Idleness, Usefulness and Self-Constitution

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Abstract

The core argument of the paper is that the modern philosophical notion of self-constitution is directed against the prospect of human beings dissolving into idleness. Arguments for self-constitution are marked non-philosophical presuppositions about the value of usefulness. Those arguments also assume a particular conception of superior experience as conscious integration of a person's actions under within an identifiable set of chosen commitments. Exploring particular arguments by Hegel, Kant, Korsgaard and Frankfurt the paper claims that those arguments are problematic in the various ways in which they suppose usefulness and explicitly or implicitly take extra-philosophical views of idleness.

1. Philosophy has, from its earliest days, offered a defence of leisure. Aristotle contrasted the energy sapping labours of the physical professions with the leisure needed for the fundamentally human enterprise of philosophical thinking. The term he used was *σχολή*, and he had in mind anything but an indolent life. Leisure was not idling, that is, the doing of nothing in particular or acting casually and without objectives: leisure permitted serious contemplation.[1] Bertrand Russell's "Praise of Idleness" proves, in fact, to go no further than its title. He, worried that modern work practices deplete our capacities for other activities, actually defends leisure in the Aristotelian sense. He wrote: "Leisure is essential to civilisation."[2] The leisured class historically had "cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies, and refined social relations. Even the liberation of the oppressed has usually been inaugurated from above."[3] Leisure, then, is to be distinguished from idleness on the basis of its superior purposefulness, the purpose of – in effect – providing ideas necessary for the advancement of humanity.[4] Leisure is either identifiable with our higher capacities: a reflective life *is* a leisured life. Or leisure provides the conditions under which those capacities can be developed: leisure *may lead to* reflective accomplishments. The prospect of superior productivity gives leisure a good name.

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Without productivity leisure takes on the character of idleness. Outside philosophy idleness has often been perceived as an evil for the human character. Discussing the discipline of obedience to God Calvin writes: "It just happens to it as with refractory horses, which, if kept idle for a few days at hack and manger, become ungovernable, and no longer recognize the rider, whose command before they implicitly obeyed."[5] The lesson Calvin tries to persuade us of would frame the social morality of the industrial revolution. Together with the permanent migration of people – increasingly construed as workers – towards centres of employment came the new phenomenon of the class of urban unemployed. Their condition was lamented as one of "idleness." In this context the problem of "idleness" has two dimensions. First, the unemployed possessed no means of living. Idleness was therefore a direct evil. Second, unemployment would entail an unstructured daily life which could lead only to irresponsibility and criminality. Idleness was in this sense an indirect evil in that it was neither irresponsibility nor a form of maliciousness in itself but freed the individual from the salutary (if not edifying) constraints of labour. It is a kind of disintegration of the moral character. Observations of the supposedly wild peoples of non-European cultures offered frighteningly instructive example to the modern world of lives without purpose, mired in idleness. Even Wordsworth – with his romantic anxieties about industrialization – had internalized the norm of productive labour. In the poem, "Gipsies" he expresses his disgust at the torpor of a gypsy camp that he encounters twice in one day, with a twelve hour gap, between the start and finish of his (self-importantly) busy day:

> – Twelve hours, twelve bounteous hours, are gone while I
> Have been a Traveller under open sky,
> Much witnessing of change and cheer,
> Yet as I left I find them here!
>
> […]
>
> Better vain deeds or evil than such life!
> The silent Heavens have goings on;
> The stars have tasks – but these have none.[6]

Any sort of busyness, then, was preferable to the apparent inertia of the idle. Obviously enough, profound differences exist between the experiences of involuntary unemployment and the idleness of Wordsworth's gypsies. The former is indissociable from misery, whereas the latter invokes images of ease and a carefree existence. However that difference holds only at the level of the direct evil of idleness. The indirect evil – disintegration through non-productivity – is where idleness as decried by moralists and idleness as gypsy freedom converge.

2. Thus far, two different features of idleness have been noted: (i) non-productivity and (ii) moral disintegration. In spite of the significant periods of idleness for those human lives free of constant duress or necessity philosophy has provided this feature of experience with very little analysis and certainly even less endorsement. Within some of the foundational modern discussions of agency idleness has been identified as in some respect normatively illegitimate. It is to be excluded from the scope of what the agent can see as consistent with her sense of agency. This is perhaps no surprise when we recall the modern assumption that agency and morality somehow reciprocate one another. Idleness is not moral behaviour. More deeply, though, the phenomenon of idleness – as distinct from the respectable concept of leisure – complicates philosophical theories that construe personhood or agency as a kind of achievement.

