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The Strange Arithmetic of Being: Time That Passes and Becomes Life

Meaning and the Path

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The Strange Arithmetic of Being: Time That Passes and Becomes Life

The same day both takes away our future and adds to our life—and what we call anxiety often turns out to be a consequence of choosing the wrong scale of vision rather than a response to the facts.

> *What is a human being in nature? Nothing before infinity, everything before nothing, a middle between nothing and everything… Equally powerless to comprehend these two abysses—infinity and nothingness.*
>
> *— Blaise Pascal, Pensées, fragment on the disproportion of the human being, published 1670*

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At the Origins of This Article

Perhaps the practice of presence in everything does not consist in constantly remaining in a "luminous" state and forcibly turning every event into something good. It consists in the ability to see that the same reality allows several scales of perception.

Every day we live really does bring us closer to death. There is no refuting that. One day has ended, so there is less time remaining.

But at the same time, that day has not only disappeared from the future. It has appeared in the past. Previously it did not exist in your life at all; now it does. It contained thoughts, touches, mistakes, conversations, sensations, discoveries. Life has become shorter as a reserve of time, but larger as a volume of experience.

A strange arithmetic of being emerges: with each day, there is less future and more life.

Anxiety most often arises when consciousness chooses too large a scale. It rises far above the present and sees the whole human life at once: birth, aging, losses, death. From that height, an individual day looks tiny, and a human being doomed.

But change the scale and move closer to the present moment, and the picture changes. Death is not here now. Now there is air, a body, a sound, the gaze of someone you love, the taste of water, the movement of a thought. Finitude remains a truth, but ceases to be the only truth.

We suffer not only from what happens, but also from the wrong choice of scale. Sometimes a person needs to move farther away. To see that today's quarrel is small compared with a whole life. That losing money is not the same as losing oneself. That the present pain is one chapter, not the whole book.

At other times, we need to move closer instead. Not think about how to live the next twenty years, but live the next ten minutes. Not settle our entire destiny, but feel the ground beneath our feet, take a breath, perform one action.

The true art of presence does not consist in fixing consciousness at one point forever. It consists in the freedom to move between scales.

When something trivial consumes you, widen the scale.
When infinity frightens you, narrow it.
When pain seems eternal, see it as a fragment of the journey.
When life seems too short, enter the depth of a single moment.

People often search for the one correct view of reality. But perhaps maturity begins when we understand that a perspective is a tool. We can choose the scale of perception according to what the soul needs now.

Sometimes we need to remember death to stop postponing life.
Sometimes we need to forget death to be able to live today.
Sometimes we need to see ourselves as a grain of sand to release our pride.
Sometimes we need to feel ourselves an entire universe to keep the world from trampling our dignity.

None of these views is final. They are all lenses.

The practice of presence does not demand that we choose between “my life has become shorter” and “my life has become larger.” It allows us to hold both.

Yes, I have one day less remaining.
And yes, there is now one day more within me.
Yes, everything will end.
But that is precisely why what is happening now has weight.

Finitude does not necessarily devalue a moment. On the contrary, it gives it form. If a day never ended, it would not be a day. If a meeting could never be the last, perhaps we would never learn to look at one another truly.

To be present means neither hiding from finitude nor allowing it to poison existence. It is the ability to know that the ocean is vast and still feel a single drop on your skin.

Perhaps this is what freedom of consciousness consists in: being a prisoner of neither infinity nor the moment, but knowing how to choose the distance from which life becomes visible again.

What This Article Is About

This thought arose from a personal observation, but it is not alone: dozens of traditions have independently formulated the same observation, through the same movement of thought, over two and a half millennia—from Roman Stoicism to Buddhist meditation on death, from the Sufi concept of *waqt* to the modern psychology of psychological distance. Below, we trace where this idea of freely moving between scales in perceiving our own finitude has already been articulated—in what words, in which century, by which thinker—and what we can take from it into the practice of a single day.

I. Seneca and Psalm 90: Counting Days So as Not to Fear Them

In *On the Shortness of Life* (*De Brevitate Vitae*, around 49 CE), Seneca begins not with consolation but with a diagnosis: people complain that life is short, but the fault lies not in its length but in how it is squandered. His formula—*vita, si scias uti, longa est*, "life is long if you know how to use it"—turns the question itself around. The problem is not the objective scale—how many days remain—but the lens through which that scale is viewed.

