

Burkeman Sample Essay #12

How we take things in stride is a product of our mind—we analyze a situation and interpret it in the framework of our experiences and our outlooks on life. Oliver Burkeman, a psychology contributor to *The Guardian*, details in “The Benefits of ‘Negative Visualization’” the effects of preparing for the worst versus hoping for the best on our happiness, as well as how negative visualization—the act of “learning to enjoy uncertainty, embracing insecurity, and becoming familiar with failure”—effectively trumps the “simple philosophy of things going right.”

There exists the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, of how if one imagines that something will happen to oneself, then the prediction will hold true; in the case of the self-fulfilling prophecy, positive scenarios are almost always the ones being applied to the theory. The hit musical, *Hamilton*, appears to exemplify this, at least superficially. Throughout the story, Alexander Hamilton vigorously asserts how he will not “throw away his shot,” insisting that he will “get a scholarship to King’s College” and help his fledgling country achieve greatness, all of which he achieves. One could argue that Hamilton set a self-fulfilling prophecy for himself by placing himself in the midst of greatness when imagining himself in the future, despite the fact that he was nothing more than an immigrant orphan when he set foot on American soil. However, there is the question of whether Hamilton, known for his attitude of never being satisfied, simply had more drive than others to transcend the reduction of motivation that Burkeman associates with positive thinking. Even then, one cannot deny that falling victim to positive thinking was what led Hamilton to almost destroy his personal relationships and ultimately to his and his son’s demise. By believing that his pursuit of a tumultuous affair would never be unearthed, Hamilton’s motivation to remain faithful to his wife was reduced. By believing that his son, and, later himself would undoubtedly come out alive from a duel, he and his son took fewer precautions to ensure their survival and allowed themselves to be killed. “Positive fantasies about the future” ruined Hamilton: He said “yes” to an affair because of his belief that everything would go about normally afterward, and goaded his son and himself into pointing their pistols in the air rather than using them to defend themselves in their duels, because he believed their opponents would not shoot.

Positive thinking also afflicted the American public much more recently in the 2016 election. Many dismissed the possibility that Trump would gain enough electoral college votes to ascend to the presidency, causing some to vote heedlessly for nonexistent candidates like Harambe or even abstain from voting altogether alongside the preconception that Clinton would win with a landslide. The citizens’ disregard for the actual election results was thusly facilitated by positive visualization, which handicapped

them from viewing the possibility of a Trump administration as an alternate reality to a Hillary Clinton one. Ironically, the reason Trump became president was, in part, because of optimism from those who fervently opposed him.

Burkeman touches on “hedonic adaption”: how what we find enjoyable, no matter the magnitude, “swiftly gets relegated to the backdrop of our lives.” He explains that the only way to reverse the adaption effect is to regularly remind oneself of how what we possess, whether tangible or intangible, can easily be lost. My father’s experience has been much the same. The way he takes things in stride within his own life is a method that actively resists hedonic adaption, a philosophy based on his experiences growing up during the Vietnam War. Born and raised in Saigon, he was rather pampered as a child; his family lived in a three-story house with maids, and his parents took their children to resorts for vacation—ones that had swimming pools with marble bottoms or ones that exclusively catered to foreigners. What he knew stemmed from the lifestyle he had; what he had was what he considered normal. When the Communists closed in, however, he began to lose what he knew—not only his possessions but his general way of life. Vietcong bombs destroyed his district; his oldest sister drowned trying to escape on a boat. When the Communists gained occupation of the South, the next ten years was a repetitive cycle of subsisting on a meager amount of rice and pork, a drastic shift from his previous life. When he asked his father why he was not allowed to escape to Hong Kong when he was thirteen, his father said he could not risk losing something that brought so much joy in his life. It was like that that my father realized that everything he had and knew could be lost in an instant. Because of that, my father goes through life applying that philosophy, and finds happiness in the simplest of things: a Coca-Cola, a few dollars, or merely the presence of his children.

Negative visualization is certainly a pragmatic approach to reaching happiness, more so than its positive counterpart. Envisioning the worst-case scenario is an effective measure for intensifying the relief and mirth one feels when things do not go as badly as expected. The idea that negative visualization is an antidote to anxiety, though, is a farce. The idea it could alleviate anxiety is somewhat contradictory in that the root of worries causing said anxiety is negative visualization itself. Thinking about the worst-case scenario only heightens the fear that the worst-case scenario will come true. For most people, dwelling on the bad things that could happen only serves to exacerbate anxiety, just as reassurance does. While negative visualization may not “tighten the coil of anxiety” to the extent of reassurance, it contributes to the feeling of “being on the edge”—something that, if maintained perpetually, is detrimental to one’s health and not conducive to happiness at all. If anything, negative visualization could give way to mental issues if not done in moderation. Rather than take to the extremes of positive and negative visualizations, what some psychologists suggest is to take the line of logic. To deal with such anxiety, psychologists ask their patients a series of questions

regarding the progression of events that could occur were they to do something they see as catastrophic. A well-known and relatable example includes failing a class, which leads to working at McDonald's and winding up dying due to lack of sustainable income. By breaking down the patient's thought process, the psychologist reasons with the patient and attempts to show how ridiculous their ideas may seem. In these instances, sometimes the best way to go is the middle road: weigh your options and see what is most realistic, what is most likely to occur.

SCORE: This essay received a score of 6.

RUBRIC LANGUAGE: A 6 paper commands attention by engaging the material in an insightful and mature manner. The response is clear, logical, and convincing. Further, the response is fully developed, relying on well-chosen examples and persuasive reasoning. The 6 paper demonstrates a strong control of language, a fluid use of sophisticated sentences and a notable understanding of the conventions of written English.

COMMENTARY: Essay 12 is notable for both its linguistic control and for the extensive nature of its development. It supports Burkeman's skepticism about positive visualization with a range of richly developed examples including one about the life of Alexander Hamilton, and the second about the positive visualization of Hillary Clinton's supporters in the 2016 presidential election. The writer goes on to talk about how their Vietnamese father's loss of a very privileged childhood and his daughter has led him to combat hedonic adaptation and to *"find happiness in the simplest of things."* And ultimately, in the final paragraph, the essay suggests that negative visualization may not be healthy because it exacerbates anxiety and suggests readers instead use logic, wherein a *"psychologist reasons with the patient and attempts to show how ridiculous their ideas may seem."* Altogether, this is an essay that truly commands attention at the upper end of the scale.