Secularism and the Right to Spirituality: Work, Leisure, and Contemplation

*Abstract: People have a claim-right to spirituality. It is therefore the duty of society, including secular societies, to enable its members to exercise this right. This means that spirituality should not be left to the realm of laissez-faire, and that society has a moral duty to nurture spiritual opportunities for children and adults. Moreover, I uphold the idea that all people, including those who live in secular societies, have the right not only to any spiritual life, but to their own, i.e., spiritual values consistent with their particular upbringing. Unfortunately, secular societies do not see themselves as responsible for the cultivation of their members’ spirituality. At the same time, they suffer from a public spiritual void. I claim that this void is due to the overwhelming role occupied by work in the lives of people of secular societies, as well as to an overly narrow understanding of leisure, here referred to as leisure 1. The combination of work and leisure 1 has marginalized practices of contemplation that are the core of any spiritual practice. These practices constitute a special kind of leisure, leisure 2, that forms the foundation of spiritual life. I argue that secularism need not be characterized as an un-spiritual, worldly culture, and demonstrate that philosophy as practice and tradition belongs to the particular spiritual tradition of the democratic secular culture – that is, philosophy is secularism’s own spiritual practice. It is the duty of governments to provide secularists with the opportunity to practice philosophy.*

*Keywords: Secularism; spirituality; work; leisure; contemplation; Søren Kierkegaard; Hannah Arendt; Josef Pieper; Cornelius Castoriadis; Pierre Hadot*

Introduction

In this article, I argue that people have a *claim-right* (Hohfeld 1913, 32) to spirituality, and suggest an interpretation of why secular societies have failed to ensure this right to their members. I do not deal here with how to ensure this right in a practical sense, i.e. what educational policy may fulfill this public duty; I will do so in a subsequent article (Anonymous, forthcoming). Rather, I aim to characterize the spiritual voidness of secularism and recharacterize the sources of the problem. Further, I will describe the meanings of spirituality and spiritual life, and demonstrate the innate connection between a particular kind of spiritual practice and secularism. That is to say, I will maintain that secularism has its own spiritual practice.

By spiritual life, as I will later establish at length, I mean life that includes a routine practice dedicated to the cultivation of a contemplative mental mode in which one’s attention is directed toward reality as a whole, its foundations and unchangeable aspects, and the place of the observer and humankind within it. While this contemplative mode may lead us to ascribe less excessive value to various aspects of our everyday life, the contemplative observer’s attitude toward existence in general is positive, in that the observer does not judge or wish to alter the reality at hand. Thus, the contemplative mode indirectly creates a special kind of leisure and, again indirectly, lends meaning to one’s life, to morality, and to existence as a whole.

Spirituality is a human need (Hart 2003; Tacey 2004; Sheldrake 2013; Stockinger 2019; Bryant et al. 2020; Hyde 2021); in its absence, people – both children and adults – are liable to lose a sense of purpose and fulfillment. A loss of this kind may cause existential despair and even suicidal ideation (in Section 2, I discuss Kierkegaard’s ideas on secularism and despair).

Hence, people have a claim-right to spirituality. It is therefore the moral duty of any society, including secular societies, to enable its members to exercise this right. This means that spirituality should not be left to the realm of laissez-faire. Indeed, I would argue that while the free market allows for a wide range of spiritual choices and practices, communities, families, and societies nevertheless have a moral duty to nurture spiritual opportunities for children and adults who cannot afford them or are unaware of their importance (in Section 2, I refer to the statistics relating to deaths of despair among the white working class).

Moreover, I uphold the idea that people, including those who live in secular societies, have the right not only to *any* spiritual life, but to spiritual practices from within their *own* tradition, i.e., practices consistent with their particular upbringing (see Margalit and Halbertal 1994, on the right of human beings to their own culture).

Unfortunately, secular societies do not see themselves as responsible for the cultivation of their members’ spirituality, even within the context of the education system (Gary 2006; 2016). At the same time, they suffer from a “spiritual void” (Wu and Wenning 2016, 566) or a “meaning gap” (Yaden et al. 2017, 554), to quote two of many publications that point to a spiritual crisis in secularism from an intellectual and not a religious point of view (e.g., Dreyfus and Kelly 2011; Grayling, 2011; de Botton 2012; Harris, 2014).[[1]](#footnote-2) I would argue that this crisis is due to the vast significance of work in secular culture and to a narrow understanding of leisure.

There are, of course, secular individuals, families, and communities that consciously hold a “deep” and well-established secularistic worldview – for example, atheism, agnosticism, naturalism, or an immanence outlook (Zuckerman and Shook 2017). However, many other people living in secular societies have no metaphysical or anti-metaphysical awareness. They simply do not practice religious or any other spiritual rituals, because we live in a *secular age* in which religion, belief in God, or any other kind of spiritual practice is not an obvious default position in either public or private life (Taylor 2007). The main objective of this article is to address the right to a spiritual life and education for this second group, which makes up the majority of secular society.

