

## Meaning and Immortality

Most of us mourn death as a great tragedy or a loss. If death is bad, then NOT dying must be a good thing. In other words, intuitively, most of us probably assume that immortality is desirable.

But, perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps death is actually a GOOD thing. Bernard Williams argues that, if we never died—that is, if we were immortal—then life would be meaningless. Thus, only the lives of beings who die can be meaningful.

**1. On the Deprivation Account:** Lucretius (philosopher, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) believed that death is never bad, because there is no one for whom death is bad—i.e., no existing person who is harmed by death. Lucretius even claims that a very short life is no worse than a long one. But, can that be right? Williams imagines two lives:

- (a) Harry dies at the age of 5, before experiencing very many good things.
- (b) John dies at the age of 85, after experiencing many good things (being in love, acquiring knowledge, many happy experiences, seeing and appreciating beautiful things—art, landscapes, etc.—doing many morally good deeds, and so on).

Which of these two lives seems better? Clearly the second, right? So, one might suggest, we should not be confused by Lucretius' claim that death is not bad because there is no one around to be harmed by it. Even if this were the case, we can still say that John's life is better than Harry's—for the simple reason that John's contains more good things than Harry's, and "more good" means "BETTER". So, then, insofar as a longer life includes more "goods", the longer a life is, the better it is. So, others (e.g., Nagel) conclude that death is bad—namely because, when one dies, one is DEPRIVED of whatever goods they would have experienced, had they lived longer (by virtue of no longer existing).

Now, clearly death is not a deprivation of future goods for everyone. Considering our grandparents or whoever, we might often think that death is a blessing for the very old—but that is only due to certain contingent facts about human life. It just turns out that, as one ages, their bodies become more decrepit, their memories start to fade, their minds atrophy, and so on.

But, what if things weren't like that? What if we never aged; never started to feel pain in our joints, or started to forget things, and so on? What if our minds and bodies remained as robust as they are in our prime (for instance, on many views of the afterlife—e.g., in heaven—life would be like this)? Surely, then we would not think of death as a blessing. If our bodies and minds were like that, we might be tempted to think that immortality would be a very good thing (e.g., an eternity in heaven seems like a very good thing to many people).

So, if we accept the Deprivation Account of why death is bad, it seems that we are committed to the conclusion that immortality is a good thing—at least, immortality COULD be good. Immortality for someone in some sort of hell would be a very bad thing! But, eternal life COULD be good, so long as more life has more good things to offer (i.e., if the life you would have had would have continued to be good for you).

**2. Conditions For a Good Immortality:** So far we have said that, intuitively, in principle, immortality COULD be good, right? (not if one is in hell, or if one continues to weaken and become senile, but, surely there is SOME way that immortality could be where existing forever would be a good thing. For instance, those who imagine being in heaven for eternity assume that immortality is good.)

But, what conditions would eternal life have to satisfy in order to be considered good? Williams claims that, in order for immortality to be good for ME, two conditions must be met (I'll use Fischer's labels):

- (1) **The Identity Condition:** The person who lives at any point in the future must be the same person as me.
- (2) **The Attractiveness Condition:** The sort of life that that person lives must be one that I want; i.e., it must be a life that is desirable, or appealing, to me.

The burden of proof, says Williams, for those who believe that eternal life could be good, is that of

providing any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity which would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life. (94-95)

In other words, we must provide a model which meets conditions (1) and (2). But, such a model is impossible to provide, he says. For, both of these conditions cannot be met at the same time.

**3. The Attractiveness Condition:** Why can't the two conditions be simultaneously met?

The Makropulos Case: Williams considers a story inspired by a play about a woman named Elina Makropulos, who has been drinking an elixir of life for 300 years. She is 342 years old. In the end, she refuses to continue drinking it, because life has become a dull state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. Williams claims that ANY sort of eternal life would inevitably be like this—in the end, boring, meaningless, and undesirable. (Consider Bill's immortality in the last 5 minutes of the film, [It's Such a Beautiful Day](#).)

Williams asks us: What would life have to be like in order for it to be good FOREVER? If you believe in heaven, try to describe how it would have to be in order to be eternally good. Surely, singing psalms forever would not be good. That would get boring, right?

Williams says, there is NO KIND OF LIFE AT ALL that could be good forever. Every kind of life at all, he says, is one that you would eventually want to be rid of. ANY sort of life, no matter how good initially, would eventually become tedious, boring, and horrible.