The notion that the self is an achievement pervades the history of philosophy, though it has been supported by very different theories. These theories range from claims about the capacities of the subject to produce its own distinctive practical agency to theorizations of agency as an essentially intersubjective phenomenon. Philosophers have also claimed, from long before the modern era, that in order for the subject to gain the truth of itself it must painfully detach itself from its social environment. The theory of self-achieving that I want to look at falls into the first category, the one which explains the development of the self as an agent in the world as a process of active *self-constitution*. This theory has systematically – i.e. as a direct corollary of its principles – denigrated idle experience as it seeks to establish some kind of normative pre-eminence for the achieved self.

The theory of self-constitution originates in Kant's idea of the moral agent (to be discussed in more detail in 4. below). Self-constitution involves the self in some kind of winning negotiation with itself in which the self overcomes its own

diffuseness in order to give its actions integral purpose. Its life thereby takes on a discernible structure because it is now normatively guided. This thesis has been given revised formulation in recent times by Christine Korsgaard (to be discussed in more detail in 5. below) but it is also found in non-deontological form in Harry Frankfurt's work (section 6. below). Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on existentialism is a popular expression of this philosophical idea, and it emphasizes one of the theory of self-constitution's central claims; namely, *not only do we constitute ourselves but that we have some kind of an unavoidable obligation to do so*: "Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality."[7] We humans are made of self-constituting choosing, whether we like it or not: not choosing is itself therefore some kind of self-constituting choice, albeit one of bad faith. Passivity, inertia, indifference to one's situation are likewise self-determining. This claim is established by Sartre by little more than insistence, but he is simply pursuing the model, in which agency is a kind of intense self-occupation, set down by Kant and Fichte. The kind of obligation at work is – as I think will become clearer below – a misleading mixture of ineluctable natural necessity and normative preference.

Few expressions of resistance to this characterization of human beings as busy, self-constituting agents are found among philosophically minded thinkers. Among the earliest, and most perceptive, are Friedrich Schlegel's. His character Julius, in *Lucinde* (1799), proclaims an "Idyll upon Idleness" likening it not to *σχολή* but to the "godlike art" of indolence (*Faulheit*).[8] It is a "liberal carelessness and inactivity."[9] He also characterizes the general comportment of idleness as "passivity,"[10] in fact, as "pure vegetating" (*reines Vegetieren*).[11] He contrasts the attitude of the idler with that of "self-conceit"[12] (*Eigendünkel*) where the individual is caught up only in the imperatives of "industry and utility," which he darkly describes as "the angels of death."[13] He identifies Prometheus, "the inventor of education and enlightenment,"[14] as the source not only of these inexplicable imperatives but also – in effect – the goal of self-constitution to be achieved through the performance of these imperatives: "It's from him [Prometheus] that you inherited your inability to stay put and your need to be constantly striving. It's also for this reason that, when you have absolutely nothing else to do *you foolishly feel compelled to aspire to having a personality*…"[15] Julius, then, seems to be progressing the notion of idleness in a radical – socially critical – manner: (i) idleness defies industry, utility, means and

ends, (ii) happiness is conceived as passivity rather than restless activity and (iii) idleness is a decentering experience in which the self abandons self-absorption. Other elements of the Idyll, though, show that Julius does not make good on this radical conception. He also thinks of idleness as providing us with the conditions under which one can "remember one's whole ego and contemplate the whole of life."[16] It is not clear how this stands in relation to *Eigendünkel*. And more conventionally idleness can permit "inspiration" (*Begeisterung*) in which the "thinking and writing of poetry" may take place.[17] In this regard idleness resonates with one of the traditional philosophical features of leisure. In spite of these complexities, though, Julius' critical insights against what he calls "Nordic barbarity"[18] will, as we shall see, have significant relevance in the theorization of idleness as criticism of self-constitution.

3. Let me describe the phenomenon of idleness as I understand it. First there are its phenomenological features. Idleness, which is a variety of behaviour, is experienced as *unfocused* and only vaguely, if at all, as purposeful. It is *restful* and *pleasurable* though there may be discomfort if idleness prevents one from completing a task of some significance. There is a *sense of freedom* throughout the duration of idle behaviour: a feeling of *non-compulsion* and *drift*. We become idle by *slipping into it*, either in the middle of tasks or for extended periods. The structure of our individual lives permits idleness in varying degrees, depending on the level of our commitments and the seriousness with which we take them. In principle, it is possible to imagine a life which is largely idle, that is, in which idleness is not a momentary release from work. Deliberate idleness – once theorized among a certain class as the art of being idle – is something else precisely because of its deliberateness: it is a way of life, carefully pursued.[19] Second are its effective dimensions. The activities which fill an idle period of behaviour are *non-productive*. Should an interesting thought, of value to ongoing or future projects, arise during idleness this is serendipitous. The effective dimension is more important than the phenomenological one in enabling us to insist that idleness is not, after all, an effort to make something of oneself, even in bad faith. And this takes us to the third dimension of idle behaviour, its structure. It just does not come with the structure of choice. Absent from it is the reflexivity required by the theory of self-determination, that is, of a self that monitors itself – even intermittently – to ensure that it is acting on its maxims, goals or desires. Likewise, although it is an experience of non-compulsion, idleness is not to be

