

Introduction

Our relationship with work and leisure is undergoing revision. Our relationship to work and leisure has always been open to some questioning, but such questioning has grown, as we see in such discussions surrounding the “Great Resignation,” “Quiet Quitting,” and the “Age of Anti-Ambition.” The general tendency of such discussions is to say, or assume, that we are increasingly disgruntled with work and increasingly open to leisure. Some bemoan this supposed movement, but others delight in the prospect of a future with much less work.

There are plenty of possible angles of approach to this revision, including inquiring into economic trends that might be introducing increased instability into the labor market, the capacity of technology to support greater leisure, and whether humans possess a natural right to free time. However, I propose that we¹ also directly address the role we *want* leisure to play in our lives. This is the more basic question. If we do desire leisure, we will certainly need to address economic realities, technological possibilities, and political policies. But all of that assumes an answer to the question of the *proper* place of work and leisure.

In the following, I address this more basic question of leisure’s place in human happiness. In the case of the “Great Resignation,” we should ask: Why have greater numbers of workers resigned their positions? Is it merely because of greater bargaining power on behalf of workers? Or, are people increasingly leaving because of growing discontent with work itself? “Quiet Quitting,” the refusal to do more at work than what is required in a job description, further suggests an increased questioning of our value attachments. Quiet Quitters are discontented with their positions, so does this mean they are placing their plans and hopes in leisure instead? The same applies for the “Anti-Ambitious.” If work is no longer the ground for our serious activity, then is it to leisure that we thereby turn?

If such discontent with work is real, it is not “idle” to ask the nature of leisure. If that is where we are turning, we should be curious about its nature, its promises, and whether we are fit for it. Thankfully, we are not completely at a loss. While we may have tended to emphasize work in liberal democracies, not all human societies and individuals have so valued work. Even if we have not spent much time experiencing leisure, or contemplating it, others have, and we should exploit these resources for our own benefit.

Methodology

The purpose of this book is to inquire into the concept of leisure, and to do so in a manner akin to that of Mary Shelley’s *Doctor Frankenstein* (though hopefully with a slightly more sanguine result). Leisure is dead, and the book attempts to understand what would be necessary to reanimate it. As with *Doctor Frankenstein*, something like anatomy is necessary. The approach of the book, the “anatomy” of it, is a genealogy of the concept of leisure. I ask: What was leisure in its peak form in the classical age? In such a form, how was leisure understood to be connected to human flourishing? Then, what happened to leisure? What is the argument for work that triumphed and shaped the modern, liberal world? Also, what must be rejected, or lost, about work if leisure is to be regained? And finally, in the end, what does this tell us about what must happen for leisure to become a focal point of our lives?

The book is therefore a kind of intellectual history. However, it makes no claim to being a *complete* intellectual history but instead a *representative* one. The purpose of the history presented here is not the history for its own sake but for the sake of understanding ourselves. It operates on the suspicion that cultural self-knowledge is difficult and often requires more effort than we initially suppose. So, when we say we would like more leisure, what do we *actually* mean by that statement? Is it even a sincere wish? I do not think such wishes for leisure are completely insincere, but I find that we often do not fully understand what we are saying or know the full implications of those wishes. I understand intellectual history as a finding of ourselves through tracking and exploring the ideas that shape our values.

Intellectual history is useful in understanding ourselves, but it is also useful in considering possible futures. This is not simply because the past offers us examples of other options but for two more important

reasons. First, it shows us what about ourselves we must reject in order to transform into something else, and, second, it shows us the bounds of that potential future. Many accounts of future leisure are insufficiently sober because of such a lack of intellectual and moral history. Without a reckoning with such history, we become like the romantic partner that is incapable of a healthy relationship because they are preoccupied with a past relationship. And like such a person, we are often ignorant of the effect that our past has on us. My contention is that a future of leisure must recognize the force and fullness of our attachments to labor before any future of leisure becomes possible.

