Existence theory revisited: A reply to our critics

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Abstract
In this essay, we provide a comprehensive reply to the critical commentaries by David Inglis, Thomas Kemple, William Outhwaite, Simon Susen, Bryan S. Turner, and Robin Wagner-Pacifici. Our reply is structured along three main pillars. Firstly, we clarify what we aim to achieve with existence theory. Drawing on neo-pragmatist philosophy, our aim is to present a new and useful perspective on a wide range of social phenomena; we do not attempt to tackle or resolve broad philosophical issues. Secondly, we demonstrate that we do not subscribe to an algorithmic notion of society which posits that people's trajectories have to fit a neat, linear pathway. Related, we do not wish to impose a normative model that endorses the existential milestones that are dominant in any particular society. Thirdly, building on various helpful pointers from our critics, we elaborate on various ways in which the theory could be enriched and further developed: for instance, by bringing in insights from the sociology of generations, critical theory, and sociological studies of the body.

We are immensely appreciative of the numerous interesting comments by the special issue contributors, which have enabled us to look at our approach from a variety of new

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angles. Given the multitude of stimulating suggestions and given the limited scope of this reply, it is impossible to engage with them all. We have taken the liberty, therefore, to address mainly recommendations that are voiced by several contributors and that, in our opinion, strike at the core of the conceptual and empirical issues involved. We also seize the opportunity to correct one or two misunderstandings as to what we claim and do not claim.

On this basis, our reply is threefold. Firstly, we elaborate on the reasons why we set out our proposal for an existence theory; this involves a brief excursion around the broader neo-pragmatist perspective that we adopt. Secondly, we address the question to what extent our theoretical framework implies a form of temporal rigidity and, relatedly, a normative bias; this section entails correcting a dual misunderstanding as to the proposals we make. Thirdly, we discuss the various ways in which existence theory and its empirical manifestations could be further developed; here we very much follow our critics' lead and run with some of their suggested connections.

What are we trying to do?

It might be worth starting with an elaboration of the rationale underlying our essay. In other words, what precisely did we try to achieve? None of the commentaries explicitly ask this question, but it is implicit in quite a few of the contributions that hint at the incomplete nature of our exercise. Inglis, for instance, questions whether existence theory is a fully-developed theory yet and suggests avenues for further theoretical exploration. Likewise, Susen holds that we should address various fundamental theoretical questions that have captivated social theorists and philosophers, ranging from the vexed philosophical question of free will to issues around universality. So, if, according to Inglis and Susen, fully-developed theorizing requires much more than we set out to do, then what did we try to achieve in the first place?

A straightforward, and somewhat evasive, answer would be to point out that this is a mere article—not a book or a treatise—and that we can only accomplish so much within the scope of a research paper. This would not be an entirely disingenuous reply and it would most certainly account for why we described our enterprise as an "outline," but it would somehow fail to get to the core of what we were trying to accomplish. Key here is that we have always been highly sympathetic toward a neo-pragmatist conception of theory (Baert, 2005; Morgan, 2016); and, as intimated briefly in our text, this neo-pragmatism underscored our proposal for existence theory. In this neo-pragmatist view, social theory should not be seen as providing a set of conceptual tools to mirror or copy external reality; nor does the value of a theory lie in the fact that it can be construed as a deductive nomological model, enabling the inference of testable hypotheses (Baert, 2006). Rather, for a neo-pragmatist perspective on social theory, the value of any theoretical enterprise lies to a large extent in its ability to enable us to see things differently, to present a new and useful perspective on things. It also follows that the value of a theoretical proposal is relative to the context in which it emerged and the issues it addressed: once established and widely adopted, for instance, its value diminishes. Coming back to our article, we tried to show that our theoretical outline is not an attempt to resuscitate old ideas, but to present and develop a novel

perspective on a wide range of social phenomena, including topics of contemporary societal significance such as populism, forced migration, and the COVID-crisis.

Incidentally, the very same pragmatist perspective might explain why some of Susen's theoretical concerns do not preoccupy us to the same extent. From a pragmatist perspective, various meta-theoretical debates—for instance, between those who hold onto a notion of free will versus those who subscribe to a deterministic picture—are not really as significant as often conceived. Theoretical questions only gain importance if there is an empirical (or other) pay-off. To put it bluntly, what would be gained by elaborating on our position in relation to the myriad philosophical schisms which Susen lists? Very little, we think, at least from a sociological viewpoint. We hold onto a parsimonious notion of theory, deliberately, as Husserl ([1913] 2017) put it, "bracketing" the enormous philosophical questions which Susen throws at us. This is not to say that we ignore key theoretical questions, for instance, surrounding the making of social order. As should have been clear from the latter parts of our essay, the theoretical outline that we propose does present a different account of social order than other traditional conceptions, one which emphasizes that the primacy of existential milestones feeds into people's decision making to such an extent that they become entangled in a variety of societal (and occasionally legal) commitments which ultimately render social life relatively patterned and predictable.

