Infinity goes up on trial: must immortality be meaningless?

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1. Wowbagger The Infinitely Prolonged

Wowbagger The Infinitely Prolonged was—indeed, is—one of the Universe's very small number of immortal beings.

Most of those who are born immortal instinctively know how to cope with it, but Wowbagger was not one of them. Indeed, he had come to hate them, the load of serene bastards. He had his immortality inadvertently thrust upon him by an unfortunate accident with an irrational particle accelerator, a liquid lunch, and a pair of rubber bands. The precise details are not important because no one has ever managed to duplicate the exact circumstances under which it happened, and many people have ended up looking very silly, or dead, or both, trying.

To begin with it was fun, he had a ball, living dangerously, taking risks, cleaning up on high-yield long-term investments, and just generally outliving the hell out of everybody.

In the end, it was Sunday afternoons he couldn't cope with, and that terrible listlessness that starts to set in at about 2:55 when you know you've taken all the baths you can usefully take that day, that however hard you stare at any given paragraph in the newspaper you will never actually read it, or use the revolutionary new pruning technique it describes, and that as you stare at the clock the hands will move relentlessly on to four o'clock, and you will enter the Long Dark Teatime of the Soul.

So things began to pall for him. The merry smiles he used to wear at other people's funerals began to fade. He began to despise the Universe in general, and everybody in it in particular.

This was the point at which he conceived his purpose, the thing that would drive him on, and which, as far as he could see, would drive him on forever. It was this:

He would insult the Universe.

That is, he would insult everybody in it. Individually, personally, one by one, and (this was the thing he really decided to grit his teeth over) in Alphabetical Order.

When people protested to him, as they sometimes had done, that the plan was not merely misguided but actually impossible because of the number of people being born and dying all the time, he would merely fix them with a steely look and say, ‘A man can dream, can't he?’

(Douglas Adams, *Life, The Universe, and Everything*, Chapter 1, quoted from elsewhere on the internet)

Wowbagger has a problem: how to make an infinitely long life meaningful. His answer to this problem is studiedly perverse. Presumably, part of his reason for taking on the project he does is that everyone likes a challenge—and the project of insulting everyone in the universe, in alphabetical order, is really challenging even if you’re immortal. Still, his response to the question ‘How shall I make my life meaningful?’ seems to be not so much an attempt to answer it as to stick two fingers up at it. Can anyone find anything less perverse to say about that question?
If the late and lamented Douglas Adams is to be believed, some beings can. The non-accidental immortals, the ‘serene bastards’ of Wowbagger’s envy, have no trouble coping with everlasting life. Adams does not tell us how they manage to cope; which is a pity, because many contemporary philosophers, notably Bernard Williams (1973) and Adrian Moore (2006), see a conceptual problem here. They cannot conceive how anyone could cope with immortality, even in the rather minimal sense of ‘cope’ that Wowbagger manages. This paper argues that their arguments fail. An eternal life, I argue, can be meaningful, and under the right circumstances, will be more meaningful than any finite life could be, because free from a threat to meaningfulness that cannot be removed from any finite life. We therefore have reason to want eternal life lived under these circumstances.

2. Human finitude and the threat of meaninglessness

We should not lose our sense of surprise at the claim that eternal life would be meaningless—even though, in our society, it is rather a clichéd paradox, usually found alongside the ‘tired fancy’ that Hell will be more fun than Heaven. (‘Tired fancy’ is Bernard Williams’ phrase, Williams 1973: 94; I’d want to add ‘analytic untruth’.) We should stay surprised because, as a matter of common experience, it is not the prospect of immortality that most frequently and most familiarly threatens meaning. It is the opposite—the prospect of mortality:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,
Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.
(T.S.Eliot, East Coker)

Eliot’s sense, like many others’, is that a life lived ‘in the valley of the shadow of death’—as all our lives ultimately are—is a life lived under the constant threat of meaninglessness. As Shakespeare saw, the threat overshadows kings as well as the rest of us (Richard II, Act 3, Scene 2):

…for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable; and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!

We might distinguish two sources of this meaninglessness. Let me take them
in turn.

