

Restlessness

In defence of an immoderate life

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Introduction: Why is it beyond us to do nothing?

When I have set myself the task of considering people's diverse, industrious activity and the dangers and difficulties they expose themselves to, at court and at war, from which so many disputes and passions, so many daring and often evil undertakings etc. arise, I have often said that all human misery has but one cause, namely people's inability to remain quietly in a room. (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*).

Although this observation by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) dates back to the seventeenth century, it sounds remarkably modern: doing nothing seems beyond us. At the same time we complain that daily life is so busy. How often do we tell one another we need a rest, but then go and take on even more? That is strange, especially because until the 1960s it was predicted that boredom would be the great problem of the twentieth century. The shortened working day as a result of technological progress and automation would mean that we would be climbing the walls with ennui.

In fact the opposite appears to be the case. Although we work fewer hours on average, we still have more to do. What is going on? Even if there are aspects of our behaviour which are specific to our time and our society is organised in such a way as to encourage us to stay busy, we would do well to look back. The fact that Pascal wrote about restlessness as early as the seventeenth century shows that the human drive to move forward rather than sit still is much older than we tend to think. Could there be something in modern man which pushes us towards restlessness?

Rather than making restlessness out to be the great villain, I ask whether restlessness has positive aspects, and if so what they might be. Is human restlessness a problem or does it rather lead to an interesting and creative life? This is the question the book addresses. Contrary to all the calls for slowing down or more balance in our lives, I break a lance for passion, creativity and yearning, positive forces which follow from our persistent flight forward. Restlessness causes us to dream of better lives, a new balance, a different job or a night of passion. It stands for excess and inextinguishable yearning. That is why many people cannot stay relaxed for long: when you are doing nothing, you think of all the things you still want to experience. Many people complain, for example, of burnout, but then why are their free weekends crammed full of activities? It is not because their work or neoliberalism forces them to do so. The fact that they are looking for activity is all down to dissatisfaction with their lives as they are.

If we want to understand where our restlessness comes from, then we must study the present from the perspective of the past. Restlessness is not only a problem of our time. If we limit ourselves to the side effects of smartphones or the internet on our emotional lives, then we miss a crucial point: no generation has gone without lamenting the decline of humanity. At the end of the nineteenth century neurologists predicted that the network of telegraphy spanning the world would bring the human race to ruin. Well, we seem to have survived, have we not?

In the first part of this book I therefore begin with a number of old tales of restlessness. The first part is largely descriptive and focuses primarily on ideas, giving a chronological account from a broad cultural perspective of how people have reflected on the tension between boredom and restlessness over the centuries, the most important question being, where does this dilemma come from?

I give voice mainly to philosophers, but also to historians and novelists. I quote diaries and lyrics which tell us how restlessness has been a central theme of Western European culture for centuries. I pass through a number of periods, from the early modern era to the end of the twentieth century, allowing us to form an image of an age-old struggle in our history of ideas. I expressly avoid an exhaustive historical overview, concentrating instead primarily on what philosophers have said on the subject.

In each chapter I dig deep into the work of a few philosophers from a particular period. Some thinkers bear witness to the quest for peace, as well as the longing for a better or richer life or to boredom and the need to escape it, and often both simultaneously. This duality cannot simply be explained by statements like, 'Fifty-seven percent of Europeans say they are sometimes restless.' Such claims might look good on the front page of a magazine or newspaper, but what do they really tell us? To explain the phenomenon we need to map out social shifts and make connections between them.

In the second part of this book I therefore move from philosophical description to explanation, exchanging historical source material for philosophical and sociological analysis. On the basis of three great evolutions (acceleration, secularisation and individualisation) I show that it is no coincidence that we currently struggle with a great drive for progress combined with exhaustion. The many calls which can be heard today for slower living often fail to grasp these complex processes and are therefore doomed to failure. We are not talking here about simple choices which we can make as individuals, but of fundamental characteristics of our time, coupled with the activity of our desires. All this plays out within the context of modern society, so-called 'modernity'.

