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THE ROLE OF IDLENESS IN *BILDUNG* A SCHELERIAN VIEW

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1) *A meaning shift in idleness*

THE word “idleness” underwent a meaning shift in the course of history.

The primary meaning of “idleness” is “vanity”. The word “idle” comes from Old English “idel” which means “empty, useless, vain”. The same root has evolved into the German “Eitelkeit”, vanity. In Wycliffe’s Bible, the expression «the earth was idle and void» (Gn 1:2) means that the earth was still empty. Note that this primary meaning, in itself, is *not* necessarily connected with the idea of inactivity. In fact, we can have “idle actions” and “idle talk” (as Macquarie’s and Robinson’s translation of Heidegger’s “Gerede” in *Being and Time* suggests). A secondary meaning (“groundlessness”) and a tertiary meaning (“silliness”) evolved further from the first one. The fourth meaning, “the state or condition of being unoccupied” is now the ordinary sense of the word “idleness”. The meaning of “idleness” has shifted from “vanity” to “inactivity.” In some cases, the two senses are both present, as in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*: «Pompey thrives in our idleness», here arguably with a predominance of the sense “inactivity”. The connection between the meaning “vanity” and the meaning “inactivity” is given by the idea that being inactive is being useless. This idea might sound very straightforward for our contemporary mindset, but it does not belong to the original meaning of the word. According to the original meaning, one could well be very busy *and* very idle, if busy

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in vain. This possibility is excluded by the contemporary use of “idleness”, which implies the equation “inactivity=uselessness” and maybe even “activity=usefulness”.

Contrary to the claim that «the modern valuation and leisure differs from that of Antiquity and the Middle Ages»,² Vickers convincingly argues that the Latin word “otium” is ambivalent, oscillating between the positive sense of “free time, leisure” and the negative sense of “easy life, neglect of duty”. He also argues that the majority of uses of the word “otium”, from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages, up to the Renaissance, has a negative connotation. According to him, «the fear of idleness in Europe up to the eighteenth century was so strong that *otium* could only be accepted if strongly qualified as *honestum*».³ Similar considerations can be extended to the word “idleness”. The *Layamon’s Brut* (around 1200) says that «idleness makes a knight neglect his duty, idleness prepares the way for many evil deeds». Here, “idleness” in the sense of “inactivity” clearly has a negative connotation. The *King James Bible* (1611) praises the good wife because she «eateth not the bread of idleness». These examples suggest that the use of “idleness” for “inactivity”, as much as its negative connotation, are not a recent phenomenon.

A shift in emphasis from the meaning “vanity” to the meaning “inactivity” does, however, take place for “idleness”. What is left out with this shift is the idea that “idle” and “vain” do not just belong to inactivity, but rather to everything which is useless, including useless activity. The contemporary usage identifies *tout court* “inactivity” and “uselessness”.

2) *Idleness and modern worldview*

The shift in emphasis among the different meanings of “idleness” correlates with a social and cultural shift taking place in the modern and contemporary age. Several authors, including Marx, Weber, Foucault and Scheler, have argued that a new organization of work and a new work ethics are among the main tenets of the modern age. The modern organization of work is characterized by division of labour and spe-

² J. PIEPER, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, South Bend 1998, 27.

³ B. VICKER, *Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: the ambivalence of otium*, «Renaissance Studies», 4/2 (1990), 153.

