Living in the Present

MARTIJN WALLAGE

Abstract
This essay examines two conceptions of the ancient ideal of 'living in the present', one that may be called 'Platonic', suggested by a remark of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and one that may be called 'Stoic', developed by Pierre Hadot. On both conceptions, a life lived and considered in the right way is complete in the present, so that nothing is wanting. I introduce a problem concerning the coherence of this concept: Life involves movement, and movement is aimed at some completion in the future. How, then, can a life be complete in the present and yet not be static? I consider and reject an answer by Hadot, based on psychological concentration on the present. I then propose an alternative answer, based on Aristotle's concept of complete activity, and discuss its significance for both the Platonic and the Stoic conception of the ideal. Throughout, my focus is on this metaphysical and conceptual problem, thus preparing the way for the ethical question whether 'living in the present' would be a good way to live.

1. Introduction

What can it mean to 'live in the present'? When one encounters this popular maxim on, say, a package of green tea its meaning is relatively clear: don't dwell too much on the past; don't worry unduly about the future; concentrate instead on what is currently real. That is easier said than done, but we all have some idea of what would count as succeeding and what would not. However, the phrase is also sometimes used in a metaphysically more puzzling way. I will introduce one remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein and another by Pierre Hadot, both of which suggest a human life that is complete and unlimited in the present, so that all that matters is always already there. That is a surprising notion. Life, one would think, involves movement, and movement is a process in time. While it is going on, it is not yet completed, and as soon as it is completed, it is not going on anymore. How then can a life be complete in the present? It may seem that such a life would have to be static, the life of a statue, not of a living thing at all.

My aim will be to take the expression 'living in the present' seriously and show how such a life can be the life of a human being. In section 2, I introduce Wittgenstein's remark on living in the present and its sources in ancient philosophy. His remark points to a Platonic conception of a contemplative life in the eternal present.

doi:10.1017/S0031819120000133 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy 2020

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In section 3, I introduce a Stoic, more action-oriented conception of living in the present, due to Hadot. In section 4, I raise the question how a life in the present can be anything other than static, specifically, how it can involve goal-directed activity. In sections 5 and 6, I develop my answer to this question, based on Aristotle's concept of complete activity. My focus throughout is on this metaphysical and conceptual problem. I only prepare a way for the ethical question whether 'living in the present' would be a good way to live.

2. The Eternal Present

Towards the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein speaks of 'living in the present' in what appears to be a metaphysically loaded sense (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.4311, trans. Ogden):

> Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through (*erlebt*).
>
> If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness (*Unzeitlichkeit*), then he lives eternally who lives in the present.
>
> Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.

These words are intriguing but opaque, and it is not clear what it would mean to live in the present in this sense, let alone whether it would be a good way to live. We can get a better sense of their meaning when we identify the ancient sources that Wittgenstein alludes to. The first sentence is reminiscent of Epicurus: 'Therefore death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, since for the time when we are, death is not present; and for the time when death is present, we are not. Therefore it is nothing either to the living or the dead since it is not present for the former, and the latter are no longer' (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, as in Warren, 2004, p. 19). Neither for Epicurus nor for Wittgenstein is this meant as a denial of our finitude. The thought is not that a human being does not die. A person lives, and later lives no longer. But only life is experienced; when I am dead there is no 'I' anymore to experience my non-being.

This realization that death is nothing to us is supposed to motivate an orientation towards the present, away from the future and from a hope for a life after death (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.4312). Yet Wittgenstein does not renounce the thought of an eternal life; he rather re-directs the desire for infinity, and the fulfilment of this desire, to the present moment. This too is an echo of a traditional notion, this time a Platonic one. Wittgenstein's distinction

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

corresponds closely to an influential distinction that Boethius drew between the timeless eternity (*aeternitas*) of God and the everlasting temporal duration (*sempiternitas*) of the heavens. He defined eternity as 'the whole, simultaneous, perfect possession of limitless life' (Boethius *Cons*. V pr. 6, trans. Slavitt, 2008). Here 'limitless' has to be taken in a sense similar to that of Wittgenstein's passage: eternal life cannot end since it does not proceed in time in the first place. For Boethius, this is the life of God, who comprehends past and future as if in one instant, in contrast to a living mortal (ibid.):

> One who lives in time progresses in the present from the past and into the future. There is nothing in time that can embrace the entirety of his existence. He has no idea about tomorrow and has already lost his hold on the past. In this day-to-day life, he lives only in the transitory moment. Whatever is in time – even though, as Aristotle says, time had no beginning and has no ending and extends into infinity – is still not what may correctly be called 'eternal'. Its life may be infinitely long, but still it does not comprehend its entire extent simultaneously. It is still waiting for the future to reveal itself and it has let go of much of the past. What may properly be called eternal is quite different, in that it has knowledge of the whole of life, can see the future, and has lost nothing of the past. It is in an eternal present and has an understanding of the entire flow of time.

A similar distinction was drawn by earlier Neoplatonists. Boethius's definition of eternity recalls Plotinus's mysterious pronouncements in Enneads 3.7 ('Eternity and Time'). There he approaches eternity through repeated near-definitions such as:

> It is just as in a point where all things are together and none of them ever flows forth but remains in identity in itself and never changes, being always in the present (*paronti aei*) because nothing of it has slipped away or again will come to be, but what it is is what it is (Plotinus 3.7.3, 19-20, trans. as in Gerson, 2018).

