

# TEMPORAL AUTONOMY IN A LABORING SOCIETY

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*ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to discuss which stance towards the allocation of labor and leisure would be defensible from the perspective of modern liberal political theory. There is a long tradition in philosophy defending an ideal of leisure, but this tradition has been rightly criticized for being too perfectionist. A liberal perspective seems more attractive in not dictating how much time people spend in labor or leisure, but to leave this choice to individuals. The question is whether this is possible. After scrutinizing the traditional philosophical defense of leisure I focus on Robert Goodin and his collaborators' recent proposal to think about labor and leisure in terms of 'temporal autonomy'. I show that their concept is a great improvement over the older philosophical theories, both in its conceptualization of labor and leisure and in its ambition to leave labor/leisure choices to individuals. Nonetheless, it contains an important unresolved ambiguity about whether discretionary time maximization is a desirable end. Since the exercise of one's temporal autonomy can undercut the temporal autonomy of others in society this leads to a dilemma. This dilemma can be resolved either in a libertarian or in a sufficientarian direction. I provide a cautious defense of the sufficientarian conception of temporal autonomy, because it accounts for the intuition in the older tradition of leisure that it is important not to be overwhelmed by the demands of labor, while also retaining the liberal emphasis on individual choice.*

In modern societies a particular attitude towards time is widespread: to endorse the allocation of maximum time to work instead of maximizing time off from work, leisure time. Many policy proposals impose such an ethic of work: for increasing the retirement age, stimulating women to work longer hours instead of spending time in the household, minimizing the time students spend at university, stimulating (and sometimes forcing) unemployed to find new jobs, etc.<sup>1</sup> Such an imposition of work is far from unanimously applauded, of course, and there are important differences in the pervasiveness of its influence between different (developed) countries. Nonetheless, over the whole, it pervades all developed societies to some extent. Sociologically this has been explained (most famously of course by Max Weber), but it has rarely been

defended philosophically. In policy circles the most important defense probably is that work has important intrinsic advantages for those who perform it: it is a mark of self-esteem, gives structure to one's existence, prevents social isolation, etc. Work is good for you. Charles Taylor's captures this well as the typically modern "affirmation of ordinary life" (Taylor, 1989).

The mirror image of this position can be found in philosophical writings, which are explicitly and self-consciously defending an ideal of leisure. This position has its roots in Aristotle and Marx. Variants of it have been defended by philosophers as diverse as Bertrand Russell, Joseph Pieper, Hannah Arendt, André Gorz and G.A. Cohen. According to these and other writers society should be focused on maximizing leisure time for its citizens, since only in leisure time one can find the truly good life, self-fulfillment, autonomous self-realization, etc. In Marxist terminology, 'the realm of freedom' can be reached only outside of labor, which represents the 'realm of necessity'. And, as Marx stated at the end of the famous passage where he introduces these two realms: 'The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite' (Marx, 1978, 441). Similarly Bertrand Russell, in his provocative essay 'In Praise of Idleness' recommended cutting the working day to four hours (Russell, 1932), a number reminiscent of actual working hours in hunter-gatherer societies (Sahlins, 1972, 17). More important than the actual numbers is the broader critique behind these proposals: modern societies are presented as being captured by an irrational work-and-spend cycle (Schor, 1992). As Max Weber ended his famous book on the Protestant work ethic becoming an iron cage: "For the 'last man' of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never attained before" (Weber, 2003 [1958], 182).

I will not conceal feeling some intuitive sympathy for this leisure-defending position and its discomfort about the hyperbolic modern work-ethic (if only because of the drawbacks of having internalized such a work ethic). At the same time, it seems to be just as biased as the labor-defending view it is fighting against. Moreover, both seem overly perfectionist in the context of modern liberal political theory. From a liberal perspective it seems most attractive not to dictate how much time people spend in labor or leisure, but to leave this choice as far as possible to individuals. My main aim in this paper is to test this idea: is it possible to leave the choice between labor

and leisure to individuals? More generally, what stance towards the allocation of labor and leisure is defensible from the perspective of liberal theory?

I will first scrutinize the traditional philosophical defense of leisure and show what exactly makes it objectionably perfectionist (section I). Then I will bring in a theory recently presented by Robert Goodin and his collaborators, who have proposed a new concept to think about labor and leisure, that of ‘temporal autonomy’. I will show that this concept is a great improvement over the older philosophical theories, both in its conceptualization of labor and leisure and in its ambition to leave labor/leisure choices to individuals (section II). Nonetheless, I will show that it contains an important unresolved ambiguity. Their theory is ambiguous about whether discretionary time maximization is a desirable end. However, the exercise of one’s temporal autonomy can undercut the temporal autonomy of others in society. This dilemma can be resolved either in a libertarian or in a sufficientarian direction (section III). Choosing between them requires a more explicit choice in the philosophical justification for the ideal of temporal autonomy. I outline the arguments on both side and conclude with a cautious defense of the sufficientarian conception of temporal autonomy. My claim is that such a sufficientarian conception brings us the best of both worlds. It accounts for the intuition in the older tradition of leisure that it is important not to be overwhelmed by the demands of labor, while retaining the liberal emphasis on individual choice (section IV).

