



WORK AND LEISURE

The Six Parts of Life

Mortimer Adler

Part 1 of 3

THE BIBLICAL STORY of an earthly paradise in the Garden of Eden presents a picture of human life devoid of the necessity of labor or toil. Expulsion from the Garden of Eden as punishment for Adam's sin of disobedience carried with it the dire penalty of toil. The Lord God said to man: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return into the ground."

There are secular myths, both ancient and modern, that also picture a golden age in the past when everything needed for the support of life existed in profusion and the human race could nourish and enjoy itself without the pain of toil. In all these accounts, toil is regarded as an affliction, as stultifying drudgery, as a crushing burden that deforms human life.

If there is no distinction between toil and work, we are led to ask:

How would human beings spend their time if their lives were exempt from toil? Doing no work of any kind, what would they do with the time of their lives?

One answer will occur to everyone immediately. At least some portion of their time they would have to spend in sleep. But sleep is a recourse to inactivity for the purpose of refreshing the energies needed to engage in activities of one sort or another. In addition to sleeping, what else would human beings have to spend time on? Activities that serve the same purpose that the inactivity of slumbering does. Eating and drinking refuel the body's energies as sleep refreshes them. Cleansing the body, eliminating its wastes, and exercising its muscles all serve the same biological purposes—health, vitality, and vigor.

There is no single word in our vocabulary that is customarily used to name all these biologically necessary activities together with the equally necessary inactivity of sleep. How, then, shall we refer to them as the set of things we must do repetitively, day in and day out, if we are to preserve our health, vitality, and vigor?

I have in the past grouped them under the one word “sleep,” using that word with a broader connotation than attaches to the word “slumbering,” in order to cover all the things we are compelled to do repetitively for our health's sake. This goes against the grain of ordinary usage, but it is an expedient that I hope readers will permit me to adopt in order to avoid more cumbersome terminology. From time to time, I will remind the reader that sleeping comprises all the biologically necessary inactivities and activities that we are compelled to engage in for some portion of our daily life.

Assuming that sleeping occupies a third of our life's time, what fills the rest of it—the sixteen hours, more or less, that remain each day? To answer this question, and to discover what activities are available to fill the time of our lives, let us consider all the time occupying parts of life, including in the enumeration both sleep and toil.

THE SIX PARTS OF LIFE

The first distinction to be made in categorizing or classifying all the parts of life divides those that are compulsory from those that are optional.

The compulsory can then be further subdivided into two groups. We have already considered the first of these under the heading of

sleep—the absolutely necessary things we must do if life itself is to be preserved and bodily health, vigor, and vitality are to be enhanced. It is, of course, possible for persons to commit suicide by fasting and to ruin their health in other ways, for purposes that we can dismiss as abnormal. Apart from such purposes, the normal conduct of life acknowledges the absolute necessity of sleep in that broader sense of the term which includes more than slumbering—everything that is biologically necessary.

The second group consists of activities that are also compulsory but only under certain conditions. If some form of work is necessary to obtain the means of subsistence—the food, drink, clothing, and shelter that, like sleep, are also biologically necessary for the sake of bodily vitality and vigor—then we are compelled to engage in it for the wealth that supports life and health. Let us use the words “toil” or “labor” for that form of work.

To recognize that the necessity of this second set of compulsory activities is conditional, we need not think only of an earthly paradise, such as the Garden of Eden, or of some mythical golden age that has been a recurrent dream of mankind. Today, as in all the historical realities with which we are acquainted, some individuals possess, in one way or another, sufficient wealth to be exempt from toil. They can sustain life and enjoy whatever they need for their health’s sake without having to engage in toil or labor to procure a livelihood.

Today, as in the historic past, such individuals form a class that comprises the few rather than the many. They have been incorrectly referred to as members of “the leisure class.” I say incorrectly because the reference involves an egregious misuse of the word “leisure” to mean time that is free from labor or toil. The title of a famous book should not have been *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, but rather *The Life of the Idle Rich*.

Those who have enough wealth to exempt them from toiling for the means of subsistence do, of course, have much more free time than those who have to obtain their livelihood by engaging in labor or toil that uses up a considerable portion of the time that is left unoccupied by sleep. Whatever time is left over should not be called leisure time but free time—meaning time that can be filled with activities that are optional rather than compulsory or necessary. The miscalled leisure class comprises those who have much more time for activities that are optional.

Before I go on to name the range of these optional activities in

which individuals can engage (whether they have more free time because they need not toil or less free time because they must do so), let me call attention to a point of grammar in the naming of all the parts of life. This grammatical digression will help us to clarify the ideas with which we are here concerned.

The grammatical distinction between nouns and verbs divides words that name things, on the one hand, and their activities or operations, on the other hand. The nouns “body,” “animal,” and “man” name perceptible things; the nouns “health” and “vigor” name attributes or properties of a body. “Eating” and “drinking,” the participle forms of the verbs “to eat” and “to drink,” name activities in which we engage; so do “sleeping” or “slumbering,” “eliminating,” and “exercising.”

Unfortunately, some words that name activities are used by us both as nouns and verbs. For example, we use “sleep” and “work,” “toil,” and “labor” in both ways. When we say that an individual obtains work, meaning that he or she has obtained employment and thereby will engage in working, our use of the word “work” as a noun may lead us to forget that it is primarily a verb, naming an activity, and only derivatively a noun. The word “drink” has a similar double usage, but not the word “eat,” unless we indulge in the colloquial jargon of calling food “eats.”

