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The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: Longevity and the Curmudgeonly Attitude to Change

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Abstract

Boredom has dominated discussions about longevity thanks to Bernard Williams’s influential “The Makropulos Case.” I reveal the presence in that paper of a neglected, additional problem for the long-lived person, namely alienation in the face of unwanted change. Williams gestures towards this problem but does not pursue it. I flesh it out on his behalf, connecting it to what I call the ‘curmudgeonly attitude to change.’ This attitude manifests itself in the tendency, amongst those getting on in years, to observe that things are getting worse. Curmudgeonliness is typically met with dismissal because it often concerns changes that don’t radically inhibit the curmudgeon’s well-being or autonomy. I believe that taking the curmudgeonly attitude more seriously will provide insight into the longer-lived self and its relation to the future. Using Williams’s approach to longevity as the framework, I contend that—as with boredom—a sense of alienation born of curmudgeonliness can become terminal for the subject, rendering her unable to envision the future as a site of worthwhile activity. However, I also uncover ways in which this agential stasis is significantly distinct from boredom and constitutes a different worry and a different risk for the long-lived individual.

Keywords: Longevity; aging; boredom; attitudes toward the future; value conservatism

Older people and sour people do not appear to be prone to friendship. For there is little pleasure to be found in them, and no one can spend his days with what is painful or not pleasant ... (Aristotle 1985, 8.5.1157b15–18)

Many of us stand a greater chance than ever of spending a significant portion of our life as an older person. Outside of applied philosophy, philosophical discussions of aging are often secondary to or derived from discussions of longevity.¹ Both involve a diachronic stretch of time considered “long” relative to some specified or presumed scale. But aging is a biological process that typically follows a certain physical and cognitive course, whereas the concept of longevity, if not the reality, is a purely temporal notion that does not entail a particular biological trajectory. This allows us to ask questions about the impact upon us of prolonged time without clouding the inquiry with contingent matters specific to this or that long-lived individual or group. The debate, in effect, becomes one about whether longevity itself is potentially detrimental to us. The concern is that given sufficient time and effort we can, to borrow Steven Luper’s unnerving phrase, simply *exhaust* life, draining it of the resources and opportunities it provides us (Luper 2013).

¹There is a longer discussion to be had about the ways in which the theoretical concerns of aging and longevity overlap, but I set this aside here and take for granted that concerns about longevity typically have ramifications for biological aging. However, see Kamm (2020, chap. 5) for a speculative exercise in separating these concepts.

Perhaps the most familiar example of this in the literature is the fictional Elina Makropulos (“EM”), the prospective immortal of Bernard Williams’s “The Makropulos Case,” whose origins lie in a play and opera of the same name. Ostensibly, her case is used by Williams to cast doubt on the desirability of immortality. However, I join with others in seeing his argument as primarily an indictment of longevity.² EM’s plight—that of terminal boredom—is often treated as relevant to our own mortal and considerably more limited lifespans.³ “There are,” as Samuel Scheffler argues, “reasons for thinking that Williams’s ultimate concern is with a problem which, if his diagnosis is correct, lies at the heart of ordinary, mortal life,” namely, a “tension between the possession of a character and the ability to engage with the world” (2013, 93). The overriding aim of this paper is to ratchet this tension up a notch by adding additional worries for the long-lived person beyond the one that Williams supplies. These additional worries stem from something that—for lack of a set term—I will call the ‘curmudgeonly attitude to change.’

In the first part of my paper, after a preliminary sketch of this attitude, I will briefly go over the familiar lessons of Williams’s case of EM. I will then argue for the presence of a neglected, additional problem to that of terminal boredom—one that Williams gestures towards but does not pursue. I will flesh this problem out on Williams’s behalf, connecting it to the curmudgeonly attitude, and showing various ways it is distinct from boredom. I will then spend the second part of my paper analysing the curmudgeonly attitude to change, and the outlook that it presupposes about the self and its relation to the world, arguing that—as with boredom, albeit for different reasons—the curmudgeonly attitude has the capacity to become terminal for the subject, adding to the long-lived person’s concerns. In the third part, I uncover and examine a key difference between the problems of boredom and curmudgeonliness. This difference is grounded in the fact that terminal boredom is an essentially self-directed problem within the Williamsian framework, while excessive curmudgeonliness born of unwanted change is a world-facing crisis. Not only the extent but the nature of what is lost for the curmudgeon is at issue here, and the losses she incurs are potentially more broad ranging than they are for the merely bored.

1.a Older people and sour people

We are familiar with the stereotype of the older person, alone and withdrawn from the world, and generally not a lot of fun to be around. It’s a condition not exclusive to the elderly; Aristotle’s non-age-specific “sour people” are also prone to social isolation. But while there may be any number of ways to safeguard against sourness, strategies for avoiding aging tend to be more drastic. And so, we may be especially fearful of becoming unpleasant and isolated as we age, even as we tolerate bouts of sourness in our youth. Simone de Beauvoir confronts us with a list of further drawbacks that aging souls can anticipate, including boredom, uselessness, loneliness, and valuelessness (1972, 464). A related trope of aging, closely aligned to that of social isolation, is the tendency amongst those getting on in years to observe that some, many, or perhaps most things are getting worse: call this “the curmudgeonly attitude to change” (or “curmudgeonliness” for short).⁴ While this attitude is

²See Rosati 2013, 359; Scheffler 2013, 91–93; Overall 2003, 127.

³Cheshire Calhoun, in her taxonomy of boredom, considers Williams’s particular conception to be “surely, the largest share of boredom” that we mortals are subject to (2018, 138). Christine Overall applies Williams’s reasoning to actual cases of long life: “Some very elderly people apparently feel ‘ready to die’ for something like this reason: they believe they have done all that they could manage and hope for. Not everyone reaches this stage, but some at least do seem to attain before death a sense of fulfilled potential” (2003, 166). And Williams himself speaks of how being reduced to conditional desires afflicts the (mortal) elderly: “some people, for instance some of the old, desperately want certain things when nevertheless they would much rather that they and their wants were dead” (1973, 85).