Before I start, one note on the concepts of liberalism and perfectionism that I will use. I presuppose a standard conception of perfectionism, according to which a theory is perfectionist if it calls upon the state to prescribe (and where possible, push its citizens into living according to) a substantive conception of the good life, and non-perfectionist if it prescribes neutrality between different conceptions of the good (Arneson, 2000, 38). I also presuppose that the perfectionist character of a theory renders its justification on its face problematic and suspect, for the familiar liberal reason that it represents a controversial ideal of the good that may not be shared by all citizens. I do *not* however presuppose that perfectionist theories will always turn out to be unjustified, since I think some degree of perfectionism is unavoidable. Indeed, liberalism as I will use it here is a perfectionist theory (albeit a very minimal one), since it is based on the endorsement of a conception of personal autonomy as its central moral ideal.<sup>2</sup> So we need to ask what liberalism, as the *least* perfectionist

theory possible, should say about the choice between spending time in labor or leisure.

## **I. The Defense of Leisure**

The philosophical tradition which offers a defense of leisure against labor (hereafter: ‘the tradition’) is extremely varied. Broadly speaking Aristotle remains an important source of inspiration. In modern times, one finds Marxists and socialists alongside cultural conservatives in criticizing labor and defending leisure. I will therefore have to be selective and leave many interpretative issues aside. My aim in this section is to reconstruct a tradition of thought, not to engage in a historical analysis of the merits of various positions. This enormous simplification is justified, I think, because the authors in the traditional defense of leisure still share some broad features, which can be usefully contrasted with the more liberal notion of ‘temporal autonomy’ to be discussed in the next section. The reconstruction will show that the leisure tradition because the basic distinction at its heart – between labor as a necessary and leisure as a free activity – cannot be sustained without overly perfectionist implications.

The basic line taken by most theorists in the tradition is that labor is somehow ‘necessary’ and leisure is somehow ‘free’. These labels are highly important for they introduce the normative stakes in the debate. If labor is coupled with necessity and leisure with freedom, then more leisure becomes, all other things equal, *better* than more labor. Leisure becomes a desideratum, both politically and philosophically. The linkage between necessity and labor on the one hand and leisure and freedom on the other hand is made as follows. The tradition makes a distinction between activities which produce the goods necessary to satisfy one’s needs (labor, the realm of necessity) and activities which bring self-fulfillment (leisure, the realm of freedom). For Aristotle as for many others, these needs could be defined objectively. There is a fixed set of needs, determined by nature, which have to be satisfied by laboring. The fact that these are needs is, in the last instance, dictated by their being necessary to survival. In labor the continuation of “mere life” is at stake. This is to be contrasted with leisure, which aims at realization of “the good life”. It encompasses those activities which are performed for the sake of self-fulfillment. This distinction was used by the ancient Greeks to support an arrangement in which household production

for one's needs in the private sphere (*oikos*) was pitched against leisure activities in the wider public sphere (Booth, 1993, 42-47).<sup>3</sup>

The idea of self-fulfillment is the normative basis of this tradition: liberation from necessity is morally required because human life *should* be aimed at self-fulfillment. Labor is unavoidable but should be kept to a minimum in order to make time for those activities which bring self-fulfillment. Which activities these are varies depending on the theory. For Aristotle, it was found both in practical activities and most completely in theoretical contemplation.<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt's distinction between labor on the one hand and work and action on the other hand suggests the following two normative sources to limit labor: the importance of creating a world of durable goods (work) and a public space of appearances (action)(Arendt, 1998 [1958]). For the conservative philosopher Joseph Pieper, leisure should be spent in "contemplative 'celebration'", an affirmation of life whose highest form is "the festival" which serves to express divine worship (Pieper, 2009 [1952], 48-49). I use the term 'self-fulfillment' to cover these and other quite diverse images of the good life which arise, in each theory, from an anthropology which tells us to go beyond the animalistic function of survival to include 'higher' activities which makes human life a truly good life.<sup>5</sup> The enormous differences between these different theories are less important, for my purposes, than their similar structure in theorizing the labor/leisure distinction.

This normative basis has often functioned to present a critique of contemporary capitalism. The time spent in satisfying needs should remain limited so that time is left for the higher activities which promise self-fulfillment. While such limitedness may have been guaranteed in an economy which consisted largely of subsistence production in the household, this is much harder in a capitalist economy. Once a market system is established which leads to unseen increases of productivity, a proliferation of needs takes place, far beyond what is necessary for survival. The attitude of limiting oneself to the satisfaction of one's "basic" needs or "natural" needs loses its attraction. Needs are now conceived as preferences or desires for goods and services which only serve 'survival' if that term is used in the expansive sense of "social survival". This leads to a quest for maintaining one's standard of living and improving one's social status (Veblen, 1998 [1899]; Hirsch, 1999 [1976]). Some supplemented this with an argument that these needs are only 'artificially' induced by corporate interests (Galbraith, 1998 [1958]). As a consequence, any time saved by the productivity increases realized in capitalism is spent in new rounds of production and

consumption. While it would be possible in principle to confine production to basic needs and extend leisure for everyone, in practice the capitalist dynamic prevents this from happening. Capitalism has opened the door to the leisurely society but at the same time firmly keeps society from entering this stage (Cohen, 1977, 120; Booth, 1989, 212).<sup>6</sup>

The traditional defense of leisure is perfectionist, most obviously, because of the substantive content given to ideal of self-fulfillment (which, as we saw, is quite diverse). Ultimately, the *purpose* of an activity determines whether it should be categorized as labor or leisure. Those activities contributing to survival are assimilated to labor, while those contributing to self-fulfillment are assimilated to leisure. Since these categories are mutually exclusive, an activity cannot be classified as labor (in some situations) and leisure (in other situations). Typically, fishing, hunting and harvesting will always be labor activities, while painting, politics and philosophy will always be leisure activities. The latter activities are higher in moral worth compared to the former. In Aristotelian fashion, the lower activities serve to make the higher activities possible but not vice versa: ‘there must be (...) business for the sake of leisure, things useful and necessary for the sake of things honourable’ (Aristotle, 1984, 2115 at 1333a2135-2136). These judgments of comparable worth serve to condemn those persons who choose to spend all of their time in laboring to accumulate more wealth instead of engaging with these higher activities. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that these kinds of hierarchies of activities are hopelessly elitist; and at any rate disrespectful towards those who choose to live otherwise.