The misuse of the word “leisure” as an adjective modifying time in order to refer to time that is open to optional activities is not the only mistake we must avoid. We must also avoid the mistake that results from the grammatical accident that, in almost everyone’s vocabulary, the word “leisure” is used either as an adjective or as a noun, not as a verb. We speak adjectivally of leisure time and of a leisure class, or we speak substantively of leisure as if it were something we possess or lack, something of which we may have more or less.

If asked how we make use of our free time, we would think it strange to say that we occupy part of it by leisuring. We would not think it strange to say that we opt for slumbering, playing, amusing ourselves, idling, or even resting. As a result of this inveterate, universal habit of speech, we identify leisure with the way we use free time by playing, amusing ourselves, or just idling, and we fail to identify an activity that we engage in when we use our free time for something other than playing, amusing ourselves, or idling.

To name that distinct activity, which comprises all the pursuits of leisure properly understood, we must use the word “leisure” pri-

marily as a verb, not derivatively as a noun, just as we use the words “sleep,” “toil,” and “work” primarily as verbs, not nouns. Thus used, we are able to say that one way in which we can occupy our free time is to leisure or to engage in leisuring. There are, of course, other ways to occupy our free time—by playing or amusing our selves, by idling, by resting, or by resorting to pastimes which, as that word indicates, consist of the things we do to kill time.

I have now named all six parts of life, all the activities that can fill the time of our lives, including under sleeping everything that is biologically necessary. They are:

1. Sleep: slumbering, eating, drinking, eliminating, cleansing, exercising, etc.
2. Toil or labor: toiling or laboring, which can also be called working to earn one’s livelihood
3. Leisure: leisuring, which can also be called working for some purpose other than earning a living
4. Play or amusement: playing or amusing one’s self
5. Idling, but not idleness
6. Rest: resting

Readers are put on notice that, in what follows, I may sometimes use the noun and sometimes the participle to refer to the activity under consideration, but I will always be referring to an activity, for the most accurate designation of which the participle of a verb should be used.

The one word that does not appear in the above listing of the six parts of life is the word “work” or “working,” even though it is the word that names the idea to which this chapter is devoted. The reason for its omission is that two of the six parts of life—toil and leisure—are both forms of work. Each is working, but working for a different purpose.

Our undertaking to clarify the idea of work requires us, there fore, to distinguish work that is toil from work that is leisure, and to distinguish both forms of work from sleep, on the one hand, and from play or amusement, on the other.

I will for the moment postpone the consideration of the remaining two parts of life—idling and resting. While they are in themselves matters of great interest, we do not need to consider them in an effort to understand work—both toiling and leisuring.

CATEGORIZING HUMAN ACTIVITIES

To define the four main categories under which the activities that fill most of our life's time can be classified, it is necessary to answer four questions, as follows:

First, is the activity compulsory or optional? Here we must consider two subordinate questions. If compulsory, is its necessity absolute (unconditional) or relative (conditional)? If optional, is it also morally obligatory for the purpose of leading a good life or living well, even though it is not biologically necessary for the preservation of life and health, and not economically necessary for earning a livelihood—the means of subsistence? If optional and not morally obligatory, is it nevertheless morally permissible because it does not frustrate our efforts to lead a decent human life?

Second, what purpose does the activity serve? Why do we engage in it? What goods or values do we achieve by doing it, either for ourselves or for the society in which we live?

Third, how is the result we achieve by the activity related to the activity by which we achieve the result, and also how is it related to the agent performing the activity? On the one hand, the result—the good or value aimed at by the activity—may be extrinsic to the activity. It may be a consequence of the activity, one that follows from it and lies beyond it. On the other hand, it may be inherent in or intrinsic to the activity itself. When the activity has no consequences as part of its purpose or aim, it is strictly nonutilitarian.

When it is utilitarian, it may, on the one hand, result in some perfection or improvement of the agent performing the activity; on the other hand, it may improve something other than the performing agent. The result may also be only a good or value for the individual performing the activity, or it may also be a good or value for the society in which the performing agent lives.

Fourth, what sort of activity is it? Is the activity physical, mental, or both in different measures: more or less physical, more or less mental?

The full importance of these questions will become clearer as we

now use them to characterize the four main categories under which activities can be grouped or classified.

SLEEP OR SLEEPING

It is compulsory, not optional; and its necessity is unconditional, not conditional. Its purpose is the preservation of life and the enhancement of bodily health and vigor. The values aimed at are primarily goods for each human individual, though these goods are also matters of importance for the community in which the individual lives. The results achieved are extrinsic to and consequent upon the activities rather than inherent in them. Finally, the character of the activities is primarily physical; or, more properly speaking, they are physiological activities.

WORK OR WORKING THAT IS TOIL OR LABOR

For the great multitude of human beings—excepting only the few who, at any time, are exempt from toil because they are otherwise provided with the means of subsistence and the comforts or conveniences of life—toiling, or working to earn a living, is compulsory, not optional.

However, if we consider the whole of humankind at any time, that statement must be qualified by saying that toil is never unconditionally necessary, since it is always possible for some individuals to be exempt from it by the privileged condition that their possession of sufficient wealth confers upon them. It is not possible to stay alive and healthy without using some portion of one's time for the biologically necessary activities; but it is possible to stay alive and healthy, and even to live well, in the fullest sense of that term, without engaging in the form of work that is toil.

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.

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