Psalm 90 offers an almost identical movement of thought, from another tradition and another age. "Teach us to number our days so that we may acquire a wise heart" (Psalm 90:12) is neither a request to extend life nor a complaint about its finitude, but a request to learn to count correctly. Counting days here is not the bookkeeping of fear, but a tool of wisdom: the same calculation that looks like depletion at one scale becomes a foundation for clear-sightedness at another.

Both traditions formulate a practical task rather than a philosophical thesis: the finitude of life is a given that cannot be changed, but its arithmetic—whether the counting feels like loss or the acquisition of wisdom—can be changed, because it is a function of scale rather than fact.

II. Marcus Aurelius: A Point Against an Abyss

In the *Meditations* (XII.32), Marcus Aurelius writes: "What a tiny part of the limitless and incomprehensible abyss of time is allotted to each person—and it is immediately swallowed by eternity. What a tiny part of all substance, of the entire world-soul, what a small clod of earth upon which you crawl."

This is not the rhetoric of self-abasement. The Stoic practice that contemporary scholars call the “view from above” consists in deliberately enlarging the scale of observation. If today's hurt, fear, or loss is considered against the “limitless abyss of time,” its absolute size does not change, but its relative weight collapses. Anxiety derives not from the magnitude of an event but from the narrowness of the frame in which consciousness places it.

Crucially, Marcus Aurelius does not use this scale exclusively. Elsewhere, he urges the opposite movement: concentrate on “the present, which is an indivisible point,” on a concrete action here and now, without looking ten thousand years ahead. For the Stoics, these are not competing doctrines but the same skill applied in different directions: widen the frame when a trifle threatens to swell into a catastrophe, and narrow it when infinity threatens to paralyze action.

III. Pascal: Living Between Two Abysses

In his unfinished *Pensées* (published 1670), Blaise Pascal describes the human being as a creature caught between “two infinities” (*les deux infinis*): the infinitely large cosmos and infinitely small matter. For Pascal, the human being is “nothing before infinity, everything before nothing, a middle between nothing and everything.” This middle offers no foothold at either scale. The attempt to encompass the infinitely large plunges reason into awe; the attempt to grasp the infinitely small plunges it into the same awe.

Unlike the Stoics, Pascal harbors no illusion that changing scale dispels anxiety: he honestly acknowledges that both limits are beyond the reach of human reason. Yet the very recognition of this “disproportion” (*disproportion de l'homme*) serves the same function. It shows that pain or fear which seems absolute is always pain or fear seen from one particular point in the range between nothing and everything, rather than an absolute characteristic of what is happening.

Pascal's middle is neither a compromise nor an average. It is the recognition that a human being is destined to live within a range of scales rather than at a single point in that range.

IV. Spinoza: Things Under the Aspect of Eternity

In the *Ethics* (published posthumously in 1677), Baruch Spinoza introduces what became one of philosophy's most frequently quoted formulas: *sub specie aeternitatis*, “under a certain aspect of eternity.” In Part II, Proposition 44, Corollary 2, he writes: “It is the nature of reason to regard things not as contingent, but as necessary… therefore it is the nature of reason to regard things under this aspect of eternity” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

This is not mystical contemplation but a specific cognitive operation: to see a particular event not in its temporal, enduring form—“this is happening to me right now, in precisely this way”—but in its logical necessity, as the consequence of causes embedded in the structure of

the whole. For Spinoza, this shift of scale, from duration to necessity, weakens the power of the affects. Fear and anger feed on the perception that a moment is contingent and unique, while the view from eternity reveals the same moment as one node in an infinite chain of causes.

Unlike Marcus Aurelius, Spinoza does not propose alternating between scales. He maintains that viewing things under the aspect of eternity belongs to reason as a faculty, rather than being a technique for particular difficult moments. But the structure of the approach is the same: anxiety diminishes not because the facts change, but because the scale on which those facts are considered changes.

V. Dogen: Time That Does Not Flow Past

In “Uji” (“Being-Time,” from the *Shobogenzo*, around 1240), the Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) offers a scale opposite to the Stoic and Spinozist view from above: not an expansion of the frame to eternity, but its contraction to a single, wholly self-sufficient moment. In the related text “Genjokoan,” he writes: “Firewood, having become ash, cannot become firewood again.” Yet this is not a metaphor of loss. It asserts that every state of time—firewood, ash—is full and complete in itself, rather than a stage on the way to another state.