Do we imply an algorithmic model of society?

Kemple's imaginative response to our piece questions the apparent implication in our model of a fixed and unidirectional timeline "that traces a straight path from the past to the present to the future" (Kemple). Outhwaite similarly singles out the implied rigidity that he sees as built into our temporal model, especially as it is expressed in the metaphor of "existential milestones." Such milestones "must, if taken literally," he suggests, "be passed sequentially in a linear progress" (Outhwaite), presenting a picture of society as akin to the design of a board game (or we might add, a "Fighting Fantasy," or "Choose Your Own Adventure" novel) with a limited number of determinate choices, leading to a series of predefined outcomes.

If this really was the model of society we were proposing, it would be concerning, for it would be providing a picture of an individual's progress through a life course as algorithmic, and ultimately binding within the limited number of choices available. This is not, however, the model we set out. Recognition of the social and normative constraints built into dominant/hegemonic and culturally specific milestones, as well as the relative path dependence of certain decisions and contextual conditions in which decisions are made, does not necessitate theoretical determinism nor does it eliminate free will. It is simply acknowledging the power of those forces that sociology roots so much of its disciplinary authority within: social pressures, aggregate probabilities, statistical likelihoods, and normative tendencies. It is admitting that society exists, and that in doing so, it exerts force upon the individual. This is not a force, like in physics, that we can predict the exact effect of for any particular data point, but it is a force that we can detect in predictable patterns when we observe sufficiently large groups of people.

To avoid these apparent issues with our proposal, Outhwaite suggests we adopt Freud's psychoanalytic notion of *Nachträglichkeit* ("afterwardsness") which draws attention to the later effect or assimilation of earlier psychological experiences. Moreover, drawing upon Archer, he emphasizes that future orientation rarely involves the execution of some initial plan or *telos* (or the meeting of some pre-defined milestone), but is often a sequence of reactions to the events and openings that life (often unpredictably) throws at us. Here we would agree wholeheartedly and point out that our metatheoretical emphasis on pragmatism complements this understanding in foregrounding how actors solve puzzles in practical yet contingent, and sometimes imperfect, ways. Actors make meanings in the process of adjusting to the world and overcoming the problems they confront. In this process of meaning-making, actors can of course redefine their interpretation of the relative significance of certain existential milestones, which is the point at which hermeneutics enters our framework. They might choose to reject such milestones entirely, or instead to relegate or amplify their importance. We would stress, however, that this pragmatic awareness of how actors attempt to "solve" the world that confronts them in both cognitive and emotional ways (so as to successfully move through it), need not invalidate the proposition that dominant norms concerning appropriate milestones nevertheless weigh heavily on these puzzle-solving processes. Moreover, as we stress in our piece, unequal access to resources also structures actors' *capacities* to pragmatically grapple with the social world. Available resources, in other words, shape actors' abilities to make use of the social opportunities and overcome the social barriers that they encounter as they move through a life course.

In a similar critique, Kemple draws on Vico and Durkheim to propose a more fluid and cyclical temporality to that which he sees us as offering, one "that cuts diagonally across these vertical and horizontal trajectories." Only by "queering" time and supplementing the notion of "milestones" with that of "civilizational 'cornerstones'" (those periodic rituals and ceremonies that compose the civil elements of collective life) might we free our model from its apparently flat, inflexible, and teleological temporal assumptions. On this charge of teleology, Kemple is correct in appealing to us to recognize the large swathes of life decisions and life course processes that are unexpected, unplanned, fortuitous, tendential, serendipitous, or feeling-toward-something-not-yet-entirely-known, rather than those perhaps rarer instances in which actors execute a definitive and preconceived plan. It is indeed, as Outhwaite also points out, often only retrospectively that such apparently ordered "plans" are superimposed on the way things happen to have turned out. Nevertheless, we simultaneously assert that whether they are fixed or not, or realized or not, or even changed to fit our retrospective interpretation of where we happen to have ended up, immediate and short-term goals, as well as longer-term life plans, do structure the lifeworlds of human beings, and in fact constitute the *sine qua non* of intentional human activity. Our pragmatic inspiration allows us to recognize the necessity of such ends to human beings in allowing them to orient and make sense of their activity, whilst at the same time acknowledging their conditional and revisable nature.

