Let me present you with a parody (this is crude paraphrase of Isiah Berlin’s presentation of negative freedom in his famous essay “Two conceptions of Liberty” (2002)):

If people were to behave the way they wanted social chaos would inevitably follow. Primary needs would not be satisfied. The strong would rule. So: We can’t be free.

There are societal mechanisms that have the function of taking the edges off the conflicts that arise out of human exercise of freedom: laws. But: there are also various values to which we subscribe (justice, culture, social bonds) which legitimize a temporary curtailment of our personal freedom (i.e. exercise of unlimited desires). Of course these values are reducible to personal desires on the same level with other desires and that is why limitation of personal freedom will always become a matter of haggling. The sacrifices we are willing to make here can be formulated in terms of loss of freedom. “Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.” These are external values we can choose to adopt. But everything cannot be included in this haggling process, can it? No. There is a primary form of liberty; those natural faculties which make it possible to pursue various ends which men hold to be good are not to be violated. “But what are those ends?” “They are those various things which men take to be important.” “Isn’t that a haggling matter, too?” “Well… at least I’d better make sure that my sacrifices of my freedom will as a matter of fact promote some other values I cherish or the freedom of another person, otherwise it will be an absolute loss of freedom! A practical compromise has to be found.” The only form of freedom that is relevant is the freedom to do the things I take to be good or from the perspective of compromise, the exercise of your freedom.¹

Philosophers have many hang-ups. One of them is the concept of freedom. More often than not, freedom is blown up into a metaphysical state of reality, like in the messy parody provided above. This is closely related to another philosophical obsession: everything can be described as being either voluntary or non-voluntary. The task of philosophy, then, seems to be that of stern, hard-headed analysis. Under what conditions are physical movements “voluntary” and what conditions make movements “mere” movements? Provide a list of criteria of “voluntary”; the philosophical machinery will process whatever is thrown into it and an answer will be submitted. This obsession is present also in moral philosophy. The concept of freedom is a concern for existentialists and analytical philosophers alike. When philosophers ruminate on

¹ Berlin ascribes this view to thinkers such as Locke, Mill and Adam Smith (and liberals from Erasmus to “our days”). I don’t think Rawls or Nozick would seriously question it, either. Even though Berlin talks about “negative freedom” here it is important to note, I think, that this conception often involves certain ways of speaking about freedom that takes on an appearance of a positive claim: I think that is one of the things that makes this discussion so slippery. I mean, very few philosophers would be content with saying: “a wants y and b wants x and the conflicts that arise are completely practical in nature.” If that was actually the case, the social anarchy scenario would not have the rhetorical effect that it does. After all, Berlin says that liberty was “sacred” for Mill (2002, 174). Haggling is not sacred.
the existential dimension of work, many of them regress to the supposedly Greek point of departure according to which work is degrading if it is done out of necessity but not degrading if it is voluntary (Svendsen 2008, 14). The meaning work has in our lives will thus be understood to be dependent on whether work is conceived as “voluntary activity” or whether it falls on the side of blind necessity. Two “Voluntary” and “necessary” are taken to be categories that can be applied to anything and applying them will have very particular consequences for what we say about a particular phenomenon. What a person wants is reduced to a naked process of autonomous expressions of will (cf. my parody). I will provide yet another parody of this image by discussing Herbert Marcuse’s book *Eros and civilization*, a book that, to a large extent, revolves around the distinction between “necessary toil” and “free play”. The concept of freedom that interests me here is negative in the sense of being freedom from constraint and freedom from necessity, as in Berlin’s famous definition: “Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree…” (Berlin 2002, 169)

**Work and “doing what one wants”**

A simple example of a situation in which certain images of work as the opposite of freedom are made apparent is the episode in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in which Tom ingeniously shirks work. He is commanded to paint his aunt’s fence, but as soon as he approaches the fence with a brush in his hand his entire existence seems to him a burden (source) Tom expects that some boys will ridicule him for having to work, but an idea comes to him. When his friend comes along, deeply occupied by play, Tom tries to appear highly immersed in painting the fence. His friend starts teasing him for having to work, but Tom replies: “what do you call work?” Tom convinces his friend that his task isn’t necessarily “work” because it suits him fine. His friend, Ben, becomes all the more interested in Tom’s fence-painting as he watches Tom’s enthusiastic demeanor. Ben asks if he can paint, too. By depicting the task as extraordinary, an honor only entrusted to the most dependable person, Tom makes the task seem more and more interesting – less and less the laborious burden that he saw himself confronted with a moment ago. So, Tom fools Ben into working by giving a different description of the situation, by shifting Ben’s attention. Mark Twain expresses a fairly common idea of work:

> If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a tread-mill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement. There are wealthy gentlemen in England who drive four-horse passenger-coaches twenty or thirty miles on a daily line, in the summer, because the privilege costs them considerable money; but if they were offered wages for the service, that would turn it into work and then they would resign (source).

The passage from Mark Twain is amusing because he pins down a psychological quirk: an obligation is often experienced as “work”. If we read the passage as pointing to an internal connection between

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2 The discussion I have in mind is not concerned with practicalities surrounding e.g. what it means to get a job or resign from a job, rather, it concerns what some philosophers would call “conditions of meaning”.

3 I will say some things about Berlin’s view of positive freedom in the sections devoted to Simone Weil.
“work” and “obligation”, what he says will have clear similarities to what many philosophers would say about freedom. (However, if we take what he says as a tautology, there is not much to say about it. A = B.) If the internal relation is supposed to reveal necessary properties of “obligation” and “work”, then the world evoked by this statement is indeed a strange one. What are we to imagine here? There are many situations in which this is the case - how writing an essay because I have to might stifle my enthusiasm about it and suddenly it appears to me as something I go through with only because of the external pressure (a motivational issue). But if this were the meaning work always has for us a lot of things would suddenly be transformed into work and a lot of things would be considered to be leisure. More importantly, that there is some sense in which I have to do something need not reveal anything about my attitude towards what I do. You tell me you’d like me to accompany you to the rail station tomorrow as you are leaving for a long trip. Does that automatically transform it into a chore? The question whether I want to go there might not even arise. First, I wrote: “That I acknowledge that I have to do something might simply mean that I see why doing it is important.” But that is actually not quite right, either. This addition of “acknowledge” mystifies what a situation might have looked like: you told me to come with you and I did, taking no particular attitude to that. “Well, something must have motivated you to act?” But that is a stupid perspective even though few philosophers would question it. THIS SECTION OF THE TEXT: I NEED STRAW MEN!!!

