

Future: what is it and why are we so concerned about it?

Do you find yourself thinking about what you will do next day, next week, or in 5 years from now, from time to time? Well, you most likely think about such thoughts, if not daily, at least once in a week. In fact, a renowned psychology professor at University of Queensland, Roy Baumeister and his team published an interesting study about our daily thoughts about time in [2020](#). They asked 492 adults to record what they

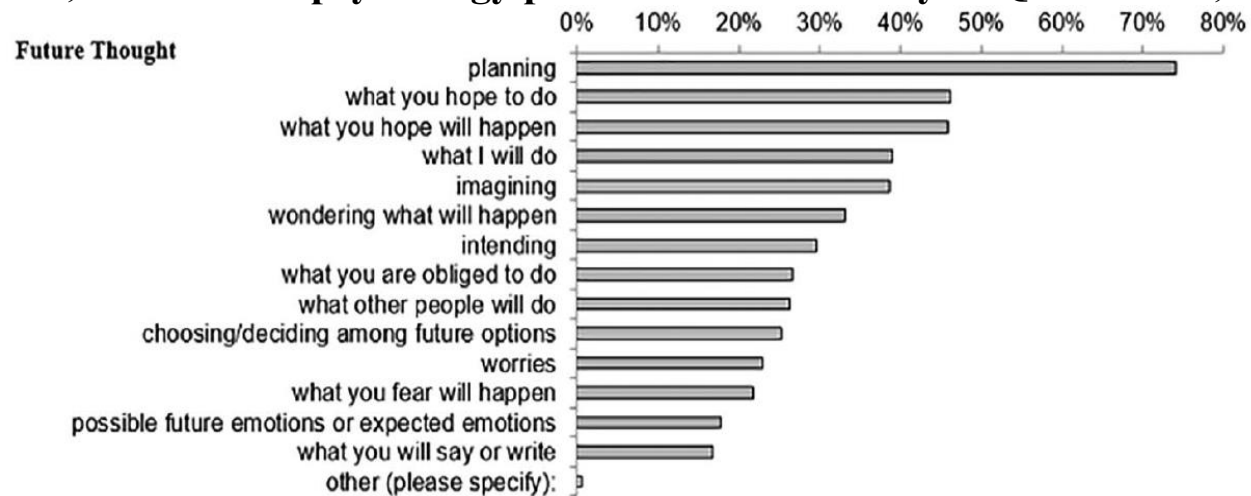


Figure. The contents of "future thoughts" in Baumeister et al. (2020)

think about and when (i.e., past, present, and future) that specific event in their thought take place, at random times during the day for 3-days. They noted that while majority of our thoughts are about the present (more than 50%), a considerable proportion of our thoughts devoted to the thoughts about the *future* (18%). The content of such thoughts, though, seem to vary from thinking about future options to planning.

Furthermore, by using similar methodology in [2011](#), Arnaud D'Argemabeau and his colleagues examined the frequency of the future-oriented thinking and its' qualities: they reported that humans do think about the future daily, however such thoughts are mainly about the near future such as what to do later that day after work as compared to the long-term future-oriented thoughts such as thinking about what they will do in 5 years.

Our main question is what is this *future* that we spend a significant amount of our lives thinking about and when do humans start thinking about the future in their long evolutionary history? More importantly, why do we think about the future? Here, in this three-part blog series, we will uncover these questions by drawing on philosophy, science, art, and literature.

Let's start with defining what *future* is. Oxford Dictionary defines future as:

FUTURE.

n. *“The time that is to come; future time”*

adj. *“That is to be, become, or happen: likely or expected to exist or occur in a time to come”*

The first use of the term, *future*, in English dates back to early 1400s in a translation of a Late Antiquity period philosopher's work ([Boethius](#)), where he argued a way to explain how future remains as potentials, but God still can have the absolute knowledge of past, present and the future. A debate that had been critical how people at time tried to reconcile two clashing ideas: (i) a holy entity to know everything that has happened, is happening and will happen, and (ii) future is unknown, and uncertain. If we take that everything is known (even by one person or an entity), then how can we talk about the endless possibilities that could have happened but did not, how can we talk about humans' free will to decide on their *future*?

Even before Boethius, Classical Greek Era philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle have discussions on *time* and *future*. In fact, Boethius had been influenced by Aristotle's discussions on the *future*.