> And if someone were in this way to speak of eternity as a life which is here and now endless (*zōēn apeiron ēdē*) because it is total and expends nothing of itself, since it has no past or future – for if it had, it would not now be a total life – he would be near defining it (Plotinus 3.7.5, 25-28, trans. Armstrong, 1967).[1]

[1] I preferred Armstrong's translation of 'apeiron ēdē' as 'here and now endless' instead of, as the new translation that Gerson edited has it,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We see here that Boethius and Plotinus, like Plato before them (*Timaeus*, 37-38), drew a close connection between eternity and life – life, that is, in a spiritual sense, the life of the non-discursive mind (*nous*). Such a life centres around contemplation (*theoria*), and for some Platonists, also a mystical union with the highest principle. Life in that sense is to be contrasted with, while serving as a paradigm for, the temporal and worldly life of the body. Eternal life is life most truly speaking, whereas day-to-day life is life in an attenuated sense, at worst a life that is but a dying, at best a moving image of eternity. This association of life and eternity is partly etymological. The Greek word that came to mean eternity – *aiōn* – originally meant 'life' or 'lifespan'. But ancient philosophers, especially in the Platonic tradition, developed this association to speak of a living eternity, a life that is always already complete in the present.[2]

To modern ears, however, the notion of a timeless life will sound puzzling. We tend to associate life and activity with movement and other changes. How can what is timeless, changeless, be anything other than static, lifeless? Before I begin to address this issue, let me introduce my second source.

3. Hadot

The theme of living in the present is central to the work of Pierre Hadot. He identified in ancient philosophy a conception of 'philosophy as a way of life', rather than as merely a body of theory and discourse (although theoretical discourse was an essential part of philosophical ways of life). It is in this connection that he discusses the ancient ideal of living in the present, finding it both in the Stoic and in the Epicurean school. With his characteristic flair for exaggeration he writes, 'Both Epicureanism and Stoicism privilege the present, to the detriment of the past and above all of the future. They posit as an axiom that happiness can only be found in the present, that one instant of happiness is equivalent to an eternity of happiness, and that happiness can and must be found immediately, here and now' (Hadot, 1986, p. 222). It is not enough merely to know this as a theoretical truth. In order to be free of undue concern for past and

'unlimited from the start', as the mention of a start seems distracting in this context. But in the remainder I will use the new translation (Gerson, 2018).

[2] For two concise overviews of this development and references to further literature, see (Wilberding, 2006) and (Kalligas, 2014, pp. 1320–1327).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

future, one must realize it with one's whole being. For such purposes, Epicureans and Stoics practiced what Hadot calls *spiritual exercises*, which are effectively reminders of human mortality, of the true self, and of the value of existence.

It has been questioned whether the ideal of living in the present was as central to the Stoic and especially the Epicurean schools as Hadot claims (Sorabji, 2000, pp. 235–240; Sedley, 2017). It nonetheless seems to me that Hadot has drawn attention to an important concept, which deserves further philosophical consideration. Perhaps the driving force behind Stoicism (I will leave the Epicureans behind) is the exclusive value they place on what is 'up to us'. But an emphasis on what is up to us tends to also be an emphasis on the present, for some of what is in the present is up to us, whereas the past is already determined and the future is uncertain. Insofar as this motivates a conception of happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) as to be found only in the present, it will contrast with the Platonic conception by according the central place to action rather than to contemplation. This we indeed find in Hadot's account. He conceives of virtuous action the way Platonists conceive of contemplation: even mundane activities are at every moment complete and wanting in nothing.[3] The day-to-day affairs of the Stoic sage may for example be political, as they were for Cato the Younger; even so, according to a description by Seneca that Hadot cites as follows (Seneca, *Ben*., 7, 2, 4–5, as in Hadot, 1986, p. 228):

> The sage enjoys the present without depending on the future … Liberated from the burden of worries which torture the mind, he does not hope for or desire anything. He does not plunge forward into the unknown, for he is happy with what he has [i.e. the present, which is all that belongs to us]. And don't believe that he is content with not very much, for what he has is everything.

The interpolation is Hadot's, and he goes on to comment that there are two reasons why the present is sufficient for happiness or – what comes to the same for the Stoics – moral virtue: 'in the first place, Stoic happiness … is complete at every instant and does not increase over time. The second reason is that we already possess the whole of reality within the present instant, and even infinite duration could not give us more than what we have right now' (Hadot, 1986, p. 228).

[3] Hadot neglects to mention the eternal present (surprisingly, given his background as a scholar of Plotinus), but Platonism nonetheless seems to exert a strong influence on his thought.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4. Heterotelic Activity

I briefly introduced two different conceptions of living in the present. Whereas the Platonic ideal centres on contemplation and Hadot's Stoic account on virtuous action, they both emphasise that life can be complete in the present so that nothing, or at least nothing valuable, is added over time. For both, I want to suggest, the question arises how such a life can be anything other than static. We tend to associate life and movement, but it is hard to see how there can be a place for movement within a life that is fully within the present. Consider a typical movement such as walking home. When I walk home, I aim at an external objective, one that is to be realized in the future. Once I have arrived home, my action is complete and thereby ceases to be: it is no longer going on. This heterotelic structure of movement is the opposite of completeness in the present: as long as the action is present, it is incomplete, and as soon as it is complete, it is no longer present.[4]

Note that in Epicurus's remark, life was also said to have this structure: as long as life is present, its end is not, and as soon as its end is present, life is no longer. For Epicurus, however, the point was that the end of life does not matter to us, since it is never present when we are. That seems right when we talk about life as a whole. Life, after all, does not aim at death; death is the end only in the sense of the end-point, not the fulfillment of life. But walking home *does* aim at being home; here the end is both end-point and aim and cannot be disregarded. There is a clear and important sense in which the action is incomplete as long as it is going on. Would all such movements have to be renounced in order to live in the present? Then it seems unclear how a life in the present can be the life of a human being; life in the present would not even be a vegetative state; after all, even plants grow. It could only be the life of a statue, that is, not a life but a permanent state of being.

