

Leisure The Basis of Culture

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Introduction by Roger Scruton

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Excepts from various chapters:

Culture depends for its very existence on leisure, and leisure, in its turn, is not possible unless it has a durable and consequently living link with the cultus with divine worship. The word 'cult' in English is used exclusively, or almost exclusively, in a derivative sense. But here it is used, along with worship, in its primary sense. It means something else than, and something more than, religion. It really means fulfilling the ritual of public sacrifice. That is a notion which contemporary 'modern' man associates almost exclusively and unconsciously with uncivilized, primitive peoples and with classical antiquity. For that very reason it is of the first importance to see that the cultus, now as in the distant past, is the primary source of man's freedom, independence and immunity within society. Suppress that last sphere of freedom, and freedom itself, and all our liberties, will in the end vanish into thin air.

Among the *bona non utilia sed honesta* which are at home in the realm of freedom, in its innermost circle indeed, is philosophy, the philosophical act, which must be understood in the traditional sense of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, and as they understood it. Grant this original sense of the word 'philosophizing' to be the true one, and it is no longer possible to speak of the philosophical aspect in the same way that one might speak of a sociological and historical or a political aspect as though one could take up the one or the other at will. In the tradition of which I am speaking, the philosophical act is a fundamental relation to reality, a full, personal attitude which is by no manner of means at the sole disposal of the ratio; it is an attitude which presupposes silence, a contemplative attention to things, in which man begins to see how worthy of veneration they really are. And it is perhaps only in this way that it is possible to understand how it was that Plato's philosophical school, the Academy in Athens, was at the same time a sort of club or society for the celebration of the cultus. In the last resort pure theory, philosophical theoria, entirely free from practical considerations and interference — and that is what

theory is — can only be preserved and realized within the sphere of leisure, and leisure, in its turn, is free because of its relation to worship, to the cultus.

The Greek word for leisure (σχολή) is the origin of Latin *scola*, German *Schule*, English *school*. The name for the institutions of education and learning means "leisure".

Of course, the original meaning of the concept of "leisure" has practically been forgotten in today's leisure-less culture of "total work": in order to win our way to a real understanding of leisure, we must confront the contradiction that rises from our overemphasis on the world of work. "One does not only work in order to live, but one lives for the sake of one's work," this statement, quoted by Max Weber, makes immediate sense to us, and appeals to current opinion. It is difficult for us to see how in fact it turns the order of things upside-down.

And what would be our response to another statement? "We work in order to be at leisure." Would we hesitate to say that here the world is really turned upside-down? Doesn't this statement appear almost immoral to the man and woman of the world of "total work"? Is it not an attack on the basic principles of human society?

Now, I have not merely constructed a sentence to prove a point. The statement was actually made - by Aristotle. Yes, Aristotle: the sober, industrious realist, and the fact that he said it, gives the statement special significance. What he says in a more literal translation would be: "We are not-at-leisure in order to be-at-leisure." For the Greeks, "not-leisure" was the word for the world of everyday work; and not only to indicate its "hustle and bustle," but the work itself. The Greek language had only this negative term for it (ἀσχολία), as did Latin (neg-otium, "not-leisure").

On the other side, consider the following: the Christian concept of the "contemplative life" (the *vita contemplativa*) was built on the Aristotelian concept of leisure. Further, the distinction between the "Liberal Arts" and the "Servile Arts" has its origin precisely here. But is not such a distinction of interest only to the historian? Well, at least one side of the distinction comes to the fore in everyday life, when the issue of "servile work" arises, the kind of activity that is deemed inappropriate for the "holy rest" of the Sabbath, Sundays,

or Holidays. How many are aware that the expression "servile work" can not be fully understood without contrasting it with the "Liberal Arts"? And what does it mean to say that some arts are "liberal" or "free"? This is still in need of clarification....

The real reason for mentioning it was to show how sharply the modern valuation of work and leisure differs from that of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The difference is so great, in fact, that we can no longer understand with any immediacy just what the ancient and medieval mind understood by the statement, "We are not-at-leisure in order to be-at-leisure."....

"Intellectual work," "intellectual worker" - these terms characterize the latest stretch of the road we have traveled, bringing us at last to the modern ideal of work in its most extreme formulation.

Up until this time (at least from the point of view of someone who worked with his hands) the province of intellectual enterprise tended to be looked upon as a kind of paradise, where nobody needed to work; at the heart of this privileged province lay "philosophy," something at furthest remove from the working world....

