

In Defence of the Post-Work Future: Withdrawal and the Ludic Life

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Abstract: A basic income might be able to correct for the income related losses of unemployment, but what about the meaning/purpose related losses? For better or worse, many people derive meaning and fulfillment from the jobs they do; if their jobs are taken away, they lose this source of meaning. If we are about to enter an era of rampant job loss as a result of advances in technology, is there a danger that it will also be an era of rampant meaninglessness? In this chapter, I offer counsel against any such despair. I argue that we should encourage the withdrawal from the world of work into a more personal world of games. We should do this because (a) work is structurally bad and getting worse as a result of technology; and (b) a more ludic, game-like life would help us to attain a valuable form of human flourishing. I offer three arguments in support of this view, and respond to critics who argue that withdrawing from the demands of work would result in a more selfish and impoverished form of existence.

1. Introduction

The Japanese word ‘hikkomori’ translates, roughly, as ‘to pull inwards and be confined’. It is a term now used to describe the living arrangements of approximately half a million Japanese adolescents and young adults (Jozuka, 2016; Teo, A.R. and Gaw, A. 2010; Teo 2010). They are modern-day urban hermits. They withdraw from society and its demands. They live inside their digitally-saturated, climate-controlled homes, subsisting on a stream of entertainment and food, all made possible by the conveniences of modern technology. Some commentators (Teo 2010) suggest that the ‘hikkomori syndrome’ is a product of Japan’s demanding educational and work culture. The demands are so strenuous that some young people cannot cope and so withdraw into a self-created cocoon. Others argue that the syndrome it is not unique to the Japanese culture, with cases being reported in other countries as well (Ovejero et al 2014). Whatever the case, it certainly seems to be a modern-day

phenomenon, virtually unheard of before the 1970s, and with an ever-increasing incidence since then (Teo 2010).

I am not a psychologist or psychiatrist. I cannot claim any expertise in diagnosing or understanding the phenomenon of the hikkomori. I know only what I have read. Nevertheless, I use them as a jumping off point for the argument in this chapter. I do so for two reasons. First, I think they represent one *possible* symptom of an underlying malaise in modern life, a malaise that relates specifically to our culture of work and the burdens it places on our psychological well-being. The burden is so great that some people are cracking under the pressure (Frayne 2015). What's more, and as I have argued elsewhere (Danaher 2017 & 2018), this burden is only set to grow as a result of increased automation. Second, and more controversially, I think the hikkomori represent a *possible* solution to this malaise. This is somewhat paradoxical, and I don't wish to trivialise what many see as a serious mental health condition, but I do want to argue that general idea of 'withdrawing' from the demands of economic life is something that should be taken seriously as a pathway to human flourishing in post-work future. Indeed, I want to argue in favour of this strategy of withdrawal.

The remainder of this chapter elaborates on both of these ideas. In doing so, it differs from many of the other chapters in this book (**editors please check!**). Where they focus on how to address the income-related losses of technological unemployment, this chapter focuses on the meaning/purpose-related losses. For better or worse, many people derive meaning and self-worth from the work that they do. When work is taken away from them, or when it becomes increasingly precarious, this sense of meaning is threatened. It is theoretically easy (though perhaps practically difficult) to address the income-related losses. It is more conceptually challenging to address the meaning and purpose-related losses. This leads many people, including some of the contributors to this book, to argue in favour of work, particularly in its more 'dignified' forms. People struggle to see meaning and purpose beyond a work-saturated culture. Yet that is what this chapter tries to do. It does so by arguing (a) that our current form of work is *structurally bad* and its automation should be welcomed – hence we should welcome a genuinely post-work economy; and (b) that in withdrawing from the 'real world' we can realise a form of flourishing that satisfies our demands for meaning and purpose.

The argument develops in three parts. First, I make the case for thinking that work is structurally bad. Second, I make the case for thinking that the strategy of ‘withdrawal’ is desirable, using three arguments to bolster my case. Third, I respond to some obvious criticisms of my proposal.

2. Work is Bad and Automation is Desirable

My first argument is that work is bad and its automation is to be welcomed. This is an argument I have defended before (Danaher 2017 & 2018). What I present here is a summary and slight modification of these previous efforts. The argument starts with the premise that work is bad and that anything that hastens its demise is to be welcomed; it then notes that automation is something that can hasten its demise; and thus concludes that the automation of work is desirable. For the purposes of this chapter, I am not going to defend the claim that automation can hasten the demise of work. This is not an uncontroversial premise, but a full defence of it would require an excessive amount of time and space. It is something that has been defended by myself and others, at much greater length, in other work (Brynjoflsson and McAfee 2014; Ford 2015; Avent 2016; Frey and Osborne 2017; Danaher 2017; Danaher 2019). For the purposes of this chapter I am asking the reader to grant, if only for the sake of argument, that automation can hasten the demise of work and to focus on the axiological premise of my argument instead. Is work really bad and should its demise be welcomed?