construed as a form of autonomy (in the over-burdened philosophical sense), since it is not a process within which thematized justifications can even retrojectively be identified. However, it is not mindless: no less than non-idle behaviour it contains conceptual and judicative components. The mind is not switched off. It cannot therefore be interpreted as essentially irrational. To interpret it in that way is to prejudice the notion of rationality by claiming it for self-determining or self-constituting actions only.

I do not want to identify idleness either as an imperative – as something we ought to pursue or leave ourselves open to – or as superior human behaviour (as Schlegel's Julius does and likewise the persona of Kierkegaard's "The Rotation Method"[20]). There may be people who either never experience idleness or dislike it. If, as Santoro Brienza puts it, "*[h]omo sapiens* comes to light through our profile as *homo faber* and *homo laborans*"[21] idleness will be a challenge to those who understand what makes them truly human as self-negotiation: it may be meaningless to them or perhaps offensive to their self-conceptions. That is a self-conception that philosophy has somehow taken to be the definition of meaningful life itself. And it is this self-conception in its philosophical formulations that this paper addresses. What I am attempting here is simply to put into question the justifications – such as that are – offered for the peculiar necessity for self-constitution.

Idleness might seem to be explicable within the framework of Galen Strawson's distinction between self-narrativity and episodic experience. Idle experience appears to be a space of experience very squarely outside what Strawson ascribes to narrative selfhood, which is: "diachronic self-experience" where one considers oneself "as a self, as something that was there in the (further past) and will be there in the (further future)"[22]; narcissistic; an effort at autobiographical "form-finding"[23]; and "story-telling,"[24] (stories which may come to be revised[25]). But the matter does not rest there. A person with narrative tendencies could well be given to idleness yet wish to account for his idleness experience by construing it as an element within a processual outcome. That is to say, the narrativist might not disavow idle experience and instead chose to incorporate it within his autobiography. Equally, though, the narrativist might feel alarm at a life that was more or less idly pursued. Indeed Strawson suggests that this is the view the narrativist might take towards his contrary, the episodist (not the idler), about whom he "may feel that there is something chilling, empty and deficient"[26] about a life not self-understood in

diachronic terms, that is as episodic. Strawson's proposal contains a compelling philosophical insight: its criticism that self-narration as an act of self-construction has prompted a whole tradition of thinking about an enduring moral agent as a necessary condition of intelligible moral action. Strawson believes that the episodist can pursue a moral life[27] regardless of the discontinuities in the episodist's self-understanding. The full range of temporally referenced moral experience – e.g. guilt and responsibility for past actions – can be accommodated within an episodic conception of the self.[28] The reflective achievements of self-understanding need not depend on diachronic narratives. Strawson's project is to detach the possibility of morality from narrativity. It should, therefore, be evident from this that what the notion of idle experience that I am developing therefore falls outside Strawson's framework. Episodic moral action is no less purposeful and intentional than its narrative alternative. Though not engaged in any acts of self-constitution the episodist can nevertheless be an agent in active pursuit of what he or she takes to be the good. The idler – if my account captures any reality – is blissfully withdrawn from that pursuit. Strawson's dichotomy refers to two opposing styles of self-understanding, whereas idleness refers to an alternative form of self-relation to that which the theory of self-constitution makes fundamental.

4. Kant explores the question of idleness only briefly, though at a crucial moment in his development of a theory of rational agency. Idleness presents itself to him as a challenge to the idea of life as commitment to self-constitution in accordance with the laws of practical reason. And he emotively identifies the opposing conception of life with the inferior spaces of an exotic and unenlightened society. The *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* offers a number of test cases with which to illustrate the rational compellingness of the "universal imperative of duty," the imperative, namely, to "act as if your maxim were to become by your will a universal law of nature."[29] In one of these instances Kant considers the case of a man who could cultivate a talent that would "make him a human being useful for all sorts of purposes."[30] However, this man is something of an idler who is indifferent to his talents. He nevertheless decides to subject his casual preference for this self-neglect to the test of the universal imperative of duty. Kant does not explain why the idler might take this decision. By setting out his thought experiment in these terms, though, Kant prepares us for the outcome that will affirm his views of what we should do and be.