⁴Not to be confused with John Martin Fischer’s notorious “immortality curmudgeons” (2013).

also not restricted to a particular time in life, it is primarily associated with people who have reached “the land of old age,”⁵ or have it in their sights.

Despite G. A. Cohen’s assurance that “it is entirely possible that ... certain *kinds* of things have *always* been worse than they were before” (2011, 204), the curmudgeonly attitude is frequently met with derision. My choice of label highlights our tendency to diminish its significance. I will take the curmudgeonly attitude more seriously in the hope of providing some insight into the longer-lived self and its relation to the world. In particular, debates about whether a protracted life is worthwhile, valuable, or meaningful could benefit from some attention to the curmudgeon and what drives her discontent. But to see this clearly, we must prise curmudgeonliness apart from other alleged attributes of the long-lived person. Boredom in particular has dominated a certain strand of philosophical discussion about longevity. So, I am especially concerned, in what follows, to separate boredom from the curmudgeonly attitude that results from a sense of things changing for the worse.

What do I mean by the curmudgeonly attitude? The key manifestation is, as said, the sentiment that things are getting worse. The things in question tend to belong to the world of human norms, practices, and behaviour. Personal attachment is part of valuing the activities, practices, items, etc. in question; it is not just the value we consider them to have but the extent and nature of our acquaintance with them that informs their perceived value. Attachment is hence a matter of personal experience (which is one reason why some specific targets of the curmudgeonly attitude don’t necessarily resonate with everyone). In addition, the valued items may be construed as types or tokens.⁶

The sentiment that things are worsening needn’t be publicly expressed. When it is, however, it takes some familiar forms. “The triumphal march of ‘need’ continues over lands once occupied by ‘should,’ ‘ought,’ ‘have to,’ and above all the wicked ‘must,’” complains poet and sometime-professional curmudgeon Hugo Williams, regaling us with many other recent instances of linguistic infelicity lest we underestimate the extent of the crisis (2012, 16). Language is a favourite proving-ground of curmudgeons. Anything in the cultural field is also fair game, with literature, visual art, architecture, film, and music on the front lines: Beauvoir’s film on aging gives us the familiar trope of an elderly person’s resistance to new trends in music and cinema;⁷ Salman Rushdie, in a feat of metalevel curmudgeonliness, criticizes his contemporaries both for engaging in and failing to live up to the full standards of “culturally endemic golden-ageism: that recurring, bilious nostalgia for a literary past which never, at the time, seemed that much better than the present does now,” while still getting in a few digs himself at the current publishing industry (2002, 56). Countless other commonplace phenomena beyond the narrowly cultural sphere can trigger a curmudgeonly response. G. A. Cohen, in his defense of value conservatism, provides other useful examples, such as decrying the closure of neighbourhood shops and the demise of traditional craftsmanship (2011, 222, 213, 203). Seana Shiffrin, in her discussion of preserving valuing, laments the disappearance of printed books and the waning of small-town life (2013, 150). And virtually anybody over a certain age is apt to complain about technology, social media, and the (surely not unrelated) decline in social manners.

This is a small but, I hope, credible sample of the kinds of objects (things, events, practices) that the curmudgeonly attitude can latch on to. The examples are useful not just for their familiarity but their (on the face of it) relative inconsequence. I don’t mean that they are trivial or that the curmudgeon doesn’t care about them, often in the full Frankfurtian sense. The expression of her

⁵This being part of the title of a documentary film that Beauvoir collaborated on in 1974 that begins with young people describing the elderly as “old fashioned” and resistant to “new things,” such as the music and cinema of the day (Ahrne et al. 2012, 339–40). Old age, comments one interviewee in the film, is “especially the period in our lives when we have completely lost all ability to adapt to new situations” (340).

⁶The idea of attachment and personalisation comes from Scheffler (2018, chaps. 4 and 5), though we should keep sight of type value in the way that Scheffler acknowledges (69) though does not always adhere to (88, 114, and 120).

⁷See footnote 5 above.

curmudgeonly attitude reveals that she is invested in their continuance.⁸ But assuming no special bias here on the part of the agent (she is not herself, say, a publisher, musician, craftsperson, urban planner, or headmistress of a finishing school), threats to these objects are not the “meaning catastrophes” that come about when, say, someone’s way of life is eradicated by direct or deliberate or systemic assaults on their culture or personhood.⁹ The particular changes on which the curmudgeon fixates do not tend to present as blatant or drastic infringements on individual autonomy or well-being. They are not the result of some catastrophic external social or natural occurrence (war, flood, famine), or any internal one (disease, disorder, breakdown). They are the commonplace, incremental social and cultural shifts that invariably occur to some extent or other in all human societies, but of which at least some people over time grow increasingly intolerant.

1.b Williams: the longevity dilemma and the fixed-character dilemma

At first glance, there’s not a lot of scope for curmudgeonliness in the lessons Williams draws from the story of Elina Makropulos. He presents EM with a dilemma that results from her prolonged existence. I’ll call it ‘the longevity dilemma’: either her character stays relatively fixed, in which case those experiences that appeal to someone like her eventually lose their attractiveness due to repetition; or her character alters in some considerable way so as to allow for the embrace of a wider array of experiences, in which case her identity is lost along with any possible claim to immortality. It is the former possibility and its consequences that Williams dwells on. The aspiring immortal who retains her identity, as EM does, is eventually left with no reason or motivation for continuing to live. In Williams’s parlance, she has used up her existing stock and no longer has the capacity to form any new *categorical desires*.

