

IDLE HANDS ARE NOT THE DEVIL'S PLAYTHINGS

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ABSTRACT: This paper extends upon Costica Bradatan's analysis of Emil Cioran in his book, *In Praise of Failure*. It provides a defence of Cioran's lifestyle - his refusal to engage in traditional concepts of work and his ideal of 'doing nothing'. I defend Cioran in three ways. First, I argue that Cioran's mantra of doing nothing enabled him to contemplate, to come closer to the absolute, and to contribute to the cultivation of civilisation through his thought. Second, I argue that Cioran's lifestyle enabled him to extricate himself from the damaging cycle of success and failure. By settling for failure from the very beginning, Cioran was able to live without the distractions and damages caused by fear of failure and desire for recognition or success. Third, I argue that Cioran's lifestyle is a radical expression of authenticity and freedom.

KEYWORDS: Leisure; Idleness; Contemplation; Absolute failure; Authenticity; Freedom; Cioran

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In the Houellebecq novel, *Atomised*, Michel, a prominent biologist, has burnt out. He has lost inspiration. As a last resort, he takes a year-long sabbatical from work in the hope that it will renew him – that he will return with a revelatory idea, or at least something worth pursuing. The year is, ostensibly, a failure. Michel does nothing. He spends weeks at a time without leaving his apartment and regularly misses meals; in most respects, he withdraws from the world. Many months later, he casually jots down an observation, one which eventually transforms humanity altogether. Only by doing nothing could he have made such a contribution.

What do I mean by 'doing nothing'? I am not speaking about literally doing nothing. This paper is not intended as a defence of literal, vegetative idleness,

physical or intellectual. Instead, when I discuss the notion of doing nothing, I am referring to a lifestyle of rejecting social norms, refusing to engage in traditional concepts of work and action, and living a life with a significant focus on contemplation. That is, rather than directing one's energy toward action, one who does nothing prefers to direct that energy toward contemplative thought, the explorative realm of reflection and consideration. They linger, toy with things, turn them over slowly. I will henceforth refer to this contemplative lifestyle as *idleness*. In the case of Emil Cioran, whose example I laud in this paper, idleness centred around a refusal to engage in work as it is traditionally defined. Cioran refused to get a job. He was not completely idle – he walked, he met with friends, he read and especially he wrote. Above all, he contemplated the nature of things. The argument of this paper is that the depth of Cioran's contemplation, his valuable contributions to the world and the authentically free life he lived could only have been brought about by his idleness.

This paper is intended as an endorsement and extension of Costica Bradatan's analysis of Emil Cioran in his book, *In Praise of Failure*. The scope of this paper is small and there are many things that I will not discuss here, such as an examination of the differences between Cioran's public and private persona or an analysis of his philosophical thought in any broad sense. I will instead consider one central question: are there genuine merits to Cioran's lifestyle, such that we should not discount it as a serious way of life? Three broad elements will be considered in answering this question: the necessity of time and space for effective contemplation, the valuable perspective idleness offers its practitioners, and its value as an act of authenticity and freedom. To live true to oneself by doing nothing, to reject social and economic pressures and instead choose a life of idleness for the unique advantages it provides one with – to live the life of the cynic, the modern-day Diogenes – this is a way of living that can indeed be taken seriously.

THE IDLER WHEEL IS WISER THAN THE DRIVER OF THE SCREW

One who lives idly, first and perhaps most obviously, is given a great deal of time with which to contemplate the world around them. Far from the distractions of work, the mental energy it expends and the time it swallows up, Cioran was able to spend as much time as he wanted, almost entirely without externally imposed

limits, thinking about the nature of things. He could contemplate life and the world in the truest sense of the word. In Costica Bradatan's book, *In Praise of Failure*, Bradatan discusses contemplative idleness and observes: "What sets the contemplative apart from other human types is the cultivated ability to dwell on the nonexistence of things: the rich virtuality that precedes their fall into existence, the fundamental precariousness of their actualization, and their inevitable return to the void."¹ Bradatan is not wrong here: a life of idleness allows one to sit face-to-face with nothingness. This is a powerful thing; not only because, as Bradatan notes, "inaction brings one closer to the absolute,"² but because nothingness is more generally important to us. We come from nothing and will return to it. As we go about our daily lives, we are often struck by the presence of nothingness in the things around us – the vacuity in our social interactions, the threat of a swift return to nothingness as we walk down the street. An idle life allows one to contemplate, and thus confront, nothingness head on. In doing so, one can deeply explore emptiness, the sublime and that which has yet to come into being.

