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Fichte and Hegel on free time

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Fichte and Hegel on Free Time

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Abstract. To us today, it seems intuitive that an ideal society would secure for its citizens some *time for leisure* i.e. some time to do ‘whatever they want’ after having attended to their various responsibilities and natural needs. But, in this essay, I argue that—in 19th century social philosophy—the status of leisure (*Muße*) in an ideal society was actually surprisingly controversial: whereas J.G. Fichte makes a strong case for leisure as part of an ideal society (going even so far as considering it its *central good*), G.W.F. Hegel implicitly argues against this idea. For him, leisure is a crook that we only need as long as the social conditions are *not* sufficiently ideal—whereas a truly rational society would create a new type of work that *subsumes the benefits of leisure into work itself*. In this essay, I reconstruct this largely forgotten disagreement and argue that although both positions contain an important overstatement, each includes an important lesson for the contemporary debate on leisure and society.

It might now seem intuitive that an ideal society would secure for its citizens some *time for leisure* i.e. some time to do ‘whatever they want’ after having discharged their various social responsibilities and having attended to their natural needs. By the same token, a society strikes us as obviously non-ideal if it is structured such that individuals have no dedicated time for themselves—if they must continuously shuttle between sleeping, eating and doing their jobs without genuine free time in between. Such a society seems to crush individuals in between their obligations, leaving them too little time to develop their individuality or exercise their personal freedom.

Another way of fleshing out this same intuition is that we tend to think that an ideal society would have policies and institutions in place, such as legal limits to the working day, that are generous enough such that social members do not only have time to address the different necessities in their lives (e.g. discharging their familial and civic obligations, eating, and sleeping), but rather such that they also have some genuinely *undetermined free time*, in which they can do, to a great extent, however they please.

But, in this essay, I argue that—in 19th century social philosophy—the status of leisure (*Muße*) was actually surprisingly controversial: whereas J.G. Fichte makes a strong case for leisure as part of an ideal society (going even so far as considering it its *central good*), G.W.F. Hegel implicitly argues against this idea. For him, leisure is a crook that we only need as long as the social conditions are *not* sufficiently ideal – whereas a truly rational society would create a new type of work that *subsumes the benefits of leisure into work itself*. In this essay, I reconstruct this largely forgotten disagreement and argue that although both positions contain an important overstatement, each includes an important lesson for the contemporary debate on leisure and

society. I begin by considering Fichte’s position, then turn to Hegel and conclude with some reflection on the contemporary significance of their disagreement.

1. Fichte and Leisure: The 1800 *Closed Commercial State* and the 1812 *Rechtslehre*

In the early 1800s, Fichte laid out his vision for a fully rational society multiple times and in multiple different venues. As readers of his texts know well, these visions¹ feature a central discussion of the domestic *political* constitution of a rational state. They also go deeply into their *economic* organization, focusing on individual rights within the sphere of property, and on how the state can institutionally guarantee these rights.²

One persistent theme running through these discussions is the idea of *leisure* as a crucial ingredient of the rational social order.³ We can already see this pretty clearly in Fichte’s *Closed Commercial State* from 1800.⁴ In this text, Fichte distinguishes several material, institutional and legal requirements for a rational society, and then states in all clarity: “[In a rational society] the human being ought to work, but not like a beast of burden which, under its heavy load, collapses into sleep, only to be roused from it again after merely the most necessary restoration [...] [The human being] should work without fear, with pleasure and joy *and should have time left over to direct his mind and his eyes to the heavens* in whose image he is made” (GA I,7: 71⁵). In other words, having some time “left over (*Zeit übrig*)” after attending to work and to our “most necessary

¹ The Fichte literature features a long discussion as to whether, and to what degree, these different texts feature a coherent vision of a political order, or whether Fichte changes his mind in certain respects. For the purposes of my essay, I do not need to take a stance on this protracted and complicated interpretative issue, except to say that there seems to be a continuity in—and indeed growing emphasis on—Fichte’s endorsement of leisure time as a social good. For a helpful stance on this debate, see Wood (2016, pp. 185–86). For another text that documents important continuities between the earlier and the later Fichte (especially with regard to the 1808 *Addresses to the German Nation*), see James (2015).

² Indeed, Fichte notoriously favors a planned economic order, which he counterintuitively takes to be necessary for the protection of individual property rights. For an analysis of this unusual combination of a planned economy with a strong endorsement of individual property rights, see Nomer (2005); Nance (2019). For a broader background on Fichte’s economic theory, see James (2011, esp. pp. 87–111); Merle (2016); Wood (2016, pp. 251–90).

³ James (2012) helpfully brings this issue to light. As I discuss below, I agree with James’s (2012) analysis that leisure attains increased significance for Fichte in the years between 1800 and 1812.

⁴ Fichte’s text famously received a very lukewarm and, in some cases, quite negative reception upon its publication. An example of a negative contemporary reaction is that by Müller ([1801]1839, pp.148–62).