For the purposes of my argument, ‘work’ should be defined narrowly as a type of economic employment, i.e. as the performance of activities and skills for the purpose of receiving (or in the hope of receiving) an economic reward (Danaher 2017). To claim that work, so defined, is a bad thing is not a new idea. There are many well-known anti-work theorists who have argued that work both immiserates and imprisons the ordinary worker (Black 1986; Gorz 1989; Frayne 2016; Anderson 2017; Graeber 2018).

The problem with such arguments, as typically presented, is that they contradict the lived experiences of many workers. Although there are, no doubt, lots of people who feel immiserated and imprisoned by the work they do (Graeber 2018), there are also, no doubt, many who see their work as a great source of satisfaction and personal fulfillment. To insist that work is bad in the face of this experience stretches credulity. It usually requires an argument to the effect that these happy workers are victims of a kind of ‘false consciousness’. While they might think their work is meaningful and desirable, they are wrong to think this:

they have imbibed and absorbed a pro-work ideology that inures them to the true horrors of what they are doing. While there is something to be said for this idea, I prefer not to deny the actual experiences of happy workers. I prefer to make two connected points (i) that while certain forms of work may be quite good, and certain individual workers quite happy with what they do, their work takes place within an institutional structure that is bad and getting worse (call this the ‘structural badness thesis’); and (ii) that non-work is better, i.e. that a life free from the demands of economic employment would allow for a greater form of personal fulfillment and meaning (call this the ‘opportunity cost’ thesis). Let’s briefly consider both of these claims.

Let’s start with the claim that work is structurally bad. The basic idea here is that work in the modern world takes place within a set of institutional structures (markets for goods and services, contract and employment law norms, social welfare and entitlement law norms etc.) that is bad and getting worse. On a previous occasion (Danaher 2018), I suggested that the structural badness of work has the character of a collective action problem. While taking up work is often rational and beneficial from an individual’s perspective, the net result of everyone doing this is an equilibrium pattern of employment that is bad (and getting worse) for the majority of workers. The badness of this equilibrium arises from the tendency of modern employment to undermine individual freedom and subject workers to arbitrary practices of domination (Anderson 2017), from the increasingly fragmented and precarious nature of employment (Weil 2014; Standing 2011), from the growing levels of income inequality and distributive injustice in employment-related rewards (Piketty 2014; Atkinson 2015), and from the tendency for modern work to colonise our time and our mental real estate (Frayne 2015). The result is that much of what we now do is geared around ensuring our employability and proving our productivity — so much so that we aren’t even given the opportunity to imagine what a world without work might be like. What’s more, all of these negative structural features of work are being made worse by technology: technology enables greater surveillance and connectivity, thereby exacerbating the tendency for work to colonise our minds and to undermine our freedom; the very same features also facilitate the fragmentation of the workplace and the precariousness of employment; and, finally, advances in automation often benefit the few, highly skilled workers, at the expense of the many.

Let’s now consider the opportunity cost thesis. The idea here is that if we could exist in a world without the pressures and demands of work we might be able to flourish in a way that

we currently cannot. This claim is essential if you are to embrace the notion that the automation of work might be a good thing. If you don't believe that non-work would be better, then a natural response to the structural badness thesis might be to try to slow-down the development of automating technologies and try to reform work from within. But if you believe that non-work might be better than work, you can embrace the disruptive potential of automating technologies. So is there any reason to believe this? Bertrand Russell (1935) famously argued that non-work was better than work because it would give people the opportunity to develop higher, intellectual virtues. Indeed, he went so far as to argue that the leisure classes have, historically, been responsible for all the advances of civilisation. The goal should be to make everyone part of the leisure class. This smacks of a certain aristocratic elitism, and suggests that the value of a non-working life should be measured in terms of its social contribution and productivity. That's not all that different from what we currently have: it just replaces economic contribution and productivity with another metric of success. A simpler argument, and one that pushes us further away from the 'work ethic' paradigm, is that without the economic pressures and necessities of work, people will be free to do what they most desire to do — to pursue their own conception of the good life. Of course, this is only true if, having been freed from the pressures of work, they are not left starving and destitute. This is where proposals for the basic income, or similar schemes of welfare distribution, become essential to any case for a post-work future. But assuming they are not left starving and destitute — that they all participate fairly in the benefits of automated abundance — there is reason to hope that they will be free to pursue whatever meaning and purpose they see fit to pursue.