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In Section 2 (*the spiritual void of secularism*), based primarily on the ideas of Kierkegaard (1980) and Dreyfus and Kelly (2011), I describe the spiritual void that characterizes secular societies; I identify three strategies for dealing with this issue and discuss one in detail. Then, in Section 3 (*understanding modern secularism in terms of work and leisure 1*), I go on to describe my perspective on the causes of the spiritual void in secularism, partly influenced by Arendt’s (1998) account. I claim that it is due to the overwhelming emphasis on work in secular societies, alongside a narrow understanding of the meaning of leisure, which I will call *leisure 1*. I argue that the combination of *work* and *leisure 1* has marginalized practices of *contemplation* that are central to any spiritual practice, as I claim in Section 4 in line with Pieper (1963) and others. These practices constitute a special kind of leisure that I will refer to as *leisure 2*, and represent a third mode of existence (after *work* and *leisure 1*): the spiritual mode of life. In Section 4 (*contemplation as the main practice of leisure 2*), I expand on the idea of contemplation and *leisure 2* to include numerous practices, among them philosophy. Finally, I argue in Section 5 (*secular societies’ right to philosophy as their own tradition of spirituality*) that the understanding of secularism as an un-spiritual, worldly culture is distorted and unnecessary. I base this argument on the history of philosophy and of liberal arts education. I describe philosophy, science, and art as belonging to the unique spiritual tradition of secular culture.

The Spiritual Void of Secularism

In this section, before describing my perspective on the causes of the spiritual crisis in secularism, I wish briefly to characterize the spiritual voidness in secularism by relying on two examples. The first is Kierkegaard, from the mid-nineteenth century, and the second is Dreyfus and Kelly (2011), from the second decade of the twenty-first. This will serve as a background for the primary claim of my article and a means of characterizing various possible solutions to the problem.

Secularism, Despair, and Alienation

Kierkegaard, one of the first thinkers to criticize modern secularism, identified the spiritual voidness associated with a secular lifestyle as a source of existential despair. In our essence, says Kierkegaard, we are complex beings who must balance our existence between finitude and temporality on the one hand and infinity and eternity on the other (Kierkegaard 1980, 31). Both are aspects of the individual’s existence, and the “I” must live so as to fulfill them both. According to Kierkegaard, the secular person, or “the secular mentality” (Kierkegaard 1980, 35), does not fulfill the aspect of infinity and transcendence in their existence, and therefore suffers from despair. This despair is not clearly visible, even to the person who experiences it. On the contrary, the person functions well in everyday life, successfully conducting various activities in business, in society, and at home. However, while this lifestyle may appear comfortable and productive, it lacks selfhood and spirit:

In fact, what is called the secular mentality consists simply of such men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves to the world. They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God — however self-seeking they are otherwise. (Kierkegaard 1980, 35)

The secular mentality, as described by Kierkegaard, is blind to possibilities of existence that are not limited to the binary realization or non-realization of material (finite and temporal) desires. The secular has no self before God, no spiritual “I.” Therefore, Kierkegaard calls for a transformation from secular belief to the adoption of a religious faith and lifestyle (McDonald 2017). Although I agree with his observation of the spiritual problem, Kierkegaard’s solution is not suited to the aim of this inquiry, which is to search for the spiritual potential internal to secularism.

More than 150 years after Kierkegaard, Dreyfus and Kelly’s (2011) much-discussed book (e.g., Taylor 2011b) explores the same theme. These authors, too, are uncomfortable with the secular cultural attitude whereby everything is perceived as subject to the individual’s choices. In secular societies, the belief, as Dreyfus and Kelly (2011) observe, is that people’s feelings and choices are sacred, and they are required to constantly reinvent themselves. This belief imposes on people a life of severe loneliness and alienation from the world around them. Moreover, individuals’ inevitable failure, at one point or another, to find the inexhaustible force within themselves to infuse meaning into their lives through personal choices ultimately leads to depression and anxiety; this has become a central theme in modern secular life (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 12, or 203–204). According to Dreyfus and Kelly, we came to hold this belief when culture moved from the polytheistic perspective that enchanted our ancestors’ world first to a monotheistic perspective that transcended our intimacy with the world, then from monotheism to atheism, i.e., to nihilism and the emptying of meaning from reality altogether, placing the source for meaning in the feelings and choices of the individual.

Three Strategies for Tackling Spiritual Voidness

Three main responses have been proposed to the spiritual crisis of secularism: (1) a return to the beliefs, perspectives, and practices of institutionalized religions, as suggested by Kierkegaard (McDonald 2017) and MacIntyre (2007); (2) acceptance of New Age spirituality, which constitutes the sporadic, eclectic, and individualistic adoption of one or more spiritual practices created throughout the history of human civilization, in an attempt to complement a secular way of life[[2]](#footnote-3) (e.g., Harris 2014; Wu and Wenning 2016; Enstedt 2020); and finally (3) (re)understanding of the unique tradition of secularism, diagnosis of the causes of the spiritual void, and actualization of the hidden spiritual practices dormant therein (e.g., Dreyfus and Kelly 2011).

In trying to focus on secularism and the potential forms of spirituality it has to offer secular communities, I will not consider responses from category (1), since my purpose here is to discuss the spiritual opportunities inherent to secularism. Category (2) may be an option, but it only serves individuals who can afford this mode of life, such as college graduates who have found some kind of economic security. Even if underprivileged individuals and families may accept the New Age zeitgeist in principle, the public sphere of everyday secular culture does not encourage them to do so. First, there is the financial barrier – it is not possible for everyone to find the spare money and time to engage in spiritual activities. Secondly, even in activities with no financial barrier, such as the endless content provided by the internet, there is a community barrier. It is difficult for an individual to engage regularly in spiritual practices even if those practices incur no financial cost. While the public sphere may encourage underprivileged individuals or families to go on shopping trips on Sundays, attend sports events, travel to Disneyland, or take a cruise, it does not encourage them – or anyone else – to invest one hour a day in reading deep and challenging texts. In addition, as Bruce (2017) notes, when secular people engage in more familiar New Age activities such as yoga or meditation, most do so because they see these activities “as contributing to health and psychological well-being rather than spiritual development” (Bruce 2017, p. 68). Hence, such a solution lacks a social perspective on the problem, which may be one of the reasons behind the statistics that show a much higher rate of deaths of despair among the white working class without college degrees (Dow et al. 2019; Case and Deaton 2020). Therefore, my stance on the matter generally fits in with strategy (3), and thus belongs to the same discourse as Dreyfus and Kelly (2011). I will now discuss their suggestion.

