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## Is Immortality Desirable?

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Many people hope to live on after death, in heaven, *forever*. Even those who don't believe in heaven usually agree that an eternal life there *would* be better than any finite, mortal life.<sup>[1]</sup> Are they correct?

Some influential philosophers have argued that *no* immortal human life would be worth living, in heaven or otherwise.<sup>[2]</sup> This view has been most famously defended by British philosopher Bernard Williams (1929-2003). This essay explores Williams' argument and some important responses to it.

### 1. Williams' Argument

Williams' argument hinges on the concept of *categorical desires*.

Categorical desires are desires that give us reason to stay alive.<sup>[3]</sup> What makes *you* look forward to being alive? The prospect of earning a degree? Of seeing your child grow up? Of going on your dream vacation?<sup>[4]</sup> Whatever your answer is, that's a categorical desire.<sup>[5]</sup>

Williams believed, however, that categorical desires can only give us reason to stay alive for so long—i.e., that categorical desires are *exhaustible*.

First, one might "exhaust" categorical desires by *satisfying* them. Imagine someone with a categorical desire to become the CEO of a particular company, i.e., someone who wants to stay alive *in order to* rise to the top of that company. By becoming that company's CEO, she satisfies that desire, and no longer has that goal to give her reason to stay alive.<sup>[6]</sup>

We also "exhaust" categorical desires by *losing interest* in them. Think again of our aspiring-CEO. Suppose she fails to be promoted as CEO. In this

scenario, her categorical desire to become her company's CEO could, in principle, give her reason to stay alive until she, well, dies.

What if she doesn't die? Suppose she's immortal and tries, without success, to become her company's CEO for millions (or billions!) of years. It seems likely that she'd eventually feel discouraged and lose interest. By then, the prospect of becoming her company's CEO would've become too unappealing to continue to give her reason to stay alive.<sup>[7]</sup>

Williams believed that, just like that of becoming a CEO, *any* categorical desire would, given enough time, either be satisfied or lose its appeal.<sup>[8]</sup> If you were immortal, he argued, you'd sooner or later get to live long enough to have either satisfied, or grown tired of, every single categorical desire you currently have.

What would it be like to carry on living forever that way, with *nothing else* to look forward to? Williams thought it'd be, at best, unbearably boring.<sup>[9]</sup>

To avoid that fate, and stave off boredom, you could acquire entirely new categorical desires whenever your old ones were exhausted. But then your future-self eventually won't be pursuing a single project, dream, or goal which you would care about right now.<sup>[10]</sup>

This insight makes it difficult to justify the claim that immortality could be desirable for us: why should we *currently* desire to live long enough (indeed, to be immortal) in order to pursue projects, dreams, and goals that we *currently* don't even care about?<sup>[11]</sup>

So Williams' argument is a dilemma: if we were immortal, we would eventually either (a) run out of categorical desires to pursue, or (b) find ourselves pursuing categorical desires that we, currently, have no interest in pursuing. Since Williams thought that neither outcome would be desirable, he believed that no immortal life is desirable for beings like us.<sup>[12]</sup>

### 2. Responses

#### 2.1. Are all categorical desires exhaustible?

One reply to Williams is that at least *some* categorical desires can be inexhaustible, e.g., the desire to pursue knowledge.<sup>[13]</sup> Imagine a scientist who has a categorical desire to discover the workings of the universe. Would she ever learn *everything* about the universe, or ever grow tired of learning?<sup>[14]</sup> It's hard to picture her ever exhausting this categorical desire.

Others have argued that the desire to cultivate love and friendships,<sup>[15]</sup> or the desire for personal

improvement<sup>[16]</sup> are similarly inexhaustible. If so, then at least some immortal lives are desirable, namely, immortal lives spent in pursuit of these (or other) inexhaustible categorical desires.

## 2.2. Can we “recycle” categorical desires?

Another reply is that immortality could be desirable if we can manage to “recycle” our categorical desires.

One suggestion is that, after enough time, we might *forget* having satisfied our categorical desires. Provided our memories remain imperfect, we would eventually find ourselves wishing to satisfy the same categorical desires time and again, indefinitely into the future.<sup>[17]</sup>

And perhaps some desires would tend to resurface. Even if you remember having satisfied that very same desire in the past, you may desire to, e.g., listen to your favorite song one more time, and feel motivated by that to stay alive.<sup>[18]</sup>

## 2.3. What’s so bad about boredom?

Others have responded that a life of complete boredom could still be meaningful and worthwhile in other ways,<sup>[19]</sup> e.g., if we were to discover that a director of an especially effective malaria-eradication program found life utterly tedious, we would still think that she had very good reasons to stay alive.

## 2.4. What’s so bad about developing new desires?

A different reply notes that these gradual changes of categorical desires we would undergo if we were immortal aren’t any different from those we already undergo in (presumably worthwhile) mortal lives.<sup>[20]</sup> Surely, toddlers have good reasons to live well into adulthood even if their adult-selves will eventually pursue categorical desires they, as toddlers, would never consider pursuing. If that’s so, the same should apply for our future immortal selves.<sup>[21]</sup>

## 3. Conclusion

Bernard Williams was something of an “immortality curmudgeon.”<sup>[22]</sup> He argued for the view that no immortal human life would be worth living. Others have also argued for the same conclusion, although in different ways.<sup>[23]</sup>

Some philosophers argue that, if we were immortal, we wouldn’t value our achievements,<sup>[24]</sup> our loved ones,<sup>[25]</sup> or our health and safety.<sup>[26]</sup> Others argue that, without death to give us a deadline to finish our projects, we wouldn’t feel motivated to do anything,

and lead lives full of apathy and indifference.<sup>[27]</sup> Others still maintain that an immortal human life would be plotless or meaningless, like a novel without an ending.<sup>[28]</sup>

Whether Williams, or any one of his followers, makes a compelling case or not, this issue raises interesting and important questions about what makes a life—immortal or otherwise—worth living.

