A Plea For (The Philosophy of) Leisure

Alex Sager thinks deeply about what to do with his free time

The day I discovered the philosophy of leisure I was working two jobs. Most mornings I bussed across Montreal to teach ESL to francophone government employees. In the evening I persuaded senior citizens to renew their cooking club memberships. The seniors recounted their surgeries, their dwindling pensions, and their disappointing grandchildren. After unburdening themselves on their telemarketer, many would dig out their credit cards. Perhaps some of them derived some joy out of a monthly magazine and a complementary set of cookware. I had my doubts. Even though there was no commission, and no hard sell, I would sometimes wake in the early hours of the morning in a dirty sweat.

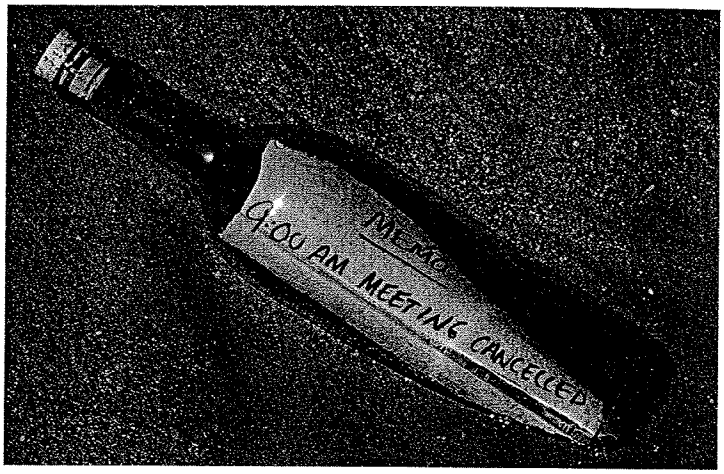
The call to the philosophy of leisure came from Concordia University in Montreal. A semester previously I had applied for part-time teaching work, and the call was last minute – they couldn't find anybody to teach the class. I was the last recourse to enlighten Leisure Studies students in the Applied Human Sciences department, although they knew more than I. Anything was better than telemarketing, so I accepted the class. Then I rushed to the nearest computer to google 'philosophy of leisure syllabus' to learn what was involved.

To professional philosophers, the philosophy of leisure has none of the weight of metaphysics, epistemology, or the philosophy of science, less rigour than logic or the philosophy of language, and little of the urgency of ethics. Few philosophy departments offer 'Philosophy of Leisure'. This neglect seems to me a mistake. Professional philosophy has surrendered too much to the self-help gurus and pop psychologists. This is a long cry from the heyday of Aristotle, who wrote in 350 BC that "happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace" (*Nichomachean Ethics*). In his classic *Homo Ludens* ('Man the Player'), Johan Huizinga identified play as the basis of culture. Yet today we live in a society where people work longer hours with fewer holidays, and dedicate themselves to largely passive activities in their spare time. Something is amiss.

Lives of Leisure

What, then, is the philosophy of leisure? The English word *leisure* comes from the Latin *licēre* through the Anglo-French *leisir*, meaning 'to be permitted or allowed'. Leisure is crucially connected to freedom, but not mere freedom *from* something. Rather, it is *to be permitted to do something*. But what?

Leisure differs across history and cultures, and this raises fascinating historical and conceptual questions. For example, when we and Aristotle refer to leisure, are we speaking of the same thing? Aristotle lived in a slave-owning society which permitted rich male citizens to debate the nature of the good, and contemplate the nature of the universe. For these aristocratic philosophers, leisure was freedom from the burden of having to earn your bread. This differs from the leisure of the medieval peasants and artisans, where work was oriented toward the tasks that needed to be completed, not to a nine-to-five work day. The creation of a rigid division between work and leisure



occurred during the industrial revolution with the regulation of the work day by means of precise mechanical clocks. In pre-industrial societies, people did not strictly separate work from the rest of their lives. Similarly, today Blackberries connect us to work all hours of the day and night, and on-line social networks like Facebook bombard what's left of our spare time.

Questions about the definition of leisure lead to moral and ethical questions. What types of activities should I value and pursue? Jeremy Bentham claimed that pushpin is just as good as poetry if provides as much pleasure. (Pushpin was a form of gambling in which players placed needles on the brim of a hat and took turns tapping it. The player who succeeded in crossing the needles collected them.) John Stuart Mill famously disagreed, instead holding that some pleasures are 'higher' than others: "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" he wrote in *Utilitarianism* (1881).

