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LATER

What does procrastination tell us about ourselves?

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Procrastination interests philosophers because of its underlying irrationality. Illustration by Barry Blitt

Some years ago, the economist George Akerlof found himself faced with a simple task: mailing a box of clothes from India, where he was living, to the United States. The clothes belonged to his friend and colleague Joseph Stiglitz, who had left them behind when visiting, so Akerlof was eager to send the box off. But there was a problem. The combination of Indian bureaucracy and what Akerlof called “my own ineptitude in such matters” meant that doing so was going to be a hassle—indeed, he estimated that it would take an entire workday. So he put off dealing with it, week after week. This went on for more than eight months, and it was only shortly before Akerlof himself returned home that he managed to solve his problem: another friend happened to be sending some things back to the U.S., and Akerlof was able to add Stiglitz’s clothes to the shipment. Given the

vagaries of intercontinental mail, it's possible that Akerlof made it back to the States before Stiglitz's shirts did.

There's something comforting about this story: even Nobel-winning economists procrastinate! Many of us go through life with an array of undone tasks, large and small, nibbling at our conscience. But Akerlof saw the experience, for all its familiarity, as mysterious. He genuinely intended to send the box to his friend, yet, as he wrote, in a paper called "Procrastination and Obedience" (1991), "each morning for over eight months I woke up and decided that the *next* morning would be the day to send the Stiglitz box." He was always *about* to send the box, but the moment to act never arrived. Akerlof, who became one of the central figures in behavioral economics, came to the realization that procrastination might be more than just a bad habit. He argued that it revealed something important about the limits of rational thinking and that it could teach useful lessons about phenomena as diverse as substance abuse and savings habits. Since his essay was published, the study of procrastination has become a significant field in academia, with philosophers, psychologists, and economists all weighing in.

Academics, who work for long periods in a self-directed fashion, may be especially prone to putting things off: surveys suggest that the vast majority of college students procrastinate, and articles in the literature of procrastination often allude to the author's own problems with finishing the piece. (This article will be no exception.) But the academic buzz around the subject isn't just a case of eggheads rationalizing their slothfulness. As various scholars argue in "The Thief of Time," edited by Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (Oxford; \$65)—a collection of essays on procrastination, ranging from the resolutely theoretical to the surprisingly practical—the tendency raises fundamental philosophical and psychological issues. You may have thought, the last time you blew off work on a presentation to watch "How I Met Your Mother," that you were just slacking. But from another angle you were actually engaging in a practice that illuminates the fluidity of human identity and the complicated relationship human beings have to

time. Indeed, one essay, by the economist George Ainslie, a central figure in the study of procrastination, argues that dragging our heels is “as fundamental as the shape of time and could well be called the basic impulse.”

Ainslie is probably right that procrastination is a basic human impulse, but anxiety about it as a serious problem seems to have emerged in the early modern era. The term itself (derived from a Latin word meaning “to put off for tomorrow”) entered the English language in the sixteenth century, and, by the eighteenth, Samuel Johnson was describing it as “one of the general weaknesses” that “prevail to a greater or less degree in every mind,” and lamenting the tendency in himself: “I could not forbear to reproach myself for having so long neglected what was unavoidably to be done, and of which every moment’s idleness increased the difficulty.” And the problem seems to be getting worse all the time. According to Piers Steel, a business professor at the University of Calgary, the percentage of people who admitted to difficulties with procrastination quadrupled between 1978 and 2002. In that light, it’s possible to see procrastination as the quintessential modern problem.

It’s also a surprisingly costly one. Each year, Americans waste hundreds of millions of dollars because they don’t file their taxes on time. The Harvard economist David Laibson has shown that American workers have forgone huge amounts of money in matching 401(k) contributions because they never got around to signing up for a retirement plan. Seventy per cent of patients suffering from glaucoma risk blindness because they don’t use their eyedrops regularly. Procrastination also inflicts major costs on businesses and governments. The recent crisis of the euro was exacerbated by the German government’s dithering, and the decline of the American auto industry, exemplified by the bankruptcy of G.M., was due in part to executives’ penchant for delaying tough decisions. (In Alex Taylor’s recent history of G.M., “Sixty to Zero,” one of the key conclusions is “Procrastination doesn’t pay.”)

