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INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY AND IDLENESS



Questions about the nature of moral values predominate in philosophy's analysis of human action. There has been comparatively little concern with bringing to light assumptions about the kinds of people we are supposed to be in order to live as effective and happy actors within the highly integrated and productive societies of today. A moment's reflection makes it very clear that "fitting in" and "doing well" require us to be made—perhaps even, we might like to think, by our own free choices—into beings of a very specific and not obviously natural type. Among the key characteristics of this type is a reluctance to idle or a tendency to recognize some wrong in idleness even as we are tempted by it or succumb to it. Philosophers have weighed in with arguments designed to defend negative perceptions of idleness. Traditional moralistic rebukes of the idle are remodeled according to the latest notion of the greatness of humanity. Higher-level narratives about what we truly are or ought to be are

offered in explanation of why idleness is not appropriate for beings like us. The aim of this study is to examine and ultimately to expose the presumptions and faults of those narratives.

I will eventually contend that idleness may, in certain respects, be considered closer to the ideals of freedom than the most prestigious conception of self-determination found in philosophy. This book, however, proceeds mainly by way of criticism and without advocacy for the idle life. This is not out of preference for either a superior stance of negativity or scholastic purism. Rather, positive recommendations risk underappreciating how deeply an ambivalence toward idleness is constitutive of much of what many of us take ourselves to be (a point that will be visited many times over the course of this study). That ambivalence will not be resolved by philosophical sketches of a life freed from the driving forces of industry.

Excluding a didactic and constructive approach does not, however, mean that the question of idleness exists here as a strictly theoretical problem.¹ The critical impetus is sustained by a sense of the harm our idleness-excluding-world does to human beings. That powerful anxiety, directly connected with the need to work for one's good standing, precariously serves our health and happiness. A social space within which a feeling of worth is gained by visible career and material success underwrites a peculiar vulnerability. Humiliation and trauma loom when the circumstances

that enable realization of those goods are either only partially available to begin with or are suddenly taken from those who once enjoyed them. Suicide rates increase, families collapse, children struggle. A more stable and less ambitious socioeconomic system could possibly save us from some of the familiar perils of modern life. A bolder image of freedom is, though, offered by idleness. What that would look like in full is another kind of question. But one can conjecture that the genuinely idle would be spared the various forms of pain that are held in store even for those who try to make the most of the twinned institutions of work and social esteem. It is that very intuition that underpins the appeal of idleness even as it sits alongside the winning importance we ultimately attach to those institutions.

The notion of idle freedom—where work is no kind of virtue or path to worthiness—is meaningful and real enough to deserve protection. Here that protection will involve exposing the deficiencies of those many philosophical pronouncements in support of the official view of the world, the view that idleness is a bad, whereas busyness, self-making, usefulness, and productivity are supposedly the very core of what is right for beings like us. Exposing the assumptions and problems of the arguments against idleness might help to preserve the notion of freedom it embodies, even if it is mainly an oppositional freedom: liberation from those unsettling expectations that are all too difficult to resist. The main task of the book, then, will

be, in a way, to prevent the philosophical case against idleness from having the last word. And we shall, in fact, see that philosophical accusations do not always lie so very far from more prosaic ones. The worries that, because of idleness, we are in danger of wasting our lives, of not doing justice to ourselves, or simply of not contributing are articulated in systematic and challenging forms in the texts to be considered. Some readers will not agree with my criticisms of those proposals that maintain that human beings are obliged to work toward something so much more impressive than idleness. Others may not believe they actually experience any desire for idleness—that, at least, is what I am sometimes told—and will therefore be unmoved by efforts in its behalf. This book does not hope to persuade them that they should think otherwise about whether they should develop that desire.

My critical approach could not be accurately described as balanced. I do not proceed with an open mind on whether or not idleness is a bad thing, and I am generally skeptical about any philosophical argument against it. Nevertheless, anti-idleness material is approached in the manner that seems to be expected by its authors. That is, I respond to the arguments found in those texts. I find almost none of them effective, for reasons that will become clear in the course of this book. Nor is my critical approach systematic. My various responses might conceivably amount to the basis of a different conception of work, happiness, or freedom. At this point a cohesive position is not,

however, evident. Lastly, what is on offer here is not purely analytical in its dealings with its selected philosophers. Motivations as well as coherence will also be considered.

