

Report on
The Affective and Practical Consequences of Presentism and Eternalism

REFEREE 1

I think this paper can be a welcome addition to the growing and interesting literature on the practical consequences of endorsing a certain temporal ontology. It provides a useful historical perspective and it is well connected to the current debate. I am thus in favour of publishing it. It requires however some minor revisions, for reasons that I shall now explain.

First of all, the paper is very carelessly proofread. The numbering of the sections is defective, e.g. §9 after §7. Some references are missing. There is leftover part after the bibliography. There are recurring typos such as “the” instead of “to” (e.g., 3d line of intro and p. 18, line 4), many grammatical/stylistic choices are questionable (e.g. “Remember because the truth of the first was taken for granted” (p. 18) instead of, I’d suggest, “Remember why the truth of the first premise was taken for granted”).

Second, the discussion of the second objection at pp. 18-19 could be made a bit clearer. In particular the “some” of 2*), which is supposed to replace premise 2), makes the former too generic, as compared to the latter, in which affective presentism and eternalism are explicitly mentioned.

Third, note 3 is perhaps misplaced. It appears to refer to the growing block view, but the content of the note seems to regard eternalism, as this, rather than the growing block view, has “implications for the openness of the future”.

Fourth, there is the matter of length. I counted 10701 words and I suppose this may be a problem given that *Argumenta* has a maximum length of 8000 words. I don’t know how strict this requirement is meant to be. The editor may want to decide about this. My impression is that after having paid some attention to matters of style, with an eye to conciseness, the paper should at least become a bit shorter, even though still longer than 8000 words. I myself would not consider this a problem, given the informativeness of the paper.

REFEREE 2

This is a nice discussion about whether the endorsement of presentism or eternalism can make a practical difference in the way we should live. The paper will make a good contribution to the current debate. I recommend the paper be published. In the attached file, some passages are highlighted in green. I strongly suggest that the author removes them, for they seem to me inaccurate.

The Affective and Practical Consequences of Presentism and Eternalism

Abstract

In the dispute between presentism and eternalism, the affective dimensions of the debate have been somewhat neglected. Contemporary philosophers of time have not tried to relate these ontological positions with two of the most discussed maxims in the history of ethics – “live in the present” vs. “look at your life under the aspect of the eternity” (*sub specie aeternitatis*)— that since the Hellenistic times have been regarded as strictly connected with them. Consequently, I raise the question whether the endorsement of one of these two ontological views can make a practical difference in the way we should live.

KEY WORDS Presentism; Eternalism; Eternalism's affective attitudes; Presentism's affective attitudes; practical stances

1 Introduction

Despite the recent flurry of papers dealing with the relationship between presentism and eternalism and our temporally oriented attitudes, the *affective* dimensions of the debate have been somewhat neglected.¹ In order to be clear about my main aim, which is the study and make explicit these dimensions, it is important to state at the outset what are the presupposition and focus of my paper. First, I will assume that the debate between presentism and eternalism, however these views are formulated, is genuine and non-trivial, since its involves the nature of reality.² Second, given the plurality of temporal ontologies on offer, for the sake of brevity here I will mention only briefly and when appropriate the *growing block view of time*,³ the “*burning fuse model of unbecoming*” (Casati and Torrenco, 2013, Norton 2014) and “*mixed views*” in which it is postulated a *now* moving on a tenselessly conceived series of events (Skow 2015).

¹ Silberstein (1990), Bradley (2002), Le Poidevin (1995) Burley (2008) Finocchiaro and Sullivan (2016) have concentrated on the relationship between eternalism and the fear of death. The latter and its relation with midlife crisis was at the center of a paper by Setiya (2014). (Dorato 2008) and more recently Ismael (2016) and Deng (2017), have discussed a possible ethical reading of presentism. Greene and Sullivan (2015) Finocchiaro and Sullivan (2016) argue that we should treat all moments of our life on a par. Orilia (2016), who discusses presentism and eternalism from what he calls an existentialist viewpoint, defends the “open future” view on the basis the sense that we have of being capable to shape at least in part the future. For a presentation of the growing block theory, see, among others Pooley (2013).

² With apologies to many others, the lack of cognitive content of the ontic debate has been defended by Meyer (2005), Savitt (2006), Dolev (2007) and Deng (2017). With the same proviso, philosophers supporting the contrary view are Crisp (2004), Merricks (2007), Mozersky (2011), and Sider (2014).

³ Despite its (controversial) implications for the openness of the future and human freedom. See for instance Orilia (2016).

Third, I will ignore also the important issue of temporal neutrality, that is the presence of time biases in the context of *rational decision theory* (see among many others, Brink 2011, Green and Sullivan (2015), Finocchiaro and Sullivan (2016), Callender 2017, chapter 12, Sullivan 2018). Fourth, I will assume that the reasons to believe in one of the two ontological views are *independent* of their affective consequences,⁴ even if it were psychologically possible to end up believing in one ontological position because we would be better off if it were true. In other words, here I will presuppose that the rationality of our beliefs in one of the two ontologies ought to be influenced only by epistemic arguments that here will be taken for granted.

There are at least two reasons to direct our attention to the issue whether a belief in one of the two opposite ontologies can have affective consequences that can make a practical difference in our lives.⁵ The first is *historical*: not many philosophers of time have tried to relate presentism and eternalism, regarded as *ontological* positions, with two of the most discussed practical and affective maxims in the history of ethics namely – “live in the present or “seize the day” (affective presentism) – vs. the Spinozistic maxim “look at your life *sub specie aeternitatis*”⁶ (affective eternalism). And yet, since the Hellenistic age, philosophers *motivated* the adoption of (i) pragmatic presentism (how we should act) with the ontological claim that only the present exist and (ii) the adoption of practical eternalism with ontological eternalism.⁷ The second motivation is more *theoretical*: to name one, Deng (2017) has argued that the dispute between eternalism and presentism reduces, as a matter of *meaning*, to the problem of which of the *two emotional or affective attitudes* toward the two ontic positions is preferable.