First, we are all constantly involved in projects and commitments, in trying to
get worthwhile things done or made, in trying, if you like, to write some memorable
poem on the blackboard of the world. We think (and surely rightly) that our lives will
be less meaningful, the fewer worthwhile projects we bring to completion or fruition:
whether those projects are philosophy essays, or friendships, or the great concern of
Shakespeare’s first nineteen sonnets, children. We are all always under time-pressure;
I am writing these words under time-pressure. The ultimate source of that time-
pressure is not our line managers, nor the editors of the journals where we want to
publish, nor the Vice Chancellor, nor even the chairman of the next RAE (bless him).
It is death: the pressure comes from the fact that we have indefinitely many things we
want to do, and only a finite amount of time to do them in before we die. How much
better to be free of the time-pressure that our mortality imposes; to have, for these
indefinitely many projects, indefinitely much time.

The second way in which mortality threatens us with meaninglessness is that it
threatens to make a mock of anything we do achieve. The thought here is more
nebulous, and more despairing. To sustain the last paragraph’s metaphor, it is that
even if we do complete a good poem or two on the blackboard of the world before we
die, still it will be wiped out not long after death wipes us out—leaving nothing:

All his happier dreams came true—
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
Poets and Wits about him drew;
‘What then?’ sang Plato’s ghost. ‘What then?’

‘The work is done,’ grown old he thought,
‘According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought’;
But louder sang that ghost, ‘What then?’
(W.B. Yeats, ‘What then?’)

‘Man that is of woman born is of few days and full of trouble’; ‘Man’s days
are like the grass that flows in the field; the wind passes over it, and its place shall
know it no more’ (Job 14.1, Psalm 103.15-16). We can get a sense of the
meaninglessness of life by looking at the vastness of the universe and time and the
shortness and littleness of us and our projects.

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making
choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet
we always have available a point of view outside the particular form of our
lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable
viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them. (Nagel 1979: 14)

In this bleak Spinozistic perspective, it can seem like there is nothing that we finite beings could do that could ward off the meaninglessness of our lives. And, of course, we can be tempted to take refuge from this sense of cosmic vertigo in the notion of immortality.

This second way to meaninglessness seems much vaguer and less compelling than the first. It seems to be just cosmic vertigo, as I called it, and no more; and vertigo is not a reason for thinking anything. If there is a thought behind the vertigo, it will be either a thought like Nagel’s, about a clash between two viewpoints, or a thought about (roughly) our smallness and the universe’s largeness. But Nagel’s thought (to take this first) seems entirely uncompelling, not because it can be answered, but because it is one of a very large set of equally possible thoughts none of which can be answered. It is possible to say with Nagel that, from the point of view of the universe, our lives are meaningless. It is equally possible to say that, from that viewpoint, our lives are rich with meaning; or that our lives are expressions of a mathematically elegant pattern; or that our lives are functioning parts of an overall mechanism that (Hitchhiker’s Guide time again) spells out the message ‘Sorry for the inconvenience’; or that our lives, properly seen from the cosmic perspective, are just funny. All of these possibilities, and indefinitely many others, are just as real as Nagel’s brow-clutching thought about ultimate meaninglessness. (In particular, Nagel’s thought does not have science on its side. Science, as distinct from the dog-eared farrago of late-Victorian prejudices that we call scientism, is professionally neutral between all these thoughts.) So these thoughts cancel out. The problem with Nagel’s idea that ‘the view from nowhere’ is a challenge to our view of ourselves as significant is that there isn’t just one ‘view from nowhere’; there are indefinitely many, and bleak nihilism is by no means a guaranteed feature of them all.

As for the thought about smallness, this is an obvious non sequitur. Just because we are small and the universe is big is, in itself, no reason to doubt that our lives can be meaningful or valuable; that is an illusion of scale. Anyway, contrary to what some have perhaps thought, being immortal certainly could not ward off this kind of meaninglessness. Even if I were immortal, I would still be small in the grand scheme of things. Even if I were big in the grand scheme of things, I could still, on any bad-enough day, work myself into a sense of the meaninglessness of my life; all it takes is a fit of accidie, one of those listless unhappy moods that we all fall into sometimes, where the reasons we have to act are the same as they ever were, yet we don’t respond to them. This kind of threat to the meaning of a finite (or indeed an infinite) life is more a mood than an argument. Of this kind of threat to meaning Wittgenstein rightly said that ‘The solution to the riddle of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem’ (Tractatus 6.521).

