

## On Workified Education and the Possibility of Leisure

Oded Zipory

Volume 29, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090411ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090411ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Zipory, O. (2022). On Workified Education and the Possibility of Leisure. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 29(2), 103–116. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090411ar>

Article abstract

*The article is concerned with the difficulty of providing leisure today with a positive definition that goes beyond merely being a negation of work. I argue that the vague boundaries between work and leisure play into the hands of work – a highly praised activity that is dominant in today’s society. I argue that in such a situation, education as leisure and as good in itself is hard to conceive and sustain. First, I present the concept of leisure in ancient Greece (scholé) as time dedicated to autotelic activities – activities taken for their own good – a definition that remains paradigmatic despite its later impossibility. I then show that once work has transformed from hated to bearable to eventually understood as good from a moral perspective, the concept of leisure has also changed – so much so that its positive definition is no longer available to us. After showing how education is affected by the diffusion of the boundaries between work and leisure, I suggest three possible ways to counter this process: (1) focusing on leisure as resistance to the dominance of work, (2) appealing to the deep connection between leisure and religious worship, and (3) a radical rejection of the concept of “leisurely work” or any other kind of work that is presumed good in itself.*

© Oded Zipory, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# *On Workified Education and the Possibility of Leisure*

---

ODED ZIPORY

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

*The article is concerned with the difficulty of providing leisure today with a positive definition that goes beyond merely being a negation of work. I argue that the vague boundaries between work and leisure play into the hands of work – a highly praised activity that is dominant in today’s society. I argue that in such a situation, education as leisure and as good in itself is hard to conceive and sustain. First, I present the concept of leisure in ancient Greece (scholé) as time dedicated to autotelic activities – activities taken for their own good – a definition that remains paradigmatic despite its later impossibility. I then show that once work has transformed from hated to bearable to eventually understood as good from a moral perspective, the concept of leisure has also changed – so much so that its positive definition is no longer available to us. After showing how education is affected by the diffusion of the boundaries between work and leisure, I suggest three possible ways to counter this process: (1) focusing on leisure as resistance to the dominance of work, (2) appealing to the deep connection between leisure and religious worship, and (3) a radical rejection of the concept of “leisurely work” or any other kind of work that is presumed good in itself.*

## **Introduction**

A few years ago, I was living in a typical American suburb where one of the popular leisure activities for children was soccer. My son, who was seven years old at the time, joined the local team and participated in two weekly practices and one match. The matches took place on Saturday mornings, usually at 8 a.m., with an active and enthusiastic participation of the parents, of whom many volunteered as referees or administrators, or simply prepared the food for everyone who attended.

As expected, the level of playing itself was not very high. Any enjoyment from watching the game, if any at all existed, came from seeing cute children dressed up in soccer uniforms and naively imitating gestures of professional players. I was wondering at the time what exactly the goals were of this meticulously organized social ceremony that attracted so many children and adults. What was it that brought so many families to leave the house on their free day to watch and participate in something that seemed to be lacking any real instrumental value yet was also hardly enjoyable? In more analytical terms, my questions were: What are the features of this activity as leisure and what definition of leisure would help to make sense of it and many other similar activities? In addition, I asked whether and how this practice may be educational and what the relationship may be between leisure and education.

In this article, I am concerned with the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of providing leisure today with a positive definition that goes beyond merely being a negation of work. I argue that the boundaries between work and leisure, once understood as being relatively simple, are now vague, with this unclarity playing into the hands of work – a highly praised activity that is dominant in today’s society. This state of affairs has grave consequences for education – traditionally understood as being

tightly connected to leisure. A concept of education that is good in itself and not just a means toward other ends is hard to conceive and sustain, both theoretically and practically. In other words, I claim that education is at risk of becoming a particular kind of work.

First, I present the concept of leisure in ancient Greece (*scholē*) as time dedicated to autotelic activities – activities taken for their own good. The purpose of this presentation is not merely historical but is primarily conceptual and is aimed at exposing the political, and to some extent even moral, meaning of leisure. Discussing leisure in Plato’s and Aristotle’s thinking will allow me to examine the possibility of leisure as something that is not dependent on work and not conditioned on its lack. Furthermore, it is this definition that remains paradigmatic despite the later impossibility of, or at least the great difficulty in, retaining the ancient concept of leisure. I show that once work has transformed from hated to bearable to eventually understood as good from a moral perspective, the concept of leisure has also changed – so much so that its positive definition is no longer available to us. The issue is not merely analytical but also political – the blurring of the lines between work and leisure signifies the dominance of the former, and leisure is much harder to defend once its meaning is vague. After showing how education is affected by the diffusion of the boundaries between work and leisure, I will suggest three possible ways to counter this process: (1) focusing on leisure as resistance to the dominance of work, (2) appealing to the deep connection between leisure and religious worship, and (3) a radical rejection of the concept of “leisurely work” or any other kind of work that is presumed good in itself.

### The Leisure of Antiquity as an Obvious Good

Leisure’s positivity can be seen when looking at its opposite terms in ancient Greek and Latin. While leisure was termed as *scholē* and *otium*, work or business were defined negatively, and were called *ascholia* and *negotium*.<sup>1</sup>

For Plato, philosophical contemplation is the most appreciated human activity, along with leisure, which is required for philosophy is therefore superior to any form of non-leisure. Threats facing philosophy can arise from several sources, but first of all is the danger derived from what Plato sees as the relation between leisure and non-leisure and his soul–body dualism:

The body keeps us constantly busy by reason of its need of sustenance; and moreover, if diseases come upon it they hinder our pursuit of the truth. And the body fills us with passions and desires and fears, and all sorts of fancies and foolishness, so that, as they say, it really and truly makes it impossible for us to think at all. The body and its desires are the only cause of wars and factions and battles; for all wars arise for the sake of gaining money, and we are compelled to gain money for the sake of the body. We are slaves to its service. And so, because of all these things, we have no leisure for philosophy. But the worst of all is that if we do get a bit of leisure and turn to philosophy, the body is constantly breaking in upon our studies and disturbing us with noise and confusion, so that it prevents our beholding the truth (*Phaedo*, 66b–d).

