ABSTRACT. At present liberal education is generally understood and justified as the acquisition of critical thinking skills and individual autonomy. Traditionally, however, the ultimate purpose of liberal education has been leisure. Freedom, it was thought, was not simply the result of critical thinking but also required the cultivation of leisure that involved a vigilant receptivity — a stillness from the busy world of work and the restive probing of a discursive mind. In this essay, Kevin Gary argues that the cultivation of leisure has been and ought to be an essential part of what constitutes a liberal education. Focused on interior freedom, leisure offers a valuable way of learning that ushers in an authentic freedom that a critical approach to learning and liberal education does not. Accordingly, it offers a valuable defense against the hegemonic world of work that defines and appraises one’s value exclusively in terms of one’s doing.

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, a liberal education, as the name suggests, is an education for freedom. As one commentator describes it, “a liberal education ought to make a person independent of mind, skeptical of authority and received views, prepared to forge an identity for himself or herself, and capable of becoming an individual not bent upon copying other persons.”1 Accordingly, liberal education is often valued or justified as a means for acquiring the critical thinking skills that are necessary to attain individual autonomy as well as for meeting the demands of an ever changing world.2 Given this important yet broad purpose, no wonder there is such a vast array of subjects and disciplines that fall within the purview of liberal education.

While this understanding of liberal education as the acquisition of critical thinking skills and individual autonomy is currently in fashion, it is not the only understanding. Traditionally, the ultimate purpose of liberal education had been the pursuit of leisure not critical thinking skills. While developing a critical mind was included in liberal studies, the ultimate purpose was to cultivate a life of contemplation that transcends the workaday world. Liberal education for leisure sought to break through a disenchanted view of the world and awaken wonder at mere being.

To contemporary ears, an education for leisurely contemplation may sound nostalgic, impractical, or even elitist. A Deweyan might regard the promotion of education for leisure as a reversion to an ancient and outdated hierarchical social

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stratum that promotes escapism and the status quo. And yet this was neither the intention nor the effect of leisure in the traditional understanding.\(^3\) Rather, leisure involved a humble and intense practice of self-examination so as to ensure a genuine freedom. Freedom, it was thought, was not simply the result of critical thinking but also required a vigilant receptivity — a stillness from the busy world of work and the restive probing of a discursive mind. Proponents maintained that this stillness was necessary for beholding and receiving the fullest disclosure of being, and they considered it the foundation of authentic freedom.\(^4\)

Today, the conditions of modern life suggest how out of place a call for leisure sounds. The preponderance of our attention, observes Abraham Heschel, is directed toward utilitarian pursuits, including the exploitation of our world's resources. Surveying contemporary Western culture, Josef Pieper also notes the ascendancy of work for work's sake. Max Weber's statement, “One does not only work in order to live, but one lives for the sake of one's work,” captures, according to Pieper, the prevailing mind-set of our time.\(^5\) This work-obsessed culture makes total claims on time and space, reducing learning to “the way of expediency,” wherein information and knowledge are accumulated for power and mastery.\(^6\) Mark Schwehn in *Exiles From Eden* notes the prevailing tendency of modern universities to reduce the academic vocation to *Wissenschaft*, the incessant drive to produce new knowledge.\(^7\) Universities, rather than being a space apart from the world of work, become engrossed by it.

Given such conditions, leisure does contradict the values that drive modern life. However, it is in light of this hegemonic ethos of work that I submit educators should be interested in the historic association of liberal education and leisure. A liberal education for leisure offers a valuable defense against the world of work that a liberal education for critical thinking is vulnerable to. More important, leisure offers a valuable way of learning that ushers in an authentic freedom that a critical approach to learning and liberal education does not.\(^8\)

In short, this essay makes the case that cultivating a leisureed way of life has been and ought to be an essential part of what is considered a liberal education. I begin by tracing the traditions of liberal education, situating and illuminating

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3. Perhaps this critique could be directed at Aristotle's understanding of leisure. The specific understanding of leisure explored in this essay, however, is the monastic leisure of the Middle Ages, which did not seek to maintain a privileged space for an elite few but offered a way of freedom open to anyone.


5. Ibid., 4. Though Pieper made this observation in 1948, it is perhaps more applicable today.


8. What “critical thinking” means can certainly be disputed. Here, I am specifically referring to critical thinking that, with its penchant for fostering an aggressive, skeptical, questioning bent of mind, tends to problematize situations as it seeks new understanding.

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leisure as it is historically associated with liberal education. Leisurely learning, though inspired by antiquity, came to fruition within a monastic milieu. It was then displaced and overshadowed by the discursive disputatio, or scientific methodology, of thirteenth-century scholasticism. The disputatio of scholasticism prefigures the scientific and critical thinking of the Enlightenment that has come to dominate the modern research university and that provides the rationale for a liberal education today. To recall and appreciate what was distinctive about leisure, the critical learning of scholastics will be contrasted with the leisurely learning of monks.

