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Time Well Spent? A Senecan Ethical Critique of Social Media and Digital Distraction

Introduction

Time is often perceived as limited in life, although it is through discipline that one may come to live as if time were unlimited. Lucius Seneca, a Stoic philosopher, challenged the widely accepted belief that life is too short through his essay *On the Shortness of Life*. Seneca argued that time is not merely a resource, but that it defines our very being. He warned that individuals who squander their most valuable asset, time, portray themselves as victims of a shortened life. People mispend their time through trivial pursuits, distractions, and mismanaged emotional distress, often mistaking busyness for purpose and activity for meaning, leading to a misconstrued understanding of the meaning of life. Despite expressing his philosophical beliefs over two thousand years ago, many people today remain entranced by addictive activities that lack significance to one's moral duties in society.

In modern society, this is evident through the existence of social media, which has become a commodity and a distraction to the soul. These digital platforms have been engineered to capture our time and attention with entertaining images and videos, as they reward the creators with significant revenue based on viewership and subscriptions. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok continue to encourage compulsive connectivity, drawing users to feel an irresistible urge to stay engaged due to the high pleasures and benefits they produce. Hundreds of millions of

people across these platforms endlessly scroll through curated feeds and notifications, as this ubiquitous engagement limits one's ability to strive for a Stoic and virtuous life, allowing precious moments of their life to slip away. This digital environment raises important ethical concerns about how technology affects our ability to live fully and deliberately.

By examining Seneca's essay and his ethical views, alongside modern virtuous ethics and Kantianism, we can uncover how discipline and moral actions serve as an affected way to fight against the moral problem of digital distraction in the age of social media. While contemporary technologies are often portrayed as neutral tools, they tend to promote compulsive behaviors that undermine human flourishing and lead to unethical behaviors. Drawing on Seneca's insights and contemporary ethical frameworks, ethical design and personal responsibility must reclaim time as a moral concern to ensure that the most irreplaceable resource—time—is not forfeited to irresistible impulses but spent meaningfully.

Seneca's Views on Time

Seneca emphasizes his understanding that time is uncertain, and that every moment of one's life contributes to their moral development in totality. He expresses concerns that most people fail to truly live because they are engaging in unproductive behavior. In his essay, "*On the Shortness of Life*," Seneca's central thesis is that "Life is long, if you know how to use it" (Seneca 1). He attempts to convey to humanity the understanding that the problem is not one's mortality, but rather the mismanagement of time. In addition, he articulates that people don't put enough emphasis on how important their time is, which allows them to get caught up in trivial matters. He says that [people] "are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time, they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be

stingy” (Seneca 4). This demonstrates the criticism Seneca has towards individuals who are excessively protective of their material possessions, such as money, land, and objects, and who become emotionally distressed if any are lost. In contrast, they lack the discipline to acknowledge the true importance of time and fail to recognize that objects can be replaced, but time, once spent, is gone forever. Seneca strongly embraces time as a foundational ethical currency, and unlike wealth or status, because it is internal and fixed, and does not return once spent. For this reason, wasting it or spending it on distractions would be seen as a morally dangerous act of consumption.

Seneca’s core argument lies in virtue ethics, which emphasizes developing quality character traits. The goal of life in Stoic tradition is to live by reason, and by cultivating particular virtues such as self-control, wisdom, and justice. These values allow an individual to navigate life in a deliberate manner, which is one that is detached from destructive passions and unsound values. A virtuous life to Seneca is one directed by intentionality rather than simply reacting to things such as scrolling, as one would typically find themselves doing on social media. Therefore, a misuse of time by social media would not be considered simply inefficient - it would be a misuse of virtue.

Seneca continues on, condemning those who let life happen to them. These are people who always chase novelties or submit to others expectations. He contrasts the life of the philosopher who is focused, inward, and mindful, with that of the distracted citizen, who is “always preoccupied with something” but “rarely at home with himself” (Seneca 97). This ethical diagnosis anticipates many of the modern critiques of digital life because of the compulsiveness that social media platforms have created. It warns that unless we are deliberate about how to spend our time, we fall into a boring, mundane routine that is dictated by

something other than our choosing. To Seneca, time wasting is not just impractical, it's a betrayal of oneself. Directly addressing the reader, he says, "You are living as if destined to live forever," he writes, "your own frailty never occurs to you" (Seneca 5). This reveals Seneca's position on living a finite life, a stance that aligns with the theory of moral time management. Ultimately, the use of our time must reflect the values and goals, and begs to ask whether the time we spend is consistent with the type of person that we seek to be.

This question becomes especially urgent in a world where our attention is always fragmented by digital platforms. If we do not gain control of our time, it will be controlled by something else—an algorithm curated specifically to maximize profit.

