

Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate

Mikel Burley

(Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds)

Abstract

This paper offers some reflections upon the debate between Bernard Williams and his critics concerning the desirability or meaningfulness of (embodied) immortal life. After sketching Williams' argument for the necessary undesirability of immortality, I outline some considerations adduced by Timothy Chappell in support of the opposing view. I highlight the reliance of both Williams and Chappell on assumptions about human nature: for Williams, the categorical desires that propel us through life are non-contingently finite and exhaustible, whereas for Chappell they are not (or need not be). It looks, then, as though there is an underlying issue of how to distinguish between contingent and non-contingent characteristics of human lives, and yet neither side in the debate provides a clear way of settling this issue.

A related problem is the muddying of the debate by the employment of underdescribed imaginative scenarios: we are typically invited to imagine an immortal life that includes enjoyable features of ordinary finite lives, yet tend not to be told which features of the world are to be held stable. Utilizing Hunter Steele's distinction between necessary and contingent forms of immortality, I outline some of the difficulties surrounding attempts to make intelligible the concept of a life that is both human, or at least human-like, and endless.

I conclude that, although the salient issues in the debate over the desirability of immortality require further attention, the considerations I have brought forward suggest that this debate has yet to be placed on a clearly intelligible footing.

... [W]ho can endure the effort to conceive an endless temporal existence?

—Schleiermacher¹

Introduction

Bernard Williams' essay 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', first published in 1973,² initiated a debate that is still rumbling on. Williams' argument can be summarized as follows. What makes a life worth living is the activity of pursuing one's deep, or 'categorical', desires; but it is a non-contingent fact about human beings that our desires are finite and exhaustible; therefore there would necessarily come a time when an endlessly extended life becomes unbearably tedious and no longer worth living. Opponents of Williams' thesis have tended to deny the claim that human desires are necessarily exhaustible. A typical strategy has been to cite certain enjoyable features of a human life of ordinary duration and then to propose that these features need not be diminished or exhausted over time. John Martin Fischer, for example, distinguishes between 'self-exhausting' and 'repeatable' pleasures, and maintains that there would be a sufficient number of repeatable ones available to an immortal person to make that person's life endlessly pleasurable and hence desirable (see Fischer 1994).³ More recently, Timothy Chappell (2007) has adopted a similar strategy, but with a few differences here and there.

My aim in this paper is not to try to resolve the debate, but rather to elucidate it by highlighting and critically examining some of the principal assumptions and argumentative strategies that drive it forward, and by asking whether any of these assumptions or strategies runs into problems of ambiguity or unintelligibility. Although I am in fact sceptical about the intelligibility of the debate in its current form, I hope the considerations that I bring forward can assist those who consider the debate to be worth pursuing to continue it with a higher degree of awareness about where the genuine disagreements lie. To give focus to my discussion, I shall begin by examining some key points made by Chappell in his recent article.

¹ Schleiermacher (1958 [1799], 100).

² My references will be to the version of the essay reprinted as Williams (1993).

³ Comparable points have been made by, for example, Lamont (1965, 33) and Momeyer (1988, 19).

1 Chappell's Overlapping Threads

Chappell, following Williams, proposes that what gives meaning to a human life is the pursuit of 'projects and commitments' that we value (Chappell 2007, 3). Chappell is broad-minded and non-stipulative about which projects might count as worthwhile, giving as examples philosophy essays, friendships, and bringing up children, but leaving it as a matter of personal preference whether these or other projects are in fact to be pursued. The point that Chappell emphasizes is that the meaningfulness of a person's life is proportionate to the number of worthwhile projects that the person fulfils, and in making this point he takes himself to be merely voicing a generally-held assumption. As he puts it: 'We think (and surely rightly) that our lives will be less meaningful, the fewer worthwhile projects we bring to completion or fruition' (ibid.).