cialization, as it is the case of manufacturers and factories. The modern work ethic is characterized by competition and a constant striving for higher achievements. The modern worldview has been characterized by a more negative view of inactivity than has ever been noted in history. Inactivity is seen as “idleness” *tout court*, as uselessness and waste. Not being busy is *per se* being “idle”, that is, being empty and vain.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault has argued that a severe attitude towards inactivity is an essential feature of a «new sensibility to poverty and to the duties of assistance, new forms of reaction to the economic problems of unemployment and idleness, a new ethic of work, and also the dream of a city where moral obligation was joined to civil law, within the authoritarian forms of constraint»⁴ dawning at the beginning of modernity. Confinement, a massive phenomenon in eighteenth-century Europe, is rooted in a condemnation of inactivity as idleness. The royal edict for the creation of the Hospital General in Paris, for instance, sets the goal to prevent «idleness as the source of all disorders».⁵ According to Foucault, confinement is an answer to a generalized economic crisis, in itself brought about by profound changes in the organization of society. Already Marx had shown in *Das Kapital* that the early stages of capitalistic production in the modern era had caused the appearance of a mass of unemployed workers and a «new class of beggars and vagabonds».⁶ Confinement of the idle and the unemployed played a double role: it was meant both to reabsorb unemployment and to control cost productions. The inmates were forced to work, and to work productively. There is a complex interaction between the modern rise of the capitalistic mode of production and the institutional repression of idleness. The expropriation of agricultural producers brings a new class of unemployed into existence, and confinement forces these unemployed to be absorbed into the new organization of labor in manufacturing.

A shift in values and in ethics corresponds to the new organization of labour. Foucault argues that: «In the Middle Ages, the great sin, *radix malorum omnium*, was pride, *Superbia*. According to Johan Huizinga,

⁴ M. FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*, New York 1988, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ F. ENGELS, K. MARX, *Collected Works*, Vol. 35, London 1996.

there was a time, at the dawn of the Renaissance, when the supreme sin assumed the aspect of Avarice, Dante's *cieca cupidigia*. All the seventeenth-century texts, on the contrary, announced the infernal triumph of Sloth: it was sloth which led the round of the vices and swept them on». ⁷ Idleness is now taken to be the root of all evil. Confinement has an ethical meaning, because it will force the idle to work. According to this sensibility, «idleness is rebellion – the worst form of all, in a sense: it waits for nature to be generous as in the innocence of Eden». ⁸ The change in the organization of labour and the shift in ethics result in a severe attitude towards inactivity, which is now as “idleness”, vanity and uselessness, *par excellence*. This new sensibility is mirrored in the shift of emphasis from the first to the fourth meaning of “idleness”.

3) *Idleness and Ressentiment*

A more articulated account of the modern attitude towards idleness is offered by Max Scheler in his book *Ressentiment*. Scheler provides a phenomenological analysis of resentment as a mood that can permeate the life of individuals or groups. Scheler also argues that resentment is an important component of our modern worldview. With “worldview”, he means «a structure according to which a race, a people or a period apprehends the world. Those who share a certain “worldview” may be unaware of it. It is sufficient that given reality is structured and accented in accordance with this worldview». ⁹ According to Scheler, the emergence of resentment as a feature of our modern worldview is correlated with the rise of a capitalistic organization of labour, and with new forms of religious works ethics, in particular with Calvinism. Being a result of this process, our worldview is saturated with a hostility towards life, and with a negative attitude towards idleness and leisure. Let's consider Scheler's analysis more closely.

Scheler starts by claiming that «the origin of resentment is connected with a tendency to make comparisons between others and oneself». ¹⁰ In modern society, characterized by free market and social mobility,

⁷ M. FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ M. SCHELER, *Ressentiment*, New York 1972, 193.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

this tendency becomes endemic: «the “system of free competition” will become the soul of this society». ¹¹ Such attitude is completely lacking in pre-modern societies: «[...] such periods are dominated by the idea that everyone has his “place” which has been assigned to him by God and nature and in which he has his personal duty to fulfill». ¹² In modern society, instead aspirations are intrinsically boundless. As a result, the structure of enjoyment is different. We enjoy objects insofar as they are commodities, we love having things because they have a monetary value: «our enjoyment [...] is now limited to those objects which are most immediately recognized as unity of commodity value». ¹³ Owning commodities becomes a sign of social status.