In hearkening back to a premodern way of learning, I do not mean to overlook the valuable contributions of the Enlightenment. Rather, this essay argues that in discarding leisure in favor of an exclusively discursive approach, something valuable has been lost. I do not in any way seek to supplant or neglect the importance of critical thinking, but I do want to argue for the benefits of leisure in addition to critical thinking. The advances of science, as well as the establishment of political and religious freedoms, are just some of the contributions that have emerged as a result of critical and scientific thinking. Free inquiry, religious tolerance, and human rights are undeniably good. Critical thinking undoubtedly ought to continue to inform contemporary education, but it should, as I will show, be balanced with a leisurely way of learning.

In returning to a monastic milieu, I certainly do not seek to replace the modern university with a medieval monastery, nor do I seek to promote a particular religious perspective. Instead, I seek to retain the wisdom of leisure as it was practiced in a monastic setting, while considering what place it might have for our contemporary and pluralistic educational context. For explication on the universal value of leisure, I turn to the writings of Pieper and Heschel, which offer a contemporary and secular account of the dynamics of leisure.

Responding to a Deweyan critique (as well as a Marxist one, for that matter) of this perspective, I note how leisure, focused as it is on interior freedom, resonates with Mahatma Gandhi’s notion of Swaraj, wherein true external freedom is only realized where there is a genuine internal freedom. Such leisure, dedicated as it is to securing an interior freedom, is necessary for enacting social change that does not replace one form of oppression with yet another.

A liberal education for leisure, it will be shown, holds some challenging initiatives for the way liberal education is often conceived and practiced. I explore briefly the practical implications of leisure for contemporary education and practice. However, my overarching purpose is to provide a theoretical backing for why such practical concerns on behalf of leisure should be taken up at all.

**Traditions of Liberal Education**

Before arguing for a particular perspective on the nature of liberal education, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by the phrase “liberal education.” For assistance I turn to Bruce Kimball’s *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea*
of Liberal Education and Pierre Hadot’s Philosophy as a Way of Life. Both offer historical perspectives on the vast tradition that constitutes liberal education.

Kimball traces the roots of liberal education from ancient Greece to the present. In so doing he discovers two distinct understandings or traditions of liberal education. The first is what he refers to as the tradition of philosophers. This tradition, holding up Socrates as its ideal, values critical thinking, rigorous dialectic, and the tireless quest for truth as the essence of liberal education. It traces a line from Socrates to Boethius to scholasticism to the Enlightenment to modern science on up to the present day. The modern research university, in its ceaseless quest for new knowledge, embodies this tradition in its current form. Above all else this tradition prizes critical thinking and the free, open-ended pursuit of knowledge in all its forms.

At odds with this tradition from its beginnings is what Kimball describes as the tradition of orators. Orators trace a line from Isocrates to Cicero to Matthew Arnold. Though sympathetic to Socrates, orators were also wary of his endless speculation, valuing instead practical wisdom and the appropriation of established virtues. For orators, liberal education was fundamentally about cultivating practical virtues. As such it involved fashioning not mere thinkers, but orators — not simply speakers in the modern sense of the word, but active citizens who embody civic virtue. The “goal of training the good citizen to lead society” was of paramount concern for orators. This civic-mindedness in turn implied prescribing a standard set of agreed upon virtues — virtues that were illustrated in an established body of classical texts.

Orators believed that liberal education was meaningless unless it translated into practical virtue. More pragmatic than analytic, orators extolled the person “who would live out the noble virtues and persuade the free citizen of the democratic city-state to adhere to them.” Philosophs, on the other hand, immediately asked, “What is virtue? And the orators will make only dogmatic, a priori appeals and not be induced into analysis and speculation. That is the orators’ weakness: reliance upon unexamined appeals to a tradition of noble virtue.” However, the orators’ strength was in arguing that speculative philosophy is only “confirmed to be true ... when it is expressed or has an effect.” Put differently, it is only true when it is lived or appropriated.

There has been and continues to be, according to Kimball, ignorance about these two traditions, which in turn accounts for the present-day confusion and conflict surrounding the nature and meaning of liberal education. Suffice it to say that the Socratic philosophical tradition, embodied in the modern research university’s quest for new knowledge, prevails today. While traces of the oratorical tradition linger in university mission statements that call not only for the fashioning of

10. Ibid., 18.
11. Ibid., 35.
critical thinkers but also for the formation of good and virtuous people, this oratorical thrust, observes Kimball, is overshadowed at the present moment. Transmitting knowledge and making new knowledge (Wissenschaft) — the philosophical approach — is the dominant approach.\textsuperscript{12} The ascendancy of the philosophical perspective, argues Kimball, has prejudiced the contemporary understanding of liberal education such that today the philosophical tradition is regarded as the normative tradition, or simply the tradition, of liberal education. Accordingly, liberal education today is [largely] justified insofar as it promotes critical thinking.

