Leisure and Democracy: Incompatible Ideals?

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"There are no longer protagonists; there is only the chorus."
J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*

Is Aristotelian leisure compatible with liberal democracy?

This paper chooses an Aristotelian perspective on leisure and thus adopts a critical stance towards liberal democracy. It does so in the belief that the aspirations of Aristotelian leisure are lofty and coherent, offering a path to the elevation of human activity, community, and spirit, a path presently closed off by liberal democratic theory and practice. It is this paper's purpose to suggest how this is the case.

The argument proceeds in several stages. The first presents a reading of Aristotelian leisure significantly different than that generally received in the study of leisure, but one more in keeping with what Aristotle actually wrote and closer to contemporary Aristotelian scholarship. The need for such reinterpretation has been argued elsewhere (Hemingway, 1988); here it will suffice to outline its substance. The second stage reviews selected elements in liberal democratic theory as it has evolved since the seventeenth century. This task is made manageable by drawing on the work of political theorist C. B. Macpherson, who has undertaken an ongoing critical exploration of the genesis and present state of liberal democracy. The third stage surveys the results of recent qualitative examinations of liberal democratic society in the United States. This review reinforces the conclusion, based on the preceding analysis, that Aristotelian leisure and liberal democracy are indeed incompatible. This incompatibility rests on the fundamental divergences in their conceptions of human essence and purpose, and the qualitative studies will further reveal that the liberal democratic conception has worked its way out in ways not unexpected by Aristotle himself, as well as by Macpherson and other theorists. That this affects leisure in ways antithetical to the Aristotelian conception is made clear in the concluding section.

Before proceeding, there is one item to be cleared away. A major objection to the Aristotelian conception of leisure is the inclusion in Aristotle's thinking of slavery and a narrowly circumscribed citizenry. These are, surely, towering obstacles to any complete acceptance of his thinking. Still, scholars of leisure (e.g., Dare, Welton, & Coe, 1988, p. 39; Kraus, 1984, pp. 42-3; Murphy, 1981, p. 24) have been too quick to suggest that Aristotelian leisure is unrealizable in contemporary society primarily because of them. The argument here is that when we separate these objectionable features out of Aristotle, there remains within liberal democracy and its concrete working out an impetus against Aristotelian leisure, and further that this, rather than any peculiarly Greek conditions (absent slavery and restricted citizenship), prevents the realization of Aristotelian leisure. Thus it is possible to stipulate at the outset an absolute rejection of slavery and imposed elitism, to go on to argue for the widest spread of Aristotelian leisure, and yet to conclude that the onus for its ultimate impossibility rests on liberal democratic theory and practice.

The Aristotelian Conception of Leisure

The prevailing interpretations of Aristotle on leisure are not satisfactory.[1] These couple a rejection of his endorsement of slavery and elitism with the observation that they are

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intended to provide the opportunity for an elite to undertake philosophical contemplation, which is regarded as the highest form of leisure activity (see the citations immediately above). Without the leisure created by the labor of slaves and the presence of noncitizens to carry out daily tasks, there could be no opportunity for an elite to devote itself to the pleasures of contemplation. Were contemplation indeed the content of Aristotelian leisure, this approach would be irrefutable, so that the impossibility of achieving Aristotelian leisure under modern conditions would lie within that conception of leisure itself.

Such contemplation is not, however, the content of Aristotelian leisure, or, alternatively, it is but a part of a much broader concept. Scholars of leisure have been misled by an uncritical acceptance of Pieper's (1952) eloquent argument, influenced as it is by a Thomist reading of Aristotle, and by an unreflective approach to secondary sources. What follows is a summary presentation of a competing reading of the Aristotelian conception of leisure. It takes its spirit from de Grazia's (1964) call to an "ideal of leisure" (p. 402; cf. Goodale, 1985) based on the search for truth in action and the strength of character necessary for that search.

Civility. To Aristotle, and to the Greeks generally, leisure was an arena for the development of the individual as a member of the community. As Tinder (1964) notes, "Leisure was conceived [by the Greeks] as an opportunity for the cultivation of personal excellence. But this excellence was to be achieved through participation" (p. 78). The participation in question here was in the community, in the affairs of the all embracing *polis,* the Greek city-state celebrated by Aristotle. What makes such participation possible is the development of a character defined by civility. With Tinder (1976, pp. 182-3), we may identify four virtues embedded in the concept of tolerance, which he suggests shapes the "contours of civility." These are attentiveness to people, openness to truth, veracity as a bond among human beings, and responsibility for the preservation of this bond. This "general definition of civility" (pp. 182-3) can also be summarized as "the capacity for sharing existence" with those among whom one finds oneself (p. 9).

The focus of civility is on the character represented in this "sharing of existence" rather than on the results of any specific action. This emphasis on character, so different from the modern preoccupation with results, is a theme in Greek thinking from Homer on. To the Greeks, as Kitto (1957) comments, "the quality of a man matters more than his achievement" (p. 64). Civility is the quality of a person, the sum of the virtues expressed in one's actions, or, as Tinder (1980) puts it, "the primary question of civility" is "How shall I bear myself" (p. 186). Without action, there can be no expression of virtues, hence no character. The "problem of civility," then, becomes what Tinder (1980) aptly calls the search for the means to "exemplary action" founded on individual character and aimed at serving "as a statement of principle" about one's virtues, one's character (pp. 180-1). Such exemplary action occurred in leisure, for this was the arena in which the Greeks pursued the development of character. Civility can be regarded, in this context, as a continuing process of public education, through which the development of character occurs in public view with the purpose of continuing public discourse about right conduct. Leisure, then, far from being withdrawal into a detached contemplative state, was a major arena for

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activity "undertaken with the serious purpose of cultivating and realizing the self" (Tinder, 1964, p. 328).