Is the happy but ignorant life of a Homer Simpson a good life, or is something more needed? Some people think that little can be said on this matter, and that all choices are of equal value. This 'whatever works for you is okay' mentality is often confused with the liberal conviction is that we should not interfere with people's choices as long as they don't harm anyone. Liberals are right that we should not force Homer to read a book – but nonetheless, his life might go better if he did. Indeed, in the episode 'Mr Lisa Goes to Washington', Homer's subscription to *Reader's Digest* leads Lisa to submit an essay winning a trip to Washington. Homer observes, "Who would have guessed reading and writing pay off?"

People evaluate our and their choices by their own standards. Post-literate Homer can reflect on what his pre-literate self lacked; and retired CEOs can regret not having spent enough time with their families. Friendless misers approaching middle age may realize that many of their best years were badly spent (or perhaps hoarded). Not only do we sometimes regret wasted years, but our choices affect other people. The workaholic alienates her family, rabid sports fans riot when their team tanks, country clubbers play golf behind security gates which keep them from noticing that their city has become a slum.

The philosophy of leisure encourages us to turn our atten-

tion from morality to ethics. 'Morality' refers to the sub-branch of ethics that deals with obligation – *what you must do*. 'Ethics' more broadly conceived, inquires into the nature of the good life. No one should oblige us to broaden our minds or cultivate our friendships, but this does not make knowledge or love less important. For the ancients, the central question was not 'what ought I to do?', but rather 'what sort of person ought I to be?' and 'what sort of life should I lead?' And many of our most pressing and personal concerns are not obligations, but rather attempts to choose the best life available to us.

On-Line Leisure

Let me suggest two issues that I would like to see philosophers of leisure take up.

First, what should we say when relationships and activities move online? Millions of people live their leisure hours in *The World of WarCraft* online video game. They inhabit a rich world in which they accomplish challenging tasks by cooperating and competing with others. This virtual world is arguably richer and more interesting than their everyday lives, although reports of gamers dying from dehydration after days of uninterrupted play suggest an analogy with narcotics. Surely, moderation has its place in all activities. Leaving aside people who endanger their lives or livelihood on the internet, what, if anything, privileges the real world over the virtual world?

People are increasingly interconnected, and, arguably, also increasingly isolated. Facebook 'friends' number in the hundreds, while face-to-face contact dwindles. Does this raise new opportunities for civil society – perhaps for a society which links people globally – or are human relationships diminished, communities drained of their vitality, and people reduced to their carefully-constructed online profiles? Perhaps human nature is merging with technology, infiltrating our brains as we flitter from website to website as we chat online, with music blasting in the background. If so, is this a bad thing?

Senior Leisure

Second, with the Baby Boomers now reaching retirement age, and living longer, leisure becomes particularly pressing. Many senior citizens, sometimes liberated against their will, turn from work to play. The wealthy ones pass the hours in resorts reading bestsellers in the afternoon sun, or on walking tours of Southern Europe. The less fortunate languish in rest homes and watch TV. Some retirement communities only allow seniors in many of the facilities, creating a society of geriatrics severed from their grandchildren – something hitherto unknown in human history. What to say about all this?

The philosophy of leisure becomes important whenever people are lucky enough to enjoy savings and pensions. The last twenty or thirty years of life should not be spent killing time. Shuffleboard has its place during a week or two away from the yearly grind, but not for the rest of your life. In an essay about the importance of children acquiring virtuous habits, Montaigne noted that children's games are serious business. Play prepares children for adulthood. The attempt to sever play from what matters most in life trivializes it. Our educational system trains us to work. We are lucky if we also learn how to play.

Moreover, many seniors live far away from their children and do not take care of their grandchildren. The rapid pace of social and technology change has diluted much of the wisdom they could once impart. There is a need for meaningful activity to fill the mind and soul. Thus we philosophers need to reflect on the place of seniors in society.

The Leisure Ideal

These are only a few of the questions that the philosopher of leisure could pursue. There are a multitude of leisure-related topics that beg philosophical attention: ecotourism, mixed martial arts, gambling, hunting, workaholic tendencies, book clubs, hiking, eating, drinking, shopping, sex. One major program would be that once we have decided what sorts of lives are worth leading, we need to ask how we can create a society in which such lives can be realized. Thus leisure is not merely a personal question, but also a political one. What institutions should we create to promote human flourishing? What forms of government would best do so? What role do nature or city planning (eg green spaces) and architecture play in the good life?

Marxists believed that the development of the mechanisms of production would inevitably liberate people from drudgery. Mass production would give people everything they need, letting them devote their time not to survival but to self-cultivation. In *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx and Engels wrote that, freed from necessity, one could "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic." Predictions of capitalism sowing its own demise have so far been foiled, but Marx and Engels' ideal of humanity at leisure is nevertheless appealing.

When approached from the leisure perspective, life takes on a new tone. I look forward to a day in which the philosophy of sport, the philosophy of sex, the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of wine are integrated into ethics, and into social and political philosophy. Then leisure will take its place at the center of the good life.

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