The body is the source of busyness and worries that distract men from the leisurely pursuit of truth, and the constant pressure it inflicts on the soul through pain or pleasure threatens to reduce the independence of the mind, and turn it into a slave.

The body is not the only source for lack of leisure. Politics and public life, for Plato, pose a similar threat, and those who take part in it from a young age are considered “as slaves in breeding compared with freemen” (*Theaetetus*, 172d). While the philosophers enjoy leisure, talk in peace, and “take their time” with their arguments, having only the truth in mind, the un-leisured person is “always

---

<sup>1</sup> Work was also called *ergon*, *ponos*, and *banaios*.

in a hurry – for the water flowing through the water-clock urges them on ... and their discourse is always about a fellow slave and is addressed to a master.” Not only are they rushed by measured time, but the scope of their words is narrowed, as they “are always directed to the point at issue” (*Theaetetus*, 172e). Measured time goes hand in hand with “measured” words – a pre-determined end to speech.

Working for the clock and for the issue at stake is harmful for mind and character. While the people Plato describes might gain proficiency with words, their souls become “small and warped.” Their lack of leisure is not a question of mere lifestyle but a moral one, since enduring this kind of slavery from their youth causes them to turn to “deceit and to requiting wrong with wrong, so that they become greatly bent and stunted. Consequently, they pass from youth to manhood with no soundness of mind in them, but they think they have become clever and wise.” (*Theaetetus*, 173a–b)

This “mutilation of the soul” is not restricted to public life or to the courthouses, but appears at every instance where leisure is absent and in every activity that is goal-oriented or involves the body. Where the two are involved, the mutilation is even worse, and in the *Republic*, Plato describes in vivid colours the harm done to the soul by such work:

Just as men escape from prison to take sanctuary in temples, so these gentlemen joyously bound away from the mechanical arts to philosophy, those that are most cunning in their little craft. For in comparison with the other arts the prestige of philosophy even in her present low estate retains a superior dignity; and this is the ambition and aspiration of that multitude of pretenders unfit by nature, whose souls are bowed and mutilated by their vulgar occupations even as their bodies are marred by their arts and crafts. Is not that inevitable? (495d–e)

Both body and soul of the worker made him naturally unfit for philosophy, as his upbringing in a leisure-less state damaged them beyond repair. Work, materiality, bodily needs, passions, and instrumentality<sup>2</sup> not only interfere with the search for truth but even threaten to contaminate it; therefore Plato recommends that philosophy should steer clear from them.

Strong as Plato’s recommendation for leisure is, it is not a principle of philosophy, morality, or politics as it is for Aristotle. While sharing Plato’s wish that citizens be “unhurried and unharassed” (Solmsen, 1964, p. 207), Aristotle expands this position by elevating leisure to a founding principle of virtuous human activity and of happiness. Leisure’s importance for the good life is unquestionable, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he asserts that “happiness is thought to involve leisure; for we do business in order that we may have leisure, and carry on war in order that we may have peace” (book X, 1177b6). This simple claim shows both how theoretically and politically unproblematic *scholé* indeed was, and the enormous conceptual distance between us and the ancients in regard to leisure and work. Even if we accept the dependence of happiness on leisure, the comparison between work and war strikes us as strange and definitely as too extreme. Yes, we can complain about work, but we never consider it as bad as a war.

Leisure is crucial to Aristotle due to its finality. It is desired, like peace, for its own sake, and does not serve as a means to any other goal. Money or a victory in battle, which are certainly good, cannot be regarded as primary, because they serve other ends. Amusement and relaxation, despite being a pleasurable not-work activity, also do not constitute leisure, as they are “a medicine for the ills of work” (Destrée, 2013, p. 309), and not ends in themselves. Leisure, in other words, is not just a relief from the burdens of work, but a set of actions taken for its own sake.

The centrality of leisure in the life of the Aristotelian best possible polis could not be overstated, as leisure is required not only for philosophical contemplation (as it does for Plato) but also for politics.

---

<sup>2</sup> Although work and instrumentality are not identical, they still share the idea that something is done in order to achieve something else. Since this relationship between means and ends, its complications in modernity, and the possibility of overcoming this relationship in leisure are my focus here, I use the terms “work” and “instrumentality” interchangeably throughout the article.

Aristotle argues that whoever cannot enjoy leisure should be excluded from governance because [they] will not be able to be an appropriate citizen. Not only do manual workers not have enough leisure needed for politics (*Politics*, 1273a), but the very work they perform harms their minds (or, at least, does not contribute to their development), making their intellectual abilities not much better than those of a slave. Aristotle strengthens this comparison between the *banausoi* (manual workers, craftsmen) and the slave more than once. Although the difference between the “real” free man and the worker, Aristotle says, is not natural (as it is in his infamous difference between the citizen and the slave), still “the meaner sort of mechanic has a special and separate slavery,” and this slavery might even be worse, since the artisan is removed from his master and cannot attain excellence from him as easily as the ordinary slave (1260b13). The *banausoi* lend their actions to the will of the community (1278a9–10), and they are subjected to the tastes and preferences of potential consumers of their products. In general, the problem is that craftsmen rely on others for themselves and their business. Even if officially the worker is considered a free man (and this was the situation in a few Greek cities), he is still not his own master.