2 The argumentative structure and the plan of the paper

Here I will try to reconstruct and evaluate Deng’s important conclusion by starting with a very different premise, which I the first of the following argument.

- (i) The ontological dispute is genuine
- (ii) There are two different affective attitudes related, respectively, to ontic presentism and

⁴ On this point, see Mellor’s (1999) criticism to Cockburn (1997)

⁵ The term ‘affective’ will be clarified in the following.

⁶ A translation of this Latin expression could be “from an eternal point of view”, or “under the aspect of eternity”.

⁷ Ismael refers to this attitude as the “temporally transcendent view” of our life (see 2016, 226) and contrasts it with the caught-in-the-moment view. Here I try to discuss these issues in more details and consider practical eternalism as the view that our life is an inseparable part of the cosmic order.

eternalism that are influenced by our epistemically motivated beliefs into the two respective ontologies.

(iii) To the effect that *actions* are at least partly motivated by our affections or emotions, these attitudes make at least some *practical difference* in how we act (and possibly should act).

On these premises, it follows that an ontological presentist (eternalist), being mostly influenced by her affections, will be (and should be) a practical presentism (practical eternalism).

Premise (i) was assumed to be true. Premise (ii) is the object of the following discussion. Premise (iii) is based on a lot of empirical evidence to the effect that emotions motivate our actions. The conclusion of the argument would be very interesting if the premises were reasonable: an epistemic commitment to the two ontological views make some practical difference in the decisions and in the actions of presentists and eternalists. Objections to the conclusion of this argument will be discussed in the last section of the paper.

More in details, the plan of the paper is as follows. In the next section, by taking advantage of some quotations from the history of ethics, I will illustrate the sense in which, at least since the Hellenistic age, the two ontological stances about time have historically been regarded as one of the main instruments to live a flourishing life. This is important in order to find out whether these historical arguments can be used also today. The fourth and the fifth sections will clarify as precisely as possible the meaning of the metaphoric expressions “live in the present” or “look at your life *sub specie aeternitatis*”, which are used in the previous sections in a rather intuitive way. It should be obvious why, without such a clarification, there cannot be any precise discussion of the link between affective and practical attitudes toward time and the respective ontological beliefs. In the last section, I will discuss the philosophical consequences the philosophical consequences for the ontological debate by evaluating an important objection to the conclusion of the argument above, which consists in claiming that the two temporal attitudes can be experienced by the same individual in different moments of her life, so that an ontic presentist can be a practical eternalist and viceversa.

3 Following the past philosophers’ call to live in the present

The historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot has well documented how in all Greek philosophical schools the meditation on the finiteness of our life and therefore on death was regarded as the essential step to learn to appreciate the inestimable value of the present moment (Hadot 1995, p. 28). In a logically possible world in which we could live for an extremely long amount of time (or even for ever), the necessity and urgency of choosing and doing what is most important for us here and now, while neglecting that trivialities, would be lost. On this hypothesis, our experience would be completely different: the sacrifice of postponing for the sake of a future benefit the happiness that we could experience in the present would become irrational, given that in the future we could also ripe the benefits of not discounting it since we will live the corresponding experience again. In such a world, our concepts of past present and future would be radically different.

It should be clear why the link between dynamical presentism, a mind-independently conceived passage of time, and death is very robust. One of the strongest arguments in favor of the mind-independence of passage is our awareness of having to die in a more or less distant future. The passage of time, as dynamical presentism has it, implies that, independently of all problems raised by a *literally* moving now,⁸ the commonsensical claim that *each day we are one day older* is non-tautological but simply and undeniably true. In more respectable words, the claim that time passes simply *means* that, relative to today, each passing day the interval of time separating our present experience from the moment of our birth is one day *longer* and that, correspondingly, whenever our death will come, we know that each passing day the interval of time separating the present experience from our last day is one day *shorter* as in the burning fuse model. To be more dramatic, we could note that counting the passage of time in terms of our heart pulses, the number of heart pulses grows in average each minute by approximately 70 units, until the heart will stop.

The eternalist may object to these arguments in favor of a “dynamic” time in various way. One is to paraphrase the statements above by introducing a finite number of unchanging B relations (to the extent that *days* are involved, of course). One unchanging relation links the day in which I am writing this paper to the day of my birth, and the other linking today with the day of my death. And so on for each day until we die. In this God’s eye point of view, which is not at all absurd, it is obvious that any dynamic element is lost,

⁸ For acute arguments against the common objections to the one second per second see Maudlin (2007). For a thorough defense of the moving now conception of becoming see Skow (2015).

and so is our experience of time. However, for our purposes it is will be sufficient to stress that the eternalist has to explain why we seem to find ourselves in different regions of spacetime in a purely relational way, as well as the fact that we first anticipate the same event, then we experience it and then we remember it.⁹

If for the sake of the argument we endorse this dynamical picture of time, we are ready to discuss the affective and practical consequences of presentism. Even though *both* presentists and eternalists are aware that the duration of our life is limited, and that we live in a state of constant uncertainty, only dynamical presentists in the sense specified above can literally make sense of the claim that the time of our death *nears* one day every day. In a characteristic epicurean spirit, Horace wrote:

“Inquire not...how long a term of life the gods have granted to you or to me: neither consult the Chaldean calculations. ...Whether Jupiter has granted us more winters, or [this is] the last, Be wise; rack off your wines, and abridge your hopes [in proportion] to the shortness of your life. While we are conversing, envious age has been flying; seize the present day, not giving the least credit to the succeeding one” (Horace Book 1, Ode 11).”¹⁰

The awareness, obviously shared by the eternalists, that our life has but a finite temporal extension and could soon end is a powerful drive to avoid (as much as it is reasonable) hopes and fears generated by imagined future events, and focus on the present experience. However, the question is whether the presentist’s belief in a dynamical passage of time that is not just *felt* like a subjective *quale* but refers to what she takes to be an objective metaphysical fact can be more effective in changing her affective stance, emotions and therefore practical decisions.

