

Brian O'Connor. *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*. Princeton University Press 2018. 216 pp. \$24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691167527).

For the last two centuries, idleness has had a bad name among philosophers. For every Russell who praises the idle life, there are many more who condemn it on the grounds that ‘busyness, self-making, usefulness, and productivity’ are ‘the very core of what is right for beings like us’ (3). Brian O’Connor, the author of several excellent books on Adorno, seeks to rebut this hostility and expose its deeper motivations. His book’s ambitions are mostly negative: rather than giving a full-throated defense of the idle life, it ‘proceeds mainly by way of criticism’ (2). This is not to say that the book has no positive aspirations. O’Connor at least suggests that idleness may be ‘closer to the ideals of freedom’ (2) than some of the paeans to self-determination found in late modern philosophy. But *Idleness* does not try to settle this argument, seeking merely ‘to prevent the philosophical case against idleness from having the last word’ (4).

The book consists of an introduction and five chapters. The introduction sketches the structural features of idleness. Not just the absence of work, idleness is a state of having ‘no guiding purpose,’ a generally pleasant condition of ‘noncompulsion and drift’ (5). It stands opposed to internal compulsion as well as external: the idle person does not engage in ‘disciplined self-monitoring’ and has ‘no sense of an inner power struggle in which something in us needs to be overcome’ (6). But idleness is ‘not mindlessness’ (6), and to see it that way is to accept the unjustified prejudice that ‘rationality belongs to self-mastering, rule-guided actions only’ (6). Nor is idleness identical with leisure. The purpose of leisure is to restore us so we can get back to work; leisure is therefore implicated in the norms of productivity. Idleness rejects these norms and their demand for ‘disciplined, goal-oriented individuals’ (8).

The remaining chapters examine some influential discussions of idleness by post-Enlightenment (and mainly German) philosophers. Chapter 1 fixes ideas by contrasting modern critiques of idleness with a famous premodern one: the one found in Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton is ‘unsparingly condemnatory of idleness’ (29), but for quite different reasons than later philosophers. He condemns it for its consequences, claiming that ‘human beings have a marked tendency to degenerate when idle’ (29). Idlers suffer from ‘digestive disorders’ and ‘mental disturbances’ (31), and their lack of productivity creates ‘a space within which wickedness can take hold’ (31). In short, idleness is unpleasant to the idle person, so when Burton urges us ‘to occupy the mind and keep it disciplined’ (34), it is for reasons of enlightened self-interest. All of this contrasts sharply with the critique of idleness advanced by Kant and his followers. For Kant, whether we find idleness pleasant or unpleasant is beside the point. It is ‘an unworthy way of life for beings like us’ (38), a ‘denial of Enlightenment’ (38) to be rejected for its ‘inherent irrationality’ (51). Genuine freedom consists in rational self-making, ‘self-discipline under principles that are valid for all’ (47). O’Connor defends this claim with readings of the *Groundwork*, the second *Critique*, the ‘Universal History’ essay, and ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Throughout, he emphasizes the ways in which Kant’s arguments reflect his time. In claiming that some cultures might accept idleness but that ‘we’ would not, Kant ‘elevates the practices of conventional society to the status of what is rational’ (50).

Chapter 2 turns to Hegel and Marx, both of whom condemn idleness on the grounds that human self-realization is bound up with work. Both think work has an ‘expressive dimension’ (89). Not just the satisfaction of immediate needs, work is an attempt to make an impression on others and the world. Hegel’s version of this view gives pride of place to mutual recognition. In modern society, properly socialized individuals wish to be useful to others (and to be *seen* to be useful to others).

Market economies are tailor-made for this demand: ‘the producer recognizes the value of what is needed—being wanted by someone makes it valuable—and the consumer recognizes the producer’s role as someone who can help fulfill these needs’ (78). Disgruntled workers may fantasize about lives of idleness, but such fantasies are a ‘violation of what modern life has made of us’ (76), and we do not really want what they promise. Despite his debts to Hegel, Marx takes such fantasies more seriously, seeing them as symptoms of a system in which most work alienates rather than fulfills. To be sure, Marx also condemns idleness, which he thinks is based on a selfish disregard for our fellow creatures. But he adds that a yearning for idleness will disappear only under communism, when work becomes ‘a pleasurable moral enterprise’ (88) instead of a form of exploitation.