And when it comes to considering what such a future might look like, if we prove capable of reanimating leisure, it will happen because of a certain historical development at the end of a confluence of technological progress, but just as importantly as the result of a particular political regime and its values. Not only do we need to reckon with our intellectual and moral heritage, but a sober assessment of leisure must also recognize what values are unlikely to be shed. I am assuming, reasonably I think, that all change, even extreme transformations, remain tied to context. A notable example of this posture toward interpreting change is Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*. Her thesis is that the American revolution and founding did not arise out of thin air. Her contention is that the American revolution owes much to the English tradition, which partially explains its success. Rather than a complete rejection of the English tradition, it incorporated many elements. Whether the details of Arendt's account of the American founding are accurate is a separate question, but here I share Arendt's posture toward a very different question, and that posture means that we should never expect a founding, even one that is the result of a revolution, to not also incorporate elements of the previous regime. This is important not just for institutional arrangements but perhaps even more important for culture, widely understood. For that reason, we should not expect a reanimating of leisure to construct Aristotle's ideal regime, with its inegalitarianism and its rejection of modern forms of freedom. The strength of such values means they are likely to inform any future leisure.

Plan of Book

This book participates in the discussion of the potential future of leisure. One of the primary claims of the book is that we are not quite prepared

for such a future, but not for the reasons often suggested. Often cited as explanations for a lack of leisure are insufficient technological advancement, inadequate economic growth, and a lack of appropriate public policy. However, I argue that there is a much larger roadblock to leisure than each of these, and that is the structure of our *values*. We work not because automation technology is not yet ready, or just because our desire for wealth is unlimited, or because policymakers have insufficiently protected leisure, but also because we find work integral to happiness and moral development.

The argument for this explanation begins by confronting what is perhaps the most thorough conception of leisure, which is found in the political and ethical writings of Aristotle. Confronting Aristotle on the question of leisure—the subject of chapter 1—reveals the radical departure from our moral thinking that is required for leisure, at least in leisure’s most thorough forms. I argue that Aristotle shows leisure to be more than the mere absence of work: it requires a fundamentally different posture toward living. If leisure is to become a larger component of our lives, we must go beyond seeing it as simply time without serious activity. Without any substantive content to leisure, there will be no great impetus to attain it.

As opposed to contemporary usage, there is certainly content to Aristotle’s conception of leisure, and it represents what I call a “way of being.” Rather than a freedom from work, leisure as conceived by Aristotle itself has requirements. Some of those requirements will be familiar to contemporary understandings of leisure, such as having enough material well-being. But Aristotle does not stop there and also includes moral virtue, intellectual virtue, and a political society devoted to cultivating leisure in its citizens. Aristotelian leisure is thereby best understood as an *achievement*, not as a resource used to achieve something else.

The classical form of leisure remains relevant in its demonstration of how demanding leisure is. At the same time, Aristotelian leisure may seem less relevant in other ways. Most obviously, Aristotle’s ideal regime, which is organized around the cultivation of leisure for its citizens, partially accomplishes that leisure through slavery. Even if some accounts of substantive leisure are not so drastically inegalitarian as to require slavery, some form of inegalitarianism is part of nearly all understandings of leisure that go beyond the avoidance of work. The inegalitarianism of classical leisure assists us in recognizing two things. First, it reveals how far removed we are from the values associated with leisure. This leads to the second revelation, that if we are to achieve leisure, we must either radically change

our values or admit that leisure will take a radically different shape. An argument of this book is that a potential future leisure cannot simply be a return to Aristotle. We remain fiercely opposed to many of the values inherently tied to Aristotelian leisure, and inegalitarianism is only one of those points of disagreement. Instead, a future leisure must be coherent with at least some forms of liberal, democratic values.

Classical leisure, as a way of being, requires that we must also shut ourselves off from other ways of being. The life of leisure cannot also, at the same time, be a life of work. Inquiring into leisure allows us to examine the depth and nature of our attachment to work, which is the goal of chapter 2. There, I address Locke's liberal view of labor. Locke, also recognizing the incompatibility of leisure and labor, provides a representative and powerful argument for choosing labor. There is more depth to his account than is often recognized by scholars. The tendency is to emphasize, in any account of Lockean labor, its relation to the right of property. While this is certainly a crucial component of his thought, Locke makes further claims about the relationship between labor and happiness.