Theoria* and *Praxis. There are several issues of textual reconstruction and interpretation that bear on this reading of Aristotle, many of them relating to Book 10 of his *Ethics* in which *theoria* (contemplation) and the associated virtue of *sophia* (wisdom) are taken as the highest good, the best life, and hence as the content of leisure. Nonetheless, Book 10 and its relation to the remainder of the *Ethics* is at the least problematic, and the contradictions between it and the bulk of the work are significant. It seems quite possible that Book 10 is a fragment attached at a later date in Aristotle's career, or possibly still later by an uncritical editor.

In any event, among these contradictions is one important to us, that between *theoria* and *sophia,* on the one hand, and *praxis* (practical knowledge) and its virtue *phronesis* (moral wisdom) on the other. It is the case that most of the *Ethics* takes the latter, that is, good action, as the best life (Ackrill, 1974, p. 3; Stocks, 1939, pp. 159-60). The contradiction with Book 10 cannot be resolved by the commonplace, though accurate, observation that for Aristotle, contemplation is a form of action. Aristotle himself sharpens the issue by writing that in matters of practical knowledge, "the end is *not* to study and attain knowledge of particular things to be done, but rather *to do them*" (E 1179a-b; emphasis added).[2] In reference to leisure, the avenue to resolving the contradiction passes through the fundamental similarity between *theoria* and *praxis*. This similarity is that both demand rigorous intellectual effort and both pursue truth, creating equally highly esteemed virtues, namely *sophia* and *phronesis,* in those who make this effort (Bernstein, 1983, p. 149). The distinction between *theoria* and *praxis* is the mutability of what they study so that the contrast is one "within knowledge" (Gadamer, 1981, p. 89) rather than between knowledge and something else. *Theoria* studies first principles, the eternal and the unchanging, mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. *Praxis* studies the transitory and the changing, including the activities of human beings as they seek to organize and to conduct themselves, that is, politics and ethics. This is in keeping with Aristotle's doctrine (E 1094b) that one may legitimately seek from an object only that intellectual precision the object is capable of supporting.

Another approach to this issue is to ask whether human beings are themselves capable of achieving knowledge of the eternal and unchanging. Although all human activity aims at some good and those goods can be ranked according to the degree they approach the true good (E 1094a), part of the eternal and unchanging, Aristotle argues human beings themselves are transitory and changing, thus making the life of *theoria,* of pure contemplation of the cosmos, in its perfection too high a mark for human ambition (E 1177b). In keeping with the doctrine of *Ethics* 1094b, human aspirations must match human capacity, and so it is that Aristotle, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, concludes the best *human* life is in pursuit of *praxis* and *phronesis*. In the end, as Ackrill (1974, p. 20) points out, Aristotle is unable to proclaim the irrevocable superiority of *theoria* because a life of *theoria* is beyond human achievement.

Telos* and *Eudaimonia. Aristotle's conception of the universe is teleological (from *telos,*

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or characteristic end). This is the source of his complex doctrine of cause and his hierarchical ordering of nature. We must never neglect the systematic structure of Aristotle's thought, with every element having an *ergon,* a specific function. Not only does each object have its own characteristic end, but these function to bring about the *telos* of nature as a whole, which is to achieve a full development and perfect ordering of its parts. Thus the *telos* of each part is, in a sense, to excel (to achieve *arete,* excellence) in the performance of its *ergon*. In the *Metaphysics* (1075a) Aristotle writes that "all things are ordered together somehow, but not all alike..; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected." Sabine (1961) explicates this idea: "Nature is at bottom a system of capacities or forces of growth directed by their inherent natures towards characteristic ends. They require for their unfolding what may be called broadly material conditions, which do not produce the ends at which growth is directed but may aid or hinder growth according as they are favorable or the reverse" (p. 121; see generally pp. 119-22; cf. Ackrill, 1981; Barker, 1959, pp. 218-31, 264-92).

We may say that each object contains within itself the possibility of full development and is endowed to greater or lesser extent with capacities to achieve full development. In purely natural objects this is a reasonably straightforward process. A flower grows and blossoms according to the form inherent in it, according to whether it is tulip or hyacinth. It has no particular choice in the matter, cannot become puzzled over whether it wants to be a tulip or a hyacinth, or over whether it is better to be one rather than the other. Human beings share this teleological nature, but they may reflect on it, posit it to themselves as one of their characteristics. They are beings who have a particular *nisus,* an impulse towards development of a particular kind. This is the attainment of the good, and of a good expressing their highest capacities in their fullest development. Given the limitations of their transitory and changing natures, human beings must search out from among competing goods those most appropriate to them, and they may err by striking too low or too high. Considering this, the good at which Aristotle believes it most reasonable for human beings to aim is *eudaimonia,* or felicity (on the difficulty of finding an English equivalent for *eudaimonia,* see Ackrill, 1974, pp. 12-3).

Eudaimonia is the result of continued application of oneself to the question of how one ought to live one's life and of the continued attempt to carry this into exemplary action (E 1079b). It is important to recognize the active element in this concept. It represents a character able not only to reflect on the content of a virtuous life, but one able also to carry this reflection over into action. Such a character is inherent in the very nature of human beings and they own the raw materials able to carry them forward in its development. This character is best described in terms of civility as outlined earlier. The hallmark of civility is its engagement in open and public discussion of the sort of life one ought to lead, discussion according to the virtues embedded in civility (i.e., attentiveness, openness, veracity, and responsibility). Aristotle does not regard a life as virtuous if it remains content only with mere knowledge of virtues. It becomes virtuous only when the virtues are developed, when they are carried from reflection over into action (E 1177a). To achieve *eudaimonia,* to become felicitous, a life must be active.