⁵ All translations from the German are my own. For the works of Fichte, I have profited from consulting Adler’s (2012) translation. For Hegel, I have profited from consulting Nisbet’s (1991) translation of the *Philosophy of Right*.

restoration” (such as eating and sleeping), appears here as a fundamental entitlement of citizens that a rational society would need to meet.⁶

In the 1812 *Rechtslehre*, a posthumously published set of lectures that Fichte delivered at the very end of his life, he stays with this theme, but emphasizes it even more. Indeed, here Fichte commits himself to the surprising view that guaranteeing its citizens some separate leisure time is not only *a* central requirement of a rational social order, but, at least in some sense, *the* central requirement. So, not only does he argue that “Everyone has to have some freedom left over after having satisfied one’s natural need (*Befriedigung seiner eigenen Notdurft*) and having discharged one’s social duties” (GA II, 13: 224), but he then even *goes further* by calling socially guaranteed leisure time “the final goal of all unity between human beings, which the state has to guarantee” (GA II, 13: 230) and an “absolute right” (GA II, 13: 229) of all citizens. In a particularly interesting formulation, he even asserts that the *true wealth* of a society should be measured not in the amount of goods or in the amount of money that society possesses, but rather in the *amount of leisure* that it can guarantee to its members (GA II, 13: 230).

Now: why does Fichte insist that socially guaranteed leisure should have such a prominent place in an ideal society? To understand Fichte’s position fully, one needs to attend to three central points. The first point is this: the central and most important argument behind Fichte’s position on leisure in rational society is an argument about *freedom of choice*—an argument, in other words, that if “all [our] time and energy were eaten up by labor (*in Arbeit aufgehen*)” (GA II, 13: 229) this freedom would be too severely restricted.⁷

As his basic premise, Fichte thinks that a society should aim to guarantee its citizens a space in which they can exercise their choice *as broadly as possible*. And against this basic premise, Fichte thinks that leisure time is essential. Neither the sphere of work (discharging our social and, especially, our economic roles) nor the sphere of our natural needs (satisfying our hunger, thirst, and need for sleep), after all, can count as *spheres of choice* in the broadest sense of the term. As long as we are still doing work in our social and economic roles (as butchers, brewers or bakers) or satisfying needs (eating and sleeping), after all, our choice is *constrained* by the constitutive norms of our roles or by the structure of our needs. And while there might be some

⁶ In the *Closed Commercial State*, Fichte backs up this line of reasoning even further by equating the day of rest (*Ruhetag*) with an “entry into a truly human existence (*Eintritt in eine durchaus menschliche Existenz*)” (OA, 85).

⁷ In my reconstruction of this first point, I’m in essential agreement with James (2012, pp. 517–18).

subordinate room of choice as to *how* to satisfy those external demands (such as some choice as how to do one's job or what to eat), this choice only unfolds within boundaries set by social roles or by one's needs—or, to put it in more Fichtean language, it unfolds only “subordinated to the law of necessity, be it the necessity of nature [or] the necessity of right (*untergeordnet dem Gesetze der Nothwendigkeit, der natürl. – der rechtlichen*)” (GA II, 13: 223).

To have an opportunity to exercise choice more broadly, then, we need some time *outside* of these various demands. And free time is by definition precisely such a moment when we can step out from under the demand of these various necessities: It is a moment when things, more than at any other time in society, depend on our individual choice – which is why a society that is devoted to guaranteeing the broadest experience of choice to all of its members needs to guarantee everyone some free time as well. The social contract, Fichte hence argues, “has to be concluded such that everyone has such a sphere for the use of their freedom as property, in which after the satisfaction of their natural needs and after the fulfillment of their social duty (*Bürgerpflicht*)⁸ *some freedom [...] remains*” (GA II, 13: 224, my emphasis).

As I read it, this is the main argument of Fichte's position. But—and this is the second point—there is *another argument* that plays a role also. This argument focuses on the idea that leisure time is a necessary condition for the development of one of the most characteristically human capacities: the *capacity for reflection*—roughly understood, in this particular context, simply as the capacity to connect particulars with their appropriate concept, and concepts with their appropriate particulars. The argument here is this: as a basic premise, Fichte argues that society should guarantee its citizens the opportunity to develop their most characteristically human capacities instead of stifling this opportunity and therefore reducing their status to that of the aforementioned “beast of burden (*Nutztier*)” (GA I,7: 71).

But against this basic premise, Fichte thinks that leisure time is essential. This is because developing our reflective capacities requires that we have some space to exercise these capacities *without constraint*. But neither in the sphere of work (enacting one's social roles) nor in the sphere of need (satisfying our hunger, thirst, and need for sleep) does one have an opportunity to do so. Fulfilling a need or enacting a role, after all, requires that a person direct their attention to it, instead

⁸ I deliberately translate *Bürgerpflicht* here as *social duty* even though *civic duty* would be more customary. I do so because, for Fichte, *Bürgerpflicht* encompasses our economic and civil responsibilities broadly conceived. *Civic duty*, by contrast, usually refers only to the much narrower set of responsibilities we owe the political state, such as our duty to pay taxes and to serve in the military if called.

of letting their mind operate freely. Enacting my role as an academic instructor, for example, requires me to think about grading student work, updating the syllabus, putting together lectures, and the like, preventing me—to pick up Fichte’s own metaphor—from looking up and “directing [my] mind and [my] eyes to the heavens” (GA I,7: 71).

By contrast, during leisure time, no such constraints are evident. When at leisure we have the opportunity—more so than at any other point in society—to step back from *doing anything at all*, and, “with your body at rest (*in dieser Ruhe eures Körpers*)” (GA II, 13: 225) not only to “think of [your] mind” (Ibid.), but indeed to withdraw to a sphere of contemplation that would otherwise not be accessible to us. It is not a surprise—or so one could say from a Fichtean perspective—that the popular imagery is full of stories that portray leisure time (such as the long-deferred vacation to an exotic place) as a moment where people finally have time to reflect and, consequently, to detect some truths about their lives that, in the daily flow of tasks, have been obscured from them. By the same token, we have the cliché of people throwing themselves *into* work—actively *avoiding* leisure time—precisely to *ward off* the opportunity for reflection and the undesired results that such reflection might yield.

