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The Buddha versus Popper: When to Live?

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The Buddha versus Popper:

When to Live?¹

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Abstract

We discuss two approaches to life: presentism and futurism. We locate presentism within various elements of Buddhism, in the form of advice to live in the present and not to allow the future to hinder us from living in the ever

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present now. By contrast, futurism, which we identify with Karl Popper, advises us to think of future consequences before we act, and to act now for a better future. Of course, with its emphasis on a well-defined path to an ideal future ideally culminating in enlightenment, Buddhism undoubtedly has elements of futurism as well. We do not intend to determine which of these two approaches to time is more dominant in Buddhism, nor how the two approaches are best understood within Buddhism; but simply we intend to compare and contrast these two approaches, using those presentist elements of Buddhism as representative of presentism while contrasting them with those elements of futurism to be found in Popper and others. We will discuss various aspects of presentism and futurism, such as Ruth Millikan's Popperian animal, the psychologist Howard Rachlin's social and temporal discounting, and even the popular but controversial idea, YOLO (you only live once). The primary purpose of this paper is to contrast one with the other. The central question of ethics is: *How* should one live? Our variation on that question is: *When* should one live? We conjecture that the notion of *flow*, developed by Csikszentmihalyi, may be a better optimal choice between these two positions.

Introduction

There are two approaches to life. The first one, which we are identifying with the Buddha, is to live in the present and not to allow the future to hinder us from living in the ever present now. However, we do not intend to claim that presentism best characterizes Buddhism, nor that pre-

sentism is only found within Buddhism; but we only intend to claim that an emphasis on presentism may be located within various elements of Buddhism.

The second one, which we will identify with Sir Karl Popper, is to think before we act and to let our hypotheses die in our stead when the overall outcome is likely to be negative. We act now for a better future, and we think now which action will bring the best future. We may call the Buddha's approach *presentism* and Popper's approach *futurism*.

Though more specific terms, present-centrism and future-centrism, may seem to define each concept better, we (the authors) are satisfied with our terms, presentism and futurism, solely for their greater verbal simplicity. Inasmuch as, philosophically, the same term presentism is sometimes used to refer to an ontological stance (only the present exists), because we are not at all making any claims that hinge on such ontological matters, a more specific discussion of ontological presentism (and ontological futurism) is beyond the scope of this paper. We acknowledge that the shortened terms, *presentism* and *futurism*, absent our caveats, might otherwise suggest that only the present or only the future exists, and involve much more complex issues in metaphysics, but, again, addressing such issues in metaphysics is not our intention here at all. Rather, we are here just following the commonsensical usage of the distinction among the past, present, and future, in terms of our psychological and motivational orientations in connection with such ideas. We are, emphatically, making no claims or implications about the merits of the Sarvāstivāda Buddhist view that the past-present-future all co-exist, or about the merits of competing alternative views of time.

In this paper, we will discuss various aspects of the discourse on presentism and futurism, as we mean those terms, making reference to presentist ideas to be found within Buddhism and to futurist ideas to be found in Karl Popper and others. The primary purpose of this paper is to

compare and contrast one approach with the other, to problematize both approaches, and to suggest a middle path between them. For the *present*, we are not attempting to side with one approach against the other, leaving it as a *future* project to find a better optimal choice between the two, although, again, we will suggest one possible alternative that may be understood as a middle path between, or integrating, both approaches.

The central question of ethics is: *How* should one live? Our variation on that question here is: *When* should one live? Again, while our primary focus is to compare and contrast living in the present with living for the future, we will conjecture that a better choice between these two positions may be somewhere in between, and thus that the concept of *flow* might lead us to such a better position. We reiterate, however, that the thrust of our paper is more comparative and exploratory than it is assertoric.

The Buddha's Living in the Present Moment

Famously, the Buddha introduced the brilliant idea of living in the present moment, though, of course, before him there must have been many sentient beings living in the present. His "An Auspicious Day" *sūtra*, translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, states:

The Blessed One [Buddha] said:
 You shouldn't chase after the past
 or place expectations on the future.
 What is past is left behind.
 The future is as yet unreached.
 Whatever quality is present
 you clearly see right there, right there.

...

Ardently doing what should be done today,
for—who knows?—tomorrow death.

There is no bargaining with Mortality and his mighty horde. (MN 131)

In another, “The Wilderness” *sūtra*, translated from the Pāli by Andrew Olendzki, the Buddha preached a similar idea by answering to a question of a *devatā* who is an inhabitant of a heaven:

[Devataa:]

Those who abide in the forest,
Peaceful, living the holy life;
Those who eat but a single meal a day;
— why is it their face is so calm?

[The Buddha:]

They do not grieve over the past,
Nor do they yearn for the future;
They live only in the present
— That is why their face is so calm. (SN 1.10)

We note that, while the idea of living now certainly did not originate with the Buddha, as a philosophical tenet it is at least popularly attributable to Buddhism, if not also Taoism and other philosophies. Conversely, we also note that, while the idea is popularly attributable to Buddhism, there is a view that the idea of Buddhism as presentism is inaccurate, if not flatly incorrect. There are a number of *sūtras* that one could identify as futurist.⁴ The concepts of karma and rebirth, one might argue, are pa-

⁴ A few examples, “Fruits of the Homeless Life,” from *the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya)*, *sūtra* 2; “Advice to Rahula at Ambalaṭṭhikā,” *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 61 (we will quote this “Advice” below.); Examples from the Ones in *the Numerical Discourses (Aṅguttara Nikāya)*, concerned with the kinds of activities that will lead to auspicious and inauspicious births.

tently futurist, and the practice of merit-making, taking actions that will lead to future benefits in this life and in future lives, is ubiquitous throughout Buddhist cultures.

It would be more appropriate, then, for us simply to *stipulate* that, because Buddhism is much more nuanced than our focus on Buddhist presentism in this article, we are simply exploring the relative merits of the contrast between presentism in Buddhism and futurism outside Buddhism. We are not suggesting that we think Buddhism is best understood as generally presentist; we stipulate instead that we are not addressing the exegetical/hermeneutical question whether Buddhism is best represented as generally presentist. Rather, we are only claiming that there are significant elements of presentism to be found in various Buddhist traditions and texts.

The very idea of following the Eightfold Path, if not the entirety of the Dharma, in order to attain enlightenment, whether for oneself, as in early Buddhism, or for the sake of all sentient beings, as in later Buddhism, clearly has a forward-looking or futurist orientation, narrative rationale, and justificatory explication. Thus, that Buddhism has its share of futurist elements cannot be denied.