There are two assumptions that influence the formulation of this thought experiment. First, Kant assumes that this idle man will give authority to reason. He is construed as one who is oriented towards the business of justification in accordance with reasons. He is not really neutral, therefore, between reason and idleness. Second, Kant assumes that this man has an interest in what kind of person he is going to be. This means that he will be hospitable to what might contribute to his (self-) constitution, over an existence of drifting from experience to experience. The idler, for Kant, will therefore be responsive to the norm of self-realization and will reflect on whether he has actually realized himself by neglecting his talents.

Kant argues that a system of nature could, in fact, "subsist" with "a universal law," where idleness was to be the basic state of the human community. This would be possible even though, as he writes, "(as with the South Sea Islanders) the human being should let his talents rust and be concerned with devoting his life merely to idleness (*Müßiggang*), amusement (*Ergötzlichkeit*), procreation (*Fortpflanzung*) – in a word to enjoyment (*Genuß*)."[31] However, no rational being, he specifies, could will idleness either as a "universal law" or for it to "be put in us as such by means of natural instinct."[32] The rational being, rather, wills the full realization of all his capacities since "they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes."[33] It is, though, obscure as to what any given individual's capacities might happen to be. And it is an open question for any individual as to whether the capacities they believe they have are worthy – both intrinsically and in terms of their agreeableness to the individual – of the endeavour needed to realize them. (A similar issue is raised by John Rawls' case of the blades of grass counter.[34])

A question about the nature of the rationality of self-realization presents itself. If there are individuals who experience no urge to cultivate purposeful talents and that it is not impossible for a system of nature to subsist with a race of idlers, what force does the self-improvement imperative have over us, particularly as a rational imperative? Kant has to hold – question beggingly, it seems to me – that it is in some sense irrational to be indifferent to the obligations to ourselves that are occasioned by our potential for all kinds of usefulness. Endeavouring to become useful rather than idle, then, is consistent with the will of a rational being. This places the weight of what is to count as rational on to the socially determined idea of what is to count as useful. What this means, though, is that the will of a rational being is ideally responsive to the prevailing social norms of usefulness and functions in harmony with

the conventional worry about idleness (though for higher "philosophical" reasons). The social norm of virtuous busyness and the specific historical roles it recognizes (the useful ones) turn out to be determiners of rationality. This hardly meets the standards of lawlikeness that Kant attributes to the choices of the autonomous rational will.

In view of Hegel's efforts both to capture the historical content of our social norms and to provide an account of our agency as a property of recognition driven intersubjectivity it is hardly surprising that he should explicitly connect self-realization with the contingent needs of others. The notion of usefulness – which according to my interpretation is difficult to accommodate within Kant's conception of the rational agent – fits within this intersubjective frame. Like Kant Hegel regards idleness as a non-rational activity. He shares with Kant the view that it is uselessness which defines the non-rationality of idleness. In the *Philosophy of Right* he claims that whereas theoretical education enables our capacity to deal with abstract ideas it is practical education that develops us as useful social beings. He writes: "*Practical education* through work consists in the self-perpetuating need and *habit of being occupied* in one way or another, in the *limitation of one's activity* to suit both the nature of the material in question and, in particular, the arbitrary will of others, and in a habit, acquired through this discipline, of *objective* activity and universally applicable skills."[35] He then goes on to contrast the "educated" or developed man (*Gebildeten*) with the "dull and solitary brooding (*Stumpfheit*)" of the lazy "barbarian."[36] This passage obviously contains a number of claims: (1) that a good of work is that the worker limits herself in response to (1a) the preferences of the social environment ("the arbitrary will of others") and (1b) to the limits of the task in hand ("the nature of the material in question"); (2) through this process one develops a self-perpetuating need to keep busy, and thereby, we can infer, to avoid idleness. It is (2) that reveals an assumption that Hegel shares with Kant: an insistence that one must work in order to gain normative standing (in contrast to the despised barbarian). We can easily see that the barbarian possesses self-perpetuating habits that suffice for his mode of self-preservation, but he is nevertheless inferior because he is lazy. In his *Stumpfheit* he does not participate in socially validated work practices: he is withdrawn from the world. He works only when necessary for his continuing physical existence. By contrast, the practically educated or properly formed person involved in the self-perpetuation of a personal activity contributes to the perpetuation of society.

The educated person is superior to the barbarian in that he is willing to work when the material productions of work are not required.[37] The very process of becoming an agent in the social world is determined by acquiring prestigious and useful though existentially unnecessary habits. Kant, as we have seen, faces the difficulty of establishing his notion of rational agency when he relies on contextual factors of what is to count as useful: usefulness and rationality come into tension in his account. Hegel, by contrast, can boldly state the value of habitual work practices because, presumably, the self-perpetuating worker gains recognition within the distinctive historical social arrangements in which he is available as a worker.

