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# Idleness as Play and Leisure

## A Reflection on

### *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*

by Brian O'Connor



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Using Brian O'Connor's *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay* as a point of departure, the author defends a conception of idleness as an expression of play and leisure. The author agrees with O'Connor that idleness constitutes an important and unduly denigrated human good, but not that it is best understood as a distinctive sphere of human freedom. Instead, he argues, idleness would be better considered a form of play and leisure, which he claims both offers further support for the value of idleness and recognizes a neglected sphere of play and leisure. **Key words:** idleness, leisure; play; recreation

Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; on the contrary it is truly a divine life, if one is not bored.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

**A**LTHOUGH MANY AMONG US are undoubtedly familiar with the practice of idleness, very few will have thought systematically about it in any theoretical or philosophical sense. It may be useful then to start with a couple of anecdotes that underscore its worthiness as a subject of inquiry, one to be taken seriously alongside such acknowledged weighty topics as play and leisure.

When I have mentioned to others that I was preparing a paper on idleness, a common, though not at all universal, reaction has been to assume I would be writing about a vice, a sort of generally unhealthy state or condition that humans need to avoid. When I point out how much being idle is actually a valued part of their own lives, say enjoying an unhurried coffee and a pleasurable read or a conversation over breakfast—or listening to music, hanging out with friends, pottering in the garden, noodling on a musical instrument, going on walkabouts, relaxing with a drink, watching TV, reading in bed, getting up slowly in the morning, taking in the autumn leaves or spring flowers, enjoying a long bath or

shower, relaxing quietly at a friend's cottage—the penny immediately drops. Still the reactions often remain guarded: “Well, yes, but in moderation of course.” I then respond that, as a recently retired person, I am quite happily testing the limits of the idleness-in-moderation hypothesis in all the aforementioned ways, and in others besides. And this leads to another common response to my reports of writing about idleness, which is that idleness is something to be sought and celebrated, difficult to get enough of, and may be the ultimate good for humans.

Into these conjectures con and pro comes Brian O'Connor's acute and refreshingly succinct book, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay* (O'Connor 2018), timed just about perfectly to offer a philosophical guide for the enforced idleness of COVID pandemic living. His book contains, to my knowledge, the first serious conceptual philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of idleness. Part of that analysis involves distinguishing it from concepts like play and leisure. But O'Connor's main purpose is not conceptual clarification. It is to defend idleness as an important and unduly denigrated human good. He spends most of his book responding to the many philosophical critics of idleness, focusing mainly on likely targets among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophers. Ultimately, O'Connor argues that idleness is a distinctive “form of freedom,” an expression of autonomy in which the “idle self is at home with itself,” though he does not endorse idleness as a way of life (2, 171–73, 186). As such, idleness as a type of freedom is more authentically human in important respects than more muscular versions of freedom found in philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Schiller, and Marx.

In the interest of full disclosure, it may seem that I am part of the philosophical problem to which O'Connor responds. In a recent paper defending human striving as a virtue, I stated in passing that idleness was one of the vices opposed to it (Russell 2020). This loose speaking was an error I now mean to correct. (“Sloth” or “laziness” would have been better and more traditional terms for a vice connected to failures of striving.) However, I left for later consideration how prominent striving should be in human lives and noted that its ubiquity and often unseen presence serve to underscore the importance of breaks from it. This leads to a consideration of idleness. And, although I want to push back on some of O'Connor's ideas, I am very much in agreement with him about the value of idleness and its importance in day-to-day life.

Contrary to O'Connor's view, I doubt idleness is well described as a distinctive or special form of freedom or autonomy, although it requires freedom and engages autonomy. Idleness as a human good is best characterized as an

aspect of play and leisure. Each is characterized by its disengagement from work and worldly affairs generally, although idleness is not concerned with worldly achievement or status whereas some aspects of leisure and play can be. The good of idleness is reflected in modest- or minimal-effort engagements whose value lies in pleasures and delights associated with a heterogenous range of activities that are, broadly speaking, nonproductive in worldly terms. We might say idleness is comprised, roughly speaking, of what an individual experiences as simple and easy pleasures found commonly in amusements, entertainments, some aesthetic experiences, bodily comforts and pleasures, companionship, solitude, and fun in general.

I have no trouble recognizing idleness as a meaningful, indeed sometimes enviable, way of life for some, although this is not to say it is a completely good and self-sufficient way of life. This is no indictment of idleness, since it is not clear what, if anything, counts as a complete and self-sufficient way of life. But the lives of certain social dropouts living in Walden-esque simplicity and the idle rich living in places like Palm Springs and whose days are filled with golf, walks, reading, conversation, and good food arguably all have idleness as a meaningful way of life.

Idleness is well described as a view of what is important that is different than that held by many philosophers and nonphilosophers who place labor, duty, and pursuit of excellence at the center of meaningful lives. Nevertheless, we shall see that idleness as play and leisure is not unconnected to more robust philosophical prescriptions for meaningful lives and can presuppose them to a degree. Idleness can also be richer and more diverse than is sometimes thought.