The first worry about the meaning of a finite life, to come back to it, is more substantial. To blend a Wittgensteinian image with the far older one of the Greek or Norse Fates, a good human life is a rope of overlapping threads, significant projects, some of which at any time are not yet fulfilled or otherwise still continuing. Since the overlapping continues as long as the life continues good, we can’t ever live long
enough to fulfil all of these projects. This is a real problem about a finite life, and it is not just cosmic angst that makes us see it as a problem. Using our metaphor, the problem can be precisely stated. Wherever a good life is ended by death, there will always be broken strands, projects of meaning that are left unfulfilled. How much this fateful cutting of the threads will destroy the overall meaningfulness of the life depends on the importance of the threads that get cut. But wherever it occurs, it frustrates something important; for it is part of what it is to be living a good human life at any time, that at that time at least some important projects are under way in the life. The problem is not, then, that death as the ending of the finite life—the cutting of the rope—will destroy all the meaning of that life, or cast upon what was achieved a retrospective shadow of cosmic vertigo.iii But it is that, in Mick Jagger’s words, ‘you can’t always get what you want’, or in St Paul’s, that ‘creation was made subject to frustration’ (Romans 8.20). Mortality dooms us, if not to the frustration of every valued project we have, then at least to the frustration of some of our most valued projects. Insofar as we value those projects, and the possibility of taking on further equally valuable projects, we have reason to value the prospect of immortality as a way of continuing to pursue them indefinitely.

Two points to notice here. First, I haven’t just said that immortality is a way of always getting what you want. Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t; what I have said leaves either prospect open, and therewith the questions that many will rightly want to raise about the very coherence of the notion of ‘always getting what you want’, especially if this is supposed to be possible, without significant modification or refinement of what we want, for everybody. I’ve said only that mortality is a bar to achieving meaningfulness in our lives by way of our projects, and that therefore insofar as we have and want to have projects, we have reasons to want that bar removed. Second, I have implicitly denied a view that seems attractive to some, namely that the way to escape the threat to life’s meaningfulness that arises from death’s threat to our projects is, bluntly, to give up having projects. My contention that ‘a good human life is a rope of overlapping threads, significant projects’ rules out the possibility that a life of Buddhistic or ascetic renunciation, if that means a life where one gives up having projects, could be a good life. (In fact Buddhists and Hindus are rather elusive about this; often what they seem to mean by their praise of nibbana or moksa is not that we should give up all of our projects, but that we should give them all up except for one very special project, the quest for enlightenment.)

Another way of giving up on projects can also be dismissed. Some scientifically-minded readers will no doubt have wanted all along to insist that immortality is unnatural for humans, because humans are by nature finite biological beings: it’s part of the natural human life-cycle for us to grow old, lose our grip on our projects, and fade away: ‘it really is like going to bed at the end of a very, very long day’.iv No doubt this conception of what it is to be human answers to some parts of what we truly are. Elsewhere, I would contend that it does not answer to all, and not the most important part, of what we truly are. But that opens up questions of revealed as well as of natural theology: too big a subject for this small essay. And it is not our question here: as Williams agrees (1973: 89: ‘these are contingencies’), our question is whether immortality could be desirable even if we were not just finite biological beings.
My argument so far, to sum it up, has been this. A good human life is one in which a variety of projects and commitments are live at any given time, and a significant number of which are or have an excellent chance of being successful projects. While these projects may be each of limited temporal duration, they do not all finish at once—they overlap like the threads in a rope. There is, therefore, reason to want continued life at any moment of a good life, to enable the completion of those projects that are not yet complete. So as long as my life goes on being good, I have reason to want it to go on. So if my life is good, I have reason to value the prospect of immortal life, and to think that an immortal life lived by me not only could be a meaningful one, but would also be unthreatened by meaningfulness in a way that any finite life would necessarily be threatened.