Dreyfus and Kelly on Overcoming Spiritual Voidness

Dreyfus and Kelly (2011) suggest shifting our attention from an atheistic secular perspective, which only leads to a disenchanted and alienated perspective of the world, towards a new and sophisticated version of polytheism in which things in the world are perceived as shining, i.e., as objects of admiration and wonder. They want to “revivify” an old “type of engagement” and to restore wonder and reverence to a “disenchanted world” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 88–89, 213).

In such a world, resplendent with emotional meaning, we can become intensely engaged with and grateful for the marvel of everyday living. For example, attending a sporting event or family gathering or hearing a political speech can offer exhilarating moments in which reality seems to shine. Such an affinity with the world may restore a long-dormant thirst for life heretofore suppressed first by monotheism and then by atheism, which emptied our world of meaning. These moments of amazement, when we are truly receptive to human goodness or to the beauty of art or nature, are inevitably temporary, but that is the most we can or should expect.

Dreyfus and Kelly are aware that the adoption of an emotional, polytheistic affinity with reality entails moral dangers, notably a risk of fascistic, violent, and cruel behavior. Therefore, they suggest regulating this deep emotional connection to the world by developing a mental sovereign capacity for meta-reflection, which they name “*meta-poietic* skill” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 220). This reflective skill would guide a person as to when, where, and in whatcircumstances they may allow themselves to be swept away by their emotions (e.g., sporting events attended by crowds of spectators, festivals, family gatherings, and the like), and when they may not (e.g., the spread of hate speech against minorities). The authors believe that by carefully exercising this sort of reflection, humans can once again imbue the world with joy and meaning, while discerning when to resist the influence of certain moods (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 211–220).

Taylor (2011b) is correct in his criticism of Dreyfus and Kelly's diagnosis and reflective polytheistic vision. Taylor proposes that monotheism, as part of the Axial Age of spiritual revolution (see Jaspers 1965), is not the source of the problem, but a potential source of the solution. He claims that the idea of a transcendent sacred being is necessary because otherwise, in the shining world of Dreyfus and Kelly, we fall into a life of idolatry in which all sorts of earthly or psychological elements can be seen as sacred: the wind; the ocean; the sun; other people, whom we treat as icons, or the self; animals; specific feelings; and so on. In a culturist arena of this kind, the individual and the community are constantly torn apart Dionysus-like by countless changing interests, passions, and feelings (Taylor 2011b, 120–121).

Therefore, a culture that seeks a more rational and stable way of living should understand that the sacred is transcendent. This metaphysical perspective may cause the actual world to appear gray and imperfect. However, it enables us to think clearly, maintain stability, and see opportunities for improvement in our ongoing search for the right path to a better world.

Yet there is another problem in Dreyfus and Kelly’s account that Taylor does not confront. Although Dreyfus and Kelly stress the need for a sovereign meta-perspective, the “*meta-poietic* skill” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 220), they fail to give an explicit account of *how* reflection of this kind can emerge and develop if we are so tightly emotionally connected to the world. In addition, they fail to explain on what grounds this mental faculty works, from whence it draws its perspective and criteria. This absence of an explanation directs the reader to the classic faculty of reason. But reason, whether in the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant, is an unworldly faculty. Therefore, Dreyfus and Kelly’s concept of meta-poietic skill is at odds with their intentions to reconnect the modern secular subject to the world.

I will now describe an alternative perspective on the reasons for secularism's spiritual void. This understanding is founded on an examination of the concepts of *work*, *leisure*, and *contemplation*, as well as their interrelationships. Hannah Arendt, who saw herself as a secularist (Moyn 2008; Liska 2015), will be a useful source for understanding secular culture in these terms.

# **Understanding Modern Secularism in Terms of *Work* and *Leisure 1***

# ***Work***

Arendt highlights the contrast between the *vita activa* – the “active life,” concerned with “doing” in a general sense, including *labor*, *work,* and *action* in public-political matters , and the *vita contemplativa*, a life of contemplation, originally referred to by the Greek term *theoretikos* (Arendt 1998, 12-14). She sees the distinction between the two as essential to understanding the human condition in modern society. Arendt argues that the original meaning of *action*, defined in ancient times as a type of political-civic engagement, has been lost over time, or rather absorbed into the other two levels of the *vita activa*, i.e., the earthlier aspects. She attributes this shift to traditions that emerged in philosophy and institutionalized religion (Arendt 1998, 16–17). This led the generations before modernity to conceive of work as a single monolithic mode inferior to the mode of contemplation, with the latter perceived as the only meaningful mode of human existence. Arendt argues that the modern project, especially the thought of Marx and Nietzsche, was to invert the pre-modern hierarchic order of work and contemplation (Arendt 1998, 17).