So, it is choice and the opportunity for reflection that support Fichte’s argument for leisure time, and for its social protection, in rational society. But, and this is the third point, there is a complication here, which needs to be considered. In Fichte’s 1798 *Sittenlehre*, Fichte presents a lengthy argument against “sloth (*Trägheit*)” (GA I, 5: 182),⁹ which he takes to be both an important part of human nature and, if we do not manage to fight it, a significant obstacle to our *moral development*. Our natural sloth, Fichte seems to be arguing, keeps us from doing the hard work of improving ourselves and our character, especially if external circumstances encourage it. In a particularly thunderous passage, Fichte even compares natural sloth to the root of all evil: “Sloth, which reproduces itself through long habituation into infinity, and soon becomes a complete inability to do good (*gänzlich Unvermögen zum Guten*), is the true and innate radical evil, which resides in human nature itself” (GA I, 5: 185). Doing the hard work of improving ourselves, therefore, is always a fight with our inner slackness (*Schlendrian*): “Every human being, even the strongest and most active, has their slackness [...] and will have to fight a lifelong fight against it” (GA I, 5: 184).

⁹ James (2012, p.521) also highlights this potential tension here.

This moral criticism of sloth in the *Sittenlehre*, however, initially appears strangely out of sorts with the endorsement of the social value of leisure time in Fichte’s political philosophy. After all, at least on first glance, one might think that granting human beings a significant amount of free time *encourages* sloth, thereby making it even harder for them to do the strenuous work that comes with realizing their moral destiny. Indeed, one might argue, would it not be plausible to think that leaving people with “free leisure for arbitrary ends (*freie Muße zu beliebigen Zwecken*)” (GA II, 13: 229) gives them highly problematic license to indulge their natural laziness, giving up the aforementioned “lifelong flight” (GA I, 5: 184) against their inner *Schlendrian*?

In the 1812 *Rechtslehre*, Fichte engages with this kind of worry directly. Of course, he acknowledges here, giving human beings free time involves a certain *risk* that the freedom is being wasted and not used for good purposes. But *not* giving human beings leisure time, by contrast, would stymie human self-development *with certainty* (GA II, 13: 228). Choice and the opportunity for reflection (which leisure guarantees), are pivotal to our development as full human beings. Without them, we would never have the educational experience of making choices that are completely up to us, nor would we develop the reflective capacities required for a truly moral life. Rather, crushed by persistent labor, our moral self-development would be held back—if not stopped in its tracks.

Moreover, and Fichte himself finds this important to stress, a good social order will not merely supply its citizens with adequate free time, but will also offer them *adequate education* that forms their inner self such that they will be less likely to indulge their sloth during free time (GA II, 13: 227-28). Indeed, having built good inner habits of self-discipline, people will instead freely gravitate to use their leisure time for better purposes (such as refining their inner selves even further)—instead of simply wasting their time.¹⁰

With this, Fichte’s position has come clearly into view. Fichte defends a right to leisure based on choice and the opportunity of reflection that leisure provides. And while there is, as Fichte acknowledges, a certain risk that human beings will not adequately use these kinds of opportunities, this ultimately seems to be a risk worth taking: being strapped into the network of

¹⁰ Fichte’s surprising announcement that in a rational society – despite the significant amounts of leisure granted to citizens! – there should be no idlers (GA II, 13: 223) is to be understood in precisely this spirit. Through good educational institutions, citizens will be non-coercively prepared by and large, to use their leisure time voluntarily for good purposes, instead of wasting it aimlessly. This, however, does not mean that such wasting can ever be completely ruled out: free time is free time after all, and coercive attempts to prevent waste would violate the spirit in which it was introduced.

natural and social necessity persistently, after all, would be deeply detrimental to the development of human beings.

2. Hegel and leisure: The 1820 *Philosophy of Right*

In the 1821 *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes *his* version of a *Vernunftstaat*—of what he takes to be a good or rational society.¹¹ As readers of the text know well, this kind of society is made up of three larger institutional spheres: the rational family, the rational economic sphere and the sphere of rational political institutions more narrowly conceived—all three spheres of which are intricately detailed, along with the respective social roles attached to them, in Hegel’s text.

Among this flurry of details, however, what seems particularly pertinent for my purposes here is that, somewhat astonishingly, separate *leisure time* does not seem to have an important place within the architecture of this rational society. Now, of course, this is not to make the absurd claim that in Hegel’s rational state individuals will not have enough time to eat or to sleep, or that they will be *so* consumed by one of their roles (such as their civic responsibilities towards the state), that they will not have enough time to focus on any of their *other* social roles (such as their responsibilities as family members). Instead, Hegel holds the view that a rational society needs to give individuals the opportunity to eat, sleep, and satisfy all their other natural needs *as well as* to act on their various social roles in the family, in the economic sphere and in the political sphere. In that way, and for this reason, individuals in Hegel’s rational state will have time to restore themselves after their demanding work, eating and sleeping enough so that they can perform their social function well. And they will, perhaps even more importantly, have time to spend with their families (discharging their filial, parental or marital responsibilities) as well as time to attend to their respective civic or political duties instead of being solely consumed by, for example, their economic roles.