Some people—perhaps the Heidegger of Being and Time is one—will respond that a life without death at the end of it would be meaningless because it would be shapeless. As we might almost put it, the prospect of dying concentrates the mind wonderfully; on the business of living. That sounds to me a bit like insisting that the only way to write a good philosophy essay is under exam pressure. Well, certainly exam pressure produces thoughts that wouldn’t otherwise pop out so easily. However, it also leads us to loose thinking, to grabbing the first plausible idea that comes to mind, and to trying to work the question round so that we can answer the question that we wish the examiner had set. More pertinently perhaps, exam pressure also leads, at least in my own experience, to the thought ‘This is all very interesting, but I wish I had more time to think about it’.

I see no reason why an endless life should be shapeless in any worrying way. Of course it is shapeless in one dimension, the forward dimension in time: though an endless life will include many completed narratives, it will never, itself, be a completed narrative. But this is not even to say that the life does not have a shape as the narrative it is so far. What gives it shape is, of course, the projects it contains. Those projects are already a very narrow selection from the huge range of logically possible projects, they define the life down to particularity without needing any help from the limitation that death is. Another form of shape, if limits are thought to be a precondition of shape, is given by the temporal and spatial locatedness of any person at any time: my life and I are here and now, and cannot be anywhere else. Culture and nurture are kinds of shaping too… and so on. This seems enough shape to be going on with, without requiring that every life should be limited by mortality as well.

My point is not that an infinitely long life is better than a finitely long one simply because it contains more goods. For one thing, I do not believe, unlike John Broome for example, that the value of any life is simply a function of the goods in that life; lives, on my view, are not just receptacles for value—they have value in themselves.’ For another, it isn’t always true that ‘More is better’. More of some goods can, familiarly, be less: wives, for instance. Rather, my argument is that from the viewpoint of the person living it, a good life means one where at any point some longstanding projects and commitments are continuing, others are coming to completion, others again are just beginning. When our lives are going well, we are carried forward into the future on the crest of a variety of different narrative waves. Eudaimonia, according to me, just is this busy variety, this engagement in a happy mix of interesting and absorbing commitments. We cease to be eudaimones, people who are living well, when our lives lose this structure. But the good life, because of
its overlapping-thread structure, always continues to give us reasons to want its continuance: the good life is a narrative (or rather complex of narratives) that goes on. The logical pressure that I want to set up towards having reason to value immortality comes from this familiar feature of lived experience, not from any pressure to maximise or promote the good (whatever that might mean).

I do mean to claim that this feature of our experience is familiar. The condemned prisoner’s thought, over his last lunch, ‘This tastes good, I’d like this for lunch tomorrow too’, and the jolt of realisation that for him there is no lunch tomorrow, has a peculiar horror to it; the horror comes from the way his future is closed in by his impending execution. (Compare a grisly Japanese joke: ‘Why have you only bought a one-way pedestrian ticket for the suspension bridge?’ ‘Because when I get to the middle I shall throw myself off.’) By contrast, normally happy people experience their futures as open, as of indefinite duration into the future. On my account, that’s how a normally eudaimôn life is lived. If I display this account of eudaimonia rather than arguing for it, that is simply because I think it is obviously true; I look forward to being told what’s wrong with it.

My argument is not guilty, either, of a fallacy noted by Adrian Moore, the fallacy of confusing always wanting that p with wanting that always p. I have argued that if we are eudaimones then necessarily we always want that there should be a future for our lives. I have not argued that if we are eudaimones then necessarily we want that there should always be a future for our lives. We might not reflect that far. But if we do reflect that far, we are bound to see that wanting, at any t, that: p leads naturally to wanting that: p at any t—even if it is obviously not logically equivalent to it.

Nor, so far, have I made any assumptions about the kind of projects and commitments that a happy life is likely to contain. For all I’ve said, they could be any projects that will suffice to carry us forward into the future on a variety of different narrative waves. They could even be such modest projects as those noted by a rather depressive and not particularly eudaimôn character in Nick Hornby’s About a Boy:

‘a few years ago, I was really, really down, and I did think about… you know [suicide]… it was always, you know, not today. Maybe tomorrow, but not today. And after a few weeks of that I knew I was never going to do it, and the reason I was never going to do it was because I didn’t want to miss out. I don’t mean that life was great and I didn’t want to miss out. I don’t mean that life was great and I didn’t want not to participate. I just mean that there were always one or two things that seemed unfinished, things I wanted to follow through. Like you want to see the next episode of NYPD Blue. If I’d just finished stuff for a book, I’d want to see it come out. If I was seeing a guy, I wanted one more date. If [my son] had a parents’ evening coming up, I wanted to talk to his form teacher. Little things like that, but there was always something. And in the end I realised that there would always be something, and that those somethings would be enough.’ (About a Boy, chapter 30, p.589 in Nick Hornby: The Omnibus)

The kind of projects and commitments that my argument needs need not be inexhaustible—need not be projects and commitments such that our participation in any one of them could go on continuing to be rewarding for ever. I do believe there
are inexhaustible projects; but that’s more than I need to show to establish my argument here. All I need is that it should be possible for us to have projects and commitments such that our participation in a range of them could go on continuing to be rewarding for ever. Now the world is a big place, and the range of worthwhile possible projects and commitments that it might afford us seems—as a matter of common experience—to be indefinitely and incalculably large. So if there is a reason why this is not possible, that needs arguing.

3. The Makropoulos case: against the meaningfulness of eternal life

Bernard Williams seeks to argue it, in his famous paper ‘The Makropoulos case’, by a number of different tactics. His central argument, as I read it (other readings seem possible), consists of two conditions and a related dilemma. The conditions are these (1973: 91): for me to have reason to find any conception of eternal life attractive, (1) ‘it should clearly be me who lives for ever’; and (2) ‘the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all’. The related dilemma—more in a moment about how it is related to the two conditions—is this (1973: 90):

There are difficult questions, if one presses the issue, about this constancy of character. How is this accumulation of memories related to this character which she [Elena Makropoulos] eternally has, and to the character of her experience? Are they much the same kind of events repeated? Then... the repeated pattern of personal relations... must take on a character of being inescapable. Or is the pattern of her experiences not repetitious in this way, but varied? Then the problem shifts, to these various experiences and the fixed character: how can it remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences? The experiences must surely happen to her without really affecting her; she must be, as EM is, detached and withdrawn.

As Adrian Moore puts it, in his recent re-presentation of Williams’ argument: ‘the conditions that must be satisfied for my life to continue to count as mine militate against the conditions that must be satisfied for it continue to be a life worth living. Conditions of the former kind demand a constancy, and conditions of the latter kind a variety, that cannot be resolved’ (Moore 2006: 314). Briefly: if EM’s life remains hers it goes round in circles; if it doesn’t go round in circles it ceases to be hers.

Begin with the second horn. Why, if EM’s infinitely long life doesn’t ever repeat itself, must it cease to be hers? That is a question about the conditions under which we should be prepared to agree that we have the same life at two different times: i.e. the question of diachronic personal identity. Williams is assuming, apparently, that EM’s life cannot be the same life (the life of the same person) at any two times unless there is a strong core of unchanged elements present at both times. (‘EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times... seems always to have been much the same sort of person’, 1973: 90.) This can surely be challenged (Williams does not try to argue it directly). Maybe a weaker condition about character or experience than this is enough for personal identity. Perhaps, for instance, we need only require an analogue of what Parfit 1987
calls connectedness, rather than an analogue of what he calls continuity. On this account we do not require for sameness of person between t1 and t2 that there should be at least one unbroken strand of experience or character that stretches all the way from t1 to t2. We require only that every strand of experience or character that is present at t2 overlaps at least in part with at least one strand of experience or character that overlaps at least in part with at least one strand of experience or character that overlaps… [ ] …with some strand of experience or character that was present at t1.

On this conception of personal identity, there might be no strands of experience or character present in EM at t2 that were present in her at t1. She would still count as the same person, because of the continuity—the unbroken overlapping of threads. Thus the first condition mentioned above will be satisfied: by this account of personal identity, it will clearly be her who has lived from t1 to t2, and yet her life has both the variety and the constancy that Moore and Williams require. The second condition, plausibly, will be satisfied too. Whether ‘the state in which she survives’ at t2 ‘is one which, to her looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which she now has in wanting to survive at all’ at t1, will depend on what we mean by ‘adequately’. Roughly, the relation will be adequate if when we describe EM at t2 to EM at t1 and ask her, ‘Do you have reason to care that that should survive?’, she can reasonably answer ‘Yes’. But ‘Yes’ seems a reasonable answer where EM at t1 and EM at t2 are linked by continuity. EM at t1 can defend her positive answer to the question ‘Do you care?’ by pointing out that EM at t2 is, so to speak, her own future. If that is not enough for reasonable concern for a future, we need to hear why not.

