

## RUSSELL'S DEFENCE OF IDLENESS

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Russell has a famous defence of idleness. But I argue that he was not supporting idleness as such. Russell valued the active and productive life. He was instead attacking overwork and defending leisure, where such leisure is used productively to contribute to civilization. This paper offers a critique of Russell's argument on the grounds that it is difficult to sustain a distinction between activities that do and do not contribute to civilization. The questions are then addressed of whether purely inactive idleness can be defended, whether it would be sensible to follow Russell's advocated work pattern, and whether work is always something bad.

### I. INTRODUCTION

When Russell struggled for money in the 1930s, he took to writing a series of semi-popular articles and so-called pot-boiler books. "In Praise of Idleness" (1932) was among the hundreds of such articles produced for this purpose. Unlike many of the others, however, "In Praise of Idleness" (henceforth IPI<sup>1</sup>) is not just a series of wry observations on the irrationality of modern society. While it contains the usual quota of such observations, it also advances a serious philosophical argument and, further, a whole philosophy of work and leisure. This philosophy does not have the depth and rigour of, for instance, Marx's theory of surplus value, but if Russell is right his theory is just as wide-ranging and significant. And Russell had, in any case,

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in *IPI (In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays, 1935)*.

already offered more detailed critiques of Marxism (1896, 1920) together with general analyses of economic-political systems (1918) and industrial society (1923).<sup>2</sup>

Russell's IPI is a philosophy of human fulfilment and the good life. But it is easily misunderstood, no doubt partly through Russell's own slightly mischievous and attention-grabbing presentation. Superficially, his view is provocative—a seeming defence of idleness—but a closer look reveals that Russell's view is more complex than that. On the contrary, idleness is defended purely as a means to an end, which is the production of the higher contributions to society. This reveals a hierarchical view of human endeavour and an aristocratic division of our working activities. It is not easy to see how ultimately such a division could be defended.

In this paper, I am going to reconstruct Russell's argument, filtering it through the surrounding rhetoric. By doing so, I hope to establish clearly that Russell's is not a defence of idleness as such. On the contrary, in IPI Russell values industry, though only where it is in the production of certain higher goals, namely those that Russell deems "contributions to civilization". I will go on to highlight the problems of such an account and then consider anew whether truly inactive idleness has any place in a good human life.

## 2. RUSSELL'S ARGUMENT

I accept that Russell may not have intended his argument in IPI to have the same rigour that would be expected of a paper in an academic journal. But I maintain that there is an argument there and that it is useful to reconstruct it in a clear and simple form. Our reward for doing so will be the exposure of a wide-ranging philosophy of work and leisure.

First, what is work? Russell offers a simple, seemingly frivolous answer:

Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid.

(*IPI*, p. 12)

Why is it pleasant to give orders to others about where to move matter?

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<sup>2</sup> Respectively, in *German Social Democracy* and *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism; Roads to Freedom*; and *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*.

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Perhaps it is pleasant because power is pleasurable, or at least is a deep-seated human drive (see *Power: a New Social Analysis*, 1938). More accurately, it is the *exercise* of power that is a pleasure, or at least I will speculate so at the end of this paper. Most work, however, is of the first kind and will be the kind of work to which we refer when we speak of work in the following arguments.

Of course, some readers see this characterization as an oversimplification of work and wonder whether Russell's definition adequately captures their own employment. What about an oboist, a spy, or a TV presenter? Are they engaged in altering the position of matter near the surface of the earth? Seemingly not. What Russell had in mind was mainly manual work and workers. This is not simply because they were more common in 1932 but also, as I will argue, because he has a view of what is *not* work. His own philosophical writing, for example, is not work according to his own account. Although Russell could be considered as industrious as any man who ever lived, his own "work" is characterized as an essentially useless contribution to civilization that is only possible due to him having the luxury of leisure time. Had Russell worked in a coal mine, for example, he would not have been able to co-write the essentially useless *Principia Mathematica*. We would not, therefore, have gained this useless contribution to civilization. This gives us the basics of Russell's defence of idleness.