## Notes

[1] People do not, of course, tend to find *any* immortal human life desirable. Most people believe that eternal existence in hell would be terrible. For an introductory discussion on such versions of immortality, see [Hell and Universalism](#) by A. G. Holdier. And see Holdier (2017) for further discussion.

[2] It is important to note that Williams aimed to argue that *any* immortal life, not just an immortal *afterlife*, would be bad for creatures like us. One might imagine achieving immortality on earth by, e.g., becoming a vampire, uploading one’s consciousness into a computer, or living in some utopia where futuristic medicine keeps everyone healthy and young forever. Williams believed that both earthly and heavenly versions of immortality would be bad for us, and for the same reasons, namely those outlined in Section 1 of this essay.

[3] Williams (1973): 86.

[4] Note that categorical desires needn’t involve major life projects or long-term aspirations. One might answer the question “What makes you look forward to being alive?” by referring to smaller, short-term goals. For instance, imagine someone who is genuinely excited to watch an upcoming episode of her favorite TV series, which comes out next week. She may very well find that her desire to get to watch that episode gives her good reason to stay alive (at least until next week).

[5] Could the desire “to attain pleasure or happiness” be a categorical desire? Williams did not think so. He argued that categorical desires are supposed to be able to motivate a person to stay alive *despite* the prospect of unpleasant times (1973, pp. 99-100). Someone who leads a life full of suffering would not be motivated to stay alive by a desire for pleasure or happiness if she only sees unending suffering for her future.

[6] Williams concedes that a person can have *many* categorical desires at the same time. This

means that, even after one satisfies (or loses interest in) a particular categorical desire, the categorical desires that remain will continue to give her reason to stay alive. In a realistic scenario, a person who gets to satisfy her categorical desire to become the CEO of a particular company would probably also have another categorical desire to be *successful* as a CEO, however she understands “success.” She could also have other categorical desires to give her reason to carry on living, even if they are unrelated to her CEO career. Williams’ main concern has to do with the possibility of a person running out of *all* categorical desires, thus lacking any reason to avoid death.

[7] Williams’ claim is only that categorical desires cannot remain “categorical” forever. One needn’t lose that desire altogether. After many unsuccessful attempts, one might still maintain a desire to become the CEO of a particular company, despite feeling too discouraged to pursue that goal, by believing that it would be great if one *were* to become a CEO there. That is consistent with the belief that one will never *actually* get to become a CEO there.

It is important to note, however, that such a desire would not be a *categorical* desire. A desire is a categorical desire only if the desirer wants to avoid death in order to either ensure that, or at least witness, that desire be satisfied. In other words, a categorical desire gives a person reason to stay alive in the sense that it gives her something to *look forward to*.

A person who maintains a desire to become the CEO of a particular company only as a far-fetched dream does not really look forward to becoming a CEO there. She does not have hopes of witnessing that desire satisfied, because she does not really entertain that as an outcome that has a non-negligible chance of actually happening.

[8] Williams (1973): 95.

[9] Williams (1973): 93. For sustained discussions about the role of boredom in Williams’ argument, see Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009) and Gorman (2017). See also Erik Van Aken’s [Camus on the Absurd: The Myth of Sisyphus](#) for a related discussion about living in a world that doesn’t meet one’s expectations.

[10] An important, related question is whether we would *survive* these radical psychological changes. According to some accounts of personal identity through time, we would not be one and the same person as our psychologically alien future selves. For

a general introduction to the debates about personal identity through time, see [Personal Identity](#) by Chad Vance. See Whiting (2016, ch. 1) for further discussion about personal identity through time, and whether we should care about our psychologically alien future selves.

[11] Williams (1973): 92.

[12] Something worth thinking about is what (typical) human features Williams must hold fixed in order for his argument to succeed. Perhaps some version of immortality would be desirable for beings *slightly* different than us, e.g., beings just like us, except less susceptible to getting bored.

[13] Levy (2005): 185.

[14] It may be worthwhile to think about whether learning new things would inevitably lose its appeal. After gaining a significant amount of knowledge, would one continue to feel *excited* to learn something new? Shelly Kagan (2012, p. 243) raises a worry along these lines.

[15] Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014): 360.

[16] Buben (2016): 213.

[17] Belshaw (2015): 338-339.

[18] Fischer (2009): 85-86.

[19] Metz (2013): 135.

[20] Chappell (2009): 35; Fischer (2009): 90.

[21] Benatar (2017): 157.

[22] The term “immortality curmudgeon” was first used by Fischer (2009) in reference to Williams, and Williams’ followers, who argue that no immortal human life would be desirable.

[23] Interesting arguments have also been made for the related conclusion that, given our *uncertainty* about whether immortality would be good (or very bad!) for us, we have strong reasons to choose not to be immortal, were we given the option. See, for instance, Beglin (2017) and Gorman (2017).

[24] Smuts (2011).

[25] Todd May (2015) gestures towards this view.

[26] Scheffler (2013): 97.

[27] Nussbaum (1994, ch. 6); May (2009, ch. 2); Smuts (2011); Scheffler (2013).

[28] Malpas (1998); May (2009, ch. 2). See Behrendt (2016) for a critical discussion of arguments of this sort.

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