My discussion, then, extends O'Connor's treatment of idleness in ways that further clarify its practice and role in human lives. O'Connor (2018) recognizes that his defense of idleness has important practical and normative implications. He notes that the dominating forces of work and pursuit of status in our "idleness-excluding-world" often have tragic social costs for mental and physical health and social stability (2–3). However, these issues are not explored in any detail. Most of his book is a scholarly philosophical response to modern critics of idleness. It is useful for showing errors in treatments of idleness and for highlighting intellectual sources of cultural resistance to it. Those discussions are supported by an important attempt to clarify the concept of idleness itself. O'Connor sees idleness as a distinctive phenomenon involving a relaxing or letting go of human personality characterized by the absence of guiding purposes and disciplined goal-directed activity (5–8, 175). This qualifies idleness as a form

or sphere of freedom to be contrasted with more robust exercises and conceptions of human personality and autonomy. Very few examples of idleness are mentioned, however, and none is discussed systematically.

By contrast, I see idleness as a more life affirming and diverse phenomenon that is characteristically an expression of human personality and freedom in familiar ways, even if it is a more subdued exercise of them that can include the sort of de-escalation of the self that O'Connor has in mind. This position emerges from a consideration of how idleness is practiced in human lives, often as an accepted, if also underappreciated, source of value and meaning.

My point of departure is also conceptual. I begin by looking at the relationship between idleness and philosophical treatments of play and leisure, and I argue that O'Connor passes over too quickly how idleness can be an aspect of each. The conceptual connections between idleness and play and leisure clarify the nature and range of idle activities and show more clearly why idleness should be—and indeed often is—valued as an important element in individual lives. This analysis also shows how political conversations about making space for idleness in everyday life can be framed and how research into it can be undertaken in an informed way.

### **Making Sense of Idleness as a Human Good**

Idleness should be regarded as a familiar aspect of play. O'Connor (2018) resists any straightforward equation of idleness and play because of “an ambiguity” about play. He acknowledges that play’s opposition to work and to being governed by necessity give it idle-like qualities (138). But he argues that there is an ambiguity about play that “takes on the quality of higher necessity” associated with worldly achievements and productivity that is contrary to idleness (138–39). A logical point needs to be made here. Assuming there is this specific ambiguity (which I shall challenge), the very notion of an ambiguity leaves open the possibility of a meaningful conception of play under which idleness as a human good falls. Rather than conclude that high-minded conceptions of play “void the very meaning of idleness” (139), O'Connor might have concluded that they void or are at odds with a familiar and much more common conception of play that includes idleness. As such, idleness properly understood can help us clarify an important and not well-recognized aspect of play.

O'Connor is certainly right that play has been associated with higher neces-

sities, going back at least to Plato. In *The Laws*, Plato (1961) says that “men and women alike, must . . . spend life making our play as perfect as possible—to the complete inversion of current theory” (803c). Taking this seriously means incorporating and subordinating play within the necessity of moral and perfectionist ends, so that humans can “live out their lives as what they really are” (804b). O’Connor’s focus is on modern philosophers, and he chooses two others who happily adopt similarly moralistic, virtue-driven accounts of play in ways that are at least as peculiar as Plato’s. He argues that the purported aspect of play as a higher necessity is contained in Fredrich Schiller’s account of play as the ultimate realization of a unity in action of our physical and rational selves (O’Connor 2018, 143–45). It is also contained in Herbert Marcuse’s neo-Marxist argument that unalienated work is properly characterized as play. However, one clearly open response to such discussions of play is that they represent misunderstandings and misuses of the concept. They tell us nothing about the ambiguity of play or any tension with the notion of idleness. Indeed, Plato’s own acknowledgment that his view of play is contrary to commonly held views (“the complete inversion of current theory”) suggests that it is question begging. That goes just as strongly for Schiller’s and Marcuse’s views.

I have recently argued that play is frequently characterized by its cognitive, practical, emotional, and moral disengagement from moral and perfectionist ends and worldly pursuits in general, often in ways that are challenging to and subversive of them (Russell 2018). In developing this position, I drew on Susan Wolf’s (1982) discussion of humor in her essay “Moral Saints” and the philosopher of humor John Morreall (2009) who explicitly associates humor with play in this sense.

Think of a comedy roast where the object is to embarrass the roastee with remarks designed first for laughs and not to say anything particularly true. Or think of puns. Often regarded as the lowest form of humor, they challenge or subvert the meanings and conventions of language and grammar for playful fun (Beck 2015). Cognitive, practical, emotional, and moral disengagement can also be found commonly in children’s play, for example, in role playing and celebrating the actions of “bad guys.” See Mark Twain’s description of the bloodthirsty posturings of Tom Sawyer’s band of robbers, to give one famous literary example. Twain’s fictional episode is not a case of art exaggerating to make a point. Theorists and sociologists have extensively chronicled similar humorously gruesome and hair-raising disengagement in children’s play. See in particular Brian Sutton-Smith’s extensive career-long collection of children’s playground doggerel and

stories. My favorite example from Sutton-Smith's (2008) collection is from a New Zealand schoolyard. It does not take second place to Tom Sawyer's band.

On top of Mt. Egmont, all covered in sand  
 I shot my poor teacher, with a grey rubber band  
 I shot her with pleasure  
 I shot her with pride  
 I couldn't have missed her  
 She was 40-foot wide.  
 I went to her funeral  
 I went to her grave  
 Some people threw flowers  
 I threw a grenade  
 Her coffin went up, her coffin went down  
 Her coffin went splat all over the ground  
 I looked in her coffin, she still wasn't dead  
 So I got my bazooka and blew off her head (120).

Playful disengagement from moral and perfectionist ends is also common in sporting play where players and fans often take part in what I term "competitive shenanigans," or behavior that is morally suspect but tolerated and sometimes embraced, like some instances of gamesmanship or bending or breaking the rules or deceiving umpires in ways that fall short of outright cheating (Russell 2018, 213–19).