This problem is also manifest in the condemnation of the proliferation of needs as detrimental to self-fulfillment. To cite only one powerful objection, Friedrich Hayek once replied to Galbraith’s condemnation of needs artificially created by corporate interests (Galbraith, 1998 [1958]): “To say that a desire is not important because it is not innate is to say that the whole cultural achievement of man is not important” (Hayek, 1961). According to Hayek’s objection, almost all human achievements rest upon socially instilled needs. This is true for the so-called higher activities as much as for ordinary consumption goods. He mentions by way of example that public education to stimulate wants for literature in children is also artificial in Galbraith’s sense. I think that Hayek is right. The use of moral evaluations of specific categories of consumption goods on the basis of their social origin is bound to be problematic. More generally, a critique of consumerism which

presupposes an extremely controversial “hierarchy of values” will always tend to be illiberal (Heath, 2005, 211).

One final way to see the problem is that part of what gave the traditional coupling of labor to necessity its appeal, was that labor often was painful. Leisure by contrast was not merely free; it also promised more pleasure when spending one’s time. Now in modern times, where much labor is less painful and burdensome (at least physically), this association has been upset. G.A. Cohen understates the case when he says that “[t]he economic distinction between job time and time off coincides imperfectly with the distinction here envisaged between toil and freedom from it. Some ‘gainful employment’ is enjoyable, and some time off is spent toilsomely.” (Cohen, 1977, 118). For many nowadays is an important part of their identity and generally experienced as a positive psychic experience. For many the household chores in leisure time are much less of an enjoyment than their job activities. For perhaps even more people both labor and leisure activities are a mixed bag of pleasure and pain. That further discredits the justification of the traditional view that labor is something to be escaped and exchanged for leisure, wherever possible.

Because of all of this it seems impossible to hold onto a categorization of activities (and their products) as being more or less valuable because they are pursued “as labor” or “as leisure” (Elster, 1989). Indeed, those activities pursued for the sake of necessity in terms of absolute physical survival can to some people bring them self-fulfillment. If we accept labor’s potential for self-fulfillment, then whether an activity is classified as labor or leisure loses its normative importance. To be sure, one might still be worried about the actualization of labor’s potential (hence the need for regulation of labor conditions). But the principled reason to restrict the time spent in labor as such has lost its compelling grip. This acknowledgment of labor’s potential opens the door to the opposite position from the one defended in the tradition: that self-fulfillment should *predominantly* be located in labor, as in Weber’s famous work ethic (for a normative discussion see (Muirhead, 2004, 100-106)). However, such a full swing to the other side, endorsing labor as the privileged option, will be as perfectionist as its leisure-based counterpart.

Instead of these two perfectionist extremes, it seems natural to see if we can stop half-way and adopt a liberal political position in which people, according to their own conception of the good, are allowed choosing their labor/leisure balance themselves. Liberal philosophers have not been able to say much about work, because

of their self-imposed neutrality about work, as long as it is freely consented to. Accordingly, liberal theory restricts itself to an argument about the right conditions of voluntary consent. I take it that the unique contribution of Robert Goodin and his collaborators' theory of discretionary time, as presented in his 2008 book *Discretionary Time*, is to have discovered a more substantive and enlightening way to fill in the liberal concern for neutrality between labor and leisure (for convenience sake I hereafter simply refer to 'Goodin', even if the book is co-authored with three other authors).<sup>7</sup>

## II. Temporal Autonomy

In this section I will present the main features of Goodin's theory and discuss how it relates to the traditional defense of leisure. Goodin proposes an ideal of temporal autonomy, which is explained in terms of having discretionary time. These are the two key concepts we must look at more closely. Before I do so, let me add that their work is mainly social-scientific. It is relatively brief on the philosophical justification of his proposal. My aim in this section and the next one is to bring out this philosophical side more explicitly by confronting them systematically with the older tradition I described in the previous section.

Discretionary time is defined as 'time beyond that necessary to attend to necessary functions' (Goodin, Rice et al., 2008, 5), or "time the use of which is not dictated by the 'necessities of life'" (p. 34). These necessities are of three sorts. Financial necessities which are met in "paid labor", social necessities which are met in "unpaid household labor", and biological necessities which are met in "personal care" (p. 34-5). The crucial point is that discretionary time is *not* all the time which is left after subtracting paid and unpaid labor as well as time spent in personal care. Such a calculation gives us "spare time" (pp. 36, 52). Discretionary time, by contrast, is the time which is left when we have done the *necessary part* of paid and unpaid labor and personal care. This necessary part is usually (much) less than the time we actually spend in these three realms (p. 87). We choose to work and care for ourselves beyond what is strictly necessary. Such additional efforts, Goodin maintain, are to be considered "as an *exercise* of their temporal autonomy, not a constraint upon it" (p. 6). We may try to make life more agreeable by spending more time in each of these

activities, but we should not think that this is forced upon us. We could have chosen otherwise.