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Leisure. The existence of many lesser goods is a threat to achieving *eudaimonia,* which is possible only through pursuit of the highest goods within human achievement. Human attention can be diverted from these highest goods, and human passions can become hindrances in pursuit of both the highest and lesser goods. For *eudaimonia* to be achieved, an arena must be opened for it within human activity, in which the virtues of civility may be activated, in which practical wisdom may be achieved and displayed. *Phronesis* (moral wisdom) can indeed be seen as a name for the collective virtues of civility. These virtues are necessary to prevent human passions and self-interest from interfering with attaining *eudaimonia*. Such an arena must therefore be separated from involvement with the passions and self-interest, must be set aside from lower order activities (e.g., from the need for daily labor: E 1099a, P 1273a). For Aristotle, leisure is this arena.

In leisure we find the unity of reflection and activity underlying civility. Leisure is one of the essential "material conditions" for civility and thus for *eudaimonia*. In leisure, politics and ethics, in the broadly inclusive sense Aristotle and the Greeks apply to these terms, form part of the same reflection and the same action (E 1094a-b, 1181b). It is necessary to keep in mind the organic nature of Greek life in the *polis,* at least as it was taken by Aristotle to have been intended if not realized. Modern thought and life tend to hold separate the many spheres that were conjoined in the *polis,* in which the political, religious, economic, cultural, and social were all bound up together. This intertwining of human activities marked the superiority of the Greeks over the "barbarians," who were simply non-Greeks. This at least was Aristotle's view, for he could not conceive it possible for a human being to live well, to live a full life that achieved *eudaimonia,* outside the *polis* (P 1252b, 1280b). The depth of loyalty to the idea of the *polis* is a major feature of Greek thinking (cf. de Burgh, 1961, pp. 101-2; Kitto, 1957, chs. 5, 9).

Aristotle makes three major statements that hold together his study of human beings, that they "by nature desire to know" (M 980a), that all their activity aims at some good (E 1094a), and that "man is by nature an animal intended to live in a *polis*" (P 1253a). Note that these are statements about the nature of human beings and that they reflect Aristotle's teleological thinking, for these are human beings' most characteristic attributes, their ultimate ends. It is the latter, the political, that assumes the most importance in this context because the *polis* represents not only the highest refinement of human association, but also provides the arena in which knowing and good actions become at all possible. The "main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions" (E 1099b). Leisure is the arena in which this civil character was cultivated and displayed. Leisure must be present in any "well organized state" (P 1269a) and the *polis* must share "in the qualities required for the use of leisure" (P 1334a). Leisure was sufficiently important that the founding legislator was to create "the right laws' (E 1178b) to provide "training for the proper use of leisure" (P 1333a).

This is not, however, something imposed from the outside on to recalcitrant human nature. It was meant to correspond to and release a natural human capacity and thus express a fundamental teleological principle in Aristotle's thinking. He argues that "Our very nature has a tendency...to seek of itself for ways and means which will enable us to

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use leisure rightly" (P 1337b), and this is in fact "the end of politics." The *polis* and its organic activities are the setting in which the character necessary for the right use of leisure is formed (P 1338a), in which this teleological development becomes possible. This contributed to the release of the full range of human excellences, for "it is the power to use leisure rightly...which is the basis of all our life" (P 1337b). Thus the search for *eudaimonia,* for the full life of virtue, flowered in the *polis,* and most brightly in leisure. Leisure, in stark contrast to the modern world, was the arena in which the drives to know, to become virtuous, and to express virtue came together in the organic activities of the individual and the community. This can be summarized by saying that the *ergon* of leisure is the unfolding of *phronesis,* that its *telos* is the felicitous life of virtue, and that its *arete* is that of the citizen whose character reflects civility in the active life of the *polis*.

Liberal Democratic Theory: The Rationality of Acquisition and Possession

The preceding interpretation of Aristotle focuses on his developmental view of human activity, intended to produce excellence in character and activity, and the display of these in the public arena created by leisure. The grounding assumption in Aristotle's approach is that human beings have an innate drive to achieve excellence, and that this excellence was a character marked by civility rather than material wealth and labor to attain it. In this section our attention will turn to features of liberal democratic theory that have been prominent in its development and that are strikingly at odds with Aristotelian conceptions. The result will be a clear schism suggesting an impoverishment of human nature and a narrowing range of human activities.

The Ascendancy of the Market. The Aristotelian view remained dominant, though certainly not without significant alterations, until into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the next two hundred years or so there was a sea change in views of human beings, a transformation integrally connected to the transformation in society then accelerating. A new interpretation emerged in western Europe, taking human beings not as pursuers of excellence in character and action, but as seekers of security and wealth. The focus of human activity shifted from communal to individual, from character to acquisition. If the Greeks, as de Grazia (1964, p. 332) has suggested, understood themselves as standing closest to the pinnacle of human achievement during leisure, the transformed view elevated labor and taught that leisure was the Devil's playground. To apply present language, human beings were seen as maximizers of individual utilities, and these themselves came more and more to be seen as economic utilities.

The communal arena faded while the market ascended. As excellence became measured by wealth and character by gain, the arena that concentrated human activity was the market. Where the *polis* had been the forum for exemplary action, modernizing government was itself conceived in the images of market activity. No longer concerned with providing leisure for its citizens, government was now intended to minimize interferences in the competitive, acquisitive activities of individuals. Indeed, the market is one of the dominant metaphors in modern social and political thought (cf. Lindblom, 1977). Its application to wider and wider realms of human activity completes the transition from the Aristotelian developmental view to the modern notion of the human being as

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"essentially a consumer of utilities" (Macpherson, 1973, p. 79).