Dogen quotes his teacher Yaoshan: “For the time being, stand on top of the highest peak. For the time being, stand on the bottom of the deepest ocean” (everydayzen.org). “For the time being” is the key phrase here: each moment is a separate being-time (*uji*), irreducible to others. Precisely for that reason, it cannot be evaluated against the measure of an entire life or an entire eternity—only against its own measure.

This is the most radical “zoom in” among the traditions considered here. Where the Stoics reduce anxiety by widening the scale to the cosmos, Dogen reduces it by narrowing the scale to a single breath that need not be compared with anything outside itself.

VI. Heidegger and Rilke: Finitude Gives Form

In *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), Martin Heidegger introduces the concept of *Sein-zum-Tode*, “being-toward-death” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Death, for Heidegger, is not an event at the end of a life's line, but a structure constantly present in the way a human being (*Dasein*) already exists now. Authentic existence—existence that is one's own—is possible only when a person does not turn away from their finitude, but holds it as the horizon that determines the weight and authenticity of every decision.

Rainer Maria Rilke articulates the same thought in poetic rather than philosophical language in a 1923 letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy: “Death is our friend, precisely because it

brings us into absolute and passionate presence with everything that is here, that is natural, that is love" (themarginalian.org). And in the same letter: "Only because we exclude it does death become increasingly alien to us and, finally, an enemy."

The movement of thought shared by Heidegger and Rilke contradicts the intuition that finitude devalues the moment. If a day never ended, it would not be a day: it would dissolve into indistinguishable duration without beginning or end, without form. Finitude does not steal a moment's value. It is the only thing that gives it the contours by which it can be recognized and lived as something distinct at all.

VII. Ecclesiastes: Vanity and Bread with Joy in the Same Text

The Book of Ecclesiastes (*Qohelet*, approximately the third century BCE) holds two scales in constant tension without attempting to reconcile them. The refrain "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2) is the view from the widest scale: against the endless repetition of cycles—"what has been will be"—any individual human effort loses weight. Yet the same text, with no sense of contradiction, says: "Go, eat your bread with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart" (Ecclesiastes 9:7): a view narrowed to a particular meal, a particular joy.

Ecclesiastes does not resolve this opposition through synthesis. It leaves the two scales side by side, as different and equally true ways of seeing one life. This very incompleteness makes the book interesting as a source on scale. It does not teach which scale is "correct," but shows that wisdom, in its own definition, consists in holding both without having to choose one forever.

VIII. Maranasati: Looking at Death So as Not to Fear Life

In Theravada Buddhism, *maranasati* (*maraṇasati*, "recollection of death") is a formal meditation practice incorporated into the canonical corpus. In the *Maranasati Sutta* (Anguttara Nikaya 6.19–20), the Buddha says: "Mindfulness of death, when developed and practiced, brings great fruit and great benefit. It gains a foothold in the Deathless" (accesstoinsight.org).

The logic of the practice runs directly counter to the intuitive avoidance of death. Instead of keeping finitude at the edge of consciousness, where it expands into vague background anxiety, the practitioner deliberately brings attention toward it and makes it a concrete object of observation in a separate, time-limited session. The change of scale works in both directions at once. Death, made an object of close examination, ceases to be a boundless background fear and becomes a fact of a definite size with which one can work. Meanwhile, everyday life, considered against a regularly practiced recollection of one's own finitude—*anicca*, impermanence, is one of the three characteristics of existence in the Pali canon—acquires an intensity that would be absent if the subject were repressed.

IX. Sufi Waqt: The Son of the Moment or Its Master

In the Sufi tradition, *waqt* (waqt) means not calendar time, but the quality of presence available to a person in a particular spiritual state. The classical Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) works with two terms that distinguish between forms of the very idea of "living in the present moment": *ibn al-waqt* ("son of the moment") and *sâhib al-waqt* ("master of the moment") (William Chittick, "Presence with God in Ibn Arabi's Teaching," Ibn Arabi Society).