In spite of the appearances, the achievement-oriented mindset of modern men expresses a *negative* attitude towards life:

the specifically modern urge to work (the unbridled urge for acquisition, unlimited by need, is nothing but its consequence) is by no means due to a way of thinking and feeling which affirms life and the world [...]. It grew primarily on the soil of somber Calvinism, which is hostile to pleasure. ¹⁴

In the fifth chapter of the book, Scheler explicitly addresses the value shifts taking place in modern morality. In particular, in the third part of the chapter, he discusses the elevation of the value of utility above the value of life. According to Scheler, the elevation of utility over life is an outcome of the resentful mindset brought about by a social system of competition. Scheler makes two general points here. The first one concerns the relation between utility and pleasure. In every civilization, utility is subordinated to pleasure, that is, to an intensification of life. This is captured by Aristotle’s famous idea that we work in order to be at leisure. Pleasure is itself subordinated to higher values, as the sacred, but it can never be subordinated to utility, as it would turn a mean into an end. It would be absurd to be at leisure in order to work. «Nevertheless it has become a rule of modern morality that useful work is better

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 193-4.

than the enjoyment of pleasure».¹⁵ While ancient ascetism aimed at an intensification of life, modern hard-working utilitarian ascetism subordinates pleasure to life. «The result is that those who put in the greatest amount of useful work, thus taking possession of the external means for enjoyment, are least capable of using them».¹⁶ The proliferation of entertainments in modern society corresponds to a deadening of the function and cultivation of enjoyment: «extremely merry things, viewed by extremely sad people who do not know what to do with them: that is the ‘meaning’ of our metropolitan “culture” of entertainment».¹⁷

Some remarks offered in an article published by *The Economist* on December 20th, 2014 seem to support Scheler’s point:

Thirty years ago low-paid, blue-collar workers were more likely to punch in a long day than their professional counterparts. [...]. But nowadays professionals everywhere are twice as likely to work long hours as their less-educated peers. Few would think of sparing time for nine holes of golf, much less 18.¹⁸

In this mindset, not being idle is increasingly perceived as an indicator of social status: «If leisureliness was once a badge of honour [...] then busyness – and even stressful feelings of time scarcity – has become that badge now».¹⁹

4) *Idleness and positive thinking*

The second point made by Scheler concerns the relation between utility values and vital values. In the modern mindset, life is no more seen as a value in itself. Rather, existence must be justified by its *usefulness* for a wider community. The value of life is subordinated to the value of utility. Before, life was seen as embodying higher values than utility. Now, a «pure expression of life is only ballast and evil luxury».²⁰ Recall here the meaning shift of “idleness”, and Foucault’s remark about

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁸ *The Economist*, December 20th, 2014.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ M. SCHELER, *Ressentiment...*, 159.

idleness as the worst evil. Existing without achieving anything useful is seen as the worst form of “idleness”, that is, as vanity. As a result, modern men are not able to understand the meaning of techniques for the intensification of life, as delivered by traditional forms of ascetism, exercise, tournament etc. Those techniques were meant as an exercise of vital functions for the sake of life, but modern men do everything for the sake of work. The value of leisure is degraded: «true seriousness pertains to business and work alone, and all the rest is only fun. Even modern sports are nothing but recreation from work».²¹ Alternatively, techniques of life are subordinated to the higher value of utility, for instance in terms of increased endurance and productivity at work.

Barbara Ehrenreich’s recent book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America* provides an updated case for Scheler’s claims. Ehrenreich tackles “positivity”, which she takes to be an important component of the reputation and self-image of Americans: «being positive [...] seems to be ingrained in our national character».²² On the surface, the positive thinking of contemporary Americans would seem offer a counter-claim to Scheler’s remarks about the subordination of life to utility in modern society. Ehrenreich, however, argues that appearances can be deceiving. In her view, positive thinking is an ideology composed by two elements: 1) the positive thought «which can be summarized as: Things are pretty good right now [...] and things are going to get a lot better»,²³ 2) the practice of thinking in a positive way. This practice works under the assumption that «if you expect things to get better, they will».²⁴ According to Ehrenreich, these two elements suggest that the core attitude of the contemporary American mindset is all but positive: «there is anxiety, as you can see, right here in the heart of American positive thinking».²⁵ Positive thinking is a constant effort to convince oneself that things are going to be good. The need for such an effort points to the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