Williams’s notion of categorical desires concerns the future-directed interests and projects by which we are “propelled forward into longer life,” and that afford a vision of the future that we can recognise as desirable and “adequately related” to our current aims (1973, 91).¹⁰ Such desires are not by any means limited to large-scale endeavours, and may include commonplace sources of happiness or engagement.¹¹ In addition, and relatedly, they should not be narrowly construed (as they sometimes are) solely as a set of goals that add up to a consciously articulated life plan; Williams warns against viewing life as “something like a given rectangle that has to be optimally filled in,” and reminds us that “one good testimony to one’s existence having a point is that the question of its point does not arise” (1981, 12).¹² EM has apparently had her share of large-scale goals *and* smaller sources of interest and happiness, having experienced “everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42” (1973, 90). All that is then left to her are, at best, conditional desires, which, while they allow her to exercise preferences that make life as

⁸The curmudgeonly attitude as I construe it is not essentially a matter of hostility to the new, but of investment in existing values; see footnote 17 below.

⁹“Meaning catastrophe” being Matthew Ratcliffe’s term for incidents such as the cultural genocide of the Crow people that Jonathan Lear examines in his book *Radical Hope*; Ratcliffe argues that *individual* meaning catastrophes are also possible and gives several examples (2011, 602–3). While my account of the curmudgeonly attitude has some affinities with Ratcliffe’s picture, particularly his notion of the less catastrophic “demoralisation” (610–12), it is—*pace* Ratcliffe—ultimately not compatible with retaining hope on behalf of other people, as I will discuss in section 3.a.

¹⁰There are controversies surrounding Williams’s categorical and conditional distinction, as well as his association of categorical desires with meaningfulness; see Rosati (2013). I accept the basic notion of future-directed interests that typically compel us forward in life or give us reasons to continue to live. The notion is consistent with diverse conceptions of life and how best to live it, and I’ll draw from an array of terms that different philosophers use to capture this notion, such as categorical desires (interests, cares), ground projects, meaning pursuits, and value activities, on the understanding that “meaningfulness” here, following Williams, cannot be entirely divorced from subjective engagement (*cf.* Metz 2013, sec. 7.5.1).

¹¹In the more nuanced account of categorical desires that he gives in “Persons, Character and Morality,” Williams is clear on this: categorical desires qua “propelling concerns” needn’t be “grand or large,” but may be “of the everyday kind such as certainly provide the ground for many sorts of happiness” (1981, 12).

¹²I discuss this further in section 2.b.

tolerable as possible, are not themselves sources of engagement and reasons for continuing to go on. The overriding “problem” or “trouble” for EM or for anyone who maintains constancy of character over a long enough time is described by Williams as one of *boredom* (90 and passim): if I remain “recognisably myself,” for long enough, “I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself” (100).

Williams’s argument has spawned a plethora of critical responses. Many of these take one or both sides of the longevity dilemma to task, arguing that a worthwhile life is more sustainable and/or that conditions for diachronic personal identity are less circumscribed than Williams depicts.¹³ The concern, in almost all cases, is to rescue EM or others like her from the alleged inevitability of terminal boredom and the cessation of meaningful living.

Amidst these boredom debates, a brief passage often gets overlooked. When laying out the details of EM’s plight, Williams gestures towards a further dilemma. At first glance, it may seem like an iteration of the aforementioned longevity dilemma, but it is in fact internal to one side of that dilemma because it presupposes that “constancy of character” is in place (1973, 90). Call it ‘the fixed-character dilemma.’ Assuming a relatively fixed character, Williams writes that either EM’s experiences in her dealings with the world are similar (“the same kind of events” and same “patterns of personal relations” are “repeated”), or her experiences of events and relations are “not repetitious in this way, but varied” (90). In the first case, EM’s situation echoes that of the first horn of the longevity dilemma: by dint of sheer overfamiliarity, her experiences would come to seem “inescapable” (90) and she will become withdrawn, cold, and at a “distance from life” (91). But in the second case, says Williams, “*the problem shifts*” to a threat to one’s constancy of character and thereby one’s identity, for how is someone’s character to “remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences?” he asks (90; emphasis mine). His answer is that, in the face of this threat, EM must become “detached and withdrawn” so that the “very various” experiences in question “must surely happen to her without really affecting her” (90).

Williams says nothing more about the nature of the “very various” experiences in the second horn of the fixed-character dilemma. Given the explicit contrast drawn between this and the “repetition” and “familiarity” associated with the first horn of this dilemma, we can take “varied” experience here to be a matter of change and unfamiliarity. And given its overtly problematic status and the ensuing consequences (detachment, withdrawal), variety in this case is clearly unwelcome. Furthermore, unwanted change has the same effect on agency as does repetition and monotony, hence the quandary: just as EM will become withdrawn, cold, and distanced from life when faced with unremittingly familiar experiences, so she is destined to become detached and withdrawn in the face of “very various” experiences, thus losing the capacity to propel herself meaningfully into the future.¹⁴ Unwelcome change in experience, like unrelenting sameness, is apparently fatal to the formation and execution of categorical desires.

The second horn of the fixed-character dilemma does not fully align itself with the problem of boredom since the phenomenon described here is the *variety*, not the repetition and stagnation, of experience. And yet Williams does not return to the threat that “very various” experience poses to those who do not relinquish their character and identity in the face of it. Indeed, the short passage discussed above appears to be his only mention of it as a distinct problem. Its distinctness immediately falls by the wayside for him, and boredom arising from experience repetition becomes

¹³For some arguments in the first category, see Levy (2005), Wisniewski (2005), and Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014). For an argument in the second category see Chappell (2009). Note that the range of critical responses to Williams extends beyond these two lines of attack; for a useful survey, see Pereire and Timmerman (2020).

¹⁴Note that “withdrawal” for Williams (and judging by EM’s case) does not necessarily involve literal departure from the social realm; the term as used throughout connotes a degree of *social* and *volitional* disengagement and “indifference” (1973, 82). Hence terms like “becalmed,” “detached” (90) at a “distance from life,” “cold,” and “frozen” (91) are used sometimes in conjunction, sometimes interchangeably, with the most frequently occurring descriptive “withdrawn” (inter alia) in Williams’s description of EM’s condition.

the focus of his paper. Thus the “tedium of immortality” comes to dominate Williams’s discussion and his critics’ responses to it; boredom is EM’s “problem” or “trouble” (1973, 90), and “the principal hazard to which EM succumbed” (94).

