

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## WORK AND LEISURE

### *The Six Parts of Life*

**Mortimer Adler**

Part 3 of 3

#### IDLING AND REST

We have already considered two kinds of activity by which we can fill our free time—uncompensated leisuring and play solely for the sake of pleasure. Two more were mentioned earlier in the listing of the six categories of human activity, but I have not discussed them so far. They are idling and rest.

I use the participle “idling” rather than the noun “idleness” because the connotation of the latter is one of emptiness or vacancy, a vacuum that is filled by mere pastimes or time-killing diversions.

When, in the past, the owners of factories or their managers resisted the demands of labor for reduced hours of work, they gave as one reason the deleterious or corrupting effects upon the workers

of the idleness that would result. It did not occur to them that they themselves had ample free time to dispose of, which they did not regard as an occasion for idleness, but rather as an opportunity to engage in the pursuits of leisure.

The Latin word “vacatio” was the antonym for the Latin word *negotio*, which means business—an economically or socially useful employment of one’s time. From the Latin word, we get the English word “vacation,” which many take as signifying an opportunity for idleness. The Latin word like its English translation gives idleness the connotation of emptiness or vacancy when free time is devoid of anything but time-killing or time-wasting pastimes.

I mean something other than that by my use of the word “idling.” I give it a meaning that borrows from the meaning of the same word when applied to an engine that is idling. The engine is turning over, but the gears are not engaged, and so the automobile is not moving. It is not going anywhere. The engine is not serving the purpose for which it was designed and placed in the chassis of the car.

I think of human idling as a use of free time in which we are awake, not asleep, and in which we are not engaged in any purposeful line of thought. Our minds are turning over but are not moving in any intended or purposeful direction. All kinds of thoughts are likely to occur to us when we use free time to engage in idling, especially if the idling occurs toward the end of a day in which we have been engaged in work that is either pure leisuring, whether or not compensated, or has some leisure component in it.

Those who insist upon being busy all through their waking hours by engaging in some purposeful activity, whether that be some form of play or leisure, deprive themselves of the benefits of idling. Their lives are the poorer for it. The spontaneous creativity of their minds is seriously diminished or may even be totally suppressed.

“Rest,” like “idling,” is a word that calls for a brief explication. Many individuals use that word as a synonym for slumber. “Take a rest” means for them lying down and going to sleep. When they say “Take a rest from what you are doing,” they are recommending that you relax by ceasing work.

They have forgotten the meaning of the word “rest” when in the Bible it said that God, having finished the work of creation in six days, rested on the seventh when He contemplated the created universe. In that context, the word could not possibly have signified

either sleep or relaxation.

They have also forgotten the meaning of the word when the Sabbath is called a “day of rest”—a day in which one does not work, nor does one play or leisure.

Still further, they may not know what theologians have in mind when they speak of souls in the presence of God as enjoying “heavenly rest.”

For Orthodox Jews in mediaeval ghettos, or alive in the world today, the Sabbath or day of rest was a sacred day, devoid of the secular activities that filled the time of other days. It had the same character for the Puritans. Strict observance of the Sabbath prohibited not only work of any kind but also play of any kind. How, then, was the time of the Sabbath occupied—the time left free from all but biological necessities? The answer is prayer and other forms of religious contemplation.

Orthodox Jews, especially in the mediaeval ghettos, did not need the day of rest to recoup the energies exhausted by six long days of unremitting toil. Sufficient slumber would serve that purpose. The Sabbath served another purpose for them. It expanded their lives beyond confinement to sleep and toil. It took them out of one world into another. It refreshed their spirits, not their bodies.

Rest, in the sense of contemplation, is the very opposite of the activities subsumed under all the other categories. All of them have some practical purpose in this life. Rest lifts us above and out of the exigencies of practical involvement of every kind.

Is there any rest for those who are not religious—who do not devote time to prayer and the contemplation of God? There is, if the contemplation of works of art and the beauties of nature has the same effect for them. It has that effect when the enjoyment of beauties contemplated involves a degree of ecstasy, which takes us out of ourselves and lifts us above all the practical entanglements of our daily lives.

The Orthodox Jew and the Benedictine monk fill much of their free time with rest. They lead three-part lives, constituted by sleep, work, and rest. The motto of the Benedictine Order is *ora et labora* (prayer and work). Chattel-slaves in antiquity and in modern times, serfs in the feudal system, and wage-slaves, as Marx called them in the early years of the industrial revolution, led two-part lives—of sleep and toil—with little or no play because they had little or no

free time. They worked seven days a week and often as much as fourteen hours a day. The feudal serfs and nineteenth-century factory workers led three-part lives only to the extent that some time was allowed on the Sabbath for religious observances.

#### THE OPTIONS OPEN TO US FOR THE USE OF OUR FREE TIME

For many years, in lecturing about work and leisure and in conducting discussions of these subjects, I have put the following question to my audiences.

On the supposition that you were under no compulsion to earn a living, for whatever reason, what would you do with all the free time at your disposal? The amount of free time at your disposal would be at least two-thirds of every day since only one-third or less would be taken up by biologically necessary activities.

The supposition is real for those who have independent means and have no need to work for a living. It is also real for all who, while engaged in work at present, can look forward to a future in which their retirement from compensated work puts the same amount of free time at their disposal.

Even those for whom the supposition is not real now or who do not see it as a reality for their future should face the question as a way of considering the quality of their lives; for under present conditions of increasingly shortened hours in the work week, they too have enough free time at their disposal to think about the options they can exercise in filling it.