* * *

Idleness is a complex phenomenon whose meaning varies, sometimes quite radically, across contexts. The notion of idleness I want to explore encapsulates a form of experience that places us outside the norms or conventions of societies like ours. It is not only a state of not working, though that is a key marker. It involves a departure from a range of values that make us the kinds of people we are supposed to be in order to live well. The very idea of being a “self” of the appropriate kind is thereby placed in question. The features of the phenomenon of idleness—in the sense that is in focus here—can be roughly grouped. First, there are what we may label its *phenomenological features*, its distinctive feel. Idleness is experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose. That absence of purpose explains its restful and pleasurable qualities. Idleness is a feeling of noncompulsion and drift. We often become idle by slipping into it, either in the middle of tasks or for extended periods. The structure of our individual lives permits idleness in varying degrees, depending on the level of our commitments and the seriousness with which we take them. In principle, it is possible to imagine a life that is largely idle—that is, in which idleness is not a momentary release from work.

In this book, claims made against that possibility will be of special interest. Philosophers appear to express no worry about momentary or intermittent idleness, but a life of idleness is often seen by them as representative of humanity in a debased form.

A second dimension of idleness is its *effective* content. The activities that fill an idle period are not geared toward productivity. Should an interesting thought, of value to ongoing or future projects, arise during idleness, it is a serendipitous outcome. A further distinctive feature of idle behavior is its *structure*. It simply does not happen as a process involving disciplined self-monitoring. There is no sense of an inner power struggle in which something in us needs to be overcome or improved. Hence idleness, as we shall see, is perceived by its modern critics as an obstacle to some grand idea of self-realization. However, idleness is not mindless: no less than non-idle behavior, it contains conceptual components and judgments. As we idle we know what we are doing, even if we have no idea of an overall end or purpose in what we do. Idleness need not therefore be interpreted as essentially irrational. To construe it in that way is nothing more than to express the prejudice that rationality belongs to self-mastering, rule-guided actions only. Idleness, on the contrary, may offer a glimpse of an alternative way of living, one that looks wholly reasonable—makes sense—to those who experience it. It does, after all, seem to place us in a liberating possession of ourselves, free of

pressure, and evidently content. From these characteristics it is obvious that idleness stands in opposition to much of what is taken to be right and normal: it has nothing to do with performance, with work, with social standing, with gaining in prestige.

Idleness can be found in other forms. Mannered idleness—once theorized among a certain class as the art of being idle—is quite different from the form described above. Mannered idleness is a way of life, carefully pursued and designed to create an impression of effortless existence comfortably elevated above the unintelligible toils of the masses. In its ostentation it involves little or no weakening of a conventional social sense. It wants to be seen and admired. That it is usually enabled by necessary social inequality—some will work while others are seen to play—also separates it from idleness in the sense that is implicitly dissatisfied with the usual social arrangements.

It is important to distinguish the notion of idleness, as it will be studied here, from leisure. Idleness obviously shares some of leisure's features. The boundaries of leisure, though, are to be found in the degree to which leisure can be incorporated within the general model of the modern social actor. For most who enjoy it, leisure is an instrument, allowing us to cede temporarily from life-shaping demands. Yet it is implicated in those demands. Leisure can renew our capacity to perform. It allows us to recover from labor or to think freely about our next task or to augment ourselves by taking the trouble to gain

valuable new experiences (cultural tourism and the like). In today's world leisure may be considered a liberation of a sort, yet many labor regimes make leisure—paid vacation leave—obligatory. Leisure is good, apparently, not only for the worker but also for the employer. The general model of the effective social actor within a system of work is partly sustained in this way. Idleness, by contrast, threatens to undermine what that model requires, namely, disciplined, goal-oriented individuals. For that reason, idleness cannot be incorporated within the productivity model—unlike leisure—since it is a noninstrumental break from all that is required to make us useful. William Morris expressed a typical concern that leisure, which has become abundant in the modern world, should not be allowed to “degenerate into idleness and aimlessness.”² Like numerous other social theorists, Morris speculated on the right balance between work and leisure. Too much leisure is idleness, a state of affairs in which no balance with work may be conceived, with imperiling consequences for the latter. In its indifference to productivity idleness clearly intersects with laziness. In some contexts—both critical and sympathetic ones—they are essentially synonyms. The family of Anna in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* cry out the traditional refrain that idleness is the beginning of all evil as they sing about the vice of laziness. Laziness is broadly perceived as a moral failing, as the state of a person

who knows perfectly well what to do but who opts for rest anyway. In that specific sense, laziness can be separated from the implicitly critical or rebellious ways of idleness. In practice, though, no definitive demarcation between the two is to be found, and the notion of laziness will sometimes be in focus in the discussions of idleness that follow.

