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Newton and Shakespeare and Munch, Oh My: Productivity in the Time of Coronavirus

On March 13, 2020, I left the campus of MIT for the last time in my undergraduate career, just one member of the mass exodus of college students heading home as cases of COVID-19 swept the country. For the safety of my family, I chose to self-quarantine in our basement for two weeks—I was delivered meals on paper plates left outside the external basement door, and the only human contact I had was through phone or window screens. In contrast to the chaos of wrapping up my last storage boxes and farewells on campus, two weeks of isolation was immensely quiet. With no real schoolwork and surreal anxiety, my productivity flagged; yet social media seemed swamped with reminders about how to best take advantage of this “break.” As a physicist, I had Newton to look up to—when he was sent home from Cambridge due to the black plague, he laid the foundations of calculus and his theory of gravitation. As a writer, I had Shakespeare as a role model—when his theater closed because of the plague, he wrote *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Never in my life had I ever felt so pressured by people who had passed away centuries ago.

The reality is that many people under social isolation right now feel this sort of pressure to be productive. In particular, the demographic vulnerable to this are those in the US who have the privilege of staying home, those for whom the virus is a ghostly spirit, one that has affected distant friends or added to the body counts on the news, but not done much worse materially than limit their number of trips to the grocery store. I propose that social distancing has distanced us,

in this specific demographic, from feeling the direct effects of the virus. Instead, isolated in our homes for who knows how much longer, we are struggling with the question of how to fill our days. Our initial impulse was to find previous narratives to imitate, especially those about productivity, which served as a comforting remnant of life pre-coronavirus. As time went on, though, members of society began pushing back on this pressure and instead elected to just try to survive day by day. Nowadays, two months into the crisis, we vacillate between clinging to productivity narratives and focusing on the moment; every day is a new struggle to strike the right balance between the two.

We can formally delve into this juxtaposition between a *narrative* and *immediate attitude* through the anthropological theory expounded upon in Iza Kavedžija's study of the aging population in Japan and their concept of the "good life." Ostensibly, the subjects of this study feel distant to our current times—in general, it seems that a wide gulf separates before-corona (BC) times from after-corona (AC) times, not to mention the inherent age and cultural differences that might exist. However, a lot of the activities that the elderly of Osaka were doing day to day are things we are now spending our quarantine time doing: picking up new hobbies or reminiscing about the old days with friends (although in our scenario, friends is often replaced by a wider sphere of connections fostered by social media). We are also similar in the sense that the elderly generally experience more uncertain futures and as a result, tend to focus more on the present and the past; COVID-19 has similarly caused the futures of most people to become more uncertain, so with this tinge of mortality and economic devastation flavoring our lives, we too, are forced to focus more on the present and the past.

Even without the similarities in population, though, the framework of narrative versus immediate attitudes is a useful one to understand a key tension in the human experience. The

narrative orientation, as Kavedžija explains it, is one found in “sense-making” activities, “a mode in which one attempts to make sense of a situation, for example, by comparing the existing state of affairs to that desired, and by problem solving” (Kavedžija 2015, 148). In the elderly of Osaka, this attitude was exhibited when the elders gathered for tea and told stories about their lives, both mundane ones like stories about caring for their families’ day to day, or serious ones like stories of the Second World War. In contrast, immediate attitudes are focused in the moment, on “direct experience...and on one’s immediate sensations and surroundings, without comparing these to what is expected or to some ideal” (Kavedžija 2015, 148). This mainly occurred in the lives of the elderly of Osaka through activities of self-cultivation, like choir practice and vegetable gardening, which they would approach with focused attention and a sense of *chanto suru*, or “doing things properly.” The two attitudes, narrative and immediate, are not mutually exclusive and do not fall into a strict dichotomy—after all, the Japanese elderly practice both—but it is a helpful delineation in making sense of our times.

For example, many indicators in news and social media show that after our country began to social distance seriously, our first instinct was to turn to a narrative orientation to make sense of the change. In general, we can see this in the way that the news media began to introduce the novel coronavirus by comparing it first with the narrative of the seasonal flu, and later with the narrative of the Spanish Flu of 1918. On a personal level, we begin to see people write about how to keep productive during quarantine. The initial narrative was that social distancing was like a sort of “break” from everyday life, so of course, we should take advantage of this “break” to further ourselves. On March 12, 2020, *The Washington Post* published an article called “During a pandemic, Isaac Newton had to work from home, too. He used the time wisely.”, whose title alone sounds like an overcompetitive parent guilt-tripping you, the reader, by

comparing you to neighborhood genius-kid Isaac Newton (Brockell). Many other internet memes, tweets, and articles focused on how people like Newton, Shakespeare, and artist Edward Munch, just to name a few, spent their quarantine working hard (Debczak).