This argument quickly runs into a problem. The hope that people who are freed from the yoke of work will be able to pursue whatever conception of the good life they happen to prefer rests on the naive assumption that the effects of automation will be limited. To be precise, it assumes that people will be displaced from forms of work they don't enjoy and left free to pursue whatever they do enjoy. This is naive because it is unlikely that we can easily control the automation of different modes of work, and quite likely that advances in automating technologies will have far wider effects, particularly if those advances are sufficient to hasten the general demise of work. In a world of significant technological unemployment, not only will automating technologies displace humans from unpleasant forms of work, they will also displace humans from activities that are associated with high levels of meaning and satisfaction, e.g. scientific discovery, or moral/charitable work aimed

at alleviating the suffering of others (Danaher 2017). What's more, even if machines don't completely replace humans in the pursuit of these goods, they may assist humans in such a way that undermines or lessens the value of human achievements in those domains. They will make things too easy and sever the connection between human activity and the goods toward which that activity is directed. Humans will still be able to derive some meaning and purpose from what they do: but it will be an impoverished or lesser form. We end up with a paradox of sorts: the kind of automation we need to achieve a genuinely post-work world may be the very same kind of automation that undermines the pursuit of happiness beyond the world of work. What can be done about this paradox?

In previous work, I argued that we could solve this paradox by pursuing an *integrationist* approach to technology (Danaher 2017). In other words, instead of racing against the machines we can race with them and become more machine-like ourselves. We can prioritise the development of technologies that enhance and augment human capacities, not technologies that replace or displace such capacities. This would enable us to continue to pursue the kinds of projects that currently bring us much meaning and happiness (e.g. discovery of new truths, benefitting our fellow humans and so on), without completely sacrificing the benefits of technology.

There are, however, some significant problems with the integrationist approach. For one thing, it is a largely conservative strategy for dealing with the automation of work and the post-work world. Its appeal lies in its capacity for maintaining the current pathways to meaning and fulfillment. The irony then is that if the integrationist strategy were truly successful, it may just suck us back into the world of work — the very world that I am arguing we should be glad to escape. What's more, the integrationist strategy is highly uncertain and unpredictable. We may not develop the requisite technologies in time to stop the negative effects of automation beyond the workplace, and we may not be able to develop them at all. To pursue the integrationist strategy is thus to make a bet that is highly uncertain and highly conservative.

This leads one to wonder whether there might not be an alternative strategy that would provide a more radical break from the world we current have, while at the same time being more practically feasible. This is where the strategy of 'withdrawal' comes in. I now turn to the defence of that strategy.

3. The Strategy of Withdrawal

To start off, I need to clarify what I mean by the strategy of withdrawal. I understand it to be the practice of withdrawing from the demands of the world as it is currently constituted, into a world that is largely ludic or game-like in nature. This isn't a new idea. Bob Black, a famous anarchist anti-work writer, long ago argued that work should be abolished in order to enable us to live a more play-like existence (Black 1986). And Bernard Suits, in his philosophical dialogue *The Grasshopper*, argued that a perfect technological utopia (in which all productive activities have been automated) would be a world in which we do nothing but play games. My goal is to offer a more persuasive case in favour of this approach.

To do that, I have to put some shape on the idea by identifying some minimal conditions on what would count as a game-like existence. One minimal condition is that individuals who pursue a game-like existence must retreat from the world of objective, instrumental goods – such as economic productivity, scientific and intellectual discovery, the alleviation of distributive inequalities and human suffering, and so on. These things will still be important to human flourishing, but the assumption is they can be left, largely, to the machines to bring about (who will do so in a more effective, efficient and tireless manner than their human forebears). Individuals can then dedicate themselves to maintaining relationships with families and friends (always a core part of human life) and, most importantly, to game-like pursuits.

What then is a game-like pursuit? Bernard Suits's (2005) widely-cited definition holds that a game is a set of activities aimed at an arbitrarily defined end (the prelusory goal), where those activities are pursued in an inefficient rule-bound manner (the constitutive rules), and where the people playing the game willingly accept its rule-bound inefficiencies (the lusory attitude). Put more pithily, Suits argues that a game is any voluntary triumph over unnecessary obstacles. As definitions of game-like activities go, this is pretty good. But for present purposes, I think we need to add one more ingredient in order to properly distinguish game-like activities from non-game-like activities. This additional ingredient is 'triviality'. That is to say, the key defining feature of a game is that it does not (and is known not to) serve a higher purpose or significance. Winning the game (if the game has a clear winning state) does not necessarily make the world a better place, improve one's economic standing, or contribute to the sum total of human knowledge. Success in the game may exemplify

certain aesthetic virtues, it may develop individual or collective character, and it may make the players happy or more satisfied, but that is about it. If it does serve some additional higher purpose, this is entirely accidental or contingent upon its role in a certain social order. In short, games are things that are to be enjoyed for the performances they entail, not for the outcomes they realise.

