

# Chapter 09

## Of Leisure

1831

### People :

Author : William Godwin

### Text :

## ESSAY IX OF LEISURE

The river of human life is divided into two streams; occupation and leisure--or, to express the thing more accurately, that occupation, which is prescribed, and may be called the business of life, and that occupation, which arises contingently, and not so much of absolute and set purpose, not being prescribed: such being the more exact description of these two divisions of human life, inasmuch as the latter is often not less earnest and intent in its pursuits than the former.

It would be a curious question to ascertain which of these is of the highest value.

To this inquiry I hear myself loudly and vehemently answered from all hands in favor of the first. "This," I am told by unanimous acclamation, "is the business of life."

The decision in favor of what we primarily called occupation, above what we called leisure, may in a mitigated sense be entertained as true. Man can live with little or no leisure, for millions of human beings do so live: but the species to which we belong, and of consequence the individuals of that species, cannot exist as they ought to exist, without occupation.

Granting however the paramount claims that occupation has to our regard, let us endeavor to arrive at a just estimate of the value of leisure.

It has been said by some one, with great appearance of truth, that schoolboys learn as much, perhaps more, of beneficial knowledge in their hours of play, as in their hours of study.

The wisdom of ages has been applied to ascertain what are the most desirable topics for the study of the schoolboy. They are selected for the most part by the parent. There are few parents that do not feel a sincere and disinterested desire

for the welfare of their children. It is an unquestionable maxim, that we are the best judges of that of which we have ourselves had experience; and all parents have been children. It is therefore idle and ridiculous to suppose that those studies which have for centuries been chosen by the enlightened mature for the occupation of the young, have not for the most part been well chosen. Of these studies the earliest consist in the arts of reading and writing. Next follows arithmetic, with perhaps some rudiments of algebra and geometry. Afterwards comes in due order the acquisition of languages, particularly the dead languages; a most fortunate occupation for those years of man, in which the memory is most retentive, and the reasoning powers have yet acquired neither solidity nor enlargement. Such are the occupations of the schoolboy in his prescribed hours of study.

But the schoolboy is cooped up in an apartment, it may be with a number of his fellows. He is seated at a desk, diligently conning the portion of learning that is doled out to him, or, when he has mastered his lesson, reciting it with anxious brow and unassured lips to the senior, who is to correct his errors, and pronounce upon the sufficiency of his industry. All this may be well: but it is a new and more exhilarating spectacle that presents itself to our observation, when he is dismissed from his temporary labors, and rushes impetuously out to the open air, and gives free scope to his limbs and his voice, and is no longer under the eye of a censor that shall make him feel his subordination and dependence.

Meanwhile the question under consideration was, not in which state he experienced the most happiness, but which was productive of the greatest improvement.

The review of the human subject is conveniently divided under the heads of body and mind.

There can be no doubt that the health of the body is most promoted by those exercises in which the schoolboy is engaged during the hours of play. And it is further to be considered that health is required, not only that we may be serene, contented and happy, but that we may be enabled effectually to exert the faculties of the mind.

But there is another way, in which we are called upon to consider the division of the human subject under the heads of body and mind.

The body is the implement and instrument of the mind, the tool by which most of

its purposes are to be effected. We live in the midst of a material world, or of what we call such. The greater part of the pursuits in which we engage, are achieved by the action of the limbs and members of the body upon external matter.

Our communications with our fellow-men are all of them carried on by means of the body.

Now the action of the limbs and members of the body is infinitely improved by those exercises in which the schoolboy becomes engaged during his hours of play. In the first place it is to be considered that we do those things most thoroughly and in the shortest time, which are spontaneous, the result of our own volition; and such are the exercises in which the schoolboy engages during this period. His heart and soul are in what he does. The man or the boy must be a poor creature indeed, who never does any thing but as he is bid by another. It is in his voluntary acts and his sports, that he learns the skillful and effective use of his eye and his limbs. He selects his mark, and he hits it. He tries again and again, effort after effort, and day after day, till he has surmounted the difficulty of the attempt, and the rebellion of his members. Every articulation and muscle of his frame is called into action, till all are obedient to the master-will; and his limbs are lubricated and rendered pliant by exercise, as the limbs of the Grecian athleta were lubricated with oil.

Thus he acquires, first dexterity of motion, and next, which is of no less importance, a confidence in his own powers, a consciousness that he is able to effect what he purposes, a calmness and serenity which resemble the sweeping of the area, and scattering of the saw-dust, upon which the dancer or the athlete is to exhibit with grace, strength and effect.