But, as we have seen throughout, this is *not* what the issue of leisure time is really about. Leisure time, after all, is a time *above and beyond* the necessities stemming from either our social roles or from the satisfaction of our natural needs—a ‘third type’ of time that is (largely) at the

¹¹ This, of course, is not to say that Hegel here presents a utopia. As I discuss in more detail below, he famously holds the view that the rational society he describes—in some hard-to-determine sense—*already exists*. For one of the most illuminating discussions of this general issue, see Hardimon (1994, pp. 52-83) on the *Doppelsatz*.

disposal of our own choice. And it is this third type of time—a separate sphere of undetermined free time—that appears largely absent from Hegel’s description of the rational social order.

We can see this in a variety of different ways. For one, the general absence of separate free time seems already implied by Hegel calling rational society an “organism” in which all the individual citizens are individual “organs” (PR § 269+Z, PR § 267+Z and *passim*). After all, organs in an organism, such as livers and stomachs, never stand outside the functional totality to which they belong—they are persistently kept at full functionality (for example, they are nourished) and they perform this function within the organic whole, but stomachs and livers do not get separate free time. So, if it is true that—as Hegel persistently stresses throughout his description of rational Ethical Life (PR § 269+Z, PR § 267+Z—that individuals relate to society as organs to an organism, we would expect a structural analogy. We would expect, in other words, that individuals fulfill their various functions within the organic totality of the state, and that their respective needs are met, but that there is, as in the physical organism, little room for a separate sphere of undetermined free time.

Moreover, consistent with this organic metaphor, and very much in contrast to Fichte’s *Rechtslehre*, Hegel does not mention leisure once in his description of the rational social order—nor, even more tellingly, does he spend any time anywhere envisioning policies or institutions that are meant to protect free time for social members. The latter point is not only notable in general, but especially so given that there would have been plenty opportunity for him to include such protections: Hegel, after all, certainly imagines *other* policies and institutions protecting goods he considers important for the protection of individuality within the social whole. He envisions institutions meant to protect the private property of individuals as well as their bodily integrity (PR § 209-222), and even—albeit somewhat grudgingly—institutions meant to protect a certain degree of freedom of opinion (PR § 319). But in all of those protections of individuality within the social order, explicit protections of free time are absent, fortifying the impression that separate free time lacks a significant role in Hegel’s social order.

And even more: in all the passages where Hegel *does* deliberate on the role that work and labor should play for individuals, he has persistent and comprehensive praise for the very *opposite of leisure*: for labor within our social and, in particular, our economic, roles. Indeed, in the remark to PR § 187, Hegel calls “hard work (*harte Arbeit*)” a “liberation (*Befreiung*)” for the subject, in which they truly become themselves. A little later in the text, he even goes further, presenting not

only the “habit of being busy (*Gewohnheit der Beschäftigung*)” (PR § 197), but indeed the persistent “*desire of being busy (Bedürfnis der Beschäftigung)*” (PR § 197, my emphasis; see also VPR Wannemann, 166, VPR Henrich, 158) as a significant value, presumably because it leads individuals to fully immerse themselves fully in the fulfillment of their rational social roles, an immersion that Hegel had already praised in PR § 153 as the best way to live a good life.¹² (“In response to the question of a father how to best raise his son ethically (*sittlich*), a Pythagorean gave the answer [...]: by making him into a member of a state constituted by good laws (*Staats von guten Gesetzen*)” (PR § 153A)).

So, while Fichte is celebrating leisure time as the true wealth of society, which a rational state has to protect, Hegel is celebrating work and the absorption into our social roles.¹³ But: what, if anything, *moves Hegel* to this admittedly counterintuitive position? Now, it deserves to be said that on a somewhat old-fashioned interpretation of Hegel’s social philosophy,¹⁴ the answer to this question would be pretty obvious. After all, for the longest time, Hegel has been read as not putting much value on freedom of choice or on individual reflection within a rational state. Instead, he has been held to propose a society in which individuals do not enjoy much choice and do not get (but also do not need) much opportunity to reflect (instead taking an uncritical stance of “faith and trust (*Glaube und Zutrauen*)” (PR § 147+A) towards society, as the notorious phrase goes). And on *such* reading, the absence of free time in Hegel’s rational state makes sense as a matter of course: there are no social institutions protecting leisure time, one would argue, because Hegel does not believe in the values underlying leisure time itself.

But as easy and straightforward as this seems, the interpretation of Hegel as an enemy of choice and reflection has in recent decades been resoundingly refuted.¹⁵ It is now clear that Hegel does—and very explicitly so—want to make room for social members to exercise their capacities

¹² O’Connor (2018, pp. 58-99) highlights this aspect of Hegel’s view. It is worthwhile noting, though, that O’Connor’s analysis—on my view—seems too critical of Hegel, as will become clear below. While it is true that Hegel valorizes work and our persistent desire to engage in it, this endorsement is contingent on work having taken a *fully rational form*: a form in which work is genuinely self-expressive and generative for human reflection. In that way, Hegel is not adversarial to some of the central benefits of leisure, but he does think that those benefits can be actualized through the right kind of work.

¹³ This is not to say, though, that Hegel goes to the *opposite extreme*, suggesting that leisure time would be forbidden or actively prevented by a rational social order. Hegel merely holds the view that there is no need to protect a separate sphere of leisure by institutional means because (as I show below) the benefits of leisure can be experienced within the rational sphere of work.

¹⁴ The type of interpretation I have in mind here is exemplified by Tugendhat (1986).