Kimball’s typology helps set the stage for comprehending the vast tradition that is liberal education. It is, however, limited by the scant consideration he gives to the liberal education that flourished in the monasteries of the Middle Ages. With an overly broad stroke, Kimball places monastic liberal education within the oratorical tradition. While monastic learning resembles the oratorical approach in its focus on lived virtue, it was, in its aims and practices, distinct. Instead of the political purposes of orators, liberal education for monks was inspired by a life of leisure. In the monastic setting, leisure provided an opportunity for deep, personal, and internal transformation that was an all-encompassing way of life.

An understanding of liberal education as a way of life did not originate with monasticism but dates back to the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Hadot notes how, in antiquity, philosophy or the practice of liberal education did not simply denote theoretical discourse or tools for thinking but referred to a way of life, “a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant ...; the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.”\textsuperscript{13} It was a spiritual practice to attain wisdom, which brought inner peace and freedom. Ultimately, this practice of liberal education was therapeutic in nature, offering practical steps for attending to human anguish. Historians, says Hadot, tend to miss or obscure this essential aspect of liberal learning, considering it primarily or exclusively as a theoretical enterprise. This perspective tends to reduce liberal education to mere thinking, separating it from the rest of life. Far from theoretical, the practice of liberal education demanded the radical transformation of an individual’s way of life from the inside out.

Christianity embraced liberal education as a way of life. In monasticism especially, Hadot observes, a particularly rich instantiation of such liberal education came into being. Quoting Jean Leclercq, Hadot notes that as much as in antiquity, liberal learning in the monastic Middle Ages designated “not a theory or a way of knowing, but a lived wisdom, a way of living according to reason.”\textsuperscript{14} To better

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Schwehn, \textit{Exiles from Eden}, 9–10.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Pierre Hadot, \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 265. Hadot’s notion, “philosophy as a way of life,” I use interchangeably with the phrase, “liberal education as a way life.” While Hadot’s understanding of the practice of philosophy certainly precedes the developing traditions of liberal education previously outlined, it definitely inspires and informs the oratorical tradition. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, the practice of liberal education inspired by Socrates and that embodied by monks in the Middle Ages was constituted by Hadot’s philosophy as a way life.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 270.
\end{itemize}
understand what this monastic leisure consists of and how it has shaped liberal education, I turn to Jean Leclercq's exposition of monastic culture and learning in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*.

**Monastic Leisure**

According to Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, “the whole organization for monastic life [was] dominated by solicitude for safeguarding a certain spiritual leisure, a certain freedom in the interest of prayer in all its forms, and above all, authentic contemplative peace.”

Similar to the rabbinic tradition, monastic contemplation centered upon sacred texts. The principal preoccupation of monks was *lectio divina*, meditative reading of sacred texts. This practice required knowledge of letters or *grammatica* — the liberal arts, as they were referred to in pagan circles. These studies, however, were always with a view toward perfecting *lectio divina*. The monastery for Benedict, while it may have had a school, was a monastery first and foremost. Studies in no way compromised the monastic ideal of contemplative peace; they were “not a part of this ideal, but of its realization ... a means which [could] be modified, [could] become more or less important without the ideal being affected” (LL, 21).

Monastic learning was distinguished by this prayerful and deeply personal contemplation of literature that involved the savoring of truth and the love of God. This endeavor was oriented not toward speculative knowledge but toward a deepening of one’s personal spirituality and practice of *caritas*, or compassion. Literature, especially sacred literature, was read or contemplated not as an object of curiosity to be dissected, but as an invitation to deeper self-understanding and self-transformation or edification. The monk’s orientation involved a receptive vigilance, an ever-deepening state of humility, born of the knowledge of God that blossomed into expressive poetry and hymn. Active humility, notes Leclercq, was “not the acquisition of a scientific principle,” but “an experience, a personal growth in real awareness” (LL, 33).