For instance, the affective role of death in practical presentism is illustrated in a very clear way by a letter that Epicurus sent to Menoecus, in which he claims that worrying about our death *in the present* is irrational, because as long as we live, our death *does not exist* (we can add “in an unrestricted sense” as it is done in contemporary literature). Consequently, a painful anticipation in the present of an event that in principle we cannot directly experience now should play no role in our mental life:

⁹ This problem has been recently voiced by Weatherall in his review of Callender (2017): “But what I still do not understand is how I, or anything else, get from one location or region of my worldline to any other. In other words, it is not merely that I represent myself to myself as occupying successively different locations in spacetime, with different stimuli, etc. It is also that, wherever I happen to be in spacetime, I will presently be elsewhere, and then elsewhere, inexorably. How does that happen?” Weatherall 2020, p.6-7)

¹⁰ Here I am using the translation by Harrison (1981).

“Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. *Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation.* Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death has not come, and, when death has occurred, we are not” (my emphasis).¹¹

Our death does not strictly speaking belong to our life, it is only the process of dying that does. But even the process of dying ought to be “nothing for us”, if this process is not experienced in the present. The reason why “Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation” is given simply by the fact that the process of dying is a *future* event that relative to now does *not* exist. In sum, without doing too much violence to the letter expressed by the above letter, we could interpret Epicurus as claiming that it is rational (if at all) to suffer only for events occurring in the present: if past and future events don’t exist, they are merely ghosts imagined by our minds by memory or “in the expectation”.

Note that Epicurus does not claim that we should accept ontic presentism for its practical advantages. On the contrary, it is from the indubitable belief that our death does not exist in the present that is not rational to fear it in the present. However, the irrationality of the felt belief can only be acquired after a considerable amount of “mental exercises” in the sense of Hadot (1995).¹² In this example, according to Epicurus, mental reflections on presentism as an ontic doctrine has the consequence of changing our emotional attitudes by changing our belief that being deprived of any capacity of experiencing the world is bad. The presentist can play the same argument not just for the remembrance of past traumatic events that exist only in our present thought, but also for those past events that precede our birth or non-existence that do not belong to our life. If we don’t fear the former, we should not fear whatever the nothingness of the after-death status.¹³

¹¹ Inwood Brad & Gerson L. P. (eds.), 1994, p. 28. For a contemporary debate on the role of eternalism in liberating us from the fear of dying, see note 1.

¹² The sense of this word is more or less “constant mental practice” (on which we will not enter) whose purpose is to train our beliefs to become more adequate to the ontological conviction.

¹³ The same mental effort should be cultivated with respect to our fear for the existence of another world: a rational understanding of the irrationality of our anxious anticipation of something that for us does not exist in our present experience serves the purpose of making the most of our present experience without groundless fears. There is huge literature on the “Symmetry Argument and Lucretius Against the Fear of Death”. This is a title of a paper by Rosenbaum (1989). Vol. 50, No. 2 (Dec., 1989), pp. 353-373

A deep concentration in our present experience can even take us “outside of time” altogether. Wittgenstein echoed Epicurus’ stress on the importance of living in the present as a way to escape the finitude of our existence, to which death does not belong: “Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through. If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.” (Wittgenstein 1961, 6.4311). In a word, the present moment, if lived fully and not halfheartedly, may even be transmuted into something eternal and take us outside time as in a mystical experience. The sense of timelessness pressed by Wittgenstein in this famous passage is that eternity does not mean eternal duration¹⁴, but a *nunc stans*, (a standing now) in which a present, intense experience basically annihilates our *experienced passage of time* that usually comprises memories and anticipations. This form of timelessness corresponds to a sort of frozen, solipsistic presentism (as Dainton calls it 2010, p. 83-84), interpreted in a mystical way. As such, it is interesting only in order to distinguish it from the form of presentism that here is considered, which involves a succession of different events coming into being in the present.

An additional reason that justifies our focusing on the present moment is given by the fact that, as a consequence of presentism, there cannot be real happiness except now, because neither the past nor the future exist.¹⁵ This claim must be handled with the utmost care, since it is of course recognized also by the eternalist: since all of our experiences occur in the present, it is only in the present that we can have happy (or unhappy) memories or happy (or unhappy) anticipations. So where is the difference between the affective timbre of the ontological positions?

The answer is that since the eternalist – as we will see in more detail in the subsequent section – recommends a self-transcendent view of time (see note 5), focusing our emotions only on the present *internal and external* experience would be to some extent irrational, given that for her the now exists on a par with the present and the future. This essentially means that for the eternalist the intentional content of the present mental acts or states is (and should be) at least “sometimes” be directed to non-present events, where the ‘sometimes’ comes in considering the needs of everyday life and the necessity of surviving.

¹⁴ ”The term “nunc stans” is found in Boetius (475-526 d.c.), and was then revived by the XII philosophers “The passing now makes time, the standing now makes eternity”); here standing now means eternity as property of God, who is outside time. Via Hobbes and most probably through the mediation of Schopenhauer, the expression is endorsed by Wittgenstein in order to explain the experience of intense absorption in a present experience (which could be regarded as mystical).

¹⁵ This viewpoint had been already defended by Aristippus of the Cyrenaic school in the fifth century b.C.