On Chappell's view, then, insofar as we desire to have a meaningful life, we thus have a reason to desire to fulfil our projects; and since death at a certain time, t , would inevitably foreclose the possibility of one's fulfilling the projects one is pursuing at t , one thus has a reason to resist dying at t . Chappell adds to this point the observation that our projects typically do not begin all at once or get fulfilled all at once, but arise at different times and come to fruition at different times. He characterizes this state of affairs in terms of the metaphor of a rope comprising multiple interwoven threads of varying lengths, each thread representing the duration of a project and the rope representing one's life as a whole. With this metaphor in place, Chappell then depicts death as the cutting of the rope, and highlights the fact that, at whatever point the rope is cut, its severance will inevitably involve the breaking of certain threads – that is, the frustration of some of our desires due to the collapse of certain projects.⁴ Chappell uses this image to illustrate his main point, which is that immortality is desirable. 'Mortality', he writes, '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, we have reason to value the prospect of immortality as a way of continuing to pursue them indefinitely' (2007, 5).

Much of what Chappell says about projects and a meaningful life is consistent with Williams' account. In arguing against the Epicurean view that death is not a disvalue for the person who dies, Williams maintains that one's wanting to achieve some goal gives one a

⁴ 'Frustration' is not to be understood here as the *experience* of frustration. Chappell is not proposing that deceased persons can experience anything.

reason to resist those things that might prevent the goal's being achieved, and since such things include one's own death, one has a reason 'to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil' (Williams 1993, 77). Where Chappell's account diverges from Williams' is in Chappell's assumption that the desires which generate our worthwhile projects could continue being replenished without diminution or cessation forever. I call this an *assumption* on Chappell's part because he provides no reason for rejecting Williams' claim that our project-generating desires – or, to use Williams' expression, our *categorical desires* – are finite and exhaustible. Of course, if Williams is right about this, then Chappell's rope analogy unravels. No longer will it be the case that, whenever death occurs, it inevitably severs some of the threads that represent our worthwhile projects; instead, we can safely predict that, for any given individual, there will come a time when the threads of the rope run out and there is no more rope to be cut. As Williams sees it, the preferable outcome would be for the rope to be cut shortly before the threads run out, or perhaps at the very instant when they run out, because if life continues beyond that point, it can only decline into intolerable boredom.

So it looks as though Chappell is begging the question against Williams on this point, but it is difficult to see how to resolve the dispute. Williams holds that our categorical desires are finite, and that this is a non-contingent fact about human beings (see Williams 1993, 82–83), whereas Chappell insists that we can in principle go on devising new projects forever and desiring to see those projects completed. Chappell proposes that a person is living 'a good life' when 'some projects and commitments are continuing, others are coming to completion, others again are just beginning', and that this rolling wave of projects gives a narrative structure to life (2007, 7). This sounds fine, and Williams would have no reason to demur. But while Chappell thinks 'this familiar feature of lived experience' lends 'logical pressure' to his view that immortality is desirable, Williams would simply deny that the wave can roll on indefinitely.

The weakness in Williams' own position is that it relies heavily upon what he considers to be the readers' natural response to the fictional predicament of Elina Makropulos ('EM').⁵ Having lived through three centuries at the biological age of 42, EM's life has been sapped of colour and enjoyment, and so she chooses to refrain from drinking

⁵ The case of Elina Makropulos is adapted from Karel Čapek's 1922 play *Věc Makropulos* ('The Makropulos Case' or 'The Makropulos Affair'), or perhaps more immediately from Leoš Janáček's 1926 opera of the same name.

any more of the elixir that would give her a further three-hundred-year span. ‘The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM’s unending life,’ contends Williams, ‘the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did’ (1993, 82). But how are we to settle this matter of what is, and what is not, a contingency in this context? It is difficult to see how the debate can ever rise above the level of bare intuitions, or what Adrian Moore has called a ‘temperamental divide’ (Moore 2006, 314), and Chappell’s contribution certainly does nothing to get us any further. In order to move the debate forward it seems that some careful reflection is required upon just what the competing claims about contingent, or non-contingent, features of human nature amount to, and thus I shall endeavour to make a start in this direction.

2 Contingencies and Human Nature

At one place in his article Chappell briefly considers, as a possible objection to his own view, the claim that since ‘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’ (2007, 6). Chappell has little patience with this objection, for he takes the debate to be unconstrained by the biological facts; ‘our question’, he declares, ‘is whether immortality could be desirable *even if* we were not just finite biological beings’ (ibid.). Chappell takes it that Williams would concur with this point, yet it is not at all clear how far Williams’ concurrence extends. Although Williams does indeed admit that our growing old and losing our powers ‘are contingencies’ (1993, 81), he subsequently suggests that what we may presume to be contingencies are not really so, and hence that there is no getting away from the fact ‘that an endless life would be a meaningless one’ (ibid.). This aspect of the debate demands careful attention.