We speculate that, both because Buddhism admits of stages of enlightenment, and because different Buddhist traditions emphasize different aspects of the same corpus of techniques and ideas, it may be that presentism is more or less appropriate in different traditions and with respect to practitioners at different stages of spiritual progress. For example, an element of Buddhist presentism may be seen in a Zen imperative of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 in the Ninth century, China. In a passage of *Linji lu* 臨濟錄 (*The Record of Linji*), the Zen Master introduces an enlightening idea:

Just make yourself master of every situation, and wherever you stand is the true [place] (隨處作主 立處皆真). No matter what circumstances come they cannot dislodge

you [from there]. Though you bear the influence of past delusions or the karma of [having committed] the five heinous crimes, these of themselves become the ocean of emancipation. (Cited in Sasaki 12)⁵

We interpret this passage to mean that to be the master of the moment is to live in the present, now. The phrase, “wherever you stand is the true place” may be understood to mean something like “whenever you are, under whatever circumstances you find yourself,” if you are in the enlightenment-oriented mental state of presence, then you are the master of your existential predicament.

When quoting the above passage from a traditional poem, Linji substitutes “the verb 作, ‘make,’ for the 覓, ‘look for,’ of the original text” (Sasaki 186).⁶ The act of *making* is more autonomous than the act of *looking for*; and *making* is more temporally immediate, whereas *looking for* implicitly involves becoming, seeking what is not present, and thus is future-oriented. If one can make oneself a master, which is more presentist, then why would one bother looking for another, which is more futurist? Linji’s imperative commands this autonomy, to live skillfully in the present moment, now. If an agent makes herself a master of any moment, the agent stands in the moment of truth.

Thus, the idea that the more mature Buddhist practitioner is more presentist than futurist may potentially be supported by such considerations. If this makes sense, then a case could be made for a two-tiered or two-staged view according to which a futurist perspective may be prescribed or more appropriate for practitioners at earlier stages along the path, whereas presentism may be a more apt description of

⁵ Sasaki’s translation and historical commentary, “爾且隨處作主、立處皆真。境來回換不得。縱有從來習氣、五無間業、自爲解脫大海。”

⁶ The original poem in Nanyue Mingzan, *the Ledao ge 樂道歌 (Song of Enjoying the Way)*.

those already having attained greater practice-based fruition at later stages of Dharma practice. We understand that there are certain Zen and related later Buddhist views according to which enlightenment is already present, that it is not to be thought of as hinging on long, serious practice, that just sitting (in meditation) constitutes enlightenment, and so on, and we realize that arguments could be developed for or against such views based on certain elements of our analysis.⁷ However, we cannot pursue such questions here without needlessly enlarging the scope of our inquiry.

A possible objection may be based on tense logic that, to make oneself a master means that one is not a master now, and one would therefore engage in actions in the present in order to become a master in the future. On the one hand, this objection is an example of why the matter of whether Buddhism can be considered essentially presentist is problematic: almost every description of the relevant considerations may be parsed in a similar manner, betraying this sort of equivocal treatment. Nonetheless, on the other hand, we interpret the Linji quote as an imperative, similar to a Kantian categorical imperative.

Kant is not interested in whether the moral agent in the present is unethical; nor in whether he ought to do the imperative in order to be ethical in the future: Kant simply says, “Just do it,” as a moral law in the universe. Analogously, Linji in the quote above is not interested in whether the sentient being in the present is a master; nor in whether he should do the imperative (make himself master) in order to be a master in the future. Simply Linji says the imperative, as a law in the Dharma-governed universe, so to speak.

⁷ For example, the Japanese Tendai notion of original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覺); Dōgen’s “Just sitting.”

Certain contemporary forms of Zen seem more focused on being fully present with whatever one is experiencing now, as the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh advocates in *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and repeatedly elsewhere (see the next section below), which presentist teaching might also be thought of as descriptive of the advanced or enlightened mental state, as depicted by B. Alan Wallace, referring to an advanced meditative state:

One nonconceptually rests in this timeless, pristine awareness, allowing actions to arise spontaneously and effortlessly, aroused by the interplay of one's own wisdom and the needs of sentient beings from moment to moment. (121)

Around 2,500 years after the Buddha, Beop-Jeong (1932-2010), perhaps the most beloved Buddhist monk essayist in his times in Korea, reminisced about a lesson from his own teacher. When Beop-Jeong was trained as an apprentice monk, his teacher Hyo-Bong said to Beop-Jeong: "Why would a Buddhist monk have two pieces of soap when one is enough? Two are excessive and not non-possession" (Beop-Jeong). Buddhist monks are trained not to worry about tomorrow's soap and whatever else.

An objection to our interpretation of this anecdote may be that it shows only that the monks are being trained to be frugal, not that they are being trained to not worry about *future* soap.⁸ Admittedly, that is a possibility; but we think our analysis can withstand this objection. For being trained not to worry about the future is arguably analogous to, say, a cause, whereas being trained to be frugal is analogous to a correlated effect; the former is more like an intended end or an essence (or more like a genotype in biology), whereas the latter is more like an unintended

⁸ We thank the editor Daniel Cozort for this objection.

collateral byproduct or a contingent phenomenon (or a phenotype). In other words, being presentist entails frugality, insofar as being presentist entails minimizing or limiting the acquisition of resources to what is needed in the present, whereas frugality does not necessarily entail presentism, as it aims intentionally at spreading out present and future resources over present and future needs. In support of this view, it may be said that the essence of the Buddha's teaching of presentism regarding the minimalism of the prescribed monastic life has been transmitted, remaining intact, even after 2,500 years: one bar of soap still suffices.

In our view, in endorsing a minimalist perspective on the amount of soap one ideally needs, modern followers of the Buddha were not advocating prudence, but rather the ideal state of the advanced practitioner, which is present-focused. Again, we eschew the idea that the Buddha's presentist teachings entail a rejection of the necessary elements of futurism that define the very concept of a *path*—a progression through time from here to there, or, perhaps more aptly, from there to here, from becoming to being.

Presentism: Sages and Ideas

We have not shown—nor have we endeavored to show—that Buddhism is best understood as presentist, but we reiterate that showing this is not our primary intent, and we remain agnostic as to whether it is. We mentioned earlier that Buddhism is certainly not the first place that the idea of presentism occurred in human history.⁹ Further, it is common to find the idea of presentism in traditions other than Buddhism.

⁹ Arguably, pre-civilized (hunter-gatherer) humans had little choice to be futurists, although anything more than simply grabbing and eating fruit in front of one must have

Kṛṣṇa, for instance, says in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: “You have the right to the work only but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction” (chapter two, verse 47).¹⁰ The verse sings that we should just perform actions in the present without attaching to the future results.¹¹ In this paper, we don’t answer the question of which one, the *Bhagavad Gītā* or the Buddha, first introduced this idea of presentism as a *prescribed* orientation or *philosophy*. Whether

involved some sort of anticipation, planning, strategizing, etc., all of which is futurist. But the facts connected with humans being more or less presentist or futurist at different times in our history is independent of the question regarding when or where *prescriptions* or *philosophies* of presentism versus futurism arose in human history. Again, the answer to such questions does not concern us in this paper.