Queering temporalities even further, Kemple builds upon Simmel's recuperation of premodern accounts of death (that apparent ultimate *telos*) not as some conclusive endpoint toward which we are all inexorably drawn, but "as inherent in human sensemaking practices that define our existence as mortals," suggesting that in doing so "Simmel

inaugurates a kind of 'queer phenomenology'." Kemple is no doubt correct here to remind us of how ancient conceptions of death treated that event as continuously informing—and therefore continuously present in—life, not only through existential reflection on one's own mortality, but also through communion and exchange (offerings, sacrifices, etc.) between the living and the ancestral dead (see e.g. Baudrillard, 1976). But as Kemple himself notes, such temporal queerings complement, rather than undermine the account that we have put forward. Moreover, we would add that whilst paying attention to the exceptions (or subversions, or anomalies, or queerings) of dominant norms is critical, it is precisely these exceptions that prove the sociological rule. Queering would make little sense without recognition of relative social fixity, and once again, this recognition of the relative endurance and stability of norms around what constitutes a "good life" within a particular social environment, and indeed what defines its various punctuated moments or milestones, need not be taken as denying simultaneous diversity, mutability, and contestability. As we make clear, the ends that we identify are not absolute. There is no ultimate teleology built into our model. We made explicit that "different forms of social power influence the actor's ability to 'reverse' time in the pursuit of deferred or redefined existential milestones" and that the "capacity to re-specify a particular existential milestone . . . or work towards an existential milestone at a later stage in life . . . is in large part an effect of the relative power and resources available to that actor" (Baert et al., 2021).

Lurking behind Kemple and Outhwaite's criticisms in this regard appears to be an even more worrying suggestion that we have smuggled in a normative model of how temporalities *should* evolve, as if we are not only asserting that certain milestones *do* define the cultural specificity of societies, and particular groups within them, but also that they *ought* to. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding of our intent. We must stress that we remain entirely agnostic (at least in our proposal) as to the desirability of the dominant internalized milestones, ladders, and urgencies we nevertheless believe it is sociologically illuminating to analyze.

Responding to our comments on how meeting certain existential milestones might allow for the fulfillment or obstruction of one's "ability to live out a fully human life," Susen recognizes that we are indeed "conscious of the socio-historical contingency that permeates human life forms, including conceptions of 'the good life'." Nevertheless, he suggests that "certain epistemic tensions" exist here between an implicit universalism, essentialism, or foundationalism (implied in the reference to a fully *human* life) and a contextualism, constructivism, or pragmatism (implied in our stress upon the cultural, geographical, and historical variability of what the content of this fully human life might be). Moreover, Susen suggests that these tensions find their source in our proposal's ambitious attempt to reconcile philosophy, which is concerned with universals, with sociology, which deals more with social contingencies. Indeed, in reference to the existential milestones, ladders, and urgencies we identify, he proposes that it would be "the task of a philosophically informed sociology to expose their *contingent* features, just as it is the task of a sociologically informed philosophy to uncover their *universal* features."

These comments might make sense for many of the dominant philosophical traditions that exist. However, as we have mentioned above, and although we do not reference it

explicitly in our paper, as both Susen and Wagner-Pacifici correctly detect, alongside its existentialist influences, pragmatism is the philosophical tradition most closely aligned with our proposal. Unlike other philosophical traditions, one of pragmatism's key defining features is precisely its rejection of such strongly-conceived universal foundations, and its attempt instead to build a philosophy out of the practical ways in which contingencies provoke unique solutions to distinctive problems.

Susen suggests—in a reasonable, though perhaps schematic, manner—that we are confronted with three options. First, to embrace the *universalist-essentialist-foundationalist* perspective, second, to pin our convictions to the *contextualist-constructivist-pragmatist* perspective, or third, to adopt a position that combines, or tries to reconcile aspects of both these perspectives. Whilst he understands most of our contribution as lying in this third camp, he implores us to position ourselves more explicitly in relation to these tensions.