Though oriented toward receptive vigilance, the *otium*, or leisure of monks was a busy leisure — “waking sleep,” or *negotiosissimum otium*, as it was paradoxically called — that guarded against *acedia*, or idleness. Leisure required practices of mortification, asceticism, and self-examination to orient oneself properly. These practices were born of compunction, or fear over one’s sinful condition, as well as the desire to purify oneself. They also kept in mind the giftedness of leisure. Leisure, Leclercq explains, was not

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\text{the end result of a discursive activity of the intelligence, it [was] not the reward of learning acquired through study, and it [did] not result in an increase of speculative knowledge. It [tended] to foster love under the forms love takes on while awaiting celestial beatitude: a vague possession, the possession of desire.} \quad (LL, 67)
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As monasticism continued to flourish, scholasticism began to come into its own, laying the groundwork for what would become the modern university, which offered an altogether different way of living and learning. The scholastic approach to learning that emerged in twelfth-century Paris stood in sharp contrast to this monastic learning. While monks were fond of poetic, personal, and narrative approaches to learning, scholastics favored impersonal and systematic methods. Scholastics were given over to disputatio and quaestio, or rigorous question-and-answer approaches to texts, both sacred and secular. They favored an aggressive style of study, characterized by disinterested speculation that separated ultimate questions from the state of one’s soul.

Monks, concerned primarily with personal spiritual growth, were wary of the new dialectics promoted by scholastics. Led by Bernard of Clairvaux, they criticized this impersonal approach to learning. Bernard’s attacks on scholastic theology in Paris, observes Alven Neiman, are often “read as the reaction of a superstitious and dogmatic authoritarianism to the first stirrings in the medieval West of an enlightened, objective reason.” Yet, as Leclercq points out, there is much more in Bernard’s critique. Upon visiting Paris, the bastion of scholasticism, Bernard found that the scholastic style of learning tended to promote more hubris and pride than intimacy with God — discussions often degenerated into “mere verbal battles, pugnae verborum” ([LL], 203). Bernard wondered if these verbal battles were not more likely to stir up idle curiosity and ambition than any sort of beatitude or satisfaction of those desires most worth having.

If disputing did take place in monastic schools, it was almost always on the subject of grammatica in contrast to sacred literature. Sacred literature always remained something more and other than liberal texts, whereas in scholastic schools the same procedure was applied to both sacred and secular texts. The monastic setting, cloistered as it was, provided a safeguard against such disputes. Ever mindful of human pride, monks regarded with distrust the dialectical methods of scholars. Such methods, they feared, could easily be abused, wherein each individual could show off his or her own personality by posing new arguments. Monks worried that such an aggressive approach lacked “respect for divine truth and sought to penetrate it as if by forcible entry after breaking the seal of mystery” ([LL], 203–204).

Monks were always wary of the psychological inflation that comes with learning and that is characteristic of a complex mind attracted to multiple and varied objects. Such scattered preoccupation incurred the risk of giving rise to a sort of agitation hardly compatible with contemplative repose or pure prayer. It also risked distracting the spirit from the undivided search for God. To offset these undesirable effects, the mind must be brought back to a single occupation and preoccupation: to seek God, not to discuss him; to avoid the inner turmoil of overly subtle investigations and disputes; and to flee from the outer noise of controversies and eliminate futile problems.

Unlike the scholastics who often employed abstract philosophical language to make distinctions and formulate questions, monks preferred language that dealt with “actual happenings and experiences rather than with ideas,” and that, “instead of being a teacher’s instruction for a universal and anonymous public, ... addressed ... a specific audience, ... a public chosen by and known to the author” (LL, 153). Above all else, monks were concerned with edification. They turned their gaze and spent their time only on that which built up the practice of charity, the experience of humility, and the savoring of wonder. Genres that sought merely to entertain were disregarded. Ancient liberal texts were taken seriously insofar as they contributed to personal edification.

**Styles of Learning**

Perhaps the best way to distinguish scholastic from monastic learning is to consider their respective fruits. Leclercq, in particular, notes the sharp contrast between monastic and scholastic commentaries on the Song of Songs. Scholastics tended to treat this text on a par with Aristotle’s commentaries or any other secular work. Favoring a systematic, detached approach, scholastic commentaries talk of God’s relation to the entire church, offering a clear, concise style that speaks to the intellect.

Monastic commentaries, by contrast, are addressed to the whole being. Their aim is “to touch the heart rather than to instruct the mind” (LL, 84). Rather than comment on God’s relationship with human beings generally, monastic commentaries dwell on God’s relationship with each soul, Christ’s presence in that relationship, and the spiritual union realized through charity. They speak to the individual in a personal way, prompting immediate actualization of the love espoused.