In many situations, it is possible to make a distinction between formal obligations to which I can take various attitudes and obligations that I’ve taken upon myself (“inner obligations”). Work can be both. The important thing is what exact role descriptions of something as an obligation or a matter of wanting have within a specific conversation. “I feel strangled by obligations.” But this is not the only possibility. I help you and I might say that I had to help you but there is no conceptual law that dictates that this implies a neutral sense of “constraint” on my will. If I don’t experience it as a burden, does that mean that I want to help you? Philosophers with a hang-up on wants and oughts would be interested in that question. “Either you want to, or you don’t.” “Either it is a question of will, or it isn’t.” It would not be put like that, of course; the same point is usually augmented with ideas about the ontological structure of action (often along the lines of the belief-desire model). This easily turns into faux-psychology.

The Tom Sawyer example touches upon a temptation to think that obligations always imply a lack of freedom. I am trying to show why this is wrong. One of the main reasons why this idea has such a gruesome appeal is the assumption that the contrast between something voluntary and something necessary is somehow written in stone (in nature/ontology/conceptual necessity) and that it can be applied to anything, to any activity, and that there are some very specific conclusions to be drawn from this “fact”. The temptation is the idea that some things in the world are necessities while others are have their origin in the will. Wittgenstein said that it is tempting to view the will as a metaphysical thing that is not moved by anything but of which one could say: “I will, but my body does not obey me” but not “my will does not obey me”. (Wittgenstein 2001 [1953] § 611-8) In this connection, I understand that temptation: that the will can be reduced to “acts of will”.

Similarly: human existence is often conceived to be divided into things I want and things I don’t want. There are thus things that clashes with my desires and things that coexist with them. Other people are obstacles to my desires or they comply with them – natural forces are undefeatable obstacles to my desires or the forces of nature can be conquered (this picture is crude but that is not to say that it has not appeared in the history of philosophy). I will talk about this more in connection with Freud & Marcuse. It follows from this
voluntary/necessary contrast that there could be some final answer to whether Ben, Tom’s friend, is under an illusion of voluntary action. It takes a philosopher preoccupied with excavating the One True Description to talk about “illusion” here. The points I’ve made so far concern what we do when we talk about something as “voluntary”. Let me expand on this. “I volunteered to tell her that she is sacked, even though I didn’t want to.” – That is, under some description she did it “voluntarily” but she might have done it with a heavy heart (“heavy heart” is an apt description for this kind of inner reluctance, but it would be a strange expression when talking about cleaning a dirty toilet.). This person calls attention to her responsibility, in distinction to her saying: “It’s our job to do it, if I refused to tell her, somebody else would have to do it.” In the same vein, I can say that I chose to do something even though I might also say that I did not really want to do it. That I say I “chose” to do it might express different things. I wasn’t forced to do it, for example. Or: I want to make it clear to you that I did it freely (“if you blame someone, blame me!”).

There is an obvious example of the rhetorical force of “voluntary”. I want to mention it, but going too far into it would stir up a mess. The following remark is sometimes heard in political discussions: “If it turns out that prostitution is voluntary, it is justified.” I want to restrict my comments to this: in this debate, those who concede that there is a voluntary form of prostitution tend to back it up by saying that it is a job, and even: a job like any other, “the oldest trade in the world” (and not: oppression/violence/crime). The logic at play here is (I think): a job is a contractual relation. Contracts are entered freely. Contracts are characterized by the transactions between equal parties. There is a particular version of right-wing libertarian for whom the question whether prostitution is voluntary or not can be resolved. We just have to obtain relevant information about the situation: whether it fulfills the criteria of a free contract. In this example, we have a cloud of descriptions of freedom, voluntariness and work. My point: our moral reactions will constitute what we will say about oppression or freedom of choice. But the statement that prostitution cannot be seen as freely chosen is not a mere opinion. It is rather a question about horizons of meaning (disagreement is not a disagreement of opinions).

The prostitution example shows the confusion in thinking that there are certain forms that as such guarantee that something is “voluntary”. I want to mention a passage from Kant’s “The Doctrine of Right”. He is, as we know, intent on making a stern distinction between “treating others as means” and treating others as voluntary agents (“a limit to my will”). Now – Kant is worried about sexuality. We are, he would say, people with “natural needs”. Under what circumstances is sexuality not an unethical “consumption of the other”, Kant asks. This is a strange idea, but for Kant it seems a natural point of departure. He thinks that marriage is a guarantee of mutual freedom because it is a contract in which sexuality – reduced to body parts - is disposed of by both parties. In the contract of marriage, the parties give up the ownership of their sexual organs for them to be perpetually available for common use. The contractual aspect of sex automatically makes this giving up of body parts a

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4 Another example: during the fifties, Betty Friedan wrote a famous book about how work could liberate women from the shackles of being a housewife. In that book, she argued that work itself is liberating, that work is expressive. Over the years, Friedan grew more and more pessimistic. In the eighties, her view of work was that choice is the all-important thing. If chosen, work is all right. Domestic work that a woman has chosen is therefore OK (Muirhead 2004, 140-146). “Chosen motherhood is real liberation.” (Muirhead 2004, 146) It is obvious that, as Muirhead notes, the content of choice is very unclear. If a woman says that she chose to stay at home, will that do? Or are we to perform a sociological analysis of her life? The point is, of course, that something hangs on the question whether something is a choice or not and that is why the question is asked only in particular circumstances in which such a question is intelligible.
Voluntary act. By linking sexuality to a contractual relation, Kant thinks that he has done away with the question and having made sexuality something else than “arbitrary will” or degrading “enjoyment of the other”. Kant views sex as inherently degrading but this aspect does not disappear anywhere in the contract of marriage – it is just that this degrading act is submitted to voluntarily by both parties – because they have made a contract of ownership (Kneller 2006, 456-460).