It is curious that boredom takes centre stage in this way. But perhaps this is just because, as said, the effect of encountering the too familiar and encountering the too new are ultimately the same: detachment, distance, and withdrawal from the world, accompanied by agential paralysis, which eventually befalls the long-lived person of fixed character whether her experience stagnates or changes. Perhaps, then, it is this detachment, distance, and coldness that are the main concern, and “boredom” a benignly vague shorthand for the incapacity to engage with any further experience either too familiar or too new. Reaction to sameness and reaction to change are not interestingly dissimilar on this reading. I think this is too forgiving an interpretation, however. It smooths over a complex terrain, downplaying or eliminating distinct concerns for the long-lived subject, as I will outline in the next section.

In discussing this, I adopt a broadly speaking “Williamsian framework.” Specifically, I grant Williams’s presupposition for the second horn of the longevity dilemma, accepting for the sake of argument that constancy of character is part of diachronic personal identity, and also that character is bound up with future-directed desires, interests, and concerns.¹⁵

1.c Varieties of withdrawal: boredom vs. alienation

If withdrawal from the world can be associated not just with repetition but also “very various” experience, it seems the long-lived individual could fall victim to two different circumstances: too much sameness or too much change. These scenarios are distinct in several important ways, as is the nature of any withdrawal that results.

To begin with, the *affective phenomenology* associated with each of the scenarios differs. A feeling of ennui or tediousness attends repetition and familiarity. While many varieties of boredom have been documented by philosophers, Cheshire Calhoun aptly identifies the species with which Williams is concerned as common- or garden-“value satiety” boredom (2018, 138), in which, through overexposure, we reach the limit of our appreciation for some activity, thing, or event.¹⁶ Unwanted encounters with the new and unfamiliar, by contrast, typically involve a very different quality of distress: feelings of discomfort, annoyance, surprise, or disaffection are just some of the plausible outcomes in this scenario. I’ll group these together under the heading “alienation” on the understanding that a variety of negative affects are subsumed under the term.

Following on from this, the act of withdrawal plays a different *motivational role* in each of the scenarios. Detachment, withdrawal, and distancing from life in the face of prolonged and widespread experience repetition is a consequence of having exhausted one’s categorical desires. Witness the case of EM for whom “everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being ... has already happened” (Williams 1973, 90). Granting the value satiety that this implies, to withdraw in the face of experience repetition is to have resigned one’s status as a meaning-pursuing subject (though one may be prepared to eke out one’s days in satisfaction of conditional desires).

¹⁵The latter point being one that Williams himself makes in the clearer and more detailed account of character and categorical desire that he gives in “Persons, Character and Morality” (1981).

¹⁶Admittedly, this understanding of EM’s boredom, though in some respects clearly accurate, is not without problems. See Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009). They contend that the “situational” boredom born of repetition is only directed at specific experiences but is *not*—contrary to EM’s experience—chronic; chronic “habitual” ennui is empirically associated with those who—unlike EM—abandon or never take up the pursuit of life goals. While a thoroughgoing defense of chronic repetition-boredom is beyond the scope of this paper, I would suggest that if we take categorical desires to include not just life goals but any number of everyday concerns (see my discussion in section 1.b), then the dichotomy between specific experiences of interest on the one hand and life goals on the other is dubious, and it is perhaps easier to envision the possibility that the cumulative effects of the loss of interest in “specific experiences” could morph into something more general and chronic for the sufficiently long-lived individual to whom, as said, *everything* of possible interest has happened.

One's character is intact, but one cannot be said to retire from the pursuit of meaningful activity for the purpose of preserving that character since its utility has already been fully depleted by the time of withdrawal.

Withdrawal in the face of experience repetition and value satiety sits in contrast to withdrawal in the face of an extreme degree of distressing experiential variety (Williams's "very various" experience). The motivating force behind withdrawal in this latter case is value conservation: the varied experiences one encounters are not merely adding something new to the mix but are also, crucially, threatening (perhaps by displacing) something already in existence.¹⁷ This is consistent with Williams's claim that in the face of very varied experience, one withdraws for the sake of one's "fixed character" (1973, 90). This indicates an active interest in preserving that character. Withdrawal in the face of change therefore implies that one has *not* yet exhausted one's categorical desires and wants to safeguard them. Indeed, if categorical desires and character are as intertwined as Williams thinks, withdrawal in the face of change is bound up with investment in such desires. Withdrawal in this case is therefore not a resignation from, but a reinforcement of, one's meaning-pursuing status. However, given what withdrawal entails for Williams,¹⁸ this points to a seeming conundrum: the move that is designed to protect categorical-desire formation and execution also constitutes the stagnation of that impulse. The individual in the face of unwanted change retreats or detaches in order to avoid direct conflict with the threat, but in so doing finds herself volitionally "becalmed" (Williams 1973, 90). We will return to this conundrum in sections 2.a and 2.b.

The motivational difference feeds into yet another difference between the scenarios of sameness and change, this time regarding the apparent *location of the problem*. Withdrawal due to the unrelenting sameness of experience is a self-facing problem in that the experiences themselves remain stable in their nature and value; what gets altered is our ability to "make use of" those qualities (Calhoun 2018, 138). Whereas withdrawal in the face of unwanted change is seemingly a world-facing problem in that the world in some critical way has apparently altered while the subject herself has not.

Finally, another important difference here is that boredom withdrawal in the face of too much sameness and alienation withdrawal in the face of too much change each point to a different view about *the self, and the scope of one's values* (cares, concerns, and interests). This difference emerges from the aforementioned ones. Boredom withdrawal, the resignation from meaning pursuit that underlies it, and the self-facing nature of boredom, all lend themselves to a conception of the self as a site of individual investment and development—a being whose own cares and interests are cordoned off from those of others. My boredom concerns only how things are for me and need not take into account whether or to what extent others do or do not continue to engage with the experiences that now bore me. By contrast, withdrawal in the face of unwanted change—'alienation withdrawal,' as we might call it—involves sensitivity to the broader context in which subject, as an active meaning-maker, finds herself. Feelings of alienation or disaffection can arise only when one attends to how things are for others in the world, noticing the discrepancy between one's own normative expectations and those of others.

