

Worth Your Time: Free Time by Julie Rose

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In her recent book, Julie Rose argues persuasively that liberal political philosophers have made a major omission in their theories of distributive justice by failing to consider inequalities in free time. Rose begins and ends the book with the political call to arms that “citizens must be guaranteed their fair shares of free time” (1) but between these points presents a considered and well-argued treatment of the relevance and importance of leisure as a distributive concern. She also draws out some of the important, radical and sometimes surprising implications of doing so.

Some may immediately respond that many political philosophers have discussed leisure, which is of course true. Rose provides a very good (and useful) summary of what political philosophers have said on the subject. She characterises these discussions as being about leisure as a *specific good*, whereas she is concerned with leisure as a general good and therefore a resource. To avoid terminological confusion Rose switches from leisure to *free time*, which is related to the idea of discretionary time developed by Robert Goodin et al. (2008). This helps because one very common notion of leisure from economics (time not in paid employment) would include several activities that everyone must undertake, such as sleep or self-care. *Free time* is time where one has no such commitments.

Rose’s attention is on the lack of consideration given to leisure (let alone free time) by *liberal proceduralist* thinkers. This may appear a surprising charge given that John Rawls (1974 and subsequent writings) and Phillippe Van Parijs (1995) discuss issues of leisure at length. However, treatments such as these have fallen foul of the assumptions that have led liberal thinkers to assume that a just distribution of material resources will *automatically* lead to a just distribution of leisure. One reason for the omission is that political philosophers have assumed that

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time and money are substitutes and that therefore it is only necessary to worry about material inequalities. Material equality would resolve inequalities of leisure.

Rose provides two strong arguments against the assumed substitutability of time and money (74–85). Firstly, because workers cannot freely choose their hours—they have to accept or reject work offers from employers who generally prefer full-time workers. Second, people cannot consistently swap money for basic needs satisfaction. Some activities, such as sleeping and grooming, cannot be purchased in such a way as to increase one's free time. Furthermore, some people have disabilities that mean that it will take them longer than others to take care of their basic needs. Equal material resources may not therefore result in equal free time.

Rose takes a broad *liberal proceduralist* approach to justice, which serves to include as wide a range of liberal distributive theories as possible. Of core importance to her argument is acceptance of the *Effective Freedoms Principle*, which is that formal freedoms are not enough for liberals—citizens need to be able to make effective use of their freedoms. By relying on such a widely-accepted notion, and avoiding reliance on a specific distributive principle, Rose's argument serves to challenge a very wide range of theories. Her proposals and conclusion are therefore available to a very wide range of thinkers, though she does acknowledge that some issues are more contentious than others, particularly those relating to responsibility, which I will return to below.

Some of the less controversial cases of unequal free time are mentioned briefly, such as that of disparities in hourly earnings (41-2), inheritance (42-3) and caring responsibilities (62). However, she devotes a chapter to each of two more prominent cases. The best philosophy takes a set of familiar and attractive premises (in this case principles of non-perfectionism, neutrality and anti-paternalism) to an entirely unexpected conclusion and in Chapter 5 Rose achieves this by arguing for Sunday closing laws on liberal grounds.

Rose argues that to have effective freedom to associate, citizens need to have their free time at a shared point in time. Given that countries such as the U.S. (on whose policies and society her book is focused) have Sunday closing laws for historical and religious reasons, it makes sense to retain these for the liberal reason that people need to be able to enjoy their free time *together*. She gives strong reasons to prefer this approach to alternatives such as a basic income or providing workers with discretion over their work hours. Rose takes an argument from the right to effective freedom of association to reach a surprising, but important, conclusion.

The other case discussed across a whole chapter (Ch. 6) is that of free time for caregivers, and specifically (and more controversially) procreative parents. The case for providing compensation and assistance for those who take time to support disabled relatives (or even friends) is a very strong one. This is indeed an important area of distributive concern. It has been acknowledged politically (for example in the provision of carers breaks in the UK) but has received too little attention from liberal theorists.