* * *

A history of idleness as a moral category would consider a range of similar-looking concepts that have emerged over its millennia-long history. Some discussion would need to be given, for instance, to sloth and *acedia*. This is not a work of genealogy, however. The focus of the analysis here is the distinctive way in which idleness comes into view in philosophy in what is broadly called the modern age. This is the age characterized by its interest in individual liberty, civic society, democracy, capitalism, and reason. Effective living within this world requires particular talents. We are expected to participate in its practices in various ways. We must develop skills that will prepare us for usefulness. Discipline is vital: we address our tasks with diligence and stand ready and willing for more. Disoccupation—idleness—is not an easy experience since our acquired discipline orients us towards yet more activity. Discipline here is not to be understood as task specific. That is, it does not refer to a situation in which one may take a highly structured approach to

one's work or hobbies but be shapeless with regard to all else. Ideally our whole lives must take on a shape, a clear purpose, a "rational plan of life," as John Rawls calls it, which brings integrity to the totality of our actions. We are permitted to play, perhaps even to idle, but we will tend not to take up any of those options without considerable hesitation, since they run counter to the motivations that are normal for social agents like us. These moments of alternative living are not to be allowed to spoil the central project.

It should hardly be a surprise that the most significant *philosophical* considerations of idleness are found in our modern period. This is the era in which progress is directly connected with the efforts of human beings to bring reasoned order to the world. That order starts with the order we bring to ourselves. Idleness is obviously one kind of impediment to progress understood in that way. The contemporary age—modernity as some prefer to label it—is not, though, a monolith in which vital questions of what kinds of freedom, society, and humanity we want are settled or agreed. These notions are obviously subject to debate. Each theory of what we ought to be, nevertheless, understands itself as an advance on the world that has gone before. Rejections of archaic authority and hopes for a better type of humanity are shared. The specifics of each conception of freedom, society, and individuality demand, as we shall see, specific arguments against idleness.

* * *

A life marked by voluntary idleness could probably be described as hedonistic in the everyday sense of the word. With its indifference to planning, discipline, and usefulness, a life of that kind appears to be gratifying on its own terms, unmoved by those hard values that might be thought to give the modern world its peculiarly driving qualities. The perception of idleness within the technical sphere of *philosophical hedonism* is, however, a less straightforward matter. In principle, the academic form of hedonism should find no difficulty in acknowledging idleness as a perfectly satisfactory pleasure, and in that respect a preference that meets the warrant of morality (given the pleasure principle that serves as the normative source of philosophical hedonism). In fact, those acknowledgments are rare. One wholehearted example is to be found in David Hume's "The Epicurean." It is an effort to defend, what we might call, hedonic idleness and pleasure generally as the truest and most positive forms of human action. By looking at Hume's essay we can, at the outset of this study, address the question of whether the value of idleness is captured by philosophical hedonism and whether, therefore, the question of idleness can be left to a larger dispute about the moral status of pleasure.

Although "The Epicurean" lends support to hedonic idleness, it does not actually represent Hume's

usual views of things. He generally has much to say against indolence. But a particular perspective is “personated”³ in the essay in order to entertain the case for a life of pleasure within its defensible limits. Its sense of where those limits lie is of some interest. The essay takes as its enemy a philosophical claim that living according to certain “rules of reason” can generate a distinctive form of happiness, one that supposedly amounts to “a new pleasure.” Hume voices the objection that the “original frame and structure” of human beings is not designed for such an unnatural variety of enjoyment. Rather, what pleases it is “ease, contentment, repose.” This languid mode contrasts with the disagreeable regime of “watchfulness, care, and fatigue,” which the proponents of a purely regulated life would inflict on us. The text speculates that “pride” motivates this effort to become self-sufficient, that is, independent of “the *outside*,” but that independence is really nothing more than an exhibitionistic denial of pleasure. The “dictates of nature,” it is confidently maintained, must win against the falseness of a life whose only basis is a “frivolous” philosophical theory.⁴