**Revolutionary road & the knots of wanting**

In the following, I will discuss *Revolutionary road*, a novel written by Richard Yates. It revolves around layers and layers of self-deception, and precisely a form of self-deception that involves what it is to “do what one wants”. Frank and April have settled down in the suburbs. It’s the mid-fifties. They have kids. Frank works as a salesman. He finds his job dull. After a period of difficulties, April starts talking about leaving for Paris, a dream they had when they were younger, so that Frank could take some time off and figure out what he wants to do in life. April doesn’t want him to refine some artistic talent – he is to find his essence.⁵

“[..] you’ll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You’ll have time. For the first time in your life you’ll have time to find out what it is you want to do, and when you find it you’ll have the time and the freedom to start doing it.” [..] He had a quick disquieting vision of her coming home from a day at the office – wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves – coming home and finding him hunched in an egg-stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose (Yates 2009, 109).

The vision of soul-searching nose-picking in an empty Parisian apartment frightens Frank. How will he know what to do then, in leisure, when he doesn’t know now? Or does he know? What does it even mean to “know”, is it a matter of knowing at all? For all this, they intend to go through with the plan this time. Frank is flattered to be treated as a man with potentials (even though it requires that he would have to be provided for economically by his wife). “My God, are artists and writers the only people entitled to lives of their own?” he calls out to his colleague Ordway, who wonders what Frank intends to do in Paris, will he write books, or what? Frank replies that all he wants is to find a job he likes but his problem is that he doesn’t know what he likes (Yates 2009, 168-9). But coincidence has it that Frank is offered promotion and April is pregnant. He gives up the idea of Paris to settle down in the role of dependable Breadwinner, justifying the change of plans with April’s pregnancy (he has started to doubt the whole thing anyway). April is disappointed in him; she wants to have an abortion. She thinks he has given up, that he has resigned to a life that they never wanted, that they considered as a temporary solution. Frank retorts with “reason”, maturity and realism. He is secretly relieved: life is back to normal. Only dreamers think that they can do what they want. Real people have no choice but to face grim reality; ordinary jobs and a solid, no-nonsense marriage, and well, deal with it, Frank’s wildest years are through; grim reality might earn you a comfortable house. What is more, Frank’s new job is far more demanding than the last one. According to April, “the present situation” doesn’t necessitate

⁵ Yates ironically describes this view as a fairly conventional way of thinking – in wealthy, young men in “the East”, “[when] college was over, you could put off going seriously to work until you’d spent a few years in a book-lined bachelor flat, with intervals of European travel, and when you found your true vocation at last it was through a process of informed and unhurried selection; just as when you married at last it was to solemnize the last and best of your many long, sophisticated affairs.” (Yates 2009, 139-40)
Frank’s actions. Rather, her perception of Frank is that he has made a choice, a choice not to go to Paris, a choice to stay in the suburb. It is not very clear what April wants (and putting it like that is symptomatic of this entire thing). It is not clear why Paris was important for her in the first place, except for a sense of guilt from the perspective of which her pregnancy forced them into the suburban life. She tells herself that she, the woman, epitomizes Grim Reality and that he, the man, at least has a choice to do what he wants. But she looks with dread at a life with Frank-the-breadwinner, sipping cocktails with boring friends. If she were to be the breadwinner, at least the feeling of guilt would disappear. Frank sees no room for choice. It is no paradox to say that from April’s perspective, he has chosen not to view his actions as a choice. It is important that this is someone’s perspective and not a general claim. By appealing to “the only mature thing to do”, Frank makes it clear that it is his understanding of the situation that is the responsible one and that April’s point of view is expressive of a childish desire to run away. He wants them to settle down with a sensible conviction that they are no more special than anybody else. He takes her to restaurants to look at people who have “turned dull jobs to their advantage, who had exploited the system without knuckling under to it […]” (Yates 2009, 217) All he has to prove is that a salesman like him doesn’t have to be spiritually dead, or wait, that is not how Frank puts it; he wants to convince April that a Knox man “can still be interesting” (Yates 2009, 219). Because isn’t that what April’s dream of Paris is all about, that Frank would grow into an “interesting person” like he was in his college years, when he excelled in entertaining her with intellectual talk?

Is Frank under an illusion of necessity? Or is it April who is stuck in deluded, idealistic dreams that she doesn’t even believe in herself? The perspective of the novel indicates that they are both deluded, that they are so entangled in the situation that the only remaining choice seems to be Romantic Paris, conventional dream as it is, or being propped up by a comfortable life in which everything proceeds at a steadfast, natural pace. Yates’ point seems to be that Frank’s (and April’s) self-deception is expressed not only in Frank’s cynical view of his work as a salesman - cynical because Frank thinks his work is “beneath him” and he relishes this feeling of superiority - but also in their momentary dream about a more authentic life in Paris. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Frank takes some pleasure in the prospect of buying a bigger house as his salary is improves – much nicer than living in dreadful leisure in Paris, among cockroaches. It all boils down to this: April wants to move to Paris for his sake. Frank wants to stay “because that’s the mature thing to do”. That there is no real alternative to sacrifice and self-evasion testifies to the knots of their relationship and their lives.