5. The difficulty that Kant faces in his argument against idleness stems from his efforts to connect work, usefulness and rationality (and that is true of Hegel also). Ultimately, as I have tried to show, Kant's imperative of self-realization is either social (utility has an historical content) and is therefore not neutrally rational, or it is simply a preference for the self-occupied self. Kant's notion of the self-negotiating rational agent, in this light, begins to look like a piece of philosophical superstructure, determined by the base of some implicit "work ethic." If that is the case then we must lose a certain degree of naiveté: rational self-constitution may be accused of being a normatively infused conception of human behaviour. That conception can be carried forward only at the cost of the complexity of agential experience. Among other aspects of this experience, idleness will be made to disappear. This trajectory, I want to argue next, is found in Christine Korsgaard's conception of agency. She takes as a given the conception of a person self-occupied with decisions and consequent actions geared towards self-integration and the formation of an effective practical identity.

A fundamental principle of Korsgaard's theory of agency is that agency is the achievement of a process that we individually undertake. And it is not a process which we can choose to reject: "Carving out a personal identity for which we are responsible is one of the inescapable tasks of human life,"[38] she writes. Our rationality – which Korsgaard does not consider in terms of historical social arrangements or the institutional requirements of these arrangements – places that challenge on us. Non-rational beings – animals – do not need to consider how to constitute themselves. But we cannot avoid it. It is a given for beings like us: it is simply a natural fact about the human condition that this burden, and its intrinsic normativity – the process of

becoming responsible for ourselves – falls upon us. Were we somehow able to resist it we would consequently be without reason "to act and to live."[39]

Creating this personal identity – self-constituting – is accomplished through the decisions we make about what practical identity we might prefer to have. In neo-Sartrean register Korsgaard writes: "I am going to argue that in the relevant sense there is no *you* prior to your choices and actions, because your identity is in a quite literal way constituted by your choices and actions."[40] By constituting ourselves as integrated complexes we create ourselves as beings with meaning and self-purpose. We have standards by which to judge our actions too, standards that are supplied by the kind of agent we want to be. Being someone in particular involves self-legislated delimitation. It means becoming an agent with defined tasks: "We owe it to ourselves, to our own humanity, to find some roles that we can fill with integrity and dedication."[41] The nature of that debt is unexplained, but it is apparently rather pressing. There are roles – presumably pre-established – which serve as options for us, and if we find one that suits our talents and inclinations we will bind ourselves to it. Adopting a role and making it our own is what self-constitution requires.[42] (Perhaps it is significant that the relationship we must have with our roles, as Korsgaard describes it, resembles Calvin's idea of a "good work," the "first part" of which "is the will, the second is the vigorous effort in doing it."[43])

The origin of our initial encounters with the forms of life that will become part of our identity may, Korsgaard says, be a matter of contingency.[44] But as they become the content of an identity we self-constitute we cease to experience them as preferences we might voluntarily abandon. "Making the contingent necessary," Korsgaard writes, "is one of the tasks of human life and the ability to do it is arguably a mark of a good human being."[45] The contingent becomes necessary as we order our desires or preferences under normative principles. That is how "the ongoing struggle for integrity, the struggle for psychic unity"[46] is addressed. Becoming someone and being a normatively structured entity belong to a single process. To be a unified agent is to be a moral agent. Korsgaard has arguments to support the notion that an immoral agent is not properly constituted (arguments which have been strongly and persistently criticized since the appearance of her *Sources of Normativity*[47]). A good person is, as Korsgaard defines it, "someone with standards, someone with integrity, someone who is able to govern herself."[48] That governance must be enacted when one feels no desire to act in accordance with one's role. The experience of what we ought

to do or be is the experience of normative necessitation. She writes: "Normative standards… are the principles by which we achieve the psychic unity that makes agency possible. The work of achieving psychic unity, the work that we experience as necessitation, is what I am going to call self-constitution."[49] We undertake this "work" though it may sometimes be painful to us. Kant also could see no reason to weigh pleasure and idleness over the exertions of self-realization since the latter falls on the side of rationality. Korsgaard adopts a similar standpoint: "being a person, having a personal identity, being a rational agent, is in itself a form of *work*. And the experience of *necessitation*, with its elements of effort and even of pain, is the experience of a form of *work*."[50] Standing in the way of that achievement are certain sorts of possible failings: "Timidity, idleness, and depression will exert their claims in turn, will attempt to control or overrule my will, to divert me from my work."[51] The self-struggle is caused by some form of necessitation to self-constitute and it appears to involve a kind of violence against an inner recalcitrance, against a tendency we have to not to want to form an identity for ourselves. That this necessitation is a source of pain might well be a reason to question its governing authority over us. This question is not raised by Korsgaard, however: it is cut off by the insistence that self-constitution is a *must* which is nevertheless not a matter of choice. It is therefore not an *ought* in any familiar sense.