Two provisos need to be made at this point. First, by focusing only on the affective attitudes following from presentism and by recalling my assumption stated at the beginning of the paper, I can take for granted that the notorious problems that presentists have, namely to give a truth conditions to statements about the past (or the future), do not arise. Secondly, what I have to say about the past in the following paragraph must be extended with the appropriate modifications, to the future

The presentist's belief that the presently remembered events do not longer exist (unrestrictedly) may have (or ought to have) as a consequence focusing her emotions only on external events happening in the present, with the addition of those mental acts whose content *excludes* events occurred in the past (or anticipated in the future). The "self-help" suggestions about how to achieve this goal of course will not be discussed here! Suffice it to say that the aims can be achieved. The capacity for concentrating on the present experience in the sense explained above can become more effective by realizing that dwelling on the memory of an event *that does not longer exist* has— to the extent that it depends on us — a neutral affective significance, not even one of relief.¹⁶ With respect to the future, note that the belief that there cannot be happiness except in the *present anticipations* of future events can be reinforced by the conviction that there is literally nothing after the present experience. Consequently, focusing on the present emotions, whatever they are, is more rational than expecting or fearing something yet to come that as of now is nothing at all.

¹⁶ Here I will limit myself to recall the infamous argument by Prior (1959): mentioning the other papers that were spawned by this very influential one here is not relevant for the arguments presented in the text.

3 Ancient, modern and contemporary examples of affective eternalism

In this section, and very schematically, I will distinguish three related ways of characterizing the affective consequences of ontological eternalism, the first focusing on the immense temporal extension of the cosmos as defended by the stoic philosophy, the second the difference between imagination and reason in Spinoza's epistemology, and the third on a novel way to cash out the practical and even "ethical" significance of eternalism due to Bertrand Russell. The choice of these three case studies is to a certain extent arbitrary, and my extremely brief treatment of them should be conceived as a springboard for the remainder of the paper.

4 Stoicism on the sheer immensity of time

A characteristic trait of Stoicism is given by the fact that *physics* plays a decisive role both in what we could call – with a little pinch of anachronism – eternalism and in the consequent attainment of wisdom. The wisdom in question consists in the affective attitude that helps us *accept* whatever event the fate (the laws of nature) has prepared for us in the present, given that the event is a consequence of an immensely long (or even eternal) deterministic chain of events, none of which can be avoided. In order to achieve wisdom, the Stoics invite us to contemplate the "rational and necessary unfolding of cosmic events", as Hadot puts it (1995, 59), which is the expression of the lawlike order of the cosmos. The practical eternalist's creed as expressed by ancient stoicism stresses the fact that it is only by looking at things from a cosmic perspective, and therefore by becoming aware of our insignificant spatiotemporal size with respect to the immensity of space and time, that can we assign the events that we experience in the present their correct place in the cosmic tapestry.

The reader will excuse this long quotation from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, which I report in full before my critical evaluation because, to my knowledge, it is one of clearest expression of an ancient philosopher's appeal to look at our life under the aspect of eternity (Ismael's temporally transcending view of our life, even though I prefer Spinoza's expression *sub specie aeternitatis*):

“Think of the whole of being, in which you participate to only a tiny degree; think of the whole of eternity, of which a brief, tiny portion has been assigned to you; think about fate, of which you are such an insignificant part.”... You have the power to strip off many superfluous things that are obstacles to you, and that depend entirely upon your value-judgements; you will open up for yourself a vast space by embracing the whole universe in your thoughts, by considering unending eternity, and by reflecting on the rapid changes of each particular thing; think of how short is the span between birth and dissolution, and how vast the chasm of time before your birth, and how the span after your dissolution will likewise be infinite.” (quoted in Hadot 1995, p. 183).

The affective acceptance of whatever happens to us (loss of health, riches, reversal of fortune, death of our dearest ones...) is a consequence of our tragic coming to know that “the way things are now” depends on a previous state of the universe, a kind of knowledge that frightens us exactly in virtue of its eternalistic and deterministic ontological basis. By provoking a psychological change in our immediate emotional reactions, the stoic form of eternalism aims at engendering a different, more adaptive affective attitude toward all the events and objects of our life. This attitude helps us to achieve a rational evaluation of their real importance, which, in turn, is a consequence of our capacity to understand their unavoidable causes. Our coming to know these causes entails the typical anti-anthropomorphic attitude of stoic philosophy: events *in themselves* are neither good nor bad, they are good and bad only *in relation to ourselves*, that is, relatively to our subjective evaluations. The stoic eternalism as exemplified by Marcus Aurelius’ passage above implies that it is within the limits of our nature to try to control these evaluations themselves, and thereby minimize the dysfunctional emotions that are generated by our experience of the external objects. As we are about to see, Spinoza similarly argued that we can replace such anthropomorphic emotions with the joy of understanding the laws of nature, holding everywhere and everywhen, in what today we would call an immutable block.

5. Spinoza’s epistemology and God’s eternal laws of nature

A crucial development of the stoic’s affective stance is to be found in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, which derives its practical eternalism from an ontology based on eternal, deterministic laws of nature leaving no room for

teleology or purposes. The eternalism of Spinoza's view of time is justified by his claim that the distinction between past present and future is a by-product of our most imperfect, *first* form of knowledge, that is, *imagination*. Imagination is filled with purely contingent ideas and cannot therefore apprehend the necessary, eternal laws of nature that Spinoza identifies with his impersonal God and that can be grasped only by *reason*. Reason is the faculty that is capable of understanding substances in terms of their true, necessary causes: "It is in the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain form of eternity (*sub quâdam æternitatis specie*)."¹⁷ Imagination is a source of error since the imagined ideas are not adequate representations of the essential properties of bodies, which are captured *only* by laws of nature.

