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Book review: 'Idleness: A Philosophical Essay' by Brian O’Connor

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Jun 3, 2018
In “Anatomy of Melancholy,” author Robert Burton enumerated the dire consequences of idleness. In addition to digestive disorders, Burton wrote, idleness was “the nurse of naughtiness, stepmother of discipline, the chief author of all mischief, one of the seven deadly sins, & the sole cause of this & many other maladies, the Devil’s cushion.” Wealthy or poor, idle people will be weary, “loathing, weeping, sighing, grieving, suspecting, offended with the world, with every object, wishing themselves gone or dead.”

Defined as “activity that operates according to no guiding purpose,” idleness has had lots of detractors and very few defenders since Burton published his monumental treatise in 1621.

In “Idleness, A Philosophical Essay,” author Brian O’Connor, a professor of philosophy at University College Dublin, analyzes the case against inactivity made by Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Arthur Schopenhauer, Simone de Beauvoir and other modern philosophers. O’Connor concludes with a provocative claim that by freeing individuals, albeit momentarily, from the (at times) onerous responsibilities attached to work, communal norms and contributions to the betterment of family and society, idleness constitutes an oppositional form of freedom.

Cogent and accessible, “Idleness” is especially good at identifying inconsistencies in the “worthiness myth” (the obligation to become worthy on one’s humanity through self-realization and industry) advanced by influential Western philosophers. Insisting that happiness and well-being occur within
an endless cycle of desire, pursuit, attainment and prestige, followed by malaise, and the identification of a new object to pursue, Schopenhauer, according to O’Connor, does not accept the possibility of idle pleasure. Indeed, he views the absence of desirable activity as torment.

Nevertheless, O’Connor points out, Schopenhauer acknowledges “escape from the pain of empty willing is possible” if individuals extricate themselves from social expectations. In ancient times, Schopenhauer wrote, the Cynics, who did not work, or pursue aims of their own, “spent their times in resting, walking about, talking with everyone and in scoffing, laughing and joking. Their characteristics were heedlessness and great cheerfulness.”

The lesson, O’Connor emphasizes, is that “idleness is a realistic possibility after all.” That lesson, he adds, is supported by Karl Marx’s claim that work is alienating and Herbert Marcuse’s prediction that “play” will become part of “humane civilization” and subject to “the pleasure principle” when people “are freed from that neurotic necessity that compels us to perform.”

O’Connor makes clear that he is not defending idleness as a form of freedom that is not more “than a life of impulse or hedonism.” His case for idleness rests instead on an understanding of freedom in a context “in which the phenomena of usefulness, competitive social identities, or long term discipline” are not deemed essential to human experience.

As he gives voice to this admittedly utopian aspiration and the legitimacy of ambivalence about lives “freed from the driving forces of industry,” O’Connor notes that “it may well be that outside philosophy most of these ideas will have little credibility.”

That said, it’s clear to me that his book is a pleasure — albeit, perhaps, an idle pleasure — to read.

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