play, should be more stringently applied in a life that involves working for a living than in a life that does not. When biologically necessary activities consume about a third of one's time and economically necessary activities consume another third, the remaining third must be more carefully husbanded in order to assure that over-indulgence in play does not reduce leisuring to a negligible quantity or exclude it entirely. Yet, paradoxically, the individual who must earn a living and does so by a mode of subsistence-work that is full of drudgery would seem to have good reasons for resorting to what would otherwise be excesses of sleep and play.

Drudgery is fatiguing and painful. Under such circumstances, the individual has a greater need for sleep and for therapeutic play and his over-riding pursuit of pleasure can be justified as an anodyne for his hours of painful toil. The paradox of this situation lies in the fact that it is the very character of the subsistence-work this indi-

vidual does—work that involves little or no aspect of leisure—that would appear to justify his using what free time he has left from sleep and work for play rather than for leisure.

As a result, a life that involves a low grade of subsistence-work (work near the drudgery end of the spectrum) tends to become a three-part life, the whole time of which is consumed in sleep, work, and play. If a good life is at least a four-part life, and one that involves as much leisure-work as possible, then the full answer to the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?*, includes the proposition that low grades of subsistence-work should either be avoided entirely or reduced to the minimum, in terms of the number of hours and years that must be spent in it.

Before we look into the implications of this proposition, one point may need to be cleared up. In dealing with the apportionment of one's time to sleep, play, idling, and subsistence-work of a low-grade variety, I have stressed minimums, whereas I have advocated a maximum use of one's free time for leisure-work. This confronts us with a striking contrast between one of the five major activities or parts of life and the other four. Why should four be kept to the minimum that is necessary, useful, or reasonable, while we are urged to devote as much time as possible to the fifth? Why cannot leisuring, like play, idling, drudgery, or sleep, be indulged in to excess?

The answer should be as obvious as it is simple. The only limitation that must be placed upon leisuring is one we have already observed; namely, that it should not occupy the whole of our free time—that reasonable minimums be left for other activities. With such allowances made, one cannot over-indulge in leisuring. No one can ever learn too much. No one can ever know or understand all that he is capable of knowing and understanding. No one can ever attain the full development of his personality. No one can ever reach by personal growth the full stature of which he is capable. No one can ever exhaust his creative resources, no matter how fortunate he is in health and length of life, no matter how much free time he has at his disposal, no matter how prudent he is in limiting the amount of free time he spends in play.

With this point clarified (and it is a point of critical importance in the common-sense answer to our question), let us return to the consideration of what should be done about subsistence-work in a life in which a certain amount of it is, for economic reasons, unavoidable. First, if one has a choice, what kind of subsistence-work should one choose to do in order to make a living for one's self? In

view of what has already been said, the ideal is easy to state. Choose an occupation that not only pays a living wage but consists entirely in leisure-work, or else has that character predominantly and so involves little painful drudgery. By a living wage, I mean one that provides more than bare subsistence—more than the bare necessities of life. In addition to providing the necessities, it should enable one to enjoy the amenities—the comforts and conveniences of life. In other words, a decent living. To say this is to say that wealth should serve not only as a means to health and vigor but also as a means to pleasure.

If you are able to choose an occupation that consists entirely in leisure-work, then there is no reason to limit the amount of time you devote to it. It is the kind of work you would do even if you did not need the compensation attached to it. Whatever time is left free by such economically compensated employment can be spent in play as well as in other forms of leisure-work.

If, however, you have to make a second-best choice—taking a job that involves an admixture of drudgery with leisure-work—then there is some point in being concerned about the time the job consumes. There is, in addition, some point in seeking a higher compensation for doing it, in order to speed and prepare for the day when one can retire from it. And to the extent that the job is not pure compensated leisure-work, one should apportion more of one's free time to leisuring rather than to play.

In short, if one has a choice of jobs, one should certainly avoid pure subsistence-work—unmitigated drudgery—and try to take a job that involves as much leisure-work as possible.

With regard to compensation, I have so far said only two things: first, that the compensation should provide a decent living—the amenities of life as well as the necessities; and second, that one should, perhaps, seek more extrinsic compensation (higher pay) in proportion as the job involves less that has the intrinsically rewarding aspect of leisure. This second point involves economic difficulties, for the market value of the work done probably does not justify higher pay, even though it would appear to be reasonable to seek it as compensation for the drudgery involved. This is glaringly true of the jobs at the lower end of the spectrum of subsistence-work. For economic reasons that cannot be lightly dismissed, work that is almost entirely drudgery is usually also at the lower end of the compensation scale.

In other words, assuming for the moment that no one is paid less than a living wage as that has been defined, it would appear to be the case that the market value of the work done is not inversely related to its value for the individual doing it. To say that the highest extrinsic compensation should be allotted to the jobs that involve pure drudgery because the work has no intrinsic value for the individual, or to say that the pay should be lower in proportion as the job has more and more the character of leisure-work, would be to posit a dream-economy that has never existed and may not be possible. Since the economic problem we have just encountered is not one that the individual can solve by himself, let us postpone it until we return later to the complex question of how organized society as a whole should operate—both economically and politically—to facilitate the individual's efforts to make a good life for himself.

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There remains one thing to consider that is a matter of individual choice. Let us suppose that, of two jobs, the one that carries a much higher compensation is humanly less attractive on the grounds that it involves less leisure-work and more drudgery. Which should one choose?

The common-sense answer, I submit, is as follows. Other things being equal (the number of years you would have to devote to both jobs being equal, the provisions for economic security after retirement being equal, and so on), one should choose the job that carries less pay but has greater human value, that is, the one that does more for the worker as a human being.

The reason for this is clearest in the extreme cases and may be very much less clear when the alternatives are less disparate in the incomes and in the human values that attach to the jobs being compared. To perceive the reason, let us consider the following extreme alternatives: on the one hand, a job that has little or no intrinsic value for the individual but yields an income that can buy unlimited luxuries; on the other hand, a job that is self-rewarding to a high degree but yields an income that can buy no luxuries at all—nothing beyond the necessities of life and a moderate amount of its amenities.

If wealth is for the sake of health and a moderate amount of pleasure, if luxuries consist in more than is needed to live and live well, then only a man who does not understand the difference between living and living well, or who does not know what is involved in

living well, would choose drudgery for the sake of a very large income. If making a lot of money involves a lot of time and effort devoted to an activity that involves no intrinsic rewards, the better choice would be a job that pays less but is more self-rewarding.

What about the individuals (and there are, unfortunately, many in this position) who have little or no choice with respect to the jobs open to them and who must take jobs that often pay less than a living wage as we have here defined it, jobs that carry little or no intrinsic reward for those who do them? This, once again, raises a problem for society as a whole. If society permits any of its members to be in the situation just described, it may have prevented them from making a good life for themselves; certainly, it has greatly impeded their efforts to do so. Nevertheless, even in a society that has not yet solved this problem, the individual may be left with certain options. He should make whatever efforts he can to obtain higher pay and shorter hours. Even more important is the use such an individual makes of his free time during whatever period, long or short, that he cannot find another type of job. As a result of the pain and tedium of the work he has to do to earn a bare living, he may be sorely tempted to fill the rest of his hours with diverse forms of sleep and play, but he should resist that temptation and counteract the stultifying drudgery of his subsistence-work by a heroic effort to increase his stature as a human being through one or more forms of leisure-work.

This may seem like a hard line to take, but it is necessary to remember that making a good life for one's self is, under normal circumstances, a hard thing to do, and it is an even harder thing to do for the individual who is impeded by abnormal circumstances beyond his own control. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is 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.

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