The inversion was perhaps too successful, says Arendt, and modernity has become obsessed with productivity. This obsession with productivity and working largely stems from both Smith and Marx’s contempt for unproductive labor (Arendt 1998, 86). Contempt for unproductivity, displayed by both right-wing andleft-wing thinkers, has pushed practices of contemplation to the far periphery of modern secular culture.

However, I believe that this marginalization of contemplation (which, as I will later show, is the primary practice and manifestation of spirituality), has caused secular societies and their education systems to suffer from a lack of spirituality, especially in the public sphere. I will now elaborate.

For much of our lifetime, we are preoccupied with creating and shaping reality in a way that will better suit our aspirations, desires, and needs. I will refer to this mode of existence as *work*. This brings to mind the differentiation the world of Torah makes between weekdays (working and creating days) and the Sabbath (a day for contemplation of *the* creation, the genesis of existence as a whole, the *arche*). *Work*, then, is *a mode of life in which mental and physical energy is directed toward changing reality and our place within it, whether preserving or altering it,*[[3]](#footnote-4) *to suit our needs and desires.*[[4]](#footnote-5)

Thus, *work* includes calming the baby down, watering the plants, getting a haircut, going to the gym, shopping, eating, holding an umbrella to keep us dry, paying for health insurance, calling a distant friend to keep in touch, driving to the beach, and even the simple act of sleeping in order to satisfy one’s biological needs and remain healthy. *Work* in my perspective also includes activities which Arendt categorized as *action*, such as: establishing a lobby group or a forum; writing an opinion piece for the newspaper; and even making a financial donation to a project or charity. Again, *work* is concerned with directing mental or physical energy to exert some effect on reality and our place within it.

The mode of *work* is not necessarily unpleasant, nor is it an activity that we must force ourselves to perform. Moreover, in this mode, one can be in a state of flow, of *being*, completely engaged in the process at hand with no interior conflict. Nonetheless, it is still *work* according to my definition, because it is intended to bring about change in reality. *Work* may bring satisfaction or frustration; it may involve optimum productivity and the creation of excellent products, or it may be something routinely performed with simple results; it may be enjoyable or not, fluid or not; it may be done on weekdays or on the weekend. In any case, one is in the mode of *work* as long as one creates or even desires change in reality. This brings us to the crux of the matter: *Work* expresses discontent with reality, whereas, as I will explain below, contemplation and *leisure 2* – as aspects of spirituality – express contentment, acceptance, and even love for reality.

The mode of work usually imposes three major burdens on the individual or the organization. Firstly, this mode conveys an uneasiness, a discontent, with reality – or at least with one of its components – as well as a continuous, niggling desire to change it. Secondly, it obligates us to invest the physical, social, or mental efforts required to change reality in order to relieve this uneasiness. The working mode may demand repetitive, routine, simple, uninteresting, and monotonous actions, or very complex actions that require full concentration, organization, and dedication; it may even demand actions that are harmful to a person’s physical or mental health or familial and social relationships. Thirdly, it may arouse uncertainty about whether the work we do as individuals or as an organized group will indeed lead to the desired change or goal; there may also be unanticipated implications. The uncertainty is deeper, of course, when we work toward long- or medium-term goals (a 20-year mortgage, for example).

These burdens are often counterbalanced by enjoyable, easy, and pleasant work, i.e., work that is aimed at achieving simple and immediate change. As demonstrated above, this may include walking the dog, going shopping, getting a haircut, repairing a broken object, or taking a shower. Although these activities are usually perceived as leisure activities, they nevertheless belong to the mode of *work* in this account.

# ***Leisure 1***

There is, however, another mode of existence in which we deliberately leave behind the mode of *work* by distracting ourselves from reality and even attempting to forget it. We call this “leisure,” but I wish to draw a distinction here between two types of leisure. *Leisure 1* is the overall term I use to designate the times in which we distract ourselves from reality and its attendant frustrations (later on, I will elaborate on the second type of leisure: *leisure 2*).[[5]](#footnote-6) In order to achieve this break from reality, we entertain ourselves through different means of distraction. Sleeping for longer than necessary is a typical activity included in this mode. Other examples include drinking alcohol, eating for pleasure, watching television series and sports competitions, gambling, visiting amusement parks, and going on “all-inclusive” vacations or cruises. In general, it is about entering a mode of enjoyment, a pleasurable experience in which we strive to forget reality and set aside the gap between how things are and how we want them to be (compare with Gary’s 2016 characterization of vacation and its differences from leisure).

In *leisure 1* mode, we do not make a deliberate effort to change reality according to our will. Rather, we expect that whatever our mind and body experiences will be somehow pre-adapted to please us. In other words, in moments of *leisure 1*, we do not wish to be confronted with any of those aspects of reality that we wish were different. On the contrary, we seek protection from the constant struggle to shape reality according to our desires; we want the specific realm of reality that we encounter in this context to be already tailored to our wishes, such that we see, hear, and feel what we want.

In order to help us forget reality*,* *leisure 1* must create some degree of illusion, because neither the uncertainty nor the physical and mental efforts of the working mode have really disappeared. In addition, others are required to carry out work to serve the purposes of *leisure 1*. Therefore, it obliges us to invest energy in the denial of many aspects of reality. If in moments of *leisure 1* – on vacation, sitting in a restaurant, or watching a movie – reality suddenly appears in the form of a child crying, a sensation of hunger, or the disappointment of poor service, it will create frustration. The curtain of denial is then torn away.