In monasteries the Song of Songs was the most read and quoted book of the Bible. As the poem of love’s pursuit, it is the very basis of monastic life — “a pursuit which will reach its end only in eternity but which already obtains fulfillment here in an obscure possession” (LL, 85). Whereas scholastic commentaries “are almost always complete, analyzing the whole text, monastic commentaries are often incomplete,” caught up in savoring over the Song of Songs (LL, 85). Bernard of Clairvaux, from 1135 to 1153, composed eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, and, of the eight chapters in this book, he made it only to the beginning of chapter 3.18

This ability to savor, to get lost in wonder, was the fruit and delight of monastic leisure. It accounts for the meandering and at times mellifluous prose of monastic commentaries. Such savoring can appear to the purpose-driven, discursive mind to be the result of sloppy or unsystematic thinking. Rather, it was the fruit of a different kind of thinking.

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Such constitutes the leisurely life of monks: an emphasis on humility and resisting the desire to be more clever than wise; taking time to savor rather than skim or dissect that which one contemplates; a single focus on reading for personal edification and moral growth that resists needless distractions — all of which cultivate a deep and abiding interior freedom. I turn now to the writings of Pieper and Heschel to elaborate on the nature and contemporary value of this leisurely style and way of thinking.

**PIEPER AND HESCHEL ON LEISURE**

While returning to the dominant monastic milieu of the Middle Ages is not possible (or perhaps desirable) there is much worth attending to here. Pieper and Heschel offer a contemporary reformulation of leisure’s importance and value, articulating the guiding epistemology that informs a practice of leisure. In so doing they offer an understanding of leisure that has value and application apart from its historically sectarian context. Their account of leisure preserves its unique essence while also serving as a valuable aim for education in a multidenominational and pluralistic context.

Pieper elaborates on the good that is leisure by chronicling its decline. His account illuminates what leisure is and what it is not, noting why we should reclaim this good. According to Pieper, Immanuel Kant’s dominant epistemology struck a fatal blow to leisure. For Kant, the human act of knowing is exclusively discursive: a busy, active capacity that sizes up, compares, abstracts, proves, and investigates to produce knowledge. His epistemology views knowing solely as an active mental effort.

Prior to Kant, Pieper notes, ancient and medieval philosophy held a very different view of the human act of knowing. The human intellect included Kant’s discursive capacity, referred to as *ratio*, but also included the *intellectus*, the ability of simply beholding, wherein the truth presents itself to the eye as a landscape does. Heschel, in his account, refers to these faculties as reason and wonder: “Through the first,” he explains, “we try to explain or to adapt the world to our concepts, through the second we seek to adapt our minds to the world.”

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19. Pieper’s simple attribution of discursive thinking to Kant is, as one anonymous reviewer of this essay noted, overstated. The history and rise of critical, discursive thinking certainly could include a whole slew of thinkers. Nevertheless, I think it is correct to say that a critical, scientific approach is dominant today, and, for the purposes of delineating the nature of leisure, Pieper’s explication of Kant serves as a useful foil for distinguishing what leisure is.

20. In turning to epistemology, I am aware of the pragmatic critique forwarded by Dewey and Rorty that sees this turn as an evasive move to avoid addressing contemporary problems. Nevertheless, while Dewey and Rorty steer clear of epistemological quicksand, they do have an epistemology that informs how they see and attempt to solve contemporary problems. While I acknowledge the potential diversionary tendency of epistemological analysis, I make the case that one’s (implicit) epistemology does inform and in some cases impair how one sees and addresses particular problems.

the world, not with the tools [they have] made but with the soul with which [they were]
born; ... [the world] is not an object, a thing that is given to [the senses], but a state of fellow-
ship that embraces [the person] and all things; not a particular fact but the startling situation
that there are facts at all; being, the presence of a universe; the unfolding of time.\textsuperscript{22}

While the discursive mind is busy and active, the \textit{intellectus} is passive or,
more accurately, receptive. While the discursive mind questions the nature of be-
ing, the receptive mind savors, appreciates, and is gifted by being. \textit{Ratio} is obtained
through human effort while the vision of \textit{intellectus} is a gift that surpasses human
limits. The one calls us to action, the other to contemplation.

The receptivity that wonder involves, however, does not imply that leisure or
the vision of \textit{intellectus} comes easy. Because this leisured condition is less at one’s
disposal — there is something gifted about it, as experiences of awe and wonder
suggest — it is, paradoxically, more difficult to attain. It takes work not to work —
as perhaps a workaholic might attest.

Ideally, there should be a balance between the \textit{intellectus} and \textit{ratio}, but an ex-
clusively discursive epistemology has prevailed, one that conceives the act of
knowing entirely as the result of strenuous human effort. This emphasis, notes
Pieper, leads to a mistrust of “everything that is without effort; that in good con-
science [one] can own only what he himself has reached through painful effort; that
he refuses to let himself be given anything” \textit{[LBC, 19]}. Moreover, this Pelagian-
style epistemology, asserting as it does a will to knowledge, detracts from the hu-
mility and receptivity that inspire leisure. More detrimentally, though, as Pieper
observes, this conception relegates the life of the intellect to a functionary status:

\textit{... bound to his function; he too is a functionary in the total world of
work, he may be a “specialist,” he is still a functionary ... nobody is granted a “free zone” of
intellectual activity, “free” meaning not being subordinated to a duty to fulfill some function.}
\textit{[LBC, 21]}

Accordingly, work becomes idolized, and leisure, rather than an end in itself, is
simply a break from work, a time to recharge so that efficient work can be re-
sumed. The person thereby is defined by work and only becomes him- or herself
through work.