¹⁵ For this, see, for example, Wood (1990, esp. pp. 174–94); Neuhaus (2000, pp. 225–82) and Novakovic (2017).

for individual choice and for reflection and that—while he doesn't think these are the highest goods in society—he thinks they are important goods for society nevertheless. Yet, while this move to a more modern interpretation of Hegel might be good for the plausibility of Hegel's social philosophy *overall*, it presents a problem for the specific topic at issue: free time. If it is true that Hegel valorizes the freedom of choice and individual reflection by social members, then why does free time not play a bigger role in his description of the social order?

My proposal is this: Hegel's view is best understood as the view that in a truly ideal society, leisure time, by and large, would no longer be necessary simply because the *benefits of leisure have become constituents of labor itself*. More specifically, Hegel seems to hold the view that leisure time would no longer be necessary in a truly ideal society because such a society would integrate choice and the opportunity for reflection specifically into *the labor that individuals do enacting their economic roles* (such as butcher, brewers, bakers¹⁶). It is in their professional lives—in their jobs, if you will—that Hegel thinks individuals, within an ideal society, experience choice and the opportunity for reflection, obviating the need for significant leisure time *outside* of their jobs.

But, obviously, Hegel's position needs careful unpacking. For, from Fichte's perspective, what Hegel is asking for here seems downright impossible: Fichte, after all, had argued that the practical and theoretical demands of enacting a social role constitutively imply constraints on our choice and on our reflection. On Fichte's view, working (as butcher, bakers or brewers) and 'the benefits of leisure' are opposed by conceptual necessity: in work, we are constrained in our choice and reflection by the necessities and responsibilities of our roles, whereas the benefits of leisure are constituted precisely in transcending these constraints, putting us in a position to do, and to think about, whatever we want. Claiming that doing our jobs could ever incorporate the benefits of free time would sound, to Fichte, downright Orwellian—like maintaining that there is a type of war that incorporates the benefits of peace.

In order to understand Hegel's position better, then, we need to attend to three central points that seem suited to respond to Fichte's argument.¹⁷ The first point concerns the role of choice in

¹⁶ This Smithian language here is intentional, of course, because Hegel's economic theory draws explicitly on Smith. The connections between Hegel and Smith are fruitfully explored in Herzog (2013).

¹⁷ One might worry here that it is unclear whether the historical Hegel himself really *intended* his position on leisure as a reply to Fichte, for it is unclear how familiar he was with Fichte's later political views, such as those laid out in the 1812 *Rechtslehre*. In response to these worries, all I am trying to do here—and all that, presumably, one *can* do here, given the complexities of the historical record—is to establish that the disagreement between Fichte and Hegel

enacting our social and, in particular, our economic roles. Fichte had argued here that it is a constitutive (practical) demand of enacting a role that I constrain my choice in accordance with the norms associated with it. Systematically choosing to act outside these norms, by contrast, means that I fail to enact my role. So, for example, enacting my role as a professor constitutively requires that I follow the professional responsibilities associated with it, such as teaching schedules, grading deadlines, and committee meetings. Systematically failing to do so, means that I fail to perform my role.

The Hegelian reply, however, is this: while it is true that enacting my role constitutively requires following the norms associated with it, this norm-following is not necessarily a *constraint* on my choices, if the role *itself* is freely chosen. If it is so chosen, after all, then it seems a mistake to say that enacting it limits our choices, for obviously the normativity that we then follow within this role stems from our own commitment to them. Arguing, by contrast, that this normativity would *still* be a limitation on choice seems to presuppose the radical view that I only experience true choice when I am free *even from normative demands that I impose on myself*. But this radical position, as Hegel clearly explains in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* (PR § 6), is obviously absurd. Enacting a choice, after all, necessarily involves following a self-imposed norm (namely, to do A instead of B, C, or D etc.), and so, on this radical position, enacting a choice would not count as an experience of choice. And that is a contradictory result.

Hence, Hegel thinks, a society that—through something like a highly idealized labor market¹⁸ (PR § 189–208)—lets social members choose their economic roles *freely* does not require significant separate free time for social members to experience true choice. Rather, social members will experience choice in their professional lives and through the jobs that they carry out. In this society—unlike the actual, non-ideal society that we currently live in—jobs would have the *structure and phenomenology of personal commitments* (such as, for example, the commitment to a certain identity or to a certain way of life), carrying out of which is not rightly interpreted as an obstacle to our choices, but rather as an expression of them. To put this closer to Hegel’s own words: in such an economic sphere, carrying out our jobs is a realization of the “right of particularity, to develop and to express itself in all directions” (PR § 184, see also PR § 185+A,

on leisure exists *as a matter of philosophical substance* and that a dialogue between them can be reconstructed on the basis of their pertinent texts.

¹⁸ For an overview of Hegel’s views on the benefits of the market, see Heisenberg (2018).

PR § 206), rather than an obstacle to individual self-expression—a moment of individual freedom *within* our economic duties, rather than outside of them.

This, however, leaves the Fichtean worry about the opportunity for reflection—which gets us to the second point that needs to be attended to. The Fichtean worry here was that, above and beyond the *practical requirement* concerning choice I just discussed, enacting a social role constitutively requires—as a kind of *theoretical requirement*—that we keep our attention fixed on the tasks required by this role, preventing our mind from reflecting freely, which, in turn, stymies the development of our reflective faculties. Systematically letting one’s attention slip from the tasks required by our role—and instead allowing our mind to operate sans constraint—means that we fail to enact our respective social role successfully.