[Aristotle](#) argues against the predominant belief that future is certain by saying that future is nothing but unactualized potentials. Aristotle's ideas, as his many ideas are, were not embraced immediately. However, the fact that he was arguing against the deterministic view, says a lot about his take on about the future. Imagine a society, where stories about how Oracles and Gods and/or Goddesses describe events that certainly would happen to the heroes such as in [Homer's Iliad](#), Achilles' mother, Thetis told him he was to die in Troy if he chose to stay and fight. She was certain that this was the future, and Achilles knew that it would be the final. It is rather striking that growing up in such a society, Aristotle describe the future in this way.

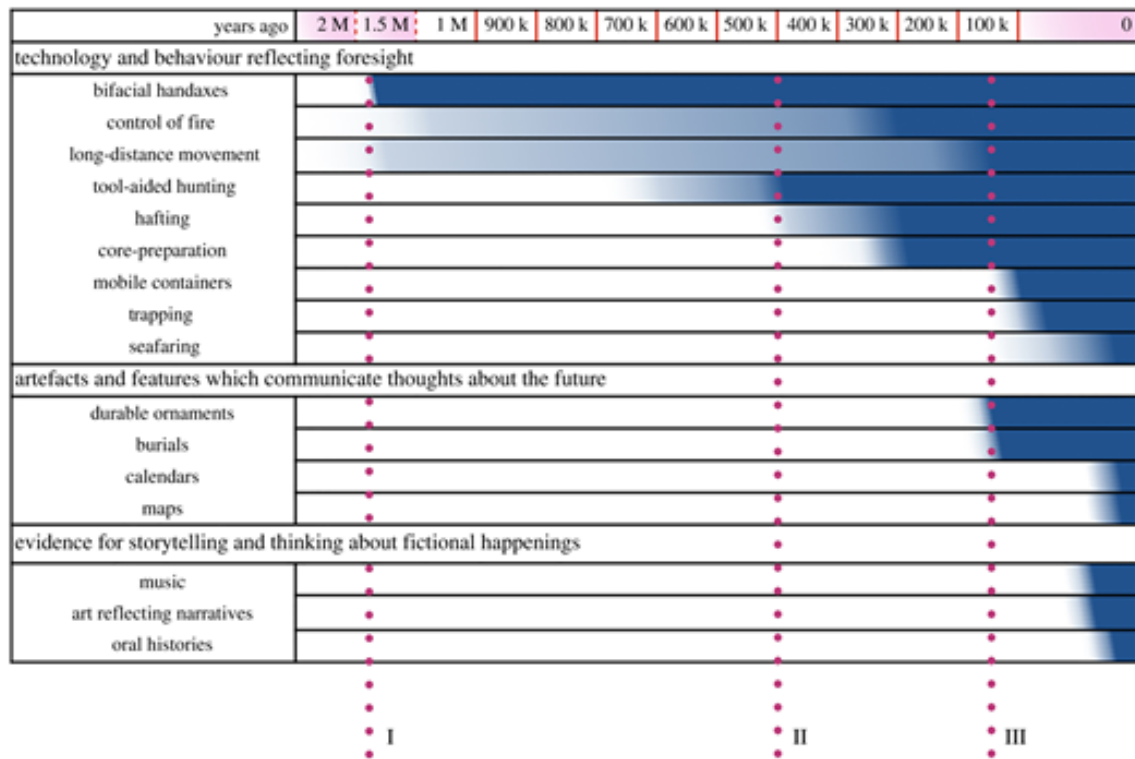
Is this the earliest reference where we see humans talk about the *future*? NO! Way earlier than Classical Greek Era, Ancient Romans did believe in Janus, the God of beginnings. It has two faces, one facing to the past the other facing to the *future*: two temporal points that holds so much for our beings, our personality. Janus holds the key to the transition from one to another: from past to the future, from the end to the beginning. Seeing such a God to exist it this time – and in one body on top of that – might surprise us at first. Because, during the Ancient Era, people think *time* as in cycles for their everyday practices, not linear. The seasons comes and goes in a cycle; the rivers flood at certain time in a year – everything happens in cycles. However, the time itself is also seen as a linear entity, continuing towards to the future, not in a circular manner but in a linear way. So, it's no surprise to see a god like Janus exist: Janus represents the duality of time in one body. They are not in a loop, but they are not separate either.



Janus, the God of Beginnings, Transition, Time

In the [*Epic of Gilgamesh*](#), which was dated back 2100 BCE, we read the divine prophecy and discussion on Gilgamesh's future: Gilgamesh's mother, Rimat-Ninsun, interprets his dreams as a message from the gods and foresees a companion (Enkidu) who will rescue Gilgamesh and assist him in his achievements. Of course these are the stories that transcend the time; however, these are the earliest references to the *future* and its qualities in the literature. Future has been discussed as a prophecy, as a path provided to the heroes given, they make certain decisions. It is, as Aristotle's suggests, a potential that has yet to be actualized. Therefore, it's uncertain.