Insisting upon this ‘triviality’ condition helps to avoid two important errors that arise from thinking about games and the post-work future. First, it avoids Yuval Noah Harari’s mistake of presuming that everything we do is a game. Harari is interested in human flourishing and meaning in a post-work economy and he is dismissive of those who worry that in such a world we would do nothing but play sophisticated ‘virtual’ reality games of no ultimate significance (Harari 2017). He is dismissive because he thinks this is what we already do. For example, he argues that religion is a virtual reality game in which we score points in order to progress to the next level (heaven) and that consumerism is a virtual reality game in which we score points in order to gain social status. While this reframing of current social practices as games has a delightful insouciance to it — and may appeal to someone like me who is deeply sceptical of religion and modern capitalism — it clearly does violence to those who actually live those belief systems. They don’t think that what they are doing is trivial or virtual or game-like. They think it is very real and very important. Insisting on the triviality condition avoids conflating or stretching the concept of the game so far as to include these serious pursuits.

Similarly, it avoids the error of assuming that much of what the work we currently do is an elaborate (if occasionally torturous) game. Someone who has read David Graeber’s critique of modern employment may be inclined to make this error (Graeber 2018).¹ Graeber argues that many of the jobs in modern service and knowledge economies are, as he bluntly puts it, ‘bullshit’: they serve no higher purpose or need, and the people working in them are aware of this but try to ignore it or justify it. I don’t deny Graeber’s claims about the pointlessness of much work. I would just argue that it is a mistake to infer from this that work as currently constituted is an elaborate game. It is not. While the tasks that make up any particular job might be trivial and pointless, having a job is not. It is economically and socially necessary. Without a job you will more than likely be left destitute and unable to

¹ I don’t suggest here that Graeber himself makes this mistake.

thrive, and viewed as a social pariah. This makes work something that is far from a game. You would have to sever the connection between bullshit work and instrumental economic gain to make it a game. Insisting on the triviality condition avoids trivialising current forms of work.

The importance of the triviality condition should not, however, be misunderstood. To say that games and game-like activities are trivial does not mean they are ‘unreal’ or ‘unimportant’. The things that happen within the games might be very real indeed. You can develop real skills and capacities within a game. You can forge real friendships and alliances. You can experience real pain, joy, frustration and satisfaction. None of this need be trivial. It’s just that the game itself that serves no larger purpose.

So, to clarify, in arguing for the strategy of withdrawal I am arguing that we should retreat from the demands of the world as currently constituted, with its focus on instrumental activities and economic gains, to a world of largely game-like activities (with plenty of time for sociability, family and friendship). I make no prescriptions about the kinds of game-like activities people will or should pursue in this post-work future. To make such prescriptions would undermine one of the benefits of escaping the world of work: the freedom to pursue that which you desire to pursue. I only make prescriptions about the abstract properties of game-like activities, properly construed.

But even if you focus on those abstract properties, I suspect you will have some questions. Why on earth would a game-like world be desirable? How could humans flourish if they knew that what they were doing was ultimately trivial? I have three arguments to offer.

(i) The Argument from Internal Goods and the Value of Craft

The first argument is that a life of game-like activities provides a forum in which people can foster the mindset of the ‘craftsperson’² and so realise the internal goods associated with a wide variety of activities. The argument consists of four premises and a conclusion (note: this is not intended to be a formally valid statement of the argument):

² I say ‘person’ to be gender neutral. The more common term in the literature is ‘craftsman’. This is the title of Sennett’s book on the topic.

- (1) The life of the craftsperson is one that sustains human flourishing.
- (2) The life of the craftsperson is distorted by economic and instrumental pressures; i.e. the life of the craftsperson can be best sustained in a world without those pressures.
- (3) The game-like world is a world without these distorting pressures; and is one that can sustain the life of the craftsperson.
- (4) Therefore, the life of the craftsperson is best sustained in the game-like world.

Let's go through each premise of this argument in more detail. The first premise is crucial because it establishes that the life of craft is one that can sustain human flourishing. This is not some novel or odd ideal. It is one with very deep roots in human society and thought (Sennett 2008). The life of the craftsperson is one that is dedicated to the skilful mastery of certain patterns of action. Think about the master chess-player, who can strategically plan and execute moves in anticipation of what her opponent might do, and who has spent years learning sequences of openings and endings and the consequences they entail. Or think about the master furniture-maker or blacksmith, who has dedicated their lives to the skilful and artistic manipulation of wood and metal to their own ends. These 'masters' are often taken to represent the pinnacle of human performance and expression. They are absorbed and dedicated to what they do. They derive tremendous satisfaction and self-worth from it. Sometimes crafts are largely physical, and dedicated to producing outputs (e.g. an item of furniture or a sword); sometimes they are more intellectual and based on skilful performances (e.g. the winning moves of the master chess player). But even when they are output-oriented, they are never really about the instrumental gains associated with those outputs. As Richard Sennett puts it in his book about the value of craft, the craftsperson's labour is purely self-contained: they do what they do for the love of it, not because it will bring them greater success or more money (Sennett 2008, 20). This dedicated performance is an important kind of human flourishing. Indeed, some authors go so far as to argue that it provides us with a secular equivalent of the sacred (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 197).