This incessant need to work, Pieper contends, is driven by a desire to escape
from oneself. It springs from an idleness or despair of being oneself:

The metaphysical-theological concept of idleness means, then, that man [sic] finally does not
agree with his own existence; that behind all his energetic activity, he is not at one with him-
self; that, as the Middle Ages expressed it, sadness has seized him in the face of the divine
Goodness that lives within him. ... The opposite of \textit{acedia} is not the industrious spirit of the
daily effort to make a living, but rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence,
of the world as a whole, and of the God-of-Love, that is, which arises from that special fresh-
ness of action, which would never be confused by anyone with any experience with the narrow
activity of the “workaholic.” \textit{[LBC, 28–29]}

The total claim made by the world of work is bolstered by this inner poverty —
the sense that one’s worth is conditioned by one’s function or role in society. It is

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 38.
To safeguard a space of freedom from the hegemonic world of work, there should be a balance in education that involves the interplay of both ratio and intellectus. Such a view stands in sharp contrast to Francis Bacon’s view of philosophy and education as mastery over nature or René Descartes’s program that grounds the philosophical endeavor in radical doubt. Philosophy born of leisure greets the world receptively, with an awareness of its mystery, rather than as something to be mastered. This mysterious encounter is negative but also positive. It is negative in the sense that the person senses there is something more to know, something they cannot grasp — “the sense that the world is a deeper, wider, more mysterious thing than appeared to the day-to-day understanding” (LBC, 105). This not knowing, though, is not the same as doubting, which risks resignation, but rather is accompanied by an “active longing to know” (LBC, 107). It is positive in the sense that the experience of wonder is inspired by hope that sets one on a journey. Wonder causes one to pause and ponder over the mystery of being. Heschel elaborates: “while the ineffable is a term of negation indicating limitation of expression, its content is intensely affirmative, denoting an allusiveness to something meaningful, for which we possess no means of expression.”

A person capable of wonder, contends Pieper, is not in need of constant new and different or sensationalized experiences. Such a need is a sure sign that one has lost the capacity for wonder. Rather, the wondrous or astonishing is experienced in the ordinary. It does indeed disturb or shake up the taken-for-granted or workaday world, but it does not remove one from the things of the world; instead, it disrupts “the usual meanings, the accustomed evaluations of these things” (LBC, 100). Most important, this leisured way cultivates a freedom that resists the restive world of work that defines and appraises one’s value exclusively in terms of one’s doing.

**Leisure and Freedom**

Though far from passive, leisure can be misconstrued as a form of quietism. As noted, a Deweyan or Marxist critic might contend that leisure, in cultivating passivity, maintains the status quo and thus fails to address or embolden the free agency required to promote social change. This criticism is specious. Rather than passivity, the leisure that Pieper and Heschel call forth involves an intense practice of self-examination that cultivates true freedom by guarding against idleness, compulsive busyness, and pointless desires.

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23. Ibid., 22.

24. This criticism bears greater attention than can be given here. I am aware of this issue and intend to develop a fuller response that traces the strong historical ties between mysticism, or spiritual practice, and prophecy, or action for social change. On this point, see Grace Jentzen’s essay, “Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City,” in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 29–44.
Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Elder Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov* illuminates this point when he contrasts worldly freedom with the freedom cultivated by monks.25 Worldly freedom, Zossima argues, is more often than not a form of slavery to countless unnecessary desires. Accordingly, worldly freedom is externally understood as the ability to satisfy desires. What this means for the rich, he says, is “isolation and spiritual suicide; for the poor, envy and murder, for they have been given rights, but have not yet been shown any way of satisfying their needs.” Such a person is not free but a slave “to satisfying the innumerable needs they have invented for themselves.”26

Zossima contrasts worldly freedom against monastic freedom, characterized as it is by obedience, fasting, and prayer. These practices, he notes, are laughed at, but it is only through them that one is able to cut away superfluous needs, humble oneself, and thereby attain true interior freedom. The monk’s freedom, while seemingly passive, is in truth a deeper, more vigilant pursuit of freedom.