Idling, properly resorted to, cannot take up too much of any one's free time. It should be done only occasionally and then only for brief periods. Nor can rest occupy a large portion of anyone's time, except for religious persons who enter strict monastic orders the members of which are withdrawn from all worldly cares, or for others like them whose religious devotions occupy a large part of their waking life.

After the time consumed by necessary biological activities and after what little time is devoted to rest and idling is subtracted from the day's twenty-four hours and the time of the week's seven days, there is still a considerable portion of free time available to those whose good fortune it is not to have to work for a living. Suppose that were you. What options would you exercise to fill it?

Let me tell you how I would judge, on ethical grounds, the answers you might give.

Were you to say that you would use up the free time at your disposal in one or another form of play, my judgment would condemn you as a childish playboy, a profligate, overindulging your lust for pleasure. While pleasure is a real good that enriches a human life, it is, as noted before, a limited good—good only in a certain measure—and so it should be pursued with moderation.

Were you to respond by saying that you would stay in bed slumbering many more hours than workers can allow themselves, and that you would kill the rest of your free time with pastimes or empty idleness, I would condemn you as a sluggard, choosing for yourself a contracted life, one devoid of the qualities that make it a decent and honorable human life. One does not have to be an orthodox Christian acquainted with the seven deadly sins to know that sloth is one of them. Its seriousness consists in its being an utter waste of one's talents and of one's human resources.

Quite apart from these moral judgments, I would also be obliged to warn the sluggards, the slothful, the profligate, the playboys and playgirls, that they are doomed to suffer boredom and ennui by this use of free time. To escape from it, they are likely to resort to ways of killing time that may turn out to be irreparably injurious to their health—to alcoholism, to drug addiction, to sexual excesses and depravities, or to other forms of human corruption.

What, then, is the ethically right answer to the question?

The major portion of the free time at one's disposal, on the supposition of no need to spend any of it working for a living, should be devoted to doing things that fall within the range of the widely diverse activities that constitute uncompensated leisuring. A reasonable modicum of play should be added, not only for its own sake but also to relieve the tensions of serious and intense leisure-work and to refresh the energies exhausted by it. That would still leave time for idling and rest, sacred or secular, to be enjoyed by those who are wise enough to make them parts of their expanded lives.

As compared with the contracted two-part life of the chattel-slave, and the three-part life of the feudal serf or nineteenth-century industrial wage-slave, the person who adopts the answer I have set forth above has chosen for himself or herself an expanded four- or five-part life.

In such an expanded life, one part is, of course, sleep (the hours devoted to the biological necessities). This part is common to all human lives. Beyond it, for the person not engaged in any form of compensated work, a five-part life would consist mainly of (2) leisure activities, embellished by (3) a modicum of play, and enriched by (4) a little idling, and (5) some measure of rest. The only part of life here omitted is toil. If, in addition, either idling or rest is omitted, it becomes a four-part life. In any case, a four- or five-part life is the ethical ideal—the kind of human life the morally virtuous man would choose to live.

While it must be reiterated that the omission of any semblance of toil from life in no way diminishes its excellence, we may still ask whether it will be included in the four- or five-part life just described, and whether a six-part life is possible.

To answer that question, consider the individual whose work to earn a living consists entirely of compensated leisure. That leisure work has an aspect that resembles toil to the extent that the receipt of compensation imposes certain obligations upon the worker as to the use of his time, the punctuality of his performance, and so on. The worker whose work is compensated leisuring is under certain compulsions. The work done having mainly the aspect of leisure and, only in a minor respect being like toil, the person so engaged would be able to use the rest of his free time for play, for idling, for rest, and especially for additional leisure activities that are uncompensated.

This brings us, finally, to two further questions that have been implicit in the original question I posed.

What about the person whose work involves both toil that is drudgery and also leisure that is compensated? If you were that person, what would you do if, suddenly, you came into a large fortune that exempted you from the need to work for a living? Would you continue the same job, doing the same work, or would you seek a change?

The answer, of course, depends upon the extent of the repetitive chores and the drudgery involved in the job. If that were large enough to be disagreeable or even insufferable, you would most probably seek to quit work. If, on the other hand, the leisure component in the job were very large, and the chores and drudgery slight and infrequent, you might choose to continue doing the work, because you enjoyed doing it, because you personally profited from doing it, or because you regarded yourself as performing a


useful public service. Whether or not you continued to take compensation for the work you did would make no difference to the quality of your life.

The last question I am going to ask is the easiest to answer. The supposition is still the same. You have just learned that you no longer need to work for a living. The work you have been doing to earn your livelihood is purely a leisure activity. Would you continue to do it, more or less in the same way, with the compensation for doing it relinquished because unneeded?

If your answer is that you would not continue, that you would stop doing any work, and devote most of your greatly enlarged free time to amusing yourself and to killing with pastimes the remaining hours that would hang heavy on your hands, my response would be, as before, a moral condemnation of you as slothful and immoderately playful. It would also carry a warning about boredom and ennui.

The ethically right answer should be immediately obvious. You should continue doing the work you have for so long been doing, with nothing changed except the removal of any aspect of toil and the foregoing of any compensation.

All of the questions considered, together with the answers indicated as ethically sound, apply to all workers who have the good fortune of being able to look forward to a long and healthy life after retirement from compensated work, regardless of how much drudgery and how much leisuring was involved in it.

To retire from compensated work without prior planning for the uncompensated leisure-work that should take its place is to face the disaster of a life that has become contracted and emptied of its most meaningful content—a prolonged vacation that is not only boring but also disabling, both mentally and physically. 

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