So the second horn of the dilemma crumples, unless we make some strong, and not particularly plausible, assumptions about the role of fixity of character in diachronic personal identity. Let us turn to the first horn. Why, if EM’s infinitely long life remains hers, must it go round in circles? The idea is that only a finite number of things can happen to or be done by someone with a determinate character; so if EM has a determinate character, the things that happen to her or that she does would have to repeat themselves over an infinite time. I have said what I have to say about determinacy of character in considering the second horn; let us now worry about this notion of repetition. A simple response is just to deny on commonsensical grounds, as indeed I already have, that there is only a finite number of things that can happen to or by done by any individual person. We could also go a little deeper, and point out that the notions of ‘repetition’ and of ‘things that can happen’ that are in use here are fatally indeterminate. If I climb the same mountain or hear the same opera twice, is that repetition? If I climb the same mountain twice by the same route (in the same weather?), or hear the same production of the same opera twice (with exactly the same cast?), is that repetition? Yes and No are equally good answers to both questions, because whether two time-ordered items count as instances of the same type, so that the latter item is a repetition of the former, depends on how we describe them.

It might be replied that the notion of sameness, and hence of repetition, that Williams’ argument needs is simply whatever notion of repetition justifies boredom as a response to it. But this just opens up a different question, and a rather difficult one, as to what justifies boredom as a response to anything, repetitious or not. There plainly are sorts of repetition which in no way justify boredom as a response. ‘Visions
of Johanna’ is only one among plenty of pieces of music that I am happy to hear again and again and again. That song does not bore me just because hearing it again is repetition.

We do not, I think, have a good philosophical theory of boredom. Williams is rather going out on a limb when he famously remarks (1973: 94-95) that it is a 'profound difficulty' to provide

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 impatience in the course of living, already, a finite life... Just as being bored can be a sign of not noticing, understanding or appreciating enough, so equally not being bored can be a sign of not noticing, or not reflecting enough.

I won’t respond to this in the shoulder-shrugging way that a theist might—by saying that heaven will simply be whatever it needs to be to overcome the problem of boredom that Williams identifies, and that it is no surprise if this is inconceivable to us, since after all the joys of heaven are supposed to be inconceivable: ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him’ (1 Corinthians 2.9). Both these points seem correct to me; but I don’t need to make them. We have already seen that we can resolve the dilemma about immortality that Williams offers without bringing Heaven into the discussion; and anyway, Williams has moved the goalposts. The challenge before was to describe a life which could be satisfying and meaningful for ever because of the various projects, commitments and activities that it contained; and I claim to have met that challenge. The challenge in the last quotation is different, and more demanding: it is to describe a single project or activity which on its own could give life meaning for ever. Since I believe that there are inexhaustible goods, and in particular God, I believe this second challenge can be met. But there is no need to meet it, if the first challenge can be met (as I’ve argued it can). To meet the first challenge is already to show that immortal life can be meaningful, and need not be unendurably boring, or indeed boring at all, without appealing to any such controversial claim as ‘There is a heaven’ or ‘There are inexhaustible goods’ or ‘There is a God who is an inexhaustible good’. To meet the first challenge, one only needs the claim that the kinds of worthwhile projects and commitments that are available to us are indefinitely various. That claim does not sound controversial at all; it sounds like common sense.