¹⁰ कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन |

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि |

karmanya-evaadhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana

mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo ’stvakarmaṇi.

Alternative translation: You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction (www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/2/verse/47).

¹¹ Of course, this idea is connected to the spiritual practice of *Karma Yoga*, in which case the background metaphysical (theological) assumptions framing the advice differ, but the prescribed mental states or attitudes in both cases are arguably co-extensive. Dispensing with attachments to expectations of positive or negative consequences of one’s actions because one is carrying out one’s dharmic duty as per the station of life determined by one’s incarnation within the Varna system because one believes that to be God’s will is quite different from performing the same ostensive actions while equally dispensing with attachment to expectations of positive or negative consequences of one’s actions because one believes everything is impermanent, insubstantial, and existentially unsatisfactory. Arguably, if ostensibly identical actions performed with otherwise co-extensive intentions but with different intensions—different meanings—count as different actions, then the advice of Kṛṣṇa and the Buddha bear only a superficial resemblance.

Hinduism influenced Buddhism, or vice versa, regarding presentism is a historical question beyond the scope of this paper.¹²

Here is Jesus, yet another distinct sort of thinker, generally thought not to be influenced by Indian philosophy, offering similar advice: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day [such as today] has enough trouble of its own” (*The Bible: New International Version*, Matthew 6:34).¹³

What about “A Psalm of Life” (1838) by the American writer H. W. Longfellow?

Trust no Future, howe’er pleasant!
 Let the dead Past bury its dead!
 Act,— act in the living Present!
 Heart within, and God o’erhead [overhead]! (2-3)

The idea of presentism is also commonly found in the teachings of contemporary religious or spiritual thinkers such as the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. For example, his famous, so-called, “Orange Meditation” shows the essence of presentism:

Take the time to eat an orange in mindfulness. If you eat
 an orange in forgetfulness, caught in your anxiety and

¹² However, the time of the writing of the Pāli Canon and the *Gītā* occur in relative proximity to each other; both likely existed in oral form for similar periods of time, in the same subcontinent, and in a context of fairly widespread inter-religious debate, and thus each may have had some influence on the other.

¹³ As with the same sorts of differences in background metaphysics yielding different actions among otherwise identical Buddhist and Vaiṣṇava agents, so too the beliefs informing the Christian version of this advice, which frame it in terms of the earthly life being only a test for the determination of the afterlife, arguably bear only a superficial resemblance. We mention these parallels, nonetheless, because we believe the coincidence of ideas across disparate spiritual traditions is instructive relative to the larger question of this paper: When should one live?

sorrow, the orange is not really there. But if you bring your mind and body together to produce true presence, you can see that the orange is a miracle. Peel the orange. Smell the fruit. See the orange blossoms in the orange, and the rain and the sun that have gone through the orange blossoms. The orange tree that has taken several months to bring this wonder to you. Put a section in your mouth, close your mouth mindfully, and with mindfulness feel the juice coming out of the orange. Taste the sweetness. Do you have the time to do so? If you think you don't have time to eat an orange like this, what are you using that time for? Are you using your time to worry or using your time to live? (Hanh lionsroar.com)

Here, we note certain words such as 'mindfulness,' 'presence,' 'time,' and 'worry,' which are all related to presentism and futurism. This way of eating an orange in Thich Nhat Hanh's style, we argue, is the way of making oneself a master of a situation in Linji's style above. Living in the present is advice that comes from many thinkers, and many different religions and cultures, but is quite prominent within Buddhism.

Now, let us contrast *spiritual* with *material*. It is ironic that, although the spiritual teachers (from the Fifth century B.C.E. to the Twenty-first century, East and West) all preach similar enlightenments of living in the present, some core representations of materialistic capitalism also preach a seemingly similar thing: e.g., YOLO (you only live once).

The old and common idea of YOLO has newly become popular by the rapper Drake's 2011 music title (Drake and Rick Ross, *Y.O.L.O. Mixtape*). Since then, this expression as an iconic word of the late capitalistic culture seems to have been overused to lead a life of self-indulgent presentism. For example, some people quit their stable but unexciting jobs, and set out on globetrotting, claiming YOLO; others spend excessive

money purchasing luxury items, instead of saving for their future houses, claiming YOLO.

Henceforth, some may argue that the idea of YOLO is not relevant to, nor does it entail, our account of presentism; on this objection, YOLO is just a slogan for materialists to justify selfish acquisition. Simply put, the materialistic ‘presentism’ of YOLO cannot be compared to the spiritual idea of presentism we are attributing to Buddhism.

Whereas we appreciate the clear difference between the two forms of presentism identified by this counter-argument, we maintain that a sufficiently cautious discussion on YOLO in this context is legitimate. For most who would make this counter-argument, YOLO is not at all a spiritual idea, but, to the contrary, a justification for consumerist, hedonist, and related materialist attitudes. But this peculiar coincidence raises the question: how can those believing they can attain nirvana by being fully present in the here and now, and those believing in no spiritual values or attainments, somehow overlap in their rejection of futurism? In other words, because materialistic YOLO rejects futurism, and spiritual presentism also rejects futurism (and “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”), are YOLO and presentism friends with each other in any sense?

The relevance of YOLO here goes beyond this simple coincidence. This overlap does seem superficial, and on one level it is; but on another level this overlap raises the question, much debated within Buddhism and between Buddhism and Vedic philosophy, between the eternalism of the soul view (arguably associated with futurism) and the annihilationism of the no-self view (arguably associated with presentism). The Buddha's Middle Way allegedly steers a path in between both. These two forms of presentism, the spiritual form seen in Buddhism and the non-spiritual form seen in YOLO, also parallels the debate within contemporary Buddhism about whether such Buddhist ideas as post-mortem sur-

vival, rebirth, etc., are soteriologically essential to Dharma, or whether enlightenment now, so to speak, is enough, regardless of whether anything continues beyond death.

Similarly, some philosophers would question whether realization of the truth of no-self, associated with Buddhist presentism, necessarily guarantees to generate altruism, the opposite of the sort of motivations YOLO prescribes. It seems to be an article of faith that enlightenment is co-extensive with altruism, but conceptual analysis alone seems insufficient to the task of demonstrating this. For if there is no difference between self and others, or self and others are interdependent, then, along with the 1st noble truth of suffering, altruism is necessary, and it does not follow that others (or oneself) matter more than oneself (or others). These important philosophical themes clearly intersect in non-superficial ways.

In addition to the connection between YOLO and hedonistic consumerism, we see a connection between YOLO and the secularized form of Buddhism spreading throughout the globe in the form of what Purser and Loy have aptly termed “McMindfulness.” (Purser and Loy 2013; Purser 2019) The be-here-now instructions of the secularized, de-spiritualized mindfulness movement may be thought to be co-extensive with consumerist YOLO philosophy, as the critics of McMindfulness allege.

