Leisure and Civility: Reflections on a Greek Ideal

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Abstract De Grazia's study Of Time, Work, and Leisure requires reinterpretation based on a more thorough understanding of the Aristotelian conception of leisure on which it is based. The prevailing approach to Aristotle is that his conception of leisure focuses on withdrawal into philosophical contemplation. This is inaccurate for several reasons. Reviewing the interconnections among the concept of civility and Aristotle's emphasis in his practical philosophy on participation in the communal affairs of the city-state, leisure is seen to be the arena in which the virtues of civil character are sought, demonstrated, and refined. This gives leisure a far more central place in the lives of people in themselves and in their communities. De Grazia's appeal to this conception in criticizing modern leisure thus becomes a more powerful indictment than has generally been recognized.

Keywords Aristotel, De Grazia, Greece, leisure, philosophy

This paper offers a rereading of Sebastiao de Grazia's Of Time, Work, and Leisure (1964) through an extended analysis of Aristotle's conception of leisure, which lies at the core of de Grazia's argument. To understand fully de Grazia's appeal to the Aristotelian conception of leisure, it is necessary to explore that conception itself. Although the Aristotelian conception of leisure and de Grazia's study are generally taken to be within the common heritage of the leisure studies field, prevailing interpretations of both are unsatisfactory, omitting significant aspects in them and thus failing to do justice either to these thinkers or to the importance of leisure in antiquity and modernity.

In the reinterpretation offered here, leisure occupies a central position in a complex body of thought. If the issues raised are thus unfamiliar to leisure studies, it can only be said that they are necessary to demonstrate the centrality of leisure in Aristotle's philosophy. Like everything else Aristotle discusses, leisure has its specific function in his system. We understand this system only by understanding these specific functions and their interconnections. If we treat leisure in isolation, we can only misunderstand it; the full human importance of leisure on Aristotle's account can only be assessed from the perspective of the system in which it rests. Misunderstanding Aristotle will lead inevitably to misunderstanding the use de Grazia makes of him.

It will be necessary, then, to build the argument here in several stages in order to make clear the ways in which the several threads come together. This will involve briefly reviewing the dominant view of Aristotle and de Grazia on leisure, leading to a reassessment of de Grazia's intentions. From there the focus shifts to the concept of civility and

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the virtues its represents; these were a central focus of Aristotle and leisure provides the arena in which they emerged. Civility, however, represents a character that is essentially active, involved in public discourse about the quality of life. This reading diverges from the dominant view in leisure studies of Aristotle’s conception of leisure as essentially contemplative and withdrawn, and thus requires consideration of the importance in Aristotle’s thought of practical reason as the source of action. All action has some aim; to Aristotle this is pursuit of the good. The next stage in the argument therefore develops a conception of *eudaimonia*, or felicity, as the highest good attainable by human action in which basic elements of human nature are unified. This unity is exemplified in the combination, achieved in leisure, of the urge to know, the search for virtue, and the civil character. Recapitulating these themes, Aristotle’s commentary on leisure is explored to support the reading offered here, followed by a return to de Grazia to reappraise his argument’s significance not only for leisure studies but for assessing contemporary society as well.

**Existing Interpretations**

An extended review of leisure studies commentary on Aristotle’s and de Grazia’s work is unneeded. The familiarity of the main features in this commentary and the dominant influence of a relatively few secondary sources within it makes it necessary only to suggest the ways in which this commentary misunderstands Aristotle and de Grazia, thus illuminating the importance of moving on to a more detailed investigation of their arguments and their implications for the conceptual analysis of leisure.

In this regard, the most distressing failing in the current literature is the absence of scholarly exploration of original sources, of the Greeks themselves and particularly of Aristotle, and the related inattention to the specialized philosophical and historical literature. These omissions account in large part for the errors of fact and of interpretation that permeate leisure studies commentary, in which we find historical confusions and the anachronistic imposition of modern categories on Aristotle’s thought. Indeed, it is possible to trace the two most basic misunderstandings of Aristotle—that the freedom from the necessity to labor for daily bread makes of leisure a strictly patrician or aristocratic privilege (Kraus 1984:42; but cf. Stocks 1939:156–58) and that leisure is a largely contemplative state arising from this freedom (Kraus 1984:43, but cf. 60)—to Kraus’s deservedly recognized text. This text itself makes extremely limited reference to original sources or to specialized secondary literature, while uncritical appeal to it has tended to reinforce the unsupported and sometimes questionable generalizations it contains. Murphy (1981), for example, who otherwise clearly states his dissatisfaction with the failure “to provide the prospective educator and practitioner the opportunity to develop a meaningful, comprehensive concept of leisure” (14), nonetheless relies on Kraus’s presentation with no reference beyond it to primary sources and to only one specialized secondary source (23–24). Even Dare, Welton, and Coe (1987), who are surely more attentive to the philosophical background of Aristotle’s conception of leisure, fall back into an uncritical acceptance of the conventional view of leisure as a contemplative state, largely because of selective attention to Aristotle’s argument (see ch. 4).

