COVID makes us want to see the future. Too bad we're not good at it

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Agnes Callard

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When the pandemic hit, my son refused to attend Zoom first grade. We asked him, "don't you want to see your friends?" He said "my friends are not flat."

Two years of Zooming have brought me around to his point of view; I now recognize that some part of my brain is unable to believe that Zoom is real. I tell it, "this is an important meeting, pay attention!" but it knows that human faces are not supposed to populate a grid. Even when I win the battle for my own attention, the energy I've expended to fight it has drained the conversation of all curiosity, emotional investment, joy. My brain is convinced that the Zoom meeting, the Zoom talk, the Zoom conference — these are just images on a screen, not real life; it insists on biding its time, waiting to see what happens *next*.

It's not just Zoom: COVID has the general effect of dulling and downplaying the present moment, and of diverting our attention onto the future, as though reality had been relocated there. At the very beginning I was struck by a desperate need to look a mere *week* ahead. Is everything about to fall apart? I went to Costco to stock up, I wanted to be prepared, but so did everyone else. The busy store overwhelmed me and I went home. I remember trying to think through how I would avoid touching my face. Would I have to sit on my hands, as I instruct my children to do when they torment each other in the car, for months on end? That's how long I predicted the pandemic might last: months. The prohibition on face-touching proved far less enduring than I predicted; the pandemic, far more.

I imagine a graveyard of such COVID predictions: about how Sweden would fare, about how quickly we could produce vaccines, about whether BLM protests would spread the virus, about whether it is *now* (or *now*? or *now*?) that some wave has hit its peak. Some of the predictions came true, others did not; either way, it doesn't matter anymore, because we always only care about what's about to happen next. At the moment, we face the Omicron crossroad — how big will this wave be, and will it be the last? It seems of critical importance to peer around this particular corner, yet if the past is any indicator the question itself will soon grow stale, our answers to it consigned to the graveyard alongside the others.

My anti-Zoom first grader is now in third grade. He asked me the other day if we could make a hole in the wall of his room, the one abutting the hallway, and insert a pane of glass there. A kid in his school had to stay quarantined in her room for a long time after testing positive, and in case that happens to him, "you could bring chairs into the hallway and eat dinner there, I'd see you through the window." On some level I think he knows you can't just cut a hole in the wall, so he wasn't really surprised or disappointed when I said no. Thinking ahead isn't always about preparation.

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surprising, from a philosophical point of view, is that it took a pandemic to drive us into the embrace of the ever receding future. Why did the present used to feel so real?

Plato tells a story about prisoners in a cave, shackled to their chairs, facing a wall of moving images. The images are produced by people walking behind the prisoners, separated from them by a low wall, carrying small sculptures — of trees, people, animals — that they hold up above the height of the wall. A fire in the background projects shadows of those sculptures onto the wall facing the prisoners. (Yes, Plato invented the movie theatre, 2,400 years ago.) Plato says such people would occupy themselves with prediction; they would compete over "who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future." Humans, trapped and helpless, pass the time by playing the prediction game.

Instead of asking why they are stuck in an underground prison, Plato's cave dwellers ask about which shadow is coming up next. When we are in extraordinary circumstances, and we feel that the way things are has suddenly become inexplicable, we seek knowledge of how things will be instead. In normal circumstances, a child thinks his parents have it covered, and doesn't envision the reconstruction of his room. When things run smoothly, we operate under the conceit that the world as it is given to us basically makes sense, and that reality is a deliverance of our senses. What makes catastrophe destabilizing is that we stop feeling we know what is going on, and start to look around, nervously, for who does.

Over and over again, we find ourselves referencing trust: public trust, trust in officials, in institutions, in experts, in vaccines. Trust that someone out there understands what is going on. Talking about trust is the surest sign that it is in short supply. Conspiracy theories — for example, ones that describe the pandemic as the work of malevolent governments aiming to use vaccines as bioweapons against their own people — reveal that some prefer to accuse those in power of evil than of ignorance. Other people prefer tamer accusations of incompetence or negligence, convinced that they themselves have the recipe for exactly what is to be done. ("No to masks, yes to boosters, no to school closings" is a motto I come across often, but there are others.) The recipes don't get tested, because the people in question lack the power to put them into effect, but the accusers can still believe that they and the people like them and the people from whom they get their information are the ones who know, who understand, who can predict.

And they might indeed be the best in the class, advancing to the front row in Plato's theatre, excelling at this new prediction contest. But if I were sent back in time by a year, I'd outshine them all, and everyone would be in the thrall of my marvellous predictive power. And yet what would I understand? Only what I understand now, so little. I'd be trusted, but not trustworthy. The pandemic has given us a taste of our own ignorance, and we are casting around for someone to take that taste out of our mouths. That is our crisis of trust.

"It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners," says Glaucon, in Plato's *Republic*, upon hearing Socrates' description of the cave. Plato has Socrates

reply: "They're like us." We're always in the cave, though we don't usually feel that way.

Because real knowledge is timeless, a person who really knows can, in fact, often predict. This is why a prediction produces the glamour of knowledge: we predict, and consume the predictions of others, and as long as they haven't come due, these predictions make us feel like we're standing on firm ground. But that ground is an ever retreating future, always a month or a few weeks in advance, while the present, always unexpected, is a confusion. So what drives us to conflate understanding with prediction is the same thing that pushes us to identify the future with a stable reality: the feeling that the present moment is somehow especially confusing, bizarre, incomprehensible, unreal. The amazing thing, again, is that most of the time, we manage not to experience the present in that way.

Pandemic or not, life is full of uncertainty — but there is a difference between the old uncertainties to which we have grown habituated, and new ones that blindside and overwhelm us. When we get into cars, we don't, strictly speaking, know whether we'll get out alive; nonetheless, we don't preface those trips with differential accident predictions based on the level of traffic, the length of the trip, the road conditions. We just put on our seatbelts and go.

When it comes to old uncertainties, we already have a way of proceeding; new uncertainties, unprocessed by such management techniques, are set to trigger awareness of the large chasm of ignorance that stands as the most basic fact of human life. The walls of the cave, the shackles around our wrists, the dim firelight, all stand exposed — at least for a time. One day the pandemic will be over; alternatively, it will be recognized as endemic, and we will learn to live with — which is to say, to look away from — a new set of risks. Death from COVID could become as mundane as a car accident. But we are not there yet. Even after two years, the pandemic is still fresh enough, still large enough, still changeable enough that the pathway between our ignorance about it and our primal ignorance has not been blocked by a set of reassuring habits. The pandemic still has the power to make us feel powerless, trapped and confused about our whereabouts. So we fall into a frenzy of prediction, just as Plato predicted we would.

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