

The Affective and Practical Consequences of Presentism and Eternalism

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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 of whether the endorsement of one of these two ontological views can make a practical difference in the way we should live.

Keywords: Presentism, Eternalism, Eternalism’s affective attitudes, Presentism’s affective attitudes.

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 To clarify my main aim, which is to study and make explicit these dimensions, it is important to state at the outset what the presupposition and focus of my paper are. *First*, I will assume without further arguments that the debate between presentism and eternalism, however these views are formulated, is genuine and non-trivial (see premise (i) in Section 2 below), for instance because it is based on an unrestrict-

¹ Silverstein 1980, Bradley 2004, Le Poidevin 1995, Burley 2008, Finocchiaro and Sullivan 2016 have concentrated on the relationship between eternalism and the fear of death. The relation between eternalism and the notion of midlife crisis is 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 arguing that we are free to shape, at least in part, the future.

ed view of existence.² *Second*, for my purpose I can safely ignore discussing other temporal ontologies (the growing block view of time),³ and “mixed views”, in which it is postulated a now moving on a tenselessly conceived series of events (Skow 2015). *Third*, I will also ignore 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, the fourth assumption—not be to be discussed here—is that our beliefs in one of the two ontologies is and ought to be influenced only by epistemic arguments.

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 contemporary 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 exists and (ii) the adoption of affective eternalism with ontological eternalism.⁷ As in assumption 4 above, both these claims were backed up by purely epistemic arguments. 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 With apologies to many philosophers that here I do not mention, 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 2016.

³ For a presentation of the growing block theory, see, among others Pooley 2013, and more recently, Correia and Rosenkranz 2018, which, to my knowledge, is the best book-length defense of the growing block theory of time against the objections to be found in the literature.

⁴ On this point, see Mellor’s 1999 criticism of 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 detail and consider practical eternalism as the view that our life is an inseparable part of the cosmic order.

2. The Argumentative Structure and the Plan of the Paper

In order to evaluate Deng's important conclusion, I will (paradoxically) start with a contrary premise, which, as anticipated above, for the sake of the argument will be taken for granted:

- (i) (Unlike Deng's claim), the ontological dispute is not merely verbal.
- (ii) There are two different affective attitudes related, respectively, to ontic presentism and eternalism that are influenced only by our purely epistemically motivated beliefs in the two respective ontologies: *namely affective presentism and affective eternalism as defined before*
- (iii) Our *actions* are at least partly motivated by our affections or emotions.

Conclusion: these different attitudes toward time make some *practical difference* in how we act (and possibly should act).

In a word the conclusion argues that a believer in ontological presentism will feel, act and should act differently from a believer in ontology presentism. For lack of better terms, I have labelled *affective presentism* and *affective eternalism* the emotional attitudes toward time that, if I am right, can be respectively attributed to believers in the respective ontological positions. A more precise account of the two affective attitudes referred to by the maxims above will be given in the following sections.

Let us now discuss the premises of the argument. 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 makes some practical difference in the decisions and the actions of presentists and eternalists. An important objection to the conclusion of this argument will be discussed in the last section of the paper.

More in detail, 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 life⁸. It then becomes important to establish whether these historical arguments can be justified and relied upon also today. The fourth and the fifth sections will clarify as precisely as possible, respectively, the meaning of the metaphoric expressions "live in the present" and "look at your life sub specie aeternitatis", which are used in the previous sections in an 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 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 vice versa.

⁸ For a reconstruction of the Hellenistic philosophy, see Inwood and Gerson 1997.

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: 28). We can add that in a logically possible world in which we knew that we could live for an extremely long amount of time by experiencing also courses of actions that we have given up today, there would be no necessity of choosing to do what is most important for us here and now by neglecting trivialities: the possibility of forming a character and a personality would be lost.

It should be clear why the link between dynamical presentism, a mind-independently conceived passage of time, consisting in the coming to be of previously nonexistent future events, 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,⁹ the commonsensical claim that *each day we are one day older* is non-tautological but simply 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 a burning fuse (Norton 2014).¹⁰ To be more dramatic and avoid possible charges of selling tautologies of the kind “time passes one second per second”, we could note that, by counting the passage of time in terms of our heart pulses, the number of heart pulses grows on average each minute by approximately 70 units, until our heart will stop.