This construction makes everything depend on where the bar is laid for what constitutes ‘necessary’ paid labor, unpaid labor and personal care. Here Goodin revert to a social standard. The bar should be set in such a way that it is not “physically or logically impossible” to fall below this (p. 5). Rather, the line should represent the socially accepted minimum that has to be spent on each of the three categories. Goodin operationalize this aim as follows. They start with paid labor and rely on the academic consensus on the poverty line, at 50% of the equivalent median income of all people in a country (pp. 41-42). Using this standard 10% of the people fall below the poverty line. Then they decide that the line should be equally demanding for the other two categories: their aim is to make sure that in these categories 10% will be below the line of necessity as well. For unpaid labor this result can be reached by taking the same yardstick as for paid labor: half of the median equivalent time defines what is socially necessary (pp. 48-50). For personal care they settle on a different line. Here putting the bar at four-fifths of the median amount of time people actually spend is what generates an outcome of 10% below the line. This standard gives on average 8 hours on personal care as a result for most countries. For Goodin, this is a confirmation of the soundness of their decision to take four-fifth as the standard: “That sounds like just time enough for a short night’s sleep, a quick shower and meals on the run” (p. 51).

All of this matters because Goodin explicitly uses the Marxist terms “realm of freedom” and “realm of necessity” to characterize his concepts of discretionary and necessary time. Freedom for them should be understood as autonomy. Discretionary time is a measure of ‘temporal autonomy’. This concept is offered as the philosophical underpinning of Goodin’s approach. Unfortunately, Goodin is very brief in his explanation of temporal autonomy. He does make it clear that it is derived from the more general concept of autonomy, which refers to “one’s capacity to form principles of one’s own and to act upon them” (p. 27). Goodin offer no elaborate theory of why autonomy is a capacity which we should endorse, but refer instead to social scientific evidence which shows that people value their autonomy and derive satisfaction from having autonomy (p. 28). Temporal autonomy is presented as a subspecies (p. 30) of this concept of autonomy, linked to the second part of the

formula: the capacity to act upon one's principles (once these are formed). We can only act as we choose to if we have the time to do so.

The bulk of Goodin's book is aimed at showing how temporal autonomy thus defined can be *equalized*. It aims for temporal neutrality which means that "we should strive to equalize people's 'necessary time' in the various necessary tasks of daily life, regardless of their social circumstances (household type, parenthood, etc.)"(p. 112). The addition of the latter clause is crucial. The discretionary time people have can be affected by their choices as well as by circumstances beyond their control. According to Goodin's theory, we should compensate for the latter while leaving intact the changes due to the former. Overall, then, temporal autonomy is geared towards temporal justice, conceived of as a variant of luck egalitarianism. Goodin makes it very clear that the aim is not to maximize discretionary time "as an end in itself" (p. 263). Rather "social concern ought instead to focus on the genuinely time poor" (p. 264).

Goodin's theory of temporal autonomy differs from the traditional defenses of leisure in four key respects. I will now outline these and argue that each of them, at least initially, seems to present an improvement.

First, while the traditional theories are based on classifying discrete activities, Goodin uses three broad categories of activity and then determines the labor-compartment in each of them. This solves at least one of the defects of the traditional theories, i.e. that they often served as the basis for relegating the activities judged necessary to the realm of paid labour (wage labour), leaving the other activities in the realm of unpaid labour. This unjustly obscures the labour-nature of unpaid activities, as a long-standing feminist critique has pointed out. Goodin is able to capture these unpaid labour activities under their headings of unpaid household labor and personal care. Thus his theory better matches the true extent of the realm of necessity.

Second, the fact that he relies on social rather than biological standards of necessity is an improvement. His theory thus is able to accommodate the criticism made against the traditional leisure defenses, i.e. that market-based economic production and consumption beyond biological survival isn't to be judged valueless just because it is socially constructed (cf. Hayek's criticism of Galbraith in the previous section). It can importantly add well-being to people's lives, even this at the same time drives up the standard of living and therefore enlarges the realm of necessity (this leads to my criticism in the next section).

Third, in Goodin's theory the escape from necessity is not meant to make space for a substantive notion of self-fulfillment in a prescribed set of higher activities. Indeed one permissible use of one's temporal autonomy is to do 'more of the same': more work, paid and unpaid, more extensive personal care. Thus, while the motivating purpose of both Goodin's concept of autonomy and the traditional defense of leisure seems to be similar – to escape necessity in the sense of a situation in which all of our time is being dictated by satisfying our needs – the way this is worked out is very different. By providing a liberal theory in which each can spend her discretionary time as she wants, Goodin seems to be able avoid the perfectionist problems that we saw plagued the traditional defense of leisure. In the following I will accept Goodin's concept of personal autonomy as the normative basis for liberal theory and his concept of temporal autonomy as part of autonomy more generally.