It seems to me that Chappell is right to suppose that Williams is not committed to a conception of human beings that is entirely constrained by the biological facts, if by ‘biological facts’ we restrict ourselves to biologically-related knowledge based on inductive reasoning. If Williams *were* committed in this way, then the elaborate thought-experiment concerning EM, upon which he relies so heavily, could not even get started. After all, although biologists may not have a full explanation of why the aging process occurs, it remains a well-established fact about human beings that our biological age increases in accordance with our chronological age, and unlike Miss Makropulos, we do not live for

hundreds of years (let alone forever – whatever that might mean). Despite this fact, Williams has to allow that a human being *could* live for hundreds of years in order for his thought-experiment to make sense. The problem here, however, is that, having thereby sidelined certain (biological) facts about human beings, Williams then wants to appeal to other (psychological) facts about human beings to support his claim that an endless life would become meaningless; it is, he thinks, a fact of human psychology that our categorical desires are finite, and it is this fact that makes it a non-contingent matter that immortality is undesirable.

It seems, then, that Williams wants to pick and choose which facts about human nature must remain stable in our reflections on immortality and which can be stretched or dispensed with: we are permitted to imagine that human beings could have an indefinitely extendable life-span, but not permitted to imagine that our categorical desires are endlessly renewable. This argumentative strategy is questionable in two main respects. Firstly, at the very least it involves double standards with respect to natural facts; but secondly, it assumes to be a natural fact something that we have no way of either verifying or falsifying, namely that human categorical desires are finite. Williams asks us to reflect upon the case of EM, whose life became insufferably dull, and expects us to conclude, with him, that the same result must occur in all cases. But why should we think that EM's case is even typical, let alone universalizable?

But Chappell is not to be let off the hook here. For he, I presume, does not think the debate should float entirely free of natural facts about human beings, whether these be to do with human biology or psychology. When Chappell maintains that the debate should set aside the natural fact that we are finite biological beings, I take it that there are many other natural facts about humans that he would be far less ready to set aside; otherwise we would be at risk of talking idly about beings, or things, that were not even remotely recognizable as human beings at all. Indeed, as we saw earlier, Chappell is not averse to invoking 'familiar feature[s] of lived experience' when it suits his argument; and are not such features tightly bound up with our psychological (and hence our biological) natures?

A major impediment for the debate as a whole is that the notion of immortal life is bandied around in ways that remain hopelessly underdescribed. The lack of important detail precludes not merely a reasonable verdict concerning the desirability or undesirability of

whatever scenario is being alluded to, but also any reasonable judgement as to whether the scenario is even conceivable or intelligible. I will now elaborate these points.

3 The Problem of Underdescribed Thought-Experiments

One way of bringing out some of the salient difficulties accompanying attempts to imagine whether an immortal life could remain meaningful (and hence desirable) is to begin by considering the problem of extravagant thought-experiments more generally. In connection with thought-experiments in the philosophy of personal identity, Kathleen Wilkes has made the following poignant observation:

... [W]e cannot extract philosophically interesting conclusions from fantastical thought experiments. We cannot do this because we have the following choice: either (a) we picture them against the world as we know it, or (b) we picture them against some quite different background. If we choose the first, then we picture them against a background that deems them impossible If we choose (b), then we have a realm of fantasy, and fantasy is fine to read; but it does not allow for philosophical conclusions to be drawn, because in a world indeterminately different we do not know what we would want to say about anything. (Wilkes 1988, 46)

This passage nicely captures the sort of dilemma that ought, in my view, to be recognized by anyone who wants to respond to Williams' challenge by claiming to be able to imagine oneself, or anyone else, living an endless life. For what such respondents typically do is to draw attention to certain features of ordinary human experience that are enjoyable under normal circumstances, and to then claim that these features could, in principle, remain enjoyable under thoroughly different – indeed, we might say, indeterminately different – circumstances. Jonathan Glover exemplifies this strategy when he writes that he is

... not convinced that someone with a fairly constant character *need* eventually become intolerably bored, so long as they can watch the world continue to unfold and go on asking new questions and thinking, and so long as there are other people to share their feelings and thoughts with. Given the company of the right people, I would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went. (Glover 1977, 57)

Here we see the perfectly reasonable claim, that intellectual stimulation and good companionship are enjoyable features of life, combined with the claim that, were such features to obtain within an extremely longevous life, that life need not become insufferable. On the face of it, the combination of these claims may appear relatively

innocuous; but under closer scrutiny we discern that the speculative scenario is seriously underdescribed, and hence it is not clear what to make of it without substantial embellishment.