I will now examine the defence in more detail. Russell actually presents two arguments together, though they are logically independent in that one could support one argument without supporting the other. I call these the *work argument* and the *contributions to civilization argument*. They are of a pretty informal nature, but I nevertheless present them in a stripped-down form:

The *work argument*:

- (1) Work is unpleasant while leisure is pleasant.
- (2) Due to mechanization, we no longer need to work as much as we do.
- (3) But our social organization requires us to work more than necessary.

Therefore (conclusion *A*),

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*We should replace our social organization with one that requires less work and allows more leisure.*

The *contribution to civilization* argument:

- (4) Leisure is reserved for the few.
- (5) Civilization is the product, and only the product, of leisure.
- (6) Potential contributors to civilization are at least as likely to be among the many as among the few.

Therefore (conclusion *B*),

*Civilization would benefit if leisure were given equally to all.*

A joint conclusion of both arguments taken together is that we should work less both because work is unpleasant and unnecessary (conclusion *A*) and because leisure is beneficial to civilization (conclusion *B*). Joining together conclusions *A* and *B* in the form of a slogan gives us Russell's position as *work bad; leisure good*.

I will now go through each premiss and show how Russell supports it.

PREMISS 1: *Work is unpleasant while leisure is pleasant.*

Work is not virtuous in itself, nor is it an end in itself. This is clear in the following statement: "moving matter about, while a certain amount of it is necessary for our existence, is emphatically not one of the ends of human life. If it were, we should have to consider every navvy superior to Shakespeare" (*IPI*, p. 23). One has to assume here that navvies work harder than did Shakespeare, otherwise the argument would be a non-sequitur. If hard work were a virtue, it seems that they would have more of it than anyone. But Russell clearly thinks they do not have an abundance of such virtue. Rather, they have an unpleasant and unrewarding life, toiling for many hours in work that they do not find rewarding in itself but perform only for wages. Workers instead see all their pleasure as coming from their leisure time. Unfortunately they are often too exhausted to do anything active or productive with it. Their work is so hard and long that it makes them incapable of making what could be made with the little leisure time they have. Hence, "The morality of work is the morality of slaves" (*IPI*, p. 14).

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PREMISS 2: *Due to mechanization, we no longer need to work as much.*

Working all day was once a necessity for our survival. A whole day's toil was once required just for our basic subsistence. But mechanization has meant that we can easily satisfy our needs through just four hours of work a day. Perhaps Russell has not anticipated the modern development of mass consumerism here. Because we could so easily earn enough to meet our basic needs, we now want so much more than that. One effect of media advertising has been the creation of additional aspirations beyond basic subsistence and thus an endless stream of new consumer goods for us to work towards. Russell did not consider this possibility. Indeed it has raised a puzzle for Marxists and others who wonder why workers invariably seem to prefer more pay instead of earning the same pay for fewer hours.<sup>3</sup> For Russell, though, it is clear that we are working more than necessary. Overworking is sustained through overproduction, high unemployment and, if necessary, war, which makes us accept overwork as our lot (*IPI*, pp. 21–2).

PREMISS 3: *But our social organization requires us to work more than necessary.*

How irrational is a society where some work longer hours than necessary while others are unemployed? And how unfair is a society in which a few have all the leisure they want while the majority have a bare minimum? Leisure has so far been secured only through unjust systems. But now we could distribute leisure time justly. On what principles? Russell does not say categorically. There are a number of different distributive options we could take:

- (i) Absolute equality: everyone gets exactly the same amount of leisure time.
- (ii) Capacity to enjoy work: those who like work can have less leisure.
- (iii) Capacity to enjoy leisure: those who are able to enjoy leisure the most should get more of it.
- (iv) Capacity to make a contribution to civilization: we will see that this is the point of leisure so it might make sense to let those most likely to contribute to civilization have the lion's share of the available leisure time.

