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Aristotle on Leisure

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I

At a conference on 'Leisure in Canada,' held more than a decade ago at Montmorency in Quebec, a participant observed that 'practically all writers on the subject take Aristotle as the point of departure in discussing leisure but seldom seem to move from that point.'[1] At first sight this statement may seem surprising. How is it to be understood? Certainly recent writers on leisure do in fact list Aristotle's conception as one of the significant positions on it. Certainly very few, if any, give

1 John Farina, 'Towards a Philosophy of Leisure,' in *Leisure in Canada,* The Proceedings of the Montmorencey Conference on Leisure, Montmorency, Quebec – September 2-6, 1969 (Ottawa: Department of National Health and Welfare 1973) 9. The aim of the conference was to 'provide the basis for the development of a philosophy of leisure which would be meaningful for the Canadian people' (ix). Bibliographies of recent literature on the topic of leisure may be found in *Soziologie der Freizeit,* ed. Erwin K. Scheuch and Rolf Meyersohn (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1972) 327-40, in Thomas L. Burton, *Leisure* (Toronto: Van Nostrand 1976) 88-90, and, on its history, in *The Emergence of Leisure,* ed. Michael R. Marrus (New York: Harper & Row 1974) 144-7.

adequate study of it in depth. Certainly also, it is not made the actual starting point from which the conclusions about leisure are developed. Rather, each writer duly mentions the Aristotelian views about it, perhaps describes them at some length, and then moves on to develop and justify his own particular ideas in ways that have little to do with the Stagirite.

At most, then, the above-mentioned statement serves to highlight the formal bow a number of present-day writers make to Aristotle as they straightway move on to other considerations. They routinely acknowledge the Aristotelian position as basic in one way or another. They note, for example, that with Aristotle 'leisure is the state or condition of being free from the urgent demands of lower level needs'[2] in order to devote oneself to purely intellectual life. But what is left is the impression of an ivory- tower, elitist, impractical mentality. It is the notion of an idle intelligentsia far removed from the realities of everyday living, or at best of a clerisy keeping quite apart from the philistines it hopes to enlighten.[3] The reader is left to wonder how the influence of such a position could have survived throughout so many centuries.

Yet in point of fact for the past twenty-three centuries Aristotle's view of life has stood the crucial tests of time and cultural change. It has continued to attract serious study. It evoked strong attention in the 'World Congress on Aristotle' held in 1978 at Thessaloniki, the city nearest his place of family origin (Stagira), and in conferences on a lesser scale in various countries, to mark the twenty-third hundredth anniversary of his death in the early fall of 322 B.C. The continued acclaim suggests at least an inquiry whether his wisdom if probed in sufficient depth might find sensitive and far-reaching application to today's absorption in the intriguing problems of leisure.

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2 Farina, 12. Cf.: 'As a result, the idea of leisurely labour has usually been omitted as a potential occupation of leisure.' Ibid., 9. Cf. infra, n. 14.

3 Cf. the attitude neatly described by Russell Hann: 'Some observers have viewed the intelligentsia as the protectors of all that is fine in western tradition; to perform this function well, it must be well insulated from society. ... the social necessity of a clerisy – that group of learned men and women separated from philistinism of everyday life, who were capable of creating enlightened opinion and social leadership' ('Brainworkers and the Knights of Labor,' in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1976) 35, 45).

II

In the opening chapter of the first among the treatises handed down as the *Metaphysics,* Aristotle has occasion to remark that a state of leisure is required for the highest kinds of knowledge. After noting that the earliest developed arts bore on the one hand upon necessities and on the other upon entertainment, he asserts:

> Hence when all such inventions were already established, the sciences which do not aim at giving pleasure or at the necessities of life were discovered, and first in the places where men first began to have leisure. This is why the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt; for there the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure.[4]

This remark might be passed over as a side observation from an historical standpoint on the way interest in the higher sciences had actually developed. Yet when read against the background of Aristotle's profound ethical notions it acquires a much more pertinent bearing on the topic of leisure. It sees the earliest crafts and arts and sciences divided into those for the necessities of daily life and those for the pleasures that entertain. Only then does it proceed to look upon leisure as meant for something over and above even the entertainment objectives. Entertainment along with drudgery is given the role of a