It is questionable, then, whether we are entitled to conclude that we understand the background of de Grazia’s argument well enough to recommend discarding it, as did one respected leisure studies scholar recently, citing the field’s inability to apply the Aristotelian conception of leisure as presented by de Grazia. Sessoms (1986:112) thus advises
bidding adieu to the "intellectual game," to focus instead on "investigations which have application to the delivery of leisure services," concluding his comments: "Thank you, Sebastian, you gave us a good run and hopefully we have played the intellectual game well. It is now time to get on with the work of leisure."

I suggest, however, that we have in fact nor "played the intellectual game well." Nor is intellectual activity to be so lightly dismissed by a field so sorely in need of it. There is an anti-intellectualism latent in dismissing de Grazia's work because it resists application to services and also in the general disinclination to pursue its conceptual bases with any rigor. This should be sufficient to make any of us uneasy about the intellectual vitality of our field. We must recognize at the very least that understanding leisure is an activity extending considerably beyond the provision of services.

This is not my view alone. Goodale (1985:44) makes a compelling case for the need to study Aristotle, de Grazia, and also Pieper with greater care. Goodale writes that "There is a deeper meaning which does not come to the surface in most talk and writing about leisure," going on to note that "With few exceptions, our encounters with Aristotle's thought, as interpreted by many of those writing about leisure, are not very satisfying." Recognizing that there is in Aristotle's thinking a close connection between leisure and the quality of life, Goodale (53), like de Grazia, sees that "free time" is a false scent and that the "leisure problem" lies not in the relative amount of free time but in the absence of meaning in our leisure. Goodale (54) remarks further that "Leisure is a useless notion if by it we mean merely free time or some contemplative state." Regarding Aristotle, Goodale suggests that the context of leisure is virtue, which in the moral and political thought of Aristotle is tied inextricably to action. This spirit is carried on by de Grazia in his own analysis. Indeed, virtue is action according to the highest human capacities, rightly understood, and both Aristotle and de Grazia believe this action occurs in leisure. One proper subject for leisure studies thus becomes what it was for Aristotle, the study of the whole person, of the conditions for and content of virtuous action, for leisure is among the primary conditions for virtue and the proper use of leisure is virtuous. Approached from this direction, the conceptual universe within which leisure studies moves is expanded considerably and the rules of the "intellectual game" are broadened beyond the constricting limits leisure studies imposes on itself.

De Grazia's Aristotelian Aim

De Grazia is not interested only, or even primarily, in a review of historical or sociological data on the proportion of free time available in society, or in pointing out the inaccuracy of claims about the increase of free time. Were this all he undertakes there would, indeed, be reason for moving beyond his work, especially as others have since covered this topic more effectively (e.g., Hunnicutt 1984a, 1984b; Linder 1970; Owen 1976). Nor is de Grazia's thesis restricted to noting the error of equating free time with leisure, though this remains an important starting point in his argument.

What has been too often missed is that driving de Grazia's analysis is his desire to raise again a certain "ideal of leisure" (1964:402), calling us back to the virtues embedded in that ideal. It is a Greek ideal, based on the strength of character necessary to the search for truth and which insists on the level of devotion and morality demanded by truth. Following Aristotle, de Grazia proposes to assess the quality of life in society by the contents of this leisure ideal, as de Grazia suggests (9), albeit indirectly, early in his book: "Aristotle in the Politics [1271b] says a curious thing. The Spartans remained
secure as long as they were at war; they collapsed as soon as they acquired an empire. They did not know how to use the leisure that peace brought." What is curious is that at a time when the Spartan virtues of martial courage and loyalty were highly regarded in Greece (they were influential, for example, in shaping the community created by Plato in his Republic), Aristotle attributes the Spartan decline to an inability to use leisure rightly. This is, in Aristotle's view, a serious failure, and it is a failure to which de Grazia believes contemporary society lies exposed. Agreeing with Aristotle that leisure is a primary good in society and that the worth of any society can be assessed against the arena it opens for the pursuit of true leisure, de Grazia moves through his historical review of leisure's forms in order to bring us face to face with our own era and, through his analysis of contemporary free time, ask this Aristotelian question: Will we, too, collapse as a society from not knowing how to use as leisure the free time made available by peace and prosperity, avoiding the difficult issues to immerse ourselves in work, amusement, and diversion?