It is also claimed that the latest fashion of YOLO life is a resistance of laborers under late capitalism who do not have hope for the future: no secure job, house, marriage, nor family in the future. According to this kind of claim, the laborers know that even though they sacrifice the present for the future, the forthcoming future will not be better than the present. Then, for what do they sacrifice the present?

These issues are obviously complexly intertwined in ways that make it difficult to answer the question whether Buddhism is or ought to

be best understood as presentism. We (the authors) see that all these thinkers and ideas, more or less, are related to focusing on the present now, from the Buddha and Krishna through Jesus, Longfellow, and finally YOLO. Of course, we do not deny that there are subtle, but still definite, differences among the focal points of these sages and ideas. For example, the presentism, if ever, of the Fifth century B.C.E. wandering mendicant sage in the forests of India may hardly be the same as the YOLO presentism of the Twenty-first century luxurious rapper in the metropolitan US. And, the opposite conclusion from the same premise can possibly be claimed: since you only live once, some may claim that your life is extremely precious or some others claim that your life is completely meaningless. We (the authors) do not endorse either of these claims. It is hard to imagine a human life that is completely meaningless—human beings are meaning makers, even if that meaning is “do as you please because you only live once.”¹⁴ Before we further distinguish various other ideas of presentism, in the following section we will turn to the more definitely different idea: futurism.

Popper’s Living in the Future¹⁵

A creature is Popperian if it considers plans before it acts, and then carries out only the plan that is most likely to lead to success.¹⁶ Sir Karl Pop-

¹⁴ We thank the editor Victor Forte for this point.

¹⁵ Refer to Section 5-2, “Popperian Creatures by Dennett, Popper, and Millikan,” of Kim 75-78.

¹⁶ The expression, “Popperian Creature,” is from Daniel Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* and *Kinds of Minds*. On Dennett’s distinction, creatures are divided into five categories (Darwinian, Skinnerian, Popperian, Gregorian, and creatures like human beings), depending on the ways in which the creatures interact with their environments (Dennett *Darwin’s*; Dennett *Kinds*; also see Kim 75-77). Since Dennett borrows the idea of

per, while discussing his “evolutionary epistemology,” argues that there are various stages in the emergence of consciousness.¹⁷ At a possible first stage, Popper proposes, some kinds of centralized warnings evolve: for instance, irritation, discomfort, pain, or fear. These warnings induce “the organism to stop an inadequate movement and to adopt some alternative behavior in its stead before it is too late, before too much damage has been done” (*Natural* 353). The absence or disregard of a warning signal often leads the organism to death.

We should note here an interesting coincidence between this observation and one of the Buddha's three marks of existence, namely, *dukkha*, the suffering that attends all sentience. Arguably, built into all unenlightened sentience is an instinctive recoiling from painful, noxious, or otherwise unpleasant sensations, which implicitly involves unenlightened sentient beings in the future-oriented mode of becoming: for unenlightened sentient beings, negative hedonic values necessarily motivate aversion, a moving away from what is (e.g., pain) toward what is not (e.g., absence of pain), and thus movement away from the present toward the future. The Buddhist path is arguably the same sort of movement, writ large: the path toward the end of *dukkha*. Yet, paradoxically, the fruition of the path involves an acceptance of being, the relinquishing of becoming, and thus an enlightened form of presentism. There is certainly an indication of this process in the 12 link chain of dependent origination.

At a second stage, for Popper, natural selection favors those organisms who try out (alternative movements) mentally before the real movements are executed. “In this way, real trial-and-error behavior may

Popperian from Karl Popper, we now introduce Popper's idea directly. And the word, “creature” (or animal), is useful for our future discussion.

¹⁷ Among others, in the first Darwin Lecture delivered in 1977 at Darwin College in Cambridge, “Natural Selection and the Emergence of Mind” (Popper 1978).

be replaced, or preceded, by imagined or vicarious trial-and-error behavior” (*Natural* 353). Another interesting coincidence between this idea and elements of Buddhist thought is that the practice of “divine pride,” of imagining one's Buddha nature (to be realized in the future), is encouraged in the present, arguably bringing about an ideal simulation of an ideal course of action, that of attaining enlightenment.

At a third stage, we may consider the evolution of purposeful actions: that is, the aims, goals, or ends of actions. If we start an imagined trial-and-error action, we should necessarily evaluate the end state of the imagined action. Again, this line of thinking calls to mind a coincidence with Buddhist teaching: its emphasis on Right Intention and Right Action, both of which are informed by Right View. The question is whether the correct view is better understood as presentist, futurist, or something else.

Based on this discussion about the three stages, Popper proceeds to argue, “Let our conjectures die in our stead!”:

The evolution of language and . . . the products of the human mind allows a further step: the human step. It allows us to dissociate ourselves from our own hypotheses, and to look upon them critically. While an uncritical animal may be eliminated together with its dogmatically held hypotheses, we may formulate our hypotheses, and criticize them. Let our conjectures, our theories, die in our stead! We may still learn to kill our theories instead of killing each other. If natural selection has favored the evolution of mind . . . , then it is perhaps more than a utopian dream that may see the victory of . . . the rational or the scientific attitude of eliminating our theories, our opinions, by rational criticism, instead of eliminating each other. (*Natural* 354-355)

We interpret this as a representative Popperian futurist quote. As soon as one “dissociates” oneself from his or her hypothesis and “looks upon” the consequence of the hypothesis, one becomes to that extent a futurist, at least while engaged in that activity. Not entirely coincidentally, when contemplating the Dharma, and using its guiding wisdom as the basis for approving or disapproving various thoughts, intentions, emotions, and/or actions one is considering, as skillful or unskillful, dharmic or adharmic, whether during meditation or even while engaged in daily activities, one is arguably exercising this Popperian ability to dissociate or detach from these hypotheses—a skill clearly enhanced by meditative practice. The earlier part of the path may be seen as the repeated exercise of this Popperian ability, eliminating all adharmic hypotheses while cultivating all and only dharmic ones, as one aspires towards the reduction of suffering and the increase in spiritual well-being.

In “Instructions to Rahula at Mango Stone” the Buddha says what is very similar to what Popper says about the three stages above:

Whenever you want to do a mental action, you should reflect on it: ‘This mental action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then any mental action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction . . . it would be a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any mental action of that sort is fit for you to do. (MN 61)

If the name “Rāhula” was deleted from this quote, we would not be able to distinguish whether this is by the Buddha or Popper.