Fourth, the traditional defenses of leisure all aimed to maximize the domain of leisure.<sup>8</sup> Goodin diverges from this tradition in making equalization of temporal autonomy his aim. The level of necessary hours in labor is set by socially prevailing standards which they accept. The normative concerns are about the distribution of labor under these standards. His main concern is about the differences between households with and without children, since Goodin shows that having children is the crucial factor in explaining differences in temporal autonomy between households. He goes through some lengths to argue that having children should not be considered a choice, but a circumstance, for which people deserve compensation. Having children according to him is a "socially valuable service", a public good.<sup>9</sup> Hence the plea for supporting parents, not by giving them time directly (which is of course impossible), but by giving them more temporal autonomy through income support which lowers their need for spending time in necessary labour.

In conclusion, Goodin's criticism of modern society is not that we are all the slaves of our needs, but that some of us carry larger time burdens than others for the common good, and that they aren't sufficiently compensated for doing so. Goodin invites us to think about the plight of those who give up a lot of discretionary time in order to raise children, while getting little in return. At stake is the question of fairness: whether it is fair that some put in a lot of time (both in paid labour and in unpaid labour for children) while others put in little, and profit from the efforts of the former. Any society arranged as a 'cooperative venue for mutual benefit' – as Rawls would have it – should consider that question.

### III. Discretionary Time Revisited

In this section, I argue for three claims. First, Goodin's professed aim (equalization of discretionary time) fits well with his use of social standards of necessity, while the rejected alternative (maximization of discretionary time) is difficult to combine with the use of such standards. Second, while most of the time he sticks to (luck) equalization of discretionary time sometimes he slips nonetheless into discretionary time maximization. Third, the intuition that there is something attractive about maximization is that everyone should have some temporal autonomy. But this can better be put in terms of a sufficientarian interpretation of temporal autonomy; which then has to compete with a libertarian interpretation of the same concept.

*1. The problem of rising social standards.* We saw earlier that the concept of a fixed set of biologically determined needs in the traditional defense of leisure serves as a basis for criticizing a continuous expansion of needs by a process of social upgrading (escalation of social standards). We also saw that such a concept of fixed needs is highly problematic. Creating and satisfying needs above this minimum isn't as straightforwardly immoral as the tradition would have it. Goodin instead relates necessity to what is socially unacceptable. This social yardstick is flexible, so that if in a society the standard of what is socially unacceptable is upwardly adapted, the amount of time in socially necessary labor will augment with it. If being connected to the internet now is often counted as amongst the basic services (while the internet didn't even exist twenty years ago), the time necessary to labor in order to pay for this will have to be added to necessary labor.

Thus, there is an internal connection between Goodin's use of social standards and their rejection of discretionary time maximization. If we imagine that many people (let's say 70%) spend more time in personal care than the currently prevailing standard, then over time this will lead to a situation in which this standard gives way to a new, higher standard. The remaining part of the population will come to feel that they have to spend more time in personal care if they want to "appear in public without shame" (to use Adam Smith's famous phrase). Similarly, if many people spend more time in paid labor, this will lead to a higher aggregate production, which will inevitably be consumed by the population at large, so that the standard of living

as a whole rises. Goodin has to accept these freely chosen expansions of necessary time; therefore he cannot accept maximizing discretionary time.

2. *Discretionary time maximization after all?* In line with this diagnosis most of the time Goodin does accept expansions of necessary time. This is clearest in what is perhaps the most provocative part of his book, where he discusses the ‘time pressure illusion’. Here he criticizes social critics like Juliet Schor, by arguing that the widespread feeling of being pressured for time is just an illusion. People themselves *choose* to work much longer than they could if they would content themselves with a poverty-level income. Goodin calculates the size of the illusion as the gap between discretionary time and spare time: people in developed countries have only 33 hours of spare time but they have 81 hours of discretionary time. This means they choose to spend 48 hours in additional, non-necessary labour, both paid and unpaid (p. 87). With the exception of the choice of getting children, people should suffer the consequences of these choices.

Before I continue, I would like to stress that I am not attacking the empirical side of Goodin’s argument with Schor and others. I grant him the assumption that each individual can choose for himself how many hours to work. This may or may not be true, depending on labour market conditions. Goodin argues that the typical high-earning professional cannot counter this by complaining that his job and his working hours are an all-or-nothing package, because each individual in the current labour market could find a job with fewer hours corresponding to his/her productivity and wage level. If this would not be the case, the assumption that individual choices about working hours are authoritative would have to be rejected (see Goodin 2008, pp. 99-112). My argument in the following will not depend on the putative coerciveness of labour market relations, but on a problem that arises even when labour relations are so flexible that every individual can choose his own working hours.

Now contrary to the passages where he defends the time pressure illusion, in other passages Goodin does seem to slip into defending discretionary time maximization. This can be most clearly seen in the discussion of personal care at the end of the book. Here he comments upon the difference in necessary time between the Swedes and the French:

“One interpretation might of course be simply that Swedes are slobs. Another might be that French standards are simply too obtrusive. We are inclined to

frame this discussion in terms of the advantages, in terms of temporal autonomy, that come from a ‘culture of equality’. Sweden has it; France does not. Lots of other countries do not, and would benefit from adopting it.” (269).