We might also ask who or what is feeling the pain that is characteristic of this necessitation? What part of a person – there must be some – is reacting against the demand of self-constitution since there is apparently "no you prior to your choices and actions, because your identity is in a quite literal way constituted by your choices and actions"? This seems to leave the experience of "necessitation" without a location, at least if we think of necessitation as the experience of doing something that our prior inclinations do not orient us towards spontaneously.[52]

This complexity is the outcome of Korsgaard's denial on the basis of principle of agency as sometimes indifferent to acts that are construable as contributions to a self-constituting process. That there may be meaningful experiences that lies outside that process is excluded. She provides an account of action to support this exclusivity, arguing that "to regard some movement of my mind or my body as *my action*, I must see it as an expression of myself as a whole, rather than as a result of some force that is at work *on* me or *in* me."[53] Note that ownership of action is set out in this binarial way: as an expression of myself as a whole or as an alien force. It would be

reasonable to say – as Korsgaard I think intends – that actions that cannot be attributed to either my intellectual or intentional physical "causality" cannot be attributed to me personally. But is the contrary of an unattributable action one that can be recognized as an expression of me *as a whole*? Korsgaard herself expands on the latter as "my entire nature working as an integrated whole."[54] But this seems to overload the notion of an actor. We might ask: what is on the list of what forms the "entire nature" of a person? And would all of my free activities be systematic or organically connected moments of a whole nature? These questions cannot bear fruitful answers, but the very notion of an "entire nature" or "the person as a whole, as a unity" seems to provoke them.[55] Instead, it seems to me more realistic to think of actions as reflective of the interests one has at time, some indeed of which may be expressions of what one takes oneself to be. But others not at all.

And this returns us the question of idle behaviour. If we cannot move away from the notion of the investment of the whole person in an action the phenomenon of idleness can be given no theoretical expression. It is neither integrating nor prompted by integrity. Nor is idle experience a variety of self-alienation or a process in which identities compete. It is experience one simply and unproblematically without any reference to self-making recognizes as one's own. We can evade this only by transferring the concept of a person to the process of the integration of desires within a single and – as I have suggested – contestable historical conception of what kind of agents agents themselves want to be.

6. As a final case study in the history of self-constitution as a repudiation of idleness I want to examine to Harry Frankfurt's conception of "what we care about," a conception he developed in order to provide some explanation, which deontological ethics does not, of what is "*important to us*" in decisions about how to act.[56] He claims that as "for the notion of what a person cares about, it coincides in part with the notion of something with reference to which the person guides himself in what he does with his life and in his conduct."[57] Frankfurt then sets out, in effect, a list of characteristics of care-type behaviour and the agent properties required for that behaviour. It is not stated that they are strict criteria nor whether they are all necessary in order for us to be able to determine that what a person finds important is also something they care about.

Care, Frankfurt claims, "consists in guiding oneself along a distinctive course."[58] In order to be capable of caring in this sense there must be "both agency and self-consciousness."[59] He goes on to describe care-type activities as essentially "reflexive,"[60] indicating some kind of thematized self-awareness: knowing what one is undertaking as one undertakes it. The degree of self-possession that is implied by this reflexivity is notable. According to Frankfurt care-type activities are purposive – in the sense of intentional – and he claims that it is because they are purposive that they are reflexive. What he seems to mean is that the purpose or intention is borne in mind through the action. To act purposefully with success, at any rate, means acting out and not drifting away from the purpose. Something that one cares about, perhaps, holds the agent in such a way as to exclude that drifting. Indeed, this might be explained by what Frankfurt describes with the curious metaphor of a personal investment: a "person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it."[61] That person, he continues, using categories that are more familiar from rational choice theory, "identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced."[62] There is, according to Frankfurt, a characteristic of devotedness in our relationship to what we care about. Finally, there is some kind of what we might call temporal self-consciousness in that, as Frankfurt puts it, the "outlook of a person who cares about something is inherently prospective; that is, he necessarily considers himself as having a future."[63] The thing that one cares about is an ongoing project in which the agent sees, if not secures, part of her identity. Frankfurt's, then, conceives of the person as a kind of self-achievement.