These four points of difference between the confrontation with too much sameness versus too much change—affective phenomenology, motivation for withdrawal, location of the problem, and the scope of one's interests—will all feature in the upcoming investigation of the curmudgeonly

¹⁷See Cohen: "The conservative propensity ... is not a propensity against creation of new things, save, perforce, when their creation requires or causes a destruction of existing value" (2011, 213). EM's possible alienation withdrawal, as briefly sketched by Williams, should likewise not be taken as a blanket disdain for newness per se; it needn't always extend to cases where the new is not perceived as displacing some existing valued thing/practice. However, there may be limit to the quantity of newness that can be tolerated in any case (see footnote 29 below).

¹⁸See footnote 14.

attitude as a problem for the long-lived subject. None of this tells us yet just how curmudgeonliness fits in to this picture. This is the issue I turn to next.

2.a *Insidious and inexorable change*

Williams focuses on one reason why an agent of consistent character might distance herself from the world at large: excessive experience repetition, which breeds a value-satiety species of boredom. But in one brief passage, he gestures towards another—excessive experiential variety—towards which feelings of alienation rather than boredom are a more likely response. The effect of an excess of boredom or alienation is the same: withdrawal in the sense of social disengagement, distancing, and coldness. But the motivations differ: “distance from life” in the face of alienating change is, by Williams’s own lights, an attempt to safeguard one’s values, interests, desires, or ground projects in the face of perceived changes in the world. This is as far as we have come in the preceding discussion. We now must consider just what provokes alienation withdrawal in the long-lived subject bearing in mind Williams’s general argumentative framework.

There are calamitous changes that can comprehensively prevent someone from engaging in value activities: coercion, oppression, displacement, and the onset of mental or physical infirmity or decline. Such changes can be radical and may simply not allow for the possibility that Williams mentions in “The Makropulos Case,” in which the long-lived subject, in the face of very various experience, retains the will and means to distance herself from problematic new experiences. What’s more, such changes may strike at any time in a person’s life or may not happen at all. This is in contrast to value-satiety boredom, which is not a mere contingency in the life of the sufficiently long-lived individual, but only becomes a deep problem over time through a process that is incremental and cumulative. Williams was committed to the view that the problem of boredom is an inevitable consequence of extreme longevity (see Williams 1973, 90–91). If the sort of change-induced alienation I’m concerned with is to command comparable attention to Williams’s value-satiety boredom, it should share these key features. Like boredom, alienation’s corrosive effects on the long-lived should be insidious but inexorable.

In light of this, when seeking the roots of alienation withdrawal, we should look not to the contingent and calamitous changes to which all of us are vulnerable at any point in life, but instead consider those changes that achieve their ill effects in a more subtle fashion, in a manner comparable to how experience repetition induces boredom. I propose the sort of changes associated with the curmudgeonly attitude as a fitting counterpart to experience repetition. The unwelcome changes that afflict the curmudgeon are not overwhelmingly dire considered in isolation. The attitude is subject to dismissal because the curmudgeon’s actions are not necessarily being obstructed in any clear or comprehensive fashion; if they were, this would be less a cause for dismissal of the curmudgeon than for intervention on her behalf. And the complaint of curmudgeons themselves is not, or not primarily, that they are in some obvious or literal fashion prohibited from engaging in their own value activities or compelled to participate in the changed state of affairs. Rather, the complaint concerns an apparent increased disparity between the value they place in certain things, projects, or activities and the decreasing value that others place in them, especially relative to the value those people accord to some irksome new thing.

This curmudgeonly species of alienation is the appropriate counterpart to value-satiety boredom. I don’t pretend that it is a rigidly demarcated phenomenon. What begins as the waning status of some valued aspect of experience may turn into a situation of its being unavailable, or less tolerated, or outright proscribed. However, the issue of negatively construed variety and change in the context of longevity is not so much one of facilitation but *endorsement*: some thing, project, or activity ceases to receive the sort of explicit or tacit approval or recognition by others than it did in the past. Its decline is often accompanied by the ascent of some new thing that may be seen as displacing it. In these ways, the world becomes a less familiar, less hospitable place for those who

continue to endorse the activity or item of waning value.¹⁹ This is a more subtle undermining of the curmudgeon's attachments than is any overt intolerance or proscription of them.

While individual instances of curmudgeonly alienation can happen at almost any time in life, the deleteriousness of them depends in large part on two factors: how long-standing and habituated the threatened things, projects, or activities in question are in the subject's life and the frequency/number of perceived threats to them. Both these factors are bound up with temporal extension. There are clear parallels between boredom and alienation here. What becomes an intolerably boring experience will depend on what had previously seemed worth repeating. This will differ from person to person, and Williams commendably avoids generalisations about meaningfulness (see 1973, 86). Likewise, what constitutes an alienation-inducing variation in experience will depend on what one's long-standing value practices and environment have been. But, as with boredom, time itself is a key factor in transforming the relatively benign into a potentially overwhelming affliction. And so, despite the relative innocuousness of the individual changes, we can anticipate temporal accretion in the case of curmudgeonly alienation, as in the case of value-satiety boredom: they erode the foundations of our meaning-pursuing capacities in stages long before they fully undermine them, and so withdrawal can be gradual but susceptibility to it increases with longevity. And, as with boredom withdrawal, while alienation withdrawal may not necessarily involve a literal removal of the self from society, it can result in a figurative exile within the social realm, as captured in Williams's talk of distance, detachment, and coldness.²⁰

This returns us to the earlier conundrum of the subject who withdraws in order to safeguard her capacity for meaningful pursuits but in so doing deactivates that capacity. This situation is all the more perplexing given my point that the individual changes endured are not, on the face of it, overt infringements on the curmudgeon's autonomy or well-being. In the case of boredom, the ostensive motivation for withdrawal was clear: one had already run out of categorical desires. Withdrawal was a final act of resignation, and boredom a symptom of this; value activity has already ceased, and the subject's withdrawal merely confirms this. In the case of alienation, though, the motivation for withdrawal is different: distancing oneself from the world is an active impulse to preserve one's character, which forms the basis of one's categorical desires. Withdrawal here signals a wish to keep pursuing meaningful goals and interests. How can it then also coincide with volitional stasis? And why put oneself in this position in the face of changes that, while clearly unwanted, are nonetheless not calamitous?