Philosophically, these examples all reflect Johan Huizinga's (2014) classic account of play as constituting a separate sphere of activity that "lies outside morals" and falls outside worldly norms of "good and evil" (6). I do not offer this here as a full account of play. Theorists and sociologists of play today widely accept that play is a plural phenomenon (Sutton-Smith 1997; Feezell 2010). However, I have yet to discover among these authors any discussion acknowledging Schiller's or Marcuse's accounts (or facsimiles) as one of them. More commonly, they warn against accounts of play as progress that place its value in its use as an instrument for realizing progressive ideals and overlook it as something also valuable in itself, for example, justifying participation in youth sports solely to promote social virtues and individual health (Sutton-Smith 1997, 2009). By contrast, idleness as playful disengagement reflects familiar tensions of each with morality, personal well-being, and excellence. Idleness and play are values that do not always align with progressive or worldly purposes.

Disengagement from worldly conventions, morality, pursuit of excellence,

and the like also characterizes idleness in the account O'Connor (2018) gives. Thus, he says idleness is not geared toward productivity or achievement and expresses a "freedom from . . . norms that are taken to gear us toward effective action," including moral constraints (181, 183). As such, idleness can sometimes appear to subvert ways of life that prize "usefulness, competitive social identities, or long-term discipline" (186).

O'Connor is on the right track about this, but these characteristics of idleness put it clearly in the sphere of play as disengagement. Play also helps explain how idleness can serve as an engine for more worldly creativity, which is commonly claimed for it as an attribute (Hodgkinson 2004; Russell 1935). This is also suggested by Sutton-Smith's (1997) claim that the "quirkiness, flexibility, and redundancy" of play is an analogue of biological variation and adaptation (221–31). Sutton-Smith calls this "adaptive variability." He later argued that play includes the genres of humor, skill, pretense, fantasy, risk, contest, and celebration (Sutton-Smith 1999). I would add idleness to the list.

Idleness is an extension of adaptive variation. It is quirky and redundant in relation to worldly pursuits. Its diverse—arguably indefinite—manifestations illustrate its flexibility. As with play, the disengagement of idleness from worldly constraints and pursuits allows a freedom to pursue self-discovery, novel experiences, and new perspectives, frequently in unstructured or open-ended activities comparable to many games and other examples of play and leisure that can be windows to creativity. As with the items in Sutton-Smith's genres of play, idleness as an aspect of play clarifies when it counts as a human good valued for its own sake, since play is unalienated activity chosen for its own sake (Huizinga 2014, 6). But idleness is alienated activity and not a human good when it is unwanted, for example, when it comes from being bored with nothing to do, being forced into prison, or simply not wanting to be idle and preferring to exercise one's skills but having no opportunity to do so. Call this "alienated idleness."

This is all substantial evidence that idleness as a human good can be unambiguously an expression of one familiar, nonquestion-begging conception of play, roughly, play as unalienated disengagement from worldly norms and pursuits. I develop this argument further later in this article. Defenders of idleness as a human good should take up this association with play to improve its reputation. Few will gainsay the value of play in this sense except prudes and moralists, perhaps with Plato leading the way. Just as Plato, Schiller, and Marcuse arguably enlist play to make worldly norms and ideals appear more palatable, indeed as a sort of emancipation or ideal freedom, defenders of idleness can

characterize its worth and attractiveness as an aspect of play *qua* emancipation or freedom from worldly demands but without a question-begging use of the concept of play.

Idleness also fits within Scott G. Eberle's (2014) insightful attempt to develop a unified definition of play. I am not sure Eberle accounts well for "primitive play," discussed later, or for some subversive uses of play that are valued for their own sake, and his is arguably a version of play as progress. But his six elements of play are well taken and are familiar features of idleness in the sense described here. Idleness in its nonalienated form is looked forward to (anticipated); involves novelty (surprises); can lead to discovery (curiosity); is enjoyed for its own sake (pleasure); is a useful instrument for promoting insight (understanding). It can contribute to physical and mental health (strength) and contribute to a sense of balance in life (poise). Most of these connections are evident or implied already, and they will become clearer in the ensuing discussion.

Idleness's relationship with leisure deserves similarly critical consideration. A discussion of Aristotle on leisure and play proves instructive because he helps us draw out the issues clearly. Infamously for moderns, Aristotle argues that play is not valuable in itself. Play is for the sake of work. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says: "To exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself seems right" (Aristotle 2019, 1176b30). For Aristotle, play is a type of activity, a manner of relaxation undoubtedly including idleness, that restores us physically and mentally so we can get back to work and be productive.

Moderns see this as an embarrassing blunder by Aristotle. The philosopher of games and play, Bernard Suits (2018), expresses this view when he says that Aristotle gets it exactly wrong. We work to have the time and resources to play and amuse ourselves for their own sake. But Aristotle's views are interesting for other reasons. For Aristotle, work and play are both means. We play for the sake of being able to work productively, and we work to have the wherewithal to engage in leisure activities that are ultimate ends for humans. Leisure is where we have the opportunity to realize ourselves and become most fully human.