According to Locke, to thrive is to be a rational self-author. While this includes the material result of labor—property—it also includes the development and creation of the self more generally. And it is here that we see his rejection of leisure. According to the interpretation laid out in chapter 2, Locke not only finds the industrious to be worthy of gaining more property, he also finds the idle to be missing crucial components of a happy life. Laying bare Locke's elevation of work allows us to see why we might feel guilty when not being industrious or productive. In such moments, we feel that we are failing to live up to our potential and also that we are being irresponsible. If we have inhabited Locke's understanding of work, these reactions are coherent. If we understand thriving to be composed of constant creation of the self, which takes shapes within various forms of work, and if we see our obligations as similarly composed of work, then we *should* feel guilty at all nonutilitarian activity. Being leisured will be remarkably difficult with such values.

But we have gone still further than Locke. Modern conceptions of vocation—the topic of chapter 3—while greatly influenced by Locke and those like him, also radicalize his notions. In other words, many of us today are even more attached to work than Locke, who used labor as an allegory for all things good, and who argued that all recreation should be useful. For Locke, work is good because it is rational, which means rationality remains the higher good. Reason thereby becomes a limit to

work. As such, Locke would be able to separate better and worse forms of laboring. What later understandings of vocation do, as powerfully developed in Max Weber's writings, is eliminate rationality from the equation. Rationality is replaced by "personality," which need not be rational. While Weber's conception of vocation is ultimately secular, it shares with its religious counterpart a sense of revelation. As with religious revelation, there is no need to answer to reason, only to a feeling. In the case of vocation, that "feeling" is one of a fit with our personality.

Vocation thereby inherits the industry and the self-expression found in Locke but removes much of its bounds. It is self-development for its own sake. This is the reason for the discomfort felt at judging someone's choice of vocation. For many, the self-expression found in vocation is anchored to various kinds of paid labor. But there is no reason for it to be. Here is where I argue that vocation tends to undermine itself. It promises happiness in self-expression and development, but in its subservience to the logic of utility, its potential for creating happiness is severely diminished. Locke's demand that self-authorship include work is sensible because he also prescribes a particular form of rationality. However, once that demand for self-interested reason, what we would today call "prudence," is relaxed, it is less sensible to be tied to work. As such, I argue that vocation is failing and is so because of its own logic. If this line of thinking is correct, many would still feel the need to explore and develop the self but be increasingly frustrated at using the workplace as the ground of that exploration and development.

Strangely, it is the radicalization of the value in work that opens the door to leisure. By emphasizing self-development to such an extreme extent, its connection with rational utility becomes uncoupled. Rousseau, as explained in chapter 4, exploits this new understanding of freedom divorced from rationality. Coinciding with our radically independent nature, Rousseau's notion of freedom is as an expression of the will rather than a function of our reason. As such, freedom is the seemingly infantile "don't tell me what to do." It is a reaching back to an original freedom that precivilized humans possessed. True idleness, then, is what we incline to do, and it must be free from obligation. Obligation contradicts our natural freedom, but it also ruins enjoyment, however noble the activity done out of duty. Reaching back to that form of idleness, then, would also be to experience that original, independent joy that supposedly existed prior to the obligations inherent to society.

In order to do what we *truly* will, to become truly idle, our will must be free from corruptions such as the desire for reputation. In his

Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Rousseau becomes like his “savage,” but with the developed faculties of the civilized. His developed faculties allow him to enjoy his will all the more, but he must strip himself, at the same time, of the corruptions of civilization that threaten his idleness. These corruptions are not limited to outside obligations but also include those internal desires for the trappings of society. Without this achievement, we cannot be truly idle, and our “idleness” will not be happy. We will be constantly considering tomorrow and its obligations, as well as yesterday and its troubles. True idleness is an infinite present. Thus, though an idleness built on freedom as inclination appears easy compared to Aristotle’s cultured leisure, freeing the will is a similarly Herculean task. Despite its difficulty, Rousseau offers a form of leisure that better coheres with modern sensibilities than does the model proposed by Aristotle. Though certainly not universally shared, Rousseau’s model is a clearer fit with contemporary understandings of equality and freedom.