More precisely, this *second* type of knowledge is produced by ideas that are adequate to reality, since they grasp the absolutely necessary, nomological, eternal order of the universe, that is, the immutability and eternity of the laws of nature (*Deus sive natura*, God or nature). The second form of knowledge is therefore about an eternal nature, "a certain form of eternity", where "*eternity*" and the "no relation to time", in the Ethics have basically two different senses, that Spinoza conflates, one referring to a timeless, logical relation between propositions, the other, relevant to this paper, to the nomic structure of the universe.

In the latter sense, our short life must be regarded as inseparable from, and subject to, the nomological structure of the universe and therefore can only be understood by reason; the attitude corresponding to this understanding is what I labeled affective eternalism. For this reason, it is not so anachronistic to attribute Spinoza an ontological view in which present events are regarded as being on a par with all events constituting the past and the future development of the universe, the latter being governed by eternal nomological relations.

The highest, third form of knowledge for Spinoza is *amor intellectualis Dei*, ("intellectual love of god") which *prima facie* reads like an oxymoron, involving as it does the *emotion* of love and the intervention of our *intellect*, which is the faculty of reason that is capable to discover the laws of nature. This impression of conflict is apparent. First of all, as is well known, Spinoza's impersonal god (*Deus*) refers to the whole web of the deterministic natural laws, which is accessible only through the intellect (or reason).

¹⁷ "It is in the nature of reason to perceive things truly (II. xli.), namely (I. Ax. vi.), as they are in themselves—that is (I. xxix.). See Spinoza (1884, pp.59-60).

The emotion of love for the eternal web of laws and therefore for god as he interprets it is the most important affective consequence of Spinoza's eternalism. Spinoza holds that *joy* is a passage from a mental state in which we have less power of acting (we are more passive and less capable of self-preservation) to one in which we have greater power of acting, and love is simply our becoming aware of this passage. Since we naturally love everything that causes this transition, our discovery that the most perfect transition is our coming to know that the necessary laws coincide with the one of the attributes of god, brings about our intellectual love of nature/god. In sum, since we tend to do whatever gives us more pleasure, the consequence of our coming to know of the eternal laws does not bring about a passive acceptance of the natural order, but a single act with which we feel to belong to something (god) that is either coinciding with the whole cosmos, or outside time altogether.

6 Russell and the ethical counterpart of ontological eternalism

A much later example of a philosopher holding that the neutrally and impartial outlook of ontological eternalism (my third case study) is the key to virtues like altruism and selflessness can be found in Russell's *Mysticism and Logic*

“The felt difference of quality between past and future, therefore, is not an intrinsic difference, but only a difference in relation to us: to impartial contemplation, it ceases to exist. And impartiality of contemplation is, in the intellectual sphere, that very same virtue of disinterestedness which, in the sphere of action, appears as justice and unselfishness. Whoever wishes to see the world truly, to rise in thought above the tyranny of practical desires, must learn to overcome the difference of attitude towards past and future, and *to survey the whole stream of time in one comprehensive vision.*” (my emphasis, Russell 1917, p. 22).

Let us make explicit the link that Russell establishes between an eternalist ontology – **in which McTaggart's famous A determinations are mind dependent** – and an affective attitude of justice and unselfishness. By implicitly endorsing a tenseless ontology, Russell maintains that our intellectually motivated belief that the instant that *we now* occupy in the vast temporal extent of nature is merely perspectival, relational and spatiotemporally located generates the eternalist affective attitude, that Russell refers to as an impartial, allocentric contemplation of the whole stream of nature. Indexicality here plays a

major role: the concept of “now” and “self” are strictly related, since the self is always situated in a particular moment of time (and in a particular location in space) and cannot but look at the world from that egocentric temporal perspective (Ismael 2007). This egocentric temporal perspective is psychologically correlated to the attitude of discounting the future and forgetting the lessons of the past, and the former implies to a certain extent being careless about the continuity of our future selves and that of the others, which makes us lose the sense of justice to which Russell refers.

For reasons of space, here I cannot provide more evidence for the historical importance of the connection between the ontological and the practical aspects of presentism and eternalism. In order to strengthen the case in favor of the claim that an independently acquired belief in one of the two ontologies can make a practical difference and see whether it holds water, it is indispensable to clarify the meaning of “live” and “look” in the expressions “live in the present” and look at the world “sub specie aeternitatis”.

7 What does it mean “to live in the present”?

Since all of our experiences occur in the present, presentists and eternalists react to the same experience with different emotions but the resulting stances could both be regarded as instrumental to controlling as much as possible *present* pain and improving *present* happiness. However, given the affective difference, they achieve their common objective in different ways and the psychological attitude toward the present moment was already clearly formulated in the Hellenistic times. As Hadot notices, stoics (who defended eternalism) pursued their aim by a constant *tension* of the mind toward an absolute or partial control of the momentary passions. This control was made possible by the affective tinged acceptance of the present moment as a necessary consequence of an eternal, lawful order. On the contrary, epicureans lived the present experience by a *distension* of the mind that, independently of its joyous components attends to all its contents.

We should reiterate the obvious point that what I labelled “the presentist’s and the eternalist’s affective stances” are an ideal classification that is compatible with the fact that in *daily life* it is impossible both for the presentist not to plan ahead or to think about past experiences in order to avoid future pains and for the eternalist not to attend to her present experiences. The two kinds of emotional stances rather involve an overall attitude toward our temporal experience that be correlated or even generated by our ontological

beliefs, and that, in the hypothesis that we are entertaining in this paper, could even make some practical difference at least in crucial experiences of our lives.

The previous quotations have made abundantly clear that the epicureans more or less explicitly believed that a dynamical form of presentism brings with itself the rationality of a practical attitude that strives for an increased capacity to be absorbed by, care for, and concentrate in, the events that are happening around us. By reinterpreting their claims in contemporary terms, the practical rule “live in the present” means that the mental acts of the presentists are intentionally directed toward the present, in such a way that the experienced events are appreciated for their own sake, as in aesthetic contemplation, scientific creation, deep conversation and play, which are the paradigmatic activities in which present memories of past events and present expectations of future events either play a minor role or no role at all.