It is necessary to explore briefly the development of western liberal democratic theory, for this is the origin of the justifying ideas reflected in contemporary practice. We find in this development a series of contradictions working their way out, many of which occur along the axes of what Sabine (1952) calls "the two democratic traditions," liberty and equality. Despite Sabine's claims, these two "traditions" are not equal partners in the development of liberal democratic thought. Liberty is the earlier concept, emphasizing the inviolability of the individual and protection of property; equality is a later addition, asserting the equal worth of all individuals even in the face of unequal economic outcomes of liberty (cf. Hobhouse, 1964; de Ruggiero, 1959). The earlier articulation of liberty, particularly in its protection of property rights, meant that its economic orientation was well established prior to the infusion of egalitarian thought that was to yield liberal democracy. Using Macpherson's work, we will see more clearly the shift from the Aristotelian conception of human activity to one that, although acknowledging the rational, purposeful nature of this activity, also held "the essence of rational behaviour...to lie in unlimited individual appropriation" (1973, p. 5).

Possessive Individualism. Macpherson (1962) argues that the possessive element in liberal democratic theory "is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as owner of himself" (p. 3). The conception of ownership of person and capacities became increasingly important, to the point that freedom was founded on the idea of ownership. The more individuals are proprietors of their capacities, and hence independent of others, the freer they are. This is not entirely dissimilar to the Greek requirement that citizens be freed of the need for daily labor. The difference is, however, that while the Greeks saw this as a liberation from economic concern to attend to higher matters, liberal theory glorified acquisition and possession as such. In doing so, it came to regard society as a collection of individuals related one to the other "as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise [i.e., of these capacities]" (p. 3).

In possessive market society, there is no longer any authoritative allocation either of work or rewards, in contrast to traditional societies where custom and status controlled allocation. As Macpherson (1962, p. 48) goes on to point out, there is a difference, too, between this society and one in which "independent producers" exchange only the products of their own labor. In possessive market society, there is a market for labor capacities as well as products. Macpherson makes this the "single criterion of the possessive market society," that "man's labor is a commodity, i.e. that man's labor and skill are his own, yet are regarded not as integral parts of his personality, but as possessions" that can be bought and sold on the labor market. Since human labor is regarded here as an essential human capacity, this transaction may be interpreted as the alienation of a fundamental defining feature of what it is to be human.

From the foregoing it is an easy step to an insistence on the rationality of unlimited desire. It is this that is decisively new in liberal thought after the seventeenth century

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(Macpherson, 1973, p. 27). In the absence of any external allocation of labor and reward, the individual's own capacities to labor, acquire, and consume guide individual actions. Under market conditions this was assumed to create an "endless increase in productivity" (p. 17) leading to further acquisition. Indeed, one of the principal value assumptions in developing liberal thought was "the rationality and naturalness of unlimited desire" to acquire and consume (p. 18). This is a radical shift. If human desires are rationally and naturally limitless, then people are no longer beings intended to achieve knowledge, practical wisdom, and live in community with others. They are now, as Macpherson points out, infinite consumers (p. 31) competing with each other in an infinite market. Nor is this restricted to an effort to overcome the enduring scarcity of goods, for what is now scarce is satisfaction itself, made unachievable by the new conception of human beings as infinitely desirous and consuming.

This development may be traced in the writings of the most eminent early liberal theorists, Hobbes and Locke, with such later writers as Hume accepting the possessive view of human beings even when they discard other long standing components of liberal thought.

Hobbes (1955) makes an individual's power, and the desire to acquire more, the centerpiece of human psychology: "So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (p. 64). Such power is not calculated along any absolute scale since one does not exist. There is no teleological purpose unfolding in and through nature. Here virtue has changed from something valued for its own sake, as in Aristotle, to what enhances the individual's power in comparison to that of others. "Virtue generally, in all sorts of subjects," writes Hobbes, "is somewhat that is valued for eminence; and consisteth in eminence. For if all things were equal in all men, nothing would be prized" (p. 42). It is not a thing's being worth desiring in itself that lends it value, but that others desire it, too. The more one acquires of what is mutually desired, the greater one's virtue (for which read: power; cf. Macpherson, 1962, p. 35). The individual can never rest from this acquisitiveness. By their natures, the desires of human beings are never at an end. In the absence of some ultimate goal, they must continue to strive against each other. Power is relational, comparative. Thus, if one rests a moment, one's competitors press ahead, putting the individual at a comparative disadvantage. It is not that there are no higher pleasures to be sought or that human beings are unwilling to be content, but simply that by their natures they must constantly measure themselves against each other. The general insecurity of life means an individual "cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present," Hobbes argues, and so the individual is compelled "to the acquisition of more power" (p. 64). In the absence of a "greatest good" (p. 63), human beings are left to strive after power, and with greater power to live "a more contented life thereby" (p. 109). Such contentment is not marked, however, by a cessation of desire or any ultimate state of achievement. To Hobbes, the lack of desire is equivalent to death. Contrasting sharply and deliberately with Aristotle, Hobbes proclaims that "Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter" (p. 63).

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From Hobbes to Locke might seem a journey of some distance, Hobbes the proponent of absolute state sovereignty before a human nature conceived as incessantly competitive and intermittently violent, Locke the defender of individual rights against encroachments by an authoritarian government. Yet the distance is not so very great when one considers the psychologies they propose, their mutual emphasis on acquisitiveness and possession as characteristics of human activity. If Locke is the defender of individual rights, it is a very narrow defense, resting on his argument that "government has no other end but the preservation of property" (1970, sec. 94, 124). Whatever else might be done, it is this task that must remain paramount.

