

# Definition of the good life

By Caroline West

**‘Whoever has not two thirds of his day for himself is a slave’, said Friedrich Nietzsche famously.**

Nietzsche was probably exaggerating but he is part of a long and illustrious tradition of thinkers who have thought that our lives should contain work, leisure, and sleep in equal balance. Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, considered leisure to be constitutive of the good life, in fact, its primary purpose. Having to work was regarded as a misfortune; an unfortunate but sometimes necessary diversion from the really important activities and experiences that make for a flourishing human existence.

From this perspective, modern industrialized western society has got its work-life priorities quite topsy-turvy. Technology now enables us to produce goods and services necessary for a materially comfortable existence with comparatively little manpower and labour time. We are living in an age which offers unprecedented opportunity for us all to lead the kind of flourishing, leisurely existence that the ancients could only dream of and, yet, many of us are working harder and longer than ever before. (Europe is a striking exception, where hours of work have fallen over the last fifty years.)

Australians, in particular, work among the longest average weekly hours of any country in the developed world. Despite our laid-back façade, as a culture we have somehow managed to create a work ethic that turns thousands of years of pre-modern wisdom on its head. Working hard has become a moral virtue; and prioritizing leisure is regarded variously as lazy, selfish, frivolous or irresponsible—unless, of course, the leisure is ‘well-earned’. It seems timely to ask ‘What’s it all for? Is our obsession with work at the price

of leisure well justified? Is it preventing us from leading happier and more meaningful lives?’

The last few decades have seen the rise of a burgeoning social movement calling for the redesign of workplace structures and expectations, to enable a more equal ‘work-life’ balance. This is driven by a number of factors, including concerns about the family-unfriendly nature of many existing workplace structures; and its adverse implications for gender equity.

This, together with the striking fact that as western societies have got richer on the back of technological advances and longer working hours, their citizens, in general, have not become more—and possibly considerably less—happy and satisfied with their lives.

It is not that work itself is necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, paid work brings three important goods:

- income;
- self-esteem; and
- social ties.

This is true, even if we don’t much ‘enjoy’ our work. Job insecurity and unemployment have a very considerable and long-lived negative impact on individuals’ levels of wellbeing. Recent research indicates that the negative impact of unemployment, in countries such as Australia, stems less from the loss of income than from the blow to self-esteem. Society seems to strongly value people according to their position in the paid workforce and tends to view the unemployed as lazy good-for-nothings.

Seemingly, working beyond a certain threshold (generally estimated to be between 4–6 hours a day), brings comparatively small real additional benefits; yet has substantial opportunity costs, including loss of leisure.



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## The toll of working long hours

One reason why many of us are tempted to work ever longer and harder is because we tend to attach status to high levels of income. There is a tendency to envy people who earn more than we do (in the sense that we want what they have), but not those who have more leisure than we do. The result is that we frequently trade off our leisure time for increased income. However, the benefits of extra income don't translate into increased feelings of wellbeing. There are a number of reasons for this. Two of them relate to deeply engrained aspects of our psychology: our habits of comparison and adaptation.

**Comparison.** How good we feel about our own life depends not simply on its intrinsic quality, but how it compares to the lives of others who we identify with, or are surrounded by. A person who shares your qualifications but earns double your income, will leave you feeling like you're underachieving. Reverse the situation and you feel pretty good about yourself. Unsavoury though it may be, it makes us feel good when we are doing better than others in our reference group, and bad to be doing less (even when 'less' is objectively pretty good). This creates a strong psychological incentive to work harder, and longer, in order to get more income than your compatriots, in order to feel good about your life and achievements. When everyone else is doing the same, this then becomes self-defeating: everyone has to work harder and harder just to maintain their position relative to others and those who get left behind feel considerably worse. The result is that everyone is a lot more exhausted, and most are no happier.

**Adaptation.** The second reason extra income typically buys us no extra happiness is because we quite quickly adapt to increased material affluence—we soon get used to our new car or house, and revise our expectations. (Less than one year on, for example, even major lottery winners are no happier than they were previously.) Psychologists refer to this as the 'hedonic treadmill' because, once we're on it, we have to keep running faster and faster just to stay in the same place.

Importantly, however, the current psychological evidence suggests we don't adapt to everything in this way. Close convivial relations with friends and family, and the pursuit of projects or hobbies that absorb us, are among the things that bring us lasting pleasure.

Longer working hours may certainly increase overall gross domestic product, but the evidence suggests that it does not increase productivity per hour, and it generally makes us (not to mention those around us) quite a bit less happy than we (and they) would otherwise be. Many of the hours in a long working day are frequently less than enjoyable, and leave us tired, residually anxious and grumpy. It is also the absence of other, typically more enjoyable, goods in life that are foregone by hours spent at work.

These points were well appreciated by the economist John Maynard Keynes and the novelist William Thackeray, both of whom were exceptionally productive (in terms of both quantity and quality of output) but who worked for less than four hours a day. "Three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us," wrote Keynes, who preferred to spend the rest of his day in long contemplative walks and conversation with friends.