Hadot does not want to give up all other-directed activity, and so the question is how they can count as fully in the present. Jeannie Carlier puts the question in an interview with Hadot, 'How can this concentration on the present be reconciled with the imperatives of the action, which always require a finality and thus an orientation toward the future?' (Carlier in Hadot, 2009, p. 163)[5]

[4] I borrow the terminology of 'heterotelic' and 'autotelic' activity from (Mourelatos, 1993).

[5] As we shall see, not all goal-directed action is oriented toward the future. But future-directed action is an important subclass of human activity, and we can learn something about what it means to 'live in the present' by considering if future-directed action can have a place in such a life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is instructive to see Hadot's reply on behalf of the Stoics (Hadot, 2002, p. 192)[6]:

> It is important to understand this exercise of concentration on the present. We must not imagine that the Stoic remembers nothing and never thinks about the future. It is not thoughts about the future and the past which he rejects, but the passions, vain hopes, and vain regrets they can entail. The Stoic wants to be active; in order to live and to act, we must make projects, and take the past into consideration in order to foresee our actions. Since all action is inevitably present, however, we must think about the past and the future only as a function of our action and insofar as such thoughts may be useful for our action. It is thus choice, decision, and action which determine the thickness of the present.

Part of the idea is that the past is no longer, the future is not yet, and only the present is. This thought is attributed to the arch-Stoic Chryssippus, who is said to have held that only the present 'belongs' (*huparchein*); past and future merely subsist (*huphestanai*). He compared this to the way the predicate 'walking around' belongs to the person who is walking around only while he is doing so (Stobaeus, 1.106, 5-23; Long & Sedley, 1987, 51B). Correspondingly, 'all action is inevitably present', as Hadot says here, or as he puts it elsewhere, 'we can no longer change the past, nor can we act on what is not yet. The present is the only moment in which we can act' (Hadot, 2009, p. 163). If that is right, this suggests that there is a deflationary sense of 'living in the present' according to which however you live your life you are already living in the present – you just have to become aware of it. When we say of someone that he 'lives in the past,' we mean that he lives under the illusion that what was still is, an illusion which shows itself in this, that he accords too much weight to events that are no longer actual. Likewise, people tend to 'run ahead of themselves', in the sense that they focus their attention on what is not yet and may never be. When we realize how common and persistent these illusions are, it is clear that it is extremely difficult to 'live in the present', and here it is meant in a different but related aspirational sense. Corresponding to the deflationary sense of living in the present, there is an aspiration to live accordingly; not just to know it as a theoretical truth but to know it with one's whole being.

[6] I am citing Hadot's longer reply in (Hadot, 2002). His answer in the interview is a more concise version of the same.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is just for such purposes that ancient philosophers practiced spiritual exercises.

Perhaps another way to ask the question how action is possible within the present is to ask how the present can endure long enough to contain an action. Hadot draws attention to this side of the problem (Hadot, 2002, p. 192):

> The Stoics distinguished two ways of defining the present. The first consisted in understanding it as the limit between the past and the future. From this perspective, there is never any present time, since time is infinitely divisible. This is an abstract, mathematical division, in which the present is reduced to an infinitesimal instant. The second way consisted in defining the present with regard to human consciousness; it then represented a certain thickness and duration, corresponding to the attention of lived consciousness. When we speak of concentration on the present, it is this present to which we refer.

The two definitions of the present Hadot here distinguishes can indeed with some difficulty be found in the surviving Stoic fragments. In the same fragment that has Chryssipus compare the way the present exists to the way walking belongs to the person who is walking, the present is also said to be a limit between past and future. But John Sellars (2007) has pointed out that the notion of a 'lived presence', as Hadot uses it, has its origin in the work of Henri Bergson. When Hadot speaks of the thickness of the present as 'corresponding to the attention of lived consciousness', he may be thinking along the following lines:

> Our consciousness tells us that when we speak of our present we are thinking of a certain interval of duration. What duration? It is impossible to fix it exactly, as it is something rather elusive. My present, at this moment, is the sentence I am pronouncing. But this is so because I want to limit the field of my attention to my sentence. This attention is something that can be made longer or shorter, like the interval between the two points of a compass (Bergson, 1911/1946, 178-179; as in Sellars, 2007).

Hadot's Stoic answer to Carlier's question, then, is that one can only act in the present, and – the Bergsonian part – the present is a lived presence since it can, given the right attention, encompass a whole action.

However, I think the Bergsonian part of the answer underestimates the force of Carlier's question. In order to understand what it can mean to live in the present, we indeed need something like the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion of a 'lived presence,' a present thick enough to act in. But how can the presence have this 'thickness' if our action is directed at the future? Because – and this is what the Bergsonian answer misses – it is the heterotelic structure of movement that makes the present evanescent and incomplete. If I am walking home, I can say that *I will* be home, but I cannot put this in the present tense: I am just not home yet. No matter how intensely I focus on this supposedly thicker present, it does not make the completion of my action actual. Once I am home, I can say that I *was* walking home, but I cannot put this in the present tense: I am just not walking anymore. Note that the problem repeats itself at a smaller scale. Walking is made up of movements that are themselves aimed at an end other than themselves. When I am putting this foot in front of the other I have not yet done so, and as soon as I have done so, I am not doing it anymore. With every step, the present of moving my foot becomes the past of having moved my foot. Isn't this the exact opposite of living in the present? I cannot, by a mere act of concentration, change the fact that my activity is all the time awaiting the future and leaving behind the past. Moreover, it seems moving my foot can again be divided into phases, the aim of each of which is to reach the next – and so on. But then all that remains of the present is an infinitesimal limit between past and future; no stretch of activity remains present long enough for me to concentrate on it. The problem is not only that movement is heterotelic, aiming at some end beyond itself, but that it is heterotelic all the way down.

