**Immortality, Boredom, and Standing for Something**

***1. Introduction***

Death is generally regarded as a bad thing. We fear it, we lament it, we go to great lengths to avoid it—and so far as it goes this all seems reasonable. But if death is bad, does that mean never dying would be good? Not according to Bernard Williams. In a well-known essay, Williams argues that if we lived forever, we’d necessarily become alienated from our environment and existence, “bored” in his words.[[1]](#endnote-1) As Williams sees it, we are in a kind of bind; there is a predicament at the center of our existence. Life is generally worth living and so it is regrettable that it ends. But, according to Williams, mortality—the fact that we die—underpins the ability to meaningfully engage with the people, projects, and values around us in the first place. In this respect, he argues, life is worth living, in part, precisely because it ends, because we die.

Williams’ discussion of immortality raises important questions about the role that death plays in making life meaningful for us. In what ways does death underpin meaningfulness in life? Is it really necessary for meaningfulness? Could we live fulfilling lives without it? Much ink has been spilled over these questions. Here, I’ll defend a modest version of Williams’ answer to them. I agree with many of Williams’ critics, who argue that he overstates the necessity of death for meaningfulness in life. Still, I believe that Williams is right to be pessimistic about the prospects of an immortal existence being fulfilling for us.

***2. The Necessary Boredom Thesis***

Williams begins his discussion of immortality by reflecting on Karel Capek’s play, “The Makropulos Case.” The play is about a woman who goes by a number of names, all with the initials “EM.” EM is 342 years old.[[2]](#endnote-2) Her life has been extended by an elixir of life, which her father, a physician to a 16th-century emperor, tested on her. The elixir extends one’s life by 300 years, and so to continue living EM has to take it again. When the time comes, though, she refuses, opting instead to die and to end an existence that has come to be completely miserable. Indeed, EM’s life has come to a state of “indifference” and “coldness.” Nothing excites her or makes her happy anymore; she has become completely alienated from her environment and existence. “In the end it is the same,” she says, “singing and silence.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

What happened to EM? As Williams sees it, she was simply “at it for too long.” He characterizes her state of alienation as a kind of boredom: “a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her.”[[4]](#endnote-4) And Williams believes that boredom like this, alienation and indifference, would overcome anyone who continued to live forever. He thus argues that EM’s story reveals something true of everyone: “that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies, that an endless life would be a meaningless life, and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life”[[5]](#endnote-5) Immortality, according to Williams, would, at least for humans, *necessarily* lead to the sort of boredom that EM experienced. Call this claim Williams’ *Necessary Boredom Thesis*.[[6]](#endnote-6) It suggests that death is necessary for our living fulfilling, meaningful lives. Without death, in other words, we would necessarily become alienated from our existence and environment; we would necessarily become bored, like EM.

A central debate about immortality has concerned this thesis. Many theorists argue that immortality would necessarily be boring; many others argue that it wouldn’t.[[7]](#endnote-7) For my part, I’m sympathetic with those who criticize the Necessary Boredom Thesis. I doubt, though, that this thesis is as important as theorists have taken it to be. As I’ll explain below, even if we grant that immortality wouldn’t *necessarily* be boring, this doesn’t entirely resolve our predicament.

***3. The Value-Filled World Argument***

Before turning to my own view of things, however, it’s worth stopping to consider and set aside one way in which the Necessary Boredom Thesis is often criticized. We can call this criticism the *Value-Filled World Argument*. This argument, I believe, misconstrues what Williams was worried about. As a result, it also misses what is interesting about his discussion. Pinpointing where the Value-Filled World Argument goes wrong, then, is illuminating. Particularly, it promises to give us a better sense of what Williams has in mind when he talks about boredom and, consequently, what’s potentially at stake when it comes to giving up our mortality.

The Value-Filled World Argument begins with an observation: the world is full of value. It’s full, that is, of meaningful ways to spend one’s time. Moreover, this value seems inexhaustible; the world seems to offer endless opportunities for meaningful engagement. And this, proponents of the argument say, flies in the face of what Williams is suggesting. After all, consider, once more, what Williams says about EM. He says that her boredom was connected to the fact that “everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her.” This makes it sound as though EM simply ran out of new experiences to have. But why think that *everyone* would run out of new experiences to have? And moreover, why think that experiences have to be new to be meaningful or fulfilling?