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<sup>3</sup> See G. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2000), p. 318.

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However, in at least one place, Russell seems to be favouring option (i): “Modern technique has made it possible for leisure, within limits, to be not the prerogative of the small privileged classes, but a right distributed evenly throughout the community” (*IPI*, p. 14). It is not clear, however, that option (i) is the most logical distribution to advocate, given his “leisure good” argument.

Premises 1 to 3 seem adequate to establish, in an informal manner, the “work bad” side of the equation. Now let us consider leisure.

PREMISS 4: *Leisure is reserved for the few.*

Landowners and aristocrats need not work. But their idleness is not particularly a good because it is gained only through others having to work more than is necessary or enjoyable. Ways have to be found to justify such inequality and make it seem right and natural. So that the poor continue to support them, the rich create the gospel of work—the work ethic—the dignity of labour. “The idea that the poor should have leisure has always been shocking to the rich” (*IPI*, p. 17). Duty is then understood for the workers as effectively no more than “to live for the interests of their masters rather than their own” (*IPI*, p. 15). The complement to the work ethic is the demonization of leisure: “Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do” (*IPI*, p. 9). If we let the workers loose, with time on their hands, they will get up to no good at all.

PREMISS 5: *Civilization is the product, and only the product, of leisure.*

The basic argument is that if one needs to work to live then one does not have the free time for the speculative contemplation that is required to produce the *Principia Mathematica*, *Tristram Shandy* or *The Origin of Species*. I will be examining this premiss in more detail in the next section. It should be noted here, however, that there is a crucial further premiss in Russell’s overall argument, namely, that contributions to civilization are essentially useless. They are, instead, ends in themselves, while work is always a means to an end. Civilization, for Russell, is an ultimate and unqualified good and is not for any further end. To call *Principia Mathematica* useless is thus far from saying that it is a bad thing. In many ways, Russell sees this as one of the best things one can say of a book.

One further thing to note about this premiss is that it is said (*IPI*, p. 24) that workers would not know how to fill their leisure time, if they had more. But this condemns present society rather than the one Russell

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envisages. Certainly, in current society, when the workers are given a holiday they may prefer to spend it drinking beer. But this is because they know that they must return to their solid toil the next day. Given a society of regular leisure, things might be different as people seek more fulfilling ways of occupying their ample free time.

PREMISS 6: *Potential contributors to civilization are at least as likely to be among the many as among the few.*

This is one of the cleverest of Russell's arguments in the paper. If all of a society's civilization comes from leisure time, then what an irrational system we have for its production. Almost all the available leisure time is awarded to an aristocratic elite. Although this system produced Darwin and Locke, most of the aristocracy are unsuited to the task: "The class might produce one Darwin, but against him has to be set tens of thousands of country gentlemen who never thought of anything more intelligent than fox-hunting and punishing poachers" (*IPI*, pp. 26–7). Yet despite the injustice and inefficiencies of this system, it has produced all that we call civilization and without the leisured class we would never have emerged from barbarism. But just imagine how much better civilization would be if everyone had the opportunity to contribute. If no one is compelled to work, "every person possessed of scientific curiosity will be able to indulge it, and every painter will be able to paint without starving" (*IPI*, p. 27). Just think of how much civilization will benefit, even if only "one per cent will probably devote the time not spent in professional work to pursuits of some public importance" (*IPI*, p. 28).

This establishes the "leisure good" part of Russell's position. I will now analyze Russell's view further and highlight some difficulties it presents.

### 3. THE ARISTOCRATIC ACCOUNT OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES

How convincing is Russell's argument? Some parts are plausible and provide valuable insight, but I will claim that other parts rest on assumptions for which it is hard to see the justification.