Leisure as an ideal entails certain forms of activity. It is not an empty existential space waiting to be filled with activity of just any sort. Aristotle and de Grazia envision a definite range of activities that constitute leisure; it is, in fact, these activities, and without them no amount of free time can become leisure. Time, in contrast to modern views, is not a determining characteristic of leisure. It is instead the nature of the activity that permits leisure's coming into being. De Grazia (332) summarizes this Greek leisure ideal clearly: "A man of leisure, according to Plato and Aristotle, was a man who believed that cultivating the mind, so important for the state, was the brightest of all activities, the single one in which he was revealed as related to the gods, and in the exercise of which he celebrated the gods." This ideal rose from the intensity of the Greeks' sense of belonging to their communities, from the moral and political obligations owed to these communities (the profundity of which is illustrated in Socrates's argument in Plato's Crito). It is this ideal of leisure, combining reflection and action with deeply rooted attachment to one's community (not to be confused by modern readers with contemporary society or the state), that I take to be de Grazia's main focus, the exploration of which leads him to largely pessimistic conclusions about the quality of contemporary leisure and hence the society in which it occurs. Drawing on the Aristotelian conception of leisure, de Grazia believes this can have only negative consequences for the cohesion and vitality of that society.

Leisure as Civility's Arena

De Grazia raises through his analysis a question I will formulate as the connection between leisure and civility. Civility, difficult though it is to define in the abstract, is a quality that, applied to de Grazia's argument, held the Greeks in close community despite their often fractious natures, a quality taken by de Grazia as a beacon in the fragmentation and isolation of our own society. What de Grazia asks is whether leisure serves or has served as the arena in which these traits of character are cultivated and developed. Before continuing, then, it is necessary to spend a moment considering what the concept of civility entails. By doing so, we will develop a more satisfactory background against which to study the Aristotelian conception of leisure applied by de Grazia.

Although "civility" has come to mean in daily speech a courteous manner of dealing with people, it has a far deeper meaning. Civility entails traits of character that must, like all such traits, be cultivated and developed. These imply in turn a certain moral and
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intellectual capacity to recognize and pursue questions whose importance ranges beyond the merely personal or utilitarian to include the manner in which people are to interact, to meet one another in the community. One might conclude, in fact, that without these traits of character, any semblance of community fades beyond recall and we are left with a formless, contentless entity called "society."

We may approach the general concept of civility by way of contemporary political theorist G.E. Tinder's work. He suggests (1976:179, 183) that civility is to be understood as a stance towards others, one that although timeless is nonetheless peculiarly a stance for our times. Tinder means by this that without civility, without a defined stance towards others, there is little at all to distinguish us as civilized human beings. If this is so, the decline of leisure pointed out by de Grazia becomes a more serious matter than might initially appear, for the replacement of leisure by mere diversion and amusement suggests a decline and possible eclipse of civility, of community, of the qualities of character that mark us as civilized.

Tinder (1976) explores the content of civility through the concept of tolerance, which he describes along with its associated virtues as defining "the contours of civility" (183). Tinder regards tolerance as "a kind of hospitality—toward people (attentiveness) and toward truth (openness)" (182). Out of such hospitality there emerges an arena in which people are able to come together in pursuit of themselves and the world around them. There is a mutuality in the creation of this arena, based on the recognition by autonomous individuals that "establishing an understanding of who we are as individuals and as a community" requires each of us to be open and attentive to what is common and what unique among us (179). This requires that we understand at the same time the meaning and value of truth as a bond among human beings, and between them and their world (62). This adds in turn a further requirement, that each person understand the responsibility inherent in such a bond of truth to preserve and if possible to extend it. These four virtues embedded in tolerance—attentiveness, openness, veracity, and responsibility—combine to "provide a general definition of civility" (182–83) which may be summarized as "the capacity for sharing existence" with those among whom one finds oneself (9).