Consider, for example, pursuits like art and intellectual inquiry. Such pursuits seem to offer endless occupation: there is always more art to appreciate and create, just as there are always more theoretical questions to puzzle over and investigate. Likewise, many experiences can be enjoyed again and again. Think of the satisfaction one can achieve from exercise or sport, or consider the comfort of sitting in a park on a sunny day or drinking coffee on a chilly morning. These sorts of experiences always seem to be there for our enjoyment. Given all the world has to offer, then, why think that everyone would be like EM? Why think we’d all run out of fulfilling experiences?

To be clear, the Value-Filled World Argument doesn’t claim that the world must necessarily be full of value. Nor does it claim that everyone necessarily has the opportunity to engage with that value. Some people, for example, might be socially situated in such a way that they are blocked from getting to pursue the meaningful activities that the world has to offer. The Value-Filled World Argument can grant all of this because it simply aims to show that boredom isn’t a *necessary* consequence of immortality. So long as it is possible for someone to meaningfully engage with the world forever, in other words, the Necessary Boredom Thesis is false. And given how much value there is in the world, some have argued, it certainly seems possible that *someone* could live forever without boredom.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As I suggested above, though, the Value-Filled World Argument misconstrues Williams’ point and, in doing so, it misses what is interesting about the questions posed by his discussion. Williams doesn’t deny that the world contains enough value to, in theory, sustain a meaningful immortal existence. He doesn’t think, in other words, that we’d necessarily become bored because we’d necessarily run out of valuable things with which to engage. His worry, rather, concerns ourability to continually engage with those valuable things in the first place. His worry isn’t about the world or our environment; his worry is about us and our agency.

Consider how Williams describes the sort of boredom that he sees in EM. He describes this kind of boredom as a “reaction almost perceptual in nature to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment.”[[9]](#endnote-9) He contrasts this with boredom of a more familiar sort. Think, for example, of the boredom you might experience while waiting for an appointment or when tasked with some unnecessary project. If it helps, imagine that your phone has died and that you don’t have a friend with you. The sort of boredom that you might feel on such occasions is the consequence of your surroundings being dull or uninteresting. You have nothing to do; you’ve been betrayed by the world. But this isn’t the sort of boredom that Williams has in mind when he worries that immortality would necessarily be boring. Williams’ sense of boredom isn’t a response to any poverty of value in the world. It is, rather, a response to the poverty of one’s *relation* to the world. Something about living forever, Williams thinks, would impoverish our ability to meaningfully engagewith what the world has to offer, and so, Williams argues, we’d become bored, alienated from our environment and existence.[[10]](#endnote-10)

This makes it clearer why it won’t do for a critic of the Necessary Boredom Thesis to point to all of the valuable things that there are to do in the world. One might be unable to meaningfully relate to the world despite its containing an endless number of valuable activities and experiences. As Cheshire Calhoun points out, one might even be aware of all of these valuable activities and experiences and yet, tragically, find oneself unable to find them engaging.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The Value-Filled World Argument’s shortcoming, then, is that it is driven by a particular way of thinking about boredom, one that takes boredom to be the consequence of our environment. Williams, though, isn’t worried about this kind of boredom. The boredom that worries him is boredom as a reaction to one’s impoverished relation to the world. Its source, then, isn’t in the world; it’s in us. A proponent of the Necessary Boredom Thesis, then, needs to show that there is something about how we relate to the world that is necessary for living a meaningful and fulfilling life, and they need to show that this would necessarily be undermined by immortality.

***4. Skepticism about the Necessary Boredom Thesis***

Earlier, I said that I have doubts about the Necessary Boredom Thesis. Let me now explain them. To defend the Necessary Boredom Thesis, we’ve just seen, one has to show two things. First, one has to show that there is something about how we currently relate to the world that is necessary for living a meaningful, fulfilling life, and, second, one has to show that this would necessarily be undermined by immortality. My doubts stem especially from skepticism about establishing the first claim.

Consider just how strong that claim is. Our mortality surely informs how we currently engage with and find meaning in the world. But why think that the way we currently relate to the world is the only possible way of relating to it that could be meaningful? Or, to put the point positively, why think that there aren’t other ways of relating to the world, other ways of being, which, perhaps, aren’t on our radar but could still be meaningful? Perhaps immortality would undermine certain of our distinctive, mortal ways of relating to the world. But why think we couldn’t adjust? Why think we couldn’t develop new ways of relating to the world, new ways of being? It seems difficult to show that we necessarily couldn’t.[[12]](#endnote-12)

I thus think there is good reason to doubt the Necessary Boredom Thesis. It simply seems too strong. Still, I don’t think denying the Necessary Boredom Thesis settles things.

