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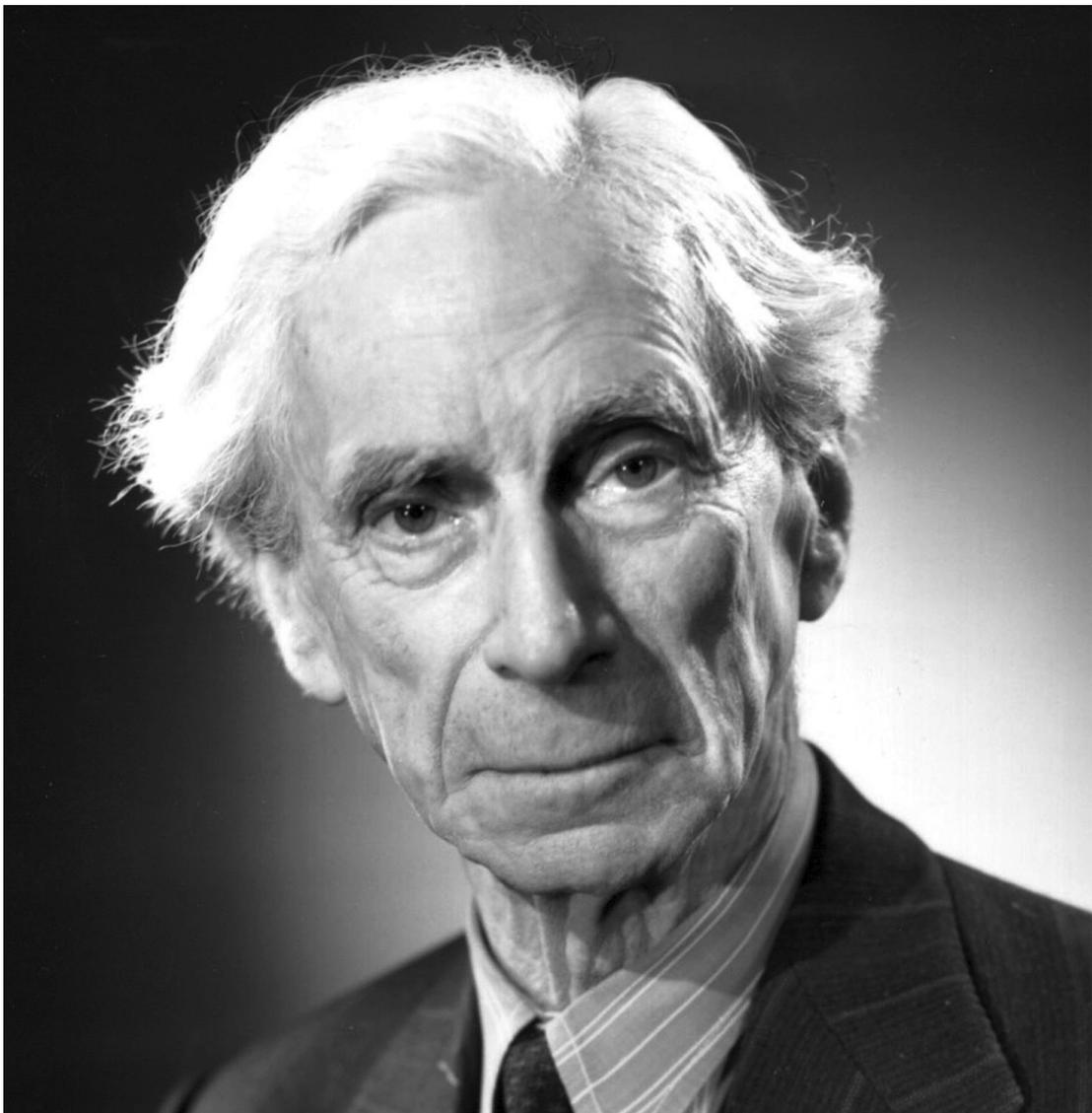


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Russell and Schlick on Work and Play