Buddhist ethics are often consequentialist, as Charles Goodman has argued (2009), its principal values being the reduction of suffering and the increase in well-being. That may mean that the Buddhist is enjoined to do exactly what Popper suggests. When B. Alan Wallace speaks about the wisdom-minded Buddhist in an elevated state responding to the needs of sentient beings, as quoted above, he is not necessarily ruling out envisioning the likely (future) consequences of response options; the mere fact that Buddhist adepts can do this spontaneously does not entail that consequences are not part of their considerations. Nonetheless, consequentialist outcomes considerations are arguably consistent with focusing on what is the best thing one ought to do in the “here and now” for the person in front of one, as Thich Nhat Hanh's Tolstoy parable emphasizes:

Remember that there is only one important time and that is now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person you are with, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making the person standing at your side happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life. (Hahn *Miracle* 75)

Again, we reiterate that our focus is on the question, as informed by Buddhism versus Popper, when should we live?

Futurism: Homo Economicus of von Neumann-Morgenstern-Savage versus That of Herbert Simon

The von Neumann-Morgenstern-Savage-like *Homo Economicus* evaluates the expected utility of each action and performs the action that has the highest expected utility. The exemplary *Homo Economicus* that is idealized in *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* by von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) and *The Foundations of Statistics* by Leonard Savage (1954) looks to “maximizing” (or “optimizing”) before making a decision on an action. The approach of this *Homo Economicus* is definitely Popperian futurism, at least, in the sense that the maximized (or optimized) outcome will be produced in the future, not in the present now.

In addition, the approach of Herbert Simon, the Nobelist in economics in 1978, to seek “satisficing,” is also Popperian futurism. In Simon’s “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment” (1956), Simon’s version of *Homo Economicus* is to pursue the level of satisficing (which is a linguistic blend of “satisfy” and “suffice”), instead of maximizing. Roughly, if a woman has an opportunity to have ten blind dates to choose her spouse, and she seeks the best one, then she is “maximizing”; by contrast, if she accepts anyone among them who meets some level of expectations, she is “satisficing.” Both approaches are Popperian futuristic, since she is mulling over the future well-being of herself.

We think that it has been conclusively shown that human beings are not primarily or generally *Homo Economicus*, as we often act in a way contrary to our best interests. (Recall, for example, the influential research work by Kahneman and Tversky on human irrationality.) Nonetheless, the central question of ethics, “How should one live?,” modified here as “When should one live?,” is an ought-question, not an is-question. Thus, while humans are not as futurist as they could or should be, this is not a reason enough to avoid the question whether we ought to be more futurist or the question whether or how we can be. After all,

the primary premise of Buddhism is that all sentient beings are mired in primary existential confusion, but that is no reason to reject the soteriological prescription of Buddhism to the effect that we can and ought to undo that primary ignorance and confusion. Thus, let us consider *Homo Economicus* as a distinct form of futurism. Indeed, if Goodman is correct, and Buddhist ethics is essentially a form of negative consequentialism (to reduce suffering), then there is certainly some affinity between the ethical aspirations of *Homo Economicus* and that of Buddhist ethics. Thus, let us return to our analysis of *Homo Economicus* as a form of futurism.

Are Animals Popperians or Buddhists?

When an animal does some action to prepare for the future, can the action be regarded as an instance of Popperian futurism? Or, simply an instance by instinct, or, at best, a result of classical Pavlovian conditioning (reflexive)? Let us consider three levels of animals. Some scientists report in the journal *Nature* that some microorganisms such as, famously, *E. Coli*, “may have evolved to anticipate environmental stimuli by adapting to their temporal order of appearance” (Mitchell et al. 220). We interpret this report as saying that even some microorganisms prepare for the future. Then, can this kind of preparation be regarded as Popperian? No, because we do not believe that the microorganisms have any *mental state*. Of course, however, that’s merely our opinion. There is a growing literature on the sentience of plants, microorganisms, etc. that questions our normal assumptions on sentience. Nevertheless, at present, whether these organisms have mental states remains an open empirical ques-

tion,¹⁸ and the answer to that question is beyond the scope of this article. Nothing in our analysis hinges on our opinion here, moreover.

At the second level, let us think of squirrels. Relating to Popper's idea above, the philosopher Ruth Garrett Millikan, in her "Styles of Rationality," argues that, when discussing the rationality of non-human animals, "being rational is being a Popperian animal" (118), among many interpretations of what it is to be rational. A Popperian animal tries things out in its head, which, Millikan argues, is "quicker and safer than trying them out in the world [and] . . . than either operant conditioning or natural selection" (118). Millikan suggests that both humans and many higher animals are Popperian. Millikan reports her observation of grey squirrels in her laboratory that show the Popperian behavior of "mental trial and error." Millikan seems to assume that chimps, dolphins, and African grey parrots are Popperian, though those are not in her laboratory (Kim 78). Unlike Millikan, we (the authors) are cautious about endorsing the claim that the squirrels hiding nuts are Popperian futuristic, since we are still not sure whether there exist the right kind of mental states of those squirrels.

Lastly, at the third level, unlike those non-human animals, we human animals seem to have more clear mental states when we prepare for the future. Whether only *Homo Sapiens* is truly Popperian is something that animal psychologists can discuss. But even the most ardent fan of chimpanzees and dolphins will not deny that we humans are the most Popperian of all species.

If we do not think that *E. Coli* is Popperian, and if we are cautious about endorsing the Popperian squirrel, then it may be an interesting

¹⁸ See Reber (2018) for an in-depth scientific/philosophical examination of the evidence on where to draw the line between organisms that are and are not sentient. As Reber's analysis makes clear, this remains an open empirical question.

question whether they are functionally equivalent to presentist Buddhists. That is, do they live only now? Again, based on our criterion of mental state, we might speculate that *E. Coli* are (functionally equivalent to) presentist Buddhists, that is, they live only in the present, whereas we are not certain about the squirrel because we are not certain about the squirrel's mental state: If the squirrel has the requisite cognitive capacities, it might be a Popperian futurist.¹⁹

Again, we've actually not yet established what exactly a 'presentist Buddhist' is, much less whether one ought to be a Buddhist presentist, but rather we have only attempted to raise considerations that reveal how problematically complex these questions are. Intuitively, how can any human survive without addressing the future? While lower animals may be able to, thanks to instinct, obviously we humans cannot. Moreover, as we showed a Rāhula quote above, we are sure we could comb through the Buddhist *sūtras* and find multiple quotations establishing that the Buddha himself quite often thought about the future. But there is no doubt that human beings think about the future, including enlightened ones. But we do not mean to suggest that enlightened Buddhists, if any, are locked into the present, unable or unwilling to entertain future consequences and to plan future works. Again, the question in this article is whether, to what extent, and/or how we ought to be presentists or futurists or some combination, as informed by Buddhist wisdom versus Popperian and related considerations. Again, when should one live? That is our question.