The concept of intellectual work has a number of historical antecedents, which can serve to clarify it.

First, it is based on a certain interpretation of the human knowing process.

What happens when our eye sees a rose? What do we do when that happens? Our mind does something, to be sure....

But what about an act of knowing? When a human being considers something imperceptible to the senses, is there then such a thing as mere "looking"? Or, to use the scholastic technical terminology, is there such a thing as "intellectual vision"? The ancient and medieval philosophers answered, "Yes." Modern philosophers have tended to say, "No.".....

Now, ancient and medieval philosophy had quite the opposite view, without, of course, justifying any charge that philosophy was something "easy." Not only the Greeks in general - Aristotle no less than Plato - but the great medieval thinkers as well, all held that there was an element of purely receptive "looking," not only in sense perception but also in intellectual knowing or, as Heraclitus said, "Listening-in to the being of things."

The medievals distinguished between the intellect as ratio (as in rationality) and the intellect as intellectus. Ratio is the power of discursive thought, of searching and re-searching, abstracting, refining, and concluding [cf. Latin *discurrere*, "to run to and fro"], whereas intellectus refers to the ability of "simply looking" (*simplex intuitus*), to which the truth presents itself as a landscape presents itself to the eye. The spiritual knowing power of the human mind, as the ancients understood it, is really two things in one: ratio and intellectus, all knowing involves both.....

Leisure is a form of that stillness that is the necessary preparation for accepting reality; only the person who is still can hear, and whoever is not still, cannot hear. Such stillness as this is not mere soundlessness or a dead muteness; it means, rather, that the soul's power, as real, of responding to the real – a correspondence, eternally established in nature – has not yet descended into words. Leisure is the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real....

Leisure is only possible in the assumption that man is not only in harmony with himself [whereas idleness is rooted in the denial of this harmony], but also that he is in agreement with the world and its meaning. Leisure lives on affirmation. It is not the same as the absence of activity; it is not the same thing as quiet, or even as an inner quiet. It is rather like the stillness in the conversation of lovers, which is fed by their oneness.....

This is why the ability to be "at leisure" is one of the basic powers of the human soul. Like the gift of contemplative self-immersion in Being, and the ability to uplift one's spirits in festivity, the power to be at leisure is the power to step beyond the working world and win contact with those superhuman, life-giving forces that can send us, renewed and alive again, into the busy world of work.....

The region of leisure, as said, is the region of culture in general, so long as this word signifies what goes beyond mere means-to-an-end considerations. Culture lives on "worship." And we must return to this original relationship when the question is considered as a whole....

But when you ask yourself, "What does it mean to do philosophy?" then you actually are "doing philosophy" – this is not at all a "preliminary" question but a truly philosophical one: you are right at the heart of the business....

And in this, that philosophy begins in wonder, lies the, so to speak, non-bourgeois character of philosophy; for to feel astonishment and wonder is something non-bourgeois (if we can be allowed, for a moment, to use this all-too-easy terminology). For what does it mean to become bourgeois in the intellectual sense? More than anything else, it means that someone takes one's immediate surroundings (the world determined by the immediate purposes of life) so "tightly" and "densely," as if bearing an ultimate value, that the things of experience no longer become transparent. The greater, deeper, more real, and (at first) invisible world of essences is no longer even suspected to exist; the "wonder" is no longer there, it has no place to come from; the human being can no longer feel wonder....

To find the truly unusual and extraordinary, the real *mirandum*, within the usual and the ordinary, is the beginning of philosophy....

Certainly, something is "lost" for the one who wonders (the experience is like a "dis-illusion," considered as fundamentally something positive: one is "freed" from a certain "illusion"). Certainly, for the one who experiences the astonishment that things that had seemed obvious before, have now lost their certainty and validity: it becomes quite clear that those "obvious" things have lost their ultimate value. But the sense of wonder is nevertheless the sense that the world is a deeper, wider, more mysterious thing than appeared to the day-to-day understanding. The inner wealth of wonder is fulfilled in a sense for mystery. The inner orientation of wonder does not aim for the stirring up of doubt, but rather for the recognition that being as being is incomprehensible and full of mystery: that being itself is a mystery, a mystery in the real meaning of the word: not merely disorientation, or irrationality, or even darkness. Mystery implies much more: that a reality is incomprehensible for this reason, that the light that it sheds is unfathomable, unquenchable, inexhaustible. This is what the one who feels wonder really feels.