Apparently, the term, *future*, has been referred in the literature and philosophy for a long time. What about how it's reflected in human life? Thomas Suddendorf (University of Queensland) and Michael Corballis (University of Auckland) suggest that the earlier signs of people thinking about the future can be seen in their weaponry choices in their [2007](#) influential paper. They argue that the fact that in human history, humans start creating stone weapons that can be used *repeatedly* is a clear sign that humans start thinking about the future AND prepare for it in the present. What is more astonishing is that this accomplishment dates back more than 400.000 years ago! In fact, Michelle Langley and Thomas Suddendorf published an article in [2022](#) with the figure below.



They demonstrated how archaeological findings shed light on the evolutionary timeline of thinking about *possibilities*. By reviewing the archeological findings, Langley and Suddendorf conclude that the earliest signs of thinking about the future can date back to 1.8 Ma. It seems humans have been thinking about and preparing for the future for so long. They first figured out how to defend themselves or satisfy their hunger by throwing stones at a predator. However, what would they do if

they face a predator and no stones available? Then, they evolved to anticipate the possibility of this event happening again and – in order not to die – they started carrying their stones with them, so that they would be prepared for a predator attacking them or use it in case they got hungry. Although this behaviour is very instinctual and can be a bit different than, let's say, planning your retirement plans, it's a clear sign that humans think about future possibilities.

This brings us about *why do we even think about the future?* Scientists propose a variety of reasons why we think about the future. Here we have the most commonly argued ones:

Planning: Scientists argue that thinking about the future enables us to formulate plans and connect our goals for the future and our behaviours in the present. For instance, if you want to buy a house once you retire, you need to understand that it's crucial you start saving money and planning how much you can save and how much you can spend each month.

Problem-Solving: Thinking about the future allows us to consider an upcoming situation from different angles. Let's imagine that you will have many project deadlines around the same time and you are aware that it will be very chaotic for you to complete them. To handle this situation, prior to the deadline, you can think about the possible scenarios where you finish different task in different times, evaluate how relaxed you will feel once you check each deadline on your list, and assess the potential quality of your work if they are completed in a timely manner.

Decision-Making: This function seems to be related to the first two. Thinking about a future scenario might result in decisions that are more optimal in the long term. Let's imagine that you have limited budget and you want to spend it with your family. You can use it to spend your summer holiday in a nice island in Mediterranean Sea. This holiday will cost a lot, given the transportation (e.g., flights to and from there), accommodation and the gifts you will bring back with you. However, it might be a once-a-life event that you and your family will remember and

cherish. OR you can go skiing during the long weekend to a familiar place where you have been going for years. However, if you go there, it would be impossible for you to have your dream summer vacation and have to stay at home during summer. What would you do in this scenario? If you think about yourselves laying on the beach under the warm sun, having fun with your family, it will be more likely for you to skip the skiing and keep your money for the vacation in Mediterranean Sea. If you are a winter person, then please go with the second plan!

Self-Regulation: Thinking about the future might also enable people to anticipate their feelings about a certain event and modifying their behaviours to either avoid or pursue that event. For instance, imagine that you need to take a very long trip to home. If you do not pack anything with you before leaving the house, such as a new novel, you would feel extremely bored during your trip. However, in order for you to think this and modify your behaviour in the present, you need to think about being in your seat, spending your time with doing nothing but getting bored. Hence, thinking about your future self in a certain situation would enable you to make a decision that would help your emotional regulation in the future.

Social Bonding: Given that humans are social creatures, it's important for us to determine if an ability has any implications for the social relations. Well, for future-thinking, some scientists suggest that thinking about the future can increase the strength of the relations and coordination. For instance, if you have an upcoming celebration, you are more likely to invite your friends and include them in your plans. You will share a meaningful moment in your life with them that will happen in the future. You show them your commitment to your relationship with them. You also update them about what is the itinerary to allow them to plan their time and coordinate their interactions with you.

Identity: One final function of future thinking is creating and maintaining a continuous self in time who has values, characteristics, preferences, likes and dislikes. Although, I would like to note that the change is inevitable, having a coherent understanding of one's own self is critical in how their personality stays relatively stable.

I want to leave you all with this scene from [Back to the Future \(1985\)](#). This is when Doc Brown says: "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads." when he drives the DeLorean to the future.

Unlike them, we do not even need the machine to think about the future! All we need to do is to imagine the potentials that are awaiting to be actualized!



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