Undoubtedly, the Dalai Lama could not continue his globe-trotting itinerary of lectures, initiations, workshops, and other activities without planning, packing his bags, arranging transportation, and so

¹⁹ Though it may be beyond the scope of this paper, we just mention here that our notion of mental state is sometimes related to the central nervous system, which *E. Coli* does not have, although the squirrel and the human do have.

forth, nor could Thich Nhat Hanh, all of which involves some element of futurist attention. On the other hand, the begging bowl and vow of non-attachment, among other soteriological prescriptions implicating minimalism, clearly indicate a positive attitude toward presentism. How are we to reconcile these opposing orientations? One admittedly simplistic answer, for now, could be: when planning is prudent, focus on planning, and only on planning; at all other times, focus only on what is present in the here and now. We will say more about this later on.

Prospection: Some Insights

The preceding topic of whether animals are Popperian or not can be reflected further by recalling a closer concept, “prospection.” Gilbert and Wilson introduce “prospection,” which “refers to our ability to “pre-experience” the future by simulating it in our minds,” and which contrasts with “retrospection” that “refers to our ability to reexperience the past” (Gilbert and Wilson 1352). Prospection is “the mental simulation of future possibilities” and can be called “teleological” because selections are done “in light of values and goals” (Seligman et al. 120). Using the terminology in this paper, prospection is the “Popperian conjecture” by imaginative simulation.

Animals can exercise their faculty of prospection at the level of each animal. For example, “[w]hen a mouse hides before a cat enters the room . . . its ability to do so is one of evolution’s most remarkable achievements” (Gilbert and Wilson 1351). But the ability of human animals “extends their powers of foresight far beyond those of any other animal” (1352).

We know that chocolate pudding would taste better with cinnamon than dill, that it would be painful to go an hour

without blinking or a day without sitting, that winning the lottery would be more enjoyable than becoming paraplegic—and we know these things not because they've happened to us in the past, but because we can close our eyes, imagine these events, and pre-experience their hedonic consequences in the here and now. (1352)

Here, the role of frontal cortical regions is critical. It seems that “few if any other animals are able to simulate future events, and even our closest relatives in the animal kingdom may be ‘stuck in time’” (1352). This is fascinating indeed. Does this mean that animals generally are functionally equivalent to Buddhists because they lack the frontal cortical regions and that we humans with active frontal cortical regions are almost unable to be Buddhists? Perhaps it takes long years of training for humans to be able to “quiet the mind,” and then, they might become “enlightened.” An exploration of “Buddha’s Brain,” as we have seen in a dozen books in recent years, might give credence to our idea that an enlightened person may be able to easily switch back and forth between a true “living in the present” (with no presuppositions to interfere with a clear cognition of things just as they are) and a more conventional future-oriented mentality with which he or she could address the needs of followers and other sentient beings. Surely, we do want to say here neither that animals are already enlightened, nor that they live in the present with “Buddha’s Brain.” Ken Wilbur has described that sort of thinking as guilty of committing what he calls the “pre-post fallacy,” the error of imputing enlightened states onto children or animals because they loosely resemble enlightened beings (Howard 2005). We do not pursue these topics further, because they are *sui generis*.

Two Paradigms: Presentism versus Futurism

The tension between the two paradigms of Buddhist presentism and Popperian futurism is common. A crucial example is whether to live for this life or the next life. If we reject all kinds of theses of reincarnation or other forms of post-mortem continuation from various religions, and focus on only this life, it is to live in the present now; whereas living in the next life (or lives) by sacrificing lots of present resources (money, time, energy, love, etc.) of this life is to live in the future. Let us call, without pedantry, the two extremes of these ways of living *this-world-ism* and *that-world-ism*, respectively. People adopting completely *this-world-ism* deny pretty much any sign of considerations based on the concept of the next life. *This-world-ists* believe that they only live once—and most Buddhists are not *this-worldists* insofar as they believe in rebirth, among other *that-world-ist* possibilities like celestial realms, devas, and the like²⁰—although *this-world-ists* may still be Popperian if they discount relatively lesser present gratification for greater projected future rewards in the present life. By contrast, people holding completely *that-world-ism* may deny absolutely everything in this world, and appear to be completely futurist.

Now, if we add one more factor (or variable), the age of the involved agent, into our discussion on presentism and futurism, we believe the discussion becomes more enlightening. It seems rational that an agent's personal preference for presentism or futurism depends on the agent's age: compare a twenty-five-year-old college graduate who has just entered the job market in Mumbai, India, where the economy is rap-

²⁰ However, some prominent Buddhist scholars and philosophers, e.g., Jay Garfield, Evan Thompson, and Owen Flanagan, argue that belief in rebirth is technically not essential to Buddhism. That some such serious Buddhists reject the necessity of *that-world-ism* only further complicates the contrasts between presentism and futurism, as well as whether Buddhism actually coherently carves a middle path between eternalism and nihilism.

idly developing; a fifty-year-old college adjunct lecturer who is in his mid-life crisis; and finally, a ninety-year-old Buddhist monk who has just “sat up” to encounter the moment of his death in a temple in Korea.

We believe that these various ages can be applied to most of the cases and examples that we have discussed in this paper so far. For example, it may not be very judicious to allow a one-year-old infant to wager *all-in* on *that-world-ism* even without living some more life under *this-world-ism*. It may not be too late if he waits until adolescence when he will come to realize the *dukkha* of life. By contrast, it may be understandable for a 100-year-old philosopher to lean toward *that-world-ism* slightly. She does not have much to lose. Regarding all these cases, the choices of a fifty-year-old college adjunct may be different from those of twenty-five-year-old or ninety-year-old sentient beings.

An Inclination: Attaching to the Self—Star Trek and Rebirth

We believe that the tension between Buddhist presentism and Popperian futurism can, partly, be explained by an inclination of human beings: attaching to the self. The question of whether to follow the Buddha or Popper is related to the question of whether there is such a thing as a continuous self over time: that is, how do I know that I now am the same person that I was earlier or will be later in my life?

This line of thinking only further complicates matters, but this is intended, for the better part of our purpose here is to problematize the main question of our paper: When should one live? Because the nature of the self is itself deeply problematic, bringing the nature of the self into the discussion clearly does further complicate the question, for if there is no *one*, the question “When should *one* live?” seems ill-conceived. When should no one live? On the one hand, then, it seems, someone who

is a presentist may have realized that there is no continuous self. Yet we've given examples of presentism among non-Buddhists, e.g., advocates of YOLO, who certainly seem to assume a continuous self. On the other hand, it is not necessary that being future-oriented must entail belief in a continuous self.

Further, although there is disagreement among Buddhist scholars²¹ about whether compassion is possible if there are no continuous selves, Śāntideva certainly thought it was both possible to realize that there is no continuous self and to be concerned about the future consequences of one's actions. As we have noted earlier, whether the consequentialism-informed prescriptions of Buddhist sages undermine a primary prescription in favor of presentism is not obvious.