April holds Frank responsible for his view of work as sacrifice. April knows Frank did not always think about his job this way. There are two notions of “necessity of work” at play here, differentiated by reactions. Before, Frank perceived work as necessary toil, but he didn’t glorify the role of Breadwinner, the Family Man who takes his work seriously because that is simply the most mature thing to do. Frank used to smirk at the dull routines at Knox. Now he takes pleasure in them and in some sense he is intent on becoming the Knox Man, embracing a life consisting of one necessity after the other (some would say that Frank’s change of heart fits perfectly with the ideals of reactionary psycho-analysis). Frank always seems to have thought that this is what most jobs are like – dull routines - why should he be special? Despite his outspoken derision of a bourgeois lifestyle, he is not prepared to seriously question why he & April are so unhappy. Let’s describe the change in this way: the expression “I need this job, it’s a question of money, really” has taken on a new meaning. From April’s point of view, Frank’s
appeals to “reason” and “necessity” are not earnest ones⁶ – this whole “responsibility deal” is a charade that, for her, only proves that Frank has given up – on everything. It is evident that April feels contempt for Frank because he has “chickened out”, he has settled for bourgeois comfort, instead of a more uncertain Parisian life. But in feeling contempt for Frank’s resignation to the Knox life, she does not confront her own ideas about “freedom” and her own feelings of guilt. I’ll come back to this later but I think Simone Weil would say that April and Frank can never find what they want. They are, she might say, too preoccupied with themselves to be real. Yates ironically dwells on the feeling of reality that the plan of moving to Paris takes on for the Wheelers – elation - and the twist is of course that it was just an appearance of decision, reality and voluntariness. What they want is not real and can never be real – partly, because they are so fixated on “wanting” and “knowing what one wants”. My question remains: what kind of discovery would that be? There are some uses of “[not] knowing what one wants” that need not be mystifying nor deluded. But if “finding out what I want” is understood as a psychological thing that one just needs to discover (as one discovers that heap of dust in the corner under one’s bed if one looks hard enough), then that is mystifying, even though it is “a common way of expression” or “a thing people might say”. Ordinary language redeems nothing. As a contrast to this view of discovery, I will in a later part of the text discuss, at some length, Simone Weil’s view of reality-as-discovery. I want to spell out in what way Weil’s conception of necessity differs from the two notions I talked about here in the section devoted to Revolutionary road: external necessity towards which we, bright, well-educated, forward-looking careerists as we are, can take a cynical attitude (“I know I have this job for now, it’s a temporal thing, but you know my colleagues, they are just so… stuck.”). We find the other use of “necessity” in Frank’s rhetorical appeals to “the mature life” to which everyone should submit with sobriety and a businesslike matter-of-factness. Weil talks about submission to necessity, too, but her view of what this means is significantly different from Frank’s.

Idealization of childhood

The following remarks about leisure will hopefully pave way for the discussion about the concept of freedom I have already hinted at with the example from Revolutionary road. For now, suffice it to say that I am interested in what is invested in the work/leisure distinction and what attitudes to life and work are taken for granted or which are even naturalized (there are clear parallels with the example above, but what I turn to now could be called a cultural delusion, rather than a mere personal one⁷).

As a kid, grown-up people asked me the question grown-ups harass every kid with: “what do you want to do when you grow up?” When asked of a kid, this inquiry does not have the ring of career planning⁸, rather, the things kids say about work/jobs tend to be enjoyed by adults as sweet and innocent views of toil expressed by children. At the age of 7, I no longer dreamed about becoming a sheriff or a rock star. Instead, I promptly said: “I want to retire.” Retirement bore the promise of “doing what one wants”. That, of course, amused my grown-up interlocutors. But my reply was not plainly weird as if I had dreamed about accounting or plumbing (the

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⁶ But if there were not honest cases of appealing to necessity there would not be dishonest ones either. I am not arguing that all statements about necessity are illusory.

⁷ Yates probably wanted to engage with a cultural delusion as well, but I can’t discuss that here.

⁸ Even though this approach to kids is common, too, think of how children’s play is sometimes depicted as a preparation for the activities (WORK, naturally) of adult life. Or: in some (?) kindergartens, kids are required to collect their drawings etc. into “portfolios”.

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weirdness will depend on class; what one is expected to conceive as “decent work” and what one is expected to dream about). My reply resonated well with cynicism towards work that grown-ups take to be quite natural among themselves. Revealingly, joy and enthusiasm shown by children tend to be understood as states of mind restricted to an all too transient period of play and gladness: children don’t yet live in reality/children are guarded from reality.\(^9\) Reality is work and work is miserable submission. Children have not yet entered the kingdom of necessity, and that partly explains the abundance of sentimental chirp directed at children (“oh boy, if I were a child again…” “Look at them kids…”). This distinguished the way kids’ are depicted as cute from the cuteness of kittens. Kittens are not “innocently sweet”. Shulamith Firestone describes it well in her feminist tract *The Dialectic of Sex*: “You are only a child once, and this is it. Children must be living embodiments of happiness. […] This is the Golden Age that the child will remember when he grows up to become a robot like his father. […] The cult of childhood as the Golden Age is so strong that all other ages of life derive their value from how closely they resemble it, in a national cult of youth….” (Firestone 2003, 83) To put it differently: The only way for the work-crazed grown-up to escape this grim reality is to take comfort in short moments of anything that resembles the ideal of carefree childhood. If the available opposites of life are either drudgery or carefree childishness – what do we get? We get having fun. Adorno makes this point in several writings. The concept of “fun” (as he conceives it) is dependent on a split between the hours of paid work and leisure, non-work. (The character of “fun”, for Adorno, is exemplified by sun-bathing, which, to him, is “not at all enjoyable” and “impoverishes the mind”.) The world of fun constructs a language of rights and sovereignty. What this mean, is, I think, that “free time” is something I own and which I should have an autonomous right to spend in the way I want. Thus: at the office, somebody else has a legitimate right to tell me what to do, as I have sold a specific number of working hours to my employer. During those hours, I am the property of my company. But in my spare time, every such tendency infringes on my rights (my right to smoke/hunt/carry a gun). Adorno would say that there is something fishy in all this. He would say that “fun” is not an innocent concept (imagine “we’re just havin’ a good time, is all”). Adorno: Fun is proving that one has a good time; fun is normatively prescribed by a machinery of power and is thus as compulsory as are the hours at work, only in a different way. Fun involves a false sense of playfulness, whereas a real sense of play involves seriousness (cf. Weitzman 2008). “These boys work hard and play hard.” (The coke snorting Stureplan brat) “He’s a person who knows how to have fun.” Of course, this point can’t be taken too far. What is right here is that there are ideologies of leisure and free time and fun that are the opposite of innocent.