In addition to its intuitive and historical appeal, the notion that the life of the craftsperson can sustain human flourishing does have some additional philosophical support. Alisdair

MacIntyre's famous account of the good life makes the point that the good life is not something that can be defined or determined in the abstract (MacIntyre 1981): to be honest or courageous or virtuous only something that be understood or make sense relative to some activity. In other words, the 'thick' sense of the good can only be realised within specific domains of activity. You can be a courageous warrior or a courageous football player; you cannot be courageous simpliciter. This makes intuitive sense. The radical aspect of MacIntyre's view is that *any activity* can take on this role of providing a forum for the realisation of some virtues and goods, as long as it is pursued in a serious and dedicated fashion. There are some exceptions, of course. A completely immoral activity couldn't do the trick, since its broader consequences would corrupt any of its internal goods. For example, an honest torturer is not living the good life. Furthermore, to really count as part of the good life the particular domain of activity would also have to have some resonance within a broader cultural tradition, otherwise the individual might question its role in their life. But neither of these constraints should concern us here. The life of the craftsperson within a world of game-like activities easily satisfies both of these demands. The triviality of game-like activities ensures that they serve no wicked or evil purpose; they are morally neutral with respect to their broader consequences. And, as noted already, the ideal of the craftsperson is something with deep cultural and historical relevance.

Moving on then to second premise, why think that the life of the craftsperson is distorted by economic and instrumental pressures? The reasoning is straightforward. The good of craft lies in the skilful dedication to performance. If the performance must also serve some instrumental end, there is a danger that this end will distract or undermine the skilful performance. Sennett (2008, 28ff) argues that the capitalistic profit motive often forces craftspeople to sacrifice art and skill for the mediocrity of mass production; and that communistic central planning often replaces skill with incompetence. Whatever the nature of the instrumental pressure, if a craftsperson is beholden to it there is always a risk that they will have to compromise on the craft itself. They may have to compete with others for the relevant instrumental ends and become absorbed by that competition (and its economic or personal necessity) instead of the craft.

This brings us to the third premise. The argument in favour of this premise should be relatively clear from the foregoing. Games themselves provide a forum for skilful performance and, as defined and characterised, the game-like world is one in which the

instrumental pressures of work have been removed. They no longer serve to distort the pursuit of the craft within the confines of the game. It is true that there could be other distorting instrumental pressures, such as a pressure to achieve social status or recognition. But these pressures are present anyway and it is probably impossible to completely eliminate them. Eliminating the major economic instrumental pressures is still valuable and still makes it more possible to realise the value craft. It would be a better mode of existence even if it is not a perfect one.

More important is whether games can in fact allow for the life of the craftsperson to develop. There are two reasons for thinking that they can. First, many of the activities we currently perceive as crafts, and as activities that can sustain the value of crafting, would continue to do so in the post-work world. Following Suits's definition of a game as the voluntary triumph over unnecessary obstacles, we see that many of the traditional crafts are nowadays games. Nobody needs a blacksmith to handcraft a sword, or a carpenter to handcraft a table. These things can all be done more efficiently and effectively by machines. They are quasi-game-like in the modern world; the only thing that prevents them from being games that is that many people still pursue them for economic reward. I'm just imagining a world in which these economic rewards are no longer part of the picture. In addition to this, it should be clear that games of all kinds are themselves are forums in which the skilful mastery of performances are both encouraged and rewarded.

In conclusion then, the life of the craftsperson is something that can sustain human flourishing and is something that can be realised, to a heightened degree, in the post-work, game-like world.

(ii) *The Argument from Arendt*

The second argument riffs off some ideas from Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958/98). In that book, Arendt develops a conceptually complex account of human activity. She argues that there are three basic forms of human activity: labour, work and action. Each of these forms of activity responds to (or is contingent upon) one or more of the basic conditions of human existence. Labour is dedicated to the urgent and repetitive maintenance of the biological systems of life: we labour to eat, stave off threats to survival, and to reproduce. Work is dedicated to developing a constructed human environment: to building a world of artefacts and symbols that is stable, durable and distinct from the natural

world. Action is dedicated to sociability and spontaneity, i.e. to doing new and creative things in an environment with other human beings serving as either audience or collaborators.