This Fichtean argument, however, is built on the assumption that having our attention fixed on a practical task *necessarily* places constraints on our ability to reflect. But on a Hegelian view, this is incorrect: whether or not attending to a practical task places constraints on our ability to reflect depends clearly on the *quality of that task*. Clearly there are some practical tasks that make it impossible to reflect freely while we are carrying them out (for example, because they are physically extremely challenging or because they need to be carried out under extreme time-pressure). Hegel himself indeed discusses such tasks when he comments on the current plight of factory workers, consigned to carry out “machine-like (*maschinenmäßig*)” (VPR Wannemann, 118) tasks under pressure, leading to a “deadening (*Abstumpfung*)” (VPR Wannemann, 118) of their reflective faculties. But—and this is crucial—there are also tasks that one could, intuitively speaking, call *multipliers of reflection*: tasks that encourage or stimulate the free use of our cognitive capacities.

Practical tasks can have this characteristic (to multiply reflection) for a variety of reasons. Most straightforwardly, tasks can have this characteristic when reflecting freely *is itself* the task. Hegel could here, for example, easily have discussed the professional role of the academic philosopher, where, plausibly, letting one’s reflection unfold freely is one of the required tasks of the role itself. But also political planners, at least on Hegel’s reading of these kinds of roles (PR § 290+Z, VPR Wannemann, 116), have free and unconstrained reflection as part of their role obligations, as such reflection is required to grasp the full demands of good governance. In those kinds of cases, then, it seems wrong to maintain—as Fichte would—that those enacting these kinds

of roles will need to step out of them simply in order to finally have an opportunity to think freely (since, of course, that is what they are doing inside their roles).

Even more interestingly, however, tasks can also be multipliers of reflection when they do not *themselves* demand free reflection. This is because some tasks can stimulate reflection simply by keeping the body busy while our mind can roam freely. When we do not have to carry them out under time-pressure or at a speed that makes them physically uncompromising, simple manual tasks such as preparing a meal, working on a craft or painting a room can also be multipliers of reflection: immersed in them, it actually becomes easier to think, because the practical shape of the task frees us from the cognitive burden to decide in each and every moment what to do with our physical selves. Indeed, it is an often overlooked but highly significant fact about Hegel's social philosophy that Hegel valorizes habitualized activity in part precisely because in habit "rational thinking has free path (*vernünftiges Denken freien Weg hat*)" (PR §152Z) because the subject is not longer dragged down by the 'arbitrariness (*Willkür*)' (Ibid.) of what to do with themselves. (Another way of putting this point, is that, contra Fichte, Hegel does not think that it is only with the "body at rest" (GA II, 13: 225) that we can reflect freely and deeply, for the occupation of our body can, under the right circumstances, also be a significant boost to our reflection).

Hence, Hegel thinks, a society that ensures through its social institutions that economic/professional roles are structured such that the tasks associated with them are, by and large, *multipliers of reflection* (that is, either properly habituated or themselves directly demanding reflection) will not need a separate sphere of leisure to give people time to think. Rather, individuals will have the opportunity, indeed will occasionally even be prompted, to think in and through the practical obligations that they have to fulfill qua their economic/social roles (as philosophers and political planners, but also as craftspeople and workers embedded in the routines of their jobs). It is against this background that Hegel, in PR § 207, even goes so far as to label the economic sphere of his rational social order as a sphere in which "reflection on one's own deeds...is prevalent (*Reflexion auf sein Tun ... herrschend ist*)" (PR § 207) because, for him, it is in doing our jobs that we have the opportunity to reflect.

The threads can be pulled together, then, in the third point. As I have shown, for Hegel, a society that ensures that citizens *come to have their jobs in the right way* (through free choice) and that ensures that these jobs themselves *have a certain quality* (featuring tasks that are multipliers

for reflection) does not require a significant separate sphere of leisure. In such a society, there is no real need to interrupt work and to bifurcate individual's lives into labor versus leisure for the sake of choice and for the opportunity for reflection, for these benefits can be experienced by individuals in the course of their professional lives themselves. Or, put differently: in a rational society, the *dualism of labor and leisure is, by and large, overcome*.

Yet, there are several tensions that need to be attended to.¹⁹ For one, it might seem that this rather optimistic description of labor in Civil Society is in tension with Hegel's own occasionally much less optimistic description of Civil Society *as a whole*. Indeed, Hegel occasionally describes even rational Civil Society as a sphere of necessity and of need (VPR Wannemann, 109), into which individuals are torn somewhat involuntarily simply because of having to make a living (e.g. PR § 238). But if Civil Society is supposed to be such a sphere of necessity, how can the work that individuals do within Civil Society offer them freedom and opportunity for reflection, as Hegel seems to describe it?

This tension, however, can be mitigated if one focusses on the details. Hegel does not describe rational Civil Society as *merely* a sphere of need, but also—and more fully—as a sphere where “necessity and dependence [...] are converted into freedom” (VPR Henrich, 150). The idea seems to be that while individuals indeed enter Civil Society largely driven by their own needs (making Civil Society a “sphere of need”), the institutional structure of *rational* Civil Society then turns this kind of neediness into a source of freedom and liberation²⁰ (“converting it into freedom”). And one significant pathway through which this conversion is achieved—one significant mediator between necessity and freedom—is precisely the rational structure of labor, as described above: individuals will subject themselves to labor out of necessity, but (if the world of labor is rightly structured) this necessity will turn into a source of freedom, as it propels social members to undertake a practice that is ultimately a locus of self-expression and of reflective opportunity. Said another way, Hegel's calling rational Civil Society a “sphere of need” is not meant to entail that the work done here is drudgery for subjects; rather it is meant to highlight one of the subtle

¹⁹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on these two important points.