Locke begins by noting that all people are "able to dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit" (sec. 4; see also sec. 123). This is most particularly true with the individual's capacity to labor, for it is out of this labor that property arises (sec. 27). Since the individual's person and possessions, of which the capacity to labor is considered part, are inviolate, it follows that the products of this capacity, i.e., property, are also inviolate. We find in Locke two justifications of property, the right to preserve one's life and the right to the products of one's labor (sec. 28; cf. Macpherson, 1962, p. 201), which Locke regularly collapses into a single proposition: "And the Condition of Humane Life, which requires Labour and Materials to work on, necessarily introduces *private Possessions*" (sec. 35; emphasis in original). These are limited initially by the law of nature to only what the individual can utilize before it spoils (sec. 23), which works against accumulation of wealth. With the introduction of money as a form of property that does not spoil, but can be stored up, it becomes possible for individuals to acquire property far beyond the limits of their immediate needs (secs. 47, 48).

This is a continuation of the Hobbesian theme of unlimited desire. Indeed, Locke wished for his own political purposes to insist that unlimited desire and acquisitiveness define rationality itself. He begins his argument by asserting that the earth has been given in common to human beings so they may by their labor "make use of it [i.e., the earth] to the best advantage of life and convenience" (sec. 26). The introduction of money reinforced the "different degrees of industry" that "were apt to give Men Possessions in different Proportions" (sec. 48). Money, in other words, allowed greater accumulation than had been possible before. Locke also holds, however, that although "God gave the World to Men in Common...for their benefit, and the greatest Convenience of Life they were capable to draw from it," God did not mean for the world to remain "common and uncultivated," but rather intended it for human industry. Locke maintains God gave the earth "to the use of the Industrious and Rational (and *Labour* was to be *his Title to it*)" (sec. 34; emphasis in original). Thus the capability to exploit the earth for "the greatest Convenience of Life" represents rationality in conformity to God's will, and this rationality is conceived as greater the more the individual's acquisitiveness increases. To accumulate is to respond to God's will (sec. 35), and what could be more rational than this? Those left with lesser holdings were simply less rational, and from this Locke went on to defend a two tier society, the implications of which are far less than democratic, for he assigns political power on the basis of rationality, which is limited to the propertied class (cf. Macpherson, 1962, pp. 220-1). To become fully realized as a human being, then, requires acquisitive,

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possessive behavior.

The assumptions of Hobbes and Locke about the acquisitive nature of human beings became commonplace in liberal thought, Hume, otherwise a debunker of liberal mythology (e.g., 1953) and a general skeptic, argued that human beings are stamped by the "numberless wants and necessities with which she [nature] has loaded" them (1948, p. 55; this is at the opening of III.2.2). Reviewing the available means to overcome these wants and necessities, Hume notes that although society and government permit human beings to achieve prosperity to some degree, they also cause a further multiplication of wants and necessities, drawing human beings into a constant search to satisfy ever greater acquisitive desires. Macpherson (1973, p. 17) suggests Hume's acceptance of these liberal themes illustrates the degree to which they were embedded in liberalism generally. He goes on to argue that later modifications in liberal thought (e.g., by J. S. Mill, T. H. Green, A. D. Lindsay, E. Barker, J. Rawls, and others) were attempts to mitigate the undemocratic, inegalitarian consequences of possessive individualism, but do not escape the underlying emphasis on economic maximization.

Summary. Macpherson's analysis allows us to do two things. The starkness with which it illustrates the centrality of acquisitive behavior in liberalism offers a clear contrast to the Aristotelian rejection of economic activity as a route to the *eudaimonia* achieved in the arena opened by leisure. Surely Aristotelian leisure is incompatible with a culture that defines rationality by the degree of economic acquisitiveness people display. At the same time, Macpherson offers us an angle of approach to our own society by which we may test whether the possessive and acquisitive implications of liberalism have worked their way out and how. The next section surveys two assessments of contemporary U.S. society, reinforced by the observations of de Tocqueville and Ortega y Gasset. Anticipating the outcome of this effort, we will find that individual acquisition characterizes this society and that acquisition extends to leisure activity as well, a point to be developed in the concluding section.[3]

Possessive Individualism and Contemporary Society

The rise of possessive individualism, with its emphasis on the market, competition, and the rationality of unlimited desire, redefined human nature in terms of economic powers. The differences between these ideas and those entailed by Aristotelian leisure could scarcely be more marked. Still, we have yet to ask how liberal ideas are manifested in contemporary society and whether they have shaped leisure as well. The point here is not to find absolute identity, but rather to look for something along the line of "family resemblances," to use Wittgenstein's phrase. Have these liberal ideas led to the commodious and contented living foreseen by Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and others? Have they opened up the way for an expansion of human capacities? Or, following Macpherson's critical account, has there been in fact a narrowing of these capacities? The discussion in this section will draw from two qualitative assessments of contemporary society, one a superbly executed and detailed sociological exploration of the structure of values and character in the U.S. (Bellah, et al., 1985), the other an articulate historical analysis of the derivation of contemporary attitudes towards the good life (Baritz, 1988). The different perspectives taken by the respective

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authors should allow a reasonable exploration of the questions raised here, for if Macpherson's critique is accurate, we can expect to find economic images and concerns dominating individual aspirations and thus shaping human interactions.

Isolation and the Market. This is indeed what Bellah, et al. (1985), find: "Americans define success in terms of free competition among individuals in an open market" (p. 198). Although willing to acknowledge assistance received from others, people cannot believe in their own success unless they have been self-reliant competitors. Baritz (1988) suggests those who are successful "adhere to a crippling rationalism" (pp. 305-6) that may be interpreted essentially as market oriented. It is a crippling, isolating rationalism because the competitors "concentrate on themselves" at the expense of forcing family, personal, and other noneconomic relationships into market form. Bellah, et al., call this a "giving-getting" model (p. 133). They find a "utilitarian contractualism" prevalent in both public and private relationships, in which the aim is mutual benefit along market lines, with each person standing alone possessing individual powers and capacities as tokens for exchange.