“The Epicurean” may seem to travel in the direction of everyday hedonism. A familiar constraining worry about hedonistic life, however, enters the discussion. Unfettered pleasure, we are told, exhausts itself. Now, in this context, the thesis has two main possible aspects. First, since pleasure is eventually expended, it cannot form the basis of any long-term

way of life. It must therefore find its place among our other valuable activities. Or, second, pleasure is so great a good that it must guard against its overuse so that it can be enjoyed in the longer term. In fact, there are elements of both of these thoughts in Hume's essay. Pleasure should, it transpires, be controlled by "virtue," obscurely identified as its "sister." Pleasure checked by virtue will restore "to the rose its hue, and to the fruit its flavour." Through this partnership the "mind," as Hume carefully puts it, can keep "pace with the body." The wisdom we possess when in a state of virtuous pleasure can enable us both to repel "the barbarous dissonance of Bacchus" and to see through the absurdity of a life dedicated to the pursuit of glory at the expense of pleasure.⁵

In its efforts to give philosophical justification to pleasure and to bring it within the framework of morality, the stance of "The Epicurean" is perhaps less disruptive than it at first seems. In moderating pleasure with virtue, it implicitly rejects the idea that there is a good to be found in spontaneous indifference to what is expected of us. Rather, it recommends, among other things, an easeful life that can steer itself clear of scandal, that is, idleness in some way accommodated to virtue. Virtue excludes those options that entail an abandonment of all that is considered proper. Although its principles are not specified, it is clear enough that virtue has an authoritative normativity of its own. The recommendations of virtue are not subservient to the imperatives of pleasure. And virtue

also contains a prudential function in ensuring that pleasure is not depleted. We get a sense from these various claims of where “The Epicurean” draws the limits to what human beings and their needs may be allowed to be. And among those needs, it appears, is moral justification. No form of pleasure deserves to be promoted if it transgresses the boundaries of what virtue can permit. “The Epicurean” gives rise to numerous questions about the coherence of at least this rather general variety of philosophical hedonism. The most obvious one is why pleasure is to be considered normatively significant given that pleasure must both be protected from itself and be subject to administrative overview by virtue. What is more relevant here, though, is whether the hedonic idleness that is valorized in “The Epicurean” really speaks to the sense of idleness we have so far considered. Hume’s essay does not conceive of idleness in terms of freedom. It is considered, rather, as a pleasure in itself that may be morally licensed, not one that makes sense as a reaction to the world of busyness or the imperatives of self-making. In line with Hume’s characteristic essentialism, it does not think that individuals are already constituted by those social conditions that make idleness both tempting yet almost impossible.⁶ The idea of idleness as freedom, in comparison, is not the way of good sense. Certainly, that freedom is a pleasure, but it is one whose historical context gives it its content.

* * *

This contrast with philosophical hedonism may be even more sharply drawn by turning to one defense of idleness that amounts to an abandonment of the very idea of proper socialization and wise indulgence. This defense is significant in a further important way, since it is set against the demands of an incipient modern age. Friedrich Schlegel's Julius, in the philosophical novel *Lucinde* (1799), presents us with an "Idyll upon Idleness." He rejects the idea that idleness is *schole* ("leisure," pursued with virtue and for virtue). It should serve no end beyond itself. Idleness is rather, a "godlike art" of laziness and a "liberal carelessness and inactivity." Julius describes the general comportment of idleness as "passivity," in fact, as "pure vegetating [*reines Vegetieren*]," a descriptor Immanuel Kant will also use, as we shall later see. Schlegel contrasts the attitude of the idler with that of "self-conceit [*Eigendünkel*]," where the individual is caught up only in the imperatives of "industry and utility," which are darkly described as "the angels of death." Prometheus is identified as "the inventor of education and enlightenment" and also of the project, in effect, of a rational plan of life: "It's from him [Prometheus] that you inherited your inability to stay put and your need to be constantly striving. It's also for this reason that, when you have absolutely nothing else to do *you foolishly feel compelled to aspire to having a personality. . .*" Julius,

then, seems to be advancing the notion of idleness in a radical—socially critical—manner: (1) idleness defies industry, utility, and means and ends; (2) happiness is conceived as passivity rather than restless activity; and (3) idleness directs the individual away from what in more recent philosophy is called self-constitution (the task of making ourselves into integrated moral beings). Julius’s critical insights against what he calls “Nordic barbarity” will have no little relevance in the theorization of idleness as a criticism of the modern social actor.⁷

Schlegel’s language is striking and, in the use of the notion of “vegetating,” perplexing. The metaphor could be unpacked in numerous ways. If it aims at describing our state of mind while idle, it is clearly excessive. Indeed, it does not match up with what we might imagine a “godlike art” to be. However, pitted against the notions of discipline and purpose, it has some purchase. It is keenly aware of its philosophical target: the ethics of Kant. And it differs from a more popular yet less radical appeal for idleness found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings, which offer both influential ideas on social freedom (sometimes interpreted as the first articulations of the notion of autonomy) and deeply contrasting thoughts about a quasi-natural flight from purpose and opinion as freedom in some truer sense.