²⁰ Of course, the freedom and liberation achieved in rational Civil Society—the freedom of individualistic self-expression—is, according to Hegel, still incomplete and insufficient, which is why even a rational Civil Society needs to be embedded in the rational state. But this insufficiency does not undermine its status as a (albeit lower-grade) form of freedom. For a helpful overview of the different forms of freedom in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, see Neuhaus (2000, pp. 17–54).

achievements of the rational social world: namely that its institutional structures can *even* turn a sphere of need into a sphere of freedom.

But, yet again, one might still be worried that the rather optimistic description of labor in Civil Society is in tension with Hegel's own *anti-utopian* commitments. After all, Hegel is, of course, committed to the idea that the rational society he describes is not a *mere* ideal, but rather an ideal that—at some level and in some fashion—already has existence in the social world that surrounds him. Yet, on first glance, it seems, even by Hegel's own lights, that the world of labor he inhabits looks different to the rational world of labor the *Philosophy of Right* describes. As mentioned above, Hegel himself acknowledges the difficult “machine-like (*maschinenmäßig*)” (VPR Wannemann, 118) labor of some manufacturing workers in his time, whose lived experience in the factory deadens their mental capacities and stifles their self-expression. By describing the *rational* world of labor as a world of self-expression and reflective opportunity in the way he does, then, Hegel seems to be opening up precisely the worrisome gap between rationality and actuality Hegel always criticized in the views of some of his predecessors.

There is something to this worry (more on this below), but—for the moment—it is worthwhile noting that Hegel himself would push back against it. For one, Hegel is pretty clear that the “machine-like (*maschinenmäßig*)” (VPR Wannemann, 118) quality of labor he himself mentions only describes *certain regions* in the world of labor he inhabits (such as the regions inhabited by factory workers), not the *entire world of labor*. Very much by contrast, the region of the world of labor inhabited by the rising bourgeoisie—the lawyers, professors, and architects—already has, Hegel thinks, a different quality to it: it is already much closer to a world of labor characterized by self-expression and reflective opportunity (e.g. PR § 204, VPR Wannemann, 120).

The intuition here can perhaps be most easily recovered by focusing on the profession exercised by many readers of these lines: the profession of an academic philosopher. While it seems too extreme to suggest that members of this profession do not require any separate leisure time, it seems plausible that this type of profession incorporates moments where *work lifts us beyond the need for leisure*. In those admittedly rare moments, when, for example, the writing of an essay just works, when a logical proof just falls into place, or when a historical text one reads suddenly just makes sense, it seems indeed unnecessary to ever step out of this moment in order to experience true leisure. Instead, those moments encapsulate precisely what Hegel appears to be

after: an instance where the dualism of labor and leisure is transcended, and the benefits of the latter have come together with the former in systematic unity.

If this seems right—and Hegel thinks it does—then the question is not whether the dualism of leisure and labor can ever be transcended, but rather whether the privilege of this experience can be generalized in society: whether work that lifts us beyond the need for leisure can, in some form, become a characteristic not only of the work *of some*, but of the work *of all*. And, indeed: Hegel thinks that it can, and that there are already historical dynamics underway that spread this experience to other regions of the world of labor. In this context, it seems highly significant that Hegel pairs the description of the machine-like labor in the factory generally with the thought that, the more machine-like work becomes, the more likely and possible it will be for it to be carried out by *actual machines*, thereby liberating human beings from having to do this work at all (VPR Wannemann, 118, VPR Homeyer, 262, VPR Henrich, 159). Liberated as such, even workers in the factory can then turn to the new kind of tasks that now emerge (such as enhancing the machines, coordinating them with one another)—tasks that are more self-expressive and that are qualitatively closer to being multipliers of reflection, as described above. In this way, Hegel seems to conceive of the ‘mechanization’ of work less as a *liberation from labor* than as a *liberation of labor*—as a pathway through which all the regions of the world of labor might, ultimately, become expressively rational.²¹

In that way, Hegel’s optimistic take on the structure of rational labor is not meant to be problematically utopian. Rather it is meant to describe a reality already implicit and partially explicit in our social world, with (in this case, technical) developments underway to bring it to full expression. Thanks to these developments, a rational society will be able to offer self-expressive and mentally enabling work not only for the few, but make it into a lived reality for the many, thereby transcending the dualism of labor and leisure that had previously marked Civil Society.

3. Fichte and Hegel today

²¹ As already described above, this does *not* mean that Hegel thinks that all tasks in rational Civil Society will constitutively require excessive amounts of reflection (Hegel is very clear that even in a rational Civil Society, there will be differences between the professions on exactly this issue, PR §203–4). It rather means that all tasks in rational Civil Society will offer an *opportunity* for reflection, because they are multipliers of reflection as described above. In that way, each task will still differ in a variety of ways (including in the amount of reflection required), but they *all* will, by and large, offer space for the development of our mental capacities.

The debate about leisure and its significance for society certainly does not rest today. Indeed, it seems like the unexpected amounts of supposed free time during quarantine have prompted philosophers to reflect, once again, on the role that work should play in our lives as does Raymond Geuss (2021) or to rediscover older texts such as Bertrand Russell’s essay “In Praise of Idleness” ([1932] 2004), as does May Hayward (2022). And, indeed, this is not a merely academic debate, but also a practical and political one: a so-called ‘anti-work’ movement is gathering some force (Lashbrooke 2021), after all, demanding a fundamentally altered ratio between work and leisure in our lives, and perhaps (as far as practically possible) limitless free time for everyone.