To answer these questions, we need to look more closely at the phenomenon of alienation withdrawal in the context of a long life and reflect on the different ways that agency can be disabled.

2.b *I used to care but things have changed*

In order to make sense of why the curmudgeon's impulse to withdraw in the name of value conservation might fail to preserve value activity, consider Cheshire Calhoun's analysis of agential engagement. Without buying wholesale into the categorical/conditional distinction, Calhoun takes seriously Williams's idea of "ground projects or commitments," which allow us to "project ourselves forward" into the future (2018, 52). But, she argues, an agent's unambiguous identification with a given normative outlook is not sufficient to secure motivating reasons for acting on these commitments. Other "background frames" need to be in place (2018, 53; 2008, 198). When these are absent or altered, one retains one's values and desires, but they are rendered strange or ineffectual. Agency is thus impaired. Sometimes Calhoun puts this in terms of agency being not so much "defeated" as it is "emptied of significance" (2008, 207).

¹⁹I set aside here the fraught issue of whether the unwelcome change is all things considered for the best, except to say that any conservative impulse grounding the curmudgeonly attitude should be distinguished from political conservatism; see Cohen (2011, sec. 6) and Scheffler (2018, 105–8).

²⁰See footnote 14.

Calhoun does not claim to give an exhaustive list of background frames, but she provides exemplars of disruptions to these frames ranging from situations internal to the subject—such as severe depression—to external ones—such as traumatic or life-threatening incidents (2008, 194, 204–6; 2018, 53–55). My portrayal of curmudgeonly alienation and withdrawal does not map neatly onto this picture—the alienating change that curmudgeons experience is, as said, a world-facing problem, but not of the calibre of the meaning catastrophes that Calhoun mentions, such as assault, severe depression, or PTSD. Curmudgeonly alienation comes close to the “demoralization” that, according to Calhoun, accompanies a disruption of belief in the effectiveness of instrumental reasoning, but the examples she gives of potentially demoralising circumstances—poverty, displacement, disability—are again drastic; they impede the practical efficacy of future-directed deliberation and action in a more concrete and immediate fashion than do many of the less severe unwanted changes in the world that the long-lived person encounters.²¹

Rather than trying to shoehorn curmudgeonly alienation and withdrawal into Calhoun’s existing scheme of background-frame disruption, I’m inclined to treat it as an additional case. The changes in question are less obvious, more insidious encroachments on the motivating force of a subject’s normative outlook. But they fit with Calhoun’s general picture of upsetting the “background conception of a future” (2018, 51) that we normally “take for granted” (2008, 197–98). Just what is taken for granted is characterised by Calhoun as “the hospitableness of the world” to the values, plans, intentions, and desires that form our normative outlook (2008, 197–98; see also 2018, 72, 74). But that outlook encompasses territory that is broader than and, it seems, prior to particular future-directed plans, hopes, desires, and intentions: “we inhabit the future by living now under an unreflective sense of what the future will be like,” and this general “phenomenological idea of the future,” as she calls it, is grounded in habituation, subconsciously infusing our imaginative sense of how our world will be (2018, 72).

In the case of alienation withdrawal born of curmudgeonliness, our unreflective assumptions about the hospitableness of the world are disrupted in various, unremarkable ways. I may intend to read a certain book; that this will be a print copy is taken as given due to my longstanding experience. Likewise, I may wish to retire to a small town, since the small towns of my experience tend towards closely knit, civic-minded communities. Or I may plan to go to a concert or purchase a (yes) CD of music I like that has hitherto occupied a certain standing in the general culture.²² There are my particular value-based aims, and then there is the more general set of background pre-conceptions that underlies and informs them. And I take the latter for granted. Or at least I do so until I cannot. Disruption occurs when I experience discrepancies at the level of the particular: the book is only available digitally; the small towns of my past are transforming into box-store-riddled wastelands or socially exclusive enclaves; younger people express disdain for—or worse, utter unfamiliarity with—my music (and wonderment at the technological means I deploy for listening to it).

My particular desires are thus grounded in a more general notion of what their context of realisation will look like. That notion was formed by past experience and is largely unreflective: “when we have been habituated to the future, we typically discover what future we were expecting only when those expectations are not fulfilled” (Calhoun 2018, 9, 73). And crucially, on my account, in many instances the expected context includes other people who share and sustain these value activities. It is not—or not just—that others may be needed, instrumentally, to help me realise them, but that the existence of like-minded people is integral to the meaning those activities have for

²¹The specific list Calhoun provides here is: “poverty, social marginality, cultural dislocation, domestic abuse, unpredictable trauma, chronic illness, as well as lesser harms” (2008, 204). But what might qualify as “lesser harms” here is left unsaid, and so I think it best to consign my alienation withdrawal to a separate class from the types of background frames Calhoun documents.

²²Let us think that these interests are too small or too much in the background of our larger concerns to qualify as anything approaching the categorical in Williams’s terms, we must remember just how liberal his own characterisation is. See section 1.b and footnote 11 above.

me. This ‘communal value scaffolding,’ as I’ll call it, is the background frame that has been disrupted in my examples. I can still read the book, spend time in the remaining small towns, or listen to my music at home on my antiquated equipment, but it is not the same as it used to be. I am increasingly alone in caring about the things I care about. As time goes on and I move further down the generational stream, these confrontations with change are likely to increase. Individual cases may seem relatively inconsequential even to me. Or at least they seem so until they do not. The insidious effect of their accumulation makes me more sensitive to each individual encounter. Given the incremental nature of this phenomenon, the background frame in this case is dismantled piecemeal, and withdrawal (whether literal or figurative) is a gradual process.