***5. A More Modest Predicament***

Even if we deny the Necessary Boredom Thesis, it is far from obvious that we should choose to give up our mortality, given the option. Indeed, even if we grant that we wouldn’t *necessarily* become bored, that our existence wouldn’t *necessarily* become meaningless, that we wouldn’t *necessarily* lose the ability to engage with the world in a fulfilling way, this is at best cold comfort. It seems that we’d reasonably want assurance that we *wouldn’t* become bored, that we wouldn’t find immortal existence alienating. And I doubt that much assurance is to be had on this front.

Of course, one might wonder about this claim. Maybe not much assurance is to be had that we wouldn’t become bored, alienated in the way that Williams describes, but surely there also isn’t strong reason to think that we would become bored. We don’t really know what immortal life would be like. Isn’t it a wash?

Not quite. After all, we do know at least one thing about immortal existence: it requires giving up mortality.[[13]](#endnote-13) And if we reflect on the ways that our mortality undergirds our current lived experience, the current ways that we find meaning and fulfillment in our particular relationships, activities, and environments, I think we find good reason to worry about choosing to give it up. This, I think, is the best way to understand Williams’ driving idea.

In particular, as I’ll explain below, I believe that giving up mortality would likely mean giving up one particularly important sort of meaning. Without mortality, we have good reason to think that our lives couldn’t stand for something, at least in one familiar sense of that phrase. Choosing to give up our mortality would thus, I suspect, change the significance that the things in our lives can have for us. And this would likely be alienating.

If this is right, then a more modest version of Williams’ predicament emerges. Death, after all, still seems to be a bad thing, something reasonably lamented, feared, and avoided. But if our mortality makes possible a particularly important way in which we can commit ourselves to things, and thus a particularly important way in which specific people, projects, and values can be meaningful to us, then it is far from clear that never dying would be good. Again, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. We might avoid death by giving up our mortality; but there’s reason to think that doing so would mean abandoning our distinctive ways of relating to the world, which currently make our lives feel worthwhile. And it is far from clear that this is desirable.

The basic thought here, then, is this. It isn’t clear that mortality is necessary for meaningfulness in life; it isn’t clear that we couldn’t possibly live a fulfilling, immortal existence. But to do so would seem to require becoming a very different kind of creature. And given that we are already living in a certain way, with certain commitments, with particular things in our lives that carry a distinctive kind of significance for us, it isn’t clear how well we could withstand such a radical transformation. From our particular mortal perspectives, that is, I doubt immortality would be, or should be, especially enticing.

***6. Immortality and the Source of Boredom***

I’m suggesting, then, that there is a distinctive way in which we commit ourselves to things, one that is central to most of our lives. And moreover, I’m suggesting that immortality would undermine this form of commitment and would thus likely be alienating for us. Let’s explore these suggestions in more detail.

Williams claims that EM’s boredom was “connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her.” I’d like to try to make sense of this suggestion. And to do so, I’d like to begin by considering a surprising claim that Williams makes.[[14]](#endnote-14) He writes:

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. One might make the immortal man content at every moment, by just stripping off from him consciousness that would have brought discontent by reminding him of other times, other interests, and other possibilities.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Williams’ idea here is counterintuitive. On the face of it, it would seem that being reminded “of other times, other interests, and other possibilities” would promise to keep one from becoming bored. Indeed, Connie Rosati, in a rich discussion of Williams’ paper, argues that our ability to reevaluate and reimagine our lives should lead us to doubt Williams’ certainty that we’d become bored during an immortal existence. Rosati believes that our capacity to imaginatively engage with possibility is precisely a solution to boredom.[[16]](#endnote-16) Why, then, does Williams claim the opposite? Why does Williams think our capacity to imagine other times and possibilities gives us *reason* to worry about becoming bored, alienated?

Williams doesn’t explain his claim; however, I believe we can make sense of it. The worry, I think, has to do with the significance of our commitments becoming diluted. When one commits oneself to different people, projects, or values, that is, one gives them a distinctive place in one’s life. And as one continues to commit oneself to things, one continues to mark those things as significant in this way. After enough time, though, after marking enough people, projects, and values as significant like this, one risks diluting the significance of the people, projects, and values to which one has already committed oneself. It seems, in other words, that one can only place so many things at the center of one’s life and history. Just as I might feel less confident that I’m really your close friend when I find out that you have 600 other “close” friends, one might feel one’s past commitments lose their significance as one continues to commit to more and more things.

