

Idleness – the highest form of freedom?

A summary of *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay* – by Brian O'Connor

Disclosure: conflict of interest – as the author myself of a book called: *Be Useful* (and usefulness is, by definition, the very opposite of idleness) this book by O'Connor piqued my interest when I first saw it in the philosophy section of Waterstones recently.

From the book blurb: 'For millennia, idleness and laziness have been seen as vices. We're all expected to work to survive and get ahead, and devoting energy to anything but labour and self-improvement can seem like a luxury or a moral failure. Far from questioning this conventional wisdom, modern philosophers have entrenched it, viewing idleness as an obstacle to the ethical need people have to be autonomous, to be useful, to contribute to the social good, or simply to avoid boredom. In *Idleness*, the first book to challenge modern philosophy's portrayal of inactivity, Brian O'Connor argues that the case against an indifference to work and effort is flawed—and that idle aimlessness may instead allow for the highest form of freedom.

'*Idleness* explores how some of the most influential modern philosophers drew a direct connection between making the most of our humanity and avoiding laziness. Idleness was dismissed as contrary to the need people have to become autonomous and make whole, integrated beings of themselves (Kant); to be useful (Kant and Hegel); to accept communal norms (Hegel); to contribute to the social good by working (Marx); and to avoid boredom (Schopenhauer and de Beauvoir).

'O'Connor throws doubt on all these arguments, presenting a sympathetic vision of the inactive and unserious that draws on more productive ideas about idleness, from ancient Greece through Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Schiller and Marcuse's thoughts about the importance of play, and recent critiques of the cult of work. A thought-provoking reconsideration of productivity for the twenty-first century, *Idleness* shows that, from now on, no theory of what it means to have a free mind can exclude idleness from the conversation.'

My notes:

O'Connor begins by attempting a definition of idleness: "Idleness is experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose. The absence of purpose explains its restful and pleasurable qualities. Idleness is a feeling of noncompletion and drift."

He goes at length to differentiate idleness from leisure. Leisure, he claims, is not without purpose. This idea goes back to ancient philosophy, O'Connor quotes Seneca in *De otio* "...that studious contemplation, and a leisurely withdrawal from civic life, can lead to an enhancement of the republic." Leisure, therefore, is useful in order to become more reflective on life. Today leisure is a right and even an obligation; most workplaces insist you take annual vacation. Leisure is a necessary part of production, for workers to recharge and be *more* productive.

In contrast, idleness is seen as not being productive: being detached or indifferent to productivity – a purposeless ambivalence to work.

O'Connor also differentiates what he calls 'mannered idleness' – that of the privileged, the wealthy or the fortunate, (lottery winners?) who don't need to work – and indeed where idleness is identified with status. "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 his talk on Idleness (podcast: UCD University College Dublin – Ethics in Public Life), O’Connor refers back to the myth of Adam and Eve before the ‘fall’ in the Garden of Eden; they enjoyed a life of bliss / idyll merely tending (not ‘working’) the garden, will provide for all their needs, with no accomplishment or achievement required. Their original disobedience provoked God’s punishment in the form of ‘work’, labour and toil in the ‘barren soil’. Since the fall, humans simply *have* to work to survive – work is not viewed as a virtue or ‘moral’ necessity, but as an existential one!

O’Connor’s interest in philosophy really begins with the prevalent thinking of the Enlightenment: “this is the age characterised by its interest in individual liberty, civic society, democracy, capitalism, and reason.” O’Connor links it to confidence in human progress, made with application and good government, relying on reason rather than authority figures. Inner worth is realised when we take on our responsibility as social contributors and promote human potential.

Key figures in the book:

Robert Burton – *Anatomy of Melancholy* (published 1622) – a quasi-medical journal in which Burton aims to show that idleness provides conditions for melancholy (similar to, but not the same as, depression) he urges: “be not solitary, be not idle.” He insists that the idle mind ‘macerates’ itself in a self-destructive manner, never at rest, because not gainfully occupied! “Burton is following the conventional moral teaching when thinking of idleness as a space within which wickedness can take hold. Even the very difficult notion that idleness actually *causes* mischief is a commonplace among those contemporaries and predecessors of Burton whose moral beliefs were marked by the Christian tradition.”

Immanuel Kant – *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (published 1785) O’Connor highlights Kant’s so-called ‘South Sea Islanders’ (whoever they are) living in Eden-like, idyllic situations; without ‘toiling’ for a living, subsisting happily like the animals. But they are not like rational agents, not like civilised people who are duty bound (Kant’s assertion that we act in accordance to the law / his ‘universal’ principle) to contribute to the improvement of society and of self (or preferably both). Kant proposes that not doing so is unreasonable or irrational: Kant’s definition of rational beings is that of achieving ‘worthiness’ through purposeful contribution to society and self-improvement – in other words being ‘civilised.’ Idleness is missing out on opportunities for self-realisation. Rational agents are useful and productive – adding to the improvement of society and self. Uncivilised savages, like his imagined ‘South Sea Islanders’ by ‘idling’ are allowing their talents or their potential, to rust, not to be fully realised. “Idleness in this light, is a denial of Enlightenment. It amounts to a refusal to meet the challenge of taking responsibility for oneself and the institutions of the state.”