The problem goes even deeper than merely working *for someone*; it lies in the fact that the worker works *for something*. He is trained from an early age to think towards pre-determined ends, and thus employ his reason narrowly; the workers’ “day-to-day relations with others are largely instrumental, and their minds have not been enlarged by education befitting a free person, [therefore] they are highly imperfect participants of public issues” (Kraut, 2002, p. 216). In addition, they work just for money, and would give up their labour if they had the chance, which shows once again how unworthy is their practice.

Classicists Destrée and Solmsen rightly notice that Aristotle is using leisure in two meanings: “in the first case, it commonly means the free time we have when we don’t need to work; in the second, it is a specifically Aristotelian usage, corresponding to autotelic activities which are never for the sake of something else” (Destrée, 2013, p. 314. See also Solmsen, 1964, pp. 196–197). What specific activities could these be? We can extract a few examples from Aristotle. In various places he discusses political engagement; listening to, learning, and playing music; philosophizing; and scientific research as autotelic activities. Comparing Aristotle’s view of two activities – displaying courage in battle and musical education – is particularly telling. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that courage permits the soldier to face the “biggest and noblest dangers” (III 6, 1115a31–32). The dangers are both big and “noble” because they involve not only the loss of life, as one would naturally assume, but the danger of being reduced to slavery – that is, of losing citizenship and leisure, and therefore losing any chance of attaining happiness. Courage is a means, because it might help in achieving victory and peace, which are required for leisure. Victory also guarantees the enslavement of the losers, which in turn, by taking care of necessities, provides more leisure for the winner: “at the same time, being courageous [with leisure activities] in view makes them choice-worthy for themselves as they show the soldiers’ commitment to them. And this is so even if they lose the battle: at least they will have shown their commitment to the activities that constitute their perfect happiness” (Destrée, 2013, p. 316).<sup>3</sup>

As for musical education, when describing the proper formal education for the ideal polis, Aristotle decides that among the subjects usually taught – writing, athletics, painting, and music – the latter is the best, as it is the farthest away from being “useful” and has nothing to do with necessities (Solmsen, 1964, p. 212). Music learned, played, and aesthetically judged in leisure, moulds and strengthens the character. It both exercises the intellectual faculty and successfully “imitates” moral virtues, thus making them easier to foster in the young. Even more important, music is enjoyable

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle is very clear about the fact that courage in war just for the cause of victory is not enough to be truly virtuous, nor does it contribute to stability in times of peace: “Most military states remain safe while at war but perish when they have won their empire; in peace-time they lose their keen temper, like iron. The lawgiver is to blame, because he did not educate them to be able to employ leisure. ... Therefore we must not cultivate virtue after the manner of the state of Sparta” (*Politics*, 1334a).

(unlike the exercise of courage in war, which, at least in a simple sense of the word, could hardly be described as “enjoyable”), and since “virtue is a matter of enjoying” (*Politics*, 1340a14), the fact that certain kinds of music are enjoyable attests to its worth. In short, enjoyment of music through learning, playing, or listening is both a means toward the acquisition of noble virtues and virtuous in itself. According to Aristotle, then, music, considered as an approximation to leisure’s most typical practice – philosophical contemplation (*NE* X 8, 1178b25-28) – is not only desired, it should be available for every citizen.

In conclusion to this point, the conception of leisure in ancient Greece is not very complicated and can be easily understood, if not intuitively then at least directly and without lingering ambiguities: leisure is important because it is both an end in itself and a means to the noblest of goals: a virtuous life, searching for the truth, and sharing life together (politics, for Aristotle). In no way is leisure a simple abstention from work, but rather, it can be found only in autotelic activities. What is important to notice is that this neat separation of leisure from work and the valuation of the former is only possible if work is understood as primarily negative. Only when work is considered a necessary evil or as divine punishment, can leisure be taken as its opposite and as a self-evident good.

As said earlier, this is not meant to be a historical account of leisure but a discussion of the concept’s connection to work. In that sense, we will see that even with the radical change in our conception of work, the idea of leisure has remained a “Greek” one, with the new apprehensions of leisure still built on the classic concept or struggling to defend it. The conceptual alternatives I suggest toward the end of the article seek to reconstruct leisure while acknowledging the impossibility of a contemporary return to the “old” kind of leisure – once the concept of work has changed, leisure has become more complex, less stable, and not as easy to identify and defend. Therefore, I will now discuss the change in our appreciation of work.

### **Work as an End in Itself**

One of the first and liveliest descriptions of the radical change in our valuation of work from a primarily negative thing to a positive one from a moral and religious perspective, can be found in Max Weber’s classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/1992). Indirectly arguing with Marx, Weber suggested that a change in certain religious views has contributed to the rise of capitalism and not the other way around. As for the concepts of work and leisure, he showed their radical, even revolutionary, transformation. According to Weber, in the protestant worldview, work was no longer merely divine punishment or just necessary for survival but a religious and moral duty. It was even an opportunity: serving God is not limited to certain people who dedicate their life to doing so (pastors, monks, nuns) or to certain activities (like prayer) but available to anyone who works – from the lowly manual labourer to the successful businessman. For work to be a way of serving God, it should be carried out in a certain way: efficiently, diligently, and not out of necessity or greed. As such it can become a vocation. Combined with the Calvinistic idea of predestination, work has also become a sign of a kind for the worker of being one of the chosen. Accordingly, and this should come as no surprise, leisure in all forms has been condemned. A good protestant should not be looking for leisure, for free time, or even for enjoyments in the fruits of his labour but only for opportunities to further serve God’s glory. The believer should look for more work (or for investment opportunities), since “waste of time is the first and in principle the deadliest of sins” (Weber, 1905/1992, p. 77). Socializing, idle talk, idleness in general, and even more sleep than is necessary for one’s health are forbidden and are morally judged as wrong. It is interesting that there is no moral connection here between work and profit or income. Time must not be wasted not because “time is money” (that will only come later) but because each hour can be used to serve God through work, and once the hour passes, it shall never return.