The idealization of children downplays the possibilities of grown-up existence - happiness, curiosity, openness. Of course, this depiction of childhood testifies to grown-up anxieties, forgetful of, to mention one thing, the fact that children usually experience boredom far more directly than the restlessness plaguing adults (“Honey, you are stressed out ’cause you work too much, have a glass of wine.”). As a cultural side note, it can be pointed out that an idealization of childhood that takes this particular form is comprehensible only in a society in which child labor is considered a gruesome crime. “There is the general belief that progress has been made because at least in our time children have been freed from the ugly toils of child labor and many other traditional exploitations of past generations.” (Firestone 2003, 84) The reasons why child labor provokes such morally indignant reactions are perhaps not always totally clear. In most cases, these reactions are about the harshness of labor conditions, but there is also a less clearly explainable attitude according to which it is always morally wrong to put children to

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\(^9\) What says Dr. Freud?
(paid) work. What ideas about work are connected with this attitude? Clearly, this conception of childhood as “the bliss of play” is not a universal one.

**Kierkegaard & the busy life**

If “leisure” is contrasted with work one is inclined to think that in leisure, one “does what one wants” (as one is free from the constraint of work), but it is a problem with humans that this is quite a problematic affair. We saw this in the *Revolutionary road* example: Frank and April were both, in different ways, deluded about “leisure”, just as they were deluded about work. Those who idealize leisure (Aristotle) as “a kingdom of freedom” forget that we often do not do what we want, no matter how “feasible” it would be from a completely practical perspective. Or, like April & Frank: the preoccupation with “doing what one wants” creates misery and hell, delusion rather than reality, resignation rather than fulfillment. This is made evident by the phenomenon of boredom, which, as Svendsen says (Svendsen 2003), does not mean that we have “too little to do”, but, rather that we fail to see anything as meaningful which is another way of saying that we are paralyzed by an existential stupor. In boredom, the horizon of meaning is closed down (Svendsen 2003). The stupor of boredom creates a perspective on the world: distraction is perhaps the most apparent dimension of that (that is, what you distract yourself from is the fact that you are unable to find meaning in anything). Or, to borrow an expression from Adorno (ref.), distraction creates “blank-faced seriousness” that could be found just as much in formula 1 statistics as in the formalistic quality audit at the branch office. What these examples show is that the boredom-fused failure to see meaning in anything is not a mere psychological failure; boredom may be a self-blinding refusal to engage whole-heartedly with something. In his book *Extinction*, Thomas Bernhard embarks on a long diatribe on how the novel character’s small town, agrarian Austrian family keep themselves busy with upholding an appearance of work; that work is a form of play-acting, blank-faced & serious distraction, and that most of us try to appear busy – that, in working, we sacrifice ourselves for Family and like good patriots we dedicate our best energies to the State. “Min får skådespelade på livstid den oerhörda arbetssamme, om inte arbetsgalne jordbrukaren, som aldrig kommer till ro ens för ett ögonblick, eftersom han inte kan unna sig en sådan ro av idel familjekänsla, precis likadant min bror, som fullkomligt naturtroget har övertagit detta skådespeleri av min far, båda hade de snart förstått att det räcker med att spela arbete, utan att verkliga utföra det.” (Bernhard 1996, 70) If rest is not the sound, transient moment of exhaustion (“re-charging the batteries”), then it is something highly depraved.10 “He died with his boots on”. As Bernhard says, it is important to keep up the appearance of work and what Bernhard shows is that this is indeed a strange form of activity - because these people are doing something, to say that they “keep themselves busy” is no lie.

In a sermon with the title *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Kierkegaard talks about the man for whom it is more important to seem busy than to actually devote himself to something that he finds meaningful (the workaholic one might say). Kierkegaard focuses on the notion of busyness; the bustling life and the man for whom leisure would bring him too painfully close to himself (remember how Frank was initially frightened by the idea of Parisian leisure). Kierkegaard looks at what it means to be lulled into a spiritual stupor in the agile rhythm of everyday (in the world’s eyes respected) business. He explains why it is impossible that the person who strives for honor and power wills one thing. Willing one thing is

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10 Anecdote told by a friend: uncle A & B stand by the window. Neighbor is working in his yard. Neighbor is religious. A: “They don’t work on Sundays…” B: “No, but from morning to night six days a week.” “Well, these people don’t work on Sundays…”
willing the good. This is important. In his strivings, the person who desires power is deluded, he is double-minded, and dispersed among the changes that are his life. To will one thing is to will the good, and this is not a contingent truth. The life of the person who strives for power and honor will attest to this. In the quote below, “counting” represents these strivings:

Is, then, this desire for counting, is this to will one thing? To count and count until it suffices, to count and count until a mistake is made; is this to will one thing? Whoever, therefore, wills this honor or fears this contempt, whether or not he is said to will one thing in his innermost being, is not merely double-minded but thousand-minded, and at variance with himself. So is this life when he must grovel (naar han maa krybe) – in order to attain honor; when he must flatter his enemies – in order to attain honor; when he must woo the favor of those he despises – in order to attain honor; when he must betray the one whom he respects – in order to attain honor. [...] Change, yes, where does change rage more unchecked than here? (Kierkegaard 1956, 58-59 & 11/33)

This person is externally driven. The worldly goals, Kierkegaard writes, are unreal (remember that Kierkegaard speaks from a religious perspective here). Pleasure and disgust, honor and contempt – for Kierkegaard, these are aspects of the same thing. Worldly phenomena are bound to change; only the good persists unchanged. The person who devotes her life to worldly goods will become changeable herself. This is not simply “being occupied with plenty of things, but Kierkegaard seems to talk about the place that one allows to these things, the role assigned to them. Her life is characterized by the security of “in case that”– her willing is conditioned by this “in case that”. Her will is not absolute, but always dependent on this and that thing. The contrast here is love (Kierkegaard 1956, 59-60, 83, 11/50). There is also another slightly different form of double-mindedness that on the surface appears to be wholehearted. The impatient person denies “that the good can get on without him” (Kierkegaard 1956, 102). This does not necessarily mean that she is interested in personal victory. It is just that the good itself takes on an appearance of “victory”. Kierkegaard talks about a specific form of activity expressive of this attitude:

When a man is active early and late “for the sake of the Good,” storming about noisily and restlessly, hurling himself into time, as a sick man throws himself down upon his bed, throwing off all his consideration for himself, as a sick man throws off his clothes, scornful of the world’s reward; when such a man makes a place among men, then the masses think what he himself imagines, that he is inspired. And yet he is at the other pole from that, for he is double-minded, and double-mindedness no more resembles inspiration than a withdrawal resembles the steadiness of the standing wind (Kierkegaard 1956, 101).