Arendt orders these three modes of activity into a hierarchy of value. She thinks that labour is the most base and inferior mode of activity. It is the least distinctively human as it is so tied to the biological realities of existence. Action is the most human and therefore the most advanced form of activity. It allows for genuine creativity and novelty (what Arendt calls 'natality'). Work lies somewhere in between. A natural consequence of this hierarchy is that, for Arendt, a world in which action (and to some extent work) is prioritised and allowed to flourish is better than a world in which labour dominates. One of her central claims is that technological modernity has a negative impact on human flourishing by reducing all human activity to labouring. She criticises automating technologies in particular. So-called 'labour saving' devices have, she argues, increased the prominence of labour in human life. We work to produce machines that are themselves dedicated to maintaining our biological systems of life. In other words, our work now serves labour. As a result, labour has become the preeminent and most valorised mode of human activity. Action has been all but forgotten and work has been degraded to the handmaiden of labour. As Arendt puts it, there is now a relentless 'instrumentalization of the world and of the earth, this limitless devaluation of everything given, this process of growing meaninglessness where every end is transformed into a means' (Arendt 1958/98, 121).

The argument I make here is that by embracing the disruptive potential of automation, and withdrawing into the game-like world, we can recapture the higher forms of activity (the purer form of work and the spontaneity of action) and save them from the relentless instrumentalisation that Arendt abhors. Again, the reason for this is partly built into the characterisation of the game-like world. It is a world that is free from the instrumental pressures of work as currently constituted. It is a world in which performances are all that matter. This world can allow for spontaneity — in both the discovery of new 'moves' within an existing game and in the creation of new games; and it can allow for the right kind of sociability and political engagement — in the way in which the games allow for actions to take place before an audience of peers and within a collaborative space, and in the way in which freeing us from the yoke of work will allow us to dedicate more time to the political sphere of action (somewhat akin to the ancient leisured classes of Greece and Rome).

Of course, the appeal of this argument lies largely in the appeal of Arendt's conceptual framework. If you reject that framework, and the hierarchy it establishes, you may be less swayed. That's why I don't rest too much weight on it here. It is just one argument among three. Nevertheless, I think Arendt's concerns about relentless instrumentalisation, and the need to develop a form of existence that frees us from this instrumentalisation, are valid and provide a good reason to embrace the strategy of withdrawal. If everything we do must serve some ephemeral and seemingly urgent need, we can never truly feel satisfied with our lives. Our current world is one that fixates on ephemeral and urgent needs: the next paycheck, the promotion, the degree or qualification. Everything is pursued, achieved and quickly forgotten (Landau 2018, ch 11). A more ludic life would allow us to wallow in the pleasures of the moment, and the virtues of our actions in and of themselves. This is a legitimate and desirable form of flourishing.

(iii) The Argument from Idleness

The third argument makes a virtue out of a perceived vice. One thing that people often worry about in a post-work world, particularly one in which 'withdrawal' from the instrumental demands of the world is celebrated, is that people will do nothing with their new found freedom. They will become idle, slothful and selfish. They will have no care for the morrow; they will become absorbed in moment-to-moment pleasures. They will have no direction or purpose or meaning. As Voltaire famously put it in *Candide*, 'work saves a man from three great evils: boredom, vice and need'. If you don't have to work for a living, you won't have the discipline or focus you need to truly flourish.

This fear of idleness has been with us for a long time. As Brian O'Connor (2018) notes in his extended philosophical essay on the topic, many famous Enlightenment thinkers, including most notably Immanuel Kant, railed against the idea of idleness. Kant went so far as argue that we have a duty not to waste our talents, and that to be a truly autonomous, well-rounded individual, you have to work hard, make the most of yourself, and triumph over any tendency toward apathy (O'Connor 2018, 37ff). This is a theme taken up by several more contemporary theorists of autonomy, including Richard Arneson and Christine Korsgaard (O'Connor 2018, 177). They all advocate what O'Connor calls a 'muscular autonomy' which insists on the presence of goals, targets and other instrumental pressures to lift us out of a primitive, pre-rational, purely instinctual mode of existence. They don't want us to slip back into this pre-rational mode of life. It looks like there is a risk that we will do exactly that if we

embrace the strategy of withdrawal. Indeed, I suspect this is what people worry about most when they look at the hikkomori. They see people who are not applying themselves, whose ambitions are paltry, and who can get what they want too easily and too conveniently. They are quick to pathologise this form of life, not to celebrate it.

The standard response to this fear of idleness among post-work thinkers is to argue that it is mistaken. When freed from the yoke of work, people don't succumb to the temptations of idleness. On the contrary, they often apply themselves with great industry to the pursuits they truly enjoy. This, once again, is Bertrand Russell's famous defence of idleness: that it will enable people to invest in building the great artefacts of civilisation, as the leisure classes of old have always done. Whether Russell's argument would continue to hold true in world of rampant automation is, for the time being, anyone's guess (we cannot run the exact experiment just yet), but all the experiments on basic income schemes around the world to date suggest that people who receive a non-contingent income do not succumb to idleness (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017 138-144; Widerquist 2005). They invest in improving themselves and their families. The assumption and hope is that they will continue to do this in a post-work future.