Although Weber is interested in the religious basis of the capitalistic “consciousness” or worldview, the approach he so vividly describes is not too foreign to us nowadays, secular as our contemporary society may be. From the common term of “work ethics” to the almost instinctive repulsion of laziness to the anxiety caused by “too much” free time, we can see that the protestant ethic regarding work and leisure has continued with almost no change in modern society, in which our activities are no longer aimed at the glory of God but at personal fulfilment and self-realization. Work is still not merely a means for survival but a matter of fulfilling one’s duties, and although these are more moral and civic than they are religious, the pro-work spirit remains the same. For example, leisure and idleness are no longer considered religious sins but they are associated with addictions, poverty, and social and personal irresponsibility, and in general they are seen as the result of character flaws and moral deficiencies. The punishment for not working enough is no longer divine but here on earth in the form of material and spiritual poverty.

The importance of work in our culture is undeniable. The values of hard work and industriousness, diligence, thrift, and frugality, which in the past were aimed spiritually at soul-saving and pragmatically at the gathering of capital, continue to function as important economic, social, and psychological apparatuses. According to sociologist Paul Ransome, in the work-society (sometimes referred to as “work-based society”) “people regard work ... as their central life interest in the sense that they attribute greater significance to the benefits which come from this realm of activity than they do from any other realm” (2015, p. 15). In a not so different manner from that of the Puritans, here too work is important beyond sustenance, and the expectations attached to it go beyond material security. Work is meant to provide psychological security (principally through income and the continuity of employment), opportunities for creativity (i.e. having interesting and challenging work), and opportunities for social contact. The prevailing organization of work is believed to be the only way currently available of enabling people to meet these needs.

Specifically with regard to social needs, political theorist Kathi Weeks rightfully indicates that “after the family, waged work is often the most important, if not sole, source of sociality for millions” (2011, p. 6). As for parenting and education, Weeks adds that “raising children with attributes that will secure them forms of employment that can match if not surpass the class standing of their parents is the gold standard of parenting” (2011, pp. 6–7).

Ransome emphasizes the satisfaction of needs by work, claiming that when these needs are understood as ahistorical and universal, work and “aggressive productivism” (2015, p. 25) indeed seem to be the best, and only, activity that can satisfy these needs. Following Russell W. Belk and Erich Fromm, Ransome claims that only work seems to answer sufficiently the basic existential needs of doing, having, and being: “whether we express ourselves primarily through our actions, our possessions or through what Fromm refers to as a ‘being mode of existence’, productivism is key to all of them” (2015, p. 24). Weeks reminds us that work is not merely the right choice for efficient satisfaction of needs, but more often than not it is also an unescapable requirement. Being employed is seen as a sign and an outcome of a successful treatment: medical, psychiatric, or educational. In fact, productivity, according to Weeks, is not motivated primarily by consumption, or by any other purely economic reason for that matter; it is also “a social convention and a disciplinary apparatus rather than an economic necessity,” an expression of independence and the fulfilment of a civic duty rather than an action related to money or goods (2011, p. 7).

To conclude, work is truly paradigmatic – we accept it as a valued practice, a necessity, an explanatory concept, a motivational pull, and a valuable reward, and ultimately we accept work as the final justification for a majority of our actions and of our social standing. It is through work that meaning and self-worth are created at the individual level and it is through work that equality, freedom, justice, and mobility are created and distributed at the level of society. Not longer relying on any explicit transcendence or religious justification, work “becomes itself an end or an end in itself” (Ransome, 2015, pp. 27–28).

## The Workification of Leisure<sup>4</sup>

How does this change in our conception of work affect our access – both conceptually and practically – to leisure as a set of autotelic activities and the time we can dedicate to them? First of all, and this is the obvious effect, leisure is often viewed as a waste caused by flaws of character. It is considered an activity no longer good in itself but as good for nothing. Secondly, and here is where things get complicated and leisure becomes even conceptually harder to defend, the borders between work and leisure become blurred by the insertion of supposedly free or leisurely elements into work, and even more importantly, by mixing utilitarian and instrumental elements into leisure.

To best understand the utilization and use of leisure I will present and discuss Thorstein Veblen's somewhat forgotten concept of "conspicuous leisure" from his important book *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994/1899). The study, a mix of speculative yet penetrating sociological, anthropological, and economic insights, is best known for its contribution of the concept of "conspicuous consumption," a concept which proved useful and relevant for post-Second World War consumerist society and "post-industrialist" economy. However, Veblen also speaks of "conspicuous leisure," which is just as interesting and relevant, especially in an educational context.

According to Veblen, society is determined by a constant competition among its members. In this struggle for power, reputation, and domination, advantage is gained through the possession of time and other resources that go beyond necessity. The most respectable persons in society would be the ones who are able to show that they are the most distant from taking care of their necessities; that they do not have to work or at least do not have to "work for a living." This is how Veblen elegantly puts it: "the upper classes are exempt from industrial employments, and this exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank" (p. 2). In this formulation, leisure is an important sign of financial prowess and it must not only exist, but also be shown for others to see. It must be conspicuous: "the wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (p. 19).

Veblen's view, then, is quite simple: working to sustain oneself is demeaning, and in order to gain respect one should distance oneself as far as possible from these activities. To gain the full advantage from this abstention from work, leisure should be shown publicly through a person's "useless" activities or through the time-use of one's family members (e.g. a wife who arranges charity events, the kids who go to college).

For example, knowledge of Latin, abstract mathematics, or any other kind of non-practical knowledge is an indication of the time resources available for the individual or the household. Higher education (again, beyond necessity), volunteer "work," carefully photographed Instagram vacations, all attest to the time not dedicated to subsistence that is in the possession of a person who is economically and socially strong enough.