Frankfurt separates caring from simple desiring. Caring involves the individual in some kind of self-negotiating acts, whereas desires "can occur in a life which consists merely in a succession of separate moments, none of which the subject recognizes – either when it occurs or in anticipation or in memory – as an element integrated with others in his own continuing history."[64] Integration, then, is achieved though acting out of what we care about. Desires, by contrast, do not register themselves within the subject's self-conception. Defined in this way – as a direct contrary of intregrational acts – desires at least resemble idleness as I have described it. It is difficult to recall what one was doing whilst idling. None of its components, as one drifts from element to element, is necessarily connected and nor are those components identifiable as part of one's life projects or ongoing concerns. There is

none of what Frankfurt calls "wholeheartedness."[65] The subject is not reflexively involved in this aimless sequence of somehow absorbing activities. There is no self-negotiation. Frankfurt claims that in the case of a succession of desires, which do not form any part of the subject's care behaviour, "there is no continuing subject."[66] It is all or nothing, because, quite extraordinarily, that the "lives of some animals are presumably like that."[67] The person who cares, however, "necessarily binds" the pertinent moments of her care projects "together."[68] There is a "steadiness of behavior."[69] In caring about what is important the steady person "guides himself away from being critically affected by anything – in the outside world or within himself – which might divert him or dissuade him either from following that course or from caring as much as he does about following it."[70] Caring, then, turns out not to be exclusively a description of how the things that are important to us determine our decisions.[71]

7. The purpose for which this analysis visited various statements from the self-constitution tradition was to demonstrate the territorial ambitions of that tradition over what is to count as meaningful experience. Determined to identify what we essentially are with actions motivated by the ongoing project of integration the self itself somehow becomes the agent of its own delimitation. And it does so in the name of rationality. But, as we have seen, in light of the phenomenon of idle experience, the arguments supporting this thesis are unusually brutal. Kant recommends that the indifference to oneself that is characteristic of the idler can be overcome by making oneself into something useful, yet the definition of usefulness belongs to the contingent conditions of any given society not to rationality. Hegel, though less explicitly interested in self-constitution, worries that idleness produces a self that is indifferent to society without explaining what kind of impairment this is. This condition is identified as a deficiency to be overcome by – again – making oneself useful. Among the contemporary philosophers considered here usefulness is not the criterion of a constituted person. But that leads not to a more appropriate conception of the achieved self or person, that is, one free of the "ethic" that compromised the German Idealists' conceptions. Rather, deprived of any reason (such as usefulness) why one ought to self-constitute dogmatic naturalism becomes the justification: we must (not ought), we are humans (not animals).

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Notes

[1] "…the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete)." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), Book X 1177b.

[2] Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2nd Ed 2004), p. 5.

[3] Ibid., p. 13.

[4] This appears to be Lafargue's position too. In support of his notion of laziness (*la paresse*) he quotes from Xenophon: "Work takes all the time and with it one has no leisure for the republic and his friends." Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, trans. Charles H. Kerr (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1907), p. 61.

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2008), Book III, Chapter 8, Section 5, p. 460.

[6] William Wordsworth, "Gipies," 1807, rev. 1815. The last two lines appear in the revised edition and are more severely judgemental than those they replace.

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 50.

[8] Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde, and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 63 (adjusted).

[9] Ibid., p. 65 (adjusted).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p. 66.

[12] Ibid., p. 65.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 68.

[15] Ibid. (emphasis added).

[16] Ibid., p. 66.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., p. 65.

[19] Andrew Levine considers the case of individuals who idle deliberately, in line with their substantive conception of a good life, and the implications of that preference for Rawlsian fairness. See, "Fairness to Idleness: Is there a Right not to Work?" *Economics and Philosophy*, Vol. 11 (1995) (pp. 255-274).

[20] In *Either / Or* he writes: "The Olympian gods were not bored, they lived happily in happy idleness (*Lediggang*). A beautiful woman, who neither sews nor spins nor bakes nor reads nor plays the piano, is happy in her idleness, for she is not bored. So far from idleness being the root of all evil, it is rather the only true good. Boredom is the root of all evil, and it is this which must be kept at a distance. Idleness is not an evil; indeed one may say that every human being who lacks a sense for idleness proves that his consciousness has not yet been elevated to the level of the humane. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either / Or*, Vol. I, trans. D. F. Swenson and L. M. Swenson (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 285.