We should reject Aristotle's purely instrumental view of play. Play can, of course, have important instrumental value (as can idleness). But it is activity that is rightly valued for its own sake and deserves to be regarded as a part of leisure. If I am right that idleness as a human good is best understood as an aspect of play, then idleness, too, should be regarded as part of leisure and a place where we can realize goods that are part of being fully human. Philosophical argument



supports this, and I daresay it makes sense, as Aristotle might say, of the attitudes of “the many” that idleness as described here is an expression of leisure and so part of a sphere where we are “at home” with ourselves.

But O’Connor (2018) resists this association on the grounds that leisure is best thought of as “*an instrument*, allowing us to cede temporarily from life-shaping demands . . . [and] renew our capacity to perform” (7–8, emphasis added). This view of leisure comes very close to Aristotle’s instrumental account of play and faces the same objections. It is too narrow a conception of leisure. The widely accepted modern view of philosophers and sociologists of play and leisure is that these are activities for which work is merely an instrument, that is, they are goods that are intrinsically valuable or that give meaning to human lives.

To be sure, “leisure” is used differently in different contexts by different leisure theorists. But I am not aware of it being used by them in the way O’Connor describes. He arguably confuses leisure with what leisure theorists often term “recreation,” which is valuable instrumentally for its socially recognized uses either through self-improvement or its contribution to society (Cooper 1991). More substantively for our purposes, further recent developments in leisure theory, although they do not discuss idleness per se, arguably point to it within the much discussed notion of “casual leisure,” which Robert A. Stebbins (1997) has defined as “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (18–19; see also Stebbins 2017). Stebbins recognizes that casual leisure can encompass play activities, so his account is open to recognizing idleness as play and leisure.

O’Connor’s (2018) separation of idleness from play and leisure seems to be part of an effort to identify idleness as a distinctive, maybe *sui generis*, sphere of freedom from human institutions, including play and leisure, and more obviously work, politics, and seeking excellence. It is a sphere where we are not a sort of self that is the product of personal striving and social and moral demands. Idleness is thus purportedly an implicit disavowal of the modern self. As such, idleness is a special form of freedom or liberation from “the task of making ourselves into integrated moral beings” (16). It “experiences no inner tension or self-alienation . . . [and] feels no urgency to have a personality” (19).

A more plausible view of idleness is suggested in the division between work and leisure that emerges from a critical consideration of Aristotle’s view. Leisure is freedom from work. It is having the opportunity and means to do things for oneself that one wants to do. It can involve serious pursuits, like knowledge, fine arts, or athletic excellence (Stebbins 2017), or it can involve play, including

casual types of leisure and play like playing games for fun or choosing to be idle. These choices are free and the activities are chosen for their own sake, at least in part, or they are not truly leisure. As such, they are unalienated expressions of freedom and autonomy.

Idleness is better regarded as an expression of freedom when it is part of leisure and play and chosen or experienced for its own sake and not as a stand-alone type of freedom and autonomy. O'Connor is right that idleness is treated badly and is at odds with certain conceptions of the self found in some modern philosophers and in a culture focused on productivity and moral progress. However, his characterization of idleness discounts familiar features of the self that are not so demanding or oppressive and fit within modern conceptions of leisure and play also found readily both in philosophy and our culture. Neither is as at odds with idleness, as a reading of O'Connor suggests.

Perhaps a main reason O'Connor resists the association of idleness and leisure is that leisure in my sense (and in Aristotle's) is a goal-directed activity. Climbing a mountain or learning a musical instrument are commonly uses of leisure, but they are goal-directed activities that typically involve too much effort to be idle. O'Connor (2018) uses what he calls "cultural tourism" as a means of self-improvement as another example (7–8). He significantly rejects goal-directed action as an aspect of idleness. Thus, he begins his description of idleness by saying it is "experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose" (5). This needs qualification. It can often seem as if idleness has no guiding purpose, especially to others who find its activities meaningless or nonproductive or both. But if the examples I gave at the outset describe idleness, it is not difficult to find guiding purposes present. Idleness aims at pleasure, entertainment, fun, serendipity, solitude, aesthetic experience, and companionship, all of which might be found spending the day lounging at the beach with friends or just sitting "watching the wheels go round and round," which was given as a guiding purpose by John Lennon in one of his many odes to idleness. In my own case, I have a ritual that I look forward to each evening of sitting up in bed before going to sleep just to be quiet for a time. Solitude can be a related type of idleness that has as its guiding purpose quietly being alone and engaged with oneself or one's surroundings. Great idlers like Lennon generally find guiding purposes in pursuing what I described earlier as simple and easy pleasures. These can all count as leisured time or play. It is easy to miss these guiding purposes given their lack of connection to worldly aims and pursuits and their principally internal nature, but they exist nevertheless.

The other conditions O'Connor (2018) places on idleness are more apt, namely, that the activity is not aimed at productivity, does not involve "disciplined self-monitoring," and so is not involved with performance or achievement or gaining social status (6, 8). But even these conditions need some qualification and clarification.

Consider self-monitoring. Experiencing idleness fully arguably requires a sense of freedom from an awareness of internal and external pressures. This is apparently what O'Connor means when he says that idleness "is a feeling of non-compulsion and drift" (5). This is an astute observation. Daydreaming is like this, and so is reading a book where readers just let the printed page take them wherever it goes. Even so, idleness can involve an important degree of self-monitoring. My candidate for the best description in verse of idleness as play and leisure makes exactly this point. It is expressed in the lyrics from Paul Simon's 1966 "59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovey)" where Simon admonishes himself "slow down, you move too fast" so he can have a carefree morning "just kickin' down" New York streets.

