

Theories of aristotle and epicurus sociology essay



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For philosophers of that time, leisure was freedom from their obligations to their occupations, which is not different from what we class leisure as today, however the term leisure does not just count for the separate body of time away from the work-place it may also include the daily activities or chores that a person takes part in.

Would a Greek philosopher such as Aristotle or Epicurus, consider leisure as relaxation, and would they have considered people's ideas of leisure worth valuing? The theories of Aristotle and Epicurus could be said to have influenced how people identify the term 'leisure' and the activities that they included.

Aristotle argued that 'the objective of human life is happiness or well-being' (Price, 2008, Pg. 12) and to achieve this happiness, was through 'Leisure well spent.' (Price, 2008, Pg. 12) By making money a person was able to enjoy the finer things in life, so the more money that a person made, the more money they had to spend on leisure activities, therefore the wealthiest people were able to spend a great deal of their time at leisure, and by using it in the best possible way Aristotle would suggest that a person would be living well. (Price, 2008, Pg. 12) With this theory in mind, leisure in the Roman society could be argued to be materialistic, suggesting you had to be educated to a high level and wealthy to afford the activities desired in order to obtain the objective of human life.

Epicurus' theory disagrees with the theories of Aristotle in several ways. The main way in which it differs is that Epicurus believed that obtaining the 'objective of human life' was possible by every member of society,

irrespective of status, gender or wealth. For Epicurus, the aim of human life was to obtain 'a state of mental and physical tranquillity' (Price, 2008, p. 22) or pleasure - 'absence of pain in the body and of turmoil in the mind.'
(Epicurus, in Price, 2008, p. 33)

To argue leisure time in Roman society with Epicurus' theory in mind, the Romans leisure time was valuable, but for different reasons proposed by Aristotle. It was not materialistically valuable however it was valuable to each person individually.

Looking at the romans, leisure was considered more intellectual than just fun. Villa life and activities were ones that Pliny the younger, who inherited properties from his wealthy uncle, 'associates with enjoyment of the arts and intellectual reinvigoration' (Huskinson, 2008, p. 72). Aristotle believed that 'the best way to use ones leisure is in the study of philosophy and science' (Pike, 2008, p. 16) and as the location of the villa allowed for a tranquil environment in which romans could study. These 'simple pleasures and intellectual reflection[s]' (Huskinson, 2008, p. 65) are what Aristotle himself encouraged in terms of leisure.

Roman Villas were built and bought for the wealthy, higher educated members of the Roman society, who were looking for locations where they could retreat with their families and friends to escape city life. The villas were often built in isolated, picturesque areas to create a peaceful and relaxing atmosphere. The villas were often located overlooking the sea but away from the cities, and had 'courtyards and porticoes' that encouraged people to 'take their leisure in the fresh air, but sheltered from the sun.'

(Huskinson, 2008, p. 81) Some examples of this can be seen in the paintings of seaside villas from Stabiae. (Plates 4. 3. 5 -4. 3. 7, 2008) and in the descriptions of the villa at Brading, on the Isle of Wight. (Roman Villa DVD ROM, 2008)

The interior of the Roman Villas had an important impression on the relaxing environment. Mosaics and painting were used within the Roman villas to depict calm and serene scenes, and were designed to portray an idealised impression of how the villas looked, however they also indicate that socialising and enjoying leisure time by the sea was also an activity that was taken part in.

The mosaics placed within the villas increased the visual appeal of the rooms of the villa and also enhanced the way of Roman life. The scenes depicted in the mosaics can be linked to events in which the Romans considered important for mythological or other heroic reasons. An example of the use of mosaics used within the villas can be seen at the Roman Villa in Brading, on the Isle of Wight. (Roman Villa DVD ROM, 2008)

These mosaics would have had several roles in the Roman villa including, creating an interesting and decorative interior to expose the affluence of the owner and illustrating the owner's interests and hobbies, which in turn led the owner's pleasure of the villa being enhanced.

It also gave the owner a serene and calm place to pursue studious activities, which was something Aristotle would approve of as valuable leisure time.

The Villa offered time for these educated people a place of 'peace and quiet'

(Huskinson, 2008, p. 67) for 'intellectual exchanges and for literary pursuit.'