I believe the mistake is to think that the structure of time is determined by attention, as if it were fully up to us. Perhaps what counts as 'now' is sometimes determined by the choice to focus on today as a whole rather than only this afternoon. But the thickness or duration of the present does not generally correspond 'to lived consciousness', as Hadot writes, or at least not in the way that Bergson has it, arbitrarily shortening or lengthening the present through attention. When the subject matter is human activity, it is the structure of that activity that determines what is past, present, and future. Because progressing towards the aim of an action is not yet achieving that aim, the completion is future when the progression is present, and the progression is past when the completion is present. There are some activities, not only contemplation, for which this is not the case, and I will soon dwell on that fact. But Hadot wants to embrace ordinary actions within his conception of living in the present, and many of those, including essential ones such as moving from one place to another, are aimed at some end other than themselves. But that structure is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

just what makes it the case that the agent is not living in the present: they are awaiting the future, and leaving behind the past. Since any movement can be broken up into smaller movements, in turn directed at an external end, what remains of the present now appears to be a mathematical limit between past and future. It is then unhelpful to say that we must concentrate on a thicker, 'lived' presence; to have a thicker present we need a life that is differently structured.

Would things be different for an activity that is not aimed at some objective beyond itself but is rather its own end? I will suggest so. Or more precisely, a certain form of such activity, identified by Aristotle in a famous passage in *Metaphysics* 9.6, is truly complete in the present. I will argue that this also means that for such activities, the present endures. This will allow me to return to the eternal present that I left behind in section 2, to which the activity of contemplation was central. But that solution will still leave me with the further task of making sense of how ordinary actions can be complete in the present. Although I have just criticised one tendency in Hadot's writing on the topic, one can see in his answer also the suggestion for a different approach. He writes that the Stoic must think of the past and future only as a function of the present action. Here, I want to suggest, concentration plays a different role than in Bergson. A certain way of regarding the aim of an action may transform its structure, so that it is after all complete in the present. I will discuss Aristotle's notion of complete activity in section 5 and return to ordinary actions in section 6.

5. Complete Activity

I argued that the structure of time as it comes to expression in the use of tense and aspect is not generally determined by attention but by the structure of the action that the verb describes. The present (tense), relative to a heterotelic action, fails to endure because, for such an action, progression and completion never occur together. But if it is the separation of progression and completion that holds back the future and makes the present slip into the past, leaving nothing but an infinitesimal limit, then the solution is for them not to be separated. There would be an abiding present if progression and completion were not inevitably asynchronous, but what is happening, or some of it, were already while going on what it aims at being. Such a happening would while it is going on not become separate from itself, leaving a stretch as completed in the past, nor would it await

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its completion in the future. That is, it would remain self-identical in the present.

That is just the structure Aristotle articulates in a now famous passage in *Metaphysics* 9.6. Aristotle there distinguishes between *energeia* – activity or actuality – which is complete in itself, and *kinēsis* – movement or change – which aims at some external end (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.6, 1048b18–34, trans. Kosman, 2013, p. 40)

> Since among actions (*tōn praxeōn*) that have a limit (*peras*), none is a completion (*telos*), but is rather a thing relative to a completion … this sort of thing is not an action or at least not a complete one (just because it is not a completion). But that sort of action to which its completion belongs (*enuparchei to telos*) is a real action. So for example at the same time (*hama*) one is seeing and has seen, is understanding and has understood, is thinking and has thought. But if you are learning, you have not at the same time learned, and if you are being cured you have not at the same time been cured. Someone, however, who is living well at the same time has lived well, and someone who is prospering (*eudaimonei*) has prospered. If that were not so, these things would have to come to an end at some time, as is the case with slimming. But in fact they do not; you are living and have lived. Of these actions, then, we should call one group motions (*kinēseis*), and the other activities (*energeias*).

The vocabulary of the passage is rather special. *Energeia* is usually contrasted with *dunamis* (potentiality, capacity) – and in that sense an actual movement must also be an *energeia*, for it is the exercise of a capacity. What is here simply called *energeia* corresponds closely to what Aristotle elsewhere (NE 1174b15) qualifies as *teleia energeia* – that is, complete activity, not in the sense of complete*d* activity but rather activity to which its end, its *telos*, is internal. I think it is in fact the same notion, and the passage spells out the atemporal character of complete activity.[7] That it is nonetheless activity, and not a state, is apparent from the fact that it has an end. The end of

[7] But see (Burnyeat, 2008). He argues that the passage did not originally belong to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; it rather originates in an ethical context. For my purposes, it is interesting that ethics and metaphysics meet here. He also argues that the passage differs in both vocabulary and the content of the view expressed from similar remarks, for example the discussion of pleasure in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. On the point of content, I disagree and follow (Kosman, 2013) and (Natali, 2013) instead.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seeing, for example, is for the object of sight to be present to the person who is seeing. We might say that seeing is for the sake of itself, but it is more than that. Learning may be done for the sake of itself, yet learning is not complete while it is going on. Complete activity is for the sake of an end that is internal to the activity, so that the end is present whenever the activity is going on – it is, so to say, autotelic all the way down.

In order to show how the notion of complete activity can help us resolve the issues raised in the previous section, let me repeat two observations from the recent literature. First, although early analytic commentators misunderstood Aristotle as drawing a temporal distinction, the point is rather that for activities, progression and completion are present together, whereas for motions, progression and completion are different and never occur together. The Greek imperfect and perfect tenses in such phrases translated as 'at the same time one is seeing and has seen' signify progressive and perfective aspect respectively, not time. This makes the distinction difficult to render in English, if it is true as some say that there is in English no present perfect: 'I have done it' implies some doing that went on in the past. But we can train our ears and use some extra description to make the point clear, as Aryeh Kosman does (Kosman, 2013, p. 42):

> It is because an activity does not need to await any further development to perfect or complete its being that it is complete and perfect at each and every present moment of its duration. And so the present and perfect of a verb that represents an activity are true simultaneously. This is not because of facts about the activity's past and its present, but because of two facts about its present: it is happening, and it has accomplished in that happening the perfection marked by our saying it has happened.