But there is another way of looking at it. As O'Connor argues in his essay, idleness is not necessarily a vice. On the contrary, looked at in the right way, idleness may be exactly what we need in order to live truly free and autonomous lives (O'Connor 2018, 179-186). O'Connor develops this argument in three ways, each of which applies quite well to the post-work world. First, he argues that most accounts of what it means to be a free and autonomous individual insist on *authenticity*, i.e. that the person lives a life of their own choosing, not one that conforms to the expectations and demands of others. A world of idle withdrawal is more conducive to this than the world in which we currently live. In a world in which we must work out of economic necessity, we cannot be fully authentic (or if we can be it is largely a matter of luck): we must conform to the demands of the market, our clients, our employers and our economic dependents. If we remove the economic necessity of work, we can be more authentic. Second, he argues that most accounts of autonomy insist on an *independence* condition, i.e. that an individual is not subject to manipulation, coercion or indoctrination by others. Again, a world of idle withdrawal and game-like activities is more conducive to this than the world in which we currently live. The demands of the market economy and its associated work ethic mean that we are easily manipulated into doing things out of some

genuine or perceived need for money, status or employment. These manipulating forces dissipate in idleness. We are free to adopt reasons for action that are desired in and of themselves; not ones that are forced upon us by others. Third, and finally, although some people worry that idleness is without its own ethic (its own sense of the good life), this is not the case. To live an idle life is to embrace a clear conception of the good life, one that prioritises freedom from external demands, and non-instrumentalism in activity. Again, these are goods that can flourish in the post-work world, particularly in the world of games with its focus on performance over outcome.

In sum, to the extent that we value freedom and autonomy, we should try to create a mode of existence that celebrates idleness over industriousness. The strategy of withdrawal into game-like activities does exactly that.

4. Final Criticisms and Concerns

I will conclude by considering some general criticisms and concerns about the argument developed over the preceding sections. To briefly recap, that argument has come in two parts. First, I argued that work is structurally bad and that its automation is something to be desired. I then noted that this argument runs into the paradox of desirable automation: the kinds of automation we need to hasten the demise of work are likely to impact on human flourishing in other ways. This led us to the second part of the argument: the strategy of withdrawal. I argued that by withdrawing from the world as currently constituted we can resolve the paradox of automation and realise a genuine and desirable form of human flourishing. Far from this being something to fear and lament, it is something to desire and hasten.

I appreciate that this argument may be tough to swallow. The most obvious criticism is that the vision of the good life being imagined here is somewhat impoverished. Even if it is true that withdrawal satisfies *some* of our demands for meaning and purpose, it does not satisfy them *all*. Ceding the pursuit of the classic objective goods (like the pursuit of knowledge and the alleviation of suffering) to machines must surely result in a ‘lesser’ existence for us humans? We would much rather participate in the pursuit of those goods.

There are three responses to this criticism. First, it’s not clear that this is an impoverished form of flourishing. The human good is pluralistic and multi-faceted: different modes of existence help us to realise different mixtures of goods. It’s hard to say that these modes of

existence can be ordered into a clear hierarchy of ‘betterness’ or ‘worseness’: pursuing one objective good often comes at a cost to other goods (e.g. friends and family). What’s more, on some plausible theories, a mode of existence in which we do nothing but play games and pursue trivialities really does represent the best hope for humankind. This is Suits’s famous argument for the ‘utopia of games’ (Suits 2005). He suggests that if we live in a world in which do nothing but play games all the time, it must be because we have achieved a level of technical mastery over the world that eliminates the basic forms of human suffering and want from life. Surely that is as close to the best of all possible worlds as we can hope to get? Second, even if there is something less desirable about a world in which humans pursue trivialities and machines pursue objective goods, we may, ironically, have a moral obligation to prefer that world over the alternative. This would be the case if the machines are able to realise those goods in a more efficient and effective way, and if humans actually impede or hinder the pursuit of those goods. We already see some reason to suspect that we face this choice. Consider the debate around the merits of self-driving cars. These merits are often expressed in terms of the safety benefits for humans. Suppose these benefits are real. Would it be right for a human to insist upon driving when they know that this poses a greater risk to their fellow humans? Clearly not. The same logic could take hold in many other domains of activity, thus ethically requiring us to prefer withdrawal over continued engagement. Third, I suspect that any lingering insistence on the ‘lesser’ virtues of withdrawal stem from the suspicion that the benefits of this mode existence are somehow surreal or unreal. For example, someone might argue that success in a game is not ‘real’ success because it lacks real stakes. I hope it is clear from what was said earlier that this is a misconception about what life in a game-like world would be like. There is nothing surreal or unreal about what happens in such a world. The skills and virtues we develop are real: they just happen to be tied to a particular set of performances that are ultimately trivial. If we follow MacIntyre this is all we can ever hope for when it comes to skills and virtues: they only ever make sense relative to some defined domain of activity. It is only when they are embedded in such a domain that they become ‘real’.