I am not going to dispute Russell's claim that civilization may have suffered with its current unequal distribution of work and leisure. We may well have missed out on undiscovered Humes or Nietzsches who have spent their lives working in mines or factories, without the leisure for writing or speculative contemplation. However, Russell's argument relies on a sharp distinction between work and leisure that is hard to

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maintain. Furthermore, a distinction that Russell allies to this, between activity that is a contribution to civilization and activity that is not, is likewise difficult to apply. What I think is behind Russell's conclusion is a hierarchical, or aristocratic, view of human activity with the manufacture of pins towards the bottom end and the writing of philosophy towards the top end of the hierarchy. Such a hierarchy may well remind us of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures in Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861).

Russell is well known for his own industry and prodigious output. But according to the present argument, this did not qualify as work. Rather, Russell was in a privileged position to have the leisure not to work and with that leisure he was able to write philosophy: an opportunity that only few enjoy under the current unequal distribution. Indeed, this kind of industry is not "bad" work. Russell would think it good and value it very highly. Clearly this raises the question of why it is not work, even though Russell was, for long periods in his life, doing it to make a living and keep from starving.

What Russell seems to value is activity. This is clear from his discussion of what we should do with our leisure time. Passivity is bad but is the way workers tend to use their leisure because work has left them so exhausted. With only four hours work a day, they could use their free time more actively, painting or writing. What then distinguishes activities that are work from activities that are leisurely?

To answer this, we need to consider the basis of Russell's hierarchy of activities. What, if anything, grounds the hierarchy? It cannot be utility for Russell accepts that civilization itself is useless. What makes a society civilized is that it contains much of what Russell elsewhere calls "useless" knowledge. We see this described in another essay, "'Useless' Knowledge" (1935). Russell put this essay together specially for the *Idleness* book and placed it immediately after "In Praise of Idleness", perhaps meaning it to supplement the argument of its predecessor or at least logically follow it.

Here might be the basis of hierarchy. Civilization is useless and, rather, an end in itself. "If a leisured population is to be happy, it must be an educated population, and must be educated with a view to mental enjoyment as well as to the direct usefulness of technical knowledge" (*IPI*, p. 39). Work is that form of activity which is not an end in itself but is a means for some other end. But why is writing philosophy a contribution to civilization and coal-mining not? An architect who designs a civic

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building is, according to Russell, making a contribution to civilization. The stone mason who cuts the stone and the labourer who puts it in place are not. Yet without the latter two, there would be no building, only the plans on paper. Given that a real stone building seems to be more a contribution to civilization than the plans alone, then the mason and the labourer must be adding something. Could one really say that cutting the stone is merely a means to realizing the end that is the building? But, if so, one could also say that drawing up the plans is just another means to the same end. So can we really draw such a sharp division between who does and who does not contribute to civilization? Similarly, without the printers and bookbinders, we would not have had Russell's own works disseminated. Would civilization have been as rich without those workers?

I think Russell clearly does have an aristocratic view of human activity that values intellectual products above all else, and values the arts and sciences in so far as they are intellectual. Working with one's hands does not qualify as a contribution to civilization, for Russell, even though the arts and sciences often require manual work for their realization. It seems far from clear-cut that the mental/manual distinction is so easily applicable, and it also seems far from clear that intellectual products have to be valued above physical products. The two are so often interrelated.

#### 4. DEFENDING IDLENESS

Next I want to consider further exactly what it is that Russell's "defence" is defending. Can we really defend idleness, where that is complete inactivity? Not on Russell's argument, I contend. What Russell really values is civilization. Idleness will certainly make no contribution to it. Hence Russell goes on to qualify his defence: "When I suggest that working hours should be reduced to four, I am not meaning to imply that all remaining hours should necessarily be spent in pure frivolity" (*IPI*, p. 25). Indeed Russell goes on to make a recommendation of education to improve our tastes so that we may use leisure intelligently (*ibid.*). We need to re-educate our interests so that we make a more productive use of our leisure time: "The pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio, and so on. This results from the fact that their active energies are fully taken up with work; if they had more leisure, they would again enjoy pleasures in which they took an active part" (p. 26).