In an effort to respond to this request, we suggest the following: whilst there are very few universals built into our theory, this does not mean that we spurn them altogether. Two obvious such universals are worth noting. Firstly, we see the obstinate biological fact of impending death as a universal feature of human life. This is something that Turner picks up on in his perspicacious review, whilst unpacking the implications in terms of embodied vulnerability and precarity that universal mortality entails (see also Butler, 2004). Secondly, and more philosophically, we also assert the universal phenomenology of human existence (shaped as it is by the first universal) as significant to understanding individuals' life choices. Beyond these two elementary universals, however, our proposal is built on an assumption of diverse social contingency and competing conceptions of what constitutes a life well lived, and competing solutions as to how to live it.

What new paths are there for further development?

The reviewers, through their own unique perspectives, have helpfully pointed out how both social necessities and contingencies shape the pursuit of existential milestones, and we take the opportunity to expand on three of the recurrent themes that could be explored in future research: the question of generations vis-à-vis the contributions of Karl Mannheim; the relationship of capitalism, commodification, and consumerism to the construction and pursuit of existential milestones; and the "body" as a key locus upon which existential milestones are conceived, pursued, and realized.

Inglis, Turner, and Wagner-Pacifici have highlighted the potential theoretical affinity between our model and the sociology of generations—specifically the contributions of Karl Mannheim. Indeed, we are fully in agreement with both Wagner-Pacifici and Turner's suggestion to develop this line of enquiry further, in conversation with existing and emerging research. Proceeding from Mannheim's position that experiences shared by similar age cohorts in adolescence and early adulthood have a formative influence on generational identity (see also Schuman and Scott, 1989), we would expect that the shared experience of these contingent events are likely to affect the kind of existential milestones a particular generation valorizes and pursues. Moreover, we would also anticipate that generational responses to these contingencies would also differ as well. As Turner explores with reference to COVID-19, the same catastrophic event can have

disparate effects across different generations in terms of health risks, employment, and quality of life. COVID-19 has shown that the pursuit of existential milestones for some generations (e.g. search for bigger houses in the suburbs and the countryside, which stimulates the housing market) may result in the blocking of milestones for other generations (e.g. unaffordable housing for younger generations and first-time buyers); these developments in turn reshape what alternative milestones one might seek to achieve. To be sure, the pursuit of existential milestones need not be a zero-sum game (e.g. legalizing gay marriage does not curtail the rights of heterosexual couples to marry), but, as we discussed in relation to the hypothetical working couple with a young child, the pursuit of certain milestones for some can also mean the giving up of milestones for others, at individual or collective levels. This does not mean, however, that the systemic "blockage" of existential milestones results in persistent misery for certain generations. As Wagner-Pacifici has suggested, such systemic deprivations of milestones for disadvantaged generations may provoke organized political action for the pursuit of certain milestones, including education, marriage, employment, and housing.

Wagner-Pacifici—via Manuella Badilla Rajevic's work—also highlights the continuities and discontinuities of existential milestones across generations of grandparents, parents, and children. This raises a related question: to what extent do younger generations "inherit" the parents and grandparents' autobiographical aspirations and reflections as "post-memory" (Hirsch, 2012)? We have stressed throughout our model that in addition to wider cultural norms, the social position of the caregiving generation plays a crucial part not only in an individual's projection of future milestones ("you will become a *X*"; "you will go to *Y* University"; "you will marry *Z*") but also in the very ability to plan for the long-term future. It does not require a Bourdieusian sociologist to recognize that the aspirations (and the concomitant social advantages) of certain professions—such as doctors, lawyers, bankers, politicians, and academics—tend to be reproduced across multiple generations: to use Maurice Halbwachs in conjunction with Mannheim, "in every family there develops. . .a particular mentality, since a family possesses traditions that are peculiar to it" (Halbwachs, 1992: 74). To develop this Halbwachsian line further, we may also find that the pursuit of milestones might also correlate with other "social frameworks of memory" such as religions, occupations, and friends.

Once again, we stress that we are not making a structural or deterministic argument here. An important sociological question—and in our view, a more interesting one than that of necessity versus contingency—is to consider to what extent an individual's projection of existential milestones is shaped by the autobiographical memories of previous generations or by other social factors such as other members of the same age cohort, wider cultural norms, and the intersectional position that an individual occupies within a society. In our view, this is a question that can only be answered adequately through detailed empirical investigation, rather than through an abstract (meta-)theoretical resolution.