Idlers need to take care—to self-monitor—to take their time and not feel pressures impinging on their activities. Idleness can involve effort and even practice. It can also include self-monitoring to create circumstances where there are no evident external pressures either. As Simon puts it in the final verse of his song, he has "no deeds to do, no promises to keep," so that he can enjoy the experience of "feelin' groovy." Feelin' groovy is regrettably an anachronism today, but I suspect it aptly picks out a main psychological marker of idleness. The word "carefree" is perhaps the prosaic expression of the same.

Self-monitoring by slowing down to be in the moment and being able to "let it go," as Lennon says in the song mentioned earlier, suggest that idling contains modest elements of striving *qua* effort to respond to challenges to its goals and even to require resilience as a response to the setbacks idling faces from a mind cluttered with internal or external pressures. Striving and resilience neatly fit the model of Aristotelian character virtues (Russell 2015, 2020), so there is an interesting connection that exists between idleness and virtue as a means of realizing it.

Lennon's and Simon's songs thus also make a case for idleness as an achievement, as does master idler Henry David Thoreau's 1854 injunctions in his fabled account of living off the grid on Walden Pond: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" and "simplify, simplify." But even where there is no evident striving, idleness is arguably an achievement. Take someone who is enjoying some moments of easy

companionship, say, just silently sitting together or holding hands or listening to music with a friend or spouse, compared with someone who has severe cognitive loss and is sitting idly with the same spouse or friend. The person with cognitive loss can lack the sort of self that can be aware of and enjoy these sorts of moments of idleness.

Such examples show that even the simplest, apparently effortless instances of idleness are important achievements of a self that are denied to some. They are also productive activities in the sense that they are uses of time and resources to achieve valued ends, even if they are not worldly ends. It is an anti-idling prejudice and a question-begging assumption to define productivity exclusively in worldly terms. This needs emphasizing to support idleness as a good and to help answer its detractors. Again, a closer analysis of the circumstances of idleness reveals stronger connections to leisure and play that can be associated with achievement and grounded in a familiar idea of selfhood as a more or less cognitively intact person. An idle person rather than “feeling no urgency about having a personality,” as O’Connor (2018, 19) says, may in part be explicitly or implicitly rejoicing or meditating about having a personality. It is noteworthy that these moments are often heightened by being shared with others which is itself a sort of social achievement that reflects valuing of relations with others, our social capacities, and who we are more generally. The social aspect of idleness is also characteristic of play (Eberle 2014). We might then revise O’Connor’s account to say that idleness is properly an achievement but one that has no guiding worldly purposes.

Perhaps the claim that idleness can be an achievement will be resisted because it involves little difficulty or effort. My response is twofold. First, as the references to Simon, Lennon, and Thoreau show, achieving idleness frequently involves effort and difficulty. Second, it takes significant time and resources—money, and planning in our culture—to produce and maintain a healthy self and to create the circumstances in which one can enjoy being idle in a sustainable way even if there is no striving in the moment of idleness. As with many human goods, idleness also requires a measure of luck—for example, favorable social circumstances and a healthy physical and mental constitution—that can be challenging to sustain.

Perhaps some will also answer that a number of these examples of idleness are too inactive to count as play (though they would still be exercises of leisure). But play in itself often involves minimal activity and effort, for example, when children watch handfuls of sand slip through their fingers at the beach or when

someone aimlessly twists a lock of hair. If these count as play, it is no stretch to say that experiencing moments lazing quietly at the beach or elsewhere alone or with friends constitutes play, too. Watching the wheels is an adult analogue of children watching sand slip through their fingers. These all seem to be examples of what Suits (1988) usefully refers to as primitive play, specifically play that does not require exercise or pursuit of any significant skill. It is done just for the sake of enjoyable experience or stimulation. Suits offers the example of a baby playing with water in a bath. Sutton-Smith (1970) makes a similar point about what he terms “exploratory” and “testing” play for children, using splashing and pouring sand as examples.

A more common and familiar example of primitive play among older individuals would be enjoying “doing nothing.” Doing nothing should be understood as a type of disengagement from worldly pursuits. It is characterized by a wide range of primitive play activities—relaxing in bed or with a drink or with one’s thoughts or without thoughts, sitting in the sun, kickin’ down the cobblestones, quietly hanging out with friends on the deck at a summer cottage, and so on. No significant skill is involved; it is the experience that matters. Idleness as primitive play arguably clarifies the idea of play in ways that are not widely recognized but fit well within common understandings of play. It is unalienated disengagement from worldly pursuits and has all the characteristics of quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility. It may seem unusual at first to describe some of these activities as play, but we should expect analysis of concepts to clarify classes of phenomena in unanticipated ways. Perhaps, too, it is pejorative attitudes toward idleness that have obscured these connections.

A good deal of idleness is primitive play but not all of it. Idleness often presupposes and is supported by more traditionally recognized virtues than striving and resilience. Conversation is a good example, by which I mean informal, open-ended talk or chatting outside of work and other serious pursuits. Tom Hodgkinson (2004), the British social critic and author of a popular manifesto on idleness (cleverly organized into twenty-four chapters—an idle pastime for each hour of the day), argues that the value of conversation has been “demonized” today because of its idle character “by a society that prizes action above all else” (214). He observes that great idlers, like Samuel Johnson, Thomas Paine, and Oscar Wilde, uniformly praise the delights of conversation for its sharing of ideas, stories, entertainment, and companionship.