The price of possessive individualism is thus the isolation of the individual in a matrix of market oriented relationships. Reduced to economic terms, determined to succeed in this competition among utilitarian personalities, the individual is left nonetheless uncertain, in the absence of all but relative scales, what exactly is to be pursued. Baritz calls the contemporary American "radically alone" (p. 290) because the emphasis on process leaves a "sense of impermanence" that offers no means of organizing the world and one's experience of it. Despite the importance of open market competition as a cultural icon, it becomes "at the same time a source of deepening anxiety." We may note here that de Tocqueville (1969, p. 444) recognized this isolating tendency early in U.S. history. With only their own subjective ideas to guide them, absent permanent or traditional standards, the limitless (so de Tocqueville) independence people achieve in democracy becomes not liberating, but frightening. The response to such conditions is to isolate the individual ever more firmly: "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (p. 508). This is in fact the final effect of the market based utilitarian contractualism that Bellah, et al., find dominating American character: "American cultural traditions define personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation" (p. 6).

Work and Acquisition as Therapy. Clearly, some means of coming to grips with this isolation is necessary if individuals are not to collapse under its weight. Such a means cannot, however, challenge the fundamental validity of the competitive, possessive values underlying society. These values must be themselves translated into standards, no matter how empty of substance, by which people may anchor themselves in society. Successful competition in the market of competing individuals has become the controlling standard, and success is measured economically (Baritz, p. 317; Bellah, et al., p. 22). De Tocqueville, again, observed this a century ago, noticing that "the taste for well-being is the most striking and unalterable characteristic of democratic ages" (p. 448).

There is a further, possibly more significant meaning in the attempt to reduce isolation

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through work and economic success. As we have seen, the roots of liberal psychology lie in the conception of the individual as laborer and infinite desirer. When the search for material well-being is added to this as the standard of success, the result is that work and acquisition become confirmations of personal identity. One is not only represented by one's economic achievements, one *is* those achievements. In Baritz's words, the only hierarchies that matter are "those based on personal wealth" (p. 307). Work and gain offer an opportunity to measure ourselves against others. They become a test of who one is and what one is fundamentally worth, a worth that can quite literally be measured in coin of the realm. The issue is not simply a "work ethic," although this is an important legitimating concept, but the way in which work links, or fails to link, individuals to each other. Work and acquisition become therapy for the isolation imposed on the individual by the economic conception of personality and the market conception of relations among people. The nature of our work and its economic rewards declare who and what we are. By immersing ourselves in our work, we are able to become ourselves more completely: "...however we define work, it is very close to our sense of self. What we 'do' often translates to what we 'are'" (Bellah, et al., p. 66).

The danger is that as therapy, work attempts to overcome the effects of defining human nature in economic terms, the very incentives underlying work. Doubling back on itself, work consumes us, becomes the dominant feature of our lives. We work to work, and not, as Aristotle observed, to have leisure. Work and acquisition place us directly in the Hobbesian dilemma discussed earlier. Having once committed ourselves, we can never rest or we fall behind. Work and acquisition are a shifting scale, based on comparisons between ourselves and others. If we stop, the basis of comparison shifts to our disadvantage as others press on. Having invested so much of our identity and self-esteem in work, this result is disquieting if not unacceptable. We become less, even though our material conditions have not changed. There can be no standing still, there can only be pressing on or falling back. One can never rest content with one's position, and hence with one's self. There must be constant movement and hence, as Lakoff (1964, p. 167) notes, there is also a state of perpetual discontent.

The Eclipse of the Communal. Devotion to one thing above others restricts our horizon, excludes other ways of seeing. A single definition of success, based on an external criterion like material wealth, narrows the range of one's attention and energy. When personal identity and value are tied so closely to a single criterion, any distraction from it is threatening not just to success but also to self. The result of such narrowed range is to dismiss or to avoid anything outside it, creating "a profound ignorance and usually a distrust of those aspects of the world that [seem] not to relate to the ownership of wealth" (Baritz, p. 316). Here is confirmation of Aristotle's teaching that freedom from the need to labor, a need that may be defined not only in terms of physical subsistence but also psychologically, is prerequisite to the development of character during leisure. As liberal psychology has manifested itself in society, however, everything unrelated to acquisition and to a self defined in economic, market terms is pushed aside in favor of the demands of work and gain. Once again de Tocqueville has preceded us: "A breathless cupidity distracts the mind of man from the pleasures of the imagination and the labors of the intellect and

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urges it on to nothing but the pursuit of wealth” (p. 455).

Ortega y Gasset’s (1957) trenchant criticism of “mass man” suggests another angle of approach to the narrowing of focus in contemporary society: “Human life, by its very nature, has to be dedicated to something, an enterprise glorious or humble, a destiny illustrious or trivial” (p. 141). What a particular instance of “human life,” whether a person, society, or an age, chooses to be dedicated to reveals its inner character. The message in both Bellah, et al., and Baritz is that Americans are engaged in a search for the “good life.” This is in itself unremarkable, but the distinctly economic content given to the “good life” and the notion of human nature accompanying it distinguish the modern liberal conception of the good life from others. The narrowing focus on work as the definition of self requires a withdrawal from involvement elsewhere. Most particularly, work is no longer seen as contributing to wider purposes; it does not reach out to others except as they become participants in the net of market relations established by the individual. Work, and little else, becomes the vehicle for the individual’s interactions in society, and other models fall away, including that of the citizen: “The individual’s need to be successful becomes the enemy of the need to find the meaning of one’s work in service to others. .... Work does not integrate one into the public household but estranges one from it. It becomes hard to do good work and be a good citizen at the same time” (Bellah, et al., p. 197; cf. Baritz, p. 317).