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Just a reminder that when Shakespeare was quarantined because of the plague, he wrote King Lear.

1:35 AM · Mar 14, 2020 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

**52K** Retweets **252.5K** Likes

There were also more general articles about how to advance one's career during corona-times; some examples include "Coronavirus Confinement Can Help Educators Advance Careers" in *Psychology Today* (Rankin), and "Use Your Self-Quarantine Time To Become A 'Coronapreneur'" in *Forbes* (Carosa). In essence, there was a focus on productivity.

In this sort of behavior, we see many intersecting forms of narrative. As already pointed out, the main one is that quarantine is a time during which we *should* be productive. This is, in one way, a continuation of a narrative that has been prevalent in career-focused work-heavy American hustle culture for quite some time. I propose that we carried this narrative thread from BC to AC because our particular demographic doesn't materially feel the impact of the virus. For those of us stuck at home, there is still enough normalcy for us to feel drawn to values held over from BC times; moreover, our time has become less structured, and we are inherently wrestling with the question with how to fill it. Hence, we see BC self-identifying concepts, like the entrepreneur, get rebranded for the new AC period to fill this void. However, because the nature of work situation has nevertheless substantially changed during social distancing, these repurposed narratives are not enough for us to make sense of the world. Given the radical and

particular sort of change caused by the pandemic, there is little in our lifetimes that we can use for reference. Instead, we turn towards history for role models of productivity—hence the focus on brilliant minds like Newton and Shakespeare. Weaving all of these narratives together lets us understand the situation we’re in and how we ought to react to it; it makes us feel that we are merely playing out a scenario that has occurred many times in human history.

The productivity narrative can be helpful in motivating some people to continue their lives despite the uncertainty; however, it can also create a source of added stress at a time where everything is already extremely stressful. As such, shortly after the narrative stance became popularized, a pushback began to rise. On March 29, 2020, *Scientific American* published an article titled “Must We All Become More Creative because of the Pandemic?” which advised people to stop feeling pressured to work and just focus on surviving day by day (Falk). Tweets were published joking about how Shakespeare didn’t have the modern distractions of Netflix and social media; *The New Yorker* published an article dispelling the myth that Newton’s discoveries were someone how a result of quarantine pressure—he was always a brilliant mind destined to do great things, quarantine or not (Levenson). People espoused taking time for hobbies and “self-care”, another popular conception of modern American society, and good fun was made of out of the productivity-focused crowd, with cartoons like this one from *The New Yorker* (Allison):



As such, we see a pushback against the narrative of productivity. We discover a call for people to focus more in the moment and just survive this historic ordeal—in essence, a portrayal of Kavedžija's immediate orientation. The promotion of self-care, in particular, is an interesting phenomenon. Self-care is a narrative by itself, one held over from BC times; those who subscribe to practicing it identify as people who place value in their own physical and mental health (or are at least performing it). However, self-care as a practice is fundamentally about focusing on the present and in the moment, through ideas like meditation and treating yourself to nice things. Here, then, we see an example where the dichotomy that Kavedžija present is not strict; both the narrative and immediate attitude apply to the concept of self-care. Nevertheless, we do notice that this overall pushback against the narrative of quarantine productivity leans much more towards the immediate attitude, so we do still get a juxtaposition of orientations.

I don't think there is any individual in our demographic who solely takes the narrative or the immediate attitude towards our time in quarantine. As Kavedžija notices for the elderly population of Osaka, the navigation of the tension between the two is a constant, active process. For us quarantined folk, each has orientation own problems: the narrative of productivity often makes us feel unnecessarily stressed and pressured, while focusing in the moment is sometimes very difficult with all that's going on. Certainly, some days I spend hours feeling guilty for not working on a novel; other days, I drain hours into Netflix without batting an eye. As the days pour forth, then, our attitudes are changing—pulling from both, we are working out the balance in real time. And as time processes further into the AC period, we as individuals and as a society will settle into a balance that works for us. Eventually, like all past pandemics, COVID-19 will fade—but our experiences and solutions for balancing the past-focused narrative and present-focused immediate attitudes will remain and shape our attitude towards the future.

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