Let us consider, as an example, a mathematician who spends their days contemplating the concept of nothing. Zero. Null. Such a concept is difficult to grasp – we can sense its presence, recognise its echo, but its form eludes us. There seem to be little practical application of this mathematician's thought. Perhaps, down the line, there will be (in a similar example, it was contemplation of the nature of prime numbers that led the development of modern cybersecurity measures). But for the contemplator, practical outcomes are irrelevant to the process. They are concerned with greater things: universal truths, the perfect, the irreducible. The concept of nothing is, after all, not only important – it is fundamental. As we know from the lesson of Ozymandias, all will eventually fall into ruin. Nothingness remains.

In practical terms, it also follows, quite naturally, that the more time and energy one devotes towards contemplation, the greater the result. This is a somewhat crude line of argumentation, but it seems in general true: when we have more time to contemplate (which idleness allows for), the odds of us observing something novel or prescient seem more in our favour. But in a more

¹ Costica Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, United States, Harvard University Press, 2023, p. 150.

² Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 150.

complex sense, it is not only time that idleness provided Cioran, but also *space*. The mind is a complex thing, always humming and simultaneously operating on a number of levels that are difficult to define. By doing nothing, Cioran was able to free up a great deal of space in his conscious and unconscious mind, space that enabled the slow percolation of thought, absent of the nagging anxieties and obligations that come with holding down a job, or a life of action more generally. In his own words, “The mind advances only when it has the patience to go in circles, in other words, to *deepen*.”³ Moreover, much of our thought (and, often, the most valuable parts of it) do not occur consciously. In his essay, *The Kekule Problem*, Cormac McCarthy notes that “the actual process of thinking—in any discipline—is largely an unconscious affair.”⁴ While the nature of this process remains largely mysterious, given that the unconscious mind does devote time to assisting us with solving problems (as seen in the example of Kekule himself)⁵, it follows that providing it with the space to examine deeper questions more fulsomely would assist in contemplation. How often do we have dreams related to our petty problems, our fears that our boss may be annoyed at us, or that we have to give a presentation the next day? Providing the unconscious mind the ability to navigate away from those pestering minutiae ought to assist in the process of contemplation. When we are in motion it is hard to see things clearly, but stillness improves one’s vision.

Some may contend that, with its lack of action, the idle life is a wasted one – but the rewards that action receives remain arbitrary. The world’s greatest football player will make millions and be considered a great success. The world’s greatest stone-skipper would be told by nearly everyone that they were wasting their life. As a civilisation, we need contemplatives. The serious examination of life’s most difficult questions, those that always feel as if their answers lay just outside our grasp, is a valuable thing. We don’t all need to have read Cioran’s observations about the world, nor even agree with them, for civilisation to benefit from their existence. The existence of the observations is enough – it is valuable

³ E. M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, trans. Richard Howard, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 86.

⁴ Cormac McCarthy, ‘The Kekule Problem’, *Nautilus*, April 20, 2017, <http://nautil.us/issue/47/consciousness/the-kekule-problem>.

⁵ McCarthy, ‘The Kekule Problem’, <http://nautil.us/issue/47/consciousness/the-kekule-problem>.

enough that some can gain something from what Cioran had to say, that lonely hearts can find solace in reading the expression of a thought to which they can relate, that the sum total of human knowledge is increased.

In his essay, *In Praise of Idleness*, Bertrand Russell claimed that, upon reflection, idle leisure had "...contributed nearly the whole of what we call civilization. It cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies, and refined social relations."⁶ Although Russell's conception of leisure may not be as all-encompassing as Cioran's vocation of doing nothing, his observations about the contribution of contemplation to our collective lives seems true. Further, while Russell may be correct that contemplation can be used as a means to an end, a mechanism by which we can develop novel ideas to improve our lives and the world around us, contemplation ought also to be valued as an end unto itself.