Many people (and the clear majority of them women) give up huge amounts of their free time to help others. Some end up materially worse-off; their careers will suffer if they need to find flexible work to fit around their caring responsibilities.

Existing liberal theories may offer some incidental compensation for such individuals. However, some carers may retain their work and income but miss out entirely on free time. This kind of disadvantage is only captured where free time is taken to be a distinct and important component of distributive justice.

However, as Rose admits in her discussion of responsibility (62), the case for aiding procreative parents is a more difficult one. The case requires extended treatment because procreative parents brought about their children and liberal proceduralists do not generally think that society should pay for people's life-choices. Rose argues (121-3) that procreative parents should qualify for the same support as other carers because children are a special kind of public good. While I accept that children are a special kind of public good for the reasons Rose outlines, I am still reluctant to concede that this should qualify parents as recipients of special regard when it comes to their free time.

As Rose admits from the outset, the issue of responsibility and choice greatly complicates the issue of free time, and the case of procreative children is just one of these. Another such issue is that of time spent commuting (55). Those with greater material resources may face less of a trade-off between time spent commuting and other concerns; they may be able to afford a sufficiently large residence located conveniently for their workplace, or afford expensive longer-distance first-class travel to live somewhere more pleasant without the usual inconvenience. Nevertheless, most people must make such trade-offs between convenience and other preferences. Therefore, while some will be luckier than others regarding the options open to them, it remains controversial to include commuting time as part of one's time commitments.

Another strong complicating factor that receives too little attention is that of the horizons for free time comparisons. Rose tends to focus on free time per week for very good reasons. However, would the amount of free time one has across one's adult lifetime not be an equally (if not more) appropriate comparison? Someone who has a much shorter expected lifespan suffers a corresponding free time deficit. There is certainly much more that could (and hopefully will) be said on this topic, but the interaction with responsibility and choice plays a big part here. Take the further example of a saver and a spender who at age 60 have different amounts of weekly free time because the saver has built up a nest-egg enabling them to afford early retirement or time-saving goods while the spender cannot. If the two individuals initially faced the same choices, then providing compensation from one to other at this point appears unfair.

Rose's ecumenical approach to liberal distributive justice is a sensible strategy. Her broad net catches all theories and shows that all need to take free time more seriously. However, this does serve to downplay potentially large differences in the way that different theoretical approaches could take account of free time. Rose's later proposals follow a Rawlsian structure, which is again sensible, but it is an approach with its own advantages and disadvantages. This means there is much more to be said on the topic.

The implications that Rose highlights are generally very appealing and well-argued. She proposes that it is possible to work out (at least roughly) a fair amount of free time to that should be guaranteed to all citizens in a society. Assistance to

workers so that they can afford to live without working too many hours is a key component of this (such as minimum wage legislation and/or earnings subsidies). Flexible working and maximum-work hours' restrictions are other important areas (and ones in which European states tend to be far more advanced than the USA, even if they themselves have a way to go).

There are also some very radical implications of Rose's conclusions that she mentions only in passing. An heiress who obtains a large fortune and a very highly paid individual not only gain *materially* over other members of society but also simultaneously gain in terms of *free time*. With their wealth, they are not required to work in the same way that other members of society are and thus even if they do work 40 or 50 h per week they do so as part of their free time; work for them is effectively a leisure activity (albeit one for which they are *also* gaining materially). The radical implication of this is that these people have *more than* their share of free time and seemingly this is an injustice. The radical implication could be that such inheritances or high hourly wages should be taxed at very high rates to *equalise access to free time*. I propose a tax and benefit system that would achieve this (Douglas Bamford 2014 and forthcoming).

Free time covers a lot of interesting and important ground very succinctly. Rose has opened an important new area of enquiry for those developing theories of distributive justice; to ensure that people have their fair share of free time. There is still much more to say on this topic, and I hope both that Rose's book gets the readership it deserves, *and* that it helps citizens in the future get their fair share of free time.

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