

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. —Ralph Waldo Emerson



THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

The book of Genesis tells us that we are made in God's image and the Garden of Eden was a paradise where all needs were met in abundance. There was no need for toil of any kind, in fact it could hardly be considered a paradise if toil was necessary.

Yet for most of us, work or toil occupies a considerable portion of our time. All of us who work for a living contrast that with our free time for leisure. Most of us have to work or toil (8± hours a day) for subsistence compensation, we need to sleep and take care of our biological needs also consuming approximately 8 hours a day. This leaves about 8± hours a day left for what?

And Plato's Socrates at his trial in the Apology tells the court,

“...you will not believe that I am serious if I say that daily to discourse about virtue, and the other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living...”

And Aristotle in his great book on Ethics says,

“...It is not unreasonable that what men regard the good or happiness to be seems to come from their ways of living. The mass of people regard it as being pleasure, ...they appear to be quite slavish in choosing deliberately a life suitable to beasts, but their view has some support because many of those in high places share their tastes.

Perhaps to say that happiness is the highest good is something which appears to be agreed upon; what we miss, however, is a more explicit statement as to what it is. Perhaps this might be given if the function of man is taken into consideration. For just as anyone who has a function or an “action” to perform the goodness or excellence lies in that function, so it would seem to be the case in a man, if indeed he has a function. But should we hold that, while a carpenter and a shoemaker have certain functions or “actions” to perform, a man has none at all but is by nature without a function? Is it not more reasonable to posit that, just as an eye and a hand and a foot and any part of the body in general appear to have certain functions, so a man has some function other than these? What then would this function be?

Now living appears to be common to plants as well as to men; but what we seek is proper to men alone. So let us leave aside the life of nutrition and of growth. Next there would be the life of sensation; but this, too, appears to be common also to a horse, an ox and all animals.”

Then comes Mortimer Adler, who defines toil as work that no one would do if they were not compelled to do so. He goes on to say, There is nothing intrinsically good about toil, neither in itself nor as a means to a good human life. However, this is mitigated by two extrinsic considerations, which cast some measure of favorable light upon toil. Toiling is a more honorable way of obtaining a needed livelihood than stealing. It is also a more dignified way to take care of one's economic needs or the needs of one's family than receiving a welfare handout. To this extent the person compelled to engage in toil preserves his self-respect by doing so.

We all aspire to live a good life or become happy. But unless we think that the money we earn is the sufficient means for living a good life, Aristotle reminds us that the life of a money-maker, is one of tension; and clearly the good sought is not wealth, for

wealth is instrumental and is sought for the sake of something else.

How are we to answer Aristotle's question: Does man have a function, and if so, what would this function be? Can we state it at least in a general way or outline as to what it is that we ought to do with the time of our lives?

THE GOODS OF OUR LIVES

Dear Dr. Adler,

In our society we place a great value on attaining material goods. We tend to judge people by their material success. But the moralists and the saints are always preaching against materialism and the pleasure of the senses. What is materialism, and why is it supposed to be bad?

Tom Hervey

Men have adopted three basic attitudes toward material goods and satisfactions.

The first is asceticism—the total rejection of material goods and sensual satisfactions. Some ethical and religious thinkers hold that the material world is of no importance or, worse, a vicious hindrance to the attainment of spiritual perfection. This is a pervasive and perennial attitude. It has been the dominant ideal of Hindu religion and ethics. While it is not central in the Western religions, it has played an important part there, too.

The second attitude is materialism or sensualism—the avid pursuit of worldly possessions and physical pleasures as the basic human goods. This is also a pervasive and perennial attitude. In its crudest form, it makes money the be-all and end-all of life. We find expressions of it in the flip cynicism of the popular song “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend” and in the familiar adage “Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die.” It is interesting to observe that no great book and no great moral philosopher ever taught this doctrine. The people who preach and practice it probably do not have the time or inclination to write books.

The third attitude affirms the value of both physical and spiritual goods. According to this view such physical goods as wealth, health, food, and sexual pleasure are genuinely good and should not be denied. But, it is maintained, they should be subordinated to spiritual goods—knowledge, justice, love—for the total well-being of the person and the welfare of the community. Of all three attitudes, this middle one is the most difficult to practice.

The ascetic way is hard at first, but, once mastery of the will has been attained, it becomes comparatively easy. The ascetic simply says No to the world and the flesh, and in time unsatisfied desires wither away. The materialist or sensualist simply says Yes to whatever gratifies his senses or fills his pocketbook. Like the ascetic, he is a specialist and does not have the problem of welding the physical and spiritual goods into a unified harmony. The man who follows the middle way has this problem all the time. It is his constant care and concern to keep the two kinds of goods in the proper order and proportion.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to believe that most of us, if we thought about it, would choose the middle way. But most of us are unable or unwilling to exercise the attention and care that it requires. We tend to forget the proper use and end of the material goods we pursue.