What does Kierkegaard have in mind? A person who is in one way dedicated to help her friends but somehow everything she does turns into a project (or more derisively still, the well-meaning “busybody”). For this person, goodness seems too slow, and she tries to make it more temporal, more manageable, more tangible, something attainable and something you can gloriously conquer.11 This person deceives us, Kierkegaard says, because she does not

11 An association: Gaita talks about Che Guevara and his attitude to the tasks at hand: “if they were to succeed in their task, he and his guerilla must transform themselves into ‘cold, calculating brutal killing machines’.” (2004, 71) Che Guevara, one might say, with Gaita, “wanted to change the world for the better”, but isn’t this attitude (if the depiction is correct) quite the same thing as Kierkegaard talks about? The good as a task that requires me to give up myself (transform me into whatever the task requires of me).
seek rewards – she is not interested in worldly happiness nor does she seem interested in how she appears to the world. She has sacrificed everything, but not her “daily self-forgetfulness” (Kierkegaard 1956, 103). Business is, he writes, like a charm, an enchanting forgetfulness. Put it this way: there are two senses of self-forgetfulness. The busy life is a double-minded life (if busyness will be the quirky self-forgetfulness I talked about in relation to Bernhard), where nobody devotes herself completely to anything. Her attention is scattered, she is “all around the place” and she is never one with herself. In “the press of busyness”, there is no time, and no place, for faith, love or self-knowledge. The busy person (in Kierkegaard’s use of the word) pursues his transient interests. This life has a deceptive “gloss of unity and of inner coherence”. “That boy really knows what he wants, look at how he walks; he doesn’t spoil a second”. Usually, such a thing is said with admiration, but contempt lurks around the corner – Kierkegaard would say, necessarily so, because of the character of this life - what becomes of him in failure. Kierkegaard would say: from one perspective his life is successful, from another it is lived for nothing. The distinction underlying this claim is that the person whose will is not divided will dedicate himself to the good in an absolute way. Worldly matters, work and success, may become essential, but the role work will have will depend on the good (Kierkegaard 1956, 111-112, 119, 17/74). The point is: there is a certain way of looking at life that Kierkegaard talks about that values activity and busyness for its own sake, which is expressed as a concern for appearances and/or conquer. Kierkegaard’s very important point is also that the person occupied with saintly deeds and the person occupied with shallow honor can be equally self-forgetful in the sense of not being whole-heartedly present in a situation and to others. Both of these may be preoccupied with “leaving a mark on the world”, “changing the state of things” or “leaving a record” in a way that is not “being claimed by the good” (to express it rather crudely).

What has all this to do with what I have tried to say earlier about “freedom” and “doing what one wants”? The double-minded person wants lots of things, but what she wants is not real for her – by means of the Revolutionary road example I tried to illustrate the existential knots that are built around this form of “wanting”. Frank and April were enthusiastic about the Paris scenario. When that plan is dropped, Frank tries to keep up appearances, he tries to appear brisk, the perfect, interesting husband. They want lots of things but none of them are ever real. Their way of dealing with it is, in the earlier phase, to depict the suburb life and office work as unreal, themselves having far greater ideals, or, later on, resorting to “grim reality”, the quiet routines of everyday life, to keep one’s desires one a more realistic level. To give a summary of my argument so far: It is difficult to explain “a worthy activity” in terms of a naked concept of freedom. The concept of freedom itself does not seem to explain why something is meaningful or not. Or, to express a similar point: to say that one does what one wants is a move one does within a conversation. What it means will – depend.

Society as Blob

[cut out: some words about Arendt, society-as-blob....]

Freud is a thinker for whom “society” is a structure that we are somehow dependent on but that oppresses our true selves all the same. Not surprisingly, work epitomizes Freud’s conception of society as “necessity”. I read Freud through Herbert Marcuse’s book Eros and Civilization, in which Marcuse tries to distill a “positive” concept of civilization from a Freudian framework. Freud does not seem to allow a non-repressive form of civilization, but Marcuse is critical of Freud’s pessimism. However, the free-wheeling individual

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12 But at this point I cannot go to far into what the concept of devotion means – I will return to the question when I discuss Simone Weil’s concept of obedience and attention.
haunts Marcuse just as much as it haunts Freud. As we saw in the Tom Sawyer example above, it is tempting to think that work and freedom exist in a relation of opposites (or tension). Work – the kingdom of necessity, and non-work – the kingdom of freedom, of “doing what we want”, of doing whatever we want. In this view, work stands for pain, toil and blind necessity whereas anything beyond this sphere of life will bear the promise of freedom. An implication of this view of work is that the goal of history/human development is the construction of a society in which work is abolished or transformed into something that is compatible with “freedom” and “doing what we want”. As we saw in chapter x, Hannah Arendt subscribes to a version of this view, even though she would certainly say that the human condition is forever predicated on labor, but as much as possible, the load is to be relieved and, above all, it is important that other institutions (the private hearth of family, politics, art) do not come under the sway of labor. With new technology, this is, she argues, possible to a great extent. In our present societal state, the burden of work is one that we have taken upon ourselves. Her main contention is that we have created a burden that is somehow illusory.