Life in contemporary society is split essentially into two cultures, and these become progressively more antagonistic to each other. Baritz states this proposition in harsh terms: “American life has become two hostile cultures: shared and private; static and fluid; acquiescent and critical; local and cosmopolitan; ascetic and therapeutic; faithful and agnostic” (p. 303). Somewhat more dispassionately, Bellah, et al., find the split into “a number of functional sectors” to be the “most distinctive aspect of twentieth-century American society” (p. 43). They summarize it as a division between the public utilitarian sphere and the private expressive sphere (pp. 45-6). The public utilitarian sphere is, as we have seen, dominated by work and acquisition. What of the private expressive sphere? If the communal has been eclipsed in the one, can it appear in the other?

The dominance of the market as the model for human interaction is such that it enters even people’s expressive activities. Indeed, these private activities may be seen as an extension of the search for self grounded on relative, comparative, rather than enduring, scales. Even the commitments one makes in the private expressive sphere are thought of “as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives” (Bellah, et al., p. 47). This search for well-being is carried out by “withholding commitment” rather than by engaging in a wider whole (Baritz, pp. 307-8; cf. Bellah, et al., p. 50). Communal involvement is limited to those associations and issues affecting the individual’s own small life space. The privatism characteristic of contemporary individual “self-enhancement” is extended even into what was once regarded as the sphere of communal activity. This is encountered only in a negative context, when the need arises to protect the individual’s life space from encroachment by outside, alien forces. There is no shared basis, nor any shared arena such as was once found in the Aristotelian conception

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of leisure, on which to establish public institutions fostering some measure of civil understanding among the heterogeneous private spheres that experience each other as opposed, as foreign, as other. Given the conception of human nature and well-being governing this society, with its economic and competitive elements, this could hardly be otherwise. The result is that even the civic participation that does occur is aimed at settling claims based not on right or wrong, but by creating "neutral technical solutions that are beyond debate" (Bellah, et al., p. 187), that is, by creating some form of market mechanism (cf. Lowi, 1979). This dynamic is aimed, in its central tendency, at a "permanent disestablishment of any deeply internalized moral demands"; it is emphatically "not in the name of any new order of communal value" (Rieff, 1966, pp. 239-40).

The Devolution of Leisure: Lifestyle and the Narcissism of Similarity

What has become of leisure in this contemporary society shaped by possessive individualism? We began with an interpretation of Aristotelian leisure that stressed its active communal focus, the development and display of character in a public arena. Having explored the roots of liberal democratic thought, with attention to the psychology underlying human interactions, and having sketched their manifestations in our own day, what shape does leisure take and what role does it play? Here, in answering this question, we see quite starkly our utter remoteness from Aristotle, and we understand how it is that the ideals of Aristotelian leisure can sound but faint echoes in the present. De Tocqueville, viewing emergent democracy, finding the search for gain, but the absence of leisure, asked a similar question: "In the midst of this universal tumult, this incessant conflict of jarring interests, this endless chase for wealth, where is one to find the calm for the profound researches of the intellect?" (p. 460). Where can one find the public expression of these researches if leisure becomes a retreat to private confirmation of self?

Bellah, et al. (p. 72), introduce a concept that goes to the heart of the matter. This is the "lifestyle enclave," which they define as "linked most closely to leisure and consumption and...usually unrelated to the world of work. It brings together those who are socially, economically, or culturally similar, and one of its chief aims is the enjoyment of being with those who 'share one's lifestyle.'" This is a rich concept and deserves more attention than it has received. Consider, for example, the following three propositions that emerge from it: Leisure is linked with consumption; leisure is privatist, cutting the individual off from the public arena; and leisure is a search for reinforcement derived from being with those who are much like oneself.

The first point suggests it is inaccurate to separate leisure and work completely, for contemporary leisure depends on one's ability to consume, which is in turn an economic ability dependent on material gain through work. Leisure thus becomes the expression of one's self and its value, the confirmation of the search for identity through work, as discussed in the preceding section. What one is able to consume is who one is, and leisure is an important arena for this consumption. Leisure thus confirms the economic grounding of the self and fosters the rationality of unlimited desire in the determination of this self.

The private nature of leisure reinforces the withdrawal from commitment. It is the

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extension of the search for the enhancement of self, an affirmation of self by negation of all that is not self. This point may be extended by pointing out that contemporary leisure is increasingly passive and focused on consumption in the home, as one extensive analysis of trends in the U.S. found (Oxford Analytica, 1986, p. 99). Television watching, for example, was the only "leisure activity" (here this phrase seems oxymoronic) showing an increase in participation across all social classes. A corollary to this privatism is that it accelerates the consumption orientation of leisure. There is an expanding need to acquire "a mass of complicated domestic technology" (p. 100) to be utilized during leisure (cf. Linder, 1970). Possession in the privacy of one's home confirms one's sense of self-identity and self-worth, but essentially to an audience of one.

Finally, the leisure lifestyle enclave is structured deliberately to prevent challenges to the individual's cultivated image of self. Exposure to difference, to challenge, to contradiction is avoided as people seek out others who are essentially likenesses of themselves, economically, socially, and culturally. Since consumption drives leisure, it is determining in filtering out dissimilar others. Thus although leisure might bring similar people together, it also helps them separate from those who are different. It denies the communal element in Aristotelian leisure, indeed, it denies community altogether: "Whereas community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmented and celebrates the narcissism of similarity" (Bellah, et al., p. 72).

