Summary of Bertrand Russell’s “In Praise of Idleness”

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In 1932, at age 60, my exact age as I write this post, [Bertrand Russell](http://www.zpub.com/notes/br.html) penned a provocative essay, “[In Praise of Idleness](http://www.zpub.com/notes/idle.html).” Russell begins,

… I was brought up on the saying: ‘Satan finds some mischief for idle hands to do.’ Being a highly virtuous child, I believed all that I was told, and acquired a conscience which has kept me working hard down to the present moment. But although my conscience has controlled my actions, my opinions have undergone a revolution. I think that there is far too much work done in the world, [and] that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous …

Russell divides work into: 1) physical labor; and 2) the work of those who manage laborers (those whose work allows them to buy what the laborer’s produce, essentially almost everyone else.) In addition, there are the idle rich, who “are able to make others pay for the privilege of being allowed to exist and to work.” Russell despises this type of idleness, dependent as it is on the labor of others. But how did this all come to be?

For all of human history until the Industrial Revolution, an individual could produce little more than was necessary for subsistence. Originally any surplus was taken forcefully from the peasants by warriors and priests, but gradually laborers were induced to believe that hard work was their duty, even though it supported the idleness of others. As a result, laborers worked for their masters, and the masters, in turn, convinced themselves that what was good for them was good for everyone. But is this true?

Sometimes this is true; Athenian slave-owners, for instance, employed part of their leisure in making a permanent contribution to civilization which would have been impossible under a just economic system. Leisure is essential to civilization, and in former times leisure for the few was only rendered possible by the labors of the many. But their labors were valuable, not because work is good, but because leisure is good. And with modern technique it would be possible to distribute leisure justly without injury to civilization.

Russell saw that 1930s technology was already making more leisure time possible. (This is even [more true with 21st-century technology](https://reasonandmeaning.com/brains-robotic-nation/).) Yet society had not changed in the sense that it was still a place where some work long hours, while others are unemployed. This is what he called “the morality of the Slave State …” He illustrates with a thought experiment. Suppose that a plant manufactures employs a certain number of people who work 8 hours a day and produce all the pins the world needs. Now suppose that an invention allows the same number of people to make twice as many pins.

In a sensible world, everybody concerned in the manufacturing of pins would take to working four hours instead of eight, and everything else would go on as before. But in the actual world this would be thought demoralizing. The men still work eight hours, there are too many pins, some employers go bankrupt, and half the men previously concerned in making pins are thrown out of work. There is, in the end, just as much leisure as on the other plan, but half the men are totally idle while half are still overworked. In this way, it is insured that the unavoidable leisure shall cause misery all round instead of being a universal source of happiness. Can anything more insane be imagined?

Russell notes that the rich have always despised the idea of the poor having leisure time.

In England, in the early nineteenth century, fifteen hours was the ordinary day’s work for a man; children sometimes did as much, and very commonly did twelve hours a day. When meddlesome busybodies suggested that perhaps these hours were rather long, they were told that work kept adults from drink and children from mischief. When I was a child … certain public holidays were established by law, to the great indignation of the upper classes. I remember hearing an old Duchess say: ‘What do the poor want with holidays? They ought to work.’

Russell acknowledges that there is a duty to work in the sense that all human beings depend on labor for their existence. What follows from this is that we shouldn’t consume more than we produce, and we should give back to the world in labor or services for the sustenance we receive. But this is the *only* sense in which there is a duty to work. And while the idle rich are not virtuous, that is not “nearly so harmful as the fact that wage-earners are expected to overwork or starve.” Russell admits that some persons don’t use their leisure time wisely, but leisure time is essential for a good life. There is thus no good reason why most people should be deprived of it, and “only a foolish asceticism … makes us continue to insist on work in excessive quantities now that the need no longer exists.”

In the next few paragraphs Russell argues that in most societies the governing classes have always preached about the virtues of hard work. Working men are told they engage in honest labor, and unpaid women told to do their saintly duty. The rich praise honest toil, the simple life, motherhood, and domesticity because the ruling class wants to hoard their political power and leisure time. But “what will happen when the point has been reached where everybody could be comfortable without working long hours?”

