

Pascal on Why Living in the Present Is So Difficult (Yet so Important)

Philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is most famous for “Pascal’s Wager,” the argument that human beings “bet” with their lives on the existence of God. Yet Pascal’s celebrated book of philosophical musings *Pensées* (in which the Wager appears) is chock full of keen insights about the human condition—many as timely now as when they were written.

Take Pascal’s discussion of time itself. It is part of the human condition that we dwell in time, yet the essence of time is that it is slipping away. As a result, we never truly live in the present but are constantly thinking about the future or the past.

We never keep to the present. We recall the past; we anticipate the future as if we found it too slow in coming and were trying to hurry it up, or we recall the past as if to stay its too rapid flight...Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. (Pensées, 47)

We spend most of our lives not truly living at all but shoring up goods for some time in the future when we can enjoy them—which never comes, since we have incapacitated ourselves from enjoying the present. It’s no wonder that our waking hours are often filled with care and anxiety, rarely with serenity.

The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out

of sight because it distresses us, and if we find it enjoyable, we are sorry to see it slip away... Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. (ibid)

I would bet that this state of affairs is even more true in our day than it was in Pascal's. It's been said that we live in a "present-tense culture." This is true to a certain extent; yet our characteristic fixations—on news, politics, technology, and our jobs—also tend to put us in the frame of mind of always looking for something just over the horizon. We are so busy planning ahead that we forget to enjoy the present. Busyness is the rage and contemplation is less valued than ever.

Elsewhere in the *Pensées*, Pascal says that man has an intimation of perfect happiness deep in his soul but is unable to attain it. Put another way, man longs for eternity but is stuck in time. According to Christianity, this time-conditioned earthly existence is only a halfway house on our way to eternal life, when time will dissolve. We are not naturally at home here on earth, and that is why the present "hurts."

Although Pascal doesn't spell out a solution to the dilemma, we can easily draw one. Our happiness depends on maximizing those experiences which help us escape the "treadmill" of life and find a foretaste of the eternal Now. These include aesthetic experiences, being with family or friends, and the act of simply looking at and contemplating the world in all its richness.

Yet at the same time, the mundane practical aspects of life don't shrink into nothing—far from it.

They become the arena of service and ethics, part of the drama of life where what we do matters for eternity. Western

civilization was built and sustained in part on these words of Jesus of Nazareth: “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself...Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

Pascal, as serious a Christian as they come, would no doubt have agreed that focusing our thoughts away from the self will allow us to banish anxiety and dwell securely in the present.

—

[Image credit: Sebastian Appelt | [CC BY 2.0](#)]