For a start, Glover does not tell us whether he is envisaging a world where only he has the chance to sample a few million years or whether this opportunity is afforded to others as well. Whichever way we go with this consideration, problems are liable to arise. If, for example, it is only Glover himself who has extreme longevity, then we are obliged to imagine him outliving generation after generation of people, in which case there would, it seems fair to suppose, be an enormous experiential gap between him and those individuals with whom he desires to ‘share [his] feelings and thoughts’. If, on the other hand, Glover is taking himself to be one among a number of extraordinarily long-lived individuals, but within a world where the rest of the population have far shorter life-spans, we must then contemplate what sort of relationship would obtain between these two very different communities. Would a group of million-year-olds within a society of ordinary mortals be treated like everyone else, or would there inevitably develop peculiar sorts of inter-communal tensions? A third possibility is that Glover is envisaging a world in which *everyone* lives for (at least) millions of years, but then we would have to wonder, for example, about the implications for population expansion. If, in this fantastical scenario, humans remained sexually active and fertile for a period of time proportionate to their counterparts in our ordinary world, then it is unclear how a Malthusian nightmare could be avoided. Yet if sexual activity or fertility were restricted in some fundamental way, then the kind of world we are being invited to imagine is radically transformed in another direction.

Worst of all, however, is that Glover, along with most other participants in the debate, fails to distinguish between what Hunter Steele has called ‘necessary body-bound immortality’ on the one hand, and ‘contingent body-bound immortality’ on the other.⁶ In the former case, the being would be completely incapable of dying, and would necessarily have no choice in the matter. In the latter case, meanwhile, the being would be merely contingently immortal, and hence there would be some means by which death could occur; if those means were to include some circumstance that could be voluntarily brought about, then the being would have a degree of choice over whether to go on living. The sort of

⁶ See Steele (1976, 426). Steele abbreviates these expressions to ‘necessary BBI’ and ‘contingent BBI’ respectively.

scenario sketched by Glover appears to involve immortality of the contingent variety, for it is implicit within the request to be given a few million years and to ‘see how [they] went’, that, should those years in fact go very badly, it would be desirable to have a choice over whether to persist any longer.

As I have suggested already, Glover is far from alone in neglecting the distinction between contingent and necessary immortality. Indeed, Williams himself gets the debate off to a confusing start by first selecting as his illustrative focal point the case of EM, which is patently a predicament of contingent immortality, but then expressing his conclusions as though they can be unproblematically extended to the necessary case. EM’s immortality is contingent because she is able to choose, after each three-hundred-year interval, whether to consume any more of the elixir that can cause her to live for a further three centuries. As it turns out, she feels that she has exhausted all that life has got to offer by the end of the first three-century stretch; and since Williams thinks we would all feel the same, he has no reason to explicitly consider the notion of necessary immortality. He perhaps takes it for granted that, given the necessary undesirability of contingent immortality, necessary immortality would also be undesirable. Now, although there is nothing obviously wrong with this entailment, the failure to make it explicit is liable to encourage other participants in the debate to conflate the two significantly different types of immortality; and this conflation contributes to a general atmosphere of conceptual murkiness that surrounds the debate. Many of the genuine difficulties of making intelligible what an immortal life would amount to are thus apt to be glossed over; and I shall now endeavour to bring out some of the difficulties that I have not yet mentioned.