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This is far from a defence of idleness, as traditionally understood. It seems more as though Russell has a plan for its eradication. Thus a more recent defence of idleness by Trainer, which purports to be Russellian, cannot be because it is a defence of idleness understood as a “non-productive consumption of time”.<sup>4</sup> Russell, in contrast, seems to think that non-productive consumption of time is something inflicted on us by overwork and clearly inferior to a productive life.

It would be useful to introduce a contrast therefore. I will reserve the term “idleness” for inactivity or a solely passive use of leisure time. What Russell is defending is something that contrasts sharply with this kind of idleness so I will refer to it, more accurately, as “active idleness”. This sounds self-contradictory but that merely reflects the competing tensions in Russell’s account. Again this may remind us of the competing strands in Mill’s utilitarianism where the additional value of the higher pleasures is a counter to pure hedonism.

The passive use of leisure time seems frowned upon by Russell. But must it be? Can there be any justification for idleness, understood in terms of inactivity? I would like to examine this question because disappointingly it seems to be one that Russell avoids. There is one obvious defence of inactivity that can be used, but it is in relation to work: workers need some period of rest so that they can remain efficient workers. Some such idleness will enable the worker to produce the greatest total amount of work during their lifetime. Obviously Russell would not want to use this defence. It would be a defence of idleness for the purpose of producing more work. It would not be a defence of idleness for any intrinsic good it might have or might produce.

What if someone adopted idleness as an end in itself? Could anyone have a happy and idle life? In other words, is idleness compatible with human happiness? If Russell sides with either view on this issue, it is the view that happiness and idleness are incompatible. This would be a view that passive leisure does no good and, at worst, could be viewed as a contemptuous waste of one’s life. Humans have the power to achieve very much. There might seem something almost immoral about wasting the opportunities provided by human life. Indeed enforced idleness, through unemployment, is depicted by Russell as a definite human bad, especially

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<sup>4</sup> Chad Trainer, “In *Further Praise of Idleness*”, in A. Schwerin, ed., *Russell Revisited: Critical Reflections on the Thought of Bertrand Russell* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 115–25 (at 116).

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where it is accompanied by poverty. In his words and deeds, Russell advocated as active a life as possible. So if there is a defence of idleness *qua* inactivity, it definitely did not come from Russell.

Do we have moral freedom to be idle if we so choose? There is an argument for the moral right to idleness that comes from Mill. We might think there is a freedom to be idle if such idleness is self-regarding. The argument for this is to be found in the use Mill makes of the distinction between self- and other-regarding actions in *On Liberty* (1859). If one had the wealth not to work or do anything active at all, but have a life consisting entirely of passive leisure, then most of us would accept that one may do so on the basis of Mill's principle. An objection is possible on the grounds that it is a wasted life. Nevertheless, Mill would have thought that even though idleness would be a waste of life, we have no right to prevent people from living that way. If that is correct, then we may think we have the right to waste our lives, if we believe in such things as rights.

I can think of some further arguments against the individual's right to idleness, but I do not see that any of them are compelling. One argument could be religious, concerning duty we have to God. Even some non-theists might think one has a responsibility to exercise one's abilities to the full. Suppose Michelangelo, though capable of sculpting *David*, had decided not to do so and remained idle. Would he have been wrong? I'm not sure that we can say he would have been. Essentially, in making one's contribution, one is giving a gift to civilization. While those who give gifts are usually praiseworthy, this does not always imply that not giving a gift is blameworthy. The reason for this is that gift-giving is thought of as supererogatory rather than obliged. Hence, we are grateful for Michelangelo's gift but could not seriously have admonished him had he decided not to produce it.

Another argument is that society has provided a stable environment in which one has the lucky privilege of being able to sculpt, write, or whatever, and one thus owes something back to the civilization that fostered one. But given that one cannot choose one's historical situation, it is hard to see that this consideration is strong enough to constitute a moral obligation to give something back to one's society. One has not, after all, consciously entered into a social contract in which rights and responsibilities were formally agreed. Indeed, one might think one's social circumstances unfair and oppressive and choose to opt out of activity within them.