But let me consider further the interesting concept of boredom. To begin with, boredom is apparently an implicitly relative notion: things are neither boring nor interesting in themselves, but only in relation to persons. I am justified in my boredom with X when X has nothing to offer me: when I am living out, as before, a variety of worthwhile projects, and the trouble with X is that it does not engage with these, and has no significant relation to anything that does engage with them. In this sense boredom is an essentially contrastive state: my being bored with X is a result of my being justifiably interested by something else. In another sense, of course, boredom might be more pervasive: there might be nothing that engages with my worthwhile projects because I have no worthwhile projects. In a third sense, I might be bored of my worthwhile projects: even though I have some, they fail to engage my interest.
Though boredom can happen in the second or third of these three ways, I doubt it can be rational, or justified, in either way. There is nothing rational about simply not having any worthwhile projects. (The right response to having projects that—like Wowbagger’s—are not worthwhile is not just to get rid of them, but also to replace them with something that is worthwhile.) Having worthwhile projects, but not being moved by them, merely sounds like the kind of failure of _joie de vivre_ (as it is well called) that I dismissed earlier as a mood rather than an argument. Some listless immortal might just give up having projects, or lose interest in the worthwhile projects that she has; but these would not be justified or rational forms of boredom.

So if there is to be _justified_ boredom, as Williams’ argument requires, it will have to be of the first, contrastive sort: A’s boredom with X will be justified where A rightly judges that X has nothing to offer to A’s worthwhile projects. From which it follows that only a person who _has_ worthwhile projects can be justifiably bored by anything: if A is justifiably bored with X, then there is some Y with which A is, justifiably, _not_ bored. Williams’ vision of unending all-pervading boredom _which is justifiably felt_ is an illusion.

4. Conclusion

I have presented a rather modest theory of what makes life meaningful, and used it to show the way out of Williams’ dilemma. A life can continue meaningful for ever, without either repeating itself or becoming a different person’s life, because lives are meaningful when they contain a variety of different worthwhile projects; and there is nothing to stop the very same life from containing an indefinite variety of such projects, if our condition for ‘the very same life’ is a connectedness condition on character rather than (as Williams requires) a continuity condition. Moreover, Williams’ key notion of ‘repetition’ is crucially indeterminate, and his account of boredom crucially underdeveloped; when we sketch an adequate account of boredom, it turns out that one of Williams’ key theses, that boredom would be a rational response to any conceivable form of eternal life, cannot be defended.

As a Parthian shot, I add another way of crumpling the second horn of Williams’ dilemma. Section 3 argued that eternal life can be meaningful if personal identity is carried by connectedness rather than continuity, and if, at each moment of eternity, we have an indefinite variety of worthwhile projects in our lives. I did not require anything in particular about the nature of these projects, beyond their being worthwhile. In particular (cp. p.7), I did not require that they should be inexhaustible projects—projects such that our participation in _any one_ of them could continue to be rewarding for ever. I could have added this requirement. If I had, I would not have needed to deny Williams’ account of personal identity as continuity of character, because if there are inexhaustible goods, then even a fixed character like EM’s can go on getting more meaning out of them for ever. In short, we can meet Williams’ argument either by combining an unfixed character with an indefinite variety of finitely satisfying goods, or by combining a fixed character with a finite variety of (at least potentially) infinitely satisfying goods.
So are there any inexhaustible goods, any goods that could be infinitely satisfying? The goods that are most central to human life—the enjoyment and practice of art, friendship and love, the contemplation of beauty, the practice of inquiry and discovery, philosophy itself understood as Aristotelian theôria (ironically enough for Williams and Moore): our experience of all these goods seems plainly inexhaustible. For each such good, enjoying it is something that I can readily imagine carrying on without any necessary temporal limit emerging from the structure of my experience and enjoyment of that good.

Notice that I can say this without even mentioning God among the inexhaustible goods. Yet God is, to put it mildly, a rather notable absentee from the Makropoulos argument, given that according to most believers in the major historical religions, east and west, God is super-eminently the central good that we enjoy in eternal life, through worship: worship being the contemplation of God’s reality and the reception of his love.\textsuperscript{xii}

Here I will not argue a full case for believing in inexhaustible goods. My point is simply that the Makropoulos argument, even if it takes a continuity view of personal identity, has no chance of success without a full case for not believing in inexhaustible goods. I see no sign of that. Without it, the possibility of meaningful immortality remains intact even if Williams is right to see personal identity as continuity of character rather than connectedness (or some even weaker condition about character). So too does the possibility, which is also worth pointing out, that something like a taste of eternity, an escape from time-boundedness, might actually be a part of the experience of plenty of goods that are well-known not only to immortals more serene than Wowbagger, but even to us mortals: ‘If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.’\textsuperscript{xiii}

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‘Projects and commitments’ is, of course, Williams’ own locution. Note that neither a project nor a commitment need be what Aristotle called a poïësis rather than a praxis, a making rather than a doing, an activity with its outcome built into it as opposed to an activity with its continuation built into it. Both can be either. It is therefore implausible to suggest that all projects and commitments have a natural end built in to them. Some do, others don’t. And anyway, my picture, as we’ll see, is an overlapping-threads picture. (NB not having a natural end inbuilt need not be the same thing as being inexhaustible.)