What is interesting in Veblen's theory is that, in fact, his concept of leisure is counterintuitively productive, and it is productive exactly through its unproductivity. By taking actions as "ends in themselves," one actually produces social and economic value. Time in which I get a suntan at the beach while doing nothing (as said, this time must be documented and displayed for all to see) is no waste at all because it shows my social standing and economic prowess as someone who can allow himself to be taking this time. This paradox was well known to Veblen and in an interesting short comment he says that "the use of the term 'waste' is in one respect an unfortunate one" (p. 46). There is no such thing as a pure waste of time and even leisure produces reputation, cultural capital, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Similarly to "gamification," here too the process signifies an insertion of "foreign" elements into an activity or a social phenomenon that was qualitatively different prior to the process taking place. The fact that the word *gamification* is relatively known while *workification* is not and even seems made up, does not mean that elements of work did not spread enough or that this is a new phenomenon. On the contrary, I believe that it signals that workification seems natural and is not understood as distinct.



economic advantages. Similar to von Clausewitz's famous saying, that "war is nothing but a continuation of policy by other means" (1993, p. 77), we can say that according to Veblen, leisure is nothing but the continuation of productivity by other means. A few common terms like *workout* and *recreation* support Veblen's view of leisure as a special kind of productivity and not as the opposite of work.<sup>5</sup>

But is there no value in leisure in itself, as was common to think in pre-modern times? For Veblen the answer is a mostly negative:

The performance of labour has been accepted as a conventional evidence of inferior force; therefore it comes itself, by a mental shortcut, to be regarded as intrinsically base. ... This direct, subjective value of leisure ... is no doubt in great part secondary and derivative. It is in part a reflex of the utility of leisure as a means of gaining the respect of others, and in part it is the result of a mental substitution." (p. 19)

To a great extent, we enjoy leisure because we associate it with the goods we indirectly gain from it. For Veblen, we take part in education, math, music, or sports, and assign them intrinsic value due to said "mental substitution."

We need not accept the full scope of Veblen's theory or his cynical insistence on leisure being merely useful and productive to appreciate his theory's explanatory power and its similarity to the later Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital. Similarly, we need not give up any value that leisure may have in order to acknowledge the ways in which it can be utilized and become productive and work-like. As I will soon show, Adorno's critique of the theory of the leisure class is an example of such an approach and can be seen as defense of leisure.

Before going into possible alternatives to and defenses against the workification of leisure, I will examine more closely what happens to education in such a state of affairs.

### **When Education Becomes Work**

Not surprisingly, when work enjoys such a high status, other human activities tend to also share in this prestige and importance. This is done in two main ways: (1) the activity is considered preparation for or an assistance to work, and (2) the activity is seen as a kind of work in itself – that is, as taking part in production, even if in a unique way. The feminist struggle for the recognition of women's duties and practices at home as "domestic labour" is one clear example. On the one hand, the caretaking of children being done exclusively by women is heralded as the "golden egg that produces cheap labor" (Kessler-Harris, 1990, p. 39). The family is seen as a condition to a functioning market and ongoing production – the "seedbed of economic skills, money, habits, attitudes toward work, and financial independence," which is codependent on the "free enterprise system." Women's place in the chain of production is thus acknowledged as the one entrusted with (1) procreation and (2) preparation of the worker-to-be. But the same actions are also understood as work in itself, as "domestic labour" that should even be waged like any other "real" work. The struggle here is to acknowledge domestic work as real work – that is, as a comparably worthy form of socially dignified labour.

The problem with both these strategies is that they all too often tend to uncritically echo the traditional discourse of the work ethic and unintentionally expand its scope to new groups and new

---

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that even mental processes – conscious and unconscious – have been described in terms of work, such as Freud's famous concepts of "working-through" and "dreamwork" (1925/1899). These are no longer understood as simple waste, mental "leftovers," or something to rid of, but as productive in their own right.

practices – ultimately reaffirming the hegemony of a work ethic. Thus, practices that were considered – rightfully or not – as acts of leisure or as “private, intimate, spontaneous acts of love” (Weeks, 2011, p. 68), such as playing with one’s children, were turned into “domestic labour” and as such became subjected to the paradigm of the work ethic.

This process of workification is not limited, of course, to domestic labour. It also applies to learning, making art, or even thinking, and we sometimes treat these activities as “hard work” in a literal sense. We can see that scholars are often regarded as intellectual labourers, prostitutes as sex workers, and doctors and nurses as care workers. Learning, teaching, and education in general are also subjected to workification. If in the past, education was considered a form of freedom and an expression of leisure (Biesta & Säfström, 2011, p. 540), today it would be difficult to maintain this approach. Learning is not “regular” work, but although students do not receive wages for their actions, the relationships and character of most activities are analogical to those of the workplace. Authority and hierarchy are abundant, rewards and punishments are given, outcomes are produced and considered expressions of talents, merit, and character. In the successfully functioning classroom the schoolwork never ceases; something is always being produced.

It would be an error to read this as a simple condemnation of the school as a “factory” – that is, as promoting an alienated, repetitive, and inhumane form of learning. Yes, certainly some schools, in the past as well as today, do resemble factories. In such traditional schools, discipline and obedience are crucial, and understanding and following instructions are more important than the ability to give them or to be in charge of one’s personal schedule and tasks. Already Bowles and Gintis (1976), as well as Willis (1977), have shown that in such ways, schools prepare children of working-class parents to take their place in working-class jobs when the time comes – along assembly lines or in the service “industry.” In that sense, schools are an integral part of the means of production, as they prepare and produce future employees.