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4 *Metaph*. 981b20-25; Oxford trans. The English word 'leisure' comes from the Latin *licere* ('to be allowed'), implying freedom from restraint. Its Greek counterpart *scholé* is traced by etymologists (see Boisacq, s.v. and s.v. *echó*; Frisk, s.v.) to the same root as that of the Greek verb for 'to have.' On its background in Greek literature before Aristotle, see Elisabeth Charlotte Welskopf, *Probleme der Müsse im alten Hellas* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening 1962). Applied in the sense of 'school' as opposed to ordinary work, the word in the course of centuries adapted itself in chameleon fashion to the coloring of the different circumstances and came to imply the rigidity and restraint of school discipline rather than the free and pleasant atomosphere of its original setting. This occasioned Maritain's quip that Scholasticism was named from its greatest misfortune. 'Leisure,' though, is not a topic that is treated of just in itself by Aristotle. The longest discussion of it is given in the course of dealing with education, in *Politics* 1333a30-b5; 1334a11-40: 1337b29-1338a30. Although Aristotle there (1334a15; 1337b30-1) refers to his conception of it as something frequently mentioned, the other passages (see Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus*, 741a20-50) that treat of it are neither lengthy nor numerous in comparison with those dealing with many leading Aristotelian themes. But his doctrine on it throughout is consistent and unhesitating, and is deeply involved in his major ethical issues. Cf. infra, n. 13. Quite as in modern Greek, the notion of leisure was expressed positively, as though it were regarded as normally in possession, while in relation to it 'work' was viewed negatively as *ascholia*. Correspondingly in Latin 'business' was *negotium*.

prerequisite for the leisure that counts. The grading happens to be in full solidarity with Aristotle's carefully worked out conception of human living as a whole. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* the ultimate goal of all human striving is located globally on two different levels of activity. Primarily it consists in the exercise of the intellect, man's highest faculty, upon its highest object. Secondarily that same goal is found in the practical activity that brings about the conditions for intellectual life. To the one goal, graded in this twofold manner, the whole life of each individual and of the entire political organization is directed.[5] This is the kind of living for which human leisure is meant and to which it should be directed.

What is immediately striking in Aristotle's conception, then, is that leisure opens out on a panorama more positive and more self-sufficient than relaxation or recreation or entertainment. Only after the pleasures of recreation have been enjoyed and have accomplished their purpose does the full role of leisure even enter upon the scene. Human effort and human science, in this conception, must first of all provide the necessities of everyday life. In current terminology, these are the physiological or biosomatic needs and the needs for defense against aggression.[6] Following upon that objective the pleasure requisite for sustaining human effort and recuperating human forces has to be assured. These come first in time. Yet both the drudgery and the relaxation function rather as *means* for something further. Neither is pursued just for its own sake. Each is in its own way meant to bring about the leisure in which higher human activity may be undertaken.

Accordingly Aristotle writes: 'To make amusement the object of our serious pursuits and our work seems foolish and childish to excess.' He makes his own the motto 'Play in order that you may work.' He gives as the reason: 'Amusement is a form of rest; but we need rest because we are not able to go on working without a break, and therefore it is not an end, since we take it as a means to further activity.'[7]

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5 C.f. *E.N.* 1094a1-b11; 1177a12-79a32. The grading is expressed by the adverb 'secondarily' at 1178a9.

6 See Farina, 11; Burton, 22.

7 *E.N.* 1176b32-1177a1; Rackham trans. (Loeb Classical Library). Cf. *Pol.* 1337b35-42. Correspondingly the reversal of ends is expressed in Browning's *Rabbi ben Ezra:*

> What is he but a brute
> Whose flesh has soul to suit,
> Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want play?

The purpose of amusement and entertainment, in this view, is definitely to make possible still further and other activity. Can the view at all be regarded as a variant of the nineteenth-century work ethic? Hardly. On the one side, for Aristotle, 'indeed it would be strange that amusement should be our End – that we should toil and moil all our life long in order that we may amuse ourselves' (*E.N.* 1176b28-30; Rackham trans.). For him amusements or pastimes are not the goal of labor and risks. But on the other side, leisure is. He writes: 'For we do business in order that we may have leisure, and carry on war in order that we may have peace' (*E.N.* 1177b4-6). Leisure does not connote idleness, lack of purpose, or waste of time. It is ranked above toil and struggle, as much as it is ranked above entertainment and pastime. Both the necessitated work and the relaxing entertainment, in a word, are but preparations for the ultimate function of leisure.