Rousseau’s images of the freedom produced by uninhibited reverie lay claim to a form of idleness that is indifferent to opinion, albeit one that does not involve the abandonment of self-determination altogether. It

is certainly not the kind of self-renunciation Schlegel entertains. Idleness of a particular type becomes possible, for Rousseau at least, when we can live in solitude in the countryside. In the *Confessions*, he declares: “The idleness [*l’oisiveté*] I love is not that of a do-nothing who stays there with his arms crossed in total inactivity and thinks no more than he acts. It is both that of a child who is ceaselessly in motion while doing nothing and, at the same time, that of a dotard who strays when his arms are at rest. I love to occupy myself by doing trifles, beginning a hundred things and finishing none of them . . . following only the caprice of the moment in everything.”⁸ Rousseau, as David James points out, develops a position in which freedom consists of “passively obeying a succession of impressions” rather than the familiar enterprise of concerted “self-direction.”⁹ Rousseau rather more famously finds freedom in the right kind of social organization, that is, in a community secured through the social contract, but here at least, the notion of freedom in the absence of others is explored. It is achieved by retreat from the critical and expectant gaze of society, away, indeed, from the city, “the abyss of the human species,” as he puts it in *Emile*.¹⁰

Schegel, rather more audaciously, offers us not a rural adventure but a provocation that invites us to consider a kind of destruction of all the forces that draft out our lives for us. These forces may be experienced as standing in tension with a primitive desire to surrender to circumstances: “passivity”—a concept

that is developed in the quite different space of Sigmund Freud's psychology. One way of understanding Freud's elusive notion of the death drive is as an analysis of the conditions in which the demands the ego places on the organism as a whole become unbearable. This motivates some attraction to a life without experience and, more specifically, one free from the pressure that reality brings with it. A tensionless state—which is death for the ego—can be gained by a dynamic release of the individual from the pressures of the ego: "The central and predominant intention of Thanatos, its aim and purpose, is precisely peace in one form or another, attained in some way or another."¹¹

In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud identifies three main drive principles—Nirvana, pleasure, and reality—allocating distinctive roles to each of them: "The Nirvana principle expresses the trend of the death instinct; the pleasure principle represents the demands of the libido; and the modification of the latter principle, the reality principle, represents the influence of the external world."¹² Pleasure and death each aim at a tensionless condition, whereas the reality principle forces the organism to forestall, painfully, that condition. The notion of a deathlike tensionlessness as some kind of reference point for idleness may seem far-fetched. And Freud's interest in this state is not to understand idleness but a specific pathological condition. The point will not be pushed

hard in this book, notwithstanding Schlegel's intriguing language or Freud's fleeting insight. Nevertheless, it is clear that some of the most sophisticated criticisms of idleness find some use for analogies with unfamiliar and even non-human-like states of being when striking against human beings who have not learned—or who refuse—to make themselves useful or to keep themselves occupied. Some critics of idleness, in other words, mark out as failings some of the very things that proponents of idleness wish to emphasize as its advantages, namely, its destruction of what are considered the key markers of modern life. Included among those markers are activity, industry, planned self-realization, a firm sense of one's ego. The critics maintain that those in the supposedly awful condition of idleness lack the motivation to elevate themselves into a higher level of existence. That lack of motivation is, though, untroubled idleness: the human being who experiences no inner tension or self-alienation and, again, feels no urgency to have a "personality."