Freud, for one, would agree with Arendt that work is burdensome toil. For Freud, the libidinal forces of man (attainment of pleasure), along with destructive drives, have to be directed and suppressed because man is a social being and society would crumble if the instincts were given free reign. Because of scarcity, society would be destroyed if we strove to have each and every need instantly gratified. The fight against nature, “scarcity” (or Lebensnot) is, for Freud, represented by work. When man is occupied by work, his craving for instant pleasure is held in check. Culture/society has a function; protection and comfort (but also cleanliness – even beauty and “higher values” (cf. Freud 200x, 426-9). Society is built around labor and labor requires instinctual restraint. For Freud, work is “painful”, “unpleasant”; there is a “natural human aversion to work” – and therefore work has to be enforced on people. There is no “work instinct”; as toiling beings, we have to suppress who we are. Marcuse sums up: “the main sphere of civilization appears as a sphere of sublimation”. For this reason, society is destructive. Eros (the life drive) is weakened and the destructive instinct becomes more and more dominant (Marcuse 1969, 81-3). Marcuse insists that this claim can only be understood to say something about our society. Work is, he says, imposed on us so as to civilize our instincts in the interest both of society and the ever-recurring group of people who happen to have the power to dominate. The function of civilization is to pacify human instincts. The destructive lust for domination & overcoming resistance is important in work: this is the classic, “Promethean” image of work as struggle against and exploitation of nature (Marcuse 1969, 110-1, others?). Our society, Marcuse states, organized around competition and economic performance, is inherently antagonistic and dependent on the control exercised by labor. Most of our needs (in the sense of sustenance of life) are fulfilled by paid labor (Marcuse 1969, 35). We work not for ourselves but for a societal apparatus over which we have no control,

13 A fascist parody of Arendt would be the ideas of society expressed in Fritz Lang’s movie Metropolis: the hands, the head, and the heart – they are different spheres, different parts of the city, and if they get out of order, society is threatened.

14 One might say that Arendt, when talking about liberating society from the burden of work, seems to have industrial work or agriculture in mind – but on the other hand she also talks about relieving society of a particular attitude that makes politics or science into the same form of necessary toil that industrial work (to her: necessarily) is.

15 “dess [samhällets] väsen består i att dess medlemmar begränsar sina egna möjligheter till behovstillfredsställelse, medan den enskilde inte visste av någon sådan inskränkning.” Society guarantees justice. Justice requires a necessary infringement on every individual’s freedom (Freud xxxx, 430-1)
“which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they are to live” (Marcuse 1969, 45). For the record, Nietzsche has a very similar idea about the relation between labor and civilization. Labor is the erasure of individuality. Labor is decadence. Labor is herd-mentality. Labor binds up human energies (cf.).

Marcuse’s own suggestion: If alienated labor is reduced to a minimum, people could dedicate themselves to forms of work which are not repressive. Marcuse says that it is possible to a greater extent than ever. Scarcity is not as grim as it used to be; certain forms of oppression now lack a material “justification”. Labor has been mechanized and, yes, most people are alienated from it; here, work is an alien apparatus. Marcuse does not think that alienated labor – labor within large, industrial organizations or work within bureaucratic hierarchies - can be transformed into anything “better” (1969, 155-8). What he does presuppose is that at some point of human history, oppression was necessary. His view of scarcity is not essentially different from Freud’s –Marcuse would say that in a historical situation different from ours “the grimness of toil” was simply a fact and the lack of freedom in this situation was a fact in just the same way. It is tempting to say that Marcuse’s point is that human beings have now conquered “nature”; that we are finally in a position to “take charge of history” (cf. …); in conclusion: that freedom from toil is empirically possible even though there are some groups of people for whom labor is still an important weapon of domination. “/industrial development makes freedom possible” –

that sounds like a quasi-Marxist (?) claim, completely dependent on the idea of negative freedom. Of course he is not talking about economic or material freedom here. But isn’t it very strange to say that at some particular historical moment, oppression was necessary? Am I presenting a caricature of Marcuse if I read him as saying that repressive society is born out of necessity and that as commodities are now produced with much less work, less time needs to be spent on toil – and we thus have time to dedicate ourselves to our “human potential”? [Help! I don’t quite manage to get to the heart of the matter here.]

Work and “free play”

Marcuse contrasts alienated labor with free play, because he sees play as having no external purpose and it is not restricted in any sense. Marcuse wants to talk about the individual who is engaged in play - “with his faculties and potentialities and with those of nature”, but he is keen to add that this does not correspond with our (we, who are living under the spell of alienated labor) conception of holiday or leisure (Marcuse 1969, 188). We have to be free….and then we will have the right conception of free play – this is basically what Marcuse says (and I think there is a point in that18). I might kick in open doors here, but Marcuse’s concept of free play is grounded on a completely barren and metaphysical idea about freedom from constraint. But as I said in the beginning of the essay, these negative views implicitly rely on positive views of freedom – “potentialities” cannot be understood in a purely negative way (what would that mean?). “Play is unproductive and useless precisely because it

16 Freud & Marcuse are typical “philosophers” (in the bad sense) who try to explain society from the outside. What are they trying to explain; the origin of society; specific phenomena in contemporary life? (what is the source of wonder here? “But we don’t go around killing each other, do we?”) Peter Winch, in his book The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy, seems to question that kind of approach (say more).

17 My reading of Marcuse can be contrasted with e.g. xxxx who wants us to acknowledge the “Hegelian Marcuse”, who, to me, sounds like a rationalist who suggests “an integration of sensuality and rationality”.

18 I will discuss this in the chapter of meaning in relation to a quote by Adorno.
cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure; it
‘just plays’ with the reality.” (Marcuse 1969, 195) It is not hard to
understand why Marcuse talks about play as unproductive and that
play lacks an external purpose (recall the strange idea of children’s
play as preparation for work and situations in adult life) even though
it is not necessarily correct to say that play can have no purpose -
which has everything to do with the complexity of the concept of
play which, like work, cannot be reduced to specific activities with
specific characteristic traits. When Marcuse finally delivers an
example it is obvious that his view of work is rather limited in scope:
the laborer who fills his quota and the tailor who delivers on time can
only experience pleasure either as the anticipation of monetary
remuneration or as the pleasure of being swallowed up in the
functional web of collective relations (Marcuse 1969, 220). The
latter, of course, is a normative description. It is rather ridiculous that
these are the only perspectives Marcuse allows for. Alienated work is
characterized by its specific purposes: productivity and performance.
In free play, individuality, repressed in alienated labor, is valued for
itself. Marcuse works with a problematic dichotomy between the
restricted and the unrestricted and his notion of playfulness is hard to
take seriously. As Russell Muirhead observes in his book Just Work:
there are two major uses of playfulness in contemporary perspectives
on work. Either “playfulness” is an ironic perspective where work is
a game, mere play that lacks serious connection with reality. What he
has in mind here is a particular form of ruthlessness, which is
DEFINED because it is “passionate”. Work is conceived as an isolated
sphere. The rhetorical use of informality, flexibility and “casual” is
important in this view of what work is. The second use is in heavy
rotation (I think) in seminars and management books: playfulness as
absorption, “flow” (Muirhead 2004, 41-5). This is an instructive
example of how a dimension of meaning is turned into a
psychological state, “to be so engrossed in something that we loose
the sense of time”.