Although *leisure 1* may promise enjoyable experiences, it has no meaningful impact on the reality in which we live, our place within it, or our affinity with it. This mental state has a negative role in the sense that it is nothing more than counter-work. In fact, we can imagine an entire life led well without a single moment of *leisure 1*. For example, take the lives of legendary statesmen/women, activists, scientists, artists, educators, social workers, doctors, or parents who work around the clock for years to send their children to college, not to mention the lives led by figures such as Moses, Siddhartha Gautama, Socrates, Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, or Oskar Schindler. Such people do not crave the kind of outlet offered by *leisure 1*. Nor do inspiring fictional characters who lead good and meaningful lives, such as Atticus Finch or Hermione Granger, seem interested in *leisure 1*; they are completely focused on accomplishing their missions. Thus, *leisure 1* is not a necessary mode for a flourishing human life.

# ***Recharacterizing the Problem***

If human life merely vacillates between these two modes of existence, *work* and *leisure 1*, then it turns out that we live a very shallow life, with only one real mode (the mode of *work*, which expresses our frustration with reality) and its illusional negative, *leisure 1*. To reduce life to these two modes is essentially to see it as a seesaw, moving up and down from one mode to its negative: two existential modes that neither nourish nor complement one another, but instead contradict and exclude each other. This perspective and way of life, which calls to mind Arendt’s observations regarding the victory of *animal laborans* (Arendt 1998),[[6]](#footnote-7) is the source of the spiritual void of secular societies.

There is nothing wrong with either of these modes in themselves. The problem is that the contemporary secular way of life, especially in the public sphere, has become identified exclusively with these modes. Thus, it is driven only by values of performativity or outcomes (Steel 2013; Gary 2016; Anonymous 2018; Hyde 2021), while neglecting and silencing a third mode that completes them: *contemplation* (Pieper 1963; Arendt 1998; MacIntyre 2007; Hadot 2002; Jalbert 2009; Nussbaum 2010; Steel 2013, 2014; Jo 2019). This mode is at the heart of spirituality, and it is the foundation that gives rise to a special kind of leisure – *leisure 2*.

Whereas Arendt (1998) seeks the root of the problem of the (secular) human condition in the relations between the three modes of the *vita activa* – action, work and labor *–* and in the domination of labor over the two others, I attribute the problem to the marginalization and silencing of contemplation and *leisure 2* by the dominant modes of *work* and *leisure 1*. In order to enhance the place of spirituality in public secular life, this third mode, encompassing contemplation and *leisure 2*,must be included.

Unless *leisure 2* is incorporated into contemporary secular society, at least four harmful phenomena will persist in secular culture. Firstly, reality as a whole, including its unchangeable aspects and the status of humanity in relation to these aspects, will absurdly remain a source of frustration and discontent. Secondly, people will continue to devote themselves entirely to work, thus losing practices of contemplation on both an individual and a cultural level (see Bruce 2017 on the minuscule percentage of secular people to engage seriously in any spiritual practice). Thirdly, the cultural attitude that navigates people between *work* and *leisure 1* may lead to the sporadic and erratic adoption of whatever shallow spiritual practices are on offer at the time (e.g., blind belief in astrology, extreme nationalism, fanatical sympathy for a certain football club), if any. Fourthly, the principle of equal opportunities will be negated, as access to spiritual life will be reserved for the well-to-do. In this case, I am concerned about the violation of the right to contemplation and spirituality to which each individual and community is entitled (Hart 2003; Tacey 2004; Watson 2006; Sheldrake 2013; Stockinger 2019; Jones et al. 2020; Bryant et al. 2020; Hyde 2021).

While strong upper-middle class individuals and families can, at least in principle, transcend the *work/leisure 1* cultural dynamic by buying or engaging in whatever kind of contemplative practice the market offers, many other members of secular society who do not come from privileged backgrounds cannot fully enjoy this opportunity from within secularism. The spiritual options locally available to them may not be secular, or may be superficial, even dangerous, forms of spirituality.

The founding fathers of secularism and modernity, in an effort to encourage creativity and technological, social, and political change, criticized what they understood as a religious mode of contemplation and its passive acceptance of reality (Arendt 1998). They also criticized metaphysics, which is the language that expresses the insights of contemplation. This criticism emerged from an informal coalition of numerous opposing schools of thought: Marxism, capitalism, positivism, behaviorism, scientism, emotivism, atheism, materialism, nationalism, and so on (Arendt 1998; see also MacIntyre 2007, on the emotivist culture to which the West was drawn as a result of the conceptual and metaphysical mistakes made by the fathers of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment and their successors). Thus, secularism, as it took shape in our culture, not only legitimated humanity to change reality in accordance with human desires; it commanded humanity to do so. In addition, the idea of individualism led to the legitimation of *leisure 1*, which was further entrenched by its significant contribution to the commercial market and capital growth. Let us now elaborate now on what is neglected: contemplation and *leisure 2*.

# **Contemplation as the Main Practice of *Leisure 2***

Unlike *leisure 1*, in which we seek distraction from reality, in *leisure 2* the person or group directs (or attempts to direct) their attention on reality as a whole and their status within that entirety (Sheldrake 2013). But unlike *work*, the person or group does not try to change reality in accordance with their desires (Halbertal 2003; Harris 2014; Shapiro et al. 2015). I place emphasis on the term *leisure 2* rather than *spirituality* in order to show (later in Section 5) the inherent connection between secularism and its spiritual tradition, based on the idea and institution of the *scholē*, i.e., leisure or spiritual leisure, in ancient Greek.