This question of *personal identity over time* is, we claim, already very well established in a *niche* of contemporary discussions in metaphysics, though the answer may not yet be well established. So, we here just take advantage of the clarity of some famous cases and arguments, instead of re-introducing, much less trying to solve, the major topics in the field.²²

More specifically, let us consider the case of Captain Kirk in the TV series and movies, *Star Trek*. Ordering, "Beam me up, Scotty," Captain Kirk (or whoever it is, afterwards) is either (A) transported (without change in identity) to the space ship, or (B) killed (technically, in the process, when his atoms are all converted to energy) and a copy of him

²¹ E.g., see the books by The Cowherds, such as *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (2010) and *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness* (2015).

²² Topics such as the three layers of identity, personal identity, and personal identity over time; the distinction between qualitative and quantitative (numerical) identity; and the three criteria of personal identity over time (body, soul, and memory). Exemplary discussions for identity include Priest (2014); for personal identity over time, Kim and Sosa (1999).

(reconfigured from his atomic blueprint, from new energy) is made on the ship. Let us deal with this case from a utilitarian viewpoint. Suppose that Kirk is offered a deal whereby he gives up an ice cream cone (which can be eaten now) and will get a million dollars when he (or whoever it is, afterwards) will be on the ship. If Kirk believes in (A) above, then he should take the deal. By contrast, if he believes in (B), then he should reject the offer. A million dollars to a copy of his are of no use to him: the future copy of the present Kirk will not be Kirk and even an ice cream cone now is better for Kirk than the large sum of future money.

Of course, it should be noted that this scenario assumes that Kirk is selfish. He may understand that being teleported means death, but if he is an advanced Buddhist then he arguably accepts that because he will be doing good through this action. Captain Kirk's teleportation is theoretically similar to death and rebirth for a bodhisattva; death is relatively meaningless because you will be reborn in a form that might be even more helpful. In other words, this case of Captain Kirk's ice cream cone and a million dollars is analogous to our discussion of *this-world-ism* and *that-world-ism* above, and so, more generally, those topics of *rebirth* (or more generally post-mortem survival of any kind) and *karma*. Like Captain Kirk beamed up to the space ship, after a person dies she will enter another stage, a *that-world* stage, such as a heaven or hell, or the same *this-world* stage again, by rebirth.

But the grounds on which this is so, arguably, the metaphysics of momentariness—which ground the non-reality of any self enduring between any two moments—guarantee a kind of presentism qua momentariness, in which case the equivalent of death and rebirth occur between any two adjacent moments, and the new Kirk in any new moment is equivalent to the beamed replica, in which case all there ever is, from this view, is a momentary non-self anyway. Again, such reasoning succeeds in showing how considerations of the nature of the one referred to

in the question “When should one live?” only further complicate the already complex nature of our central inquiry.

Marshmallows and Social Discounting

The by-now well-known marshmallow test goes roughly as follows. A single marshmallow is put in front of a child and the child is told that if she can wait fifteen minutes without eating the marshmallow, she can have a second one. Some children are able to wait but others cannot resist the temptation and eat the marshmallow right away. Shoda, Mischel, and Peake (1990) claim that children who can resist the temptation and are able to wait are more successful in later life. However, a more recent study by Watts, Duncan, and Quan (2018) disputes this conclusion. Watts et al. claim that poorer children are less able to resist the temptation because the future is not certain for them. (If so, that would ground an alternative explanation for the disparity in later-life success.) Without trying to adjudicate these conflicting claims, we notice that there are indeed two kinds of children and the distinction might be loosely like the distinction between presentism and futurism.

The children in the marshmallow test and the inclination discussed above may be understood further by comparing *intertemporal* discounting to *interpersonal* discounting. The business economist Julian Simon envisages a three-dimensional scheme of allocation. In his scheme, in addition to a one-dimensional aspect to maximize the present utility for an economic agent, Simon considers a two-dimensional intertemporal future “self-persons” and a three-dimensional interpersonal “distance” to other persons (Simon *Interpersonal*).

This interpersonal social distance is interestingly studied by the psychologist Howard Rachlin and his co-authors (Rachlin *Notes*; Jones

and Rachlin *Social Discounting*; Rachlin and Jones *Delay Discounting*).²³ The researchers ask the participants in the test how many dollars they would forgo between \$0 and \$80 for themselves in order to give \$75 to another person who is in the list of the 100 people closest to the participants. We may give up more money for our relatives than people in some far away foreign countries. What Rachlin and Jones find is that, based on social distance, “social discounting is meaningful,” and the discount function is closer to a hyperbolic one rather than an exponential one (Jones and Rachlin 285).²⁴ The discovery that the social discount function is hyperbolic should not be a surprise since we do not have an expectation that it should be otherwise. But with temporal discounting, there is a logical argument that it should be exponential. If you discount by 10 percent each year, then you should discount by about 61 percent over five years. It so happens that both social and temporal discounting as performed by people are hyperbolic.

Now, this interpersonal social discounting based on social distance is analogous to future discounting based on temporal distance. How many dollars do we forgo in order to give some to our future selves who will exist ten years or thirty years later than now? Pronin, Olivola, and Kennedy show, through some experiments, that people’s decisions for their future selves are different from the decisions for their present selves, and rather similar to decisions for other people (in the present) (Pronin et al.). This analogy may explain Captain Kirk’s dilemma vividly. If Captain Kirk believes (A) above (that he himself is transported to the space ship), then even a hundred dollars on the space ship will beat an ice cream cone now. If he believes (B) above (that he himself is killed and

²³ Rachlin’s earlier works on discounting are, among others, *Diminishing* (1992).

²⁴ The hyperbolic function that Rachlin and Jones are using is $v = V / (1 + sN)$, where v is the discounted value, V is the undiscounted value, N is a measure of social distance, and s is a constant measuring degree of social discounting. This form of hyperbolic function was suggested in Majur.

a copy of him made on the ship), then even ten million dollars on the space ship will be beaten by an ice cream cone now. So, there is a stark contrast here. Either the person on the space ship is Captain Kirk or is not. By analogy, either the future continuant of me, in ordinary life, is me or is not.²⁵ Of course, the Buddha directly rejects this dichotomy by adhering to the Middle Way. Thus, from this perspective, to say the future self is the same is to take the extreme view of eternalism, but to say the future self is another is to take the extreme view of annihilationism.²⁶

With temporal discounting, it seems that I in five years am *somewhat* the same person as I am now. However, because we humans often tend to consider personal identity to be absolute, discounting, which corresponds to “I will be *somewhat* the same person,” seems puzzling. Two people are either the same or different. The idea that two people could be 90 percent the same is hard to grasp: That is, it is hard to absorb this idea for a non-Buddhist, i.e., for anyone not long-familiar with or accepting of the no-self doctrine. However, even non-Buddhists can be pressed to acknowledge that there is something right about this doctrine, however instinctively resistant they may be, naturally or culturally. For instance, the person who is sixty-six years old is somewhat the same as they were at age twenty—somewhat the same dispositions and traits, somewhat the same body, somewhat the same thoughts. But even if not influenced by Buddhist thought, they might never regard them-

²⁵ For an interesting pico-economic (micro-micro) model of the individual as a collection of multiple self-components functioning like a collective bargaining agreement among the individual’s competing interests, potentially consistent with Buddhism’s no-self model, see Ainslie; for a similar, but explicitly Buddhist, model of a shifting coalition of self-components, see Siderits.