Philosophers are interested in procrastination for another reason. It's a powerful example of what the Greeks called *akrasia*—doing something against one's own better judgment. Piers Steel defines procrastination as willingly deferring something even though you expect the delay to make you worse off. In other words, if you're simply saying "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," you're not really procrastinating. Knowingly delaying because you think that's the most efficient use of your time doesn't count, either. The essence of procrastination lies in not doing what you think you should be doing, a mental contortion that surely accounts for the great psychic toll the habit takes on people. This is the perplexing thing about procrastination: although it seems to involve avoiding unpleasant tasks, indulging in it generally doesn't make people happy. In one study, sixty-five per cent of students surveyed before they started working on a term paper said they would like to avoid procrastinating: they knew both that they wouldn't do the work on time and that the delay would make them unhappy.

Most of the contributors to the new book agree that this peculiar irrationality stems from our relationship to time—in particular, from a tendency that economists call "hyperbolic discounting." A two-stage experiment provides a classic illustration: In the first stage, people are offered the choice between a hundred dollars today or a hundred and ten dollars tomorrow; in the second stage, they choose between a hundred dollars a month from now or a hundred and ten dollars a month and a day from now. In substance, the two choices are identical: wait an extra day, get an extra ten bucks. Yet, in the first stage many people choose to take the smaller sum immediately, whereas in the second they prefer to wait one more day and get the extra ten bucks. In other words, hyperbolic discounters are able to make the rational choice when they're thinking about the future, but, as the present gets closer, short-term considerations overwhelm their long-term goals. A similar phenomenon is at work in an experiment run by a group including the economist George Loewenstein, in which people were asked to pick one movie to watch that night and one to watch at a later date. Not surprisingly, for the movie they wanted to watch immediately, people tended to pick lowbrow comedies and

blockbusters, but when asked what movie they wanted to watch later they were more likely to pick serious, important films. The problem, of course, is that when the time comes to watch the serious movie, another frothy one will often seem more appealing. This is why Netflix queues are filled with movies that never get watched: our responsible selves put “Hotel Rwanda” and “The Seventh Seal” in our queue, but when the time comes we end up in front of a rerun of “The Hangover.”

The lesson of these experiments is not that people are shortsighted or shallow but that their preferences aren't consistent over time. We want to watch the Bergman masterpiece, to give ourselves enough time to write the report properly, to set aside money for retirement. But our desires shift as the long run becomes the short run.

Why does this happen? One common answer is ignorance. Socrates believed that *akrasia* was, strictly speaking, impossible, since we could not want what is bad for us; if we act against our own interests, it must be because we don't know what's right. Loewenstein, similarly, is inclined to see the procrastinator as led astray by the “visceral” rewards of the present. As the nineteenth-century Scottish economist John Rae put it, “The prospects of future good, which future years may hold on us, seem at such a moment dull and dubious, and are apt to be slighted, for objects on which the daylight is falling strongly, and showing us in all their freshness just within our grasp.” Loewenstein also suggests that our memory for the intensity of visceral rewards is deficient: when we put off preparing for that meeting by telling ourselves that we'll do it tomorrow, we fail to take into account that tomorrow the temptation to put off work will be just as strong.

Ignorance might also affect procrastination through what the social scientist Jon Elster calls “the planning fallacy.” Elster thinks that people underestimate the time “it will take them to complete a given task, partly because they fail to take account of how long it has taken them to complete similar projects in the past and partly because they rely on smooth scenarios in which accidents or unforeseen problems

never occur.” When I was writing this piece, for instance, I had to take my car into the shop, I had to take two unanticipated trips, a family member fell ill, and so on. Each of these events was, strictly speaking, unexpected, and each took time away from my work. But they were really just the kinds of problems you predictably have to deal with in everyday life. Pretending I wouldn’t have any interruptions to my work was a typical illustration of the planning fallacy.

