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## ON “LIVING IN THE PRESENT”

*Honorary Center Member*  
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*“History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make today.”*

—Henry Ford, *Chicago Tribune*, 1916.

### I

Recently, I came across a rather gushing account on the “newness” of the time in which we live. Actually, it was cast in theological terms. Pope Francis’ writings, it was claimed, have made the previous history of the Church and its doctrines obsolete. The past cannot bind the present. We are in a “new”, I mean “really” new age. Nothing that went before—things like nations, constitutions, doctrines, customs, and traditions—are all built on discarded foundations. What we have now is, finally, our complete freedom. We have no baggage from ancient, medieval, or recent history to bog us down. It’s just great to be alive!

This “freedom” is expressed in terms of “rights”. We all, as it were, have a “right” to rights, themselves ever changing according to our wants and “values”. A “value” has no objective referent. “Values” are not grounded in something once called “reason” or “natural law”. Their content is wholly constituted by what we will. Moreover, no one can tell us what we are or what we have “rights” to. That would place our “dignity” in the hands of someone else. The only laws we observe, as Rousseau once said, are those that we give to ourselves. All “binding” contracts must be seen in the light of this prior “right” to autonomy.

Biology is not destiny. Biology signifies nothing as we did not give it to ourselves. It contains no rule or measure. We decide what our biological make-up is. We ourselves define that configuration with which we are most comfortable. We are the objects of our own art and technology. Since we have no given “nature”, we are “free” to define everything about ourselves. This self-defining freedom is the only one worth having. The notion that the gods have a “plan” for our good or well-being that is better than our own is a delusion. We rejoice in our utter “diversity”. We are so diverse that we can dismiss any “universal” principles. The nominalists were right all along.

We have a “right” to have our “freedom” protected without question. This is the principal function of government, the protection of individual “rights”. Freedom has no relation to reason. Reason by itself is a form of oppression. It is at all times the servant of will, our will. The old pesky distinctions of male and female are anachronisms. Marriage and family are at best temporary conveniences. Family can be configured any way we want.

What once thought itself to be a male, now thinks itself to be a woman; this is his/hers/its “right”. No one can object to our choices without violating our “right”. To do so would be to deprive us of our “dignity” and create resentment. We have the “right” to be what we say we are, however we look. Any criticism of our “rights” or deeds constitutes “hate-language”. It is not to be allowed in any public or private forum. The rule of “rights” must be total. The old notion of freedom of speech, religion, or assembly rested on the false belief in a given human nature that indicated what we are. Universities, consequently, are “research” centers, the purpose of which is continually to refashion and develop ever new “rights”. “Truth” cannot be its purpose. Truth is an outmoded concept that restricts our “rights”.

The exercise of these “rights”, however, would, in logic, depend, for example, on whether the “women who once were men” accept the “men who were once women” in the same facilities and communities, all with equal “rights”. Likewise, we will have men who still choose to think themselves to be men, as is their “right”, and women who still choose to think of themselves as women. This communal interchange, that includes all types in the “common good” of letting each be what he/she/it chooses to be, may be somewhat confusing in the beginning. We cannot formulate any stable or general rule, as that attempt may restrict our newer “rights” that we do not yet know will exist.

Probably, the best solution is to drop the distinction between men and women as traditional and out-of-date. Ultimate freedom exists when we cannot say anything of any other thing lest someone’s “rights” be violated. This “new” reticence would make our societies considerably quieter and more contemplative, since we would waste no time in trying to figure out what anything was or how to name it lest anyone’s “rights” be violated.

## II

This is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Henry Ford’s most famous foray into philosophy. “History is bunk,” he said, in an easily recollected phrase. This insight made him the most quotable of the early American industrialists. It seemed finally to refute the pejorative influence of the Greek historian Thucydides who had led the whole western civilization astray by claiming that the study of history meant something. Indeed, he implied that we could only know the present if we knew the past. Actually, Ford said that history was “more or less” bunk, a cautionary distinction. He added that we don’t want “tradition” either. We want to live in the “present”. If the historians want to live in the “past”, they will find nothing useful there.

Now it is true, to give Ford credit, that we can only live in a “present”. Even eternity is a “present”. Indeed, that is its whole point. We can know something about the past. We can guess or speculate about the future. But we live in an on-going “now”, as Aquinas put it, in our present lives while they last.