There are different views about what constitutes contemplation. First, an inclusive approach to contemplation (e.g., Barbezat and Bush 2013) assumes that it can be performed in many different ways. It can be found in traditional and institutionalized meditations, monotheistic prayers, and other cyclical traditional rituals. It may also manifest in conscious-movement methods such as yoga or tai chi. It can find expression in less formal or methodological mental states, including creative pursuits such as playing music, singing, painting, or writing a journal, as well as other activities involving the provision of services, such as volunteering aid to people or societies in need (Barbezat and Bush 2013, 10–11; Steel 2014, 228–229; Ergaz and Todd 2016). Yet, it should be emphasized that even though these activities seem like general leisure activities, they may create *leisure 2* only if one practices them as a tool of contemplating reality as it is, as a whole, and without using them as instruments to achieve rest, enjoyment, distraction from reality, and so on. Otherwise they would be considered *work* or *leisure 1*.

Second, a psychological approach characterizes contemplation as a kind of attention given with full intention and over a significant period of time to inner or external experiences such as thoughts, feelings, breathing, the sound of a bell, an image, or other people (Shapiro et al. 2015, 3). More generally, it describes contemplation as the effort to turn one’s attention to the ongoing present and be there in a non-judgmental way (Harris 2014, 6–7). This approach describes contemplation as serious and focused attention to the movement of feelings, thoughts, and emotions that arise within us, detached from the value and meaning regularly ascribed to them, and thus without willing any experiences beyond those that arise in the ongoing present. “The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking and to stop reflexively grasping at the pleasant and recoiling from the unpleasant […]” (Harris 2014, 38).

Third, in the classical approach, contemplative practices are seen to include the contemplative practices of the Western tradition, such as philosophy, science, and art, as well as other intellectual activities in pursuit of experience or knowledge of truth, reality as a whole, the unchangeable aspects of reality, or the person’s status within reality (e.g., Plato *Rep*. 5.479d–5.480a; *Rep*. 6.509d–510a, or Plato *Meno* 97e–98a; Pieper 1963, 2006; Hadot 1995, 2002; Pieper 2006; Lewin 2016; Cottingham 2017). Below, I will show the innate connection between this approach and the tradition of secularism.

In the history of human thought, unchangeable aspects of reality, which can also be characterized as anything that seems in principle beyond our control, have received many theoretical titles, such as: logos, idea, God, god, gods, the unmoved mover, substance, necessity, ideas of reason, values, the truth, the good, form, frame, matter, the thing in itself, the limits of language and the world, and so forth. One of the ways in which this approach differs from the psychological approach of Harris (2014) is that the former holds an ontological assumption regarding the existence of an objective reality beyond human perception, a reality accessed by the contemplating person, while the psychological approach does not assume an objective reality of this kind (Cottingham 2017). The meaning of that objective reality is usually close to the idea of the *arche*, the primordial source of creation and existence (Calogero 2019) from which all the affairs of the world, including the existential status of the observer, derive their meaning (Bell 2004).

Generally, contemplative observation is also characterized as a unifying experience in which the observer, in experiencing the object of observation, experiences the self simultaneously and without separation (Calogero 2019). The unifying character of contemplation is also described as a perspective that unifies the entirety of existence. For example, see Books 6 and 7 of Plato’s *Republic*, or Book 10 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which casts contemplation as a “divine” perspective executed by the faculty of the intellect in which a person contemplates the unity of metaphysical truth (see also Pieper 1963, 27).[[7]](#footnote-8) Sometimes, a contemplative perspective of this kind creates a third, higher or transcendent point of view (Calogero 2019; see also Kant 2000, 145, on the sublime).

This contemplative outlook tends to undermine the usual value and meaning we ascribe to things in the world. For example, the meanings of property, wealth, success, wisdom, and above all the everyday identity of the contemplating person become more fragile and contingent (Steel 2014; Harris 2014). This change in attitude gives room to feelings of humility, reverence, awe, or mystery (Calogero 2019, 389).

Another element of contemplation is the emphasis placed on a positive attitude toward reality. A non-judgmental attitude toward reality (Harris 2014) is one that is positive, open, and peaceful, and that can even express love for reality (Steel 2013; Shapiro et al. 2015; Cottingham 2017; Anonymous 2019; Calogero 2019).

A final quality of contemplation and *leisure 2* is that while *leisure 1* counteracts and excludes the everyday mode of *work,* the characteristics of *leisure 2* accord with and complete the mode of *work*. By entering into the mode of contemplation and drawing attention to the fixed and unchanging aspects of reality – to the *arche* – the person reinforces their “metaphysical faith in the existence of regularities in our world […] without which practical action is hardly conceivable” (Popper 2005, 250). Put differently, practical action is devoid of meaning without some kind of metaphysical perspective, whether conscious or subconscious. More concretely, in *leisure 2* a person continues to observe various aspects of reality. Although this type of contemplation is by definition for its own sake, it nevertheless indirectly leads the observer to insights regarding the nature of reality as a whole, its potentialities, and a clearer understanding of one’s place within reality. These insights may contribute to the mode of *work* and everyday life. For instance, they may serve to improve moral and political norms (e.g., Locke’s concept of a natural right common to all human beings, which inspired concrete moral and political developments); they may reveal unknown possibilities concerning matter or the physical realm (e.g., Newton’s understanding of forces and motions), or new perspectives on one’s personal, familial, or social life (e.g., Freud’s ideas of human *psyche* and culture). Of course, there can be much more straightforward and everyday insights, for example if a person changes her or his attitude toward a partner after contemplating her or him without the urge to change her or him. But again, these insights cannot be the aim of or motivation for getting into the mode of contemplation.