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The concepts of work, labour, leisure, and play have been widely debated by the social sciences. By contrast, most canonical figures in the history of analytic philosophy have written very little, if anything, on the topic. One of the few exceptional discussions of the concept of labour and its history can be found in Bertrand Russell's popular work from the 1930s, and more specifically his well-known essay 'In Praise of Idleness'.¹ In the essay, Russell attempts a spirited defence of a specific, qualified proposal for eventual reform: the universal limitation of the working day to four hours. Looming in the background of this proposal is a bolder thesis, namely the view that social progress involves the eventual minimisation (if not the complete elimination) of labour in the sphere of human activity. It is this bolder view that, as I shall show in what follows, Russell at least partly shares with another philosopher whose work shaped the history of analytic philosophy, Moritz Schlick. While Russell's work on the future of leisure and labour was written for a popular audience and widely read, Schlick's early writings on work and play have not received adequate scholarly attention. Aside from some differences in their scope and details, there are some striking parallels between Russell's and Schlick's overall views on the future of work and play.

Russell's more pragmatic proposal for a four-hour working day is based on a specific economic argument that is informed by his sketch of the history of labour. Historically, in Russell's view, a certain high amount of labour had been necessary for the survival of humanity. In his account, this need was met within a threefold division between those who undertake the labour itself, those whose work it is to ensure others undertake the labour, and a landed aristocracy which is altogether exempt from labour. While this seems roughly like an account of a feudal society, Russell generalises this account to cover every socio-economic formation from antiquity to his contemporary world. Within this socially and economically unjust, as Russell sees it, distribution of labour, the landed aristocracy has indulged in leisure time that was granted it by the

¹ Bertrand Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', in *In Praise of Idleness: And Other Essays*, pp. 9-29 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935). As Russell notes (p. 9), the essay was written in 1932.

toil of others. This made the aristocracy 'oppressive, limited its sympathies, and caused it to invent theories by which to justify its privileges'.² One of these inventions, according to Russell, was the work ethic, which he also refers to as 'the morality of the Slave State'.³ Employing this ideology (though Russell does not use such a Marxian term), the landed aristocracy had pursued its own interests by indoctrinating others into upholding work as inherently virtuous. Yet, as Russell points out, the theories on which such a work ethic was founded were produced by those who had the leisure time to do so and were nothing other than ways of holding on to this leisure time at the expense of those who believed them.

Russell even admits to having been indoctrinated in the Victorian work ethic, and to having struggled to overcome it. I must note here that his effort to overcome the Victorian work ethic involves regurgitating colonial prejudices in his references to 'Mediterranean sunshine idleness'.⁴ In Russell's view, the lazy Mediterraneans rightly rejected the work ethic, and it is only the Northern Europeans that need a 'great public propaganda'⁵ campaign to overcome it. Such xenophobic, and demonstrably false, views have had disastrous economic effects in recent years. If Russell could see past his prejudice, he would have understood that the implementation of his proposal for overcoming the work ethic would require a global effort.

Russell claims that, in the past, the social and economic injustice brought about by the division of labour described above may have been warranted, insofar as it had been necessary for the survival of humanity. In the broad economic history outlined by Russell, he believes that up to the early twentieth century, there may have been no viable alternatives to injustice, given the long labour hours needed for producing basic necessities like food. During the First World War, according to Russell, for the first time in history, a viable alternative was shown to be possible. This was accomplished through the use of 'modern technique'.⁶ Wartime economies made it possible to sustain the lives of numerous people who, due to participating in the war effort, 'were withdrawn from productive occupations',⁷ i.e., did not labour for the production of basic necessities. This, Russell argues, shows that it is possible, due to the rise of

² Ibid., p. 26.

³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷ Ibid.

modern technology, to drastically reduce labour time without ensuing famines or other loss of goods necessary for survival. Indeed, according to Russell, what had taken place during wartime

showed conclusively that, by the scientific organization of production, it is possible to keep modern populations in fair comfort on a small part of the working capacity of the modern world. If, at the end of the war, the scientific organization [...] had been preserved, and the hours of work had been cut down to four, all would have been well. Instead of that the old chaos was restored, those whose work was demanded were made to work long hours, and the rest were left to starve as unemployed.⁸

Without considering alternative modes of explanation, Russell naïvely attributes the post-war restoration of chaos described above to the entrenched ideological faith in the work ethic. His strategy in defence of his proposed four-hour day is, thus, to shake this belief by countering variants of the view that work is somehow either virtuous in itself, productive of beneficial outcomes, or that its absence brings about vice. I will not here labour to rehearse the details of Russell's specific objections to either of these theses. I will instead simply sketch, very briefly, Russell's defence of the benefits of leisure.