For instance, the contemplation of a beautiful sunset or of a piece of music is not instrumental for some other means: on the contrary, being absorbed by the presently experienced sunset is an end in itself.¹⁸ More in general, the affections characterizing practical presentism are based on the fact that the more we regard the activities in which we are currently engaged as end in themselves, the more meaningful and rewarding they are with respect to the activities that are merely instrumental to reach some other end. Any present activity that is pursued in the present as a mere instrument to reach some future goal is *future-oriented* and the corresponding mental events are intended toward the future. On the contrary when in the present we are engrossed in doing something for its own sake, nothing else in the past or in the future matters.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle put forward a very effective argument in favour of this view, based on the fact that ends are superior to the means that we use to reach them. We can decide to change a means to reach our end, while leaving the latter unchanged: “an end, pursued by itself...is more complete than an end pursued because of something else...and an end that is always [choiceworthy] and choiceworthy in itself, never because of something else, is unconditionally complete” (*Nich. Eth.*, Book

¹⁸ Here I don't have to be more specific about the specific nature of the present in the “present experience” since what is meant by this expression may differ for different sensory modalities. For instance, in the case of music, the attention span of our mind may last a few seconds, as retentions of just-heard and anticipation of yet-to-be heard notes are integrated into our actual experience as a whole (Husserl 1990). For some individuals, relatively short temporal integration windows may even contain the entire melody.

i,1097a30, transl. in Aristotle 1985,p.14).¹⁹ Doing something that is instrumental to an end presupposes that the end is after the present doing.

It might even be suggested that being absorbed in activities for their own sake takes us “outside of time” (the experience of timelessness referred to Wittgenstein in the previous quotation) but what is meant by this provocative expression is that in activities of the kind mentioned above, our awareness of past and future event is somewhat suspended. In a word, when we are mentally engrossed in an activity for the sake of it, we paradigmatically live as affective presentists, that is, as accomplishers and realizers of an ontological doctrine.²⁰ It seems safe to conclude that a dynamical form of ontological presentism can de facto and ought to be an important motivator for the effort of making the most of what we are experiencing “right now”. However, before raising some objections to this claim, we must explain in some more details what the practical stance expressed by the motto “look at your life sub specie aeternitatis” consists in.*

9 What does it mean to “look at one’s life sub specie aeternitatis”?

Going back to the eternalist’s affective outlook as described by Marcus Aurelius’ quotation reported above, it is clear that he was supposing that a belief in ontological eternalism could generate the affectively belief that, in order to answer in an emotionally appropriate way the challenges of our present experiences, we must temporally locate them in the history of the universe. Our coming to know the true physical description of our spatiotemporal place in the cosmos could help us to avoid a dramatization of “relatively small” setbacks or complications of the present moment (say, missing a plane or arriving second to a race, or suffering a theft, etc.), by realizing in addition that, qua consequences of long chain of events preceding our life, they were unavoidable.

The expression “relatively small” is deliberately ambiguous: suffering a theft can be nothing for an affluent family, but can be the ruin for a poor one. Missing a plane can entail a delay for the beginning of our vacation, but also losing a very important job that could decisive for the future of another person.

¹⁹ See also Schlick 1987 and Russell: “there can be no value in the whole unless there is value in the parts. Life is not to be conceived on the analogy of a melodrama in which the hero and heroine go through incredible misfortunes for which they are compensated by a happy ending.” (Russell 1930, 24).

²⁰ Without necessarily engaging in creative activities, one can live in the present also by being fully aware of one’s surroundings, by concentrating on proprioception, breath etc. This bodily-oriented form of practical presentism is often associated with forms of meditations originated with Buddhism, but shares with the activities mentioned above a suspension of past-oriented and future-oriented present mental acts

Analogously, the unavoidability of present actions²¹ will be received differently by different human temperaments. Even though these objections seem to create problems for generalizing the emotional reactions that are appropriate and beneficial for single individuals to all of us, this fact is not a decisive objection. Rather, we should consider two opposite driving emotions: on the one hand, the question is whether the eternalist's attitude would not make *any* moment of our life utterly insignificant; on the other, for this very reason, this well-grounded belief in ontological eternalism could create a sense of solidarity and compassion for our fellow beings and for all living beings sharing such a tragic destiny with us all. This emotional attitude, present in Schopenhauer (1958), can be endorsed without subscribing to his metaphysical irrationalism, based on the belief of a blind *Wille* (will) hidden behind the veil of our *Vorstellung* (representation of phenomena). The creation of a strong tie of solidarity and compassion among human beings is a plausible consequence of the awareness of the brevity and impotence of our life if compared with the immense temporal size of the cosmos.

Independently of well-known arguments pertaining to the semantic and the philosophy of language providing epistemic considerations that here we decided to leave aside, this awareness is typically stronger in those scholars reflecting on, and dedicating their carrier to, the study of cosmology, astrophysics, geology, evolutionary biology and, to a minor extent, human history. All of these disciplines can be instrumental to adopt a more detached and allocentric attitude toward our present experience.²²

By zooming in from the temporal length of human history to the length of our own life, ontological eternalism implies the belief that all events of our life are ontologically on a par. The corresponding affective attitude toward our existence then becomes correlated to an important question that cannot be discussed but that must at least be mentioned, namely the “constitution” of the self as an entity that is extended in time (Korsgaard 2009, Ismael 2016). The eternalist's typical emotional stance motivates the belief that each action and decision taken in the present moment must be part of a coherent narrative that ought to guide our self during our entire life. The future is going to be affected by the present decisions, which must also *cohere* with those actions and values that have inspired our life. This coherence need not

²¹ This issue is the object of the famous consequent argument proposed by van Inwagen, which generated a long discussion on free will that here cannot be touched.