4 Imagining Forever?

From much of what both Williams and his opponents say, it would seem that to regard Williams’ challenge as the demand to imagine a desirable life that is literally endless is the proper way of construing it. Williams himself, for example, declares his thesis to be that ‘Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless’ (1993, 73); and Chappell, on the other side of the dispute, states that ‘An eternal life ... can be meaningful, and under the right circumstances, will be more meaningful than any finite life could be ...’ (2007, 2). Clearly the disputants take themselves to be arguing about the desirability of an endless

life; but in their eagerness to do so, they overlook the prior question of whether it even makes sense to speak of an endless life that is recognizably human.

When trying to address this prior question, we need to remind ourselves that there is a significant logical difference between ascribing any finite duration to an entity on the one hand, and ascribing to it an infinite duration on the other. One way of expressing this difference is by highlighting the impossibility of an actual, or completed, infinite series, and then noting the consequences of this for what would count as the truth-conditions of the claim that some entity has infinite duration. When we say of some object, such as a house, that it has existed for, say, two hundred years and is liable to exist for two hundred more, it is not difficult to comprehend what the truth-conditions of such claims are; and furthermore, we also have a firm grasp of what would count as confirmation or disconfirmation of these claims. Even though none of us will be around in two hundred years' time, it makes perfect sense that someone who *is* around then could empirically verify or disconfirm the proposition, expressed two hundred years earlier, that a certain house would exist for another two hundred years.⁷ The proposition is, therefore, verifiable or falsifiable at least in principle, and this would remain so even in a case where the predicted duration of the entity was millions or billions of years. I take it that it is this in-principle verifiability that makes the proposition an empirical one, or in other words, a proposition that concerns an empirical fact.

Very different, however, are propositions concerning infinite duration. Suppose someone says of an entity, such as a celestial body (perhaps a 'black hole'), that it will, or is likely to, or might, exist forever, where 'forever' is meant in the strict sense of absolutely without end (rather than as an exaggerated way of saying a very long period of time).⁸ Although this bears a surface resemblance to an empirical predictive truth-claim, it is difficult to see what could count as its truth-condition. Of course, it is easy enough to say something like: "'x will exist forever' is true if and only if *x* does indeed exist forever'; but it is precisely the matter of establishing what could count as *x*'s existing forever that is the stumbling block here. As many philosophers, from Aristotle to Wittgenstein, have

⁷ Philosophers may, of course, disagree about the diachronic identity conditions of things such as houses, but such disagreements are not immediately relevant to the contrast I am making here.

⁸ It is conceivable that someone might think the notion of 'forever' is ambiguous when it is expressed independently of any opinion on whether time itself could come to an end. For my purposes here I am discounting the possibility that time itself could end, principally because I'm not sure how to make sense of the suggestion that it might.

observed, while we can make sense of the notion of a potentially infinite series – and hence, of a process that could, in principle, be continued without end – we cannot make sense of a *completed* infinite series.⁹ It follows from this that it makes no sense to speak of an empirical fact or state of affairs of x 's existing forever; for there is no point in time when it could ever become true that x had existed forever, and thus any empirical observation of such an occurrence is not possible even in principle. In the light of this fact, the intelligibility of a prediction that something will, or even might, exist forever becomes highly questionable.¹⁰ And if we say we can imagine something's existing forever, we must be clear that we are not imagining the thing's existence or life-span as a whole, but merely the possibility of the thing's going on without end.

Despite these difficulties, however, some philosophers will no doubt insist that there can be, say, a *metaphysical* fact of something's existing forever, which furnishes a truth-condition for statements of the sort in question. And although it's not at all clear to me how such a claim could be established, or even what the sense of such a claim is, I am willing to set aside those sceptical worries here for the sake of argument. Rather than question the intelligibility of the abstract claim that it is, or might be, the case that some x exists forever, I will here focus on the specific, and more immediately pertinent question of whether it makes sense to suppose that a human being, or something recognizably akin to a human being, could live forever. In posing this question, I take the sort of investigation that it invites to be a conceptual one; that is to say, an investigation into the conceptual connections that surround the concept of a human being. More particularly, it involves endeavouring to establish whether the concept of a human being can retain a clear sense when an attempt is made to predicate immortality of it. While a fully comprehensive investigation of this kind is beyond the scope of the present paper, I hope I can at least gesture in some useful directions. There are, I think, two main orientations that a conceptual investigation of the relevant sort might have, and I shall outline each of these in turn.