We do not need some practical use to which we can put knowledge for that knowledge to enrich our lives, to colour our experience, stimulate us or bring us peace. After all, how many of us have been profoundly moved by a poetic image or a passage of prose that reverberates somewhere deep within us? Even our failures in the act of contemplation are meaningful. It is enough to be invigorated and satisfied with the mere search for such knowledge, even when clear answers are not forthcoming. A victory in the pursuit of knowledge is not necessary for the pursuit itself to have enriched one's experience. The idle life is not for everyone (and, if it was, society may well collapse, for who would keep the trains running on time?), but given the value of serious contemplation, and the necessity of time and space for it to function effectively, there are evidently merits to an idle life.

Idleness is particularly valuable in the context of late capitalist Western society, in which there is less and less space for serious contemplation. As Cioran himself put it, society is "more indulgent with a murderer than with a mind emancipated from actions."⁷ I am not only speaking here of STEM-ification, nor increasing economic pressures and social stratification,⁸ but also the nature of

⁶ Bertrand Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', *Harper's Magazine*, October 1932, <https://harpers.org/archive/1932/10/in-praise-of-idleness/>

⁷ E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard, London, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 164.

⁸ Brian O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, United States, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 20.

modern life in the West more broadly. In her essay, *Ognosia*, Olga Tokarczuk observes that:

Infinity burst in on the world of Homo consumens... overwhelming us with the wealth of services offered, of goods, types, patterns, varieties, cuts, styles, trends.

...

Our generation and previous generations were trained to tell the world: YES, YES, YES. We kept repeating: I'll try this and also this, I'll go there and then there, I'll experience this as well as that...

...

Now alongside us there is a generation that understands that the most humane and ethical choice in this new situation is learning to say: NO, NO, NO. I will give up this and that. I will limit that and that. I don't need that. I don't want this. I will let this go.⁹

Tokarczuk highlights a transformation that is occurring in many societies around the world: we are drowning in stimulation. Our smartphones, the addictive algorithms that pervade the internet, the enormity of the scale of consumer goods on offer - it is more difficult than ever to find space and silence. It is in this specific context that the time and space offered by a life of idleness are particularly useful. First, because it is growing increasingly more difficult to find space for any real contemplation, and idleness provides us with it in spades. Without brave souls willing to reject social pressures and embrace idleness, the space for contemplation and the value it produces may be beginning to vanish from our collective lives. Second, if we truly are on a dangerous path, we need the insights of idlers to show us the way home. In *The Temptation to Exist*, Cioran wrote, "The sphere of consciousness shrinks in action...to act is to cling to the properties of being at the expense of being itself, to form a reality to reality's detriment."¹⁰ Many of us feel at odds with the society around us. We may feel intuitively that ours is a dangerous reality, that we are being overworked and underpaid, that silence is more and more difficult to come by, and that this cannot bode well for our future nor the future of others. Yet with our focus on action, we remain tied tightly to this scenario – not only are we unable to extricate ourselves

⁹ Olga Tokarczuk, 'Ognosia', *Words Without Borders*, trans. Jennifer Croft, June 6, 2022, <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2022-06/ognosia-olga-tokarczuk-jennifer-croft/>.

¹⁰ E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1968, p. 38.

from it, but our attempts to contemplate the nature of the world around us are constantly interrupted. We form realities to reality's detriment. The noise is simply too loud.

Idleness can be our saviour in this context precisely because it removes us from this conundrum, and thus enables us to contemplate our reality more fulsomely – for there is a unique vantagepoint offered by the life of a parasite: an *external* one.¹¹ Someone who does nothing, who refuses to 'play the game', is consequently able to view the nature of that game and those who play it through a different lens. When we are an active participant in a system, any system, our perception of it is inevitably coloured by our desires, our understanding of the rewards that the system can provide, our distrust of our competitors and the promises of potential success. Our very thoughts are shaped by the whims and favour of others as we alter ourselves to conform to what the system needs from us and what would enhance our chances of climbing up the social and economic ladder. Our investment in different systems and institutions encourages us to mould ourselves to their mechanisms of operation and to the expectations of those within them.

Idleness, on the other hand, when practised as a vocation, situates the individual outside of those systems. They have not been pushed to the lowest rung of the ladder, nor are they still trying to climb it. They have chosen to exit the game completely. It is little wonder, then, that Bradatan considers idleness to provide one with "a more accurate picture of existence,"¹² for the extrication of oneself from the realm of action allows one to view it with unclouded judgment. It is unsurprising that there is scant space for a factory worker to truly contemplate the absurdity of their position – after all, being late for work can be grounds for dismissal. A consultant or a busybody software engineer do not have the freedom to truly see things differently. If they try, it could spell disaster for them. Even innovation, in such systems, tends to serve merely to improve the function of that system. An idle life, on the other hand, enables one to cut through the justifications for the way that things are; it enables one to look beyond them, or to examine them honestly, with open eyes. As Bradatan puts it, "The great

¹¹ Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 151.