Marcuse’s positive image of freedom (bursts of energy) seems
strangely empty. Empty, that is, if we grant that freedom – or to be
more concrete (in a way that the use of the notion of “freedom”
rarely is), expressions such as “doing what one wants” – can be
understood very differently. Kierkegaard would say that an
understanding of “doing what one wants” is connected with doing
something good. But as I tried to say: it is important to remind
oneself about situations in which “what I want” becomes a real
question. Deception might have this form. If we take seriously the
Freudian picture that Marcuse presents, there is only the re-routing of
drives from one object to another. Sure, Marcuse talks about desires
being sublimated within capitalist society and how capitalism creates
a false life revolving around alienated labor and leisure [should I
read One-Dimensional Man?]. But form the point of view of his
Freudian perspective he seems unable to provide an account of the
moral significance of “false”. One could, of course, criticize what I
have said so far by pointing out that the task of psychoanalysis is to
explore multiple layers of what “doing what I want” means. This is
something Ilham Dilman has discussed in several books (cf. Dilman
1984, 54-58). But if Freud is taken to develop a theory about psychic
energies/drives that are more or less necessarily held in check by
“society”, then this aspect of psychoanalysis will certainly be
mystified. From this point of view there will be nothing such as a
(moral) questioning of what it means that you say that you are
“doing what you want”.

19 One of the great jokes in Revolutionary Road is that Frank suggests to
April that she should sort out her problems by undergoing therapy. What he
really says is: a psychoanalyst should help her reconcile herself with being a
mother in the suburb. Marxist writers used to blame psychoanalysis for
being reactionary. I suppose that this could mean two things: either that
psychoanalysis subscribes to a kind of individualism or that it subscribes to
some kind of obligatory “collective morality” that everyone should submit
The transformation of work Marcuse envisages will turn work into a fulfillment of an individual need at the same time that it is “socially useful” (Marcuse 1969, 210). Like Marcuse, one could say a great deal about destructive functional relations, but Marcuse makes it too easy for himself when functionality is one thing and that thing is contrasted with Free Play. His image of what it is to work for something abstract (in the sense of “apparatus”) is at its clearest when stated like this, I think:

To say that the job must be done because it is a “job” is truly the apex of alienation, the total loss of instinctual and intellectual freedom — repression which has become, not the second, but the first nature of man (Marcuse 1969, 221).

I talked about this – in connection with Thomas Bernhard, and in connection with Kierkegaard. That work is sometimes a “neurotic necessity” the major psychological function of which is to comfort us because we can tell ourselves that we are valuable, is a significant point. But invoking the perspective of primary drives does not elucidate much here. Somebody says she is doing something because it is “merely” a job. I fill in forms every month where I tell my employer how many hours I have worked. I fill in the same sum every time because I don’t care, I don’t see any point in it and, for me it’s just something I have to do. Marcuse would probably talk about alienation here; freedom versus necessity, self-expression versus submission. This is very simple, of course — too simple. In this example the loss of meaning is not due to functionality and nor is it that this form of bureaucracy lacks “self-expression” (one might say that good forms of bureaucracy presupposes interchangeability, impersonal standards etc.) My critique of it would rather be that I don’t see how it is a part of my job and that means that there could be a good sense of saying “it’s my job to do it.” That I realize it’s my job to do something might express responsibility; it’s my job, even though I would perhaps rather let my colleague take care of the mess, but I admit that it’s “on my table” as it were. Is this automatically a case of alienation? I can’t see that.

When getting this far you might start to wonder: is what I have said now a preparation for a philosophical move towards some sort of “communitarianism” (“the concept of a practice offers a way of grounding the promise of fulfillment [in work]?”) Even though I can’t go into that now, that view is/often is very problematic, too, and it might also depend on a freedom hang-up. In his book *Just Work*, Russell Muirhead (who is Professor of Government – not Philosophy) rejects crude elevation of interests and free choice as a point of departure for understanding what good work is. Still, he says things like (about justice): “can we each get our due while at the same time contributing to the common good?” (2004, 2) and “is there some way of reconciling freedom and work?” Muirhead’s answer: work is good if it fits us and it fits us if work corresponds with our essential capacities (Muirhead is influenced by Nussbaum & Aristotle). Work, at best, is “fulfilling”, in which case it is no mere necessity but “good in itself”, “worthy in its own right of devotion” (2004, 69). I must say, that here I want to ask, with Marcuse: so why is work important *in itself*? The intrinsic value of work? I don’t get

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20 Marcuse talks about how relations, in this potential state of society, will be libidinal relations, that the realization of Individuality will, at the same time, create a new form of social being — a, I presume, libidinal struggle for survival (cf. Marcuse 1969, 213-4). The changes that take place will not be a result of psychological re-orientation but change will require material re-organization of work, organizations and groups. This he says. At the same time — and this is what confuses me — he seems to say that what this basically means is that “forces” are set free.
it. Work has a social dimension, he writes: dignity, value, commitment. The happiest state of work is when we realize that work is some sort of necessity but at the same time acknowledging, as did ex-president Clinton in one speech, that work “gives structure, meaning and dignity to our lives.” (2004, 47) One problem I have with this “communitarian” view is that the notion of contribution to society, “the common good”, tends to be abstract and rhetorical. “The tension between serving social needs and serving our own purposes is at the heart of the problem of meaningful work.” (2004, 49) In the next section of the text, I will discuss a view of work that some\textsuperscript{21} may take to be related to Muirhead’s view, but that I would say is in one respect completely alien to it – Simone Weil strongly rejects the kind of psychological grasp of meaning that is essential for Muirhead’s understanding of good work [\textit{To be continued}...]

\textsuperscript{21} Isiah Berlin (2002), for example, might say that they both have a positive view of freedom.