Still, ignorance can’t be the whole story. In the first place, we often procrastinate not by doing fun tasks but by doing jobs whose only allure is that they aren’t what we should be doing. My apartment, for instance, has rarely looked tidier than it does at the moment. And people do learn from experience: procrastinators know all too well the allures of the salient present, and they want to resist them. They just don’t. A magazine editor I know, for instance, once had a writer tell her at noon on a Wednesday that the time-sensitive piece he was working on would be in her in-box by the time she got back from lunch. She did eventually get the piece—the following Tuesday. So a fuller explanation of procrastination really needs to take account of our attitudes to the tasks being avoided. A useful example can be found in the career of General George McClellan, who led the Army of the Potomac during the early years of the Civil War and was one of the greatest procrastinators of all time. When he took charge of the Union army, McClellan was considered a military genius, but he soon became famous for his chronic hesitancy. In 1862, despite an excellent opportunity to take Richmond from Robert E. Lee’s men, with another Union army attacking in a pincer move, he dillydallied, convinced that he was blocked by hordes of Confederate soldiers, and missed his chance. Later that year, both before and after Antietam, he delayed again, squandering a two-to-one advantage over Lee’s troops. Afterward, Union General-in-Chief Henry Halleck wrote, “There is an immobility here that exceeds all that any man can conceive of. It requires the lever of Archimedes to move this inert mass.”

McClellan's "immobility" highlights several classic reasons we procrastinate. Although when he took over the Union army he told Lincoln "I can do it all," he seems to have been unsure that he could do anything. He was perpetually imploring Lincoln for new weapons, and, in the words of one observer, "he felt he never had enough troops, well enough trained or equipped." Lack of confidence, sometimes alternating with unrealistic dreams of heroic success, often leads to procrastination, and many studies suggest that procrastinators are self-handicappers: rather than risk failure, they prefer to create conditions that make success impossible, a reflex that of course creates a vicious cycle. McClellan was also given to excessive planning, as if only the ideal battle plan were worth acting on. Procrastinators often succumb to this sort of perfectionism.

Viewed this way, procrastination starts to look less like a question of mere ignorance than like a complex mixture of weakness, ambition, and inner conflict. But some of the philosophers in "The Thief of Time" have a more radical explanation for the gap between what we want to do and what we end up doing: the person who makes plans and the person who fails to carry them out are not really the same person: they're different parts of what the game theorist Thomas Schelling called "the divided self." Schelling proposes that we think of ourselves not as unified selves but as different beings, jostling, contending, and bargaining for control. Ian McEwan evokes this state in his recent novel "Solar": "At moments of important decision-making, the mind could be considered as a parliament, a debating chamber. Different factions contended, short- and long-term interests were entrenched in mutual loathing. Not only were motions tabled and opposed, certain proposals were aired in order to mask others. Sessions could be devious as well as stormy." Similarly, Otto von Bismarck said, "Faust complained about having two souls in his breast, but I harbor a whole crowd of them and they quarrel. It is like being in a republic." In that sense, the first step to dealing with procrastination isn't admitting that you have a problem. It's admitting that your "you"s have a problem.

If identity is a collection of competing selves, what does each of them represent? The easy answer is that one represents your short-term interests (having fun, putting off work, and so on), while another represents your long-term goals. But, if that's the case, it's not obvious how you'd ever get anything done: the short-term self, it seems, would always win out. The philosopher Don Ross offers a persuasive solution to the problem. For Ross, the various parts of the self are all present at once, constantly competing and bargaining with one another—one that wants to work, one that wants to watch television, and so on. The key, for Ross, is that although the television-watching self is interested only in watching TV, it's interested in watching TV not just now but also in the future. This means that it can be bargained with: working now will let you watch more television down the road. Procrastination, in this reading, is the result of a bargaining process gone wrong.

