

## **Is the immortal life worth living?**

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### **Introduction**

John Martin Fischer has argued<sup>1</sup> that Bernard Williams' account of the tedium of immortality<sup>2</sup> is inadequate – that human agents could, in principle, bear the burden of immortality without falling prey to the necessary boredom Williams thinks accompanies prolonged life. Although Fischer offers several criticisms of Williams' view of immortality, I will limit my discussion in this paper to one. It is my contention that an essential ambiguity concerning the term “boredom” pervades Williams' argument, and that it is this ambiguity, not Williams' argument, that makes his position susceptible to Fischer's objection. I will argue for an alternate reading of boredom that allows him to escape (one of) Fischer's objections. In the final portion of this paper I argue that, even if we grant Williams the use of “boredom” as a term of art, we can still criticize his claim that boredom (construed as an absence of categorical desires) is a necessary condition of the immortal life. Williams ignores the possibility of the new fulfillment of old categorical desires, and this possibility allows one to hold that boredom is not a necessary consequence of immortality, even if it is a probable one.

### **Categorical desires and boredom**

In “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Bernard Williams has argued that “from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil,”

(73). My concern is with the former claim, though it is impossible to make sense of Williams' position without first coming to terms with his response to the Epicurean/Lucretian view of death. Williams views death as a harm because of the nature of human desire: the very act of desiring an object or a state-of-affairs makes it rational to want to avoid the state of being dead. This is a rather obvious point: if you desire something, it makes little sense to aim at things which would prevent you from getting this thing. As Williams puts the point, "from the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of affairs in which [her] want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil" (77).

This line of reasoning is buttressed by the (useful) distinction Williams draws between types of desire. Williams holds that, as desiring agents, our desires can be either conditional or categorical. The first of these consists in those desires we will have given the assumption that we will continue to live. The second category consists in those desires which propel one into the future – categorical desires are not conditional on one being alive.<sup>3</sup> Defeating Lucretius' argument that death ought to be nothing to us hinges on having a categorical desire, however thin this desire might turn out to be. By Williams' lights,

the reasons a man would have for avoiding death are, on the present account, grounded in desires – categorical desires – that he has; he on the basis of these, has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided, and we, looking at things from his point of view, would have reason to regard his death as a misfortune.  
(79)

As Williams goes on to remark, this view of the "evil" of death is endorsable on utilitarian grounds. One can "attach disutility to any situation that [one] has good reason to prevent, and [one] certainly has good reason to prevent a situation that involves the nonsatisfaction of his desires" (80). But, as Williams' points out, this implies that death is an evil regardless of when it occurs – it is an evil at six as well as 72. But if this is the case, and we prefer good things over evil ones, then we seem committed to the position that life will always be preferable to death, and because of this, that immortality will always be preferable to mortality. To put the point another way: in any instance where categorical desires are present, death must be construed as a misfortune

at least insofar as it thwarts these desires. Because satisfying desires is preferable to thwarting them, life will always be preferable to the misfortune of death. While this certainly entails that a longer life is better than a shorter one, it also entails the much stronger claim that immortality is preferable to dying at any time. “If Lucretius is wrong, we seem committed to wanting to be immortal” (81).

It is precisely this conclusion that Williams wishes to combat, and it is precisely here where the current point of contention arises. It is Williams’ view that “an endless life would be a meaningless one, [...] we could have no reason for living eternally a human life” (81).<sup>4</sup> This is so, according to Williams, because immortality would fail to satisfy the conditions of a desirable life. The first condition of such a life has been deemed the “identity condition” by J. M. Fischer, and requires that “it should be me who lives forever,” (83). The second condition (the “attractiveness condition”) requires that those interests we have in the future are sufficiently related to those interests we currently have. As Williams’ puts it, because we are “propelled forward by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires” (83). Even if our categorical desires are very thin (*viz.*, even if they are just the desire to have desires), we must be able to conceive these desires as our own.

On Williams’ account, there is no model of immortality that will adequately satisfy both of the above criteria. For my current purposes, I would like to limit the discussion to the most straight-forward case. If we envision a more or less permanent character having immortality, then it seems that at some point any possible categorical desire will have exhausted itself. Those things propelling one forward will have lost their proverbial momentum, and by virtue of this, my interest in continuing life will diminish. According to Williams, an account of immortality that adequately answered this challenge would have to make boredom unthinkable – that is, it would have to rule out the possibility of one tiring of one’s categorical desire. Williams claims that boredom is an essential feature of an immortal life, not merely a contingent effect of living too long. It is “a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment” (87). For a character that is more or less constant, then, a vision of eternity where boredom is unthinkable is required. Because, as Williams claims, no such model of immortality is available, we are licensed to reject the claim that an anti-Epicurean position demands that we want the immortal life.