When the quotidian preferences, tools for living, and social norms and behaviours of many around them alter, those left standing in place can experience a vectionlike slippage backward. This is not just a recognition of the change in question, but the way in which each change throws the agent’s own longstanding value-laden interests, attitudes, and assumptions into relief, exposing them in all their contingency. The agent can, in response, effect a more literal retreat from the disconcertingly shifting world and double-down on her commitment to continued planning around her quotidian value activities in isolation, but her relationship to them is no longer comfortable or complacent, depending as it did on some broader communal scaffolding that is now deteriorating. Her commitment to her value activities is not defeated. But her agency is emptied of significance because others now see those activities differently—a fact that literal departure from the larger social realm does not eradicate and may only serve to highlight. The agency impairment that ensues can be likened to Williams’s description of EM’s becalmed state—a volitional stasis that, as discussed, can happen in the face not just of repetition but variation of experience. Though the individual changes that the curmudgeon endures may seem relatively harmless, the cumulative effect of them is ultimately disabling.

Calhoun’s notion of the disruption of background frames thus helps resolve an otherwise puzzling aspect of the motivational aspect of alienation withdrawal: the conundrum of how an agent can become unable to act or form plans for future action on the basis of values and interests that they nonetheless still possess and have actively sought to protect. Inaction here does not signal the exhaustion of one’s valuing capacity. To become cold and detached from life is not necessarily to be bored. On the contrary, the curmudgeon who withdraws in the face of alienating change is still invested in her values. However, this is not sufficient to ensure successful planning and action in the face of the changes; the presence of a like-minded community is also expected. When that expectation is not met, the impulse to further withdraw is compelling even though it is, in this case, self-defeating, undermining the pursuit of the interests it seeks to protect.

The curmudgeon’s experience of alienation is, broadly, in keeping with Calhoun’s notion of the disruption of background frames. However, underlying and to an extent driving my identification of the background frame of “communal value scaffolding” is a factor that takes us beyond the boundaries of Calhoun’s account.

3.a The only self one wishes to have

Calhoun’s unreflective “phenomenological idea of the future” is fundamentally an idea of *one’s own* future (see 2018, chap. 3). Her concerns about the disruption of background frames are rooted in a Williams-inspired interest in what an agent needs in order to continue projecting herself into the future. To have “a motivating interest in the future—and thus an interest in leading a life—may therefore depend on our ability to live in the present *under the idea of a future in which our deepest self has a place*” (52). For Calhoun, as for Williams, the ongoing unity of the self is of paramount concern in these matters of practical identity. Hence the importance of background frames of agency: their disruption jeopardizes the persistence of “the only self one wishes to have” (2008, 202).

Having started with Williams, it's easy to remain ensconced in his individualistic picture of the self's relationship with the future when considering the challenges that longevity poses, and Calhoun's contribution does not dissuade us from doing so. I propose, however, that once we shift the conversation from boredom to alienation and include communal value scaffolding amongst the background frames that support practical agency, our concern should reach beyond the self and its future. The curmudgeon's withdrawal in the face of alienating change at the quotidian level is, as said, a world-facing problem; it concerns not just the only self one wishes to have, but the world one envisions oneself to be a part of. Value-conserving interests here thus extend beyond the self. Communal value scaffolding is, after all, grounded in the values and actions of other agents in the world, and it is that change that is the source of the curmudgeon's distress even when, as said, it doesn't necessarily infringe in any robust sense on her own value activities. The curmudgeonly attitude signals not just an interest in her own future but in the future of others as they act largely independently of her. This interest can and likely does encompass the future of other agents beyond her lifetime. It is here that we must draw a line between the concerns and complaints of the mortal long-lived person versus those of the immortal.

Williams's EM is not a solipsist; she understands that there are others in the world whose interests may not coincide with her own. Nonetheless, it's hard for her to have concern for that world independent of concern for herself, and this self-centred concern is a side effect of the immortal's particular situation. EM will have trouble separating interest in the future from an interest in *her* future since the two have always been expected to coincide. The concern that things are getting worse is for her always, at bottom, bound up with the question, "should I continue to live thus?" If her answer is in all sincerity "no," then her relationship with and concerns about the future *tout court* can be severed. She is not accustomed to thinking of the future as a place that she will not occupy. Withdrawal in the face of unwanted change is wrapped up in an impulse to preserve her standing in the future indefinitely.²³ That this impulse is ultimately unsuccessful does not undercut the self-interest that underlies it. Withdrawal and the feelings that prompt it in this case may serve only to intensify the immortal's preoccupation with her own life. However, as suggested, this preoccupation is a by-product of her putatively immortal status and not a truth about the deep rootedness of individualism amongst the long-lived generally.

The situation for long-lived mortals is quite different. The mortal is primed to be aware of the world apart from herself, and in the later stages of life may become highly conscious of it indeed.²⁴ The growing failure of others to endorse the curmudgeon's values often coincides with her sense of the decreasing amount of time that she has left. The closer one gets to the presumed later stages of life the more unreasonable it becomes to frame despair about where things seem to be headed in terms of concern for one's own future. Something beyond individual desire fulfilment underlies the agency-debilitating despair of the mortal curmudgeon. It is not only—and perhaps not primarily—herself, her declining engagement with the world, and her ever-shrinking future that she worries about, but the future of others as it extends beyond her own, and the values they will emulate.²⁵ This concern is not conditional on her continuing to live or to have a personal place in posterity.²⁶

²³Her alienation withdrawal is, perhaps, more in keeping with Rahel Jaeggi's Hegelian-inflected treatment of alienation. Self-constitution can only happen within the world, on Jaeggi's account, and our concern about the world is rooted in a more fundamental interest in our own fate (2014, 136–39).

²⁴Hence what Calhoun would call the "planning idea of the future" in the later stages of life often involves plans—sometimes considerable and detailed—for how things will go after one's death (2018, 74).

²⁵We should hence make an effort to separate the often-conflated condition of curmudgeonliness in the long-lived individual from that of depression, the latter being a more self-absorbed state. See Ratcliffe (2015, 280).