So much for the advantages reaped by the schoolboy during his hours of play as to the maturing his bodily powers, and the improvement of those faculties of his mind which more immediately apply to the exercise of his bodily powers.

But, beside this, it is indispensable to the well-being and advantage of the individual, that he should employ the faculties of his mind in spontaneous exertions. I do not object, especially during the period of nonage, to a considerable degree of dependence and control. But his greatest advancement, even then, seems to arise from the interior impulses of his mind. The schoolboy exercises his wit, and indulges in sallies of the thinking principle. This is wholesome; this is fresh;

it has twice the quickness, clearness and decision in it, that are to be found in those acts of the mind which are employed about the lessons prescribed to him.

In school our youth are employed about the thoughts, the acts and suggestions of other men. This is all mimicry, and a sort of secondhand business. It resembles the proceeding of the fresh-listed soldier at drill; he has ever his eye on his right-hand man, and does not raise his arm, nor advance his foot, nor move his finger, but as he sees another perform the same motion before him. It is when the schoolboy proceeds to the playground, that he engages in real action and real discussion. It is then that he is an absolute human being and a genuine individual.

The debates of schoolboys, their discussions what they shall do, and how it shall be done, are anticipations of the scenes of maturer life. They are the dawnings of committees, and vestries, and hundred-courts, and ward-motes, and folk-motes, and parliaments. When boys consult when and where their next cricket-match shall be played, it may be regarded as the embryo representation of a consult respecting a grave enterprise to be formed, or a colony to be planted. And, when they inquire respecting poetry and prose, and figures and tropes, and the dictates of taste, this happily prepares them for the investigations of prudence, and morals, and religious principles, and what is science, and what is truth.

It is thus that the wit of man, to use the word in the old Saxon sense, begins to be cultivated. One boy gives utterance to an assertion; and another joins issue with him, and retorts. The wheels of the engine of the brain are set in motion, and, without force, perform their healthful revolutions. The stripling feels himself called upon to exert his presence of mind, and becomes conscious of the necessity of an immediate reply. Like the unfledged bird, he spreads his wings, and essays their powers. He does not answer, like a boy in his class, who tasks his understanding or not, as the whim of the moment shall prompt him, where one boy honestly performs to the extent of his ability, and others disdain the empire assumed over them, and get off as cheaply as they can. He is no longer under review, but is engaged in real action. The debate of the schoolboy is the combat of the intellectual gladiator, where he fences and parries and thrusts with all the skill and judgment he possesses.

There is another way in which the schoolboy exercises his powers during his periods of leisure. He is often in society; but he is ever and anon in solitude. At no

period of human life are our reveries so free and untrammelled, as at the period here spoken of. He climbs the mountain-cliff; and penetrates into the depths of the woods. His joints are well strung; he is a stranger to fatigue. He rushes down the precipice, and mounts again with ease, as though he had the wings of a bird. He ruminates, and pursues his own trains of reflection and discovery, "exhausting worlds," as it appears to him, "and then imagining new." He hovers on the brink of the deepest philosophy, inquiring how came I here, and to what end. He becomes a castle-builder, constructing imaginary colleges and states, and searching out the businesses in which they are to be employed, and the schemes by which they are to be regulated. He thinks what he would do, if he possessed uncontrollable strength, if he could fly, if he could make himself invisible. In this train of mind he cons his first lessons of liberty and independence. He learns self-reverence, and says to himself, I also am an artist, and a maker. He ruffles himself under the yoke, and feels that he suffers foul tyranny when he is driven, and when brute force is exercised upon him, to compel him to a certain course, or to chastise his faults, imputed or real.

Such are the benefits of leisure to the schoolboy: and they are not less to man when arrived at years of discretion. It is good for us to have some regular and stated occupation. Man may be practically too free; this is frequently the case with those who have been nurtured in the lap of opulence and luxury. We were sent into the world under the condition, "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread." And those who, by the artificial institutions of society, are discharged from this necessity, are placed in a critical and perilous situation. They are bound, if they would consult their own well-being, to contrive for themselves a factitious necessity, that may stand them in the place of that necessity which is imposed without appeal on the vast majority of their brethren.

But, if it is desirable that every man should have some regular and stated occupation, so it is certainly not less desirable, that every man should have his seasons of relaxation and leisure.