Social Media and a New Economy, Attention

In our modern day society, social media has proven to be a parasitic technology that shapes our day-to-day lives. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and other platforms have all been deliberately and meticulously engineered to monetize our attention in the most efficient way possible. Short-form reels, notifications, and algorithmic targeting are all designs that are meant to exploit users' psychological vulnerability to maximize engagement by feeding content that a user would find interesting or controversial. Moreover, the more time users spend on these respective platforms, the more valuable the platform becomes to advertisers, effectively turning the users' attention into a currency. The values cultivated by social media are in a direct conflict brought about by Aristotle's virtue ethics and Kant's ideologies.

Seneca places virtue at the center of a meaningful life. For Stoics, virtue is not simply a moral guideline. It is a life of discipline, guided by reason, self-control, and thus time is incredibly important to the practice of virtue ethics. The misuse of time, such as being distracted,

is ethically harmful because a person who fails to master their attention and self-control fails to master themselves. Therefore, a life of scrolling and compulsive digital consumption is not representative of a life of virtue. It is a life distracted from the pursuit of self that virtue ethics seeks. Character traits that may be derived from social media are impulsiveness, vanity, and distraction, which are all vices in Aristotle's framework. Users are not only wasting time, therefore they are also destroying their character.

Virtue ethics demands that we ask ourselves this question: *What kind of person am I becoming through this activity?* If it results in becoming a person with less ability to reason, being less temperate, or less focused, then the activity is considered ethically corrosive. In this light, the ethical implications of social media extend beyond momentary choices of scrolling on social media. They shape the trajectory of our moral development and directly contradict Aristotle's concept of virtue ethics.

From a Kantian perspective, the ethical stakes at hand are just as serious, but for a completely different reason. Kant argues that a moral action comes from duty, which is a rational principle that is chosen freely. Rational beings must act from self-given moral laws, meaning that as humans we must treat others and ourselves as a priority.

However, social media's attention encapsulating nature undermines people's autonomy to make these rational decisions by hardwiring compulsiveness. Have you ever opened your phone and mindlessly opened social media? Rather than consciously choosing what to intake, these platforms encourage a user to act from habit rather than making deliberate choices. Users are simply a means to an end. Kant would view such behavior as morally problematic. Firstly, it fails the test of moral worth - actions driven by external manipulation lack ethical value. Secondly, the platforms themselves treat users as instruments by extracting data, predicting our next behaviors,

and generating revenue from this. People are used as a means to another's end, which is a violation of his categorical imperative.

Seneca, Aristotle, and Kant, though very different, Kant believed that we have a duty to ourselves to cultivate our own rational and moral capacities, and social media heavily undermines this. All three argue that to live ethically is to live rationally and intentionally. For Seneca, time must be used in accordance with virtue. To Aristotle, flourishing needs moral character. Kant believed that actions must arise from rational autonomy. All three philosophers would reject the idea that the passivity or compulsion developed from social media can be morally positive, and all would reject the modern attention economy. Kantian ethics demands that users be treated as ends, and Stoic and Aristotelian ethics require that technology serve the pursuit of virtue and moral growth, insinuating that social media in this era is harmful to individuals.

Conclusion

Lucius Seneca "*On the Shortness of Life*" ultimately offers a philosophical understanding of the ethical significance of time and its far-reaching impacts on society. He recognized time as the true measure of life through the acknowledgement that while life is seen as endless, it is often caused to be short and wasted by unnecessary busyness. On the other hand, if lived wisely with purpose and morality, life can be long enough for "the highest achievements." This distinction depends on truly understanding the difference between confusing mere activities with genuine meaning and busyness with true purpose.

Modern digital distractions, such as doom-scrolling through TikTok and the passive consumption of trending feeds, perfectly exemplify this moral dilemma. Such engagement often

lacks virtuous meaning as it encourages unhealthy addictions that inflict damage on one's life and hinder future moral flourishing. Furthermore, social media's design often mocks Kant's imperative to treat humanity as an end in itself, instead treating them as means to generate data and revenue. Many users increasingly crave these digital experiences for the brief pleasures and satisfaction they provide, yet unintentionally become detached from reality. This form of digital immersion leads to a profound lack of awareness regarding the virtuous potential many may live, to be considered, a truly longer life, free from the waste of digital distractions. Technology, in its design, has often impacted society with its negligent act of neutral balance between individual benefits and harm, instead leaning towards undermining one's moral future. Every second of our lives presents another second for potential advancement to one's future, but every second wasted represents a lost opportunity. While social media may seemingly offer temporary happiness and pleasure, it unintentionally steers you away from a meaningful life. Life is undeniably finite, everything comes to an end for all people. Therefore, mindful engagement with our most precious resource becomes an ethical imperative, urging each of us to consider how we truly choose to live. Thus, the next time one considers endlessly scrolling through the digital world, remember Seneca's philosophical advice and rethink your decision.

Citations

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