(Huskinson, 2008, p. 67)

The Roman villa's function was not only a retreat from the stresses of public life it was also used as a place for wealthy romans to use and maintain their upper class status in society. The emperors of the Roman society organised and provided many different forms of entertainment such as chariot races, religious festivals and also events that have made the roman amphitheatres famous to this day, such as the gladiatorial battles and the slaughtering of exotic beasts. Because these events were provided by the emperors for society, it allowed them to control the activities and manipulate them to keep social conflicts at bay, presenting a more laid-back society which in turn would encourage more civilians to spend time on leisure and 'the whole of Roman society could meet [...] in a spirit of public concord' (Toner, 1995, cited in Huskinson, 2008, Pg. 67).

The Victorian seaside experience included many activities, but none more enjoyed than those that involved music. 'The Victorians had eclectic tastes' and the 'musical repertoire was plentiful and varied'. (Hubert, 2008, p. 108) Music became 'essential' and an 'incredible ingredient in leisure' (Hubert, 2008, p. 108) and the people enjoyed all the activities that it involved such as dancing, band music and listening to the classical and operatic music performed in venues such as winter gardens. The introduction of 'rational recreation' (Hubert, 2008, p. 113) meant that the audience were involved in 'listening to good music' that was self-improving. As the people could be seen to be studious in their reception of these performances, the intellectual element of this activity would have been something in which Aristotle would

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have approved of as an activity of leisure. The appreciation of music and the intellectual element seen in this leisure activity however were marred during the 1960's, when music 'based around surfing' (Jones, 2008, p. 185) for example 'Surfin' USA' performed by The Beach Boys was seen as 'easy-going' which contrasted against the music performed by groups such as The Who. The 'hard-edged' music of The Who, (Jones, 2008, p. 187) in particular, 'My Generation', became an 'anthem' and an essential part of the 'hedonistic weekends at the beach.' (Jones, 2008, p. 187)

The influence of music was now showing its darker side where the idea of leisure and relaxation was overshadowed by the 'danger and violence' involved when these subcultures clashed. These subcultures, known as the Mods and the Rockers, made the seaside a somewhat worrying experience for the other visitors of the south coast of England in the mid-sixties. Although Aristotle valued people listening to music as an activity of leisure, the same cannot be said for the musical influence of the sixties, as it goes against the idea of 'excellent' people spending leisure time on intellectual reflection. Aristotle stated that 'An excellent human is someone who excels at rational activities.' (Pike, 2008, p. 15) He maintains that a person is human because he has 'the ability to reason' (Pike, 2008, p. 15). While a person is engaged in an activity that involves reason, as something 'precious in itself' then they are realizing 'their full potential' as a human. The 'function of the human is to reason' and 'to make rational choices about their leisure activities' (Pike, 2008, p. 15) These views would support his ideas that people who make informed choices about their leisure activities are 'excellent people.' (Pike, 2008, p. 19)

The Seaside was not always a place for leisure or relaxation, during the mid-nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century 'taking exercise was portrayed as both fun and good for health' (Brunton, 2008, p. 174) and that the sea had a long standing association with health and people believed that by drinking or bathing in the sea water they would be cured of their diseases and illnesses. This information was encouraged by doctors who would have prescribed and regulated their patients in the first instance as, submersion into the cold waters was believed to have been potentially dangerous.

Bathing would not have been an activity that Aristotle approved of as leisure, bathing was done for therapeutic reasons and the patient was looking to improve their own health. Aristotle felt 'Convalescing after an illness is a necessary concession to human frailty, not as an end in itself' (Price, 2008, p. 13) swimming on the other hand may have been an activity however Aristotle may have valued, if it was an activity that was done for 'its own sake', yet if it made the swimmer happy then it would have been considered a valued leisure activity.

Being free from life's restrictions is depicted in Sabine farm: retreating from town by Horace, when he writes 'We have no truck with crazy rules.' (Reading 3. 1, Horace. p. 88) and can be seen in more recent history where people have the freedom to behave outside their normal routines and 'throw off their inhibitions and evade the normal codes of conduct expected of their class and gender.' (Faire, 2008, p. 132)

The activities of leisure cannot be described as relaxing without taking into account the participants views. For each of us, leisure will be classed

differently, for example, mechanics repairing cars would class what they do as 'work', however the retired gentleman next door for example may enjoy spending his free time tinkering with the car he has had for 20 years.

The Romans can be seen enjoying their leisure time studying and taking part in the intellectual activities of the time, even if they were still participating in social activities that they would have done whilst working. For the modern day person these intellectual activities are not considered relaxing at all.

Furthermore as both Aristotle and Epicurus agree that leisure is an essential part of human life, and that it encourages people to succeed as human beings, (Brunton, 2008, p. 28) if we are personally relaxing during the activities we chose to participate in, we can be seen to be succeeding in our own rights.

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