## Work to live or live to work?

Many studies now confirm there are things in our lives that generally bring us, and those around us, considerably greater pleasure than work. Some people are fortunate enough to be paid to pursue a passion and paid work becomes a 'calling' rather than a career—something they would want to do, even if they were not paid. For such people, work is like a kind of paid leisure activity, with an added bonus to self-esteem provided by the stamp of approval society gives to paid work over mere 'hobbies'.

Unfortunately, workplace callings are the exception rather than the norm (although see *Authentic Happiness* for some tips from the guru of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, on how to transform even the most mundane of jobs into a calling).

Most of us enjoy other things in our lives considerably more than we enjoy going to work. However, work has a tendency to overshadow these other goods. The longer we work, the less time we have for those things that bring us greater enjoyment. Intensely happy and satisfying moments become fewer and further between.

The Princeton University psychologist and Nobel Laureate, Daniel Kahneman and his team, conducted a large study of around 900 working women in Texas and the results

were published in 2004 in the prestigious journal, *Science*. Using a method known as the Day Reconstruction Method, subjects were asked to divide up their day into a continuous series of episodes, like scenes in a movie (eg 'commuting to work'; 'having coffee with Claire and Susan'). They were then asked to record in a diary how they felt during each of the various episodes on the previous day, and rate their feelings on a scale of 1–6. Sex scored highest (with a happiness yield of 4.7), followed by socializing (4.0), relaxing (3.9), and praying/worshipping/meditating (3.9). Working scored right down the bottom of the list (at 2.7), below housework (3.0). Only commuting alone, which was hated, scored slightly worse (2.6). The women preferred almost any company to being alone. The one thing that ranked worse than being alone was spending time with the boss!

These findings are important for a number of reasons. This is one of a number of studies that reveal a surprisingly significant mismatch between what subjects judge makes them happy and what actually does make them happy, as revealed in the diaries. More generally, we are inclined to dramatically overestimate the good effects of extra income on our feelings of wellbeing, for example, and dramatically underestimate the disutility of long commuting times. This, along with other of Kahneman's findings, suggests that we are often not very good judges of what actually makes us happy. This may lead us (repeatedly) to make bad life choices—choosing to do things that will bring us more overall pain or suffering rather than pleasure—without necessarily realizing what we have. For the women in the study, choosing to spend long hours at work with the boss would probably be one such bad decision, at least in so far as their own wellbeing is concerned.

The study makes vivid that most of us spend the vast proportion of our waking lives doing things that are comparatively unenjoyable. Working, the second least enjoyable activity, takes up on average 6.9 hours of the day. Whereas socializing, the second most enjoyable, occupies on average less than one-third of this time at 2.3 hours, some of it coincident with work. Long working hours may top up the coffers of employers and governments, but it generally does not make us happier or more satisfied with our lives. The activities that do make us feel good about our lives are, briefly:

- convivial social contact, especially close committed relationships with friends and family;
- voluntary community and charity work;
- meditation or worship;
- decent amounts of sleep; and
- exercise, especially of the social kind, eg playing team sport.

These are the kinds of thing we currently leave for our comparatively sparse 'free time'.

### What's on the box?

Just as work is not a bad thing in itself (the problem is too much of it), so too, leisure in itself can sometimes not necessarily be a good thing. (By a 'good thing' here, I mean something that leads to an increase in feelings of wellbeing, such as joy and satisfaction, and the absence of negative feelings, such as anxiety.) It depends a lot on how we choose to use our leisure time.

Australians choose to spend a significant proportion of leisure time watching television. An average Australian watches three hours and seven minutes of television each day (slightly more if they have access to subscription television). This much television is in the category of not a 'good thing'. Apart from its effects on our physical health, some researchers have found that our mood while watching television is generally one of mild depression and anxiety; and this is caused by, not simply correlated with, television watching. (The effects are exponentially greater for busy people, probably because of the increased opportunity cost and related feelings of guilt.)

On the other hand, spending time enjoying the company of our family and friends, voluntary community or charity work, meditation and worship, being engrossed in a good book or hobby, getting a good night's sleep and playing team sport bring us great joy and contentment.

This raises an important point. One of the reasons we are prepared to trade off our leisure for extra income we don't necessarily need may be because we don't utilise our leisure as rewardingly as we could. Our education system focuses primarily on preparing us for a life of work. However, we may need to educate ourselves in the same way about what to do with our leisure, if we are to fully enjoy its fruits. This was certainly Aristotle's opinion. Indeed,

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he thought that the chief point of a liberal education should be to teach citizens how best to enjoy their leisure and the privileges and opportunities it offers.