One approach would be to ask, straight out, whether a logical entailment (or internal relation) obtains between the concept of a human being and the concept of mortality. Those

⁹ 'Nothing is complete unless it has an end, and an end is a limit' (Aristotle, *Physics* III.6a14). '[I]sn't that which we can imagine multiplied to infinity never the things themselves, but combinations of the things in accordance with their infinite possibilities?' (Wittgenstein 1975, §147).

¹⁰ On these points, compare for example Holland (1974).

attracted by this approach might start by observing comparable instances of alleged entailments. One might, for example, draw attention to Peter Strawson's suggestion that, in the case of the concept of an animal, there is a logical entailment between this concept and the concept of the animal's having been born. This is to say that, if this entailment did not obtain, then 'animal' would not have the meaning that it does in fact have in our language (Strawson 1959, 51–52). If this seems plausible, then so too might it seem plausible that 'human being' would not have the meaning that it does if a statement such as 'she is a human being' did not entail 'she was born'. And if *this* entailment holds, then how about an entailment between 'she is a human being' and 'she will die'? An acceptance of this entailment would preclude any claims concerning immortal human lives, since any purportedly immortal life could not (logically) be human.

While it does not seem unreasonable to accept the proposed entailment between the concepts of being human and being mortal, and some philosophers do appear to have accepted such an entailment,¹¹ I suspect that those who maintain that talk of immortal human lives is intelligible will not readily concede that the entailment holds. And, even if they did concede it, they might nevertheless deny that it marks the end of the debate, by raising a contention that is expressible in the following terms: 'It doesn't ultimately matter whether the concept of a human being entails the concept of mortality – all that matters is whether we can imagine some kind of being that is both immortal and *like* a human being in the relevant respects (call it, if you like, a "quasi-human" or "post-human"¹²).' The strength of this objection hinges, of course, on what counts as being similar to a human 'in the relevant respects'. And this is where we can introduce the second possible approach to the question of which predicates are relevant to determining whether our concept of a human being can withstand attempts to predicate of it an unending life.

Instead of starting with the concept of a human being and asking whether this concept entails mortality, the second approach involves starting with the concept of immortality – construed as a life that goes on from one day to another without ever reaching a final day – and asking what conditions would need to be satisfied in order for such a life to obtain. Once a fair number of these conditions have been reasonably established, the question then

¹¹ John Whittaker, for example, writes that 'If human beings did not have bodily organs, did not have to eat to stay alive, did not die, and so on, then our understanding of what a human being is would fall apart' (1981, 24).

¹² Compare, for example, Elhefnawy (2007) and also the ideas propagated by the Future of Humanity Institute based at the University of Oxford.

becomes that of whether these conditions are consistent with a life's being human in the relevant respects. I would admit that, when one comes to respond to this question, the issue of what would make an immortal life desirable cannot easily be disentangled from that of what would make it conceivable. For when we ask whether a life is human 'in the relevant respects', at least one way of plausibly construing this question is as a request to consider whether such a life is one that we, as real human beings, can imagine ourselves living while still feeling sufficiently at home in our lives to recognize those lives as being ours; and this latter question cannot neatly be separated from that of whether such a life is desirable for us.

When inquiring into the necessary conditions for an immortal life, we immediately encounter the question of what sort of immortality is at issue. Crucially, we need to decide whether it is necessary or contingent immortality that we are considering, in the senses of these expressions that I noted earlier. And if it is the latter, then we must think about which contingent factors bear upon the life's persisting or coming to an end. As I see it, the main difficulty for those who opt to consider a contingent form of immortality consists in finding a principled reason for holding some features of a human being, and of the world in general, constant while permitting others to be modified or dispensed with. The danger is that, without any such principled reason, once the debate begins to float free of the natural facts it becomes subject to the free rein of imagination and, to paraphrase Wilkes, we lose our grip on what to say about anything.

The problem for anyone who wishes to advocate necessary immortality, meanwhile, consists in making intelligible the claim that such a life could be recognizably human or near enough to human that it would be anything in which we could have a personal interest. To elaborate this point, I will give some examples. Consider, for a start, whether a necessarily immortal being could be composed of flesh and blood, and bone and gristle; that is, the sort of stuff that we are made of. Or are these forms of matter inherently corruptible? And if such a being could *not* be composed of these organic materials, what else could it be made of which would entitle us to say that the being is human, or is like a human in the relevant respects?

