Meaning and Immortality

<u>1. Intro</u>: They say that "Life is Good". There's even <u>a whole store</u>, with hats and stuff! If that's true, then doesn't it automatically follow that "MORE Life is GOODER" (i.e., *better*)?

Consider little Timmy, who dies in a car crash at the age of 10. Isn't this a tragedy? Timmy had SOME of a good life. But MORE of it would have been even BETTER. It is also true that Timmy's death seems to be a HARM to him.

In the history of philosophy, there has been some controversy regarding whether death is ever really a harm for the one who dies. E.g., Lucretius (philosopher, 1st 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. (Essentially, death can't be bad for you if you're not around to notice it!) But, can that be right?

It may help to consider what it means to be a harm. Here's a common answer:

Harm = Making someone worse off than they otherwise would have been.

But, now consider Timmy's 10 years, and compare this with how he otherwise would have been, had he NOT died in the car crash:



It seems like Timmy HAS been made worse off than he otherwise would have been, had he not died in the crash. For, he only gets 10 units of a good life instead of 80!

But now imagine Grandma, who dies at 80. It's sad, yes. But most people do not lament this as the same sort of great and sorrowful tragedy that Timmy's death is considered to be. Why not? Doesn't Grandma's death at 80 deprive her of countless good years that she could have lived, had we cured aging? Compare:



If life could continue to be good indefinitely, then death is always bad; it always comes to us as a harm. But the question is, COULD life continue to be good indefinitely?

<u>2. Two Conditions For a Good Immortality:</u> Bernard 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 Attractiveness Condition:** The life being lived must continue to be good, or desirable (i.e., "attractive") to the one who lives it.
- (2) **The Identity Condition:** The life must continue to be lived by *me* (i.e., personal identity must be preserved through time).

Unfortunately, says Williams, these two conditions cannot both be met at the same time.

• **The Makropulos Case** There is a play about a woman named Elina Makropulos, who has been drinking an elixir of life for 300 years. She is 342 years old. By this age, life has become a state of boredom, and indifference. Life itself has become dull, and tedious. She no longer wants to live. So, she stops taking the elixir, and she dies.

Williams claims that EVERY life would inevitably become like this—boring, meaningless, and undesirable. At some point, the attractiveness condition would fail to be met.

Is he right? [*What do you think?*] If you disagree, then ask yourself: What would life have to be like in order for it to be good FOREVER? [*For example, if you believe in heaven, then you ALREADY believe that eternal life could be good. So, what is heaven like?*]

You might be imagining doing fun stuff like eating your favorite meal, reading your favorite book, or hanging out with your favorite friend. ...But, now imagine doing this *forever, and ever, and ever, and ever...* Wouldn't it become tedious at some point?

There's a phenomenon known as **diminishing marginal utility**, where, the more units of some good that you get, the less value or goodness it brings. For example, imagine eating your favorite candy. The first one is delicious, and gives you a lot of pleasure. The second one is pretty good, but not as good. The third one is alright. The fourth one brings almost no extra pleasure. And so on. Could life itself be like this?



Williams says yes. Life itself is like this. Eventually, more of it ceases to be a good thing.

<u>3. Preventing The Tedium of Immortality:</u> How to prevent this? Perhaps the solution is to remove the psychological features that lead to boredom. We might do this in a number of ways:

(1) <u>Removing Higher Consciousness:</u> Perhaps a lobotomy would prevent this. We could damage your brain to reduce you to the intelligence of, say, a rat. (This would, in Williams' words, make boredom literally "unthinkable".)

Ignorance is bliss, as they say. Right? Could that sort of immortality be good? Maybe. But is this YOU? It doesn't seem so. In this case, there seems to be a complete loss of self. So the identity condition is not met.

(2) <u>Complete Engrossment:</u> Sometimes we find ourselves in a state where we are so completely engrossed in some project, activity, or train of thought, etc., that we forget everything else. Perhaps entering such a state eternally might distract us from the (supposedly) inevitable boredom?