The "son of the moment" is a Sufi wholly, passively subject to the state brought by the current instant: he is present, but present as a victim of circumstances, changing completely with every new state. Ibn Arabi prefers a higher degree, the "master of the moment," sometimes translated as "master of time," *al-sâhib al-waqt*: someone who is not simply dissolved in the present state, but actively holds it, directs it, without being carried away by it (New Age Islam, discussion of *al-sâhib al-waqt*).

This distinction matters to the question of scale precisely because it shows that "living in the present moment" is not a single skill, but at least two different relationships to the same narrowed scale. One can be carried away by the moment, or one can be its master: retain the ability to step out of it, widen or narrow the frame at will. The freedom Ibn Arabi describes lies not in the scale consciousness occupies, but in who chooses that scale—consciousness or circumstances.

X. Nietzsche: Eternal Recurrence as a Test of Both Scales at Once

In aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882), titled "The Greatest Weight" (*Das größte Schwergewicht*), Friedrich Nietzsche proposes a thought experiment. A demon announces that this life, "as you now live it and have lived it," must be lived "once more and innumerable times more, and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy... must return to you, all in the same sequence" (holtof.com, full text of aphorism 341). The question this demon asks of every action—"Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?"—Nietzsche calls "the greatest weight."

What distinguishes this thought is that it makes us hold two scales simultaneously rather than switch between them. A single, irreversible, contingent action today must be assessed as though it would recur forever. The small scale—today's decision—and the greatest possible scale—an eternity of repetition—do not contradict each other here, but fuse into one act of evaluation. In aphorism 276 of the same book, Nietzsche articulates the outcome of this capacity as *amor fati*, "love of fate": "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things... Amor fati: let that be my love from now on!" (holtof.com).

XI. The Science of Distance: Why a Change of Scale Is Measurable

What the traditions described in the language of mysticism and ethics, modern psychology describes in the language of measurable effects. Construal level theory, developed by Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman in 2003–2010, shows that psychological distance—temporal, spatial, social—systematically changes how abstractly or concretely a person perceives an event, and that this can be consciously managed (Wikipedia; original article by Trope and Liberman).

In *Chatter* (2021), psychologist Ethan Kross describes "temporal distancing"—literally stepping back from a current emotional state by imagining how it will be perceived in a month or a year—as a measurable way to reduce the intensity of anxiety, documented in experimental psychology (APA review).

Finally, the "overview effect," first described by writer Frank White in 1987 on the basis of interviews with astronauts, is a documented cognitive shift experienced by people who have seen the Earth as a whole from space: a sudden expansion of the scale on which they perceive their own lives and conflicts against the visible smallness and fragility of the planet (The Guardian; NASA podcast). Carl Sagan described a secular version of the same technique in *Pale Blue Dot* (1994): "Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us." The entire history of human wars, love, and ambitions took place "on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

What the Stoics called the "view from above," and twenty-first-century psychologists call "construal level" and "temporal distancing," is the same measurable skill, independently rediscovered across two millennia in different descriptive languages.

What This Means in Practice

All the traditions considered converge not in a conclusion but in a skill: the scale of perception can be changed consciously, and the skill grows through training, not understanding alone. Here are four concrete techniques, each a working version of one of the lenses explored above.

Widening to the view from above. When a single problem—a quarrel, a deadline, a loss—threatens to fill your entire consciousness, deliberately widen the scale to Marcus Aurelius's exercise. Imagine your whole life, from birth to death, as one line, and the present situation as a point upon it. Psychologists call this same technique "temporal distancing" (Ethan Kross): ask yourself not "What am I feeling now?" but "How will I remember this in a year?" The difference between these two questions is precisely the scale you can control.

Narrowing to a single breath. When what frightens you is not a specific event but infinity itself—the future, loss, the unknown—return your attention to what is happening in your body right now: a breath, a sound, the weight of your body on the chair. This is not an escape from the question of finitude, but Dogen's technique: firewood is fully firewood, under no obligation to become ash in advance. Anxiety almost always lives at the scale of “my whole life”; calm returns at the scale of “one whole minute.”

Keeping both accounts at once. Once a day, not as a ritual but as a check, silently say both halves of the arithmetic: “I have one day less remaining” and “There is one day more within me.” Do not choose which formulation is true: both are accurate, each at its own scale. This is a version of *maranasati* without dramatization: not meditation on the horror of the end, but a habit of holding finitude beside what has accumulated, without a hierarchy between them.

