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From Academia

ACADEMIA  
 Editorial

## The Use of Being Idle

The notion of "utility" (or "usefulness") can take on myriad shades of meaning, including productivity, profitability, functionality, and practicality; efficacy, efficiency, effectiveness, and expediency; adequacy, aptness, applicability and advantageousness.

At first glance, this might read like a list of the key concepts of capitalism in its purest, 19th-century form. But these are also all words that are used again and again in reference to modern-day scientific research. What purpose does science serve? To what use can its findings be put? What is taxpayers' hard-earned money actually being spent on?

These are questions we have been striving to answer time and again in *Academia* magazine over the past 10 years, by showcasing the research done by Polish scientists and scholars – always trying hard to bring high-flying intellectual feats back down to Earth, and always paying particular attention to what the results of scientists' hard work mean, or might mean.

But this time, however, we'd like to somewhat playfully consider a kind of activity that is quite well forgotten in today's world: the art of doing nothing.

"I think that there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous," the British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote back in 1905, in his famous essay "In Praise of Idleness."

"A preposterous view!" one might feel like crying out, from the perspective of the modern research community so demanding of fastidious toil. Thomas Edison, certainly someone who understood what it takes to get somewhere as a scientist, himself wrote, "The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are: hard work, stick-to-itiveness, and common sense."

But on the other hand, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," the well-known proverb maintains, and surely there's some truth in it as well. We race to catch up with time, yet it continually evades us and slips through our fingers. Just because research results are hard-won does not necessarily mean that they are innovative. So can anything truly result from idleness? Can sleeping in late actually help us get ahead?

Perhaps something does happen when we take our mind off things. After all, a popular anecdote maintains that Newton conceived of the law of gravity when an apple fell on his head. And that never would have happened if he had not been just lazing around under an apple tree.

And music, poetry, painting – it would be hard to find a direct "application" or "utility" in them. So is time spent on such endeavors being used efficiently? A skeptic might say that without the wheel, the steam engine, or the computer humanity would still be living in caves, but it could certainly get by without a couple of poems or abstract paintings. But how true is that?

Doing nothing in particular, allowing rambling trains of thought to run their course, is the kind of thing that some might consider just lazing around, but might for others be a crucial part of the creative process, the grain of inspiration that leads to innovation. And so we should not be so afraid to waste time – at least for just a moment!



Marcin Koniak / Desa Unicorn

Henryk Stażewski, Relief, 1975

ACADEMIA staff