We can leave it open whether Goodin is right, empirically, that a “culture of equality” leads people to pay less attention to their looks (one could also imagine an opposing mechanism, based on the narcissism of small differences). The principled point is that here Goodin clearly is non-neutral with respect to the question whether social standards should be allowed to rise. He recommends ‘moderating social expectations’. Individuals should spend their time in certain ways rather than others: “non-fussy standards of housekeeping and personal grooming; not expecting one another to spend all that much time preening before the mirror or sweeping communal stairs on a daily basis” (269). For the reasons just given, this seems to contradict the logic of their concept of discretionary time. For similar reasons, the closing passage of the book, in which he heralds the coming of a four-and-a-half working week (270) seems to violate his own principle of neutrality.<sup>10</sup>

One could extend Goodin’s these examples beyond personal care and standards of housekeeping, of course. One only need to think about rising expectations about health care, where more and more preventive medical check-ups become standard, additional tests are made possible by technological innovation, and the end of life can be slightly postponed by very costly surgery. All of these additional health interventions have contributed to rising health costs for consumers. In so far as these costs are pooled and shared in a population (under a collective scheme which forbids opting out) this affects everyone’s required standard of living. Escalating home sizes or college tuition fees are other examples. Each time a gain in the provision of some good, becoming a standard across the population, requires more productive work, and therefore tends to reduce the available amount of discretionary time.<sup>11</sup>

One might take Goodin’s remarks mentioned above simply as slips of the pen that could easily be omitted. Thus, one could imagine a purified version of Goodin’s theory which is solely concerned with equalizing discretionary time, making sure that as much people as possible do not fall below the poverty line. The systematic question is: should we want such a purified theory? Or are these remarks indicative that there is

something attractive about maximizing temporal autonomy after all; something which his overall theoretical framework cannot do justice to?

3. *Reframing the choice ahead.* What is attractive about temporal autonomy is, of course, the freedom to choose how to live one's life. A positive valuation of temporal autonomy is implicit in the project of equalizing autonomy. For why equalize temporal autonomy if it is valueless? The normative concern with the time-poorest group, that of lone mothers, presupposes that the unequal possession of time matters; i.e. that discretionary time is valuable. Goodin's framing of temporal autonomy as part of the more general moral ideal of autonomy supports this. Here we touch upon the core belief that temporal autonomy shares with the traditional defense of leisure: an ideal of freedom that is pitted against the constraints upon our lives because of the fact that we all have to invest time in necessary work. If temporal autonomy is valuable, however, we need some guarantees that temporal autonomy isn't driven down to zero because of a process of escalating social standards. But Goodin does not provide such guarantees, because of the commitment he also wants to maintain, to the free exercise of choice about what to do in one's discretionary time.<sup>12</sup>

The problem at stake is in no way unique to thinking about the distribution of time. It just as much plays a role in other theories about equality of opportunity. Clare Chambers has captured this nicely by making use of the idea of a "moment of equality of opportunity". If one wants to give two groups, let's say children from fortunate and less fortunate backgrounds, equal opportunities to reach higher education and successful jobs, then one needs to define a moment of equality of opportunity; e.g. one's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The problem is that after that moment, people make choices and are affected by circumstances beyond their choice, both of which affect their chances at later points in their lives. Should one also compensate for these? If not, then it seems people are subject to arbitrary influences so that the ideal of equal opportunity is violated later on. If one does compensate, then one keeps introducing new moments of equal opportunity and frustrates the choices people make, including their – foreseen and unforeseen – consequences. "Each outcome is another opportunity", as Chambers puts it (Chambers, 2009).

Temporal autonomy is the ideal of equal opportunity to enjoy discretionary time. Similar to Chambers' example, if we would be able to correct for all the injustices between individuals in their possession of discretionary time (i.e. Goodin's

equalization program) we would have a moment of perfect equality of opportunity. From that moment onwards, we face a dilemma. Either we interfere with people's choices to make sure that social standards do not escalate so that people have less and less discretionary time. This is done in the name of safeguarding some minimum of discretionary time for everyone. Let's say that this option is based on a *sufficientarian* conception of temporal autonomy. Or we let the process run its course, judging that the kind of social and political restraints on choice necessary to prevent an escalation of standards would render the ideal of temporal autonomy vacuous. Let's say that this option is based on a *libertarian* conception of temporal autonomy.<sup>13</sup>

Using this dichotomy we can say that Goodin's theory follows the libertarian conception (he places no sufficientarian floor in his theory), while what animates his project as a whole is the thought behind the sufficientarian conception: that each person should be able to enjoy some amount of discretionary time. Now part of the reason why he rejects discretionary time maximization might be that he thinks we only have a choice between maximization, which strictly speaking requires prohibiting *every* choice that contributes to a rise of social standards (however small) or else the libertarian attitude of respecting all individual choices which cause a rise in social standards (the latter can then be accompanied by an equalization program). But this ignores a third alternative, the sufficientarian one, which recognizes what is attractive behind discretionary time maximization (to have some temporal autonomy), but doesn't require maximization itself. This way, we can allow individual choice and accompanying increases in social standards, as long as these do not threaten the minimum.

I hope this diagnosis of the concept of temporal autonomy, and the tensions it contains, is illuminating in its own right and helps bring forward the discussion on this important concept. However, my diagnosis does raise the normative question which of the two alternatives just sketched – the sufficientarian or the libertarian one – is to be preferred. In the last section I want to uncover the arguments that can be given for both of these options and give a cautious defense of the sufficientarian option.

#### **IV. Towards a Sufficientarian Conception of Temporal Autonomy**

The crucial step in choosing between the libertarian and the sufficientarian conceptions of temporal autonomy is to see that they rely on a different reason for

why we judge temporal autonomy to be valuable in the first place (in this sense Goodin's agnosticism on the exact philosophical foundations of his ideal fails to provide sufficient guidance).