²² B. EHRENRICH, *Bright-Sided. How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America*, New York 2009, 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

necessity of overcoming a constant feeling of anxiety. «The practice of positive thinking is an effort to pump up this belief in the face of much contradictory evidence».²⁶ Positive thinking is an ideology because it is a form of self-deceiving, originating in anxiety. Even without quoting him, Ehrenreich seems to parallel Scheler in characterizing the contemporary mindset in terms of a negative attitude towards life. Moreover, positive thinking as an ideology is functional to capitalism in different ways. Despite appearances, Ehrenreich sees a continuity between the «grim and punitive outlook of the “Calvinist”»²⁷ Weber and Scheler talk about, and positive thinking. Firstly, positive thinking encourages individuals to want more, to consume more, by making them thinking that they *deserve* more and that they can have it if they just try. Secondly, positive thinking works as an apology for market economy. It tells people that they are guilty for their own failure: «if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must because you didn’t try hard enough».²⁸ Thirdly, positive thinking promotes an industry in its own right, promoting books, DVDs and several other sorts of products. In Scheler’s words, positive thinking presents itself as a technique for life, functional to enjoy life more fully. In fact, it works as an ideology functional to subordinate life to utility and capitalism. Positive thinking reveals itself as extremely far from a positive appreciation of leisure and idleness, because it fails to see a value in life as such. Even when it promotes methods for relaxing and overcoming stress, it is functional to a further increase in activity and productivity.

5) *Idleness and Bildung: a culture struggle*

Scheler argues that the rise of the modern worldview is at the origin of a peculiar hierarchy of values. The material and spiritual driving forces of modernity push towards a subordination of the values of life to the values of utility. This new axiological configuration, in its turn, is at the origin of the straightforward identification between “idleness” and “inactivity”. According to Scheler, in this way, a new image of man is brought into existence: man is the *homo faber*, the total worker. A new

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

image of man is destined to have a profound impact on education, education being the process of full development of human potentiality. The German word *Bildung* adequately captures the essence of education in terms of a “formation” aiming to a final form (*Bild*). A different image (*Bild*) of man implies a different understanding of education (*Bildung*).

In a late manuscript Scheler remarks: «that tremendous reality of modern work nowadays lays claim to reconfigure the very philosophical essential idea of man that has been uncontroversial for centuries».²⁹ According to the new view, man is not “homo sapiens”, but rather “homo faber”, the “working being” (*Arbeitswesen*), the being which builds tools, perpetually active. This new idea of man has an impact on our understanding of the relation between work and knowledge. Thus, it also impacts education. Scheler, for example, raises the question: do we study physics and astronomy in order to build better machines, or do we build machines so that some people might have *free time* to study the stars «without any practical interest?».³⁰ It is telling that the two views on work and knowledge diverge about the value of free time and leisurely occupations. According to the modern worldview identified by Scheler, an occupation without practical interest, as in studying the stars for the sake of itself, would be “idle.” The question about the relationship between work and knowledge concerns the meaning of intellectual culture as such: does intellectual culture have a value in itself, so that the meaning of work is mostly to «provide more and more leisure, and inner freedom from the constraints of the necessities of life?»,³¹ or is intellectual culture just a mean for more productivity? According to Scheler, different answers to these questions lead to a genuine cultural struggle (*Kulturkampf*).

Writing around the same time as Scheler, Max Weber had some important remarks on this “culture struggle” on schooling and education. He interpreted the struggle in terms of a conflict between the “cultivated man” type and the “specialist” type. For the “cultivated man” type, the goal of education is a quality of life conduct. For the “specialist” type, the goal of education is a specialized training in some expertise.