Russell argues that what has happened in the West is that the rich simply grab more of what is produced and amass more leisure time—many don’t even work at all. Despite the effort of the rich to consume more—their yachts sit mostly unused—many things are produced that are not needed, and many people are unemployed. When all this fails to keep enough people working

we have a war: we cause a number of people to manufacture high explosives, and a number of others to explode them … By a combination of all these devices we manage … to keep alive the notion that a great deal of severe manual work must be the lot of the average man.”

It seems we are determined to be busy no matter what the cost.

The key philosophical idea for Russell is that physical labor, while sometimes necessary, is not the purpose of life. Why then do we so value work? First, because the rich preach that work is dignified in order to keep the workers content. Second, because we take a certain delight in how technology transforms the world. But the typical worker doesn’t think that physical or monotonous labor is meaningful. Rather “they consider work, as it should be considered, a necessary means to a livelihood, and it is from their leisure that they derive whatever happiness they may enjoy.”

Some object that people wouldn’t know what to do with more leisure time, but if this is true Russell thinks it “a condemnation of our civilization.” For why must everything be done for the sake of something else? What is wrong with deriving intrinsic pleasure from simply playing? It is tragic that we don’t value enjoyment, happiness, and pleasure as we should. Still, Russell argues that leisure time isn’t best spent on frivolity; leisure time should be used intelligently. By this, he doesn’t just mean highbrow intellectual activities, although he does favor active over passive activities as good uses of leisure time. He also believes that the preference of many people for passive rather than active pursuits reflects the fact that they are exhausted from too much work. Provide more time to enjoy life, and people will learn to enjoy it.

Consider how some of the idle rich has spent their time. Historically, Russell says, the small leisure class has enjoyed unjust advantages, and they have oppressed others. Yet that leisure class

… contributed nearly the whole of what we call civilization. It cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies, and refined social relations. Even the liberation of the oppressed has usually been inaugurated from above. Without the leisure class, mankind would never have emerged from barbarism. The method of a leisure class without duties was, however, extraordinarily wasteful … and the class as a whole was not exceptionally intelligent. The class might produce one Darwin, but against him had to be set tens of thousands of country gentlemen who never thought of anything more intelligent than fox-hunting and punishing poachers.

Today “the universities are supposed to provide, in a more systematic way, what the leisure class provided accidentally and as a by-product.” This is better, but the university has drawbacks. For one thing, those in the ivory tower are often “unaware of the preoccupations and problems of ordinary men and women.” For another thing, scholars tend to write on esoteric topics in academic jargon. So academic institutions, while useful, “are not adequate guardians of the interests of civilization in a world where everyone outside their walls is too busy for unutilitarian pursuits.”

Instead Russell advocates for a world where no one is compelled to work more, but allowed to indulge their scientific, aesthetic, or literary tastes, or their interest in law, medicine, government, or any other interest. What will be the result of all this? Russell answers this question with his quintessentially beautiful prose:

Above all, there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia. The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid. At least one percent will probably devote the time not spent in professional work to pursuits of some public importance, and, since they will not depend upon these pursuits for their livelihood, their originality will be unhampered, and there will be no need to conform to the standards set by elderly pundits. But it is not only in these exceptional cases that the advantages of leisure will appear. Ordinary men and women, having the opportunity of a happy life, will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion. The taste for war will die out, partly for this reason, and partly because it will involve long and severe work for all. Good nature is, of all moral qualities, the one that the world needs most, and good nature is the result of ease and security, not of a life of arduous struggle. Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen, instead, to have overwork for some and starvation for others. Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish forever.

Reflections – The hopeful nature of this last paragraph nearly move me to tears. And these are not mere quixotic ideas. Open source code, Wikipedia, my own little blog and millions like them all attest to the desire of people to express themselves through their labor.

Moreover, recent research shows that more money is not what people want from work—people want autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their pursuits. This is consistent with what Russell is saying. Give people time, and many will produce good things. So much creativity is wasted in our current social and economic system, where people are forced to do what they don’t want to do, or when they are denied the minimal amount it takes to live a decent life. In my [next post](https://reasonandmeaning.com/2015/10/05/autonomy-mastery-and-purpose-what-we-really-want-from-our-work/), I will look at the surprising scientific evidence about what motivates people to work. Spoiler alert. It is not what you think.