The school in the work-society produces not only a future employee but a whole modern person who strives continually to excel at work, and through this work – schoolwork and homework – become both a disciplined and obedient subject and paradoxically an independent person as well. The worker today must become self-directed as well as manageable, autonomous as well as dependent, creative but only to a certain degree. Is not this an exact description of the contradiction within progressive or liberal yet mandatory education? Students are brought up to be independent and open-minded adults, yet at the same time they are expected to be able to follow authority and willingly subject themselves to the demands of the market. Thus, the claim that education based on autonomy or “creativity” is emancipating is not exactly true. It is correct only in as much as, for example, 21st-century work in the knowledge industry is freer than working on an assembly line. It certainly rings true but it also suggests that exploitation and subjection have changed forms, rather than being abolished. The changes in production did not rid us of the contradictions prevalent to both the workplace and the school but only switched their trajectory from society to the self. Contemporary progressive schools use a language of creativity, autonomy, and self-sufficiency in learning, but they do not solve the antagonism between autonomy and dependence, nor do they solve the problem of alienation in learning. They do re-pose it at a higher level – within the personality of the student. The student in the post-Taylorist school is, therefore, not free from oppression and alienation, but only more prepared for a new style of workplace, maybe even a new mode of production.

In fact, some claim that in this sort of workplace and mode of production, the workers (and we may add, the students) “are expected to be the architects of their own exploitation” (Henwood, 1997, p. 22). For example, employers are not just seeking sacrifice, obedience, and submission but are looking to find “creativity and their relational and affective capacities; it is not obedience that is prized, but commitment; employees are more often expected to adopt the perspectives of managers rather than simply yield to their authority” (Weeks, 2011, p. 70). One is expected to not only fill the requirements of the job but also be enthusiastic about it, to show “character” (usually understood as self-discipline, responsibility, and persistence), and even “love” the company, the product, or the actual day-to-day

work. Again, a similar attitude toward their tasks, the institution, and their own learning is expected of students in most schools – they are not expected to merely fulfil the assignments but also to go the extra mile and express satisfaction with their own learning.

The shift from a Fordist or Taylorist model of education to a newer one can be seen as well in a shift in the status of learned content compared to that of skills, especially “soft” skills, and in the rise of various forms of alternative evaluations – for example, a suspension or delay of numerical evaluation among older grades. If numerical grades or the stable chunks of knowledge gathered by students are products of the learning process, then the shift from them to skills and mental dispositions is not about more freedom in education but about a new ideal worker and new values in work ethic. In other words, it is the style of work that changed but not work ethic’s hold on society and on education. School is still far from the Greek *scholé* and it still resembles a workplace, even if the work is of the less oppressive kind.

The changes in work, both in its day-to-day practices and in its valuation, and the implications for education and schooling remind us of the discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic goals for education, with intrinsic goals associated with leisure (and therefore desired) and extrinsic ones with work (and therefore rejected or at least accepted as mere necessity). I believe this analogy misses the specific problem with modern concepts of work and leisure, and appealing to education as an intrinsic good – education as good in itself – will not show us a way out of this conundrum. In the same way that work and leisure have lost their distinctive features and are no longer considered exact opposites, so has the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy in education lost its distinctive features. For example, while personal growth, to take a popular term, is naturally considered an intrinsic goal, it will still be described as one that requires work, and the educational practices aimed at growth will be suspiciously similar to work, perhaps even work that is alienating. As said earlier, our once natural and largely intuitive access to the Greek concept of leisure is no longer available to us, and, in a very similar way, neither is our access to the intrinsic value of education. Under the dominance of work and instrumentalism – in education and elsewhere – one cannot simply connect to a “good in itself” but needs to adopt an alternative point of departure from which it is possible to examine anew the relationship between leisure and work, and intrinsic and extrinsic value.

### **Can There Still Be Leisure under the Moral Dominance of Work?**

It seems that overall, leisure is losing the battle against work. On the one hand, it is condemned and marginalized as a waste, and on the other hand, it is transformed into a quasi-productive activity, therefore losing its uniqueness and becoming a kind of work (even if a more pleasurable one). I would like now to point to three possible ways to defend leisure without resorting to its pre-modern and perhaps romantic conception. Or in other words, the point of departure for these suggested directions is that work is dominant and a simple return to leisure as a self-evident good is impossible.

First, in his critique of Veblen, Adorno (1941) constructs a concept of leisure that is not entirely determined in a manipulative and subconscious way by constant competition and a search for social advantages, yet which still acknowledges the perceived superiority of work. Adorno’s leisure is not productive and is not meant to conspicuously display social advantage by abstaining from work. In his essay “Veblen’s Attack on Culture” from 1941, Adorno points out the many contradictions in Veblen’s theory, and wonders about its ideological motivations. He argues against Veblen’s a-historicity – that is, the way in which the entirety of human behaviours, or what Veblen calls “habits of thought” (1994/1899) are just the residue of barbarism from ancient times, a barbarism that tries to mask itself as something new and as progress but in fact is nothing but the same familiar competition. For Adorno, this is an attack on culture and Veblen is wrong to dismiss all possible human uniqueness as “pseudo-uniqueness” (1941, p. 77). Adorno agrees with Veblen that mass society is in many ways a

form of advertising, but claims that he is wrong in his sweeping view that society “was never anything but advertising, a display of power, loot, and profit” (p. 78).