Yet, if we know nothing of the past, we dwell in a world as blank as our minds were when we were first endowed with them. There does seem to be something out there even if we manage to convince ourselves that it has nothing to do with us. If only the “present” merits our attention, we have nothing to go by but a kind of

contemporary emptiness filled with our own imaginations. Nature, history or revelation cannot help us.

Our present situation is like talking at the same time to everyone in the world each minute on our cell phones. We have only horizontal extension. We cannot call the past or future. Each minute replaces the minute that went before. No moments are connected. It is not unlike the Muslim notion of Allah who wills each moment separately. Nothing follows from anything, but all comes from Allah's arbitrary will which is not bound by anything. We have time for nothing but diffused minutes of the present. We are so totally absorbed in our "now" that we have nothing left but the passing moment that is before us. In this context, the notion of "tradition" as truths being handed down to us has no meaning.

In a recent essay, Patrick Deneen at the University of Notre Dame remarked that even the brightest students today, however eloquent, seem to know nothing. Their education has deprived them of all particulars by which we place things in relation to each other. We have no history in other words, no record of significant and insignificant facts and events that were not "imagined" but that did actually happen. Human beings with this education are not ordinary Johns and Suzies with real romances who settle down to raise their own children.

Rather they are types, genders, or classes. If someone belongs to the wrong one, he causes of the world's ills. If something goes wrong, it is never a personal fault. Rather we have a world filled with "victims". If we flush out all particulars, we never really encounter anyone else. Everyone is a "type". And if the autonomous individuals we do meet have the "right" at all times to choose to be something else, we are left only with fleeting impressions of vague universals which do not exist.

Literature, however, was once designed to enable us to live vicariously other lives than our own. We might know what ethical principles were. But unless we saw how they worked themselves out in particular lives, we would know little about their exigency and nature. The only history "worth knowing about," Ford had said a hundred years ago, is the history "that we make today." But of course the days of Ford's own Model T's, even his Model A's and V-8s, are also long gone. The Model T's only exist in museums as carriages of a past era that is no concern of ours.

Another form of this living in the present is the projection of the present on the future. If we were to succeed in this endeavor, then

nothing new could happen in the future either. We have a chronological stagnation. But did Ford's building the Model T, we wonder, have anything to do with Stephen Hawking's recent \$100 million dollar effort to find life in outer space? If we did find such extra-terrestrial life, would it insist on its "rights" as we do?

The ecologists are busy telling us to save our resources for those who will be born three or ten centuries from now. That is, we impose on the future the limited nature of our present knowledge. We think we can know now that nothing will be developed in the future that will enable these future generations to live on our planet in a much better way than we do now. The whole rhetoric about saving the world for future generations is little less than fixing our way of life on the future on the grounds that we already know enough about what we will need or can do in the future.


Finally, to complete these reflections on living in the present, I came across an essay In *The Atlantic* by Amanda Geffer. It was entitled: "The Case against Reality". As I have been suggesting, most of these proposed "rights" and "values" that belong to our "now" seem to be against reality. This is the first sentence of the essay:

As we go about our daily lives, we tend to assume that our perceptions—sights, sounds, textures, tastes—are an accurate portrayal of the real world. Sure, when we stop to think about it—or when we find ourselves fooled by perceptual illusion—we realize with a jolt that what we perceive is never the world directly but rather our brain's best guess at what that world is like, a kind of internal simulation of an external reality.

On finishing this sentence, I thought: Where have I read this before? It seems right out of Descartes and Kant, but they seem pretty dated by now.

While I did think that our senses deceive us once in a while—we once had a philosophical thesis to that effect—still our senses do tell us some pretty good things about reality. Without them, we cannot get to anything but our insides. Our senses also help to warn us about a few nasty things that can go very wrong. So perceptions did indeed have something to do with the "real world", as it is called.

I now find out, with a "jolt", that what I am seeing or smelling out there is my brain's "best guess" about what the world is like. I never realized that my brain was somehow doing my thinking for

me. Just where it gets its information on which to make an educated “guess”, I am not sure. I am trying to grasp this idea that, every time I meet a friend, I have to ask my brain to “guess” for me whether he is really there or not. Presumably, my friend is also trying to “guess” in return whether what his brain thinks it sees is really there. With such reflections, one is tempted to say, one hundred years after Henry Ford’s famous statement, considering what is being said about “rights”, autonomy, tradition, brains, and freedom, that there is more that is “bunk” in this world than merely history. 

**Father James V. Schall, S.J.**, *author of more than 40 books, retired in December after 35 years teaching in the government department at Georgetown University. His last lecture, “The Final Gladness,” can be viewed online [here](#).*

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