¹² Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 151.

contemplatives have always been equally great realists.”¹³ The idler does not have a dog in the fight, and thus they can watch on from a vantagepoint above it. Perhaps those of us who are less willing to abandon our work ethic can learn something from what the idlers see.

BEYOND FAILURE AND SUCCESS

Cioran’s philosophy of idleness is also useful insofar as it enabled him to extricate himself from the false dichotomy of failure and success. The idler sets themselves up for failure from the beginning. One who lives idly is undoubtedly a loser; by all commonplace social metrics they are an enormous failure. They have no job and little money. They do not contribute anything of economic value. A millionaire may brag about his new Mercedes-Benz, his tailored suit, the profitability of his business. Perhaps he operates in political circles, donating money and cozying up to those even more elite than he. He is a success, and the world smiles upon him. It does not smile upon those who do nothing. But doing nothing, and thus embracing a life of failure, altered not only Cioran’s perception of things, but his very experience of them and of himself.

For most of us, the only thing that can save us from our myriad failures is the prospect of future success – something to wipe the slate clean. We are invested in the notion of success and failure because it is the only thing most of us have ever known – we remember bullying others and being bullied ourselves as children, the nerves before an exam in school, the public and private disasters we witnessed. We live in a society that enforces this paradigm; not only through the acquisition of capital or the legacy of the protestant work ethic, but in the explicit and implicit hierarchies that develop in every system we come across.¹⁴

Regrettably, one’s investment in this dichotomy of failure and success amplifies the harms of failure when it occurs, or at least makes the experience of it far more unpleasant. We fear the judgment of others, internalise the idea that we are useless. We judge ourselves based on the imagined (or genuine) judgment of those around us and we do not like what we see. Yet we still strive for success, we want the boom that could come after the bust, and thus are condemned to repeat the process. We are found to be inadequate, so we hate ourselves. We try

¹³ Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 151.

¹⁴ Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 165.

again. We are found inadequate again. Perhaps we seek to avoid failure, numbing ourselves by the comfort of tasks well below our capabilities. Or else we try again – for who wants to be a loser?

As a consequence of our investment in the notion of success, our conception of the external world and even ourselves is distorted. Value becomes dependent on something's use and recognition and often we are found wanting. Our thoughts are drawn into conformity with the world around us. We are glad when we see others fail because it means that, at least this time, we were not the loser. We are fond of ourselves when we succeed and despise ourselves when we fail. As Cioran observed, "The poor, by thinking unceasingly of money, reach the point of losing the spiritual advantages of non-possession, thereby sinking as low as the rich."¹⁵ It should also be noted here that it is difficult to learn much of anything from success. Cioran himself noted this, writing that "...success distances us from what is most inward in ourselves and indeed in everything."¹⁶

There are several problems with success. First, success distances one from oneself by reinforcing through reward the guises we use to succeed. Too much success and we learn to act precisely as the system wants us to act – we are subsumed by it. To be invested in the prospect of success is to wear a succession of masks, facades that fit each and every situation one comes across, until the very nature of oneself becomes blurred and difficult to identify. This is the land of the mid-life crisis; the world of those poor souls who get to fifty only to realise that they wasted their time and that they cannot remember who they even are. The other problem with success, inherently, is that it acts to reinforce things rather than deconstruct them. Success encourages repetition, orthodoxy, conformity. If we discover a method for success in a given field, we tend to replicate it for as long as it continues to work. Success discourages us from reckoning with ourselves and our limits. Our vision is blurred by reward.

The idler, by opting to deny themselves the prospect of success, does not fall for its traps. Speaking of this phenomenon, Bradatan observes that "Here, Cioran reveals one of the most important lessons of failure and the most mysterious: when it's done well, and pursued to its natural end, failure is no longer tied to

¹⁵ E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard, London, Penguin Books, 2020, p. 182.