Gandhi in the *Hind Swaraj* articulated this same point. Indians, he said, in their haste to expel the British from their homeland failed to see how their oppression had become internalized. Once the British left India, whether by force or voluntarily, Indians would still be oppressed. Gandhi described it this way: “we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. This is not the Swaraj that I want.”27 What was needed was the attainment of true freedom — or *Swaraj*, as Gandhi called it — which was often misunderstood as simply expelling the British while keeping their political, military, and economic institutions.

Instead, Gandhi explained, *Swaraj* involves a deep personal transformation wherein we learn to rule ourselves. It is “something that has to be experienced internally, giving rise to an internal moral transformation for the individual.”28 Lacking this, he said, Indians become captives to the marketplace and its ratio-dominated epistemology. Moreover, as a consequence, Indians accept the charge that they are a lazy people and that the Europeans are an enterprising and industrious people. This mistaken view stirs up a restlessness to change their condition. In their haste to be free like the English, Indians forget their religious traditions that teach them “to remain passive about worldly pursuits and active

25. I am especially grateful to Alven Neiman for pointing me to the relevant insights of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and Mahatma Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* discussed in this section. Dostoevsky and Gandhi underline the connection between leisure and authentic freedom.
28. Ibid., 73.
about godly pursuits,” and thus give in to the total claims made by the world of work. Focused only on material goods and external freedom, Indians forget their spiritual or interior freedom.

**EDUCATION FOR LEISURE**

Given the intrinsic value of leisure, what would an education dedicated to leisure consist of today? How might an emphasis on leisure change the curriculum and educational practice? In attempting to answer these questions, it is helpful first to examine the discursive approach to learning, exploring how it informs contemporary education.

The discursive approach is perhaps best exemplified in the scientific method that discovers a problem, formulates a hypothesis, and then conducts experiments to measure or assess the validity of that hypothesis. Discursive thinking is also a central part of the Socratic method, wherein a thesis or point of view is offered, followed by a counterpoint, culminating in a rigorous dialectic that seeks to discover a new and better conclusion. The outcomes reached by both scientists and dialecticians are always tentative, continually subject to further questioning. The provisional nature of such inquiry lends itself to a critical mind-set, prone to doubting, problematizing, and questioning.

This discursive mind-set is pervasive, seemingly touching every aspect of present-day education: in math classes, students are presented with problems; in literature and history classes, questions are entertained; in chemistry and biology classes, labs are designed to provide students with opportunities to experiment and test theories. Moreover, the annual battery of standardized tests seeks to quantify students’ abilities to think critically.

Given the dominance of discursive thinking, it is hard to imagine a place for leisure in today’s curriculum. As I noted at the outset, it is not my intention to displace or overturn discursive thinking; its value is well established, but such thinking is vulnerable to abuse. The concern of medieval monks about dialectics being driven more by a love of winning than a desire for wisdom is still valid today.

To consider a place for leisure, it is helpful to further compare and contrast leisurely versus discursive approaches to learning. Leisure, as noted, is a form of beholding. It is the step prior to the discursive ratio. Before doubting or questioning can occur, something must have been seen and observed. Thus ratio and intellectus need not be in conflict. The problem, though, is the rush to exploit or problematize that which is seen. For instance, consider a person walking in the woods who suddenly stumbles upon a beautiful field of grass. Such a person, rather than encountering the field in all its grandeur, might quickly jump to considerations of what practical good can be made of it. Perhaps to one person such a field is a valuable piece of real estate for a housing development, to another it is a perfect place to walk a dog, and to yet another it is an ideal place to play

29. Ibid., 42–43.
football. Or perhaps another person inclined toward scientific scrutiny might ask how, amid a vast forest with trees pollinating every spring, did such a field come to exist? Often one’s interest or agenda can determine and limit how and what one sees.

Leisurely learning is optimistic in assuming that seeing can transcend particular interests of the moment. To pursue leisure is to put on hold vested considerations so as to experience wonder at the mere presence of something. Such a process, of course, is easier said than done. In seeking to keep in check one’s interests or agendas (well-intentioned though they may be), one begins a difficult process of self-examination. The desire to pursue our interests and satiate our desires often outweighs the desire for self-knowledge or even liberation from needless desires.

Preparing for leisure is thus an arduous journey of self-examination that requires patience and abstinence in the face of questions or desires that demand immediate resolution. Hence the ascetic practices of monks that were practiced not as masochistic ends in themselves but always as means to self-understanding, self-control, and ultimately self-surrender to the beholding that is leisure.

Cultivation of humility in the face of that which we think we know is essential. It entails the abiding and practiced awareness that there is always more to see. Such humility, as Leclercq says, is “not the acquisition of a scientific principle,” but “an experience, a personal growth in real awareness” (LL, 33). Leclercq’s distinction here is significant. Grasping a principle involves attaining power or control over some aspect of reality. Cultivation of leisure, by contrast, involves surrender and humility in the face of reality so as to receive the vision of intellectus.