G.W.F. Hegel – builds on this view, asserting that humans are social beings, and that society precedes our part in it. Through what Hegel calls ‘Practical Education’ we learn to be usefully occupied, playing our part in a community of needs, developing the habit of serving the community, providing what others need / want. Hegel describes a ‘barbarian’ (not unlike Kant’s ‘savages’) as ‘solitary, brooding and dull’, one who doesn’t participate in socially valuable activities, he acts without rationale or reason – only working to meet his immediate needs – not for the needs of others or for self-improvement and has only animal needs. “His (Hegel’s) point of attack is to start with human beings and to show, in effect, that idleness is the alien element.” O’Connor goes on “..to

accept that high levels of socially motivated industry and exertion are the means by which true fulfilment can be reached.”

Arthur Schopenhauer and **Simone de Beauvoir** – both discuss the phenomenon of boredom as a consequence of idleness. In this perception of idleness, they find no proposal for ennobling or positively liberating work. They argue that human beings are without the capacity for contented idleness. Our main task in life is to avoid idleness and the negative effects of boredom. O’Connor even quotes **Tolstoy** here: “..because our moral nature is such that we cannot be both idle and at ease. An inner voice tells us we are in the wrong if we are idle. If man could find a state in which he felt that though idle he was fulfilling his duty, he would have found one of the conditions of man’s primitive blessedness.”

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. “He sees it as egoism. Idleness involves a disregard for a community of others to whom we owe sentimental duties of care. But it is also a disregard for our obligation to ourselves individually to increase our powers and capacities.” Marx maintains that we cannot *truly* realize ourselves without productivity.

Max Weber – *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (published 1905) explores the rise of industrialisation and our sense of worth linked to performance, productivity, usefulness etc. This takes its roots in Calvinism and the value of work, in and of itself. Today we have cultures of ‘work’ that acknowledge the importance of leisure only in the context of enabling people to be *more* productive and contribute meaningfully to society – not to ‘waste’ your life through idleness. The social gaze motivates us to contribute and participate positively – unlike the idler who is detached / disinterested in what society needs.

Friedrich Schlegel – *Lucinde* (published 1799) offers an ‘Idyll upon Idleness’ - O’Connor says “He (Julius) rejects the idea that idleness is *schole* (“leisure,” pursued with virtue and for virtue). It should serve no end beyond itself. Idleness is rather the “godlike art” of laziness and a “liberal carelessness and inactivity,” Julius describes the general comportment of idleness as “passivity,” in fact, as “pure vegetating.”

At the end of the book O’Connor attempts to offer some more positive views on ‘idleness as play’ from **Friedrich Schiller** and **Herbert Marcuse**: “Marcuse contrasts the harshness of the relentless sense of purpose that characterises people today with the ideal form of freedom encapsulated by the notion of play. He believes that a state of play is an attainable ideal for human beings.” O’Connor goes on to note “Marcuse...aligns his notion of play with the paradoxical Kantian notions of ‘lawfulness without law’ and ‘purposiveness without purpose.’ The fundamental feature of play is, that it is gratifying in itself, without serving any other purpose than that of instinctual gratification. This is implicitly, the boldest possible call for idleness. It entails complete indifference to purpose, and it makes no appeal to the notion of a self that must have integrity, moderate its desires, or find its place within a network of recognition.”

After reading the book I was prompted to revisit ‘The Idler’ – created by Tom Hodgkinson over 30 years ago, which was itself inspired by the essays of the same title by **Dr Samuel Johnson** (published 1758) “[The Idler] who habituates himself to be satisfied with what he can most easily obtain, not only escapes labours which are often fruitless, but sometimes succeeds better than those who

despise all that is within their reach, and think every thing more valuable as it is harder to be acquired.”

So, I'd like to leave you with The Idler's Manifesto written by Tom Hodgkinson some 10 years ago.

“The religion of industry has turned human beings into work robots. The imposition of work-discipline on free-wheeling dreamers enslaves us. All joy and wisdom have been replaced by work and worry. We must defend our right to be lazy. It is in our idleness that we become who we are; it is when lazy that we achieve self-mastery. Jobs rob our time. Productivity and progress have led to anxiety and unease. Technology imprisons as it promises to liberate. Careers are phantasms. Money is mind forg'd. We can create our own paradise. Nothing must be done. With freedom comes responsibility. Stay in bed. Be good to yourself. Inaction is the wellspring of creation. Art, people, life. Bread, bacon, beer. Live first, work later. Time is not money. Stop spending. Quit your job. Study the art of living. Live slow, die old. Embrace nothing. Know nothing. Do nothing. Be idle!”

Jos Burton – Aug 2021