In summary, spirituality is a contemplative mental mode in which a person tries to direct one’s attention towards reality as a whole, its unchangeable aspects and foundations, and the place of the observer and humankind within it. This outlook on existence as a whole may undermine the everyday (excessive) value we tend to give to things in our everyday world, yet in this state the observer’s attitude toward reality is positive. This state of mind creates a special kind of leisure, leisure 2, in which, despite the observer’s deep awareness of reality, one does not judge it or wish it would be altered. In constrast to *leisure 1*, distraction, resting, or enjoyment are not the aim or motivation of *leisure 2*. A person does not enter *leisure 2* and the contemplative mode for enjoyment. Rather, it is done as a spiritual-moral obligation. For example, a typical case for leisure 2, coming from the Jewish world of Torah, would be the ideas and practices of Talmud Torah (Torah study for its own sake), and of observing the Shabbat. Whether one likes it or not, whether it brings joy or not, one sees oneself as obliged to practice these spiritual exercises. Thus the idea of *leisure 2* is a generalization of times devoted to such practices. They are times devoted to contemplation of reality as a whole in a positive affinity, i.e., without any wish that reality would be different than it is, and without expectations as to results or outcomes from that contemplative state, in terms of health or what the person feels or wishes to feel. In the description above, I distinguish between three manifestations of contemplation and *leisure 2*, one of which is the classical practice of philosophy (Hadot 1995, 2002; Pieper 2006; Lewin 2016; Cottingham 2017).

# **Secular Societies’ Right to Philosophy as Their Own Tradition of Spirituality**

Despite these benefits, we tend to ignore the mode of contemplation and leisure 2 or dismiss our potential to implement it. Our drive to work increases our blindness, and we continue to underestimate this mode of existence. This tendency to "be practical," to devote ourselves to work, is not unique to the secular age. See, for example, Socrates' first speech in the Apology, in which he criticizes the Athenians for focusing solely on improving their bodily strength, material prosperity, and honor, while neglecting philosophy, i.e., contemplation, which balances their souls and perfects their lives.

Nevertheless, secularism, as it is monopolized by *work* and *leisure 1*, may face extra barriers to the cultivation of contemplation and *leisure 2*. Indeed, it may even be possible to claim that secularism and spirituality exclude one another, as per Samuel Johnson’s dictionary entry: “Secular […] not spiritual” (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 5).

In this final section, I will try to show that this is not a complete understanding of secularism – that members of secular societies may publicly engage in their *own* traditional practice of contemplation and *leisure 2* as part of a secular life.

As discussed above, philosophy upholds the values of contemplation and *leisure 2* (Hadot 1995, 2002; Pieper 2006; Lewin 2016; Cottingham 2017). Philosophy reinforces these values without necessarily belonging to an institutionalized religion or specific metaphysical or methodological paradigm. Therefore, philosophy as a practice of contemplation stands out as an excellent way for secular societies to enhance spirituality without undermining their secular beliefs and way of life. Furthermore, as Cornelius Castoriadis shows, philosophy is not a random spiritual practice that secular societies can patch onto their way of life; rather, it is rooted essentially, historically, and socially in democracy, which is the political complement of secularism:

Greece is the social-historical *locus* where democracy and philosophy are created, thus, of course, it is our own origin. (Castoriadis 1991, 84)

[…] the Greeks *create the truth* as the interminable movement of thought which constantly tests its bounds and looks back upon itself (reflectiveness), and they create it as democratic philosophy. Thinking ceases to be the business of rabbis, of priests, of mullahs, of courtiers, or solitary monks, and becomes the business of citizens who want to discuss within a public space created by this very movement […]. The creation of democracy and philosophy is truly the creation of historical movement in the strong sense […]. (Castoriadis 1991, 160)

Philosophy and democracy are therefore twins. They were born in the same place, at the same time, and share the same inner features. Hence, secularism, as a substantial part of democracy, does not exclude spirituality. On the contrary, it has its own spiritual practice and tradition – philosophy.

Perhaps the alleged tension between secularism and spirituality often taken to shape the general secular landscape has been caused by the secular battle against the coerciveness of spirituality and *teloi* (Taylor 2011a). The family and the tribe, institutionalized religions, and rigid social classes – each with its uncritically arbitrary dogmas – have all imposed, and in many cultures still impose, their spiritual agenda, thus rendering individualism and social mobility impossible.

Although this battle is understandable and even justified, it has caused a side effect, a trauma perhaps, which has led secularism to limit its public way of life to the *work*/*leisure 1* dichotomy, and to the problems, at least four, described in section 3C. Is it not time for secularism to affirm the right of *every* secular person to engage in their *own* practices of contemplation, *leisure 2*?

The struggle for the right to contemplation and *leisure 2* in secular societies has a long history. In this struggle, one of the primary means of promoting the right to spirituality was the establishment of the *scholē*. The ancient Greek word *scholē* (σχολή)referred to leisure time intended for spiritual development (Rojek 2010; Masschelein and Simons 2013; Ildefonso-Sanchez 2019). The *scholē* was a place in which people could retreat from the mode of *work,* instead devoting their attention to the unchangeable aspects of reality and the status of humanity in relation to these aspects. This institution made contemplation the *telos* of humanity (Aristotle 2002; Hadot 2002; Nussbaum 2010). The name of these institutions is preserved today in the word *school*.