To better see the worry, it might help to reflect more on the significance of our substantive commitments. Samuel Scheffler observes that temporal scarcity is a condition under which “the attitude of valuing comes to play an important role in human life.” Scheffler’s idea is that our morality, along with the temporal scarcity it creates, forces us to “establish priorities, to guide our lives under a conception of which things are worth doing and caring about and choosing.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Scheffler’s thought, then, is that when one commits oneself to some person, project, or value, one does so against a background of finitude, against a background of the people, projects, and values that one isn’t and won’t be committing oneself to. This helps us see what it is to mark some person, project, or value as especially significant for one’s life: the person, project, or value to which one commits oneself is especially significant relative to the other people, projects, and values that one won’t be committing oneself to, that one won’t be making central to one’s life. In a sense, then, when we commit ourselves to something, our life comes to stand for it. And the worry—about the dilution of significance—is that if one gives up one’s mortality, if one thus gives up temporal scarcity, one gives up the finitude that makes sense of this kind of significance. Consequently, it seems that one also gives up one particular purpose one’s life can have: making one’s life stand for something.

The significance of commitment, along with its attending sense of purpose, seems to be of great importance to us. Think, for example, of the kinds of attitudes we take toward our own and others’ lives. When some writer or artist or businessperson dies, we might marvel at and admire the way they “dedicated their life” to their pursuit. When our friend continues to float from one thing to the next, with no commitments, working a dead-end job, getting drunk all the time, we might worry our friend is “wasting their life.” And from time to time, we might worry about how we are “living our lives” and about whether we’ve “made our lives” about the right stuff. Likewise, consider the following common piece of advice: “live each day like it’s your last.” This advice tells us to put our energy only into those people, projects, and values that merit our limited time. Or consider the common hypothetical question: “What would you do if you only had 5 more years to live?” Our answer to this question is supposed to reveal our most important commitments, those most central to our lives.

The idea, then, is that our mortality, and particularly the finitude that it brings with it, is the condition for the possibility of a familiar and important way in which we commit ourselves to the people, projects, and values in our lives. Because we’re mortal, our commitments accrue a symbolic significance—our lives can stand for things. If we were to give up our mortality, then, we would seemingly lose this way of committing ourselves to things, and our particular commitments would eventually lose this significance.

This helps us to see how immortality threatens us with boredom, with a kind of alienation from our own existence. When considering whether to become immortal, we have already lived a finite life, characterized by commitments to certain people, projects, and values. And the significance of these commitments is threatened by a life that never ends. If we relinquish our mortality, that is, we also give up on this significance. Of course, this may not occur to us immediately. But, as Williams points out, it seems that as long as we remain conscious of other times, interests, and possibilities, the loss will eventually become salient. And this, I think, constitutes the realization that one’s relation to one’s environment has become impoverished. One will come to realize, in other words, that the significance of one’s commitments have been diluted, that the things one took one’s life to stand for have stopped being central to one’s life. Moreover, one will realize that one can no longer commit to things in the way in which one once could. So, I believe, one will become alienated from one’s environment and existence—one will become bored.

We can apply this line of thought to EM. Williams, we’ve seen, explains her boredom by suggesting that it is “connected to the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular woman of 42 had already happened to her.” His point, though, shouldn’t be understood in terms of EM running out of new experiences to have. In a sense, I suspect, her problem was the opposite. The world marched on, and she, as a particular person, with a particular history, had to keep pace. She had to continue to engage with new people, projects, and values. And after enough time, it might have simply become unclear what the point of it all was. Committing herself to this person or that project began to lose its meaning. Singing and silence began to look the same. She could no longer live a recognizably human life. She was simply at it for too long.

***7. A Lingering Hope***

Still, there is a lingering hope for the proponent of immortality. And it is worth considering this hope, in part, because I think it makes clearer what we might lose if we were to give up our mortality. The hope is this: it doesn’t seem like life-standing commitments would *necessarily* be undermined by immortality. After all, it seems possible that one might make one’s life about something like intellectual inquiry or promoting justice. And it seems like if one did, then this would provide a stable commitment. One wouldn’t, in other words, have to commit oneself to anything new, and so the significance of one’s commitment wouldn’t necessarily become diluted or undermined.

What should we make of this possibility? It certainly provides further reason to doubt the Necessary Boredom Thesis. But should we find this possibility reassuring? That is, does it give us much reason to choose to live forever, to think that we wouldn’t find an immortal life alienating? I don’t think that it does, or, at least, I don’t think it provides as much assurance as one might hope.

First, even if we dedicate ourselves to such abstract, inexhaustible ends, we’d have to mediate those commitments through particular people, projects, and activities. For example, one cannot promote justice in the abstract. One would have to take up particular causes, or come to the aid of particular people in particular situations. An interesting feature of a life dedicated only to abstract, inexhaustible ends, then, is that it would change the way in which one relates to the particular people and projects in one’s life. Those people and projects would become something more like means to some grander activity that one will never finish. And this way of relating to the particular people and projects around one isn’t clearly desirable.