Consider: Things that are good to have in small quantities often (always?) become bad for you in large quantities. (Imagine eating 100 chocolates in a row) Is life itself like that?

What keeps life meaningful? Experiences? Well, imagine doing something you love. Now imagine doing it for one year straight. Now 10 years. Now 100. A million. A billion... An experience—no matter how good—will inevitably become tedious if done for long enough. Eating your favorite candy may be great for a little while, but not after a billion years (probably not even after a few hours).

Perhaps the problem is that we need to imagine a situation with more diversity. Okay, so now imagine doing something you love each day of the week. Monday is art day. Tuesday is sports day. Wednesday is learning day. Thursday is love day. And so on (or whatever it is that you love). But, now imagine doing that for a year. 10 years. 100 years. A million. A billion... Even diverse good experiences will become tedious eventually.

Still not good? Okay, perhaps MORE diversity? But, of what sort? What could possibly be good FOREVER. And EVER. And EVER... ?

A pleasure machine? Imagine a machine like ones that some rats have been hooked up to, where they press a lever and are stimulated with euphoric pleasure. (Maybe some sort of drug is equivalent). Could an eternity of THAT be good? Wouldn't you become bored of it, or horrified by it, at some point? Surely, you would eventually reflect on your state and recognize that your eternal state of euphoria was really dull and meaningless.

Conclusion So Far: For any sort of model that we try to conceive of, The Attractiveness Condition is not met.

**4. The Identity Condition:** Perhaps the problem is that we are able to reflect on what is happening and become bored? Well, then, perhaps the solution is to remove the psychological features that lead to boredom. We might do this in a number of ways:

- (1) Removing Higher Consciousness: Perhaps some sort of lobotomy would prevent this; something to reduce us to the intelligence of, say, a rat. (We would have to, in Williams' words, make boredom literally "unthinkable".) Ignorance is bliss, as

they say. Could that sort of immortality be good? Maybe. But do you WANT that as your immortal life for yourself? Probably not. It seems that such a life would constitute a complete loss of self. YOU would no longer exist. Something else without your own unique, individual higher consciousness would exist, perhaps—but not YOU. (This might be similar to some Buddhist ideas where the self is lost or absorbed into something greater and perfect.)

- (2) Complete Engrossment: Williams considers the idea of immortality in a state where one is so completely engrossed in some project, activity, or train of thought, etc., that one is distracted from one's self and one's boredom (this is another possible scenario where boredom becomes "unthinkable"). Williams dismisses this possibility because such an individual would, again, not be YOU. If one were really SO engrossed in an activity that they were no longer capable of reflecting on one's self and recognizing the tedium of it when performed for an eternity, then that is just to say that the person has ceased to exist. In short, to lose one's self in some activity is LITERALLY to lose one's self.
- (3) Eternal Reincarnation: Williams toys around with the idea of a sort of eternal reincarnation, where one individual lives an endless series of "lives", one after another. But, to Williams, a series of lives is not a single life at all—but rather a SERIES of lives. For, in order for reincarnation to prevent boredom, it would need to be the case that you cannot REMEMBER any of the past lives. But, if one cannot remember any of one's past lives, then how is this a continuity of identity?
- (4) Forgetfulness: Perhaps forgetfulness mixed with immortality would make immortal life good? If you watch the same movie over and over—even your favorite movie—it probably starts to get boring after a while. But, what if you FORGOT the movie afterward every time after watching? Maybe then, things could continue to be amazing forever and ever. (I've heard many people say, for instance, "I'm so jealous. You get to read Harry Potter FOR THE FIRST TIME! What I wouldn't give to be able to do that again.") But, once again, a problem of personal identity creeps in here. How similar does the future person have to be to present me in order to be ME? How much can they forget and still remain me? If boredom is to be averted, a GREAT DEAL of forgetting would need to take place. But, if you were to describe to me a person who has no memory of ever hearing any of the songs I've heard, or reading any of the books I've read, or having the sorts of beliefs, goals, dispositions I've had, and so on, it might seem like you are NOT describing ME at all, but rather someone else.

In our attempt to avert the problem of inevitable boredom—i.e., in our attempt to meet The Attractiveness Condition—we have now come up with several models that fail to meet the OTHER condition: The Identity Condition.

And so we have a dilemma on our hands:

**Dilemma:** If \*I\* am the one who lives forever, then boredom will inevitably set in. If boredom does NOT set in, then it is not I who lives forever—but someone else.