Unhappy is the wretch, whose condition it is to be perpetually bound to the oar, and who is condemned to labor in one certain mode, during all the hours that are not claimed by sleep, or as long as the muscles of his frame, or the fibers of his fingers will enable him to persevere. "Apollo himself," says the poet, "does not

always bend the bow." There should be a season, when the mind is free as air, when not only we should follow without restraint any train of thinking or action, within the bounds of sobriety, and that is not attended with injury to others, that our own minds may suggest to us, but should sacrifice at the shrine of intellectual liberty, and spread our wings, and take our flight into untried regions. It is good for man that he should feel himself at some time unshackled and autocratical, that he should say, This I do, because it is prescribed to me by the conditions without which I cannot exist, or by the election which in past time I deliberately made; and this, because it is dictated by the present frame of my spirit, and is therefore that in which the powers my nature has entailed upon me may be most fully manifested. In addition to which we are to consider, that a certain variety and mutation of employments is best adapted to humanity. When my mind or my body seems to be overwrought by one species of occupation, the substitution of another will often impart to me new life, and make me feel as fresh as if no labor had before engaged me. For all these reasons it is to be desired, that we should possess the inestimable privilege of leisure, that in the revolving hours of every day a period should arrive, at which we should lay down the weapons of our labor, and engage in a sport that may be no less active and strenuous than the occupation which preceded it.

A question, which deserves our attention in this place, is, how much of every day it behoves us to give to regular and stated occupation, and how much is the just and legitimate province of leisure. It has been remarked in a preceding Essay<sup>1</sup>, that, if my main and leading pursuit is literary composition, two or three hours in the twenty-four will often be as much as can advantageously and effectually be so employed. But this will unavoidably vary according to the nature of the occupation: the period above named may be taken as the MINIMUM.

Such, let us say, is the portion of time which the man of letters is called on to devote to literary composition.

It may next be fitting to inquire as to the humbler classes of society, and those persons who are engaged in the labor of the hands, how much time they ought to be expected to consume in their regular and stated occupations, and how much would remain to them for relaxation and leisure. It has been said<sup>2</sup>, that half an hour in the day given by every member of the community to manual labor, might

be sufficient for supplying the whole with the absolute necessities of life. But there are various considerations that would inevitably lengthen this period. In a community which has made any considerable advance in the race of civilization, many individuals must be expected to be excused from any portion of manual labor. It is not desirable that any community should be contented to supply itself with necessities only. There are many refinements in life, and many advances in literature and the arts, which indispensably conduce to the rendering man in society a nobler and more exalted creature than he could otherwise be; and these ought not to be consigned to neglect.

On the other hand however it is certain, that much of the ostentation and a multitude of the luxuries which subsist in European and Asiatic society are just topics of regret, and that, if ever those improvements in civilization take place which philosophy has essayed to delineate, there would be a great abridgment of the manual labor that we now see around us, and the humbler classes of the community would enter into the inheritance of a more considerable portion of leisure than at present falls to their lot.

But it has been much the habit, for persons not belonging to the humbler classes of the community, and who profess to speculate upon the genuine interests of human society, to suppose, however certain intervals of leisure may conduce to the benefit of men whose tastes have been cultivated and refined, and who from education have many resources of literature and reflection at all times at their beck, yet that leisure might prove rather pernicious than otherwise to the uneducated and the ignorant. Let us inquire then how these persons would be likely to employ the remainder of their time, if they had a greater portion of leisure than they at present enjoy.--I would add, that the individuals of the humbler classes of the community need not for ever to merit the appellation of the uneducated and ignorant.

In the first place, they would engage, like the schoolboy, in active sports, thereby giving to their limbs, which, in rural occupation and mechanical labor, are somewhat too monotonously employed, and contract the stiffness and experience the waste of a premature old age, the activity and freedom of an athlete, a cricketer, or a hunter. Nor do these occupations only conduce to the health of the body, they also impart a spirit and a juvenile earnestness to the mind.

In the next place, they may be expected to devote a part of the day, more than they do at present, to their wives and families, cultivating the domestic affections, watching the expanding bodies and minds of their children, leading them on in the road of improvement, warning them against the perils with which they are surrounded, and observing with somewhat of a more jealous and parental care, what it is for which by their individual qualities they are best adapted, and in what particular walk of life they may most advantageously be engaged. The father and the son would grow in a much greater degree friends, anticipating each other's wishes, and sympathizing in each other's pleasures and pains.