Since, then, the passage is only concerned with the present moment, one might think that duration is irrelevant. Yet a second crucial point for our purposes is that duration is not excluded, but on the contrary emphasised. There is, as Carlo Natali puts it, 'not only a "tense test" in the passage, but more importantly a "stop test"' (Natali, 2013, p. 108): it is characteristic of activity that it need not stop. The stop test is to be found in Aristotle's counterfactual 'If that were not so, these activities would have to come to an end at some time, as is the case with slimming. But in fact they do not; you are living and have lived'. The example of living may cause surprise. Surely life does come to an end at some time. I take it that the point is that when life comes to an end, this is due to a cause that is external to the activity of living (sickness, car crash). The activity of living is the activity

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of maintaining your own existence and so of continuing to live. We might then go further and say: an activity will not stop of its own accord, but only if an external cause intervenes.

Taking both points together, the passage shows a way in which goal-directed action can nonetheless be complete in the present. It can be in the present if its end is present to it at every moment. This must be distinguished from the way in which the end is present to the sort of act that has been called an *achievement*, such as crossing the finish line. Whenever you are crossing the finish line, you have in that moment 'accomplished the perfection marked by our saying' that you have crossed the finish line. But in that very moment, the end having been achieved, the event ceases to be. An achievement is naturally understood as the starting-point or end-point, the limit, of a movement. And we saw in the previous section that such a limit is too 'thin' for activity within it to be possible. This contrasts with Aristotle's activities in that *their* end is or contains their own going-on. The end of seeing is not to catch a glimpse; it is for the object of sight to remain present. When this end has been achieved, the activity does not cease to be but on the contrary will keep going on. And so as long as no external cause intervenes, the present of an activity endures.[8]

A continuous activity of seeing or understanding can all the time be expressed in the present tense. That its end is continuously achieved does not mean that any part of it becomes past. Relative to an external measure, it would be possible to speak of the first minute when you started understanding, the second minute, and so on. But it cannot be said that the first minute was for the sake of reaching the second, as one phase of movement is for the sake of reaching the next. And so when the second minute has been reached, this does not mean that the first is completed and ceases to be, nor does the activity await a completion in the future. Of the activity of understanding it may be said what Plato said in the *Timaeus* about the paradigm living animal: 'For we say that it *was* and *is* and *will be*, but according to the true account only *is* is appropriately said' (Plato, *Timeaus* 37-38, trans. D.J. Zeyl, in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997). We might say, 'I understood it then and I still understand it now,' but it more accurately reflects the structure of the activity to use the present tense both for the understanding that has been going on in the past and the

[8] The terminology of 'achievement' is due to Zeno Vendler, but I do not mean to imply that Aristotelean activities fit any other category of Vendler's scheme. See (Mourelatos, 1993).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understanding that is going on now – considered by itself, not relative to other activities, it is all going on in one continuous present.

Just the fact that the present of complete activity endures, however, might seem to show that my analysis is still at some remove from the Neoplatonic notion of an eternal present. For we saw that the Neoplatonists, like Wittgenstein in his remark, were careful to distinguish eternity from endless duration. Many commentators indeed think that the notion of eternity underwent a development from Plato to Plotinus.[9] Whereas in Plato it is still equivalent to everlastingness, Plotinus carefully distinguishes eternity from duration and all forms of extension. Although he speaks of eternity as 'always being', he writes that the word 'always' (*aei*) may 'mislead the soul into thinking of something extending itself more and more and yet still never going to stop extending' (Plotinus 3.7.6, 25-26, trans. as in Gerson, 2018) He suggests that in order to prevent this misunderstanding, it would be better to avoid speaking of 'always' altogether. Instead of using a qualifier to speak of 'always being', it would be better to reserve the qualifier for 'temporal being' and speak of eternal being simply as 'what is'. This solution seems designed to prevent us from forming any kind of image of eternity, which befits the exalted place it has in Plotinus's system. Perhaps he thereby distinguishes himself from the earlier tradition. But it could also be said that he simply draws the same distinction more carefully. I am inclined to the latter interpretation. When Plotinus and others distinguish eternity from endless duration, the contrast is with duration understood as having parts, one moment following upon another. This still allows us to think of eternity as enduring in another sense; eternity endures not as an endless procession of moments but by remaining the same moment. That is just the structure that Aristotle's passage articulates.[10]

It is still difficult to get a concrete sense of what this comes to. For Boethius, what makes the life of God eternal is that He sees all of time within one moment. But we do not have to think of such superhuman feats to get a sense of the eternal present. Whenever we apprehend how things are, for example how musical notes hang together in a song, our activity is, in a sense, complete in itself: 'to understand how things hang together' is both a description of the activity's aim and of what it always already is. There is a question concerning to

[9] See for two such arguments and further references, (Wilberding, 2006) and (Kalligas, 2014), pp. 1320–1327.

[10] Whether or not Plotinus knew of Aristotle's passage, see (for an argument that he did not) (Burnyeat, 2008, Appendix 2, pp. 281–284).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

what extent the completeness of such activity is spoiled by an incompleteness in its object, or an incompleteness at any one moment. A song has a beginning, a middle and an end; we cannot apprehend it all at once. Must our apprehension of the song then also be spread out over time? Kosman thinks the point is irrelevant: 'I may completely enjoy a symphony without enjoying a complete symphony' (Kosman, 2013, p. 43). I am not so sure. It seems to me intrinsic to the enjoyment of a song or symphony that it is a whole, but not an instantaneous whole, and in the best case one enjoys the whole thing from beginning to end. It is possible to completely enjoy a symphony at one moment because the whole is, in a sense, present in each moment – the enjoyment of this note is dependent on remembering the previous and anticipating the next. But this structure seems better described as a moving image of eternity, like that of movement in a circle. Thinking in this way, it becomes understandable that to the Platonic tradition, a true eternal present requires noetic activity with an eternal object, perhaps – since for similar reasons it must not only be eternal but also alive, active – the very activity of contemplation itself.