²² Such reflections are made possible by a mechanism called mental time travel, which recently has been object of intense neurocognitive studies, and which consists in the capacity to stretch one's imagination to more or less long temporal intervals. See Suddendorf et al. (2009), Arzy et al. (2016), Guathier and Wannehoven (2016), Buonomano (2017) is an elementary exposition. It turns out that the capacity to create allocentric spatial maps is mirrored by that of creating allocentric temporal maps, by which we get in “cognitive contact” with future (and past) events from the perspective of our present experience. For a nice, brief review of the difference between egocentric and allocentric temporal maps, see Callender (2018, pp.207-20).

include only events between our birth and death, but pushes us to extend our ethical interests also to events preceding and following our life. As far as the past is concerned, for instance, the affective stance following from ontological eternalism may help us to extend our care also to the legacy of previous generations, especially when it is characterized by the attempt to achieve social and cultural ends, like the advancement of knowledge and the extending to all mankind the right of living a dignified life and receiving an education. Likewise, the eternalist affective attitude can stimulate the obligation of focusing our actions also to the future generations. In this more extended sense, the coherent narrative that a practical existentialist tries to achieve in her own *individual* life must be extended to the past and future generations as well, in order to bequeath the best ideal of the former to the latter.

In the previous part of the paper we did not clarify the relationship between a *de facto*, psychological affective consequence of ontological presentism or eternalism and a pragmatic rule that should guide our concrete actions and could follow from the beliefs in the two ontologies. Ought a rational constraint on our actions to follow from our belief in the two ontological views with their respective affective consequences? Since the *prima facie* answer seems no, we must justify this impression.

10 Some objections to the practical importance of the two ontological views

There are at least two objections against the hypotheses that the two temporal ontologies have practical consequences. However, both can be countered

The first is independent of emotional aspects, but claims that a commitment to eternalism may even imply that one should worry only about the present self. According to four-dimensionalism, reality is spread out in space as well as in time. Suppose with Merricks that four-dimensionalism presupposes eternalism: in some perdurantist views of persistence in time, “I now” exist only now, since my identity is *not* the same across the times of my existence. Shouldn’t I then worry and be immersed only in what happens to “me now” and be completely immersed in everything else that I am doing right now, despite the truth of ontological eternalism? This objection can be countered by noting that not only it is based on an extremely controversial hypothesis,²³ but it is also irrelevant, since here we are just presupposing eternalism

²³ For an opinion contrary to Merricks’, see Sider (2001).

without calling into play problems related to fourdimensionalism. In any case, some weaker form of identity between the various stages of the self across times must be ensured!

The second objection is more relevant to our purpose. In order to discuss it in explicit way, it is appropriate to report the premises of the argument that I presented above

- 1) The ontological dispute is genuine.
- 2) There are two different affective attitudes related, respectively, to ontic presentism and eternalism that are *influenced* by our epistemically motivated beliefs into the two respective ontologies, namely, for lack of a better term, affective presentist and affective eternalism
- 3) To the effect that *actions* are at least partly motivated by our affections or emotions, these affective attitudes make a *practical* difference in how we act (and possibly should act).

C Conclusion *The ontological dispute makes a practical difference in the way the ontic eternalist and presentists live and should live*

The second objection points out to the existence of a tacit premise of the argument that seems patently false, namely that an epistemic commitment to one of the two ontologies has a univocal – even if not binding – affective consequences:

- 4) A believer in ontological presentism, by being subject also to the emotions typical of a believer in eternalism, can look as well and as often at the world *sub specie eternitatis*, and conversely, a believer in ontological eternalism can as well and as often be completely engrossed in her present experience like a practical presentist.

Let us see why (4) is necessary for the conclusion to go through. Remember because the truth of the first was taken for granted. The third looks plausible, to the effect that our emotions, can make a practical difference in motivating our actions, together, of course, with the means-to-end calculation of their consequences.

Premise 2), if considered in light of 4), must be discussed with care. It seems plausible to claim that a believer in eternalist may be more prone to have an attitude toward her temporal experience similar to one illustrated so vividly by Marcus Aurelius. The content of her present mental acts and of her imagination is not limited to the present experience. However, if P's adoption of eternalism for robust epistemic reasons

does not a priori exclude that she may focus on the present moment with the same intense emotions of the “affective presentist” (and conversely), we must conclude that an epistemic motivated commitment to one of the two ontological views has no practical consequences in the sense advocated by 2), even if we assume that the ontological debate is genuine.

Are there rebuttals to 4) that allow one to defend the conclusion? Premise 4) does not deny that a commitment to one of the ontologies cannot have any affective consequences. It just affirms that a (ontic) presentist can at times be a pragmatist presentist and conversely without abandoning her epistemic commitment. So 2) should be weakened by this reformulation:

2*) Ontological commitments to presentism and eternalism can be correlated with *some* affective stances that influence them.

But this reformulation does not suffice to defend premise 3. A commitment to one of the two ontologies does not make a *stable* practical difference in our affective attitudes, and therefore does not seem to make any important pragmatic difference. In other words, affective stances underdetermine an epistemic commitment to one ontology, since the same affective stance is compatible with a different ontological commitment.