In short, one can meet **EITHER** The Identity Condition **OR** The Attractiveness Condition, but not both.

One more time: If there is eternal life, then the future person will either have the same basic dispositions as me, or he won't. But: If the immortal person is ME (i.e., their basic goals, projects, interests, and dispositions are similar to mine), then boredom will set in. If we solve the problem of boredom by lobotomizing me or making me forget my experiences (or radically altering my basic dispositions in some other way), then it isn't ME that lives forever, and so isn't an attractive option for ME.

**5. Conclusion:** The fact that I am going to die is actually not a bad thing. After all, the alternative is to NOT die—i.e., to be immortal. But, if Williams is right, then immortality would be horrible. So death is the blessed escape from such a horrible fate.

*Note, however, that this is compatible with it being rational to mourn our own deaths and the deaths of others. Eternity is a very, very long time. Perhaps a life of 500, or 1,000, or one million years could still be very good, even if an INFINITE life could not. Perhaps the best life is neither 80 years nor infinity years, but rather a very long life—maybe a million years, or however long you'd like. So, even if Williams is right in claiming that ETERNAL life would be bad, and that being mortal is therefore good, it might still be the case that we have good reason to mourn the death of even a 100 year old, because that is still "too soon", and far short of the amount of time it would take for a life to become dull and no longer worth living.*

**6. Objections:** John Martin Fischer objects to the claim that Williams' two conditions could not be simultaneously met.

(a) The Attractiveness Condition: Fischer distinguishes between two types of pleasures.

- (1) Self-exhausting pleasures: These are the sorts of pleasures where, once you have experienced them once, you do not form a desire to experience it again. For instance, climbing to the top of Mt. Everest, or graduating high school, might be good examples. You may be very proud, or happy, to have completed these tasks, and you take some joy in them, but very likely you would not be eager to complete them again.
- (2) Repeatable pleasures: These are the sorts of pleasures where, once you have experienced them once, you DO form a desire to experience them again. For

instance, eating at your favorite restaurant, or hearing a really great song. "I'll definitely be eating here again," or "I want to hear that song again" are common things for people to say.

Williams' mistake, Fischer says, is to not include enough diversity in his models. Williams keeps speaking as if you are repeating ONE single activity forever and ever. Certainly, self-exhausting pleasures would become tedious immediately. Even if there were many of them, so long as there were a finite number, eventually one would have done everything there is to do. And, even repeatable pleasures would become tedious if repeated too frequently, or too close together. (for instance, imagine putting your favorite song on repeat for the next 50 years). But, perhaps with a suitable, large mix of repeatable pleasures, why couldn't eternal life be appealing?

(b) The Identity Condition: Williams claims that, if your character changes significantly over time, that it ceases to be YOU. But, Fischer challenges this claim. With the right amount of forgetfulness or change over time, and in the appropriate way, Fischer insists that personal identity would be retained. For instance, consider your beliefs, opinions, goals, dispositions, and so on at the age of 5, and compare them with yourself now. Surely, these things have changed dramatically! But, surely also you and that 5-year-old are one and the same person? What is important is that the change was gradual, and was the result of the right sorts of causal processes that suitably connect your present self to that earlier person. Fischer claims that there is no reason to think that such change could not occur eternally without jeopardizing or erasing your identity.

*Side Note: Fischer also asks, if you become so engrossed in something that you "lose yourself" in it for a while, during that time have you really, as Williams claims, LITERALLY lost yourself? Do you cease to exist during those moments? Fischer says no (contrary to Williams). You merely cease to stop thinking ABOUT yourself, but that does not entail the much stronger claim that, because of this, you also cease to exist! So, perhaps it remains a possibility that eternal life could be good if it involved something that was completely absorbing or engrossing in this way (e.g., if you are religious, perhaps—metaphorically—seeing the face of God for eternity would do the trick).*

Rebuttal: Is Fischer just failing to correctly conceive of eternity? Imagine that you experienced lots and lots of diverse, repeatable goods for a million, billion, trillion, billion, trillion, zillion, bajillion years. After all of that, how much longer would you have to go? What is the remaining duration of your immortality? Answer: Still an INFINITE number of years to go. When one is immortal, no matter HOW MUCH time one lives, there is always an INFINITY of years left to go. One NEVER gets closer to the end of one's life. Forever. And ever. And ever. And ever. And ever... Eternal life is simply staggering to think about. Does Fischer fail to respect this? [What do you think?]