The libertarian conception is based on the idea that temporal autonomy is valuable because and only to the extent that people have conceptions of the good life which include a preference for discretionary time. Following this libertarian conception, the problem is framed as a contest between labor-preferring and leisure-preferring persons. The former derive more utility from spending their discretionary time on paid and unpaid labour (and personal care), the latter derive utility from activities which do not fall under these categories. Whatever group is more numerous, will be able to set social standards and make the members of the other group conform to these standards. The conception is libertarian in the sense that no separate moral or political judgment on the value of each of these preferences is accepted. Instead, the aggregate weight of these preferences determines what happens with social standards and hence with the amount of discretionary time available to everyone. If a population in a certain country overwhelmingly chooses a workaholic life style, who are we to prohibit them from doing so?

The sufficientarian conception is more complex, in that it can be based on a variety of considerations. Let me mention two of them: a subjectivist and an objectivist one.

The subjectivist option is to remain within a preference satisfaction framework, but argue that the choices people make aren't really free in the relevant sense, since people act out of a need to position themselves favorably towards others. This is the idea of a positional arms race. Concerns about relative position may easily make people engage in a race for higher incomes and consumption patterns (and house holding and personal care standards), in this sense "voluntarily" choosing to put pressure on the leisure time available to them (Frank, 1999; Claassen, 2007). A political intervention with these choices then is warranted since each of the participants in the game chooses what is individually rational but prefers another outcome. Each is engaged in "defensive expenditures" (Hirsch, 1999 [1976], 57) that he or she would prefer to avoid, if possible. Political intervention to safeguard a minimum of discretionary time (e.g. in the form of reducing the working week) would be necessary to establish this preferred outcome.

A second defense of the sufficientarian conception is to move outside of this subjectivist framework and resort to a more objectivist argument, to the extent that autonomy is objectively valuable and that temporal autonomy is an indispensable part of autonomy. Every individual should be autonomous and every individual needs a certain minimum amount of discretionary time in order to be autonomous at all. This defense then needs separate arguments for the moral value of autonomy and for the contribution of temporal autonomy to the more general ideal of autonomy. I will restrict myself to the second part of the argument, which is distinctive of the topic discussed here.<sup>14</sup> Why would discretionary time be necessary to be autonomous?

Here we have to distinguish again between two options. One possibility is to argue that certain activities can only be done outside of the domain of work. Protecting a minimum amount of discretionary times then serves the function of protecting these specific activities. This option of course brings us back to a comparative assessment of the value of different activities (hunting versus painting). Here we would fall back on the perfectionist tradition. A more promising option, I think, is to argue that the fact that the opportunity to have a certain amount of time in which one can choose for oneself what to do, is itself necessary to be autonomous. People who only have the option of being engaged in work (however gratifying in terms of self-fulfillment that work is), lack an important dimension of choice. Compare the choice of what kind of work to do and the choice how to spend discretionary time. It may be very important for autonomy not to be confined – say, by tradition and birth – to a specific job or profession. But still one cannot choose *not* to choose any job. The argument here would have to show that in addition to this kind of freedom (and, one might add, to all kinds of possible freedoms *within* one's job), it is essential to be able to choose things which one could also choose not to do at all. This is a separate kind of experience of freedom which adds to one's autonomy.

In the end, this kind of argument could provide the foundation for leisure as a human right (cf. article 24 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, which does seem to hint at a sufficientarian conception in guaranteeing a minimum of leisure: “Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay”). It would amount to a more formal defense of a minimum defense of leisure, as compared to the tradition's substantive endorsement of certain activities to be done in leisure. In this way it would take over one of the core intuitions of the tradition, by transforming it so as to fit a liberal framework: the

case would now be about having opportunities for leisure (in contrast with prescribing leisure itself), and about the value of these opportunities for an autonomous life, instead of a more perfectionist ideal of the good life.

Having sketched the normative bases for both the libertarian and the sufficientarian conceptions, the latter seems to me to have the stronger cards. But I cannot provide anything close to a complete argument for this contention, since this would require a much more general argument about the philosophical foundations of the respective conceptions. Instead, let me mention in closing two considerations which speak in its favor, relatively independently from these larger philosophical commitments.

First, the analogy between the general problem of equality of opportunity (as exemplified by Chambers' discussion of two groups from different backgrounds; see the previous section) and the problem of discretionary time fails on one important point. In the case of equality of opportunity the choices people make affect themselves and those to whom their opportunities are to be compared (say, everyone acting on the same labour market at the same time). In the case of discretionary time, people's choices not only affect those in the same society, by determining social standards. In addition they affect future generations, the first of which always overlaps with the current generation. While social standards can easily become higher (when people spend more of their discretionary time in labour), they can only be lowered with great difficulty. For every new generation faces social standards inherited from the previous ones. When reproducing these in their activities, they at the same time reproduce the realm of necessity. So the 'tyranny of a workaholic majority' would affect not only the current minority (who, say, would want more leisure), but also future populations as a whole.<sup>15</sup> A politically guaranteed minimum amount of leisure could be a precautionary measure against the influence of such a majority.