Modernity is a broadly used concept and I will not go into the historical discussion here of the moment at which this period begins. This book starts out from modernity as the idea that as humans we ourselves give meaning to the world and are no longer willing to submit to our destiny. Philosophers refer to this as our sense of meaning or purpose in life: what significance do we give to our lives? Is this life a step in the direction of eternity, or is the interval between our birth and death the only perspective we have to make do with? A typical characteristic of modern society is that it starts out from the latter view: there is only this life and we have to make do with it. That is what is meant by 'secularisation': a society which is no longer focused on what the gods have mapped out for us, but on what we ourselves make of our lives.

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes life in modern society as a 'workshop of self-realisation', an image which is all too familiar. Open a magazine at random: catchphrases such as 'working on yourself' abound and self-realisation seems a central theme of our existence. This self-realisation is what makes us modern as human beings and what gives individualisation a central place in our society. We want to control our own lives and build our identities according to our own desires; and that is what we do, en masse. Things can always be different, better, grander or slower, which is why this struggle never ceases, because we never reach our goal. Our self-realisation therefore comes to mean a maximised life. Only when we have extracted everything from it can we feel that we have lived. Finally, as many people reason, we only live once. That means that everything must happen in this life, giving us an enormous drive to make something of it before it is too late.

Finally part three does the opposite of what most books on busy lives and lack of time do. I do not end with a call for calmer living or bringing time to a standstill. Rather than achieving peace and balance, it comes down to developing a relationship with our insatiable but also very positive drive for self-realisation and all the passion that comes with it. That does not mean that we should not be wary of overwork or burnout, or social and economic processes which make life busier. The fact is that many aspects of our daily lives happen faster than a few centuries ago. It is important to understand this acceleration properly to grasp why we complain about it and at the same time continue to go along with it. After all, since when does a good life have to be balanced? Does the quest for a balanced life itself not also push us forward, because besides our day's work and the children we also have to follow a yoga class or a course about 'knowing

yourself? Do the persistent attempts to find an alternative for our busy existence not bear witness to the same restlessness?

So anyone hoping for a manual on living differently will be disappointed. There are enough books like that, both practical and academic. Moreover such publications are a symptom of our ambivalent relationship with restlessness: we chase the wind and at the same time are willing to believe that there is an instant recipe for a balanced life. Although these routes are often presented as polar opposites, here I want to approach them expressly as two sides of the same evolution. Rather than moralising over what we are doing wrong, I would like primarily to understand why we do what we do and how we have come to do so. How is it that so many people seem to pass themselves by? That is a philosophical question and that is what I will tackle in this book.

Philosophy in my view is dancing on the skin of time: standing still in the stream of events of which we are part. We can understand our time better by looking back. By distancing ourselves from the current affairs of the day we gain a clearer view. Rather than going along with the quest for a new balance, in this book I pose the fundamental question: if we constantly complain that our lives are too busy, why is it beyond us to do nothing? In short, what are we chasing after? Or as the Flemish singer Mira muses in the song 'In my prime' (In de fleur):

I urgently need to climb a mountain somewhere
Or start up twenty or so new affairs
Or else into my coffin I'll crawl
With the miserable feeling
Of having missed it all

I do not end this book with a solution for the restlessness Mira sings of. Anyone who has a solution in mind before the problem is properly understood restricts the space for thought. Perhaps, on closer inspection, there is no problem after all, or perhaps the problem is not as we thought it was. Is *dolce far niente* really the greatest happiness? Or is our struggle for balance the reason we make such progress? Those are all philosophical questions and in this book I intend to use philosophy to gain a better understanding of the duality of peace and restlessness I have described.

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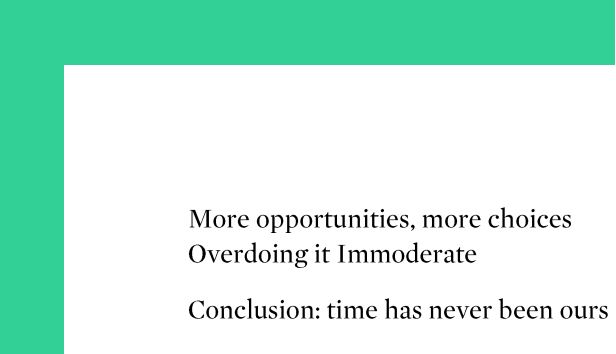
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