In Russell's view, regardless of the fact that the existence of their class relied on social injustice, the aristocrats are to be seen as exemplary of what can be achieved by a group of people that has been granted the gift of leisure time. Russell attributes to this leisure 'nearly the whole of what we call civilization',⁹ including the arts, sciences, philosophy, and 'even the liberation of the oppressed'.¹⁰ In Russell's view, such achievements will be proliferated by universalising leisure time through the minimisation of labour time. Minimising labour time will prevent exhaustion, thus maximising the value of leisure.¹¹ In this Russellian utopia, everyone will be free to indulge their scientific curiosity or need for artistic expression,¹² and 'at least 1 percent'¹³ will produce something of value during their leisure time.

⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹² Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹³ Ibid., p. 28.

The many significant parallels between Russell's and Schlick's philosophical positions have long ago been acknowledged in the secondary literature.¹⁴ Nevertheless, scholarship has ignored the striking similarities between their accounts of work and leisure, as well as their visions of societies freed from work. In part, this is due to the fact that, in both Russell's and Schlick's case, the relevant works in which these views are developed were ill-received by their academic colleagues, who were much more interested in either philosopher's technical work, and far less in their musings on social or cultural topics. Academic philosophers have tended to see Russell's popular writings as a sign of decline from his exceptional early work. L. Susan Stebbing, for example, referring to a meeting with Russell in 1935 in her private correspondence, notes that

It seemed like the Russell of old, whom I admired so much. He has so much that's fine and sensitive [...] in him. I think his recent books (e.g., 'In Praise of Idleness') are so cheap; & he can be so good.¹⁵

A similar attitude has been directed to the central early work in which Schlick first developed his account of work and play, namely his 1909 book *Lebensweisheit*.¹⁶ Schlick had been previously trained as a physicist, and the 1909 book may seem like a novice's entry into philosophical writing. It covers a perplexingly broad domain of topics, from neurophysiology, biology, and drive-psychology, to ethics and the nature of love. It is not only the breadth of its topics, but also Schlick's literary language that has

¹⁴ See e.g. Herbert Feigl, "Russell and Schlick: A Remarkable Agreement on a Monistic Solution of the Mind-Body Problem," *Erkenntnis*, 9 (1975): pp. 11-34.

¹⁵ Quoted in Siobhan Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2013), p. 65.

¹⁶ Moritz Schlick, *Lebensweisheit: Versuch einer Glückseligkeitslehre und Fragen der Ethik*, edited by Mathias Iven (Vienna: Springer, 2006). I explore in further detail Schlick's early work, and its notion of play, in Andreas Vrahimis, "The Vienna Circle's Reception of Nietzsche", *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, 8 (9) (2020): 1-29; "Philosophy (and Wissenschaft) without Politics? Schlick on Nietzsche, German Idealism, and Militarism." In *The Socio-Ethical Dimension of Knowledge: The Mission of Logical Empiricism*, edited by Christian Damböck & Adam Tamas Tuboly (Basel: Springer, forthcoming); furthermore, I explore the early Schlick's critical response to Russell in Andreas Vrahimis, *Bergsonism and the History of Analytical Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave, forthcoming).

contributed towards discouraging philosophers from taking the book seriously. Nonetheless, as recent scholarship has pointed out, the book develops themes that will continue to play a role in subsequent work, including his many contributions to debates within the Vienna Circle.¹⁷ Schlick's conception of work and play lies at the heart of the book.

Russell's attack against the work ethic was, as we have seen in the above, primarily prescriptive. His main purpose had been to recommend a particular, in the main pragmatic, attitude towards the limitation of working hours. While sharing Russell's broadly critical attitude towards valuing work, Schlick's approach to the topic is founded on a descriptive biological account of the emergence of play. In other words, rather than begin, as Russell does, from an evaluation of the merits and demerits of labour and leisure in the history of feudalism and capitalism, Schlick's descriptive account looks back to the origin of the distinction between work and play in the longer history of the evolution of the human animal.