III

Aristotle, of course, was quite aware that this was not the popular view. In his own day as in the nineteenth-century a popularly recognized 'leisure class' was seen devoting itself to entertainment and seeking happiness in it. Then, just as in Veblen's day, 'conspicuous leisure' served as a guide to popular opinion: 'So it is supposed that amusements are a component part of happiness, because princes and potentates devote their leisure to them (*E.N.* 1176b16-7; Rackham trans.). Yet obviously, Aristotle emphasizes, the pleasures of entertainment indulged in for their own sakes, and left to themselves without dominating guidance, lead to ruin: 'Agreeable amusements ... are often more harmful than beneficial, causing men to neglect their health and their estates' (ibid., b9-11). Permitted to run their own course, these pleasures can be destructive. To give one's leisure time to entertainment after the recuperation of one's forces has been achieved is in consequence a wrong use of leisure, an abuse of it.[8] Leisure, rather, is

8 Cf.: 'We should introduce amusements only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines.' Aristotle, *Pol.* 1337b40-2; Oxford trans. Here, as in the use of medicines, excess tends to defeat the original purpose. Philosophically this is a leisure problem in the Aristotelian setting, for it concerns the correct understanding of the purpose of leisure time. From other standpoints it may appear differently, e.g. "... it is probable that many people choose to expend their increasing resources in a manner injurious to themselves and their environment. ...

meant for the exercise of man's intelligence upon the mind's highest object.

Against this background Aristotle's general conception of leisure may be probed in depth and profitably compared with other recognized views on the topic. Today the views for the most part are preoccupied with recreation and entertainment, even when they leave side doors open for cultural or religious interests. The one basic characteristic of leisure commonly recognized by them all is choice.[9] Leisure is the condition in which one is free to do what one wishes. It is promoted by making the maximum number of choices available to all. Choice is basic.

But choice turns out to be a difficult concept. People may *choose* to work compulsively. They may locate their chosen pleasure in exacting labor on their own part or in directing it in those under them. They may deliberately choose to subordinate everything, no matter how great the burden, to status and prestige. From Aristotle's viewpoint they abuse work just as they abuse pleasure, when choosing either as the ultimate goal in life.[10] For him choice characterizes all moral action. It is the original source of all moral conduct and the basic principle of moral science.[11] The whole purpose of ethical training and study is to guide choice correctly, for choice has to be disciplined. Conduct, both in the individual and in the social organization has to be directed in a way that assures the conditions required for properly human life. If choice is made the distinguishing characteristic of leisurely action, then the topic of leisure and the topic of morality will coincide in Aristotle. Leisurely conduct and moral conduct will become the same.

This is a very real problem, but it is obviously no leisure problem, in the sense that people do not know what to do with all their time. It is a social problem' (Staffan Burenstam Linder, *The Harried Leisure Class* (New York and London: Columbia U.P. 1970) 12). Cf. ibid., 46 and 95. On the 'conspicuous leisure' theme, see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: B.W. Huebsch 1918) 35-67.

9 Cf.: 'The defining characteristic of leisure is choice. Choice, or freedom from obligations, is a constant theme permeating the many varied interpretations of leisure throughout history' (Burton, 18). Nevertheless Burton remarks: 'Choice, however, implies diversity; and the whole current approach to planning for leisure seems to militate against the creation of diversity' (ibid., 86).

10 See *E.N.* 1095b19-31. Cf.: 'Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end,' *Pol.* 1337b33-4; Oxford trans.

11 'Choice, then, is the origin of conduct,' *E.N.* 1139a31. 'The first principle of the practical sciences is in the agent, choice,' *Metaph.* 1025b23-4. Cf. *Pol.* 1337b32.

This stand is not so farfetched as it may seem at first hearing. Through correct education from earliest years people should, in Aristotle's view, be habituated to choose what is best. For him, what is best is the highest activity of the intellect upon its highest object. People so habituated will then regulate freely their individual and civic lives in a way, he trusts, that will provide them with the leisure to engage in that intellectual activity. They will be habituated to locate their own good in what is good absolutely.[12] That is morality, and what it brings is true happiness, lived in leisure.[13] In this perspective all workaday toil and all recreating pleasure become conditioned by leisure. One's work becomes leisurely – a goal sought by present-day writers – and one's recreation becomes leisurely.[14] Both are freely chosen for the extent to which they actualize the conditions for the attainment of a man's supreme destiny. So, while man's ultimate goal remains located in activity, the type of activity in which Aristotle finds it may without too much strain be designated as 'leisurely.'

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12 'In conduct our task is to start from what is good for each and make what is without qualification good good for each,' *Metaph.* 1029b6-7; Oxford trans. Cf.: 'Now men ... should pray that the things that are good absolutely may also be good for them,' *E.N.* 1129b5-7; Oxford trans.