²⁶ See *The Connected Discourses (Saṃyutta Nikāya)*, in Part II, *The Book on Causation*, sūtra 17 “The Naked Ascetic Kassappa.”

selves as the same person. In fact, many of us say of earlier versions of ourselves, “that is not me,” or of their present self, “I have changed.” And yet we still have to pay old debts.

A Suggestion on Combining Presentism and Futurism: the “Flow” of Csikszentmihalyi

In this paper so far, we have not discussed the question, “What exactly does it mean to live in the present now?” (except the brief introduction of being the master by Linji in Section two). Although believing that such a discussion will be another future task, we here mention a brief possible characteristic of an answer to such a question by introducing the concept of *flow*.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* and other works has developed an interesting concept of *flow*: a state of complete immersion or concentration. In a state of flow, we feel “optimal experience:” “instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate, . . . a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment” (Csikszentmihalyi 3). Some typical characteristics of being in flow include the following:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation

because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next

- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 240)

Relating to the main theses of this paper, it is noticeable that a flow state includes loss of self (no agent thesis) and distortion of time (no time thesis). We believe that these two features explain the state of living in the present moment in a much more significant way than some common truisms, such as *being mindful*, which, unlike flow states, may be meta-cognitive, self-reflective, or, so to speak, meta-conscious—involving self-awareness. The typical activity that Csikszentmihalyi talks about is goal-oriented. There is indeed a goal to be reached, but in the process of reaching that goal you are living in the present and not having your eyes focused on the future. A samurai in a state of full concentration, alert, and fully prepared to ward off the next blow is a good example.

It is important to note, in Csikszentmihalyi's frame, that there is a connection between flow and happiness (and between our ordinarily self-centered psychology and suffering). Whereas we can be happy now, happiness is a consequential concept such as pleasure (or pain) or utility (or dis-utility) that will be evaluated in the future. And also, we want to note that it is probably impossible to be in flow all of the time, although the concept of enlightenment suggests that is precisely what it is. The samurai above, unless he is a Zen master, can probably be in a state of full concentration only for a certain limited time. Those who can be (at least, approximately) in a state of full concentration are those who are able to exercise self-cognition even when thinking about the future; i.e., as all the books on mindfulness tell us, when thinking about the future,

people are “aware” that they are doing so. Hence, there is an aspect of being in the present moment even when considering the past or future. This is what we exemplified above with the globe-trotting Dalai Lama case.

Let us consider the following sort of description of what it is like to be living in the present, as well as some prescriptions for doing so:

Living in the present means being mindfully attentive to whatever is occurring in the present moment; being awake, awakened; not being a victim of the past or the future. Living now means fully appreciating the present moment. Be yourself, as you are, now. It is helpful for living in the present if you remove unneeded possessions, smile, and practice yoga.

This description is not a quote from a particular author, but a simple combination of common phrases from a search result of the query, “living in the present,” through the Internet, slightly modified.²⁷ Well, although we don’t claim that this kind of description is completely useless, as trained in the analytic tradition in philosophy, we consider this description virtually vacuous. When we ask what living in the present is, on this sort of description, an answer can be that, for example, it is being mindful; then, when we ask what being mindful is, this description would answer that it is living in the present. This kind of a Ping-Pong circular game is an analytic tautology, in the Kantian sense. Rather, we

²⁷ We are adopting this strategy, instead of quoting an actual author, because we believe that this communality is better to show what expressions are commonly uttered in the discourse of living in the present. Analogously, we believe that if we were to order an Artificial Intelligence (AI) program to perform a “deep learning” technology in order to extract essential expressions from some “Big Data” on living in the present, then the AI program would report something like what we summarize above.

want a synthetic a priori answer—a substantive answer with genuine informational content.

Here, we believe the concept of self is more crucial to an answer to the question, “What exactly does it mean to live in the present now?” Unlike “being yourself,” somewhat paradoxically, “not being yourself,” that is, not attaching to self, is a key to living in the present moment. We believe that this point is what Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow contributes to our current discussion. An agent in the state of flow loses the reflective element of self-consciousness that bifurcates the subject from being fully engrossed in their present experience. Analogously, we suggest the following, somewhat paradoxical, thesis:

No Agent Thesis: An agent (subject) living in the present moment becomes a selfless non-agent (subject).

This thesis is admittedly paradoxical. If there is an act, there must be at least an actor, that is, an agent (subject) who does that act; if there is an agent who becomes a non-agent, or who reduces the amount of his selfhood to the level of zero, there still must be some agent who is doing that act, at least on a certain understanding of what it means for something to count as an action, namely, something *done* by a *doer*, an agent, as opposed to something that just happens.

Of course, Nāgārjuna deconstructs the notion of agent and action through the logical analysis of *śūnyatā* in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter 8. However, scholars disagree about how this is to be understood. For example, Repetti argues that Nāgārjuna’s remarks about the interdependence of the potter, the pot, and the pot-making do not entail the non-existence of the potter (or, by analogy, the actor/agent), but merely the interdependence of all three, or the non-independent-existence of a self (2019). Does the agent-subject living in the present

now disappear or persist? We don't pursue this interesting topic further here, as its complexity renders it beyond the scope of this paper.²⁸

We may ask, "Can we even live in some other time than the present? (We can only live now)." In this paper we don't pursue, either, the "no time thesis" of the concept of flow above. Such questions, "What is time?" or "Does time exist?" or "Is the distinction among the past, the present, and the future real?" could be helpful (see McTaggart).

Conclusion

We have discussed two major contrasting answers to the question: When should one live? We contrasted presentism, which we identified with the Buddha, with futurism, which we identified with Popper. We discussed various aspects of presentism and futurism, such as Popperian animals, social and temporal discounting, YOLO, personal identity over time, teleportation, post-mortem continuation, and, among others, the concept of flow. Our purpose was simply to contrast the two approaches through these different lenses, problematizing each in the process, rather than answering the questions raised. We conjectured that the notion of flow may provide an attractive choice between these two positions, insofar as it entails a view of agentless agency that Buddhists are likely to find plausible. To the extent that this paper sketches a promising direction for solving the puzzle of when one should live, it may be considered an indirect argument in support of the Buddhist view of agency.

²⁸ For example, recent discussions on this issue are found in Repetti's *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* and in a symposium on the book (Repetti Symposium), as well as his *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*; on the complexity of the issue of self versus no-self, see Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi's *Self, No Self?: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*.

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