A related issue is that of the putative immortal's vulnerability to injury or disease. Perhaps we can imagine someone's possessing an immune system strong enough to fight off every possible disease, but can we also imagine a human or human-like body capable of

withstanding, for example, any kind of physical impact? If even the mildest of injuries were able to be sustained, then, given unlimited time, the accumulation of these would inevitably lead to decrepitude and, ultimately, destruction. Yet if it is claimed that a necessary immortal cannot sustain even a mild injury, how are we to imagine the outcome of, for example, such an immortal's being caught in a nuclear explosion?

Among myriad further questions that arise are ones to do with where a necessary immortal is supposed to live out its infinite number of days. Supposing it begins its life on earth, where, then, is it going to go when the sun becomes a red giant and engulfs this planet, as it is due to do in about 7.6 billion years' time according to recent estimates?¹³ Are we to imagine the immortal's being somehow transported to some other inhabitable planet, or are we instead to set aside the facts about the universe as we know them and presume that the earth can remain inhabitable forever?

While considerations of these kinds are perhaps most pressing for the proponent of the conceivability of necessary immortality, many of them also arise in relation to immortality of the contingent variety. Again, the underlying worry is that, as it stands, the debate concerning the desirability of immortality rides upon examples that are seriously underdescribed, and that when we start to fill in the details of those examples, or ask how those details are to be filled in, the intelligibility of the purported scenarios becomes severely strained. At best we find ourselves in the realms of bizarre, and largely ad hoc, science-fiction fantasies where many of the facts are indeterminate, and at worst we find ourselves mired in incoherence.

5 Conclusion

As I said at the outset, my purpose in this paper has not been to take sides in the debate over the desirability of embodied immortality, but rather to scrutinize some of the key assumptions and argumentative strategies that generate that debate. I have argued that in large part the debate centres upon questions concerning which features of human beings, or human nature, are contingent and which are non-contingent or necessary. For the debate to get underway at all, the assumption must be made that mortality is merely a contingent feature of human lives, or of lives that are recognizably human-like; otherwise it would

¹³ See, for example, Schroeder and Smith (2008), and the related press release (University of Sussex 2008).

make no sense to ask whether immortal human, or human-like, lives could be desirable. Yet participants in the debate then go on to disagree about which other features of human beings are contingent. Williams maintains that the finitude of our categorical desires is not a mere contingency, but is a non-contingent fact about us. The likes of Chappell demur on this point, but concur with Williams that it is in pursuing and fulfilling worthwhile goals and projects that we find satisfaction and meaning.

In a nutshell, what I have argued is that if we enter into the game of abandoning certain well-established natural facts, such as the finitude of a human life-span, and yet still hope to appeal to other natural facts in order to make our case, it becomes extremely difficult to settle the matter either way. Given the present state of the debate over immortality's desirability, both sides appear to be on very shaky ground. Williams' central claim is based on his reflections on the single fictional case of Elina Makropulos, from which he draws what he takes to be a necessary truth about human beings, while Williams' opponents rely on imaginative scenarios that are so sketchily described that it is hard to see how any definite conclusions can be derived from them.

Ultimately I am sceptical about the intelligibility of the whole debate in its current form. Although it would take more than what I have done here to firmly establish the point, I would suggest that the conceptual connections between humanity, or what it means to be a human being, on the one hand, and mortality, or what it means to be a temporally finite being on the other, are not so weak that we can simply lay them aside in order to consider what we think about temporally unlimited human lives. If I am right, that our very understanding of what it means to be human is intimately bound up with our mortality, then we risk stepping into a muddle as soon as we try to wrench these concepts apart. And if we suppose that this problem can be avoided by speaking, not of humans, but of beings that are like humans in the relevant respects, it remains very doubtful that the 'relevant respects' can accommodate the potential for embodied temporal immortality.¹⁴

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¹⁴ I delivered an earlier version of this paper at a postgraduate seminar at the University of Leeds in February 2008. I am grateful to members of the audience on that occasion for their stimulating comments and questions, especially Stephan Krämer. I am also indebted to Robin Le Poidevin and Roy Holland for discussing these issues with me, and to David Brown for useful correspondence.

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