**Distinguishing two senses of “boredom”**

In this section, I will attempt to rescue Williams from one criticism in Fischer’s “Why Immortality is Not So Bad.” The criticism with which I am here concerned might be put as follows: we can view a finite life as a worthwhile one even if we must endure several instances of boredom. If this is the case, we can reject the asymmetry between an infinite and a finite life. Given that a finite life does not require that boredom is unthinkable, we have little reason to suppose that wanting an infinite life requires that boredom is unthinkable.

It is my contention that we can save Williams from this criticism by pointing out why an asymmetry does not in fact exist between our ability to consider finite and infinite lives desirable: boredom in *either* case would make life meaningless. If this is correct, then Fischer is wrong to say that boredom is *not* unthinkable in a finite life. If boredom is not unthinkable in a finite life, the initial criticism of Williams’ view fails.

The claim that boredom must be unthinkable in a finite life for that life to be meaningful, of course, is highly implausible. To understand what the claim means (and to defend Williams against Fischer’s criticism), it is necessary to disambiguate “boredom.” It is possible to read Williams’ claim that boredom must be unthinkable in two very distinct ways. Fischer’s criticism commits Williams to a much broader view of boredom in the immortal life: namely, that an immortal life can never contain a single instant of boredom (here understood in its colloquial sense). If Williams in fact means that boredom simply cannot occur in an immortal life, Fischer’s objection seems both right and obvious: there is no reason to demand that boredom be unthinkable, simply by virtue of the fact that we do not have such a rigid criterion when assessing our finite lives. Indeed, it is probably impossible to live a life without boredom. Even if I manage to have very robust categorical desires that propel me into the future, it seems implausible to suggest that these categorical desires will prevent even seconds of boredom within my life. One might even suggest that boredom is a necessary condition for *having* robust categorical desires.

Consider the following case. If I have a categorical desire to be the best musician in the history of music, one might say my categorical desire is robust: it gives me reason to do several different things equally. To satisfy this desire, I am perhaps required to master every musical instrument. Now, let us assume that boredom never occurs. If

this is the case, I can continuously practice very intricate maneuvers on a saxophone, never tiring of this activity. If my categorical desire was to be the best saxophone player ever, then that categorical desire would certainly be satisfied by my continual practicing. But my desire is not to be the best saxophone player. It is to be the best musician. If I never tire of playing the saxophone, I have no reason to attempt to master another instrument. And if this is the case, there is a disutility in my satisfaction of my categorical desire because I am never bored with the activity of playing the saxophone. In order to satisfy the categorical desire of mastering all instruments (and hence being the best musician ever), I need a reason to stop practicing the saxophone. If I never become bored playing the saxophone – that is, if the activity was truly absorbing, I would never stop playing, and by virtue of this I would in effect thwart my categorical desire to be the best musician ever by not fulfilling those things required by my categorical desire (namely, the mastery of all instruments).

Even if boredom is not necessary to motivate me to practice other instruments, it is still unreasonable to think that, in playing the saxophone, I will never tire of that which I have thus far learned, or even the activity of playing. This does not mean that I will no longer have a categorical desire – it only means that I need a break in a specific activity. If Williams holds that such instances of boredom cannot exist in an immortal life, then Fischer's objection is certainly correct: this view is untenable. If we still have categorical desires propelling us into the future, then we still have a reason to live. If we still have a reason to live, then we can still say that it is reasonable to want an immortal life.

Williams' position regarding why immortality is not desirable hinges on the claim that, at some point, we no longer have categorical desires propelling us into the future, and by virtue of this fact, we become bored with life. The above example shows that we can be bored at an instant even though we still have categorical desires. But if this is right, it seems that boredom need not be unthinkable for an immortal life to be desirable.

It is possible to read the above considerations in two ways. On the one hand, we might think that these considerations give us ample reason to reject Williams' claim that boredom must be unthinkable in an immortal life. On the other hand, however, we may want to emphasize another role the term "boredom" could play in Williams' position. Given the principle of charity, I opt to give another possible meaning for the term "boredom" as Williams employs it.