It should not be overlooked, however, that enjoyable conversation is an achievement, one that arguably presupposes and is made possible by intellec-

tual virtues—an inquisitive attitude, an ability to reason, a readiness to listen and to learn and to be fair. It also requires character virtues like patience, a degree of courage in explaining and defending ideas, empathy, and of course wittiness. And idlers like Johnson, Paine, and Wilde were not know-nothings. Conversation for them was the product of being well informed, educated, and having a well-developed intelligence. Conversations with them undoubtedly had the intended purpose of traveling on some uncharted serendipitous journey to wherever the conversation led—a conversational road trip, as it were. It might have productive results, an idea for a play or an essay, for example, but that need not be its purpose, even if such outcomes are hoped for. Virtue and education can be good preparation for some types of idleness.

Much more can be said about the often unrecognized relationship between idling and virtue. In particular, the connections between idleness and virtue draw it more closely to play, since many forms of play require virtue and exercise of human excellence generally, for example, games and sports. Some forms of idleness do not require any virtues or skill. Often bodily pleasures do not require them. This is primitive play again. But sex is probably different, at least when it involves others. It cannot require too much effort or striving, of course, or it is no longer idling. But assuming sex with others can be a simple and easy pleasure, it does require perception of and sensitivity to how others want to be treated, in short, a measure of care for others. And companionship or love, endorsed by O'Connor as idle activity, according to Aristototele (2019), "is a virtue, or involves virtue" (1155a). So, it seems O'Connor should be open to connections between idleness and virtue and a virtuous self generally that is not quite as much a suspension of human personality as his formal description of idleness envisages.

Putting idleness clearly in the context of play and leisure and marking its association with human virtues make it less exceptional as an expression of human agency and freedom than in O'Connor's account. It shows that idleness encompasses a wide range of familiar human capacities. It can engage in the relaxed exercise of a variety of skills and virtues that give it a sophistication beyond primitive play—what Suits (1988) calls "sophisticated play"—albeit still well within the range of simple and easy pleasures of a relaxed self disengaged from worldly concerns and from the busyness of modern life. The familiarity of idleness and its connections with virtue and achievements and goal-directed behavior found in play and leisure all mean it is not so extraordinary, or even weird, an expression of personhood and autonomy as in the account that O'Connor (2009) gives. He overstates things when he says, "the experiences of

idleness seem so obviously to involve meager exercises of agency” (175).

The exceptional conceptions of autonomy and the self are found in the works of certain philosophers and others besides. They can make the agency of idleness appear meager by contrast, but this is not evidently the correct comparison. Idleness sometimes involves what can be described as a meagre exercise of agency or feeling a minimal sense of personality, but to think of all idleness in this way overlooks the diversity and attractions of simple and easy idle pleasures and much of the attraction of idleness for those in a position to enjoy them.

### **Moral and Aesthetic Dimensions of Idleness**

Idleness as play and leisure means it is entitled to consideration as part of basic human rights under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) recognition of rights to play and leisure. Idleness as a human good fits so well within familiar analyses of play and leisure that it deserves to be part of conversations about social justice where individuals live without or with limited opportunities for play and leisure. Everyone should have opportunities for idleness as part of being fully human. By contrast, idleness for many is frequently obtained at the expense of others’ work that prevents workers’ access to idleness (Russell 1935).

As I have noted, many great achievers who have lived rich personal lives have enjoyed abundant opportunities for idleness that have apparently also contributed to their social well-being and creativity. This is predicted by the analyses of play outlined earlier. The argument about idleness given here is also implicitly another ground for critique of the “hustle culture” in which careers and the pursuit of status exclude important aspects of being human, including idleness as play and leisure (Griffith 2019). It is also noteworthy that the activities of idleness generally do not require many external goods to realize. This makes them both accessible and a limited burden on the environment and, thus, worthy of cultivation and praise (although this is not an argument for restricting access to the resources needed for more active forms of play and leisure). The simple and easy pleasures of a relaxed idle self must also eschew any significant interpersonal conflict, and this can add to and be instructive for personal well-being.

Idleness as an aspect of protected human rights, human well-being, and social justice pointedly raises topics for ethical and social science research. But research into idleness needs to be developed that properly characterizes it to

better assess its extent, the attitudes toward it, and its value in human lives and communities. O'Connor's and my efforts at conceptual clarification and explaining how idleness should be valued are starting points for such productive research. As far as I can tell, almost nothing has been done on this topic by social psychologists or by applied ethicists.

An instructive exception is a widely cited study that purports to show people prefer being busy over being idle (Hsee, Yang, and Wang 2010). In this study, two experiments tested attitudes toward idleness by taking away the participants' distractions—cell phones and books and other personal belongings—as they were offered the option, in effect, to do nothing or undertake menial activity to fill their time. More participants chose being busy with a menial task over doing nothing. The researchers concluded their results demonstrated a psychological principle of “idleness aversion” (search this term for the influence of this research on public discourse) and, just as remarkably, ended up advocating “futile busyness” over idleness when one has nothing to do.

But, of course, this research badly misconceives idleness. Idleness is not properly characterized as an option for enforced inactivity without distractions. What needs to be compared are the types of activities or engagements that constitute idleness as play. Arguably taking away books and cell phones and other belongings biased the results by taking away many options for idleness. The study participants may well have rejected the option they perceived to be alienated idleness. What the researchers needed was a richer, more accurate conception of idleness against which to compare being menially busy against. It could include choosing to do nothing at all, but that is not the limit of idleness. Research would also need to be devised that tries to filter out cultural biases against idleness, including the researchers' own biases. There is rich, unturned ground for further investigation about idleness as an activity and value.