It becomes, on this account, impossible to identify through contemporary leisure the content of the good life, and to see its extension into the public sphere, in other than the most personal terms, matters of preference enabled by access to various patterns of personal consumption. It need hardly be said that this is far from Aristotelian leisure, but does this distance matter? It matters profoundly if we value the ideals embodied in Aristotelian leisure. There is little meaning to any talk of recovering these ideals in a societal milieu so antithetical to them. The discussion of liberal thought and its manifestation in contemporary society suggests, to my mind, that our loss here has been fundamental, going to the heart of our conceptions of human purpose and interaction. It might remain true that happiness is the end of life (Bellah, et al., p. 6), but the contemporary notion of happiness is not at all what Aristotle understood by *eudaimonia*. Rather than clearly defined cultural standards that guide conduct and anchor the individual in society, happiness is now reduced to a matter of personal preference, a utilitarian calculation that can be changed whenever convenient for the individual. Happiness as the aim of leisure is, for the privatist expressive self, simply a "purely subjective grounding of the self" (Bellah, et al., p. 46). Leisure thus has no extension beyond the individual, leaving the individual still adrift among the multitudes of other similarly subjectively defined selves.

The liberal democratic aspiration has always been founded on the liberating effects of competition, most particularly competition in pursuit of wealth. In its working out, however, it has become apparent, as Macpherson (1973) notes, that "the income and leisure resulting from extractive power are not automatically conducive to the development

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of essentially human capacities. The presumption...is to the contrary" (p. 72). The failure of liberal democracy stems from the essentially possessive, market orientation it imposes on human activity, legitimated by the assumption of the rationality of infinite human desire. But if indeed human desires are infinite, there is never a point at which sufficiency is achieved, at which the turn can be made to the development of human capacities beyond the economic. It is not that there is a complete ignorance of other standards, other values, but that these are seen as simply irrelevant to possessive, acquisitive society. Noneconomic human capacities become peripheral, cultivated when the serious business of life permits. But this serious business seldom permits because it is justified by postulating infinite desire and acquisition. The possessive self is grounded in subjective terms on a scale whose measurement is always shifting, always relative. The individual can never stop because this threatens the fragile construction of the acquisitive self. Capacities other than the economic simply have no place in this construction, and alternative conceptions of the self are regarded merely as archaic. Commenting on this, Baritz makes specific reference to Greece: "The middle class simply substituted its pecuniary standards for the culture of what it considered an irrelevant civilization." Among the elements of this "irrelevant civilization" Baritz believes to have been discarded are "intellectual curiosity, the ability to understand each other, the necessity of beauty, and a deep sense of proportion" (p. 317). All these, of course, were present in leisure as conceived by Aristotle and practiced, to some degree at least, by the Greeks.

Ortega (1957) observes that "If you want to make use of the advantages of civilisation, but are not prepared to concern yourself with the upholding of civilisation—you are done" (p. 88). What engaged the citizen of the Greek *polis* during leisure was exactly this, upholding civilization as the Greeks conceived it, with all the difficult questions and choices this entailed. This is not a romanticized image, for though we know there were many instances in which the Greek ideal was violated, by men such as Alcibiades, for example, we know also that their actions were recognized as violations and it was understood what had been violated. But what engages the individual today if not the cultivation and confirmation of self, in leisure as elsewhere? What standards can this individual be said to uphold or to violate? When and where are such standards articulated and examined critically?

De Tocqueville described the effects of the absence of leisure in liberal democratic society as a decrease in intellectually rigorous activity: "Men living in times of equality have much curiosity and little leisure. Life is so practical, complicated, agitated and active that they have little time for thinking. So democratic man likes generalizations because they save him the trouble of studying particular cases" (p. 440). The particular case they seem to have most difficulty studying is their own. The grounding of the self in subjective terms only makes it exceedingly difficult to step outside the "narcissism of similarity" to achieve an alternative angle of vision, nor, in their self-certitude, are individuals likely to see the need or find the means to do so. As Aristotle notes, "a time of the enjoyment of prosperity, and leisure accompanied by peace, is more apt to make men overbearing" (P 1334a). Not conceiving an end, *telos,* to leisure, it is a simple matter to misuse it, to neglect the character it both calls for and builds. The absence of this character had

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unfortunate, perhaps tragic, consequences in other ages (cf. P 1271b). If we are prevented from recapturing the ideals of Greek leisure, we can at least reflect on the reasons why this is the case and prepare to meet the consequences of our failure with the necessary understanding and, perhaps, character.

Notes

1. Materials in this section appeared originally in my "Leisure and Civility: Reflections on a Greek Ideal," *Leisure Sciences, 10*, 179-91 (1988), Taylor & Francis, Publishers. Permission to extract these materials is gratefully acknowledged.

2. In the text, reference to Aristotle's works will be denoted by E for the *Ethics,* by M for the *Metaphysics,* and by P for the *Politics*.

3. Although sympathetic to Macpherson's (1973) claim that "Western democracy is a market society, through and through" (p. 25) and that in it democracy is therefore "reduced from humanist aspiration to a market equilibrium system" (pp. 78-9), this paper does not take up his argument in detail. It should be noted, however, that a prominent theme in recent discussions of democracy has been to distill democratic theory into a calculus based on principles of economic choice, and that these attempts have enjoyed considerable vogue. Among others, see Dahl (1956), Downs (1947), and Schumpeter (1950). Even Rawls (1971), seeking to resuscitate the ethical dimension in liberal democracy, falls back on utilitarian decision making models. Davis (1964), although ultimately at odds with Macpherson's diagnosis and remedy, makes an eloquent statement on the losses entailed in such market oriented approaches to democracy.

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