First, we buy a car for simple transportation purposes. Then it becomes an item of prestige and conspicuous consumption. Next, one car is not enough—we must have at least two or three. Finally, we become devoted to the automobile almost as if it were an end in itself. We have become possessed by our possession. It is using us, instead of we it.

The realization that evil lies in the attachment to material goods, not in the goods themselves, is expressed in our philosophic and religious tradition. Aristotle distinguishes between legitimate wealth-getting, which provides us with the means we need in order to lead a good human life, and the piling up of wealth for wealth's sake. The Bible asserts the goodness of the material world, as created by God for man. It inveighs against the corruption of soul that often accompanies great wealth, but not against wealth itself. The rich young man in the Gospels is at fault not because he is rich, but because he is such a slave to his wealth and comfort that he cannot give it up to follow after the spirit and the truth.

USING THE FREE TIME OF OUR LIVES

Dear Dr. Adler,

The increased leisure time that is a result of the shorter work week presents modern Americans with a difficult problem. How are they to fill the workless hours? Didn't the ruling classes of ancient societies become weak and degenerate through too much leisure time? I wonder if leisure is a good or a bad thing for most people. Isn't a man's work more important than his leisure in building his character?

Francis Fink

Before I answer your excellent question, let me clear up one point about the use of words. Like so many people today, you speak of "leisure time" when what you really mean is free time—time free from the work you have to do to earn a living.

Free for what? Leisure is one answer to that question, but most Americans today who give that answer mean play, amusement, recreation, even sleep. My old friend Aristotle means the very opposite of all these things. Of all the great writers of the past, he is the one who can give us the best advice about the problem of leisure in our society today. And there is no question that it is a serious problem now and will become an even more serious problem in the years ahead as the work week approaches thirty and twenty-five hours.

Leaving play or amusements aside for the moment, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of serious activity in which men can engage. One is labor, toil, or business—the kind of work which produces wealth and earns a man's subsistence. The other he refers to as "leisure activities"—the kind of work which produces not the goods of the body, not the comforts and conveniences of life, but the goods of the spirit or of civilization. These include all the liberal arts and sciences, and all the institutions of the state and of religion.

Like labor, toil, or business, leisure is hard work, in the sense of a tiring activity. Men need play or recreation to remove the fatigues of leisure as much as they do to refresh them from toil. In order to

avoid today's widespread confusion of leisure with play, I recommend speaking of "leisure work" and "subsistence work" to indicate that both are serious activities, and that the one is as far removed from play as the other.

Aristotle, in considering these three parts of a human life, places them in a certain order. Since he feels that earning a living is for the sake of being able to live well or lead a good life, he says that business or toil is for the sake of leisure. Business or toil is merely utilitarian. It is necessary but, in and of itself, it does not enrich or ennoble a human life. Leisure, in contrast, consists in all those virtuous activities by which a man grows morally, intellectually, and spiritually. It is that which makes a life worth living.

From Aristotle's point of view, those who have enough property so that they do not have to work for a living are the most fortunate of men. All their waking time is free. How should they spend it? Aristotle's answer: "Those who are in a position which places them above toil have stewards who attend to their households while they occupy themselves with philosophy or politics." In other words, a virtuous man who has plenty of free time devotes himself to the arts and sciences and to public affairs.


As for play or amusement, Aristotle acknowledges that, like sleep, it has some biological utility: it provides relaxation and refreshment; it washes away the fatigues and tensions caused by work—subsistence work or leisure work. Hence, just as toil is for the sake of leisure, so play is for the sake of both toil and leisure. Aristotle writes:

We should introduce amusements only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines, for the emotion they create in the soul is relaxation, and from the pleasure we obtain rest. To exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself seems right.

Now let me rephrase the question you asked, as follows: "Is it good for a society to have much free time?" The answer is that it depends entirely on how men who have ample free time use it. If they use it, as so many Americans do today, in aimless play, passive forms of amusement, and desperate measures to kill the time that hangs heavy on their hands, then it obviously is not good for them or for society. It can only lead to degeneracy and corruption. But if people use their free time to develop their faculties, to grow mentally, and to participate in society and culture, then the more

free time they have, the better.

Of course, there is a great difference between the problem of leisure in Aristotle's day and in ours. In his day only a small segment of society formed the "leisure class," that is, men with enough property to have free time for leisure. The rest were slaves or toilers. But in our society all of us who work for a living also belong to the "leisure class." We all have plenty of time free for leisure, if we would only use it for that purpose.

Will we? That's the most serious problem our society has to face. In my opinion, we can successfully check the trend toward mindless and passive time-killing indulgences only if genuinely liberal schooling prepares the young for the liberal pursuits of leisure in adult life. In addition, such things as the great books and great ideas discussion seminars for adults may help them to use their free time in the right way, for continued learning in adult life is one of the best examples of leisure activity. 

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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