A useful complement to the current discussion that suggests other avenues for research is Richard Adelman's (2011) *Idleness, Contemplation, and the Aesthetic, 1750–1830*. Adelman shows how early works of political economy in Great Britain, like Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, ignore idleness as a sphere of human life in favor of defending labor as fundamental to human progress and happiness. Later English-speaking intellectuals, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, address this omission by considering a role in human lives for what Adelman terms “idle contemplation.” These thinkers' attitudes toward idleness as described here are generally critical and cautionary even though they



acknowledge its widespread presence in human life. Their response is to propose cultivating idle contemplation as a tool for developing moral and aesthetic understanding and sensibilities. I have argued that such uses of idleness ignore its value independently of serving progressive ends. But I have also noted many important connections between idleness and exercise and the development of human virtue, aesthetic experience, and creativity. These connections deserve further investigation for how they might extend our understanding of the social and personal value of idleness. This plausibly extends beyond moral and aesthetic development to human agency in general. It would follow that these aspects of idleness will figure within a rhetoric of play as progress. Adelman's work provides an important starting point for such inquiries.

An extension of such discussions would consider more fully the aesthetic dimensions of idleness. Although I cannot consider the topic here in the detail it deserves, the attraction of idleness often seems to lie importantly in its aesthetic qualities. The experiences of simplicity, repose, stillness, contemplation, passive engagement, fellowship, and "feelin' groovy" found in idleness seem to mark it as a richly aesthetic category of human life to the extent that idleness itself could be described as a category of aesthetic experience. It seems to fit well into the recently established field of "everyday aesthetics" (Saito 2001).

### **Objections: Guilt and Boredom**

John Locke should be added to the catalogue of anti-idling philosophers. Locke thought that humans feel naturally guilty or anxious about being idle, which is purportedly evidence that they understand that idleness is a vice (Snyder 2021). However, this seems flatly wrong as a matter of psychology, since many humans do not feel misgivings about being idle. And the discussion in O'Connor's book shows that negative attitudes toward idleness hardly demonstrate that it is always a vice. Locke's outlook plausibly reflects a certain Protestant capitalist work ethic that had emerged in his time. The position advanced here and in O'Connor's book is that there exists no reason ever to be shamefaced about being idle *per se*. The same goes for play, of course. Any guilt from being idle seems due to a sense of responsibility toward internal or external demands that are in tension with being idle. These demands can be reasonable or unreasonable. What these boundaries are requires discussion. We have not had that discussion yet, arguably because of the bad notice idleness has often received in our culture.

Another concern about idleness is that its relative inactivity will make it a ready source of boredom, and so it is of limited, if any, human value. This seems to be Suits's (1978) position. In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, he argues that a utopia in which there is no need to work, and thus one that presents endless opportunities for play, nevertheless threatens to be a boring and deeply unhappy place, since humans will have nothing to strive for. According to Suits, the only solution to this predicament is to create games of sufficient challenge and complexity to occupy utopians. But this presumes without argument that humans can only find lives meaningful that require "as much energy as is expended today in serving institutions of scarcity" (176). The example of idleness suggests an alternative vision of play that many humans in Suits's utopia could be happy with (Russell 2022). After all, it is a sort of life that many aspire to today and that many who are in favorable positions apparently find rewarding enough.

The heterogeneity of idleness also suggests that its many avenues of activity and opportunities for novelty can stave off concerns about boredom easily settling in. Also, as we have seen, it is not as if idleness involves no striving or challenges, though perhaps not the demanding ones that Suits has in mind. And we can raise a similar concern to the one raised about Locke. Perhaps a sense of the importance of having difficult challenges to strive to overcome is partly or largely a cultural artifact. If so, those who feel the need for more in the way of exertion in Suits's utopia could look to the idlers there for advice about how to address at least some of their sense of alienation and unhappiness. Nevertheless, idleness as play and leisure can undoubtedly flow into (and out of) boredom, as can any human activity (Svendsen 2005). This is a topic that I cannot address here, but one that probably deserves careful attention for how it might better characterize both idleness as a good and alienated idleness.

There is a deep empirical question about human psychology underlying Suits's vision of play in utopia and this response to it. My sense is that Suits is at least partly right about the presence and meaningfulness of striving in our lives. Following Suits, I have defended the value of striving, drawing on evidence from biology, psychology, philosophy, and even physics (Russell 2020). But I also have acknowledged the importance of breaks from the inevitable needs to strive in our nonutopian lives. What a healthy balance would look like is a matter for further investigation. For now, we might say provisionally that Suits describes something that reflects a common or perhaps a species typical trait. But this does not mean that engaging in idleness or idleness as a dominant way of life could not be rewarding for many. Just as idlers might be brought through evidence

and experience to recognize value in more robust ways of life, the more driven among us may have important things to learn from the idlers. It seems highly plausible that a flourishing human life would include recognition of both the value of idleness and of engagements and achievements requiring more strenuous efforts. It is instructive in this respect that the great idlers mentioned in this essay were also great achievers. We might equally say that these great achievers were also devoted idlers. There is no necessary exclusionary opposition between idleness and achievement, and my discussion has suggested ways in which they can be mutually reinforcing. A key conclusion of this discussion is that idleness as play and leisure can be part of a balanced, meaningful life.