### Life, truth, justice and the universe

But here I should come clean about the fact that Aristotle's conception of leisure was quite different from our own conception, which is heavily shaped by its juxtaposition with the nature of modern paid work. Nowadays 'work' is often conceived as paid employment, and 'leisure' as simply the time left over. Some prefer to conceive of leisure slightly differently, as 'freely disposable time', in recognition of the fact that some unpaid employment (such as running a home or rearing children) does not seem accurately described as 'leisurely' and more closely resembles work.

Furthermore, we sometimes also employ a conception of leisure that is narrower than this. For many of us, thoughts of leisure conjure up images of lying on tropical beaches, with cocktails with little umbrellas resting in our hands. In this 'tropical beach' conception, leisure is freely disposable time spent in a particular way: namely, doing and thinking about absolutely nothing. This is in contrast to—and often a blessed relief from—the physically and/or intellectually demanding nature of much paid work.

However, this was not Aristotle's conception. For Aristotle, a life of leisure involved a life of active contemplation and the search for wisdom and knowledge, free from demands to attend to the necessities of life. The Aristotelian conception of leisure bears a striking resemblance to what academic scientists, philosophers, lawyers, and the like, are now paid to do full-time: grapple with questions about the nature of life, truth, justice and the universe in order to increase our understanding, to disseminate the results and contribute to public discussions in order to facilitate social progress. Aristotle distinguished 'leisure', thus defined, from mere 'amusements' (such as relaxing on tropical beaches). Such amusements, while enjoyable and permissible now and then, were nonetheless diversions from true leisure or flourishing, which involved the active exercise of our distinctive intellectual capacities for reason, reflection and understanding. (This presentation politely ignores Aristotle's further claim that only certain kinds of men, in fact, possessed these

capacities.) From the modern perspective, this may look a lot more like hard work than leisure.

I am not going to suggest that we adopt the Aristotelian conception of leisure. For one thing, I am sceptical that Aristotle was right to think that a philosophical life, in its broadest traditional sense, is the only intrinsically good life for human beings, objectively superior to any other less intellect-focused kind of life. There is always a temptation to think that one's own lifestyle, if very enjoyable and rewarding, will thereby necessarily be so for others. Not everyone who's tried it enjoys grappling with problems about the nature of life, the universe and everything. Some find music and dancing and other such 'amusements' equally or more enjoyable, or prefer to garden or cook than to argue over the finer points of Plato's *Republic*. And even those of us who like a good Platonic argument, often prefer to do it over a good meal with a glass of nice wine, followed perhaps by some music and/or dancing and other such hedonic excesses of which Aristotle would most likely have disapproved.

Nonetheless, I think Aristotle was right about at least three important things.

**First:** the majority of peoples' lives would indeed be more flourishing—that is, happier and more fulfilling—if a greater proportion of them were free from the demands of paid work. This is shown by empirical evidence not available to Aristotle. (The exceptions are those for whom paid work is a calling: nuns, for example, are among the happiest people in the world.)

**Second:** we do need to be better educated about how to use our leisure so as to spend it most rewardingly. This is suggested by Kahneman's results, in particular, which indicate that our uneducated judgements about what we do and don't enjoy are often unreliable.

**Third:** and relatedly, Aristotle was right that 'amusements' or 'relaxations' (such as tropical beach holidays), though they provide important and very enjoyable relief from demanding jobs, would get boring if we did them all the time. The 'tropical beach' conception will not satisfy us for long, if we decide to devote a greater proportion of our life to leisure.

This does not mean, as some have thought, that greater leisure will thereby bring boredom, to which more paid work is the only antidote. Rather, we need to fill our greater leisure time with a richer array of projects and experiences

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that absorb and stimulate us and which we regard as meaningful. We must find a calling. It need not be an Aristotelian calling of the mind, it might be a calling of the senses or the spirit: helping out in the community, bird watching or spending time with our near and dear.

The body of empirical research on wellbeing, which we now have to hand, has important policy implications for how social institutions might be better structured so as to maximise the overall wellbeing of their members. Among them are implications for workplace reform. Overwork makes people unhappy: it causes them to be tired and anxious, less productive, and forces them to forego activities that would bring them (and those around them) considerably greater enjoyment. Unemployment makes people much unhappier than was ever previously supposed. We now know, with solid empirical backing, that overwork and underemployment is a serious social problem that prevents us from leading the flourishing lives we otherwise could.

There is a solution and its outline was suggested by Keynes, and also by the great British philosopher Bertrand Russell, who in a lovely little essay entitled 'In Praise of Idleness' wrote

'If the ordinary wage-earner worked four hours a day there would be enough for everybody, and no unemployment—assuming a very moderate amount of sensible organisation.'

In 1932, when Russell's essay was originally published, his proposal was met with polite ridicule: as silly, though somewhat endearing, musings of an idealistic old academic, out of touch with the nature of modern life and economics. But as more and more talented workers opt for alternative lifestyles and jobs that offer more of the life and less of the work, employers and governments may have to sit up and take notice. The time for Russell's idea may be slowly, but surely, arriving.



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