

On Diversion

Blaise Pascal

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In this excerpt, Pascal analyzes the role of diversion in human life. He argues that people constantly occupy themselves with activities not for their own sake, but to avoid confronting the misery of their condition. However, diversion is itself a deeper form of misery, as it merely conceals the problem and prevents any real solution.

When I have set myself now and then to consider the various distractions of men, [...] I have discovered that all the misfortunes of men arise from one thing only, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own chamber. A man who has enough to live on, if he knew how to dwell with pleasure in his own home, would not leave it [...] to besiege a city. [...] People only seek conversation and amusing games because they cannot remain with pleasure in their own homes.

But upon stricter examination, when, having found the cause of all our ills, I have sought to discover the reason of it, I have found one which is paramount, the natural evil of our weak and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can console us when we think of it attentively.

Whatever condition we represent to ourselves, if we bring to our minds all the advantages it is possible to possess, royalty is the finest position in the world. Yet, when we imagine a king surrounded with all the conditions which he can desire, if he be without diversion, and be allowed to consider and examine what he is, this fragile happiness will never sustain him; he will necessarily become preoccupied with the illnesses which threaten him, of revolutions which may arise, and lastly, of death and inevitable diseases; so that if he be without what is called diversion he is unhappy, and more unhappy than the humblest of

his subjects who plays and diverts himself.

That is why games and romantic relationships, war, and offices of state, are so sought after. There is not any real happiness in these [...]. We do not seek an easy and peaceful lot which leaves us free to think of our unhappy condition, nor the dangers of war, nor the troubles of statecraft, but seek rather the distraction which amuses us, and diverts our mind from these thoughts.

That is why men so love noise and movement, hence it comes that a prison is so horrible a punishment, that is why the pleasure of solitude is [...] incomprehensible. And it is a great joy for kings, that everyone around them try incessantly to divert them, and to procure for them all manner of pleasures.

The king is surrounded by people who think only how to divert the king, and to prevent his thinking of self. For he is unhappy, king though he might be, if he thinks of himself.

That is all that human ingenuity can do for human happiness. And those who philosophise on the matter, and think men are unreasonable that they spend a whole day in hunting a hare which they would not have bought, do not know much about our nature. The hare itself would not free us from the view of death and our miseries, but the chase of the hare does free us. [...]

They fancy that were they to gain a position they would then rest with pleasure, and are unaware of the insatiable nature of their desire. They believe they are honestly seeking rest, but they are only seeking agitation.

They have a secret instinct prompting them to look for diversion [...], which arises from the sense of their continual pain. They have another secret instinct, a relic of the greatness of our primitive nature, teaching them that happiness indeed consists in rest, and not in turmoil. And of these two contrary instincts a confused project is formed

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within them, concealing itself from their sight in the depths of their soul, leading them to aim at rest through agitation, and always to imagine that they will gain the satisfaction which as yet they have not, if by surmounting certain difficulties which now confront them, they may thereby open the door to rest.

Thus rolls all our life away. We seek rest by resistance to obstacles, and so soon as these are surmounted, rest becomes intolerable. For we think either on the miseries we feel or on those we fear. And even when we seem sheltered on all sides, weariness, of its own accord, will spring from the depths of the heart wherein are its natural roots, and fill the soul with its poison.

[...]

A man passes his life without weariness in playing every day for a small amount of money. Give him each morning, on condition he does not play, the money he might possibly win, and you make him miserable. It will be said, perhaps, that he seeks the amusement of play, and not the winnings. Make him then play for nothing, he will not be excited over it, and will soon be wearied. Mere diversion then is not his pursuit, a [...] passionless amusement will weary him. He must deceive himself into thinking that he is happy by gaining what he would despise if it were given to him without playing [...].

[...] No matter how sad a man may be, he becomes happy for a while if you can get him into some diversion. And no matter how happy a man may be, he will soon become dispirited and miserable if he is not diverted and occupied by some passion or pursuit which keeps him from falling into weariness. Without diversion no joy, with diversion no sadness. And this forms the happiness of people in high position, that they have a number of people to divert them, and that they have the power to keep themselves in this state.

[...]