Moreover, as Williams points out, our commitments to activities like intellectual inquiry or promoting justice are reflective of more about us than some pure appreciation of the value of the activity itself.[[18]](#endnote-18) We commit to the things that we do because of our character and interests and because of other commitments we have. And there is a good chance that these other aspects of us might be affected by immortality. Indeed, this point is strengthened when considered in light of the foregoing idea, about the way in which we must pursue abstract, inexhaustible ends through the particular, concrete people, projects, and environments around us. Dedicating one’s life to intellectual inquiry or promoting justice might lose its appeal without particular colleagues or once one finishes some particular project, which might have spurred one to those larger pursuits in the first place.

I doubt, then, that there is much consolation to be had in our lingering hope, the hope of dedicating our lives to abstract, inexhaustible ends. While it is certainly possible that one could find a life dedicated to such ends meaningful and fulfilling; it would still mean abandoning certain more immediate ways of relating to the people, projects, and values around one. And it isn’t clear that abandoning those more immediate ways of relating to the world is desirable. It would still mean abandoning, in a sense, our commitments to the particular people, projects, and values in our life.

***8. Conclusion***

What, then, is the take-away from the foregoing discussion? I haven’t meant to argue that boredom—alienation—would be a necessary consequence of immortality. Indeed, I don’t even mean to suggest that boredom would necessarily afflict any human who chose to give up their mortality. Perhaps one could find a different way of relating to the world. One might become more present-oriented, with things only being important to one *now*, with no claim to mattering for one’s life as a whole. My point is only that immortality seems to threaten one particularly important way in which many of us live our lives, one particularly important way that many of us relate to our worlds. And it is far from obvious that we would be fulfilled after having lost this way of committing ourselves to things. Boredom, I think—alienation in the way Williams described—is far from unthinkable for most of us. And this gives us good reason to worry about choosing to give up our mortality.

We’re left, then, with a version of Williams’ predicament. It’s worth noting, though, that there is a silver lining here. After all, implicit in the foregoing point is something else: there is something to celebrate about our mortality. Our mortality, through the finitude that it brings, makes possible a particular way of committing to things, a particular way of engaging with the world, of creating a life. As mortals with a reflective awareness of our mortality, we’re capable of living our lives for certain people, projects, and values. It isn’t all bad, then.

1. Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” reprinted in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 71-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is the age Williams reports. In the play, EM is 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Williams, “Makropulos Case, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 81 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I borrow this term from John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, “Immortality and Boredom,” *Journal of Ethics* 18 (2014), 354. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For defenses of the Necessary Boredom Thesis, see, e.g., Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). For criticisms, see, e.g., John Martin Fischer, “Why Immortality Is Not So Bad,” reprinted in *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Martha Nussbaum, “The Damage of Death: Incomplete Arguments and False Consolations,” in *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death*, eds. J.S. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 25-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, in “Immortality and Boredom,” make this kind of argument. They worry proponents of the Necessary Boredom Thesis sometimes conceive of the world as though it has only a finite amount of valuable experiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Williams, “Makropulos Case,” 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There is another aspect of Williams’ argument that I won’t emphasize here. He worries that not becoming bored would require becoming a different person. Becoming a different person, though, would undermine the value of immortal existence, since, presumably, we want *ourselves* to be the person who persists. See Williams, “Makropulos Case,” 83-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cheshire Calhoun, “Living with Boredom,” *Sophia* 50 (2011): 275. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, e.g., Nick Bostrom and Rebecca Roache, “Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement,” in *New Waves in Applied Ethics,* eds. J. Ryberg, T. Petersen, and C. Wolf (Pelgrave Macmillan, 2008), 120-152. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Here, I have in mind what is sometimes called *true* immortality, as opposed to *medical* or *contingent* immortality. The latter are forms of immortality wherein one can still ultimately die; one’s vulnerability to death is just radically circumscribed or temporarily suspended. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. What follows draws heavily from David Beglin, “Should I Choose to Never Die? Williams, Boredom, and the Significance of Mortality,” *Philosophical Studies* 174 (2017), 2009-2028. There, I provide a more detailed discussion of Williams and of how we should understand the boredom that would likely result from immortal existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Williams, “Makropulos Case,” 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Connie Rosati, “The Makropulos Case Revisited: Reflections on Immortality and Agency,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*, eds. B. Bradley, F. Feldman, and J. Johansson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Williams, “Makropulos Case,” 88-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)