The question raised at the end of section 2 was whether life in the eternal present would not be static. It cannot involve any acting, since action is directed at some completion in the future. The answer now suggested is that there is a form of goal-directed action that is nonetheless in the present, because its end is present whenever the activity is going on. And because its end is or includes that the activity go on, reaching the end does not mean that the activity stops (as with reaching the finish line) but rather that it continues. And since it continues without moving, without changing, the present endures (though here 'enduring' must be distinguished from a procession in time). In that way, then, an important aspect of human life is fully within the present.

6. Movement as Complete Activity

If that is right, that still only answers half of the question. Say it is acknowledged that there are some activities that have the structure of complete activity. Then to the extent that we engage in those activities, we live in the present. But Aristotle also offers the examples of *living well*, *well-being* (*eudaimonia*, translated as 'prosper' in the passage above), and *living*, and these surely involve more than only complete activity. A life lived well, or for that matter a life lived badly, will consist to a great extent of ordinary actions such as walking home. But these simply do not have the structure of complete

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

activity: their end is not present at every moment; they rather proceed toward an external objective which is to be realized in the future. There seems to be no denying that they proceed in time. So how can we live in the present?

The problem is almost the same as a more purely metaphysical problem that Kosman discusses in his account of Aristotle's notion of complete activity. In the passage in Met. 9.6, Aristotle suggests that movement, *kinesis*, is also in a sense activity, but not activity strictly speaking. In fact, motion must be *energeia* for it is the *energeia*, the actualization, of a capacity. But the passage goes on to contrast activity and motion, energeia and kinesis. How, in the light of this contrast, can we nonetheless understand motion as a kind of activity? Kosman's answer to this question is complicated and takes him through various aspects of Aristotle's system which are beyond my present concerns. But it is relevant that he wants to see motion as the complete realization (*entelecheia*) of a thing's ability to be other than it is: in some sense, a thing in motion must at every moment be completely what it is, even though the motion is the realization of something other. For example, when bricks are becoming a house, they have not yet realized their ability to be a house, but they are fully manifesting their ability to *become* one.

Kosman compares this kind of realization to the sense in which an actor, having to play the role of a stutterer, may improve upon his stutter: not by removing it, but by increasing it. Or again the way a papyrologist may complete a fragment of an ancient poem: not by completing the poem, but by completing the fragment. In both examples, an intrinsically privative reality is considered as a thing in its own right. Such a realization Kosman calls 'constitutive' in contrast to the 'privative realization'. A constitutive realization completes a privation by making it fully that privation; the corresponding privative realization instead removes the privation; the result is a whole poem instead of a fragment, fluent speech instead of a stutter. If movement is the ability to become other, it is intrinsically privative: it is defined relative to what it is not. My walk home is paradoxically completed at precisely the moment when it is no longer. But considered as a thing in its own right, as the constitutive realization of my capacity to get home, it can be complete at every moment when it is going on (Kosman, 2013, Ch. 2).

For my less than purely metaphysical purposes, however, one may wonder if this points to anything more than a sophistical solution. Sure, at every moment of my walk home I am ceaselessly becoming other. I have not yet realized my ability to be home but I am fully displaying my ability to get there, and even if my walk should be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interrupted by an unforeseen meteor precisely on my head, my *becoming other*, considered as constitutive realization, will in no way be less complete. But whether I am thereby living in the present would seem to depend on whether that is the relevant description under which to view my walk. In the same way, it is only in the context of acting that the activity of the actor may be rightly seen as improving (amplifying) rather than failing to improve (attenuating) a stutter. So what we need is a context in which a movement may indeed be regarded as a thing in its own right, rather than as merely a means to achieving an end that destroys the movement.

A life of virtue provides one such context. Aristotle contrasts *praxis*, virtuous action, which must be chosen for its own sake, to *poiēsis*, production, which is for the sake of producing (and derives its value from) a product that is independent of the activity. But it has been pointed out that although praxis is chosen for itself, it will often or always consist of actions that are themselves productions. J.L. Ackrill used the example of mending a neighbour's fence: a virtuous action, and considered as such valuable in itself, but clearly also a production, and considered as such valuable only insofar as it gets the job done (Ackrill, 1978). Again, if the action is interrupted by a meteor, that will detract from its value and even its reality (remaining incomplete) as production but not from its value or reality as a moral act. Now it may seem that it all depends on how we look at it, which is arbitrary. But it is not arbitrary that here a production is taken up in a life of virtue. Thus taken up, there is a context that makes it appropriate to consider the action as the constitutive realization of mending a fence, rather than as the privative realization of the same. We then consider the action as a thing in its own right, that is, as a thing done by the agent, rather than as merely a means to get the fence fixed. And considered as a thing in its own right, it is complete in the present.

But only in a sense, because it remains true and relevant that the action is structured in pursuit of an external aim which, once reached, will end the action. What is at every moment fully realized is an intrinsically privative reality: that of becoming other. One way in which this shows up in Aristotle's philosophy is that praxis takes up an intermediate place between production and contemplation. Production is only valuable for the sake of its product, practical and especially political activity (although it must be *chosen* for itself) is valuable in itself as well as for its results, but only contemplation has the exalted status of being valuable purely for itself: 'And this activity alone would seem to be cherished for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

activities (*tōn praktikōn*) we gain more or less apart from the action (*para tēn praxin*)' (Aristotle, NE 1177b, trans. as in Barnes and Kenny, 2014). Why is it better to be valuable purely for its own sake? Aristotle gives various arguments. But in terms of the present theme, one reason to think so would be that contemplation is more purely complete at every moment, whereas the completeness of an action is spoiled by its being, so to say, a complete incompleteness, like the complete fragment of the papyrologist. The other-directedness of action adulterates its completeness in the present.