This brings us to the second point of enquiry, on the generative merits of certain aspects of critical theory, specifically the concept of "hegemony" which appear to be integral not only to the pursuit of existential milestones, but to the consumption of milestones such as marriage, "mid-life crises," traveling, retirement, even funerals. Kemple and Inglis provide a lucid elaboration of how one might combine our analysis of

existential milestones with notions of commodification, transaction, and consumption, and a critical examination of industries built entirely around the realization of such goals (what Inglis memorably calls the "milestones industry," of which a subsection is clearly the "gravestone industry"). We wholeheartedly agree that an incorporation of the insights of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School may help elucidate the *doxic* conditions within contemporary societies, as well as to explore how one might resist and reject these normative conditions. Inglis's identification of existential milestones as a primary site of commodification takes insights from sociologists such as Zelizer (2007) concerning how the profane world of money and exchange shapes the sacred world of love, intimacy, and our most cherished ties to others, in an exciting new direction.

Taking this line of enquiry further, however, we might also suggest that the very act of "resisting" or "rejecting" certain normative milestones is often indebted to normative discourses of its own, grounded in a *different* form of consumerism to that of "mainstream" milestones. Moreover, the culture embodied in resisting dominant milestones has come not only to structure consumption, but production practices too. In other words, the "queering" libertarian countercultural spirit of the 1970s has morphed into the "new spirit of capitalism" of our present era (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2017).

There are several theorists in addition to Inglis's suggestions that could help develop these arguments in useful ways. For instance, Elliott and Lemert (2009) have argued that the rise of "new individualism" has led to the decline of traditions, privatization of public institutions, transnationalization of cultural practices, the pursuit of "short-term" changes through instant fixes (such as plastic surgery), and continuous "reinvention" of the self to the extent that the notion of the self as a "project" has, as Foucault recognized, itself become a "social norm and cultural obligation" (Elliott and Lemert, 2009: 13). Similarly, Gill and Orgad (2015) have pointed out that women's "confidence" is increasingly a commodity that can be bought and sold. As Gill (2007) has argued in her earlier work, "postfeminism" relies on the self-regulation of the female body as a site of power, through a double process involving the denial of structural sexism alongside the affirmation of the "active, confident, assertive female" subject (Gill, 2007: 152). In this context, neoliberal postfeminism posits that gender-based inequalities could be solved if only women were more confident and assertive (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 328–329), and the ultimate responsibility lies with women to change themselves through instant fixes sold in the form of self-help books and courses (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 331). Following Inglis's exhortation to consider certain milestones as commodities, then, we might also suggest that whether one is pursuing, rejecting, or "queering" certain existential milestones, the act of pursuing those milestones is often ineluctably embedded within capitalism and the hegemony of "consumption."

The third point of elaboration regards the theoretical richness of focusing on the body as the site at which individuals conceive of, act on, and realize their existential milestones, explored in different but complementary ways by Kemple and Turner. Concepts surrounding embodiment and enactment are crucial to our proposed model, not just because we reject the straightforward body-mind, idealism-materialism dichotomies that Susen mentions, but more importantly, because the body is very often the site upon which individuals wish to enact their existential milestones.

There are several reasons why the body is crucial to the understanding of existential milestones. Firstly, as we have elaborated in the original article and in the discussion above, and as Turner has explored in his text, existential milestones arise out of a sense of one's own mortality, which in turn drives existential urgency. Secondly, the body is ever-changing: the body itself undergoes continuous physiological changes over one's life course, which defines the ability to achieve certain milestones (e.g. have children), or to delay death and to realize more milestones along the way. Thirdly, because of the relative "malleability" of the body, for many people, the body becomes the very object of one's project for realizing their "authentic self," from dieting, bodybuilding, and "anti-aging" beauty products to procedures such as tattoos, body modification, Botox injections, plastic surgery, and gender reassignment. Fourthly, and lastly, the body becomes the central object of concern for achieving the ultimate existential milestone: what kind of death would one like to meet? Once again, we stress that this is not merely a philosophical question, but also a sociological one. Short of suicide, most of us do not have a choice over when and how to die. Nevertheless, there are disparate outcomes and life chances surrounding how one is likely to pass away, as seen in global disparities in life expectancies, health in old age, retirement age (if one can afford to retire at all), pensions, as well as end-of-life care and access to euthanasia or assisted suicide.

Although we have not been able to address all the provocative and productive responses to the preliminary theoretical outline we proposed, engaging with those that we have been able to has been an intellectually stimulating exercise for us. The various unexpected directions in which the respondents have taken our essay has reminded us that the elaboration of ideas is rarely an isolated endeavor, and almost always a less interesting one when it remains so. Whilst as authors we have our own future plans for extending, deepening, and refining our proposal in both its theoretical and empirical aspects, our hope is that it will also continue to be taken up, critiqued, and developed in the exemplary ways that the contributors to this Special Issue have done.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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