[21] Liberato Santoro-Brienza, *Some Reflections on the Meanings of Work and Labour* (Rome: Eidos, 2008), p. 44.
[22] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio*, vol. 17/4 (2004), p. 430.
[23] Ibid., p. 441.
[24] Ibid., p. 442.
[25] Ibid., p. 443.
[26] Ibid., p. 431
[27] Ibid., p. 450.
[28] See Galen Strawson, *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 8.
[29] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31 (AA 4: 421).
[30] Ibid., p. 32 (AA 4: 423).
[31] Ibid., p. 32-3 (AA 4: 423).
[32] Ibid., p. 33 (AA 4: 423).
[33] Ibid., p. 33 (AA 4: 423).
[34] Rawls attempts to accommodate within the terms of a "rational life" the idea of a person who though not neglecting his talents, pursues one of them to the exclusion of all others. He examines the case of "someone whose only pleasure is to count blades of grass in various geometrically shaped areas such as park squares and well-trimmed lawns." And concludes that counting blades of grass is a "rational plan" which will serve as "the end that regulates the schedule of his actions, and this establishes that it is good for him." This contrasts in an obvious way – its content – with Kant's notion of a rational life. But it shares, nevertheless, the view that what is good for us will take the form of a life plan. That is, that the task of self-constitution – regardless of the eccentricity of the particular ends pursued – defines us. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, rev. ed. 1999), pp. 379-380.
[35] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 197.
[36] Ibid, § 197z.
[37] Heinrich Böll's "Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral" provides a dramatic "critique" of the peculiar rationalizations that place this self-perpetuating conception of work before idleness.
[38] Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution, Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 24.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 23.
[41] Ibid., pp. 24-25.
[42] Ibid., p. 43.
[43] Calvin, op. cit., Book II, Chapter 3, Section 9, p. 185.
[44] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, p. 23.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p. 7.
[47] See the contributions by G. A. Cohen, Raymond Geuss, Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams to Christine M. Korsgaard et al, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[48] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, p. 170.
[49] Ibid., p. 7.
[50] Ibid., p. 26.
[51] Ibid., p. 69.
[52] The notion of prior commitments is difficult to abandon. As Ulrich Schlösser writes: "Imagine a person who seriously struggles with a form of extreme laziness. We do feel entitled to reproach her for not being able to perform the acts that are necessary in order to achieve her ends. We do so, although the person may not have decided to be in that state; she may not have brought it about that she is in that state in any way. What we demand is that she pulls herself together. But if we are entitled to make this demand, then there seem to be normative obligations prior to the fact that the person already qualifies as an agent (and has accepted the norms for this reason). "Review of Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*," *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 19:1, p. 162 (2011).
[53] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, p. 18.
[54] Ibid., p. 19.
[55] Ibid., p. xii.

[56] Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 81.
[57] Ibid., p. 82.
[58] Ibid., p. 83.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., p. 175.
[66] Ibid., p. 83.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 84.
[70] Ibid., p. 87.
[71] This is clearer still in Frankfurt's (earlier) essay "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" where his famous discussion of the "wanton" appears. He describes wantons as "agents who have first-order desires but who are not persons because, whether or not they have desires of the second-order, they have no second-order volitions" (*The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 16). They are not, at least, "brute animals" (ibid., p. 16), but nor are they persons. And it looks as though what it means not to have second-order volitions is to be without any basis for self-negotiation. Frankfurt writes that the wanton "ignores the question of what his will is to be. Not only does he pursue whatever course of action he is most strongly inclined to pursue, but he does not care which of his inclinations is the strongest" (ibid., p. 17). The wanton may be rational in that he is capable of deliberating on "how to do what he wants to do" (ibid., p. 17). Yet he has a "mindless indifference to the enterprise of evaluating his own desires and motives" (ibid., p. 19). He is, in other words, not interested in what he ought to care about and his behaviour has none of the features of continuity that Frankfurt attributes to the self-negotiating carer.

In fact this indifference to the matter of second-order volitions is evidence of an absence of freedom. Frankfurt thinks of freedom as the process in which the person aligns her will with her second-order volitions. Should she suffer, for instance, from some powerful addiction that makes it difficult for her successfully to align her will and second-order volition she will experience this as a "lack" of freedom (ibid., p. 21). Her attempts at self-negotiation fail. The wanton, however, for whom the question of this alignment never arises does not qualify as a being to whom freedom could apply: "Since he has no volitions of the second order, the freedom of his will cannot be a problem for him. He lacks it, so to speak, by default" (ibid., p. 17).

Idleness, if my description is accurate, is also a mindless indifference to immediate desires. The idler has no interest in reflexively aligning desires and volition in the manner set out by Frankfurt for the self-negotiating agent. Since the idler (recall Wordsworth's Gypsies) and the wanton are relevantly similar in this regard it would seem to follow that the idler, as a non-person, is unfree. Yet this seems to be strikingly at odds with the experience. By locating the operations of freedom within acts of self-negotiation Frankfurt's theory excludes in principle philosophical endorsement of that experience as either free or valuable because whatever kind of experience idleness may be it is not the experience of a person.