A different concept of leisure can be extracted here from Adorno’s critique, one that is not fully determined by the market and the culture industry. When he points to the fact Veblen ignores all “ritual practices, the impulse of sexuality and its symbolism (sexuality is not mentioned once in the entire *Theory of the Leisure Class*), the compulsion to artistic expression, all yearning to escape the enslavement to utility” (pp. 79–80), we see that for him there are human motivations and activities that remain free from the necessity to produce and to display social superiority and that exist outside the control of any competitive instinct. In the same essay, Adorno writes about happiness and its double character, a feature we can attribute to leisure:

There is no happiness which does not promise to fulfil a socially constituted desire, but there is also none which does not promise something qualitatively different in this fulfilment. Abstract utopian thinking which deludes itself about this, sabotages happiness and plays into the hands of that which it seeks to negate. For, although it strives to purge happiness of the social stigma, it is forced to renounce every concrete claim to happiness and to reduce human beings to a mere function of their own work. (p. 86)

Countering Veblen, who understands leisure and culture in general only in terms of productivity – so much so that leisure is productive, waste does not exist, and culture is simply barbarity – Adorno argues that leisure and the culture it enables can express, or at least, are able to express, an aspiration for freedom and a resistance to being policed, utilized, and reduced to productivity. Not very surprising if we consider Adorno’s work in general, this is a concept of leisure that becomes meaningful from the resistance within it. This resistance is definitely partial, unstable, and cannot be institutionalized, but the passion that drives it is strong enough not to be coopted easily.

For education, this approach means that leisured education can occur if it acknowledges that the promises it makes are socially constructed; and yet it need not be shy in offering utopias and utopian thinking that rejects the status quo and offers alternatives.

Another possible way to think about and experience leisure today that is partially resistant to workification can be found in the work of German philosopher and theologian Josef Pieper. In his essay “Leisure: The Basis of Culture” (1963), Pieper criticizes what he calls the “world of total work” (p. 1) and highlights the particular qualities and unique character of leisure, especially when compared to “free time.” This character is not obvious but requires attention and is of a spiritual nature. Pieper would have agreed with de Grazia, who claimed that: “leisure and free time live in two different worlds. Anybody can have free time. Not everybody can have leisure. ... Free time refers to a special way of calculating a special kind of time. Leisure refers to a *state of being*, a condition of man, which few desire and fewer achieve” (1952, p. 5). For Pieper, such a “state of being” can be achieved primarily through an appeal to transcendence and through divine worship. He argues that there is no leisure without celebration, and there is no real celebration absent of gods – whether we are talking about a wedding or about a carnival. Historically speaking, Pieper is not wrong, and indeed it is difficult to find non-religious (religion understood broadly) periods of time that in principle are not dedicated to sustenance and production – from the Jewish Sabbath to the word “holiday” as a synonym for vacation. He is also correct when stating that a critique which is merely intellectual with no basis in religion might prove weak against the enormous pressure for more and better work and for a more “useful” leisure. Prayer, for Pieper, is an example of an ideal leisure activity. Assuming it is not coerced, it involves reflection, contemplation, and relaxation. And in general, religion is the last line of defense that leisure has against the work-society: “When culture itself is at risk, and leisure is doubtful, there’s only one thing to do: get back to the original source” (1952, p. 50). This, as said, is the basis of leisure in religious worship.

With regards to education, this surely cannot mean that education should become religious. Rather, it suggests that reflection, “taking one’s time,” and an appeal to transcendence, at least in the

vague sense of something beyond the merely technical, are worth considering. Having that in mind, we should also be cautious that even these attempts can be incorporated back into the logic of production, like we see with the current discussion of “mindfulness” in schools.

Finally, another approach to leisure can be primarily negative and based on a stern rejection of the attempts to improve work and learning so that they will be more creative or freer. This refusal is double: (1) against inserting elements of leisure into work, and (2) against giving leisure a productive goal. In her book *The Problem with Work* (2011), Weeks critiques the approach of socialist humanism to work and clears the way for a more radical concept of leisure to take place. Weeks sees Fromm as a prominent representative of socialist humanism, and cites his approach to work: “in this process of genuine activity man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end – the product – but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable” (Fromm, 1961, pp. 41–42). In other words, socialist humanism does not reject the idea of work as positive but wishes only to alter it. Alienation in production should be fought against so that a return, which is not unromantic, to labour as an individual and to a creative capacity will take place.

For Weeks, this approach is problematic and cannot stand up to its promises. Quite brilliantly, she points to Fromm’s inaccurate and misleading reading of Marx’s famous quote about work in the communist society-to-be. In this future society, a man could “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, [and] criticise after dinner, as he wishes” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 53). While Fromm sees this as socialism overcoming alienation and freeing man to act authentically, Weeks shows (p. 86) that elsewhere Marx asserts that “in any case, a reduction of working hours is a basic prerequisite” (Marx, 1981, p. 959) – a sentence that Fromm failed to mention. Of course, this is no simple omission, nor is it incidental – for if work is so liberating as the socialist humanists claim, why should we have less of it?

Weeks further critiques socialist humanism for its “impatience with theory” (Negri, 1991, p. 154), its nostalgia for work in the pre-industrial era, and for romanticizing work and creating a new ascetic ideal for production, one that is aimed toward use and not toward consumption (Weeks, 2011, p. 88). Overall, she rejects the notion that socialist humanism offers a better version of work. Instead, Weeks argues for “less work” and not for an allegedly better form of it.

In education the principle that guides socialist humanism – taking alienated activity and transforming it to an authentic one – is not uncommon. The idea here is to counter industrial-like education with an appeal to more authentic goals so it will serve the students themselves and not the market. Progressive education, generally speaking, is a step in that direction, and while being perhaps more pleasant for the students, and while it may even lead to better learning in terms of cooperation, this does not mean that this education involves leisure so much as it is based on a different kind of work. Refusing this approach could mean trying out radical uselessness – leisure not even as its own goal, but that serves no goal at all. In schools, this could mean choosing play over learning – though again, accompanied by the caution that this useless play can very easily turn into yet another method for learning purposes.

## Conclusion

Back to our Saturday morning soccer match, I believe it would be pretty difficult to regard it as a “classic” leisure activity, that is, as being taken for its own sake. The game is understood as a preparation for adulthood in which the child is supposed to learn certain life skills that will assist them later in life. Seen this way, the game is a means toward a goal other than itself. Also, following Veblen, we can argue that through attendance and participation in the game, the family conspicuously displays their resources of free time and manifests its social and economic prowess.