²⁹ GW VIII, 448.

³⁰ GW VIII, 449.

³¹ *Ibid.*

According to Weber,

behind all the present discussions about the basic questions of the educational system there lurks decisively the struggle of the “specialist” type of man against the older type of the “cultivated man”, a struggle conditioned by [...] the ever-increasing importance of experts and specialised knowledge». ³² In Weber’s words, «this struggle affects the most intimate aspects of personal culture». ³³

To sum up: The modern worldview conveys a new image of man as a “working being”. The goal of education becomes a training in some expertise for working, rather than a quality of life conduct. Everything in life and education is seen as functional to work. Leisure and idleness are either a mean to more work, or a waste. Neither do they play a role in the formation of human beings (*Bildung*), nor in the definition of what a human being is. As Vickers points out, it is not that pre-modern cultures had an unqualified appreciation for idleness. In this sense, Josef Pieper’s praise for the centrality of leisure in classic and medieval culture might have something of an idealization of the past. However, it seems accurate to state that those cultures had some place for a positive view on idleness, and that they considered it an important part of being a human being, so that it was also part of their education.

6) *Bentham and Schiller on idleness and education*

In his book *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750-1830*, Richard Adelman provides a relevant case study in this culture struggle on education. He starts with an analysis of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, in order to show that Smith had thought about the impact of the division of labour on the formation of human beings. Following Rousseau, Smith was aware that the division of labour could stand in the way of a full human development. Smith senses that the rise of the capitalistic mode of production is going to have long-lasting effects on culture and society. Adelman, then, contrasts two opposite models of education: Bentham and Schiller’s. The two models can be seen as iconic representatives of two opposite stances in the culture struggle

³² M. WEBER, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1978, 1002.

³³ *Ibid.*

about the image of man. Bentham, whom Scheler mentions in his *Resentiment* book, proposes an idea of education functional to the needs of modern production, and to the formation of “total workers”. Schiller, in his turn, sees in education a necessary counterweight to the alienation brought about by modern working society.

Unsurprisingly, once again idleness is the bone of contention. According to Adelman, both Bentham’s and Schiller’s educational aims revolve around the idea of “idle thought”. For Bentham idleness is a dangerous malaise, which must be uprooted. Bentham’s ideas offer a vivid example for Foucault’s and Scheler’s analyses on the repression of idleness in modern society. For Schiller, instead, an incapacity for idleness will lead labourers to «become stunted and lopsided, able only to work at their repetitive tasks rather than interact with their fellow men».³⁴ Bentham and Schiller’s view on education seem to literally embody the ambiguity of the world “idleness”: emptiness and vanity on one hand, leisure and rest on the other.

Bentham opens his pedagogical work *Chrestomatia* with a definition of the word *ennui*, which he defines as follows: «a species of pain. It is a “state of uneasiness” brought on by a lack of occupation and the mental inactivity such a physical state engenders».³⁵ Thus, inactivity brings about a peculiar kind of pain. According to Bentham, the first goal of education is to provide security against *ennui*. In fact, he considers *ennui* at the root of all evil and all vices. Education aims at “avocation”, that is, a constant avoidance of idleness. Adelman remarks:

We might say that Bentham is constructing a portrait of human activity in which all occupations slide into pain and vacancy, a portrait in which man must be constantly wary of his level of activity and the duration for which he has been engaged in it, if he is to avoid a mixture of misery and inertia.³⁶

Education in school must keep pupils busy with the greatest variety of activities. The long-lasting effect of education will be to prepare the

³⁴ R. ADELMAN, *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*, 1750-1830, Cambridge 2011, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

pupils to a rewarding life of labor: «the “more things” the pupil is “more or less acquainted with, the more things” he or she “is fit for” and the “better chance” he or she has of “meeting with some *occupation*”».³⁷