Thus an education for leisure would no doubt involve rigorous self-examination. Leclercq’s metaphor of growth suggests some direction. We have a natural propensity for leisure but this growth, like the growth of our own bodies, is not reached through personal will power. Leisure can be cultivated but not achieved. Thus an education for leisure would not employ outcomes or objectives (or grading) in the usual sense, wherein a teacher using a variety of pedagogical strategies can expect a certain degree of success among students, qualitatively or quantitatively measured. It is doubtful that leisure can be directed in the way that a biology teacher can direct students through the dissection of a frog or a grammar teacher in diagramming sentences. Unlike discursive methods, leisure is difficult if not impossible to quantify. Rather, in aiming for leisure, we as educators may only be able to model and invite by creating space in our ratio-dominated days for the experience of leisure. However, we cannot force leisure, either with the threat of a failing grade or the promise of a reward, for leisure is an intensely personal endeavor — intangible but real.

In addition to creating space for savoring the wonders of the world, educators who aim to cultivate leisure can hold up exemplars, such as Gandhi and Heschel, who embody a practice of leisure. One especially compelling exemplar is Etty Hillesum. Hillesum is of particular interest because she did not consider herself to be
a religious person. Though Jewish by birth she did not practice organized religion. Yet, through carefully attending to her own experience, she reveals in her diaries the rigorous self-examination as well as self-surrender that characterize the practice of leisure:

And here I have hit upon something essential. [In the past] Whenever I saw a beautiful flower, what I longed to do with it was press it to my heart, or eat it all up. It was more difficult with a piece of beautiful scenery, but the feeling was the same. I was too sensual, I might also write too greedy. I yearned physically for all I thought was beautiful, wanted to own it. Hence that painful longing that could never be satisfied, the pining for something I thought unattainable ....

Eventually, a change occurs inside of Hillesum — a change she could not account for. She describes a walk outside as follows:

It was dusk, soft hues in the sky, mysterious silhouettes of houses, trees alive with the light through the tracery of their branches, in short, enchanting. And then I knew precisely how I had felt in the past. Then all the beauty would have gone like a stab to my heart and I would not have known what to do with the pain. Then I would have felt the need to write, to compose verses, but the words would still have refused to come. I would have felt utterly miserable, wailed in the pain and exhausted myself as a result. The experience would have sapped all my energy. Now I know it for what it was: mental masturbation.... But that night ... I reacted quite differently .... I was just as deeply moved by that mysterious, still landscape in the dusk as I might have been before, but somehow I no longer wanted to own it. I went home invigorated and got to work. And the scenery stayed with me, in the background, as a cloak about my soul, to put it poetically for once, but no longer held me back: I no longer “masturbated” with it.

Free from her old desires, Hillesum experiences a vision of intellectus — an experience of delighting in things as they are, without a desire to own or exploit them. Hillesum’s journal entries reveal an intense self-awareness born of careful self-examination. They offer an exemplary case of what an education for leisure consists of — a humble, thoroughgoing process of self-examination that seeks to create space for the gift of intellectus.

Though leisure is fundamentally a personal endeavor, it is difficult to maintain on one’s own. It is best sustained and cultivated within a community, as monastic leisure suggests. To sustain a practice of leisure, monks created communities completely dedicated to it. Without a communal commitment to leisure, it is difficult to ensure the requisite time and space for savory and wonder, as well as an awareness of the discipline and sacrifice that leisure involves. Nevertheless, I believe educators can make inroads by establishing classroom communities that make some space for leisure.

Though leisure came to fruition in a Catholic context, a commitment to leisure today does not require a commitment to a sectarian religious tradition. Instead, leisure, understood as a profound way of seeing, is an intrinsic good

31. Ibid., 11.
available to anyone. This leisured way cultivates a true freedom that resists the restive world of work that defines and appraises one's value exclusively in terms of what one does. Liberal education justified primarily or exclusively for its contribution to *ratio* thinking is vulnerable to the hegemonic world of work and risks undermining the very freedom it seeks to attain. In the rush to problematize, to question, to refute, to exploit, and to doubt, one may be masking a discontent with oneself or be blindly driven by questionable desires and interests. Moreover, liberal education as critical thinking offers only one side of the great tradition of liberal education. Valuable as it is, this leisurely way of learning and living once was, and ought to be again today, an essential part of what constitutes a liberal education.

I AM GRATEFUL to Nicholas Burbules and the reviewers for their helpful suggestions on improving the manuscript. I owe a special debt of gratitude of to my friend and mentor Alven Neiman for critical review and direction in the writing of this paper.