Despite all that, can we still regard the game as leisure – a relaxed, low-stakes activity from which the children gain mental and physical pleasure? I believe these pleasures are conditioned on the

relationship between the children's goals in playing and their parents', and the suggestion that there is no necessary harmony between the two. The children's leisure does not have to lead to learning "life skills" or to any other sort of future reward, and in fact labelling leisure as a "teaching" activity might even damage it through its use. Awareness of the fragility of leisure – children's leisure as well as adults' – and especially an awareness of the delicate yet pervasive ways in which leisure is used, becomes productive and instrumentalized, and in general is "taken to work," can assist in its preservation.

The normative direction for leisured education that I suggest here is primarily negative and is based on a refusal to use the student's time and effort toward this goal of using leisure for work, and on constantly guarding leisure activities against this risk of being used. From this perspective, educating leisurely is mainly a form of resistance. As important as resistance is, there are also some promising and constructive approaches that the educator can use and to which they can appeal. Among these is the concept of *interest*, in which teacher and student focus on the things they care about intellectually (and otherwise). In his book *Interest and Discipline in Education* (1971), Wilson argues for educating for and out of interest, and while not explicitly speaking of leisure, applying our earlier discussion of the term we can say that interest can provide a basis for a non-instrumentalized mode of education. A similar thing can be said of some of Dewey's work, especially when he critiques education that is carried out as "distorted preparation" (1963, pp. 27, 49), and in his early conception of interest in education (Jonas, 2011). Yet another direction could be found in forms of playing and creating that have no lasting and stable outcomes. One can think of theatrical activities, especially in Walter Benjamin's understanding in which "the theater is the art form of the child because it is ephemeral" (2015, p. 203), or of "adventure playgrounds," in which structures are built by children but are very quickly taken down in order for others to arise (Scott, 2012). Finally, following Lyotard (1992), we can understand philosophy as a "childish" action focused on questions and imaginative power rather than on the accumulation of knowledge or conclusions, and as such, see how an education that embraces this approach, either through Philosophy for Children (PFC) or through other disciplines, can constitute leisure.

Of course, the suggestions above cannot guarantee leisure or its "immunity" from utilization, but their focus on enjoyment, lack of stability, and ephemerality make them worthy of experimentation and further inquiry. Ultimately, leisure in and through education can help us envision a student that is not a future worker or an employee-to-be. Moreover, with leisurely education, the student can learn to act and think beyond the dominance not only of work but of the whole means-ends dichotomy.

## References

- Adorno, T. (1941). Veblen's attack on culture. *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 9(3), 389–413.
- Aristotle. (1934). *Aristotle in 23 volumes*, Vol. 19 (H. Rackham, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2015). Program for a proletarian children's theatre. In M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, & G. Smith (Eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings, Vol. 2, Part 1: 1927–1930* (pp. 201–206). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Biesta G. and Säfström, C. A. (2011). A manifesto for education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 9(5), 540–547.
- Bowles S. and Herbert Gintis. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Clausewitz, G. von. (1993). *On war* (M. Howard & P. Paret, Eds. & Trans). London: Everyman's Library.
- de Grazia, S. (1952). *Of time, work, and leisure*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Destrée, P. (2013). Education, leisure, and politics. In M. Deslauriers (Ed.), *Cambridge companion to Aristotle's politics* (pp. 301–323). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books.

- Freud, S. (1925). *Interpretation of dreams: The complete and definitive text*. Basic Books. (Original work published in 1899).
- Fromm, E. (1961). *Marx's concept of man*. New York: Frederick Ungar.
- Henwood, D. (1997). Talking about work? *Monthly Review*, 49(3), 18–30.
- Jonas, M. (2011). Dewey's conception of interest and its significance for teacher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(2), 112–129.
- Kessler-Harris, M. (1990). *A woman's wage: Historical meanings and social consequences*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Kraut, R. (2002). *Aristotle: Political philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lyotard, J. (1992). *Postmodern explained to children: Correspondence 1982–1985*. Eastborne, UK: Gardners Books.
- Marx K. (1981). *Capital: A critique of political economy*, Vol. 3 (D. Fernbach, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and Friedrich Engels. (1970). *German ideology*, Part 1 (C. J. Arthur, Ed.). New York: International Publishers.
- Negri, A. (1991). *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (H. Cleaver, M Ryan, & Maurizio Viano, Trans.). Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Pieper, J. (1963). *Leisure: The basis of culture* (A. Dru, Trans.). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Plato. (1966). *Plato in twelve volumes* (H. N. Fowler, W. R. M. Lamb, P. Shorey & R. G. Bury, Trans.). Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Ransome, P. (2015). *Work, consumption and culture: Affluence and social change in the twenty-first century*. London: Sage Publications.
- Scott, J. (2012) *Two cheers for anarchism: Six easy pieces on autonomy, dignity, and meaningful work and play*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Solmsen, F. (1964). Leisure and play in Aristotle's ideal state. *Rheinisches Museum*, 107, 193–220.
- Veblen, T. (1994). *Theory of the leisure class*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. (Original work published in 1899).
- Weber, M. (1992). *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Routledge. (Original work published in 1905).
- Weeks, K. (2011). *Problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working-class jobs*. London: Routledge.
- Wilson P. (1971). *Interest and discipline in education*. London: Routledge.

### About the Author

**Oded Zipory** is an assistant professor at the Seymour Fox School of Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He specializes in educational philosophy and theory. His major areas of research and teaching are philosophy of education, political philosophy, intellectual history, and critical pedagogy. Zipory's current research projects examine the scientific discourse concerning intellectual hierarchies, and the relationship between hope, despair, and education.