In his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller sketches a completely opposite project of education, and claims that utility is «the great idol of our age, to which all powers are in thrall and to which all talent must pay homage».³⁸ According to Schiller, the progress and specialization of modern society is at the origin of a fragmentation in human life, which prevents the formation of a harmonic human being. In a telling passage, Schiller remarks:

Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge.³⁹

An effect of this fragmentation is an imbalance in the development of the different human skills, as in the case of over-thinking (*Vernünftelei*). The solution to this incomplete human development lies in an education revolving around a peculiar tendency in human beings, the play-drive (*Spieltrieb*). Thus, leisure and idleness have a central role in the formation of a harmonic human being. In a famous passage, Schiller remarks: «man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and *he is only completely a man when he plays*».⁴⁰ In leisurely activities, a harmonic interplay between reason and the senses takes place. A key role is played by the disinterested contemplation of beauty. Adelman comments: «By means of the physical sight of what is beautiful, man is [...] led to a sort of negative freedom, a temporary deliverance from restraint».⁴¹ Remember Scheler’s remark that the modern mindset sub-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

ordinates life to utility. Here Schiller claims that leisure and contemplation are crucial in the formation of human beings, because they provide moments of freedom from the constraints of everyday activity. Idleness is an occasion for the celebration of the value of life over utility. In it, we cultivate the wholeness of our being, as opposed to the fragmented specialization imposed by the division of labor.

7) *Idleness and Bildung: A return to the classics?*

As shown by Vicker, idleness has an ambiguous status in pre-modern culture. “Otium”, the Latin word for “idleness”, is both the name for a vice and for an elevated form of life. In the modern age, the negative connotation greatly prevails. In the previous section I suggested that the modern view on idleness is related to a view on man and to a view on education. Idleness is a litmus test for a whole paradigm of anthropogenesis: The stance we take towards idleness reveals our image of man. The “culture struggle” about education is also a culture struggle about the meaning of idleness.

An alternative to the modern mindset would be a return to the pre-modern view on idleness and education. This is not, however, Scheler’s proposal. According to him, both the ancient and the modern view have failed to fully appreciate the meaning of inactivity in anthropogenesis. The modern negative attitude towards idleness was prepared by the ancient ambiguous attitude towards it. In order to appreciate Scheler’s originality in this point, I will briefly contrast his view with Joseph Pieper’s *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*. As announced in the title of his book, Pieper proposes a return to a pre-modern idea of culture and education, based on a positive appreciation of leisure and idleness. Pieper’s criticism of modernity on this point seems to have many aspects in common with Scheler. In fact, he also refers to Scheler’s work. A comparison will highlight the difference between the two.

8) *Pieper: Contemplation as a power of the soul*

In his book, Pieper presents three main claims. The first one is that leisure, that is, inactivity (in the sense of “useful occupations”) plays a central role in the formation of human beings. The second claim is that modern culture has obliterated such a deep value of leisure. The third

one is that we should recover the ancient appreciation for philosophy as leisurely, “idle” activity.

According to Pieper, modern culture is characterized by total work. Quoting from Max Weber, Pieper thus captures the spirit of modern culture: «one does not only work in order to live, but one lives for the sake of one’s own work». ⁴² For our modern mindset, a statement as “we work in order to be at leisure” would sound idle and lacking commitment. However, such a statement can be found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, a pivotal work for European culture. Aristotle’s statement is radically opposed to our modern mindset, because it praises inactivity as the final goal of human activity. The whole post-Aristotelian tradition has seen in contemplation, a passive openness towards reality, the highest state in human existence. In this noble kind of inactivity, human beings can overcome themselves and can tend towards the divine. Such a «purely receptive seeing» is «really the highest fulfillment of what it is to be human». ⁴³ Philosophy is the cultivation of this disinterested attitude towards reality, which allows humans to overcome the domain of work and utility: «the philosophical act is one which transcends the working world» ⁴⁴ and «only in such authentic leisure can “the door into freedom” be opened out of the confinement of that “hidden anxiety” which a certain perceptive observer [Richard Wright] has seen as the distinctive character of the working world». ⁴⁵ In virtue of its transcending power, philosophy deserves a special place in education as *Bildung*. As observed earlier with other authors, Pieper attributes to inactivity a qualifying role in the education of a well formed human being, (which he also calls “the gentleman”, quoting from John Henry Newman), as opposed to «all mere career training». ⁴⁶ Finally, the act of human self-transcendence realized in contemplation is made possible by a peculiar power of the human soul:

⁴² J. PIEPER, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, South Bend 1998, 26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

This sentence became a constant point of reference for the anthropology of the High Middle Ages: *anima est quodammodo omnia* [“The soul, in a certain way, is all things”]. “In a certain way”: that is to say, the soul is “all” insofar as it sets itself in relation to the whole of existence.⁴⁷

In his plea for a rediscovery of the role of leisure in culture, Pieper calls for a renewed attention to the power of the human soul.

9) *Scheler: inactivity as distinctive human possibility*

a) *Intelligence and spirit*

In his work *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, Scheler presents his mature philosophical anthropology. Traditionally, higher cognitive skills have been considered a distinctive feature of human beings. However, recent experiments with apes pointed to their ability to solve problem in order to access food. Apes were able to provide original solutions, by combining different elements in a given environment (boxes, sticks etc.) in new ways. These experiments indicated that intelligent behavior, as opposed to mere stimulus-response behavior, also belongs to animals other than man. Surely, there is an immense difference between piling boxes on one another to reach a banana, and inventing cars or lightbulbs. However, Scheler asks, is this a difference in essence or in degree? If intelligence belongs both to human beings and other animals, it cannot be considered anymore as a distinctive feature of human beings. If this be the case, Scheler famously remarks, «between an intelligent chimpanzee and Edison taken as a technician only, there would be only a *gradual* difference – even if a very large one».⁴⁸

The distinctive feature of man lies not in cognitive skills, but rather in the possibility of a radically different interaction with their environment. According to Scheler, intelligence has a pragmatic function. It allows living beings to cope with their environment in a successful way. In this sense, human work is itself an expression of intelligence and a function of utility: It changes the environment in order to cope with it more successfully. Unlike other animals, however, human beings have also the possibility to interact with the environment in a disinterested

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁸ M. SCHELER, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, Evanston 2009, 26.

way. It is a possibility for «freedom and detachability».⁴⁹ Scheler calls this possibility “spirit”, and adds that his use of the word is different from the traditional one. Provided with spirit, human beings can shift from a manifold of practical interests to an openness to the totality of the world. The ancient thinkers called “contemplation” this disinterested openness to the totality of the world. Scheler’s provides here an extensive analysis of spirit, which is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵⁰

b) *Derealization as an operation of the spirit*

The relation between spirit and inactivity is explored by Scheler in his discussion of the act of ideation. The act of ideation is a spiritual act, «completely different from those that appear in technical intelligence and all mediate and reductive “thinking”, whose rudimentary beginnings we already attributed to animals».⁵¹ As an example, consider a pain in my arm. Using intelligence, I try to find out why the pain is there, and how to remove it – leading eventually to the discoveries of physiology and medicine. With an act of ideation, instead, I look at my pain as an essential state of affairs, and I ask questions as “what is pain in itself?”, “Why is the world permeated with pain?” and similar. I take a «more distant, pensive, and contemplative standpoint upon it».⁵² Intelligence works with repeated observations and induction. Ideation works by grasping the essential features of something in the world, by looking at one specimen of it.

According to Scheler, only humans can perform an act of ideation. In fact, an act of ideation is made possible by a deeper operation of the spirit, called “derealization”. Derealization is «a technique which can [...] be called a suspension of the reality of things and the world».⁵³ The original impression of reality is related to our unceasing interaction with the environment. As living beings, we are constantly enacting our

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the “openness to the totality of the world” in a Schelerian framework see G. CUSINATO, *Periagoge. Teoria della singolarità e filosofia come cura del desiderio*, Verona 2014.