Williams says no. Again, this would not be YOU! If you were really SO engrossed in an activity that you were no longer capable of thinking of anything else but this thing that you're engrossed in – e.g., no thoughts about your self, or your life, etc. – then it is as if "you" have ceased to exist! [*Is this correct? When we "lose ourselves" in an engrossing activity, do we literally LOSE OUR SELVES??*]

- (3) <u>Eternal Reincarnation</u>: Perhaps we could live a series of lives, one after the other. If we were eternally reincarnated, retaining no memories of our past lives, we wouldn't even know that we HAD been around for a long, long time. And so we wouldn't get bored. And yet... If you cannot remember any of your past lives, is it really YOU that survives? Williams says no. Again, the identity condition is not met. [*Note: Clearly, he believes that psychological continuity is a necessary condition of a person's survival through time. Do you agree?*]
- (4) <u>Forgetfulness</u>: If you watch the same movie over and over—even your favorite movie—it probably starts to get boring after a while. But, have you ever gone back to something where SO much time had passed since you first saw it (or read it, or whatever), that you can't remember it at all? It's just as exciting as the first time, then, isn't it? So then, what if we just periodically had our memories erased, so that we forgot our past experiences? Then, things wouldn't ever get boring because they'd always be new! Problem solved!

Williams disagrees. If boredom is to be averted, a LOT of forgetting would need to take place. Surely someone who cannot remember any of the things I've done – e.g., being at W&M, etc – surely that isn't ME. Right? [*Do you agree?*]

Conclusion: 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 proposals that fail to meet the OTHER condition: The Identity Condition. And so we have a dilemma:

EITHER life will become tedious and dull (so the Attractiveness Condition is not met) **OR** the person living a good life will not be me (so the Identity Condition is not met).

So, apparently, it's a GOOD thing that we are mortal! Yay, death!!

[Though, note that this is compatible with being in favor of researching anti-aging treatments. Even if an INFINITE amount of time could never continue to be good, perhaps a life of 150, or 500, or 1,000, or even a million years could still be very good. Right? Especially if our bodies are not slowly decaying and aging! What do you think? Even if you agree with Williams that immortality is bad, what is your upper limit? How long could it continue to be good for, in your opinion?]

<u>4. Objections</u>: John Martin Fischer distinguishes between two types of pleasures.

- (1) <u>Self-exhausting pleasures:</u> 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) <u>Repeatable pleasures:</u> 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.

Fischer's claim: If we fill our lives with enough repeatable pleasures, it could continue to be good forever!

Williams might say: But, imagine going to your favorite restaurant over, and over, and over, and over, and ever, and ever... Even this so-called "repeatable pleasure" would eventually become tedious, and horrible.

Fischer's reply: We just need to imagine more diversity. Like, imagine SEVEN repeatable pleasures that you love. Maybe Monday is art day. Tuesday is sports day. Wednesday is learning day. Thursday is laughing with friends day. And so on. THAT could be good!

Williams: But, now imagine doing that for a year. 10 years. 100 years. A million. A billion... Even diverse good experiences will become tedious eventually.

Fischer: Perhaps with a suitable, large enough mix of repeatable pleasures, eternal life continue to be appealing indefinitely?

The Right Amount of Forgetting? Consider the example above where it's been so long since you read some book, or saw some movie (or whatever) that you can't remember it at all anymore. Now ask: Have you DIED since you read it the first time? Surely not! So then: It seems that you can survive through time, EVEN IF you forget some of your past experiences so thoroughly that doing them again seems totally new to you.

With that in mind... Perhaps with JUST the right amount of forgetfulness or change over time, and in the appropriate way, personal identity could be retained, AND life could continue to be enjoyable indefinitely.

[Side Note: Fischer also replies to Williams' claim about engrossment: If you become SO engrossed in something that you "lose yourself" in it for a while, Williams seems to claim that you LITERALLY lose yourself. Fischer disagrees. You merely cease to stop thinking ABOUT yourself, he says, but that does not entail 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. For example, if you are religious, perhaps being in the presence of God for eternity – such that you were utterly engrossed in the perception of perfect goodness – perhaps that would do the trick.]

<u>Rebuttal:</u> 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, billion 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?*]

Also, imagine someone who HAS lived for that long, and has been experiencing slow and steady forgetting that whole time. Conceivably, there could be some 5 billion year old person in the future who is ME, but says the following: "They say I once lived on Earth. But I don't even know what Earth is... They say I was a philosophy professor. But I know nothing of philosophy... Now excuse me, I need to fly my spaceship to the planet Globleplop, so I get in on the next round of my favorite game, Bloogleplorf."

...Could this person really be ME???