Against this background, it is obvious to ask: What, if anything, are we to take from the historical reconstruction undertaken in this paper? As I have already indicated, my view is that—while both of the positions we canvassed here contain an important overstatement—they also each contain an important lesson for the contemporary debate about leisure and society.

To turn to Fichte first, the value lies in the clear and persuasive argument that he presents for leisure being a *political value*. Indeed, Fichte shows us that leisure is neither too trivial to be considered an important part of a good human life nor that, alternatively, leisure, while important for the good human life, belongs to the set of goods (such as romantic love, for example) that we cannot reasonably expect the *state* to guarantee. But Fichte’s argument accomplishes this, in contrast to some advocates of the modern anti-work movement, not by an emotional appeal to the unpleasantness of work or by an appeal to the supposed virtue of laziness, but rather by connecting leisure to two even more fundamental values—choice and the opportunity for reflection—which seem relatively uncontroversial ingredients of both the good human life and relatively uncontroversial public goods.

With Fichtean resources, then, it seems possible to argue (again, more convincingly than others have) for leisure to have an important place in the social order. It is, hence, a mistake to defend policies such as legal limits to the working day or institutions such as public holidays *solely* by reference to the room that they give citizens for the pursuit of their *other* social responsibilities or for the pursuit of their natural necessities—that is, for the room that they provide for spending time with their families or for finding some rest. Instead, these kinds of policies deserve to be defended also on the grounds that they give individuals the opportunity to step away from their social and natural functionality *altogether*, escaping the network of purposes that they are usually

strapped into: thereby experiencing the opportunity for free play and free reflection, which otherwise seems hard to come by within the world of necessity.

The overstatement in Fichte's position is that—at least in the 1812 *Rechtslehre*—he seems to take the endorsement of leisure to a controversial extreme (which itself seems inconsistent with his own premises²²). It is, after all, one thing to say that leisure is an *important* social good, and yet another that its realization qualifies as the *highest* goal of a social order (GA II, 13: 229). The latter view implies that, within the set of social goods (such as the material welfare of citizens or their external security), leisure time has an exalted status and that, in cases of genuine conflict, leisure *trumps* the others. But this implication seems difficult to defend: Are we really to prioritize leisure over technological progress (such as in medicine or the environmental sciences)? Are we to prioritize leisure over security measure that might protect the most vulnerable members of society from external threats? The answers to these questions are not obvious, and Fichte's 1812 position seems to be burdened with them. The easier way out, then, is to take Fichte's general endorsement of leisure as an important social good—without elevating it to an even higher status.

Turning to Hegel, it seems that the value of his position lies in the fact that he helps us see that enacting a social (and especially economic) roles does *not* constitutively imply any constraints on our choice and reflection. It is therefore unwarranted, as some advocates of leisure have done, simply to *equate* work with constraints on the opportunity to realize these two values. Unlike what Bertrand Russell may have claimed, the “morality of work” is *not* the “morality of slaves” (Russell, [1932] 2004, p. 5)—or at least not necessarily so. Rather, whether or not work constrains our choice and our opportunity for reflection is a question of the *social conditions* under which this work is taken up and carried out. In that way, Hegel can be seen to insist, there is the possibility of a society in which the work that lifts us beyond the need for separate leisure is not just the privilege of certain professions at certain times (such as that of academics or artists, when their work goes well), but rather a property of work in society in general.

Now, the overstatement in Hegel's position is, of course, that Hegel seems to overestimate the historical dynamics that were supposed to bring the possibility of a fully rational world of work to actuality. Even two hundred years after the publication of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the

²² Fichte's basic position after all, even reiterated in the 1812 *Rechtslehre*, is that the highest good for the political order really lies in the protection of *freedom of choice*, to which leisure time is only one important means. Elevating leisure time to an even higher status (or, confusingly, equating it with freedom of choice) seems, hence, a mistake by Fichte's own lights.

world of labor is full of jobs that are chosen under various forms of duress, whose structure ‘deadens’ mental capacities, instead of furthering them. Indeed, the very technological developments Hegel points out have often *not* served to eliminate the need for mechanical and mentally unfulfilling labor, but have rather made those forms of labor *more unrelenting*: technologies capable of surveilling any bodily movement of a worker, for example, seem designed to prevent any moment of reflection or thought during work, instead exhorting workers to reach ever new heights of putative efficiency. Against this background then, it appears unrealistic that we have already gotten or, even more, that we will *ever* get to a point where the world of work incorporates the benefits of free time as thoroughly as Hegel imagines this. At best, we might imagine such a state as a highly desirable, yet far-away goal, in the pursuit of which we should make progress but which, by the same token, will presumably never make the sphere of leisure time unnecessary.

Taking both lessons from Fichte and Hegel together, then, but side-stepping their respective overstatements, one can perhaps conclude this: As Fichte shows us, leisure time is neither too trivial to count as an important human good, nor is it among the set of human goods that it would be inappropriate to expect the *state* to guarantee. Instead, because of its connection to choice and reflection, it deserves a status of a public good in its own right. Yet, as Hegel shows us, one *significant path of pursuing this public good of leisure* might, counterintuitively, run *through labor*: bringing the world of work closer to a state in which, as Hegel describes it, the dualism of labor and leisure is overcome. This, as I have shown, would not mean a generic push for better working conditions or a push for work to *feel subjectively* more like leisure. Rather, following Hegel’s argument, it would be a push for work to *be objectively more like leisure*, because of the way we come to take up economic roles and because of the quality of these roles themselves. In that way, as odd as this sounds, labor might be—partially, but still significantly—the future of leisure²³.

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