The eternalist may object to these arguments in favor of a “dynamic” time in various ways. 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, the other linking today with the day of my death. And so on for each day until I die. In this God’s eye point of view, which is not at all absurd, it is obvious that any dynamic element is lost: all of these relations don’t change. However, for our purposes it 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.¹¹

⁹ For acute arguments against the common objections to “the one second per second” argument see Maudlin 2007. For a thorough defense of the moving now conception of becoming see Skow 2015.

¹⁰ On a shrinking view of the future, see also Casati and Torrenzo 2011.

¹¹ 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: 6-7.

If for the sake of the argument we endorse this dynamical picture of time, we are ready to discuss the main 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*).¹²

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 very effective in changing her affective stance, emotions, and therefore practical decisions that lead to live her a more flourishing life.

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 in contemporary literature). Consequently, painful anticipation in the present of an event that in principle we cannot directly experience now should play no role in our mental life:

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).¹³

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 strict meaning of the above letter, we can 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 in memory or “in the expectation”.

¹² Here I am using the translation by Harrison 1981.

¹³ Inwood & Gerson 1994: 28. For a contemporary debate on the role of eternalism in liberating us from the fear of dying, see note 1.

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 irrational 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).¹⁴ In this example, according to Epicurus, mental reflections on presentism as an ontological 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. Since we don’t fear the former, we should not fear the nothingness of the after-death state.¹⁵

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” (Wittgenstein 1961: 6.4311).

In a word, the present moment, if lived fully and not halfheartedly, may even transmute into something eternal and take us outside time as in a mystical experience. The sense of timelessness pressed by Wittgenstein in the famous passage above is that eternity does not mean eternal duration, but a *nunc stans* (a standing now),¹⁶ in which a present, intense experience annihilates our *experienced passage of time* that usually comprises memories and anticipations.

As evident from these quotations, the key reason that justifies 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.¹⁷ However, since all of our experiences occur in the present and it is only in the present that we can have happy (or unhappy) memories or happy (or unhappy) anticipations, where is the difference between the affective timbre of the presentism and eternalism?

¹⁴ 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 and more adequate to the ontological conviction.

¹⁵ The same mental effort should be cultivated to overcome 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. Lucretius claimed that if we look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing, we may see as in a mirror the time that shall be after we are dead.

¹⁶ The term “nunc stans” is found in Boetius (475-526 A.D.) and was then revived by the 12th century philosophers: “The passing now makes time, the standing now makes eternity”; here ‘standing now’ means eternity as a property of God, who is outside time altogether.

¹⁷ This viewpoint had been already defended by Aristippus of the Cyrenaic school in the fifth century B.C. For the notion of happiness in the ancient world, see Annas 1995.

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 7), focusing her 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 past or future *content* of the *present* mental acts or states is (and should be) at least *sometimes* if not often be directed to non-present events, where the ‘sometimes’ is a proviso making room for the needs of everyday life.

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 capacity for concentrating on the present experience in the sense explained above can de facto become more effective by realizing that—as a coherent consequence of an epistemic endorsement of *ontic* presentism—dwelling on the *memory* of an event that does not longer exist has, to the extent that it depends on us, a negligible affective significance. Concerning 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.

4. 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 on 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 (Stoicism, Spinoza and Russell) is to a significant extent arbitrary, but my extremely brief treatment should be conceived as paradigmatic of related ways in which affective eternalism has been proposed.

4.1 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 im-

mentality of time (and space we could add) 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' *Meditations*, which I report in full before my critical evaluation because, to my knowledge, it is one of clearest expressions of an ancient philosopher's appeal to look at our life under the aspect of eternity (Ismael's "temporal transcending" view of our life, or 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 depends 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: 183).