For a higher appreciation of praxis, or at least a fuller sense in which action may count as complete in the present, I want to return to the Stoics. Remember that Hadot wrote that as Stoics we must think of the past and future, and especially the future, 'only as a function of our present action'. I think this suggests a different role for concentration than in the passage from Bergson; here concentration affects the telic and temporal structure of the activity. Hadot's formulation calls to mind a comparison that the Stoics reportedly drew between virtue and archery. The Stoics followed Socrates (and opposed Aristotle, as they read him) in thinking that virtue suffices for happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*); any external goods, such as health, may be 'selected' but not desired. Nonetheless, a life of virtue involves among other things the pursuit of external goods. How can these two things be brought into harmony? Well, as the true aim of archery is not to hit the target but to 'do all in one's power to shoot straight', so too with 'our ultimate good', as Cicero writes in the voice of a Stoic. 'In this kind of example, it is to shoot straight that one must do all one can; none the less, it is to do all one can to accomplish the task that is really the ultimate aim. It is just the same with what we call the supreme good in life. To actually hit the target is, as we say, to be selected but not sought' (Cicero, *Fin*. 3.22, trans. Raphael Woolf, in Annas, 2001).

The point has sometimes been taken to be that virtue, like archery, is a stochastic art. It is characteristic of stochastic arts that even if the art is perfectly executed, its end may still fail to be achieved. This is indeed true of archery: a sudden gust of wind may blow a perfect shot off-course. The Greek word 'stochastikos' even means 'skilful in aiming at', which is obviously relevant to archery. But at least on Aristotle's conception of a stochastic art, the external end, though not guaranteed by skilful action, is still desired by the agent. The orator wants to persuade the jury, not just to do everything within his power to persuade. That this cannot be what Cicero has in mind is confirmed when he goes on to write that virtue is not like navigation or medicine, the stock examples of stochastic arts. It is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rather like acting and dancing: 'Here the end, namely the performance of the art, is contained within the art itself, not sought outside it'. But wisdom is even more purely for its own sake than acting and dancing are. 'Only wisdom is directed at itself in its entirety; this is not the case with other arts' (Cicero, *Fin*. 3.24).

Jakob Klein, in an article that I found helpful, suggests another function for the comparison to archery. Archery as ordinarily practiced is undeniably a stochastic art. The comparison of virtue to archery is more plausibly understood as offered by a critic of the Stoics (Carneades), and what Cicero describes is the Stoic rejoinder: if you want to compare virtue to archery, then the virtuous agent is like a peculiar archer whose ultimate aim is to do everything within her power to aim straight (Klein, 2014, p. 13). Archery as thus conceived and practiced is similar to acting and dancing and generally to playing games. The comparison shows how an activity that is organised in pursuit of an external objective can nonetheless be performed for its own sake – or in terms of my theme, how the value and reality of the action lies only in its going on, not in achieving a result in the future. In that way Stoic archery is like virtuous action, which is organised in pursuit of external goods and yet does not depend for its value and reality on actually getting those goods.

That may seem a strange conception of archery and perhaps also of virtue. The comparison annoyed ancient commentators, none more so than Plutarch:

> If someone were to say that the archer does everything in his power not for the sake of hitting the target but for the sake of doing everything in his power, one would suppose him to be speaking in a riddling and fantastic way. So it is with the idiots who insist that the end of aiming at things in accordance with nature is not the getting but the taking and selecting of them, and that being healthy is not each man's end in his desire and pursuit of health, but on the contrary being healthy has reference to the desire and pursuit of being healthy (Plutarch, *Comm not* 1071Fff., as in Long & Sedley, 1987, 64C, pp. 7-8; Blecher, 2006, pp. 160–161).

I am not entirely sure what caused Plutarch's ire, but I understand how the idea of 'aiming straight' can seem unsatisfying. It may seem that doing everything within one's power to hit the target *just is* to act for the sake of hitting it. The Stoic has merely redescribed her action in a new way. But first, that is not quite true. There is admittedly no difference to how someone acts who takes hitting the target or 'aiming straight' to be the purpose, but there is a difference

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to how they feel: the first will and the second won't be disappointed if the arrow doesn't hit the target, as long as they have done everything within their power to aim straight. But perhaps that seems hypocritical. If the activity is worth doing, and the activity *is* the pursuit of an external aim, then the aim must be worth pursuing, and then how can you not be disappointed when you don't get it? The question is again if we are entitled to think of the activity as the full constitutive realization of an ability (to hit the target) rather than as the partial privative realization of that ability (which, once fully realized, ends the activity).

Here it matters that the example is archery, for the comparison is after all not entirely unsuited to Stoic purposes. Even when hitting the target is considered to be the aim of archery, this aim is not independent of the activity. This is true when archery is practiced as a means of war, since there is an element of honour involved: Paris wants to shoot Achilles, he does not merely want him dead. When archery is practiced as a sport, it is even less clear what the aim is apart from the activity; the aim is not, for example, merely for the arrow to be stuck in bull's eye.[11] Archery, even non-Stoic archery, is more like building sand castles than it is like genuine production. The child who is building a sand castle is interested in the finished product only as a function of his present action. He does not want a sand castle (as becomes clear when he tramples on the finished thing); what he wants is to *build* one. Similarly, the archer does not want the arrow to be stuck in bull's eye. What makes the Stoic archer peculiar is that she won't even be disappointed when a gust of wind blows her shot off-target, just as the Stoic sand castle builder won't be disappointed when a wave washes away his hard work. But this becomes more understandable than Plutarch found it when we see the external aim only as a means to organise the activity of playing. Why be disappointed? You have had a good time playing, and nothing stops you from playing again.