The focus of civility is on character and not results, which marks it off from the prevalent modern emphasis on the latter. If, as Tinder (1980:186) argues, the "primary question of civility" is "How shall I bear myself?" then civility is a composite of the virtues represented in one's actions. Entailed here is a three part process in achieving civility, namely, obtaining knowledge regarding a choice, determining what constitutes civil action based on this knowledge, and carrying this civil action into effect. Not that there are any "precise rules" or structures for achieving civility; Tinder (185) rejects this explicitly. As a matter of assuming a stance towards others and towards the world, civility must remain fluid, responding to the nuances of one's situation and the choices contained in it. As Tinder expresses this, "No one is responsible for achieving any particular historical result, but everyone is responsible for behaving in a certain manner" (186). This "certain manner" is governed by the virtues Tinder outlines as civility, which, it turns out, are related closely to those virtues he regards the ancient Greeks as having pursued (1976:7). These may be conventionally summarized as courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice.

The virtues constituting civility remain incomplete unless expressed in action. Tinder (1980:190) calls this the "problem of civility," to find the means to "exemplary action" based on individual character and intended "to serve as a statement of principle" (191) about the virtues integrated in that character. This problem of civility may be seen, in the
context of Greek thought, as the problem of leisure, for it was in the arena of leisure that the Greeks pursued the development of character. This required engagement: "Leisure was conceived [by the Greeks] as an opportunity for the cultivation of personal excellence. But this excellence was to be achieved through participation" (Tinder 1964:78). Civility thus remains active (Tinder 1976:180). For a person to withdraw into a state of "detached contemplation" is a withdrawal both from the communal element of civility and the activity inherent in leisure. As de Burgh (1961) notes, "Leisure meant to the Greeks anything rather than idleness; it furnished an escape from the pressure of material claims, and an occasion for the display of intellect and talent. We must think of the Greeks as men of action, even more than as artists or thinkers; their art and their science were closely bound up with the interests of practical life" (103).

This emphasis on the active person is echoed in the Greek conception of education, which took place during leisure. Greek education addressed three components of the individual: character, reasoning, and the body (Barker 1948:16). Character was regarded as preeminent because it is the foundation for right conduct, but no complete education neglects any component. The same is true of civility, the character at which education aimed. To neglect any aspect of it in favor of another skews character, imbalances it, an affront to the idea of "right proportion" that is so prominent in Greek thinking. We might think of civility, then, as a process of ongoing public education in the sense that the development of civil character occurs in public view where it is displayed and where it is aimed at a continuing public discourse about the nature of right conduct. For the Greeks, this occurred in leisure, which, far from being passive and withdrawn, was thus a major arena for activity "undertaken with the serious purpose of cultivating and realizing the self" (Tinder 1964:328; of Barker 1948:18).

The Question of Practical Reason

The preceding comments, in their emphasis on activity and participation during leisure, diverge from the prevalent view in leisure studies that the Aristotelian conception of leisure turned on withdrawal into philosophical contemplation. The source of this view would appear to be Book 10 of Aristotle's Ethics, in which he discusses contemplation (theoria) and the resulting virtue of wisdom as the highest human good. Since leisure is to be spent in the pursuit of the highest good, it follows that leisure is to be devoted to contemplation. This view is sufficiently well established in leisure studies to require attention to the elements in Aristotle's philosophy that work against it.

It must be pointed out at once that Book 10 continues to pose considerable difficulties in interpretation (see Bernstein 1983:47; Rorty, ed. 1980). It contains a number of statements contradicting those made elsewhere in the Ethics and in the Politics. In regard to our present concern, Book 10 conflicts with Aristotle's treatment elsewhere of practical reason (praxis) and its resulting virtue of moral wisdom (phronesis). As Ackrill (1974:3; cf. Stocks 1939:159–60) notes, "most of the Ethics" holds that "good action" is "man's best life," but this changes in Book 10, where "purely contemplative activity" is said to be the best life. Ackrill argues, persuasively, that Aristotle fails to reconcile this contradiction. Whatever accounts for the contradiction itself and its lack of resolution, we have in leisure studies too often ignored the issue and have thus omitted, without arriving at any clearly stated reason for doing so, a highly significant theme in Aristotle's thinking. This is a clear demonstration of the perils of failing to investigate original sources and specialized secondary literature. The field has been encouraged in this ten-
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Leisure and the perception of leisure are important factors in the development of the human condition, particularly in the context of the Ethics (e.g., Ross's translation in McKean, ed. 1941). And perhaps there has also been a preference for this interpretation because it has the virtue of convenience, of fitting more readily into the tripartite taxonomy of leisure, play, and recreation.