13 'And happiness is thought to depend on leisure,' E.N. 1177b4; Oxford trans. Introduced as a commonly accepted notion, this view is upheld by Aristotle, ibid., 1177b16-78a8. For him, happiness is the ultimate goal of all morally good activity. Cf.: 'Therefore, leisure is not limited to the non-work sphere, but can permeate all phases of existence, because *leisure* then becomes a *philosophy of life* ...' *Leisure in Canada,* Montmorency II, The Proceedings of the Second Montmorency Conference on Leisure, Montmorency, Quebec – September 7-10, 1971 (Ottawa: Department of National Health and Welfare 1973) 177. On the topic, see Stanley Parker, *The Sociology of Leisure* (New York: International Publications Service 1976) 65-76.

14 Cf.: 'Leisure in this context can no longer be opposed to work,' *Leisure in Canada,* Montmorency II, 150. 'Leisure then is possible during what is generally considered work time,' Farina, 12. But Farina's remark 'the compulsively neurotic pursuit of free time activity is difficult to exclude from leisure as derived from Aristotle' (9) is unjustified. For Aristotle every morally good act has to be regulated by the right reason, and the moderation of the proper mean has always to be observed in the pursuit of pleasure. On the other hand, Aristotle has been understood to exclude anything purposeful from leisure: 'Therefore no occupation can be leisure, not even the self-employer's, whose purpose is self-chosen. Nor can leisure be anything related to an occupation,' Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund 1962) 15. In this regard, one may recall John K. Galbraith's remark 'Social philosophy, far more than nature, abhors a vacuum. Men must see a purpose in their efforts,' *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1958) 281. On the 'New Class' mentality, see ibid., 340-8.

What does this mean in actual practice? The necessity of exacting work cannot be abolished. Unpleasant labor is often demanded by the means for living well. The requirement of diverting pleasures and entertainments and pastimes cannot be eliminated. But these all can be directed towards and regulated by the pursuit of one's ultimate destiny, freely chosen and located in intellectual life. They take on their moral attractiveness, their intelligible choice-worthiness, to the extent to which they are means towards the leisure for intellectual activity. They are constituent parts of a program that taken as a whole gives the highest intellectual satisfaction.

Here as elsewhere for Aristotle in the moral order, great flexibility has to be accorded to the notions involved. They have to remain supple and adaptable as differing circumstances succeed each other.[15] Rushed at times, one's work will for the moment become unleisurely. Nor is there any mathematical way of calculating the exact amount of pleasure needed for recreation. It has to be left to the individual's good judgment, as regards both quantity and kind. It cannot be standardized, from the viewpoint of leisure. Troubles and sufferings have to be endured. Even in these, as Aristotle sees the situation, the attractiveness of one's ultimate end will shine through and dominate.[16] The intellectual composure and the deep understanding that are brought about in leisure will continue to condition one's life even in those adverse circumstances.

IV

These considerations unfold the meaning of the stand, attributed to Aristotle, that the purpose of education is to prepare people to occupy their leisure.[17] Education should regulate people's aspirations and habits

15 See *E.N.* 1094b14-6, 1104a1-10. Cf.: 'Mass leisure, however, may represent an unfortunate choice of terms,' Farina, 13.

16 'Yet nevertheless even in adversity nobility shines through, when a man endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul,' *E.N.* 1100b30-3; Rackham trans.

17 'Aristotle ... stated that "the object of education is to prepare a man to occupy his leisure," ' Farina, 8. Cf. Aristotle: 'Now, in men rational principle and mind are the end towards which nature strives, so that the birth and moral discipline of the citizens ought to be ordered with a view to them,' *Pol.* 1334b14-7; Oxford

in such a way that they will freely choose to bring about conditions under which the highest human intellectual activity may be pursued. Not professional or technological or athletic competence, but rather leisure, should be the overall purpose of education. Yet let a university president mention this in a commencement address. He will bring upon himself the scorn and ridicule of the press and the tax-paying public, and of many of his colleagues outside the humanities departments. It conjures up the notions of ivory-tower existence.