The affective acceptance of whatever happens to us (loss of health, riches, reversal of fortune, our diseases and upcoming death etc.) 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 deterministic¹⁸ ontological basis. By provoking a (slow) psychological change in our immediate emotional reactions, the Stoic form of practical 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 interpretation of our experience of external and internal 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 could call an immutable block universe.

4.2 Spinoza's Epistemology and God's Eternal Laws of Nature

A crucial development of the Stoic 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

¹⁸ Here I identify somewhat anachronistically determinism with fatalism, but I think that the identification does not change the meaning of the quotation.

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*)”.¹⁹ 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 our knowledge of 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. For this reason, it is not so anachronistic to attribute to 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. Spinoza identifies such laws with an immanent God, *Deus sive natura* (God or nature). Once our reason understands that our mental and corporeal attributes are ruled by the nomological structure of the universe, we achieve the highest, third form of knowledge, which is at the same time an affective attitude toward God/nature, which Spinoza dubs *amor intellectualis Dei* (intellectual love of God). *Prima facie* this expression reads like an oxymoron, involving as it does the *emotion* of love and the intervention of the *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, Spinoza’s impersonal God (*Deus*) is identical with the whole web of the deterministic natural laws, which is accessible only through the intellect (or reason). 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 a greater power of acting, and love is simply our *becoming aware* of this passage. Since we naturally love everything that causes this transition, the discovery that the most perfect transition is our coming to know that the necessary laws coincide with the essence of God brings about our intellectual love of nature/God. *The awareness that we can understand Nature brings about love because it is the purest form of activity of human beings.* In sum, the consequence of our coming to know the eternal laws does not bring about a passive attitude of resignation to the destiny, but a joyous, active awareness to belong to something (God) that is either coinciding with the whole cosmos, or is outside time altogether.

4.3 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 example) is the key to virtues like altruism and selflessness can be found in Russell’s *Mysticism and Logic*:

¹⁹ “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 1996: 59-60.

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* (Russell 1917: 22, my emphasis).

Let us make explicit the link that Russell establishes between an eternalist ontology 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. In its stress of the indexical nature of “now” and “I”, Russell’s analogy is very important: 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 a egocentric temporal perspective (Ismael 2007). This perspective is psychologically correlated to the attitude of discounting the future and forgetting the lessons of the past, which can imply to a certain extent our being careless about the continuity of our future selves and that of the others and the future generations, 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”.

5. What Does it Mean to “Live in the Present”?

I have already raised an important objection to one of the main claims of the paper, which here is appropriate to formulate in a different way. Since all of our experiences occur in the present, it could be objected that both presentists and eternalists try to avoid as much as possible *present* pain and improve *present* happiness. Therefore, also the eternalists focus on the present experience. However, if I am right, the crucial point is that they try to achieve their common objective in different ways. The different psychological attitude toward the present moment was already clearly formulated in the Hellenistic times. As Hadot notices, the Epicureans’ presentism led them to experience the present moment by a *distension* of the mind that, independently of its joyous components, attends to all its contents. On the contrary, the Stoics (who defended eternalism), pursued their aim by a constant *tension* of the mind toward an absolute or partial *control* of the momentary passions. As already noticed, such a tension was possible thanks to the affectively tinged acceptance of the present moment as a necessary consequence of an eternal, lawful order.

Despite the fact that in *daily life* it is impossible both for the presentist not to plan or to think about past experiences in order to avoid future pains and for the eternalist not to attend to her present experiences, 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. 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.

More in general, the affections characterising 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 [choice worthy] and choice worthy in itself, never because of something else, is unconditionally complete” (*Nich. Eth.*, Book i, 1097a30, transl. in Aristotle 1985: 14).²⁰ Doing something instrumental to an end presupposes that the end is an effect of the present action.

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 events 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. 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”.

The description in some more detail of the affective consequences of adopting the motto “look at your life *sub specie aeternitatis*” will also give me the opportunity to raise two additional objections to the main claim of the paper.

²⁰ 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).