The alternate reading of “boredom” in question might be put as follows: “boredom” designates that state of an agent in which no categorical desires are to be found. This rendering of the term boredom makes sense of the above example. Because categorical desires are still present in me as I put down my saxophone from boredom with it, I still have a reason to want to live. It is only after I have mastered every instrument and can no longer find satisfaction in playing any of them that I have entered into a state of *fatal* boredom – that all my categorical desires have subsided and I no longer have any reason to continue to live. This narrower reading of boredom allows instances of boredom, though it does not allow what we might call “states” of boredom – situations in which categorical desires are no longer present.

Only portions of Williams’ Makropulos Case support this reading, and by virtue of this fact I will not claim that this is the correct reading of Williams’ view. I will claim, however, that it is a more tenable position than the one we get when taking boredom in its broader sense. To give some substance to this reading, consider the following passage:

[There is a profound difficulty in] providing any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity that would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes, and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life. The point is not that for such a man boredom would be a tiresome consequence of the supposed states or activities [...] The point is rather that boredom, as sometimes in more ordinary circumstances, would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment. Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom unthinkable. What could that be? Something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing? (87)

In claiming that we ought to read “boredom” in the narrower sense – that is, as meaning a state in which one no longer has any categorical desires – I am capitalizing on a certain rendering of the above passage. One can read the claim that boredom “would be not just a tiresome effect” as both pointing out that boredom is inevitable in an immortal life and that the nature of this boredom is unlike a “tiresome consequence.” On this rendering of “boredom,” the fact that I tire of playing my saxophone is a tiresome consequence of

playing my saxophone for several hours. It is not a necessary consequence of playing the saxophone. Williams can be read as distinguishing this sort of boredom from the sort that accompanies immortal existence. The boredom accompanying immortality is “almost perceptual in character,” and hence quite unlike the boredom that ensues after many hours of playing the saxophone. Fatal boredom is the inability to see things as worth pursuing – an inability that stems from not having categorical desires. It is not simply a tiresome consequence of an activity, but a state that arises when one has exhausted the possibilities of a life.<sup>5</sup>

If we take “boredom” as a term of art, Williams’ position becomes tenable. There is no longer an asymmetry between the finite and the infinite life. Much as we embrace a finite life that has occasional ‘tiresome consequences’ stemming from certain actions, we can embrace an immortal life that has these. Likewise, while we cannot embrace an immortal life that gives an infinity to a state of having no categorical desires, we would also reject a finite life that had no categorical desires. In both cases, rendering “boredom” as “a state without categorical desires” allows symmetrical assessment of finite and infinite lives.

#### **A problem with the narrow reading of “boredom”**

Even if we grant Williams the far more tenable position I have articulated above, we are still entitled to criticize his assertion that a state without categorical desires is a necessary consequence of an immortal life. The criticism runs as follows: even if I end up in a state in which I no longer have categorical desires, it does not follow from this that significantly related categorical desires will not arise in the future.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention that Williams’ view rests on the assumption that an infinite life takes place within a finite set of possible activities. Once we reject this setting for immortality, the immortal life can escape fatal boredom.

To return to my previous example: assume that I have been living for more than a million years. The categorical desire that has been continuously propelling me into the future – the desire to be the best musician ever by mastering every instrument – has recently subsided. The explanation of this is simple enough: I can play any instrument on the planet – and play it more brilliantly than anyone with a finite life could hope. Having spent the better portion of a million years

learning to play these instruments, my categorical desire has been satisfied, and I find myself without reason to go on. There is no longer any reason to look with hope at the countless days that are sure to follow. I have entered fatal boredom.<sup>7</sup>

But then, miraculously enough, a few hundred years later – years filled with sheer boredom – a new instrument is invented. It is a string and a woodwind, and it requires musical talents which had been up to that point unimaginable. My boredom begins to subside—I recognize that a categorical desire that had for so long propelled me into the future had not in fact been satisfied. I am given new vigor in life – new reason for being.

This example is meant to show that, even if one enters a state where no categorical desires are present, it does not follow from this that the state is permanent. One can easily imagine hundreds of new instruments being invented over the millennia – indeed, one can imagine me inventing such instruments perpetually in order to satisfy my categorical desires. Composing every possible combination of notes and inventing every possible instrument would undoubtedly allow an existence that was in principle desirable. Even given possible states where I have no categorical desires, it does not follow that the immortal life is undesirable so long as these categorical desires can arise once again. In the above example, it is the same categorical desire that re-emerges, and by virtue of this, it satisfies both of the above conditions of wanting immortality.