Men are burdened from infancy with the care of their honour, their fortunes, and their friends, and more, with the care of the fortunes and honour of their friends. They are overwhelmed with business, with the study of languages and physical exercises; they are led to believe that they cannot be happy unless their health, their honour, their fortune and that of their friends be in good condition, and that a single thing lacking will render them unhappy. Thus we give them business and occupations which harass them incessantly from the very dawn of day. A strange mode, you will say, of making them happy. What more could be done

to make them miserable? What could be done? We need only release them from all these cares, for then they would see themselves; they would think on what they are, where they come from, and where they are going, and therefore it is impossible to occupy and distract them too much. This is why, after having provided them with constant business, if there be any time to spare we urge them to employ it in diversion and in play, so as to be always fully occupied.

[...]

[...] Man wishes to be happy [...]; unable to wish otherwise, he does not know how to gain happiness. That is why he needs to make himself immortal; but unable to do this, he sets himself to avoid the thought of death.

The miseries of human life are the cause of all this; having a perception of them men turn to diversion. If man were happy he would be even happier the less he was diverted, like the Saints and God.

Yes, but is not the power of being pleased with diversion in itself a happiness? No; for that comes from elsewhere and from without, so it is dependent, and therefore liable to be troubled by a thousand accidents, which make afflictions inevitable.

The one thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, yet this itself is the greatest of our miseries. For this it is which mainly hinders us from thinking of ourselves, and which insensibly destroys us. Without this we should be weary, and weariness would drive us to seek a more abiding way out of it. But diversion deceives us and leads us insensibly onward to death.

This is all they have been able to discover to console them in so many evils. But it is a miserable consolation, since it does not serve for the cure of the evil, but simply for the concealment of it for a short time, and its very concealment prevents the thought of any true cure. Thus by a strange inversion of man's nature he finds that the weariness which is his most sensible evil, is in some measure his greatest good, because more than any thing else it contributes to make him seek his true healing, and that the diversion which he regards as his greatest good is in fact his greatest evil, because more than any thing else it prevents his seeking the remedy for his evils. Both of these are admirable proofs of man's misery and corruption, and at the same time of his greatness, since man is only weary of all things, and only seeks this multitude of occupations because he has the idea of a lost happiness. And not finding this in himself, he seeks it vainly in external things, without being able to content himself, because it is neither in us, nor in the creature, but in God alone.

[...]

Strife alone pleases us, not the victory. We like to see beasts fighting, not the winner furious over the defeated. We wish only to see the victorious end, and as soon as it comes, we are satiated. It is the same in play, and in the search for truth. In all disputes we like to see the clash of opinions, but care not at all to contemplate truth when found. If we are to see truth with pleasure, we must see it arise out of conflict.

So in the passions, there is pleasure in seeing the shock of two contraries, but as soon as one dominates it becomes mere brutality. We never seek things in themselves, but only the search for things. So on the stage, quiet scenes which raise no emotion are worthless, so is extreme and hopeless misery, so are brutal lust and excessive cruelty.

[...] Continuity in any thing is displeasing. Cold is pleasant, that we may seek warmth.

Nothing is so insupportable to man as to be completely at rest, without passion, without business, without diversion, without study. He then feels his nothingness, his loneliness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness.

At once, from the depth of his soul, will arise weariness, gloom, sadness, vexation, disappointment, despair.

[...]

Men busy themselves in pursuing a ball or a hare, and this is the pleasure even of kings. Caesar, as it seems to me, was too old to set about amusing himself with the conquest of the world. Such a pastime was good for Augustus or Alexander, who were still young men, and these are difficult to restrain, but Caesar should have been more mature.

[...] A man lives with pleasure in his home, but if he sees a woman who charms him, or if he takes pleasure in play for five or six days, he is miserable if he returns to his former mode of life. Nothing is more common than that.

It is plain that the frivolity of the world is so little known, that it is a strange and surprising thing to say it is foolish to seek for greatness, and this is great cause for wonder.

Whoever does not see the frivolity of the world is himself most frivolous. And indeed all see it except young people, who are engaged in turmoil, diversion, and the thought of the future. But take away their diversion and you will see them consumed with weariness; then they feel their nothingness without knowing it. For it is indeed to be unhappy to be intolerably sad as soon as we are reduced to the thought of self, without any diversion.

References

1. Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal* (George Bell and Sons, London, 1901).