Over time, the struggle for spirituality became integrated into the classical curriculum alongside the seven liberal arts, i.e., the arts that allow for liberation from the narrow tunnel of the *work/leisure 1* dichotomy. Following the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, another ideal was added to this tradition. This was the figure of the autonomous, brave, and contemplative intellectual in search of knowledge, goodness, truth, self-development, and improvements in their social and physical surroundings. Von Humboldt’s formulation of the concept of *bildung* (Willbergh 2015) is an example of an ideal that links philosophy and the cultivation of the self through education. This philosophical ideal is still present, to one extent or another, in the curricula of schools worldwide, where students encounter “contemplative” subjects such as mathematics, grammar, sciences, and art. Unfortunately, in many cases the ideal exists only in principle and potential; in practice, students are taught the liberal arts in a shallow and cursory fashion, or as a means to the world of *work*, i.e. the study becomes *work* and not contemplative. Therefore, as always, there is an imperative to continue the struggle for spirituality – to fulfill spiritual objectives and to make them equally accessible to *every* individual.[[8]](#footnote-9)

I believe that this narrative expresses three cultural facts. Firstly, it emphasizes that the ongoing struggle for contemplation, *leisure 2*, and spirituality belongs not only to the institutionalized religions, but also to the *specific* spiritual tradition of secularism. Secondly, it reveals the need for this specific tradition to publicly defend the right of *every* individual, including secular individuals, to spirituality. Thirdly, it demonstrates that education in the sense of *scholē*, in which philosophy, science, humanities, and art are practices of contemplation and *leisure 2*, is no less part of the secular tradition than *work*. This mode of life, which has been pushed to the far periphery of secular culture, must regain its place at the center of secular society so as to become an integral part of public life.

# **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, contemplation and *leisure 2* are the foundations of spiritual life. They are not alien to secularism; on the contrary, they are central to secular tradition and history. Nevertheless, perhaps because of the battle historically waged by secularism against coercive spirituality, the spiritual mode of life has been shunted into the private sphere. Thus, it has become a sort of hobby adopted in a shallow, eclectic, and sporadic manner, or a luxurious commodity for the well-off. For many years, traditional practices that do not contradict secularism and that are in a sense part of its legacy, such as philosophy, science, and art, have been neglected as spiritual practices, and have served only as means to operate in the mode of *work*. Thus, *work* and *leisure 1* have become the two available modes for secularism in the public sphere.

A way of life comprised of these two modes alone is spiritually void. The remedy is not to flee to institutionalized religion, nor to supplement life with whatever spiritual practice the market offers, but rather to conceive of secularism as a tradition with its own practices of contemplation and *leisure 2* (philosophy, science, and art). Moreover, secular society has a global net of institutions and curricula, from the kindergarten to the academy, with the ability to support the return of contemplation and *leisure 2* to the center of public secular life. Elsewhere (Anonymous forthcoming), I suggest a way of doing so.

Every secular person or community has a claim-right to practice contemplation, and to enjoy *leisure 2* and spiritual life in a form embedded within their own tradition. Therefore, it is the duty and responsibility of governments and local authorities to provide secular children and adults the opportunity to publicly practice philosophy, just as they provide education directed to the world of *work*, or parks, playgrounds, and basketball courts for *leisure 1* activities.

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1. The discussion of secularism's spiritual crisis should not be confused with the discussion of the post-secular public sphere (Habermas 2008 and others), regarding the tension between secularism and increasing religious trends, and the right way to cope with it. Also, *secularism* as an idea and a way of life is not the same as secularization, the historical process in which religious belief lost its default position in culture and civilization (Taylor, 2007). Lastly, I am not dealing here with secularism in communist, fascist, or other illiberal or un-humanistic secular states, groups, and societies, though my argument about the humanistic branch of secularism certainly applies to these political types as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Some, such as Sam Harris’s suggestions (Cottingham, 2017), are more systematic and rigorous and are founded on well-established philosophies, while many others offer New Age spiritual solutions that are far less established. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Later, I will also use “change” to indicate the act of preserving something that might otherwise undergo an intentional or unintentional change due to external forces, natural or human, e.g., mowing the lawn. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This mode of *work* does not slot into Arendt's three categories of the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action. However, I would argue that all three levels of Arendt's *vita activa* are included in my definition of *work*, which is inspired by the idea of the Sabbath and what one should not do when one wants to be in a mode other than that of work. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Compare with Stebbins (1982, 2005, 2016) who draws a distinction between (1) serious leisure, (2) unserious or casual leisure, and (3) project-based leisure (see also Davidson & Stebbins, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. According to Arendt, in secular modernism the two more sophisticated levels of *vita activa* (work and action) have been erased, placing all *vita activa* on the level of labor, whereby life becomes dedicated only to promoting the alleged survival of the individual (Arendt, 1998, 320). Arendt describes *animal laborans* in these terms: “[t]he only contents left [for it] were appetites and desire, the senseless urges of [its] body which [it] mistook for passion […]” (320–321). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For the idea of unity in Aristotle, see Gerson 2002; Keeling 2012; Cohen and Reeve 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See for example Chapter 5 of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), in which Mill, one of the pillars of this tradition, advocates an education for every child, and imposes the financial responsibility for this education on the government and the public. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)