The divergences between their prescriptive and descriptive approaches are further reflected in the difference between Russell's and Schlick's definitions of 'work'. Russell's definition of 'work' is deployed in his account of the threefold division of labour outlined above. According to Russell, work is divided into two types, either that of 'altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter',¹⁸ or of ordering others to do so. Russell is clearly careful here not to introduce any normative element into his definition of 'work'. By contrast to Russell's apparent restriction of his definition of work to the domain of physics, Schlick upholds an explicitly evolutionary biological definition of 'work'. In various places, Schlick defines 'work' as any activity undertaken not for its own sake, but rather for the sake of some other end. Already in his 1909 *Lebensweisheit*, Schlick would connect this conception of work to evolutionary theory, insofar as his definition of work ties it to what is ultimately undertaken for the goal of the survival of the individual or the species. Thus, though both Russell's and Schlick's definitions might initially seem equally broad, Russell's discussion of work is more strictly tied to the common-sense notion of the concept. Schlick, by contrast, comes to see a broader range of activities as pertaining to work. In his discussion of aesthetics, for example, he conceives of all sensation as a type

¹⁷ See e.g. Thomas Mormann, "Zwischen Weisheit und Wissenschaft: Schlicks weites philosophisches Spektrum." *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 80 (2010): pp. 263–85.

¹⁸ Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', p. 12.

of work, insofar as it is a type of action whose purpose is to guide an animal, whether human or not, through its surroundings. Equally, any activity that is geared towards a particular practical end must, in Schlick's account, be considered as work.

Interestingly, though the teleological dimension of work and play does not enter directly into Russell's definition of work, he concurs with Schlick that the activity of 'moving matter about [...] is emphatically not one of the ends of human life'.¹⁹ In his view, work is clearly not undertaken for its own sake, but for the attainment of something else, such as survival. The work ethic has so deeply infiltrated modern approaches to work that many have forgotten this:

There was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been to some extent inhibited by the cult of efficiency. The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake.²⁰

Russell goes on to examine a variety of cases in which something is praised as virtuous because it is undertaken for the sake of some other end (such as that of earning money, or of preparing oneself for further work).²¹ Conversely, Russell notes, activities enjoyed for their own sake are condemned for violating the work ethic. He argues that this leads to the following absurd outcome: the work that goes into making a product is applauded, while the consumption of the same product is frowned upon.

In Schlick's account, almost all activity by all living beings, including human animals, counts as work, insofar as it is undertaken for the sake of some other goal – ultimately for the sake of surviving. Once coupled with his broad acceptance of evolutionary biology, Schlick's definition of work as any activity undertaken for the sake of some other end gives rise to the following question: how is it possible, within an evolutionary framework, for any activity to be undertaken for its own sake? To answer this question, Schlick gives a detailed account of the evolutionary origins of play in human animals.²² According to Schlick, play is made possible only as a result of a certain amount of work. Work cumulatively secures the adaptation of human animals

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

²² Schlick, *Lebensweisheit*, 143-155.

to their environment. Once a certain level of adaptation is accomplished, all drives guiding action can become temporarily satiated, during which time humans can cease working. In a state where all drives are temporarily satiated, activity that had previously been undertaken as work can now be undertaken, and even enjoyed, for its own sake. A sensation can now be attended to not as a guide to action, but as a pleasing thing in itself.²³ In Schlick's account, such a playful approach is presupposed not only by aesthetic appreciation, but also by the kind of dispassionate search for truth that he understands science as essentially involved in. This is a central view maintained throughout Schlick's career, e.g. when he talks, in the midst of the Vienna Circle's Protocol-Sentence debate, of the joy that comes from affirming the truth of a scientific prediction.²⁴ While all living things engage in some form of work, and some can even engage in certain forms of play, the human animal's higher ability to play can allow it to engage in an ongoing search for truth unavailable to other living things.

The broader scope of Schlick's descriptive account of the emergence of play leads him to some quite bold predictions concerning the future of humanity. In Schlick's utopian vision, the evolutionary development of the human animal will eventually lead to the replacement of all work by play. As Schlick sees it, this will come about through a progressive adaptation of humans to their environment. In his environmental vision, Schlick calls for a future harmonisation of culture with nature.²⁵ Play is exemplary of this harmonisation: it is the transformation of the toil which nature imposes onto human civilisations in the guise of work, into a joyful activity undertaken for its own sake. This transformation of course presupposes work, which is necessary for the adaptation of the human animal to its environment prerequisite for play. Once an adequate amount of work has been put into this adaptation, Schlick claims, then a stage can be reached at which all work will be redundant. What this means is that, at this

²³ This underlies the account of aesthetics developed both in Schlick's *Lebensweisheit* and in Moritz Schlick, "The fundamental problem of aesthetics seen in an evolutionary light." In *Moritz Schlick: Philosophical Papers: Volume One (1909-1922)*, edited by Henk L. Mulder and Barbara van de Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979) pp. 1–24.