¹⁶ E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with being Born*, p. 17.

success as to an ugly twin. At this point failure is like perfectly transparent glass: you no longer see it, you see through it. The loser has transcended himself.”¹⁷ In choosing to genuinely, not performatively, reject the dichotomy of failure and success, to instead embrace failure and to live it as a vocation, one can transcend beyond that dichotomy altogether.

Failure did not break Cioran and success did not interest him. He could peer through the veil of failure and see it for what it actually was: renewing, transformative, invigorating. By settling for failure from the very beginning, Cioran was able to understand himself and his place in the world differently. He was not cursed to follow the whims of others, nor was he distracted by labours to which he could not relate, and extrication from those forces enables one to better understand themselves. Cioran faced things from a position of authenticity – he explored and contemplated honestly. If we are frightened by the prospect of failure, or too invested in the prospect of success, it is difficult enough to even be honest with ourselves. Cioran, instead, was motivated by neither fear or failure nor the glory of success, and they did not cloud his perception of things. He could see clearly.

THE IDLE SELF IS AT HOME WITH ITSELF

Finally, idleness ought to be valued as an act of freedom. In his essay, *Idleness*, Brian O’Connor argues that “...the genuinely idle would be spared the various forms of pain that are held in store even for those who try to make the most of the twinned institutions of work and social esteem.”¹⁸ This is a consequence of the fact that idleness manifests as “...liberation from those unsettling expectations that are all too difficult to resist.”¹⁹ He is not wrong. Idleness is, after all, an act radical in its expression of freedom. It involves the wholesale rejection of social norms in favour of living a radically different life that is authentic to oneself. This is liberation manifest: freedom from being guided by the desires of others. Idlers are regularly looked down upon by those who continue to play the game, but the idler is aware of why they are living the lifestyle that they do – they

¹⁷ Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, p. 156.

¹⁸ O’Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 3.

¹⁹ O’Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 3.

are seeking liberation from burdens with which they do not identify.²⁰ To deny the validity of this choice is therefore to deny the idler's subjectivity. If we accept, for instance, the existentialist position that meaning is something constructed and manufactured, that it is an entirely subjective process, then the act of being completely true to oneself through idleness is an act of freedom that ought to be respected. As Cioran's example shows, idleness is a vocation of living wholly in accordance with one's own values.

Critics of idleness may contend that it is, by its rejection of a life of action, a way of living that merely seeks to abstain (that is, the idler is not truly *free*, they are merely avoiding the expression of genuine freedom by refusing to act). However, idleness ought not to be seen as an absence of feeling, nor a desire for neutrality.²¹ It is a positive aspiration to live authentically in line with one's own subjectivity. If the idler wants to go for a walk, they do so. If they want to doze until midday, they do that, too. If they want to write feverishly until four in the morning, one ought to suspect that it will happen. As O'Connor notes, "The idle self is at home with itself."²² Idleness, when deliberately practised, is about as close as most of us could ever come to feeling truly autonomous. Defiance against the social and economic pressures opposed to such a lifestyle is not only brave, not only difficult, but for the idler it is an act of resistance against societally induced degradation. Idleness does not prescribe action. Nor does it suggest that individuals need to reshape themselves to fit any external criteria. In this sense, as O'Connor explains, "...idleness in certain respects more successfully fulfills the very criteria of what it means to be free than the usual moral positions that lay claim to those criteria."²³ Liberated from the search for social esteem and the pressures that enforce upon the population the daily grind of work, the idler is truly free. No wonder so many of us daydream about such a life.

A LIFE WELL LIVED

Idleness deserves that we take it seriously. We *need* idleness, its lack of structure and its freedom of exploration, if we are to contemplate things in earnest. Undoubtedly, however, there are many would-be idlers who never get there.

²⁰ O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 181.

²¹ O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 180.

²² O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 186.

²³ O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, p. 171.

Much pain is experienced by those who suffer from a dissonance between their ideals and desires and the method of living enforced on them by society. Some are crushed by it, never to recover. And yet there remain those brave few among us who cast off the shackles of work and embrace idleness instead. Undoubtedly, the idle life is not for everyone. Nor should it be. But for contemplatives the idle life is of immense significance; it is an embrace of freedom and authenticity. At the end of their life, as the idler returns fully to the nothingness from which they came, they can take solace in the strength of their choice. An idler does not need to produce something akin to Cioran's volume of beautiful writing for their life to have been lived well. The sublime beauty of the exploration is enough.

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