Without redressing this omission of practical reason, we cannot attain an appreciation for the forcefulness of Aristotle's conception of leisure, of the Greek leisure ideal, as de Grazia applies it in his analysis of contemporary leisure. Leisure studies would at the same time cut itself off from a significant strand in contemporary philosophy that draws heavily on Aristotle's philosophy of practical reason and devotes attention to the importance of play and leisure as human activities. Among the writers contributing to this development are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hannah Arendt, and more recently Richard Bernstein. It would be unfortunate were leisure studies to narrow its own understanding of leisure by failing to follow out the same concern for practical reason in Aristotle's thought.

Aristotle, in Book 6 of the Ethics, discusses the categories of human knowledge. Without denying the dangers of oversimplification, it is useful to consider these categories as grouped into three broad classes. These are knowledge about things that are unchanging and eternal (theoria); knowledge about things that are changeable and transitory (praxis); and knowledge about skills and crafts (techne). The latter, concerned with the production of objects valued for use and not in themselves, is the least of the three classes. It has, however, been too often confused with praxis, which has been taken to be closely related to techne as technical control of limited tasks through the application of 'true' knowledge, usually taken to be scientific. This represents what Gadamer (1975:312; see also 1981:69–87) calls an 'awful deformation' of practical reason and misunderstands completely what Aristotle intended.

Contemplation and practical reason are joined by their equal demands for rigorous thought. They share the quest for knowledge valued in itself rather than for application to utilitarian projects, but this knowledge is of separate classes of objects. Aristotle holds (E 1094b, see Note on References) that it is intellectually legitimate to seek from an object only that precision the object is capable of supporting. In keeping with this, Aristotle separates contemplation and practical reason on the basis of the mutability of the objects they study. As Gadamer (1981:89) notes, this is 'a contrast within knowledge' rather than between knowledge and something else. Contemplation focuses on the unchanging and eternal, on knowledge of first principles, which Aristotle takes to mean of the gods and the cosmos, of mathematics, metaphysics, and logic. Practical reason, on the other hand, focuses on the changing and transitory, which means to Aristotle the affairs of human beings as they seek to conduct and organize themselves. This means particularly ethics and politics. Although contemplation may be accorded a higher status than practical reason because it investigates the unchanging, and this is, to the Greeks, the highest level of being, both contemplation and practical reason share in the demand for rigorous intellectual effort and both create esteemed virtues in those who pursue them (Bernstein 1983:149).

We may approach this question from another angle in order to show how it is that practical reason comes to occupy a central position in Aristotle's thinking. Although he begins the Ethics (E 1094a) by arguing that all human activity aims at some good and that good may be ranked respectively by the degree to which each approaches the true good, and although he explicitly ranks knowledge of the unchanging as a good exceeding
knowledge of the changeable (E 1141a), Aristotle points out that human beings are themselves among the changeable and transitory objects in the cosmos. This means to him that the life of contemplation, of theoría, is in its perfection entirely too high a mark for human ambition (E 1177b). Searching for something more appropriate, Aristotle concludes, perhaps somewhat wistfully, that the best human life must be spent in pursuit of practical reason and moral wisdom. Although it is necessarily of a lower station, it is in keeping with the nature of human beings and is thus all that may be asked. As Ackrill (1974:20; see also Hamburger 1951:172–73) points out, Aristotle is in the end unable to commit himself to the irrevocable superiority of contemplation over practical reason because the life of contemplation is ultimately beyond human achievement.

This conclusion suggests that we need carefully to reconsider the idea that leisure consists entirely in some contemplative state. To insist on such an interpretation misreads Aristotle and directs our energies down a blind and ultimately barren path. At the same time, however, I do not wish to suggest that contemplation has no place at all in Aristotelian leisure; that would be clearly false. As Pieper (1952) has argued eloquently, contemplation is a central element in Aristotelian leisure, though we must not be misled into too narrow a view of contemplation. There is a to and fro motion here, a swaying from the world into contemplation and back again, and the contact between the two invigorates both. With this caveat added, however, it remains the case that leisure studies has tended to accept contemplation as the paradigm for Aristotelian leisure and that having done so has resulted in a one-sided understanding of Aristotle. We are more likely to come to a deeper understanding of the weight Aristotle gives to leisure by examining its relation to practical reason and the achievement of moral wisdom.