In the next chapter the author explores the link between idleness and boredom, focusing on Schopenhauer and Beauvoir. It shows how Schopenhauer’s critique of the idle life grows out of his metaphysics of the will. For Schopenhauer, boredom is not a sign that we have directed the will toward the wrong objects; it is an ‘immediate experience of the miserable emptiness of existence’ (109). At bottom, life is suffering, and boredom offers a rare direct glimpse of this. Boredom spurs us to activity, but not ‘in order to make meaningful lives for ourselves. Rather, we act simply to escape from boredom’ (109). Beauvoir’s discussion of the idle woman in *The Second Sex* focuses on a different kind of boredom: that imposed on some women through the institution of marriage. Upper middle class women pressured to ‘spend most of their mature lives in the family home’ are prevented from acquiring ‘the capabilities through which they might realize themselves in ways Beauvoir considers authentic’ (129). O’Connor admires Beauvoir’s description of idleness as a ‘self-defeating’ state that ‘nullifies the very capacities that keep us from boredom’ (133). But he stops short of endorsing her conclusions, hopeful that idleness might be more satisfying when it is not forced on one.

Chapter 4 explores the attempt to ‘to think beyond the tension between work and idleness’ (136). It examines Schiller’s and Marcuse’s attempt to reimagine work as a form of play. These thinkers envision play as a ‘truly human freedom’ (138) that unites freedom and necessity in a way that overcomes the tensions between them. Schiller finds this freedom in ‘morality,’ ‘athletic competition,’ and ‘aesthetic creativity,’ all of which operate ‘freely ... within prescribed rules’ (146). For his part, Marcuse tries to reimagine work as a ‘playful idleness’ (161) that transcends necessity altogether. Marcuse’s project is ‘the boldest possible call for idleness,’ since it involves ‘complete indifference to purpose, and makes no appeal to the notion of a self that must have integrity, moderate its desires, or find its place within a network of recognition’ (161). O’Connor doubts we can ever have what Schiller and Marcuse want: to the extent that work becomes playful, it ceases to be work, and vice versa. Still, he finds Schiller and Marcuse invaluable for asking why idleness might seem like an unattractive or unattainable possibility for us. ‘If something in our present dispositions sets us against playful idleness,’ he suggests, ‘then we need to worry about what society has made of us’ (168).

The brief fifth chapter sketches a positive case for idleness. It does not give a full defense of the idle life, but it suggests that such a life comes closer to ‘meeting the conditions of self-direction that is a vital quality of freedom’ (173) than the views discussed elsewhere in the book. In the tradition discussed in the first four chapters, he argues, autonomy is considered ‘onerous’ (175). We are not genuinely autonomous unless we have struggled to make something worthy of ourselves. So on the classical view, a good life is an ‘ongoing inner tussle’ in which we are torn between reason and desire, and ‘the self that counts is the one that identifies with reason’ (176). This autonomous self is, so to speak, a universal self, in that the reasons that count to it are ones that count to all rational beings as such. For O’Connor, this is an unjustified privileging of one aspect of ourselves over others that are also valuable—for example, the ‘comfort we enjoy through being at home with ourselves’

(178). There is value in living one's life in ways that reflect one's 'individual, subjective needs' (178). There is also value, and freedom, in repudiating the socio-economic norms of one's time. Properly understood, idleness is freedom, but 'freedom in a context, a knowing indifference—and implicit resistance—to specific recommendations about how one ought to live' (180).

Idleness is best seen as an exposé—a look at the underbelly of a tradition that prizes autonomy and self-making at the expense of other values. A more accurate (if less catchy) title for this book might be *Idleness According to Some Kantian Philosophers*. I suspect some of its readers might prefer a more conventional piece of applied philosophy—a discussion of idleness organized around questions or problems rather than readings of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Marcuse. To other readers—including me—the book's focus on the post-Kantian tradition is its great strength. Engaging with that tradition is a uniquely valuable way to bring certain contemporary assumptions about the good life into view. To paraphrase O'Connor, if our philosophical training prevents us from seeing the value of a book like *Idleness*, then we should worry about what that training has made of us.

Robert Piercey, *Campion College, University of Regina*