So the context of playing games offers a deeper reason to think of the activity as the constitutive rather than the privative realization of an ability to become other. Unlike praxis as Aristotle conceived of it, building a sand castle is not valuable for the sake of itself as well as for the sake of its product; it is only valuable for the sake of itself. That is why the concept of play (as Klein argues) is particularly suited to illustrate the Stoic notion of virtue; it shows how an activity can be organised in the pursuit of an external end without its value and reality depending on reaching that end, indeed without that

[11] See for this point, (Blecher, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

end having any value apart from the activity. This is just what the Stoics need in order to hang on to the Socratic commitment that virtue is happiness even though virtuous action involves the pursuit of external objectives. It is also just what we need in order to understand how life can be in the present even though it involves the pursuit of objectives that are to be realized in the future. Since the future objective has no value in itself, action on the Stoic conception can be even more fully within the present than action was according to Aristotle; it need not anymore take second place to contemplation. Although the playing child does everything in his power to build a sand castle, it is perfectly understandable why a sand castle is of no value to him, so that his activity can be always already complete.

7. Conclusion

Even if my present investigation has not been only for the sake of reaching a conclusion, it may nonetheless be helpful to repeat the main points. My aim has been to take the expression 'living in the present' seriously and show how such a life can be the life of a human being rather than that of a statue. I have identified two different approaches: the Platonic one centring on a contemplative life and the Stoic one centring on a practical life. Given the emphasis that both place on activity for its own sake, I found it helpful to turn to Aristotle for elucidation of the temporal – or rather, atemporal – structure of such activity. It can then be seen that certain activities, such as understanding and seeing, especially of the leisurely contemplative variety, are fully in the present and yet active, as they have their end present to them at every moment. An other-directed movement can be complete in the present in an attenuated sense, insofar as we are entitled to think of such a movement as the constitutive realization of an ability to become other. It turns out that the Stoics have particularly good reason to think of actions in that way, since their conception of virtue allows them to think of the relation between virtuous actions and external goods as the relation between a game and the aim by means of which it is structured but which has no value in itself. In these different ways, then, a life in the present can be the life of a human being.[12]

[12] Research for this paper was first presented at the University of Chicago and then at the conference *Philosophy as a Way of Life in the History of Philosophy*, held 28–29 June 2019 at King's College London. I thank the organizers for the opportunity and both audiences for helpful

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

J.L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on Action', *Mind*, 87 (1978), 595–601.
Julia Annas, ed., *Cicero. On Moral Ends*, trans. Raphael Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
A.H. Armstrong, trans., *Plotinus. Enneads III* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).
Jonathan Barnes and Anthony Kenny, ed., *Aristotle's Ethics. Writings from the Complete Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
Henri Bergson, Oxford Lecture, first published in *La Perception du Changement: Conférences faites a l'Université d'Oxford, les 26 et 27 mai 1911* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), reprinted in H. Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 143–76, and translated in *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 153–86.
Ian Blecher, 'The Stoic Method of Happiness', *Apeiron*, 39 (2006), 157–176.
Myles Burnyeat, 'Kinesis vs. energeia: a much-read passage in (but not of) Aristotle's Metaphysics.' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2008), 219–92.
John M. Cooper, D.S. Hutchinson, ed., *Plato. Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997).
Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *Plotinus. Enneads*, trans. George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd P. Gerson, R.A.H. King, Andrew Smith, James Wilberding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). Originally published in French under the title *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Gallimard, 1995).
Pierre Hadot, *The present alone is our happiness: conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Originally published in French under the title *La Philosophie comme une Manière de Vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Albin Michel, 2001).
Pierre Hadot, '"The Present Alone Is Our Joy": The Meaning of the Present Instant in Goethe and in Ancient Philosophy,' *Diogenes* 34 133 (1986). Reprinted in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual*

questions and comments, and specifically Joachim Aufderheide, John Callanan, James Conant, David Finkelstein, Amy Levine, Joshua Mendelsohn, Christoph Schuringa, and John Sellars. I also want to thank Garrett Allen and Kyoung Min Cho for thought-provoking discussions on these themes. I am grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for funding my research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Exercises from Socrates to Foucault, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999).
Alexander Mourelatos, 'Aristotle's Kinêsis/Energeia Distinction: A Marginal Note on Kathleen Gill's Paper' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 23 (1993), 385–388.
Paul Kalligas, *The Enneads of Plotinus*. A Commentary, Vol. 1, trans. Elizabeth Key Fowden, Nicholas Pilavachi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
Jacob Klein, 'Of Archery and Virtue: Ancient and Modern Conceptions of Value', *Philosopher's Imprint* 14 (2014).
Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being. An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).
A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, ed., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
Carlo Natali, 'A Note on Metaphysics Θ.6, 1048b18–36.' *Rhizomata* 1 (2013), 104–114.
David Sedley, 'Epicurean versus Cyrenaic Happiness' in *Selfhood and the Soul. Essays on Ancient Thought and Literature in Honour of Christopher Gill*, ed. Richard Seaford, John Wilkins, and Matthew Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
John Sellars, 'Aiôn and Chronos: Deleuze and the Stoic Theory of Time', *Collapse* 3 (2007), 177–205.
David R. Slavitt, trans., *Boethius. The Consolation of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind. From Stoic Agitation to Christan Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
James Wilberding, 'Eternity in Ancient Philosophy', in *Eternity: a History*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14–56.
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, 1922).

MARTIJN WALLAGE (martijn.wallage@uni-leipzig.de) *is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Leipzig University. His research interests include the metaphysics of ethics, in relation to both early analytic and ancient philosophy.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819120000133 Published online by Cambridge University Press