Aristotle, it is true, has been interpreted in this ivory-tower way.[18] But a cursory reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* should be enough to show how far from his thought is the notion of an intellectual life hermetically isolated from what is going on in the workaday world. The intellectual life to which Aristotle directs human activity requires all the moral or practical virtues. It demands moderate wealth, good fortune, friends to entertain and associate with, mature years, well-organized civil environment – in a word, everything that goes to make full living. It does indeed consist essentially in intellectual acitivity, but that is the activity by which the soul becomes and is all things with which it makes intellectual contact. It excludes nothing that is good and that contributes to one's happiness. Consequently it is not exclusive of things other than intellection, but rather requires them according to a man's capabilities. In this secondary way practical life plays its full part in human happiness. It is demanded for the habituation and control that are necessary for intellectual contemplation. It exhibits in itself the beauty and order that accord with the intellect's longings.[19] In a corresponding way the useful arts, the fine arts, and all the doings of

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trans. 'It is clear then that there are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake; whereas those kinds of knowledge that are useful in business are to be deemed necessary, and exist for the sake of other things,' ibid., 1338a9-13. The extent of the leisure problem today is emphasized in Max Kaplan and Phillip Bosserman, eds., *Technology, Human Values, and Leisure* (Nashville: Abington Press 1971) – 'the study of leisure covers all ages,' 5. Yet the view may still be found asserted that 'our leisure problems, compared with those of work, are secondary' – Nels Anderson, *Man's Work and Leisure* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1974) x.

18 See John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P. 1975) 144-80. Cooper (115-43) sees a different view in the *Eudemian Ethics*, a view that for him is older and that survives in a secondary position in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

19 The Aristotelian term for the object of morally good activity is the same as that for the physically or aesthetically beautiful – *to kalon*.

everyday life fit into the picture of a happiness that consists essentially in intellectual contemplation, in which deep understanding catalyzes toil as well as pleasure. The intellectual life envisaged by Aristotle as the supreme destiny of man is open to everything that promotes a man's well-being.[20]

V

This brings the inquiry to the final and most elusive query. What precisely does Aristotle mean by the highest object of human intellection, the object in which man's destiny is attained? Here Aristotle himself does not specify. He writes as though, after four decades of intense personal acquaintance with intellectual activity, he is aware that the intellect's reach must exceed its grasp in a way he felt himself unable to fathom or at least unable to describe. This intellectual self-control has saved his philosophy from restriction to the cultural milieu of his own times and has left it open for application and development down through the centuries, no matter how far the thoughts of men have 'widened with the process of the suns.' His followers have taken upon themselves the task of specifying it. From his own works they have taken leads that would place it in the pursuit of metaphysics, or in the self-contemplation of separate substance, or in a life of general intellectual activity. But he himself does not specifically locate it in any of these ways. Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas experienced little difficulty in finding it in the beatific vision of God. Modern secular

20 In this wide sense one may agree with the assertion 'The cultivation of the mind and spirit is generally accepted as being the supreme goal of human effort,' Linder, 94. But for different mentalities it will take on different embodiment. For a Christian believer it may readily be centered in divine worship, e.g. 'The soul of leisure, it can be said, lies in "celebration." ' Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Pantheon Books 1952) 71. So: 'Separated from the sphere of divine worship, of the cult of the divine, and from the power it radiates, leisure is as impossible as the celebration of a feast. Cut off from the worship of the divine, leisure becomes laziness and work inhuman,' ibid., 75. Aristotle's Greek background does in fact leave his principles open to development in this direction; see Pieper, 78-9. Discussions of leisure vis-à-vis religion may be found in Huizinga, 14-27, and Parker, 103-13, and a survey of the topic on the U.S.A. scene in Robert Lee, *Religion and Leisure in America* (New York: Abingdon Press 1964). At least the Aristotelian wisdom shows that leisure, with its deep origins in human freedom, is meant for something much more important than recreation and entertainment.

writers may see it in a life dedicated to scientific pursuits or approach it by the route of music or art. But in Aristotle himself it is left open.

Here in fact lies the enduring merit of his philosophy. He is not doing our thinking for us. He is showing in broad outline a continuing basis upon which the thought of each age and each person may be erected. In this way his philosophy is not transitory. It is as fecund for our times as for any other. In regard to leisure it does not offer us any detailed blueprint. It requires us to do our own thinking. But it does furnish the guidance and the inspiration for developing a fully rounded conception of leisure, as something highly purposeful and personal, something based upon and characterized by free choice, something that lies at the very core of genuine human living and that conditions the deepest fiber of moral conduct. Aristotle's thoughts on these topics, if adequately reflected upon and absorbed, will serve continually as a leaven for working the experience of our own century as of every other century into a palatable and life-sustaining nourishment. His philosophy is a heritage we can ill afford to neglect. As the starting point for discussion on leisure it is more than just a runway that one may promptly forget on becoming airborne. It is rather the fertile intellectual soil in which one may remain implanted while drawing uninterruptedly from its riches as one moves on to deal with contemporary problems and needs.

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