Second, we have to keep in mind that higher standards also increase well-being, and (more importantly here) autonomy. A harder working population also is richer (compared to an equally productive population working fewer hours). Wealth increases, at least at lower levels of average wealth, tend to correlate with increases in people's well-being and autonomy (even Marx conceded the emancipatory effects of capitalist wealth accumulation). So we may want to safeguard a minimum amount of labor as a necessary precondition for autonomy, just as we may want to have a

minimum amount of leisure. From this perspective a population spending all of its time in labor is as problematic as a population spending no time in labour at all. In particular, more labour than the bare minimum necessary for survival will probably increase everyone's autonomy. So we would have to adopt a *double sufficientarian standard*, with minimum amounts of both labour and leisure, in response to the fact that both labour and leisure suffer from declining marginal contributions to autonomy. Discretionary time shouldn't be too small, but it shouldn't be too large either.

I think this gives us the best picture of what a liberal conception would say about the distribution of leisure and labour. It would allow each individual to choose one's own mix of labor and leisure, but within two bandwidths set by society: a minimum amount of labour hours and a maximum of labour hours (each including time for unpaid labour and personal care, in line with Goodin's expansive definition of necessary labour time). It would discourage or even inhibit people's choices to the extent that they threaten to raise social standards above the maximum or lower social standards below the minimum (enforceable regulation of time spent in unpaid labour and personal care will arguably be both practically difficult and normatively difficult to justify). All of this doesn't say anything about where these minima and maxima should be set. Here different societies could make different judgments about the respective minimum amounts of wealth production and free time that it judges compatible with autonomy. A democratic choice would be the most appropriate way to determine where to set these thresholds, as it is itself the kind of political procedure most respectful of autonomy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that these policies always impose a work ethic because they affirm work as good for the person. Often budgetary reasons simply play a key role.

<sup>2</sup> This characterization will of course not be unanimously shared; not for example by political liberals like the later John Rawls and Charles Larmore, or skeptic liberals like Richard Rorty.

<sup>3</sup> One important omission (broadly Marxist) strand of thought, that I have to leave out of consideration here, associates 'leisure' with freedom *within* labor, that is, self-directed instead of other-directed labor. The important thing here is that the aim and organization of an activity are self-chosen: it is all about *control* over one's work activities, both what is produced (their aim) and how this is produced (their organization). Labor in capitalism would lack these qualities. See for example (Gorz, 1989), making a distinction between 'autonomous activities' (leisure) and 'heteronomous activities' (leisure).

<sup>4</sup> For the connection between leisure and contemplation see the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1984, 1861 at 1177a1819-1177b1826). For the connection between leisure and a life of practical virtue, see the *Politics* (Aristotle, 1984, 2109 at 1328b2137-2140). For a discussion of Aristotle's view of leisure, see (Grazia, 1964) and (Owens, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper the term self-fulfillment should be understood in a broad sense. The use of the pre-fix 'self' shouldn't been taken to rule out more collectivistic visions of a fulfilling life. Also, one should not read any Romantic connotations in it. For a nice discussion of 'public holidays' with communally prescribed activities and individually

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determined ‘vacations’ as the two dominant conceptions of how to spend leisure time, see (Walzer, 1983, 179-196).

<sup>6</sup> The theme is linked to a debate about the ‘end of scarcity’ in a ‘stationary state’, envisaged by Mill, Keynes and others (Keynes, 1963; Mill, 1994 [1848]). For discussions of the possibility of reaching a state of ‘abundance’, see (Xenos, 1987; Parijs, 1989; Pecchi and Piga, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See also the papers (Goodin, Rice et al., 2005) and (Goodin, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> I say ‘maximize’, but this should be understood against the background of a labor-dominated society. The aim of most of these theories is to make room for more leisure, i.e. enlarge the domain of leisure as it stands, not to enlarge it indefinitely and do away with all labor (apart from utopian theories of abundance). Implicitly this presupposes that somewhere there is an optimum size of the domain of leisure, although this optimum is rarely theorized.

<sup>9</sup> This raises a further question; namely why only mention raising children and not include all kinds of other valuable social services into this category? Getting children is not the only public good around. If so, then Goodin risk having to compensate for much more activities. But this then threatens to undermine their theory as a whole, based as it is on the luck egalitarian choice/chance distinction. I cannot pursue this question any further, but do want to note that this is a very weighty aspect of their theory that deserves closer scrutiny.

<sup>10</sup> There are more traces of a maximization thought. For example, on p. 31 they state that ‘more “temporal autonomy” is always better, other things being equal’. This is also more in line with Goodin’s earlier work, where he was closer to the maximization idea, praising part-time work as part of a welcomed ‘post-productivist’ paradigm (Goodin, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> I thank one of the referees for suggesting to add these examples.

<sup>12</sup> Maybe he expects that people will out of themselves act so as to preserve low enough social standards, so that sufficient discretionary time will remain available to everyone; but it seems politically naive to rely on that kind of optimism.

<sup>13</sup> I use these labels loosely, referring to the ideas of “a social enforced minimum” versus “free individual choice” on this issue. I hope the reader will not read into them all the further theoretical commitments coming with these terms.

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<sup>14</sup> The first part of the argument could have a more anthropological flavour (autonomy as necessary for human flourishing) or a more Kantian constructivist flavour (autonomy as a requirement of practical reason). The philosophical strengths and weaknesses of each of these defenses of autonomy have of course been well documented elsewhere.

<sup>15</sup> Using the idiom of “workaholics” here does not imply that their preferences for long hours are the causes of people actually working long hours. There might also be important supply side factors at stake: companies and organizations pushing their employees into long hours. Whether people prefer to work long hours or feel compelled to do so in fear of losing their job or job promotions (or whether it is a mix of both) can be left undecided for purposes of my argument.

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