⁵¹ M. SCHELER, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, 35.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 37.

drives and coping with our surroundings. Intelligence and work allow us to be successful in these complex interactions. Reality presents itself as an «inhibiting and constraining pressure»⁵⁴ on part of the environment surrounding us. Thus, the stress of modern life is just a heightened version of a mood of angst that constantly accompanies «earthly existence»:⁵⁵ It is the angst of dealing with the pressure of the environment. Derealization carries out an annihilation of the whole impression of reality and its correlative mood of angst. Unsurprisingly, Scheler refers here to Schiller. Both thinkers see in derealization a form of “negative freedom” from the pull of utility in our life. Spirit is the distinctive feature of human beings that make derealization possible.

Scheler’s characterization of derealization closely resembles the pre-modern view on contemplation, as it is presented by Pieper. In it, the anxiety of life and work is overcome by a passive openness towards totality. Its disinterested gaze is the highest possibility in human existence, and a source of freedom from constraints. However, according to Scheler, the ancients have misunderstood the nature of the spirit and its operations. Scheler calls “classic theory” the view according to which spirit has «both power and activity, indeed the highest measure of might and power».⁵⁶ Pieper endorsed this view, according to which the self-transcendence of human beings is made possible by a peculiar power of the human soul. Scheler claims that this is a misunderstanding. As he puts it, «initially, spirit has no energy of his own».⁵⁷ In derealization, spirit is neither creating nor producing anything. It is misleading to interpret the operation of the spirit as a kind of activity. Rather, derealization is an expression of the radical *in-activity* of the spirit: derealization is the alternative to activity. On the one hand, the ancient philosophers were able to discern the presence and the peculiar operation of the spirit as a unique possibility of human beings, which opens them to the totality. On the other hand, they mistakenly interpreted such a possibility in terms of activity. This ambiguity in the classical theory eventually led to a more radical misunderstanding in the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

modern age: «their conceptualization became the basic outlook held by the larger part of the Occidental bourgeoisie»,⁵⁸ the modern worldview I addressed in the first part of the paper.

10) Conclusion

As shown in the first part of the paper, the attitude of pre-modern culture towards idleness was ambiguous. Idleness could be both a vice or the highest human achievement. This ambiguity is present in the meaning of the Latin word *otium*. The attitude of modern culture towards idleness is almost one-sidedly negative. In a Schelerian framework, all this is due to a long-standing failure in fully appreciating the role of inactivity in human existence. The negative attitude of modern culture, oriented towards total work, is an exacerbation of the ambiguous attitude of classical culture, which interpreted the spirit in terms of activity. Both attitudes failed to realize that the peculiar human possibility, derealization, is an alternative to activity, and not a form of activity. Thus, an incomplete view on idleness brings about an incomplete view of human beings. Scheler pleads for the necessity to acknowledge the function of inactivity as a possibility pertaining only to human beings, and belonging to the definition of what a human being is. Inactivity as a spiritual operation allows us to transcend the boundaries of utility and be open to the totality of the world. This acknowledgement calls also for a renewed attention to idleness in philosophical anthropology and education. Eugen Fink, another distinguished phenomenologist working on philosophy of education, called to the same attention in his *Oasis of Happiness*, a book on the ontology of play. As Scheler wrote in his comments to Heidegger's *Being and Time*: «A philosophy of everydayness must be countered with a philosophy of Sundays. Sunday casts its light back and forth onto everydayness. We live from Sunday to Sunday. Care is only a mean from Sunday to Sunday».⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁹ *GW IX*, 294.

ABSTRACT

Contemporary society has mostly a negative view of idleness. Scheler provides insights for an alternative view, in which idleness plays a central role in our being and becoming human (*Bildung*). Scheler's view is philosophically original, and not just a return to the traditional Aristotelian discourse on contemplation.