Another criticism people are likely to have is that the world being imagined is one that lends itself to isolation, selfishness and narcissistic pleasure-seeking. If we don’t have to work for a living, and if we don’t have to strive to produce objective goods for the rest of humanity, then we lose the outward, other-facing domain of life. We will become inward-looking and self-focused. This is part of the fear that surrounds the hikkomori in Japan. They

are seen as a group of people that have turned inward and lost the will to communicate, engage and be held accountable to others.

There are two responses to this criticism. First, although I did use them as a jumping off point for the argument in this chapter, the argument I have developed should not be mistaken for endorsing the hikkomori way of life. My understanding of what it means to withdraw from the pressures of life is slightly different from theirs and is wholly consistent with a flourishing social and family life. In fact, I would argue that it is work and its insatiable demands that takes us away from these outward looking and other facing activities. Withdrawing from the world of work makes it possible to engage with them with greater vigour. Second, even though I make this distinction, I suspect some of the concern and indignation around isolation and selfishness only makes sense in a world of instrumental pressures. If you have to work to survive and thrive, and to ensure that others survive and thrive, any desire to withdraw from work will seem overly selfish and narcissistic. You will not be making your contribution to collective economic well-being; you will be living off the backs of others. In a world without those instrumental pressures, the withdrawal from work will seem a lot less selfish and narcissistic. It will seem like a reasonable choice.

This brings us to another potential criticism: that I am overselling the difference between what would happen in the game-like world and what happens in our world now. The claim I'm advancing is that in the game-like world the distorting effects of instrumental pressures would be removed from human activity. But surely this is naive? Even if we succeed in removing economic pressures, or the pressure to do some objective good, it is likely that other instrumental pressures will step in to take their place. For example, people will want fame and social status, and they may use games as a stepping stone to such ends. These new instrumental ends are just as likely to corrupt or undermine the value of withdrawal.

There are two responses to this criticism. First, as hinted at previously, we shouldn't make the perfect an enemy of the better when it comes to the elimination of instrumental pressures. Our current world is one in which our activities are distorted by a wide range of instrumental pressures, including the need for money and the desire for fame and social status. Eliminating some of the major instrumental pressures from the mix will make for a better, and less distorted, mode of existence, one in which the virtues of craft, action and idleness have more space to breathe. In this regard, I think it is especially important not to

understate the negative impact that the pressures of work have on life as currently lived. Eliminating its instrumental pressures would be a major improvement. Second, notwithstanding this point, there is reason to hope that instrumental pressures such as the desire for fame or social status will hold less sway in a post-work world. For one thing, the desire for fame and social status is currently catalysed by the desire for economic security and success: the latter strengthens the former. In a world of automated abundance, this strengthening effect will be lessened. Furthermore, we already have ample evidence to suggest that the possibility of fame and status does not distort or undermine the conviction with which people play games. The leagues of amateur sportspeople, hobbyists and gamers, who show up week-in-week-out for the love of what they do, and not for fame or glory, is testament to this. It suggests, at the very least, that a large majority of people can flourish in playing games without worrying about other instrumental ends those games may serve.

Finally, there is the criticism that the strategy of withdrawal is impractical. Remember, I originally sold the idea of withdrawal on the grounds that it was more practical (and more radical) than the integrationist strategy that I favoured in earlier work. The integrationist strategy may help to conserve much of what we currently value, but it is technically uncertain and potentially impossible. The strategy of withdrawal is, on the face of it, much more tractable. But maybe this is not quite right? Maybe to truly embrace the ludic life, we would have undergone a major cultural revolution³ that would be just as impractical and uncertain as the technical obstacles facing the integrationist strategy.

I think this criticism is a bit of a stretch, but, nevertheless, there are two responses to it. First, if it does require a major cultural revolution, this is a revolution that may be forced upon us anyway as a result of technological change and the effects it has on the mechanics of capitalism. If advances in automation result in significant increases in the ‘surplus population’ (i.e. the people who are not needed for the productive work of capitalism), then we will have to come up with some conception of the good life that is attainable and meaningful to them (and, to be clear, this is not an ‘us vs them’ issue — I include myself within their potential ranks). Second, I think what I have said in the preceding sections should make it clear that this strategy of withdrawal and the pursuit of ludic pleasures, is not completely alien to human society. It has a long cultural and philosophical pedigree. It is just

³ I appreciate the historical resonances of this term and call upon them deliberately in order to make a strong case for the prosecution.

that the institutional structure of modern capitalism has blocked us from fully realising it. As those institutional structures start to fray, it becomes both tangible and realisable. It wouldn't require a major cultural revolution; just a cultural reprioritisation.

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