²⁴ Moritz Schlick, "The Foundation of Knowledge, translated by David Rynin." In Ayer, A. J., *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 209–27. See Christian Bonnet, "Schlick et l'origine pratique de la connaissance." In *Wissenschaft und Praxis. Zur Wissenschaftsphilosophie in Frankreich und Österreich in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Christian Bonnet and Elisabeth Nemeth (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), pp. 43–53.

²⁵ Schlick continues to uphold such views in his final unfinished work from the 1930s; Moritz Schlick, *Natur und Kultur* (Vienna & Stuttgart: Humboldt, 1952).

stage, *all* activity will be undertaken not in order to attain some other end, but for its own sake. His example in the domain of aesthetics is that of the transformation of sensation. As long as humans continue to work in order to adapt to their environment, their sensations will be mere guides to action. But once this is no longer necessary, all sensations will be eventually come to be enjoyed for their own sake. In Schlick's utopian future, every sight or sound will give the kind of pleasure that is currently only glimpsed in works of artistic genius. This is, of course, a prediction concerning a distant future (assuming that the human species has worked to ensure its survival for such a length of time). Schlick presents his environmentalist vision as being at odds with the development of modern technology, which in his view forges further divisions between nature and culture. Thus, while Schlick predicts a utopian evolutionary future for humanity, he also warns against moving towards the contrary direction.

Russell's bold proposal to limit working hours appears to be quite reserved when contrasted with Schlick's bold vision of the transformation of all work into play. This difference is partly reflected in their ways of applying their accounts of work to their specific views of academic work. Russell sees universities as a way of systematically pursuing what had initially arose as a by-product of leisure time, i.e. the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Apart from various other disadvantages of this systematic pursuit of knowledge, such as its potential stifling of originality, the basic problem which Russell sees as faced by universities is a split between academic life and the world outside it. While the world at large is more and more engaged in work, academics are engaged in paradigmatically 'unutilitarian pursuits'.²⁶ In Russell's view, academics thus

tend to be unaware of the preoccupations and problems of ordinary men and women; moreover their ways of expressing themselves are usually such as to rob their opinions of the influence that they ought to have upon the general public.²⁷

This outlook may provide some of the reasoning behind Russell's work as a public intellectual, which can be seen as at least in part his way of attempting to breach this gap. Yet one academic's outreach programme would be completely inadequate in a

²⁶ Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', p. 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

world increasingly too busy to deal with 'unutilitarian pursuits'. Russell's proposed solution to this is the four-hour day, which will give everyone leisure to engage in such pursuits for no gain.

What Russell did not foresee in the 1930s was that the tension between the 'unutilitarian' world of universities and the utilitarian pursuits of the world outside academia could be resolved by the transformation of the academic vocation into something more closely resembling work. Given that his conception of work is modelled on manual labour, Russell seems to think of the academic pursuit of knowledge as, by default, a kind of leisurely pursuit, almost a hobby. Schlick's account of work is better equipped to handle this issue. On the basis of his definition, Schlick could clearly see that academia can and does involve work, though he questions whether it should. In his view, insofar as the activities of academics are undertaken for the sake of some other end, such as academic advancement, money, or power, they are to count as work. In Schlick's account, however, the genuine pursuit of scientific knowledge must be a form of play, i.e., an activity undertaken for its own sake. Science, in Schlick's account, is the search for truth, undertaken for its own sake, regardless of the various practical benefits it may also bring about.

In the above I have claimed that, despite their various differences, Russell's and Schlick's accounts of work call for future societies in which work is reduced and play and leisure are highly valued. Though both Russell's and Schlick's accounts of work come from a time very different from the present, they both serve as reminders of the evitability of the work ethic. They call us to think of the destructive effect such an ideology may have on the environment, as Schlick warns, and also, as both Schlick and Russell insist, on the development of human culture.

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