Thirdly, one infallible consequence of a greater degree of leisure in the lower classes would be that reading would become a more common propensity and amusement. It is the aphorism of one of the most enlightened of my contemporaries, "The schoolmaster is abroad:" and many more than at present would desire to store up in their little hoard a certain portion of the general improvement. We should no longer have occasion to say,

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page,  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll.  
Nor should we be incited to fear that ever wakeful anticipation of the illiberal, that, by the too great diffusion of the wisdom of the wise, we might cease to have a race of men adapted to the ordinary pursuits of life. Our plowmen and artificers, who obtained the improvements of intellect through the medium of leisure, would have already received their destination, and formed their habits, and would be disposed to consider the new lights that were opened upon them, as the ornament of existence, not its substance. Add to which, as leisure became more abundant, and the opportunities of intellectual improvement increased, they would have less motive to repine at their lot. It is principally while knowledge and information are new, that they are likely to intoxicate the brain of those to whose share they have fallen; and, when they are made a common stock upon which all men may draw, sound thinking and sobriety may be expected to be the general result.

One of the scenes to which the leisure of the laborious classes is seen to induce them to resort, is the public-house; and it is inferred that, if their leisure were greater, a greater degree of drunkenness, dissipation and riot would inevitably prevail.

In answer to this anticipation, I would in the first place assert, that the merits and

demerits of the public-house are very unjustly rated by the fastidious among the more favored orders of society.

We ought to consider that the opportunities and amusements of the lower orders of society are few. They do not frequent coffee-houses; theaters and places of public exhibition are ordinarily too expensive for them; and they cannot engage in rounds of visiting, thus cultivating a private and familiar intercourse with the few whose conversation might be most congenial to them. We certainly bear hard upon persons in this rank of society, if we expect that they should take all the severer labor, and have no periods of unbending and amusement.

But in reality what occurs in the public-house we are too much in the habit of calumniating. If we would visit this scene, we should find it pretty extensively a theater of eager and earnest discussion. It is here that the ardent and "unwashed artificer," and the sturdy husbandman, compare notes and measure wits with each other. It is their arena of intellectual combat, the ludus literarius of their unrefined university. It is here they learn to think. Their minds are awakened from the sleep of ignorance; and their attention is turned into a thousand channels of improvement. They study the art of speaking, of question, allegation and rejoinder.

They fix their thought steadily on the statement that is made, acknowledge its force, or detect its insufficiency. They examine the most interesting topics, and form opinions the result of that examination. They learn maxims of life, and become politicians. They canvas the civil and criminal laws of their country, and learn the value of political liberty. They talk over measures of state, judge of the intentions, sagacity and sincerity of public men, and are likely in time to become in no contemptible degree capable of estimating what modes of conducting national affairs, whether for the preservation of the rights of all, or for the vindication and assertion of justice between man and man, may be expected to be crowned with the greatest success: in a word, they thus become, in the best sense of the word, citizens.

As to excess in drinking, the same thing may be expected to occur here, as has been remarked of late years in better company in England. In proportion as the understanding is cultivated, men are found to be less the victims of drinking and the grosser provocatives of sense. The king of Persia of old made it his boast that he could drink large quantities of liquor with greater impunity than any of his

subjects. Such was not the case with the more polished Greeks. In the dark ages the most glaring enormities of that kind prevailed. Under our Charles the Second coarse dissipation and riot characterized the highest circles. Rochester, the most accomplished man and the greatest wit of our island, related of himself that, for five years together, he could not affirm that for any one day he had been thoroughly sober. In Ireland, a country less refined than our own, the period is not long past, when on convivial occasions the master of the house took the key from his door, that no one of his guests might escape without having had his dose. No small number of the contemporaries of my youth fell premature victims to the intemperance which was then practiced. Now wine is merely used to excite a gayer and livelier tone of the spirits; and inebriety is scarcely known in the higher circles. In like manner, it may readily be believed that, as men in the lower classes of society become less ignorant and obtuse, as their thoughts are less gross, as they wear off the vestigia raris, the remains of a barbarous state, they will find less need to set their spirits afloat by this animal excitement, and will devote themselves to those thoughts and that intercourse which shall inspire them with better and more honorable thoughts of our common nature.

## FOOTNOTES

1 See above, Essay 7.2 Political Justice, Book

VIII, Chap. VI. From : Anarchy Archives.

### Chronology :

**November 30, 1830** : Chapter 09 -- Publication.

**January 28, 2017** : Chapter 09 -- Added to

<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

**March 20, 2019** : Chapter 09 -- Last Updated on

<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

PDF file generated from :

**<http://www.RevoltLib.com/>**