The Highest Good Reconsidered

The preceding discussion suggests the necessity of exploring Aristotle’s practical philosophy. I want to take this up by offering a different view of the highest good in Aristotle’s thinking and by pointing out how it begins to tie together the various threads of the argument to this point. Most particularly, it will illustrate the connection between achievement of this highest good and the value of civility. This will open the way to arguing for the importance of leisure as the arena in which civility is developed through participation and thus of leisure as activity in the communal affairs of the Greeks, a theme to be developed in the following section.

Although all human activity aims at some good (E 1044a), there are many goods which people may pursue. If a virtuous life consists of pursuit and achievement of the highest good, human beings must somehow be able to arrive at an attainable conception of it. Aristotle believes this is represented by eudaimonia, frequently translated as “happiness,” a questionable choice, though perhaps forced by the limitations of English (cf. Ackrill 1974:12–13). “Happiness” fails to connote the ethical depth of eudaimonia. We speak more readily of a “happy moment” than of a “happy lifetime,” yet eudaimonia is not a passing moment but the result of continued application of oneself to the question of how one ought to live one’s life and the attempt to carry this into exemplary action. Eudaimonia is the “final synthesis” of a life spent in virtuous action (Hamburger 1951:175); it is “final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action” (Aristotle E 1097b).

It is important here to emphasize the active nature of a life that pursues eudaimonia. It represents not only a character able to engage in reflection about the content of a virtuous life, but also a character that insists at the same time on representing these reflections in
action. The hallmark of this character is its civility, its engagement in public discourse about the sort of life one ought to live and its incorporation in this discourse of the virtues identified earlier with civility. Aristotle finds it impossible to accept as virtuous a life content with the mere possession of virtues. Indeed, these virtues are such only to the extent that they are acted on (E 1177a). If a life is to achieve eudaimonia, it must be active in accord with the virtues constituting it (E 1098a).

Since there are any number of goods and many forms of activity, it is quite likely the precise nature of eudaimonia will remain in debate. As a matter of human life and thus of practical reason, eudaimonia can be known only inexacty. The danger is that the debate will become so strident that the virtues themselves will be damaged. About something so important as the quality of a virtuous life human beings are prone to have strong feelings. For eudaimonia to be achieved, for it to have any possibility of existence, it is necessary that a space be opened for it. This space is created in leisure by the emergence of civility; indeed the virtue allied with practical reason, namely, moral wisdom (phronesis), may be seen as a collective name for the virtues of civility. We might, alternatively, see the role of leisure as the creation of the arena in which civility connects three of Aristotle’s major statements about human activity. He begins the Metaphysics (980a) by observing that “All men by nature desire to know.” The impulse towards practical reason thus arises out of the very nature of human beings. Second, as we have seen, Aristotle argues in the Ethics that all human activity aims at some good and searches to know what that good is. Third, in the Politics (1253a), Aristotle claims forcefully that human beings are meant by their very nature to live in a polis, or city-state, the unique form of political association created by the Greeks that reached its greatest richness in classical Athens. Only there, Aristotle believes, is it possible to release human energies to achieve the good. The conjunction of these three claims is the development of eudaimonia. The combination of the urge to know, the search for virtue, and a civil character can yield that cumulative life that may be called, if an English equivalent is necessary, felicitous, that embodies the development of eudaimonia.

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Leisure is the arena in which this conjunction occurs. It is the arena in which civility is cultivated, in which the character that seeks both to know virtue and to pursue virtue is developed and displayed. This is leisure’s specific function (its ergon; see Ackrill 1974:15) in Aristotle’s system. In discussing this specific function, themes that have been developed earlier will be recapitulated to show where they intersect in Aristotle’s conception of leisure.

The Greek conception of excellence (arete) rises from the fulfilling of an object’s or being’s specific function. Thus human excellence lies in the highest achievement of the human function (E 1079b). Intellect and the drive to know being the highest human possession (E 1177a), it follows that human virtue is the “excellence” of the intellect (E 1102a). Because activity “has a greater claim to be the function of man,” we find, then, that “the good man is an activity of the soul [intellect] in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best or most complete” (E 1098a). If we then take the achievement of excellence as eudaimonia (E 1177a), we are led to the conclusion that “the activity of our intelligence constitutes the most complete happiness [eudaimonia] of man” (E 1177b; cf. P 1323b). Barker (1959:285) summarizes Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia as “a life of virtue furnished with the conditions of
virtuous action." Among these conditions and at their center is leisure, during which excellence is to be demonstrated (P 1329a), and, to a lesser degree, sufficient wealth to create the opportunity for leisure by releasing the citizen from the need for daily labor (E 1099a, P 1273a; cf. P 1269a).