6. What Does it Mean to “Look at One’s Life Sub Specie Aeternitatis”?

Going back to the eternalist’s affective outlook described by Marcus Aurelius’ quotation above, it is clear that he was supposing that a belief in ontological eternalism could generate the affective belief that, in order to answer in an emotionally appropriate way the challenges of our present experiences, we must temporally locate them in the complete history of the universe. A more credible and less radical formulation of affective eternalism could just consist in the claim that our frequent reflection on the true physical description of our spatio-temporal 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 a long chain of events preceding our life, they have a negligible meaning.

The first objection amounts to a dilemma: a less radical but more reasonable formulation of affective eternalism is uninteresting, the more coherent one is impossible to achieve. The expression “relatively small” of the previous paragraph is ambiguous: suffering a theft can be “nothing” also for an affluent presentist but can be tragic for a poor eternalist. However, the coherent eternalist should react to all events (even the most tragic ones) in the same way, by locating them in the temporal vastness of the cosmos. It seems clear that this is an impossible ideal because the death of one’s son cannot be compared to losing one’s wallet.

The thesis implied by the first horn of the dilemma seems highly controversial: thinking that the universe is 13,4 billions year old can be of help in many practical circumstances, even we cannot describe them one by one. As far as the second horn is concerned, the eternalist can reply by pointing out that affective eternalism can *help* to accept also the most tragic events by reflecting on her metaphysical assumptions. She needs not be fatalistic: dwelling on a terrible *present* tragedy is inevitable but projecting one’s life in an existing future is the only way to make the present more bearable. This option is open only to eternalists. In 1980, after an earthquake in the southern part of Italy that caused many casualties the past president of the Italian Republic Sandro Pertini said: “the best way to remember those who are dead is to think about those who are still alive”. And a large part of those who are alive, for an eternalist but not for a presentist, have and will have a future, and we can make a difference to make it better. People have reported that thinking about Pertini’s words after the tragedy helped them to suffer less.

The second objection is that the eternalist attitude would make *any* moment of our life *utterly insignificant*. The response here is that a well-grounded belief in ontological eternalism could create a sense of solidarity and compassion for our fellow beings and all living beings sharing the tragic destiny of death and pain with us all in a temporal immense universe. This emotional attitude, defended in particular by 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 universe.

It should be noted that, beyond voluntary reflections on eternalism, the corresponding attitude is typically and implicitly stronger in scholars 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.²¹

By zooming in from the temporal length of human history to the length of our own life, ontological eternalism also 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 here 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 selves 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 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, I did not clarify the relationship between a 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. How can a rational constraint on our actions follow from our belief in the two ontological views with their respective affective consequences?

7. An Objection to the Practical Importance of the Two Ontological Views

In order to tackle this issue, I must discuss a key objection to my main thesis. Recall the argument presented above:

- (i) The ontological dispute is non-verbal.
- (ii) There are two different affective attitudes related, respectively, to ontic presentism and eternalism that are influenced only by our purely epis-

²¹ Such attitudes 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 among others Suddendorf et al. 2009; Arzy et al. 2016. Buonomano 2017 is an elementary ex-position. 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 2017: 207-20.

temically motivated beliefs in the two respective ontologies: *namely affective presentism and affective eternalism*.

(iii) Our *actions* are at least partly motivated by our affections or emotions.

Conclusion: these different attitudes toward time make some *practical difference* in how we act (and possibly should act).

The objection points out that an epistemic commitment to one of the two ontologies need not have a *univocal* affective consequence. The objection can be stated thus:

(iv) A believer in *ontological presentism* can look at the world *sub specie aeternitatis* as well and often as the *practical eternalist*. Conversely, a believer in *ontic eternalism* can as well and as often be completely engrossed in her present experience like a *practical presentist*.

In a word, (iv) does not deny that an epistemic commitment to one of the ontologies can have affective consequences. It just affirms that a (ontic) presentist can *in different moments of her* life be a pragmatic eternalism and conversely, without abandoning her epistemic commitment to the respective ontic view. It follows that the different ontological commitments to presentism (eternalism) do not suffice to fix the respective affective stances, since the same affective stance is compatible with the two different ontological commitments. If the two ontologies are *underdetermined* by the affective stances, it seems plausible to conclude that a belief in one of the two ontologies does not make a *temporally stable difference* in her affective attitudes, so that it does not make any important pragmatic difference. “Temporally stable” here refers to a prevalent *character trait* that is reinforced by an epistemic belief in one of the two ontologies: the italicized expression will be clarified and become important in what follows.