The mistake Williams makes in assuming that an infinite life will necessarily end up being an infinitely boring one, it seems to me, is to imagine that a particular field of possibility exists in the instant I want immortality, and that this field of possibility will remain the same. To put the point differently: Williams situates an infinite life in a finite set of activities. Simply by virtue of the fact that those things that would satisfy a categorical desire will also change, we are entitled to reject the view (at least in some cases) that a categorical desire will of necessity exhaust itself. Consider a rather debaucherous example.

Having been born in ancient Greece, I have spent the past few thousand years being propelled into the future by a categorical desire to experience every possible bodily pleasure: it has been the driving force behind my desire to live. At certain points during the middle ages, I was convinced that I had done everything that was conceivable. I spent the next few hundred years without a categorical desire – bored to death, as it were. The rise of technology, however, revealed to me that I had been mistaken. With film, video, and eventually virtual

reality, a new field of possibility opened up to me – my old categorical desire re-emerged in full force as the churning of time yielded a new field of possibility in regard to desire-satisfaction.

In this example, once again, there is a period of what looks to be fatal boredom that is followed by the re-emergence of old categorical desires. Given that these categorical desires can re-emerge, I no longer have a reason to find an immortal life necessarily unappealing. I recognize that, although there might be times in which I have no categorical desires, these periods are not permanent, nor will these periods necessarily be longer than those periods in which I maintain categorical desires. Indeed, if it is the case that those times in which I have categorical desires are frequent enough – if they somehow drowned out my moment of utter boredom – it seems that, given the nature of desire, I am forced to want the immortal life. To put the point in Williams' mouth: "If I desire something, then, other things being equal, I prefer a state-of-affairs in which I get it from one in which I do not get it" (76). If I desire to continuously have those desires which are for me categorical, then, I am entitled to prefer the immortal life to the merely mortal one.

### Conclusions

I have argued that, although Williams' position can survive a criticism regarding an asymmetry in assessing infinite and finite lives via noticing an ambiguity in the term "boredom," the position is still flawed. The flaw in Williams' position lies in the mistaken assertion that a categorical desire, once it subsides, cannot possibly return. Because a categorical desire, once dead, does not necessarily remain dead, it is an open question whether or not any particular person will be able to bear an immortal life. If I can have a state without categorical desires that changes into a state where old categorical desires re-emerge, then there is no reason to suppose that boredom – whether rendered in the broad or narrow sense – must in fact be unthinkable in order to rationally want an immortal life.

### Notes

1. John Martin Fischer, 'Why Immortality is Not so Bad' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*. (1994).

2. Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. J.M. Fischer. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
3. Fischer has helpfully characterized this distinction as follows: Conditional desires "are desires for certain things, given that one will continue to live. Someone surely will want adequate clothing, food, shelter and so forth, on the condition that he or she will continue to be alive," (267). On the other hand, "preferences which imply an answer to the question of whether one wishes to be alive are categorical desires," (267).
4. One must here separate two questions. On the one hand, Williams is committing himself to the view that death, at least in some sense, provides the meaning of life. On the other hand, Williams is claiming that we need not be committed to the view that an anti-Epicurean position will commit us to wanting immortality. I am only concerned in the current context with the latter position.
5. It is still possible to claim that instances of boredom, understood colloquially, lead to the absence of categorical desires. On this view, excessive and repetitive instances of boredom eventually result in a state where nothing is promising. (My thanks to John Fischer for bringing this to my attention). We can still maintain, however, that the boredom which must be unthinkable is the "boredom" referring to the state without categorical desires. We might express the compatibility of these views as follows: to desire an immortal life, the causal chain stretching from instances of boredom to a state of boredom must be impossible. Our instances of boredom in an immortal life can never lead to the absence of categorical desires if we are to desire an immortal life. On this view, any life that is fundamentally represented by such a chain (3 years of instances of boredom leading to 50 years without categorical desires) is undesirable.
6. The desires must be significantly related to meet the attractiveness condition stipulated by Williams.
7. I leave it an open question whether or not my pleasure in playing instruments is in fact an exhaustible one. While Fischer's contention that certain pleasures are not exhaustible seems to me an adequate response to Williams' position, I am here interested in showing that, when appropriately situated in time, a categorical desire may not in fact be exhaustible.