The models of leisure from Aristotle and Rousseau, as well as the arguments for work and vocation, provide us with a sharp scalpel to dissect our contemporary use of free time in hobbies. This scalpel, which is the subject of chapter 5, allows us the ability to not only understand our free time in terms of what we ask of it, and why we ask those things of it, but also allows us to consider our free time’s future shape. Both Aristotle and Rousseau force us to ask the purpose of our hobbies in different ways, but our hobbies suggest that our free time is not as free as it first seems. I eventually argue that though we think of our free time as a space to be free from utility, usefulness tends to mark our hobbies. First, given our attachments to work, we often require our hobbies themselves to be useful. Whether it be gardening or woodworking or whatever, we are inclined to hobbies that have useful results. The term “hobby” itself does not denote or connote much in the way of seriousness. Hobbies are not our primary activities but are there to pass the time. Our serious efforts are those directed to vocation. This means that our hobbies *cannot* be serious, as the majority of our efforts are directed elsewhere. Even if we do not see our work as a vocation, we are not creatures of infinite energy. In the very least, we need our hobbies to be restorative, and not all activities admit of being restorative.

And yet, hobbies are free in a way. Though it is important to notice the structures limiting hobbies, perfect freedom from influence is perhaps not an achievable standard. It is therefore still valuable to consider the freedom that *is* present in hobbies. The argument of chapter 5 is that hobbies reflect freedom as inclination, even if influenced and structured

by utility. If we are looking to a future of increased leisure, then, the shape and structure of hobbies offer an important clue to the possible directions of that leisure. In addition, it offers an opportunity to consider how we might improve our relationship with our free time, particularly by cultivating a taste for uselessness.

Place in Scholarship

This project contributes to scholarship by addressing leisure as a complete way of life. There has been increased scholarly attention paid to leisure in the last decade, but most of these works focus on whether there is a right to leisure within the liberal tradition. Julie Rose's book, *Free Time*, is a notable, and very good, example of that posture. This project is distinct in that it addresses *why* leisure should be desirable in the first place. A right to leisure only makes sense, from my point of view, if it is part of a thriving human life, and this book aims to address that connection between leisure and happiness.

It is also distinct from another type of contemporary argument about leisure: that it is useful. While I will discuss the tendency to make such arguments in chapter 5, and while I will address multiple lines of argument for leisure, I am largely devoting the following to a leisure that is valued for its own sake, not one valued because it is useful for something else. An excellent compendium of the reasons why leisure might be useful is Alan Lightman's *In Praise of Wasting Time*. Though he finds leisure good for other reasons, much of his short book points out that play, downtime, and rest make us more focused and creative. Such arguments are worth contending with, but I intend to emphasize a more substantial leisure that understands itself as valuable regardless of its utility.

The potential utility of leisure is related to a final type of understanding leisure, and that is the supposed need for balance. Just as in the case of wanting more leisure, I am unconvinced that we fully know what we are saying when we point to the need to balance work and leisure. And as a piece of advice, it is unhelpful. It is like telling those who struggle with attaining a healthy weight that they simply need to eat less. While it might be true in a sense, it is unmindful of the fullness of the endeavor. In the same way that moving to a healthier diet might require addressing values and social constraints, it is not enough to tell someone to "work less." This book attempts to confront the fullness of what it would mean to

work less, which must address our various moral and ethical attachments, and not just economics and political rights. Tellingly, no one says the reverse, that we need to limit our leisure and balance it with work—only that we need balance work with leisure. We understand leisure to be the remainder, not the primary form of existence. This book considers what it would be mean for the roles to be reversed, where leisure is the center, and work is the remainder.