The test of eternal repetition. Before entering an important conversation, a meeting, an ordinary evening, ask Nietzsche's question: would I agree to experience this exact moment an infinite number of times, every detail unchanged? If the answer is no, this is not a reason for despair but a signal that the scale has been chosen incorrectly. Perhaps you are looking at the evening as preparation for something else rather than as the moment itself. If yes, you have entered, for a few seconds, the scale Spinoza called *sub specie aeternitatis*.

All four techniques continue philosophical understanding into the body and into the time of a day. Freedom to move between scales does not emerge from a single reading. Like any other skill, it emerges through repetition.

Key Quotation

> *Death is our friend, precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with everything that is here, that is natural, that is love... Life always says “yes” and “no” at the same time. Death, however—please believe me—is the true speaker of “yes.” It stands before eternity and says only one thing: “Yes.”*
>
> *— Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy, 1923, quoted via A Year with Rilke, themarginalian.org*

Connections Between Traditions

• Marcus Aurelius ↔ Spinoza ↔ Sagan / overview effect: widening the scale to eternity or to the view of Earth from space as a way to reduce the relative weight of particular anxieties. *Meditations* XII.32 · *sub specie aeternitatis* · *Pale Blue Dot*.

• Pascal ↔ Dogen ↔ Nietzsche: holding two scales at once—infinity and a point, eternal recurrence and a single moment—without reducing either to the other. *Pensées* · *Uji* · *The Gay Science* §341.

• Heidegger ↔ Rilke ↔ *maranasati*: finitude as that which gives presence form, rather than cancels it. Being-toward-death, SEP · Rilke, The Marginalian · *Maranasati Sutta*.

• Ecclesiastes ↔ Psalm 90 ↔ Seneca: “numbering the days” as a path to wisdom rather than despair. Ecclesiastes 1–9 · Psalm 90:12 · *De Brevitate Vitae*.

• Sufi *waqt* (*sâhib al-waqt*) ↔ Dogen ↔ construal level theory: active mastery of the scale of the moment rather than passive residence within it. Chittick, “Presence with God” · *Uji* text · construal level theory.

• Kross's “temporal distancing” ↔ the Stoic “view from above”: scientific confirmation of an ancient cognitive technique for changing the scale of anxiety. *Chatter*, APA review.

• Spinoza (*sub specie aeternitatis*) ↔ Nietzsche (*amor fati*): affirmation of necessity through a view detached from the duration of the moment. Stanford Encyclopedia, Spinoza · *Amor fati*.

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- Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Countess Sizzo, quoted via *A Year with Rilke*, themarginalian.org.

Tags

scale of perception, practice of presence, Stoicism, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, view from above, Spinoza, sub specie aeternitatis, Pascal, two infinities, Buddhism, maranasati, anicca, Zen, Dogen, being-time, uji, Heidegger, Sein-zum-Tode, Ecclesiastes, Psalm 90, Sufism, waqt, Ibn Arabi, sahib al-waqt, Nietzsche, eternal recurrence, amor fati, construal level theory, psychological distance, Ethan Kross, overview effect, Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot, Rilke, finitude, death, presence, time, eternity

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Archival Editor's Note

This translation preserves the accepted Russian essay's argument, including its strong claims about anxiety, independent convergence among traditions, and a single scientifically measurable skill. Those equivalences are the authors' interpretation; this translation has not newly verified a clinical or scientific conclusion. Construal level theory, temporal distancing, Stoic exercises, Zen being-time, and Sufi presence are not established here as identical practices. Anxiety cannot generally be reduced to a wrongly chosen perspective, and the suggested reflection exercises are not treatment recommendations. A refusal to relive an event can reflect real harm or an unwanted situation rather than an error of scale.

The description of Yaoshan as Dogen's “teacher” is retained from the archive; it should not be read as a verified direct teacher–student relationship. The discussion's modern psychological recasting of *ibn al-waqt*, *maranasati*, and Spinoza is likewise interpretive. Quotations are translated as supplied in the Russian archive, except familiar wording where it aligns, and are not certified against original editions. Trope's given name is normalized to Yaacov from the archive's “Yaron”; the inherited paper attribution is unchanged. The bibliography's “Primary Sources” heading is preserved although it also lists secondary summaries. External references have been inherited, not freshly read or verified.

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