There is something disconcerting about the wholesale revisions in human reality that seem to come with a life of idleness. The much-valued ideal of "flourishing" might become an irrelevance, a thought that surely speaks against idleness. That ideal takes many forms. Martha Nussbaum, drawing lessons from the Athenians, has influentially explained it as a kind of harmony of virtue, excellence of character, and the

freedom to participate in the politics of one's place.¹³ The less classically minded will understand it as the exercise of freedom that sees individuals realize themselves in ways that personally enrich and please them. There is no agreement about the form flourishing ought to take. There is more likely to be convergence on when its possibility is precluded. Among the negative conditions standing in its way are political oppression, economic inequality, rigid class structures, limited access to education or food. If we think of flourishing as something that comes into view when negative conditions are in place, we might conclude that idleness need not be regarded as an impediment to it. Where idleness involves a way of living that has ceded from social pressures, thereby reducing the scope of the influence of socialization itself, it too may be understood as an expression of flourishing. Even, perhaps, the vegetating idler might be said to flourish insofar as that individual leads a life of a specific kind that is voluntary and that is fulfilled in its own terms. What would not count as flourishing would be the kinds of misery that accompany the effort to make something of ourselves in a world where success and triumphs of various kinds are accompanied by a worry about failure.

* * *

The texts examined in this book come mainly, though not exclusively, from the period of German idealism and its aftermath. But nothing here is examined for

the sake of scholarship or historical commentary. A more important principle of selection is that the philosophers considered each articulate views of idleness that are now implicit, if not prevalent, in everyday discourse. They are undoubtedly more advanced and deeply grounded than common clichés about idleness and its dangers. But by looking closely at those views, we might hope to learn something about the kinds of justifications that are readily brandished whenever idleness becomes attractive.

The first chapter begins not with German philosophy or with philosophy at all but with a discussion of Robert Burton's analyses of idleness. We start there in order to establish what I take to be encompassed within premodern rejections of idleness. The model gleaned from Burton's work helps us to see what, in the sections that follow, is distinctive about Kant's later efforts to defend usefulness and rational self-determination. Kant's position may be cast in rather demanding theoretical terms but it aligns perfectly with a common view that a life worth living will be characterized by self-advancement and admirable industry. Kant, in fact, associates the attributes of usefulness and rational self-determination with "worthiness," a kind of inner quality that we have some obligation to realize. He maintains that the achievement of worthiness is not always pleasant or in line with our natural desire for idleness. It is nevertheless an ineluctable demand that is placed on us by virtue of the very beings we are.

G.W.F. Hegel, to whom I turn in the second chapter, takes a more integrationist view of human beings who have attained their worth. Nothing that we need to value is lost as human beings advance beyond the condition of savagery he finds among the peoples who still subsist in a state of idleness. He argues for the developmental advantages of those who can make themselves useful—even when there is no immediate use for them—and are able to contribute to the “system of needs” of all in a modern economy. As we shall see, a striking part of the story of this development is Hegel’s identification of the formed or “educated” consciousness of a slave with the willingness to work usefully. Whereas Hegel’s picture has something to do with what for him is the compelling dynamic of society, Karl Marx denounces idleness—a reluctance to work—on mainly moral grounds. It is a refusal to do what others need you to do, and it represents a retreat from the space of the “social” to selfishness. What is absent from Marx’s account is a consideration of arrangements in which idleness—laziness, in his terms—is possible without some questionable reversion to isolated individuality.

The third chapter looks at the phenomenon of boredom as a consequence of idleness. In this perception of idleness we find no proposal for ennobling or positively liberating work. The philosopher who best represents this view is Arthur Schopenhauer. He argues that we are without the capacity for contented

idleness. Our main task in life is to avoid idleness. We work, or throw ourselves into activities of virtually any kind, in order to escape the boredom that comes with idleness. This position represents a break from the idealizations of busyness found among Schopenhauer's illustrious predecessors. In a very important respect, however, it remains at a conventional level in that it does not consider whether our restlessness—our alleged incapacity for idleness—might be the product of social arrangements which form us in that way. Schopenhauer, rather, interprets human nature—though not always consistently—as fixed and ahistorical. The notion that boredom accompanies idleness is further illustrated in an examination of “the idle woman” offered by Simone de Beauvoir. Her position challengingly outlines the risk of boredom among individuals whose formation is not geared toward the realization of their actual needs.

Chapter 4 examines utopian efforts to reconcile the grim necessity of work with the distinctive freedom enjoyed in idleness. That reconciliation seems to promise to extricate human beings from Promethean burdens. It offers us the prospect that work might actually be a sphere of happiness rather than discipline and subordination to an alienating system. The models examined are those proposed by Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Marcuse, who both identify “play” as the space of this reconciliation. The obvious difficulties of giving coherent expression to what seems like a new

harmony of extreme opposites will be examined. The book concludes, in chapter 5, with an assessment of the very idea of idleness as freedom. Idleness is contrasted with autonomy, a conception of freedom that continues to set the standards, among philosophers, of what freedom is supposed to be.

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