A further consideration would be a "no free lunch argument". This

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would be to claim that idleness is not a purely self-regarding action because one person's idleness always means that someone else has to work to support that inactivity. Russell's justification of premiss 4, above, is based on something like this argument. I may have the wealth not to work, but then this means that others are having to work to support me, either by supporting an aristocratic system or by being exploited in a capitalism through which I ultimately benefit. Or suppose we lived under a communist system in which it was expected that people contribute "from each according to his ability".<sup>5</sup> If I did not contribute according to my ability—if I underperformed—then I would be damaging my entire community.

Such arguments show once again how difficult it is to apply Mill's distinction between self- and other-regarding actions. It is always possible to tell a story of how others suffer from any action I may perform or omit to perform. Mill's book is also, however, about the correct balance of individual liberty and the demands a society can fairly make. If one is born rich into a capitalist society or landowning family, or one is not born rich but willing to endure poverty, then the spirit of *On Liberty* would dictate that one has a right to idleness. Marxists, I think, have more of a problem on this issue. If someone refused to contribute according to their ability then there may be some sanction possible, such as that they do not receive according to their need. But such a sanction is again coercive. A Marxist may contend that no one under such a just system would want to remain idle. The danger of this view is that the idle might be classed as mentally ill or socially maladjusted, which could just be another form of coercive power that the collective has over the individual.

This discussion only scratches the surface of the issue. What I have tried to do is set the issue of idleness in the context of individual liberty. If there is to be any argument for the admissibility of inactive idleness, this seems one plausible source from which it could come. It should be noted, however, that it is almost always the case that people do find an active life more pleasurable than an idle one. They take enjoyment from achievement, in being busy and, once they reach maturity, a sense of being useful to their society. This is, however, an empirical claim—a psychological or sociological one—not a philosophical or moral argument.

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme" (1875), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), pp. 311–37 (at 321).

### 5. IS RUSSELL'S ADVOCATED WORK-PATTERN DESIRABLE?

Returning to Russell's essay, we find, in what is possibly a minor detail, that he suggests we all work for no more than four hours a day and have the rest of our time as leisure. How plausible and practical would this be as a division between work and leisure? I am not going to question Russell's estimate of how many hours we would need to work in order to satisfy our basic material needs. The suggestion of four hours can be regarded as a fairly arbitrary assessment of what might be needed on average in a world with equal distribution. It now seems the case, in reality, that a western lawyer might need only to work one hour a week to make an adequate living while a manual worker in the developing world still could need to work 60 hours a week just to earn enough for basic subsistence. Setting aside such vast inequalities, would we want a four-hour working day? It seems very unlikely that we would.

A four-hour day may often be impractical. Getting started and finishing are, for some jobs, time-consuming. In such cases, it is often rational to work for longer periods at a time. For example, coalmining requires travel to the pithead, down the shaft, then to the coalface. Afterwards, as well as the return journey, everyone needs to shower and clean up. The less the time actually mining then the greater proportion of the job is spent in starting and finishing. Similarly, many jobs require tools to be gathered and put away. To work for only four hours might then be wasteful and irrational. A simple solution, of course, is for such people to work full eight-hour days but perhaps only two days per week.

Even then, however, is it not a mistake to prescribe a single kind of work pattern for all workers? And wouldn't it be wrong to require or even expect this? Different people have different needs for their work/leisure balance. It is not clear that these people are irrational. Some people take pleasure or pride in their work and often work more than they need to, such as professional philosophers. There would be two Russellian responses to this example. Clearly Russell wants to exclude some such workers by his aristocratic theory: philosophers are not workers but are "actively idle" contributors to civilization. I have already indicated doubt about the ultimate validity of this distinction. Second, a reason lurking in the background that seems to explain why Russell is so against work is that many people do not enjoy it because, in Marxist terminology, they are alienated from the product of their labour. Hence, if I tile my own bathroom, I can take great pride and pleasure in both the