We must not be misled by the distinction between labor and leisure into accepting the emphasis in Book 10 of the Ethics on the contemplative element in leisure. Leisure is most certainly separate from and higher than labor (P 1337b), but leisure is itself not abstention from activity, even activity of a most vigorous sort. It is the release from the necessity of and hence dependence on labor that is at issue. Activity in leisure is distinguished by its aim at the higher virtues, the pursuit of excellence for its own sake. Indeed, contrary to prevalent images of contemplative man, Aristotle in fact argues that "in matters of action," which include on his account the application of practical reason, the guiding maxim is that "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). It is not enough simply to know about excellence and virtue; we must also apply them.

We reach here the unity of activity and reflection that is summarized in civility and which characterizes Greek culture, most particularly in Aristotle. In this civility, politics and ethics form part of the same reflection and the same action (E 1181b; cf. E 1094a–b), that is, there is no separation between them (Ross 1949:187; Jaeger 1962:397–400). We have noted that Aristotle argues human beings are meant by nature to live in the polis, which united its citizens (as opposed to residents: the limitations of Greek citizenship are well established) in a homogeneous, organic community. Within the polis, "the aim of politics" is "the highest good attainable by action" (E 1095a), leading Aristotle to declare politics "the most sovereign and most comprehensive master science" (E 1094a). Recalling that leisure is necessary to virtue, it is not surprising to find it is also the arena in which an individual's virtue may be expressed in political action (P 1329a).

"Leisure as the occasion for expressing virtue in political action" is a formulation that sounds odd to modern ears. This can perhaps be reduced by understanding the more inclusive conception of political life embodied in the polis, a conception embracing at once many spheres of human activity that moderns tend to hold separate. The political was conjoined with the social, the economic, the cultural, and the religious in a manner foreign to us. All figured in the development of civility, in the character of the citizen and the quality of life, themselves preeminently political questions. Civility was displayed in the arena opened by leisure for this inclusive political activity, and to Aristotle it marked the superiority of the Greek over the non-Greek world. A citizen's highest calling was service to the polis, nor was this service only an occasional or narrow involvement by voting or paying taxes (see Stocks 1939:166–68). The depth of Greek attachment to the polis exceeded this by far, so that, as de Burgh notes (1961:101–02), "The polis furnished at once the basis and the ideal of Hellenic civilization." If there are many forms of human association noted by Aristotle, it was nonetheless inconceivable to him that a human being could live well outside the polis (P 1252b, 1280b). To develop a fuller image of this devotion, we have only to turn to the Funeral Oration of Pericles during the Peloponnesian War as reported by Thucydides (1943, where, incidentally, leisure is praised as among the benefits of Athenian citizenship; see II.38). As such, then, the classical Greek polis offers one of the great counter-examples to the isolation and fragmentation of modern society.

This contrast becomes sharper in Aristotle's analysis of leisure's intertwining with virtue and politics. His teleological (from telos, or characteristic end; see Ackrill 1974:9) principles lead him to argue that "Our very nature has a tendency . . . to seek of itself for
ways and means which will enable us to use leisure rightly" (P 1337b). This is, in fact, "the end of politics." It is "the best of ends; and 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" (P 1099b). The connection between character and leisure makes it necessary that citizens learn the importance of leisure: "There are some branches of learning and education which ought to be studied with a view to the proper use of leisure in the cultivation of the mind" and which "should be regarded" as ends in themselves (P 1338a), thus becoming part of the highest good (E 1094a). Clearly, then, civility and moral wisdom are valued qualities finding their places in public discussion about the nature of the highest good, about *eudaimonia* (Ackrill 1974:12–13; Bernstein 1983:160; Gadamer 1981:91–92). This is a matter of public deliberation and choice, calling upon citizen involvement in all aspects of the *polis* and its affairs.

Given the inclusive nature of the *polis*, it is not surprising that provision of leisure to all its citizens was among its cardinal functions. But it did so not that they might withdraw into a world of contemplation or of private amusement and diversion. Since leisure is the basis of involvement in the communal life of the *polis* and since politics pursues "the good for man" (E 1094b), leisure must necessarily be present in any "well organized state" (P 1269a). The *polis* itself must share "in the qualities required for the use of leisure" along with its citizens (P 1334a). This was conceived as the responsibility of the founding legislator, charged in antiquity with shaping the foundational laws of the *polis*. He had to create "the right laws" (E 1178b) to provide "training for the proper use of leisure" (P 1333a). Here Aristotle emphasizes the importance of education in forming the proper character of the citizen (E 1095b), culminating in the content of leisure, for "it is the power to use leisure rightly . . . which is the basis of all our life" (P 1337b).

