

Why we procrastinate

Is it just a bad habit, asks James Surowiecki in The New Yorker, or is something profound at work when we are not?

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 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. 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! But Akerlof saw the experience, for all its familiarity, as mysterious. He had 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.” 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. Since his essay was published, the study of procrastination has become a significant field in academia, with philosophers, psychologists, and economists all weighing in.

THE ECONOMIST GEORGE Ainslie argues that dragging our heels is “as fundamental as the shape of time and could well be called the basic impulse.” But anxiety about it as a serious problem seems to have emerged relatively recently, in the early modern era. The term “procrastination” (derived from a Latin word meaning “to put off for tomorrow”) entered the English language in the 16th century, and by the 18th Samuel Johnson was describing it as “one of the general weaknesses” that “prevail to a greater or less degree in every mind.” The problem

seems to be getting worse. 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. 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 GM, was due in part to executives’ penchant for delaying tough decisions.

Procrastination is a powerful example of what the Greeks called *akrasia*—doing something against one’s own better judgment. Steel defines procrastination as willingly deferring something even though you expect the delay to make you worse off. 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, 65 percent 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 a new book on the subject—*The Thief of Time*, edited by Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (Oxford)—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 an illustration: In the first stage, people are offered the choice between \$100 today or \$110 tomorrow; in the second stage, they choose between \$100 a month from now or \$110 a month and a day from now. In substance, the two choices are identical: Wait an extra day, get an extra 10 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 10 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 in which people were asked to pick one movie to watch that night and one to watch at a later date. 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. We want to do the responsible, serious thing. But our desires shift as the long run becomes the short run, and so we often fail to do what we had planned.

One reason for this might be ignorance. Many of us, it seems, underestimate how powerful the distractions of the present will be. We also succumb to 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

both before and after Antietam, he similarly squandered a two-to-one advantage over Lee’s troops. Afterward, Union Gen.-in-Chief Henry Halleck wrote, “It requires the lever of Archimedes to move this inert mass.” McClellan was, in ways, a classic procrastinator. He was unsure that he could accomplish the tasks before him. And he was given to excessive planning, as if only the perfect strategy was worth doing. Lack of confidence, sometimes alternating with unrealistic dreams of heroic success, often leads to procrastination; rather than risk failure, procrastinators create conditions that make success impossible.

Viewed this way, procrastination looks less like a question of 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 the same person. Game theorist Thomas Schelling proposes that each of us is a “divided self,” containing different beings jostling, contending, and bargaining for control. “Faust complained about having two souls in his breast,” Otto von Bismarck said, “but I harbor a whole crowd of them and they quarrel. It is like being in a republic.”

For the philosopher Don Ross, the various parts of the self constantly compete and bargain with one another—one wants to work, one 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 later. Procrastination, in this reading, results from a bargaining process gone wrong.

The idea of the divided self 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 call “the extended will”—external tools to help the parts of our selves that want to work. Ulysses provides a classic illustration of the extended will. 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 to the mast, forcing him to adhere

to his long-term aims. Similarly, Thomas Schelling once said that he would be willing to pay extra for a hotel room without a television in it.

A FEW YEARS AGO, Dan Ariely, a psychologist at MIT, 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, and there was a potential cost to setting the deadlines, since if you missed a deadline your grade would be docked. 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 separate deadlines for each paper, precisely because they knew that they were otherwise unlikely to work on the papers early. This is the essence of the extended will: Instead of trusting themselves, the students relied on an outside tool—deadlines.

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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The human condition

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, since we do learn from experience: Chronic procrastinators know about the distractions of the present and want to resist them, but don’t. So a fuller account of procrastination needs to take into account the way we feel about the tasks we’re avoiding. Gen. George McClellan, who led the Army of the Potomac during the early years of the Civil War, 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, he dillydallied and missed his chance. Later that year,