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process and the result. But if I tile someone else's bathroom, I take far less pleasure in the process and less pride in the result, which is not mine to enjoy. Therefore, I will only do this work in exchange for money, and the work is not an end in itself. If we had an economic system in which people were not alienated from their labour, then work might—even manual work—become a source of pride and pleasure. Yet even in current conditions this undeniably does sometimes occur, though often depending on the type of work. Philosophers rarely feel alienated from the products of their work: namely, their publications. And there are evidently some workaholics who enjoy their own industry, whatever its nature. And some people also prefer to work longer so that they can indulge expensive tastes. Could we really oblige them to work less?

### 6. IS WORK ALWAYS BAD?

This has brought us to the issue of whether work is always bad. As Russell characterizes work, it *is* always bad. But this is because he restricts it to those activities that do not contribute to civilization, which are unpleasant and badly paid. We saw earlier that there are concerns with Russell's view. Some contributions to civilization are both good in themselves and ultimately a pleasure to perform. Why could this not be extended to other activities, including physical ones, which might be contributions to society in their own way? If we can also eliminate alienation from the product of one's labour, the worker may then take pride and pleasure in making their manual contribution to civilization and enjoy their active life.

As I suggested above, a sense of fulfilment can be gained through the exercise of a power. Russell seems to acknowledge this only in the case of the intellectual powers of human beings. However, it seems evident that pleasure can be gained in the exercise of physical abilities just as much as mental abilities. Some activities, which often bring the most pleasure, involve our mental and physical abilities working together, e.g. in playing the piano. But also there are some manual but skilled jobs, such as tiling a bathroom, which are clearly not physical labours alone. Such jobs may require manual dexterity and physical strength but also a problem-solving ability which involves imaginative assessment of the various ways forward. Many manual jobs will have this aspect, and overall Russell underplays the mental aspect of most forms of work.

Russell also, I contend, underplays the physical aspect of the human

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situation. The exercise of our powers brings confirmation and understanding of our embodied existence and is perhaps why a completely idle life will be unfulfilling. The physical aspect is affirmed in our sex lives but also in sports, dance, child-like play, and often in manual work. A merely manual job tends to be unfulfilling because it does not stimulate our mental abilities, such as if I am shovelling sand. Most of us would regard such a job as under-stimulating. But even then I might gain pleasure through exhibiting my physical strength alone and enjoying experiencing the power that my body has.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The philosophy of work and leisure is an underexplored area that could allow us to understand more about the nature of the human condition, with our combination of physical and mental powers. Russell's paper would be an excellent starting point of a more detailed study. But as I have argued here, Russell offers no real sustainable defence of idleness. Chiefly, he values activities that contribute to civilization, though he defines these restrictively and aristocratically. Behind this is a distinction between work and "active idleness" that seems difficult to sustain or justify. What Russell thinks he does in his activity is make use of his leisure whereas those whose employment is mainly manual are depicted merely as workers.

Instead, there seems to be some reason to say that work is not of necessity a bad. Russell has not demonstrated that it need always be so. If his aristocratic account of activity is rejected, it is not clear that there is a sharp distinction between activities that contribute to civilization (and are good) and activities that are work (and are bad). Work can sometimes combine mental and physical capacities where the exercise of those powers is pleasurable and fulfilling. Furthermore, idleness understood as complete inactivity, while not a good, might be defensible as a self-regarding action or, more accurately, inaction.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The writing of this paper was suggested to me by Simon Glendinning for the Forum for European Philosophy *Work and Leisure* conference at LSE. An earlier version was also presented at the 2006 Central Division meeting of the APA at the Bertrand Russell Society section. I thank all who gave comments at these two events. I am also grateful for comments and discussion of earlier drafts with Gregory Mason and Christopher Woodard and to the anonymous referees for this journal.

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