Bertrand Russell [in A Free Man’s Worship] went on about the transitoriness of human beings, the tininess of the earth, the vast and pitiless expanses of the universe and so on, in a style of self-pitying and at the same time self-glorying rhetoric that made Frank Ramsey remark that he himself was much less impressed than some of his friends were by the size of the universe, perhaps because he weighed 240 pounds.’ (Williams 2006: 137)


For more on this see my Ethics and the Vision of Value, chapter 7.

There might be other difficulties if EM’s consciousness were to split, Parfit-style, in two before t2. But not if there is, as normal, no split.

This same problem about indeterminacy undermines Moore 2006: 327’s claim that ‘where allowing the subject to die would open up new possibilities of narrative, new opportunities for sense-making, and new ways of defying nihilism, preserving the subject would impose restrictions and constraints on subsequent interpretation that would impose an overall burden.’ Going any determinate way rather than any other closes down some possibilities and opens up others. How are we to decide which possibilities it is more fruitful to leave open?

In the background here, I suspect, is a different thought, about biology: mortality is good because it’s good to make way for succeeding generations. I take it that, like the thought about biology mentioned on p.4, this thought is irrelevant to the issue of the meaningfulness of immortality as it is posed in ‘The Makropoulos Case’.

A related issue is raised by Nozick 1974: 313, who considers the difficulty of designing a political utopia that will satisfy its every member. Nozick regards this difficulty as an impossibility; he quotes Alexander Gray’s remark that ‘No utopia has ever been described in which any sane man would on any conditions consent to live, if he could possibly escape’. It is perhaps salutary to reflect that the question of the meaningfulness of immortality is usually debated as if it were a question solely for individuals. Presumably it is a social or political question too.

To say more about it would be a different argument, about (inter alia) the variety of the goods. I say some of what I think needs saying under that heading in Ethics and the Vision of Value chapter 7.

If this is what worship is—as I contend: it would take another paper to defend the contention—it should be obvious how odd it is to speak of an obligation to worship, or to look for grounds for this alleged obligation in, e.g., God’s maximal excellence, or the belief that he created us, or the claim that worship does us good. Is there an obligation to be in love? And if we do not love because the beloved is maximally excellent, or made us, or because it does us good to love—does that make love ungrounded? I don’t think so; but for these claims see Bayne and Nagasawa 2006.

Thanks to Tim Bayne, Sarah Broadie, Christopher Coope, Larry James, Adrian Moore, Adam Morton, and Yujin Nagasawa for comments.
Immortality—living forever and avoiding death—seems to many to be desirable. But is it? It has been argued that an immortal life would fairly soon become boring, trivial, and meaningless, and is not at all the sort of thing that any of us should want. Yet boredom and triviality presuppose our having powerful memories and imaginations, and an inability either to shake off the past or to free ourselves of weighty visions of the future. Timothy Chappell (2007). "Infinity Goes Up On Trial: Must Immortality Be Meaningless?" 3. (pdf online). 4. Mikel Burley (2009). "Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate." (pdf online). Module IV: Is Belief in an afterlife Reasonable? 1. Plato, Excerpts from Phaedo. Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while But, Mona Lisa must have had the highway blues you can tell by the way she smiles. Bob Dylan73. músico, cantante y poeta estadounidense 1941. Citas similares.

"Museums are my cathedrals. Artifacts in glass cases are my sacred relics. I truly believe I have felt something close to religious fervor inside some of these buildings." Looking up into the night sky is looking into infinity” distance is incomprehensible and therefore meaningless. Help us translate this quote. Douglas Adams, Guía del autoestopista galáctico. Fuente: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. A clear lesson I learned in the museum was that outside forces that tend to divide people up inside their country are unbelievably counterproductive.