Objection (iv), if correct, would have two important consequences.

The first, if (iv) is correct, is relevant to Deng’s (2017) hypothesis that the presentist/eternalist dispute is merely verbal and “reduces simply” to an affective dimension. If, as Deng has it, (i) is false, we could not conclude with her that the eternalist/presentist debate reduces *simply* to the two different and incompatible affective attitudes towards time. As a consequence of the underdetermination thesis, and even dropping as she does any reference to ontological claims, the “reduction” in question is much more complicated than could be expected.

On the other hand, by accepting premise (i), as I have done here, the importance and the interest of the affective dimensions of the debate illustrated above would be even greater, even if (iv) were correct. It is only if we accept the genuine character of the debate that the historical positions that we briefly commented above could be explained.

The *second* consequence amounts to a rejection of (iv) on the basis of the pragmatist view that our beliefs are guides to actions: whatever makes some practical difference ought to make some epistemic difference. However, the first consequence claims that our beliefs in the two ontologies make no pragmatic difference because they make no *temporally stable* affective difference. If a pragmatist’s initial trust in the fact that believing in one of the ontologies could have practical consequences were followed by the discovery that there is no epistemic difference between the two ontologies, she might plausibly end up in a state of *epistemic neutrality*. Such a neutrality between the two ontologies, which is com-

patible with the truth of (i), would bring with itself *indifference*, an additional affective consequence not contemplated before, but that is typical of an anti-metaphysical philosophical position.

The real way out of (iv) relies on James's notion of *temperament* (James 1979: 7). By invoking this notion, the independence of one's affective attitudes from one's belief in one of the two ontologies claimed by (iv) would be substantially weakened. *In fact, it would be undermined by the claim that an epistemic commitment to a given ontology influences or reinforces a previously present, temporally stable temperament or character.* This claim is all that is needed to defend the conclusion of the three premises above and therefore the claim that a rational, epistemic motivated 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 1979, *ibid.*).²² By modifying his distinction in order to apply it to our case, the physicalist 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 physicalist, 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) pushes towards the adoption of ontological presentism.

This pragmatist outlook, however, should not be generalized to the point of endorsing James' general claim that "the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments" (James 1979: 7). In philosophy, the *initial motivation* to adopt a certain metaphysical position may depend on our character trait, but must be justified *only* by rational arguments that can be brought in its favor, and therefore, in our case, not by Jamesian "time-related" temperaments or affective stances. The point that I am stressing here is that, given the presence of stable character traits, (iv) can be weakened if not rejected by the claim that temporally stable character traits will be reinforced by epistemically motivated commitments to one of the ontologies. This commitment can at the same time independently reinforce the values she cherishes most in virtue of her character trait, even though these values do not play any role in logically justifying her position.

8. Conclusions

Despite the reasonable defense of eternalism given above, it must be admitted that a commitment to this ontology can change our emotional reactions only to a certain extent, even if it can make an important difference. This was explicitly

²² To 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 (1979, *ibid.*).

recognized by a well-known defender of eternalism: in a much less famous letter of condolence sent to the mathematician Elie Cartan on May 21 1930,²³ Einstein openly claims 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”. In this passage 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 since our temporal experience amounts just to arbitrary perspective on the immense temporal and spatial extension of the universe. Cultivating eternalist thoughts and, consequently, affective attitudes of this kind is a different way a vindicating a fact already insisted upon by the Stoics: the adoption of a particular ontological view of time makes and can make an important difference in how we should live.²⁴

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²³ The more famous letter I am referring to was sent to Besso’s sister after Besso’s death, in which he famously writes that for believing physicists the difference between past present and future is only a stubborn illusion. 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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