### **Summary of the Phenomenon of idleness**

I finish with a brief review of the phenomenon of idleness as it has emerged in this discussion. Idleness as a human good is:

**EXPERIENCED ACTIVITY.** As such, it can involve goals and even guiding purposes. It may seem odd to think of idleness in some cases as an activity, but this is a misunderstanding or prejudice. Sitting and relaxing for a time is not doing nothing at all. It is sitting and relaxing. Its activity consists in being engaged with enjoying the experience of rest or repose. Merely being at rest or inactive is thus not yet idleness (for example, simply taking a break or sleeping). Idle activity encompasses both primitive and more sophisticated play activities.

**DISENGAGED FROM WORLDLY ENDS.** It is not productive in the sense of getting on in life, or pursuing work, politics, excellence, money, status, and the like. Idle activities do not have worldly ambitions in themselves. As such, idleness can appear, as play sometimes can, to be subversive of worldly pursuits and moral and perfectionist goals.

**PRODUCTIVE.** But not in the worldly terms just described. It is characterized, roughly speaking, as a heterogeneous class of activities aimed at realizing and experiencing simple and easy pleasures found commonly in some aesthetic experiences, amusements, entertainments, bodily comforts and pleasures, companionship, solitude, and fun generally. Idleness is not a simple hedonism, since its pleasures may be obtained as a result of valuing certain experiences, states, activities, and relationships for their own sake. This extends the notion of the productivity of idleness beyond pleasurable experience alone.

**AN ACHIEVEMENT INVOLVING MODEST OR MINIMAL EFFORT IN ITSELF.**

Too much effort spoils idleness. Although idleness can include self-monitoring, too much effort in self-monitoring, or failures of it, qualify or undermine what it is to be idle until those efforts can be put aside. What idleness uncovers is just how much enjoyment and reward activities involving modest or minimal effort or ambition can find outside worldly engagements. Creating or sustaining conditions where idleness can take place can, and often does, require substantial effort.

**NOT NECESSARY.** Many activities involving little effort can in practice have the feeling of idleness—washing the dishes, raking the leaves, or folding laundry, for example. But they are necessary activities in most life circumstances and as such cannot properly be regarded as idleness. Anything that is a task to be done is not idleness. Work, moral obligations, required religious practices, and the like, are not idleness. This is an extension of the idea of disengagement.

**PLANNED OR SERENDIPITOUS.** One can plan idle time (e.g., relaxing in bed), or it can be come upon and enjoyed by accident (e.g., daydreaming).

**PROPERLY REGARDED AS AN ASPECT OF PLAY AND LEISURE.** It fits a common understanding of a familiar aspect of play. It is not work and can be valued for its own sake, and so is an aspect of leisure. Just as more strenuous exercises of play and leisure can amount to a way of life, idleness can be a way of life as a less demanding expression of play and leisure. Idleness should be acknowledged and investigated as an important aspect of play and leisure.

**REFLECTS AND DOES NOT UNDERMINE HUMAN DIGNITY.** Idle engagements presuppose a personality or self, including capacities for choice. These features of idleness align broadly with connections philosophers have drawn to sources of a sense of human dignity and personhood. If idleness had no connection at all to choice or effort or an awareness of self, it would not be a characteristically human activity. It would be a “vegetating” conception of idleness that is a caricature some of its critics use to denounce it (O’Connor 2018).

Most of these conditions agree with or clarify positions that O’Connor takes. The main exceptions are the remarks about play, leisure, achievement, and productivity. The boundaries of these conditions are admittedly vague, but that does not undermine their usefulness as general guides. Climbing a ten-thousand-foot mountain from sea level in a day does not count as idleness, though it could be a use of leisure and play. Playing golf just for fun and companionship and not keeping a handicap probably does count as idle activity. Playing games just for fun or what Kretchmar (2019) calls “gentle pursuits of a modest competence,” is probably idleness, at least sometimes (380). Playing games for a living or to achieve excellence or status is not idleness. Ballet is not idleness.

But simple, easy bodily movements just for the sake of the aesthetic experience and fun of them is arguably a type of dancing that counts as idleness. Where these boundaries are crossed is for further discussion, but it is also likely that vagueness about idleness is just a fact. It is something that can come in degrees and that it is possible to wander in and out of.

The frequent mention of solitude invites consideration about where meditation fits into idleness. The term “meditation,” however, covers such a wide range of activities and purposes, often directed at worldly objectives like self-improvement and enlightenment (perhaps including learning to be more idle), that its relationship to idleness is not straightforward, and I leave discussion of it aside. Nevertheless, it is a topic worth pursuing.

This leads to a closing thought about idleness as a way of life. Many philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to today have thought of philosophical contemplation as the ideal way of life, in part because it seems to be a stable and endless source of fascination over a lifetime (Aristotle 2019; Plato 1989), in contrast with other types of pursuits and achievements, for example, athletic achievement or raising a family. It has struck many, including myself, that this is special pleading by philosophers for philosophers. But I am sure the philosophers are right that contemplation has these enduring qualities for those (perhaps the relatively few) with the right talents and dispositions. For them, the contemplative life need never be uninteresting or boring. But the goods found in idleness are similarly stable and enduring and include other types of contemplation. Idleness as play and leisure is more catholic in this respect than the philosophers’ life of contemplation. I doubt that we need to rank order these ways of life, and we can certainly choose to live in both realms and in others besides.

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