If my discussion is correct, two conclusions follow. This first conclusion, besides its own interest, is important especially in view of Deng’s (2017) hypothesis that the presentist/eternalist dispute is epistemically trivial and “reduces” to an affective dimension. Even granting that the ontological dispute is genuine and that it has some affective consequences as expressed by (2*) an ontic presentist can feel emotions typically associated to an ontic eternalist and conversely: in view of (4) even its affective dimension would not make a significant practical difference, because the epistemic commitment would not make a stable affective stance.²⁴

The second conclusion is predicated on the *pragmatic* view that our beliefs are guides to our actions: whatever makes some practical difference ought to make some epistemic difference. However, the first conclusion has it that our beliefs in the two ontologies make no pragmatic difference because they make no stable affective difference (4), even in those conditions in which they could be relevant. If a pragmatist’s initial trust in the fact that believing in one of the ontologies could have practical consequence were followed by the discovery that there is no epistemic difference between the two ontologies, she would end

²⁴ Stable should be interpreted in a temporal sense.

up in a state of epistemic neutrality. Such a neutrality between the two ontologies, which is compatible with (1) being true, would bring with itself indifference, an additional affective consequence not contemplated before, but is typical of the anti-metaphysical attitude, reinforced by the fact that the ontological debate makes no difference also in physics. A metaphysician will of course counter the pragmatic move but on what grounds?

This question suggests a way out against (4), which is to remain on the pragmatic ground without endangering the importance of metaphysics, but by bringing into the discussion James's notion of *temperament* (James 1977, p. 7). With this move, the independence of the affective attitude from our belief in one of the two ontologies would be *limited* by the claim that an epistemic commitment to a certain ontology influences a previously present, "stable" temperament or affective stance. This claim is all that is needed to defend the conclusion of the three premises and therefore the claim that a rational commitment to one of the two ontologies reinforces the affective stance of a distinct kind of "time oriented" person.

Just to illustrate, James refers to "the realist philosopher" as a tough-minded person and the idealist philosopher as a tender-minded person (see 1977, *ibid.*).²⁵ By modifying his distinction in order to apply it to our case, the physicalistic outlook that attracts the tough-minded philosopher and that inspires her eternalism thrives on the idea that one of the aims of metaphysics, science and physics (recall the stoic position) is a sort of liberation from our anthropomorphic beliefs, of which ontological presentism is a fundamental ingredient. On the opposite side, the "tender-minded" ontological presentist wants a universe in which not only is our experience of an objectively privileged present veridical, but it even takes precedence over the physicalistic, eternalistic outlook, independently of any evidence physics may have in its favor. Consequently, despite our negligible place in the large scheme of things, the temperament of ontological presentists (eternalist) would justify the adoption of ontological presentism.

This pragmatist outlook, however, should not endorse James' general claim that "the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments" (James 1977, p. 7). Given our initial presupposition (see introduction), the motivation to adopt a certain metaphysical position depends *only* on the rational arguments that can be brought in its favor, and therefore not on the "jamesian" "temporal" temperaments or affective stances. However, the stability of an affective, eternalist (presentist)

²⁵ The cut James's description short, tough-minded philosophers stick to fact, i.e., are realist, pessimistic, and irreligious. The tender minded are idealistic, optimistic, religious, and free-willist (1977, *ibid.*)

temperament will weaken in an important way objection (4). Her epistemically motivated commitment to one of the ontologies can independently reinforce the values she cherishes most, even though these values do not play any role in logically justifying her position. In other words, in order to defend my main thesis, it is not necessary to reduce an epistemological position to a stance involving a commitment to certain values expressed by propositions that are neither true nor false, but are about the way we would like the world to be.

One final remark is important: the commitment to one ontology can change our emotional reactions only to a certain point but it can make a difference. In a much less famous letter of condolence sent to the mathematician Elie Cartan on May 21, 1930,²⁶ Einstein openly claim that an intense suffering in the *present* is to some degree *irrational* because objectively there is no now: “In these trying moments one feels how it is difficult for a human being to hold fast to the idea – so inescapable to a physicist – that the now is only an illusion, not something pertaining to reality”. Independently of whether the now is really illusory, Einstein seems to be implying that in less trying moments, a firm belief that the present has no objective existence should make our pain more tolerable, so that the adoption of a particular ontological view of time should make an important difference in our life.

²⁶ The letter I am referring to is that sent to Besso’s parent after his death, in which he writes that for those “who believe in physics the difference between past present and future is only a stubborn illusion” (Einstein, 1972, p. 258). In my opinion, the letter to Cartan states in a much clearer way why Einstein thought that a firm belief in eternalism “*rationally*” should, even if it actually may not, alleviate a present pain.

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Conversely, one can be an ontological presentist (for epistemic reasons) and in some moments adopt the typical affective attitudes recommended by Marcus Aurelius, Spinoza and Russell. This criticism does not exclude that a believer in ontological eternalism (presentism) or an epistemically-neutral chooser of one

the two positions would be completely unaffected by her ontological belief. To illustrate this fact, we can do no better than quoting the following, neglected letter²⁷ that Einstein addressed to Elie Cartan on May 21 1950. Cartan had just suffered a great loss and Einstein tried to console him with the (absurd) idea that one should overcome one's attachment to the present because the according to physics the present does not exist, "In these trying moments one feels how it is difficult for a human being to hold fast to the idea –so inescapable to a physicist – that the now is only an illusion, not something pertaining to reality". In this passage, Einstein seems to imply that a metaphysical view of time should make an important difference in our stance toward our life, but he really shows his affective attitude, or his temperament. And temperaments are matters of study for psychologists and not for philosophers.

So the debate is irrelevant for physics. Suppose it has empirical consequence on the subjective side. The different ontologies then must be compatible with just one affective ingredient. But we showed that this is not true either. But if the genuine character of the debate does not boil down to two different affective attitudes toward time, since the main thesis of my paper is correct why should we worry about them? Even assuming that the ontological debate is genuine, the fact that it also fails to have relevant *practical* consequences should give us pause.

²⁷ The letter I am referring to is that sent to Besso's parent after his death, in which he writes that for those "who believe in physics the difference between past present and future is only a stubborn illusion" (Einstein, 1972, p. 258). The letter to Cartan in my opinion clarifies in a much better way why he thinks that a firm belief in eternalism rationally should, even if it actually does not, alleviate a present pain.