The idea of the divided self, though discomfiting to some, can be liberating in practical terms, because it encourages you to stop thinking about procrastination as something you can beat by just trying harder. Instead, we should rely on what Joseph Heath and Joel Anderson, in their essay in “The Thief of Time,” call “the extended will”—external tools and techniques to help the parts of our selves that want to work. A classic illustration of the extended will at work is Ulysses' decision to have his men bind him to the mast of his ship. Ulysses knows that when he hears the Sirens he will be too weak to resist steering the ship onto the rocks in pursuit of them, so he has his men bind him, thereby forcing him to adhere to his long-term aims. Similarly, Thomas Schelling once said that he would be willing to pay extra in advance for a hotel room without a television in it. Today, problem gamblers write contracts with casinos banning them from the premises. And people who are trying to lose weight or finish a project will sometimes make bets with their friends so that if they don't deliver on their promise it'll cost them money. In 2008, a Ph.D. candidate at Chapel Hill wrote software that enables people to shut off their access to the Internet for up to eight

hours; the program, called Freedom, now has an estimated seventy-five thousand users.

Not everyone in “The Thief of Time” approves of the reliance on the extended will. Mark D. White advances an idealist argument rooted in Kantian ethics: recognizing procrastination as a failure of will, we should seek to strengthen the will rather than relying on external controls that will allow it to atrophy further. This isn’t a completely fruitless task: much recent research suggests that will power is, in some ways, like a muscle and can be made stronger. The same research, though, also suggests that most of us have a limited amount of will power and that it’s easily exhausted. In one famous study, people who had been asked to restrain themselves from readily available temptation—in this case, a pile of chocolate-chip cookies that they weren’t allowed to touch—had a harder time persisting in a difficult task than people who were allowed to eat the cookies.

Given this tendency, it makes sense that we often rely intuitively on external rules to help ourselves out. A few years ago, Dan Ariely, a psychologist at M.I.T., did a fascinating experiment examining one of the most basic external tools for dealing with procrastination: deadlines. Students in a class were assigned three papers for the semester, and they were given a choice: they could set separate deadlines for when they had to hand in each of the papers or they could hand them all in together at the end of the semester. There was no benefit to handing the papers in early, since they were all going to be graded at semester’s end, and there was a potential cost to setting the deadlines, since if you missed a deadline your grade would be docked. So the rational thing to do was to hand in all the papers at the end of the semester; that way you’d be free to write the papers sooner but not at risk of a penalty if you didn’t get around to it. Yet most of the students chose to set separate deadlines for each paper, precisely because they knew that they were otherwise unlikely to get around to working on the papers early, which meant they ran the risk of not finishing all three by the end of the semester. This is the

essence of the extended will: instead of trusting themselves, the students relied on an outside tool to make themselves do what they actually wanted to do.

Beyond self-binding, there are other ways to avoid dragging your feet, most of which depend on what psychologists might call reframing the task in front of you. Procrastination is driven, in part, by the gap between effort (which is required now) and reward (which you reap only in the future, if ever). So narrowing that gap, by whatever means necessary, helps. Since open-ended tasks with distant deadlines are much easier to postpone than focussed, short-term projects, dividing projects into smaller, more defined sections helps. That's why David Allen, the author of the best-selling time-management book "Getting Things Done," lays great emphasis on classification and definition: the vaguer the task, or the more abstract the thinking it requires, the less likely you are to finish it. One German study suggests that just getting people to think about concrete problems (like how to open a bank account) makes them better at finishing their work—even when it deals with a completely different subject. Another way of making procrastination less likely is to reduce the amount of choice we have: often when people are afraid of making the wrong choice they end up doing nothing. So companies might be better off offering their employees fewer investment choices in their 401(k) plans, and making signing up for the plan the default option.

It's hard to ignore the fact that all these tools are at root about imposing limits and narrowing options—in other words, about a voluntary abnegation of freedom. (Victor Hugo would write naked and tell his valet to hide his clothes so that he'd be unable to go outside when he was supposed to be writing.) But before we rush to overcome procrastination we should consider whether it is sometimes an impulse we should heed. The philosopher Mark Kingwell puts it in existential terms: "Procrastination most often arises from a sense that there is too much to do, and hence no single aspect of the to-do worth doing. . . . Underneath this rather antic form of action-as-inaction is the much more unsettling question whether anything is worth doing at all." In that sense, it might be useful to think about two kinds of procrastination: the kind that is genuinely akratic and the kind that's

telling you that what you're supposed to be doing has, deep down, no real point. The procrastinator's challenge, and perhaps the philosopher's, too, is to figure out which is which. ♦

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