It was in leisure that citizens pursued the intellectual and moral excellences that created the special character of the *polis* (E 1102a). This was the search for *eudaimonia*, the felicitous life of virtue. To Aristotle, the good person and the good citizen are one, united in the good *polis*: "The Good is one and the same for individuals and communities; and it is the Good which the legislator ought to instill in the minds of his citizens" (P 1333b). Leisure, in contrast with the modern world, was the arena in which the good emerged and, in fact, leisure was a central element in this good, the arena in which the drives to know, to achieve virtue, and to express virtue came together in the life of the individual and of the community. We may summarize this finding by saying that the specific function (ergon) of leisure is the unfolding of practical reason and moral wisdom, that its characteristic end (telos) is *eudaimonia* or the felicitous life in pursuit of virtue, and that its excellence (arete) is that of the citizen whose character reflects civility in the active life of the *polis*.

The Shame of Modern Leisure

In Aristotle’s view, a failure to understand and use leisure rightly is a moral failure, resulting in a special shame: "If some shame must always attach to any failure to use aright the goods of life, a special measure of shame must attach to a failure to use them aright in times of leisure," incurring a "particular censure" on those who so fail (P 1334a). This censure falls on individuals and society alike.

Here we may begin to turn back to de Grazia, recalling his citation of Aristotle’s observation that the Spartans’ failure lay in not knowing how to use rightly the leisure brought by peace and prosperity. By raising the question of modern leisure in Aristotelian
terms, de Grazi a also raises the question of modern society’s moral condition (1964:chs. 7, 10). Rather than true or Aristotelian leisure (13), what we have presently is recreation, understood as immersion in amusement and diversion from work (223; cf. Barker 1948:9; Gadamer 1981:139; Tinder 1964:78–79, 92–93). So understood, modern leisure leads us away from any true confrontation with ourselves, our lives, and our society. We thus stand, individually and collectively, in danger of that “special measure of shame” and “particular censure” Aristotle calls down on those falling to understand and use leisure rightly. Nor would Aristotle be particularly surprised at this, for he noted that “a time of the enjoyment of prosperity, and leisure accompanied by peace, is more apt to make men overbearing” (P 1334a). Our time has not been particularly marked by peace, but its prosperity, though maldistributed, cannot be questioned in material terms. It is precisely here, however, that we have great need for the virtues required in the wise use of leisure. The modern emphasis on utility and function mirrors faults Aristotle saw developing in the ancient polis, faults diminishing the virtues of its citizens (P 1334b) by diluting the content of leisure (Barker 1959:452). De Grazi a (1964:334) questions the consequences of this emphasis for the quality of modern life, assessed by the quality of modern leisure. His answer is that they are incompatible, that although “free time” might exist, “of leisure, there is none.”

De Grazi a has, then, done much more than propose a resurrection of an antique definition of leisure and demonstrate that there is less free time available than is commonly assumed. He has instead suggested that the very idea of “free” time comes into question when we fail to use it rightly and that the moral quality of our lives diminishes with the decline of leisure. No matter an increase in free time, without attention to and education in the right use of leisure our lives will not achieve what de Grazi a takes from Aristotle as their highest calling, the direction of human reason and virtue to the creation of a cohesive community bound by the principles of civility. There is presently little of this in our society. We are stamped more by “ontological individualism” than community (see Bellah et al. 1985) and the higher learning on which cohesion was once thought to rest has faded perhaps beyond recall (see Bloom 1987; Hirsch 1987), while the leveling effects of what Ortega (1932) terms “the revolt of the masses” have estranged us still further from the virtues of civil character embedded in Aristotelian leisure. Leisure was once not only conceived but pursued as the arena in which cohesion and learning—practical reason, virtue, and civility, if you will—were pursued for their own sakes. We must consider, then, what it might mean to bid adieu to de Grazi a’s study, abandoning the “intellectual game,” whether there is not yet reason to hold fast to it, for in surrendering its Aristotelian vision and appeal to an “ideal of leisure” there is much else that might also be abandoned.

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References

Note: Citations from Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics are indicated by an E and from his Politics by a P; the numbers following are standard across the various editions and translations.
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