²⁶For this reason, I follow Scheffler in not regarding this as a form of egoism (see 2018, 53–58). If there are vestiges of self-interest in the curmudgeon's attitude, I don't think it is for the reasons that Harry Frankfurt suggests, namely a desire that one's actions have an impact on and/or be appreciated by future generations (2013, 138). Rather, the importing of one's value attachments into concern for future generations is in part a product of the formal constraint on the curmudgeon to imaginatively construct the further future in her own image; see footnote 29 below.

Far more so than boredom ever could, this complicates the long-lived mortal's relation to the future, as we shall see.

3.b *The only world one wishes to have*

I've asked that we pay more attention to the many relatively small, quotidian, or "background" value-laden proclivities and expectations against which our larger ones play out. Disruption of these over the course of a long life, on my reconfiguration of Williams's account of the perils of longevity, threaten the curmudgeon with full-scale alienation withdrawal. In the context of a long life, the concern here is not just that I find myself unmotivated to act on certain values, but that others show no interest in those values now and in future. All of this leads to a potentially problematic picture of the curmudgeon once we further probe the issue of the curmudgeon's concern for the future of others. Lessons and warnings can be drawn here from contemporary debates about our relation to future generations.

In these debates, nonegoistic unconditional desires are typically reserved for big-ticket items such as reversing climate change, curing cancer, improving education, or enhancing our seismic engineering capabilities.²⁷ These are easy aspirations to get behind on behalf of posterity, not just because they are widely shared but because it is unlikely that their fulfilment depends on our existence to begin with. However, on the picture I'm painting, if we are curmudgeons, our hopes for the future of humankind beyond our lifetime (what Scheffler calls "the afterlife") come with certain caveats that are tied to us more personally. We want future people not just to be disease free, ecostable, and earthquake resistant, but we'd also prefer them to be rather like we are—not for our own sake, but because this is a vital component of our prereflective picture of what a world worth living in looks like.

Taken to the extreme, this may lead to Harry Frankfurt's discomfiting suggestion that we only really care about the afterlife insofar as it will resemble us (2013). If the world beyond our lifetime is prereflectively envisioned as a place in which "if, contrary to fact, one did survive, one would remain socially at home" (Scheffler 2013, 34), and if our caring about it is tied to that vision, then the curmudgeon's diminished individualism must not be mistaken for unreserved altruism.²⁸ When it comes to subsequently thinking through the specific concerns we have on behalf of future persons, focus on the big-ticket desiderata may overshadow the myriad smaller value commitments that are embedded in our imagining the future without us. But those smaller items, when ferreted out, may prove to be more important than we realised. This is especially so if, as Scheffler says, the future beyond our own lifetime is always something we tend to "personalize" (2018, n9 and passim) even as we accept that we will not be present in it.²⁹ The curmudgeonly attitude exposes just how fine-grained and potentially widespread this personalisation might be. If, in the face of apparent evidence that things are continuing to get worse, we find ourselves increasingly unable to personalise our vision of the future beyond our lifetime, we may well cease to envision that future as a site of care. Thus, there is more at stake for the curmudgeon than there is for the merely bored. It is not just sustaining her own future interests that is at stake; her capacity to care for the future of others beyond her lifetime is also threatened.

²⁷See, for instance, Scheffler (2013, 89; 2018, 550) and Luper-Foy (1987).

²⁸Scheffler is, in any case, clear that the point of contrast with individualism is not altruism but *dependence*; see (2013, Lecture 2), and also (2018, chap. 1) on beneficence and its limited relevance within these debates.

²⁹This is in turn an obstacle to Shiffrin's preference for the *practice of valuing* over the preservation of valued things; she gives the example of finding the loss of print books as "sad," or "wrongheaded," or "alien," but nonetheless accepting those changes when they occur for good reasons (2013, 150). My concern is that this otherwise reasonable outlook is unlikely to penetrate the core of what motivates our concern for future generations to begin with, at least in the methodological approach that Williams and Scheffler share, namely thought experiments involving imaginative projections into the future. Our particular and prereflective value attachments are more likely to intrude here and, having done so, prove more difficult to expel.

3.c Concluding remarks

Williams treated boredom born of experience repetition as the central problem for the long-lived individual. I have argued, extrapolating from remarks by Williams, that alienation born of a certain type of experienced change presents an additional problem for the long-lived person of relatively fixed character. This is especially noteworthy for those who don't take Williams's boredom problem to heart on the grounds that they're unlikely to reach a value-satiation point even if they live indefinitely.³⁰ Such people do not fear EM's terminal boredom and would likely be unmoved by the suggestion that the lessons from Elina Makropulos carry over to their mortal lives. The thought is that, barring contingent catastrophe, they can be propelled into a future of meaningful activity even across a protracted mortal lifespan. If, however, my analysis is correct, these individuals may have a new thing to fear and a new reason to worry. Alienation born of curmudgeonliness can set in while—and because—we are unsated and remain invested in value activities. Left unchecked, this can disable our capacity to pursue those activities. Furthermore, and in contrast to boredom, there is more than our own future life at stake for the curmudgeon, and so the problem of alienation is not summarily resolved with our death (as EM's boredom was); the source of alienation is located in the changing world, and our concern for that world extends beyond our own temporal boundaries in a manner that demands scrutiny if we wish to ensure that we have the right relations not just with present but future generations.

All of this still falls short of saying that—given world enough, and time—curmudgeonliness, like boredom, will take hold and become fatal for the person of fixed character, manifesting in full-fledged withdrawal and incapacity to engage in meaning-making activity. Are we all in theory susceptible to curmudgeonliness and alienation? While Cohen is happy to declare that “*everyone* who is sane recognizes and honors in practice” the desire to “conserve what has value,” even he concedes that some want this more than others (2011, 211). And just as some of us think ourselves more boredom resistant than others with a high tolerance for certain forms of repetition, so we may also consider ourselves more value progressive—open to the myriad changes around us. Nothing in my analysis speaks against this outlook. Change tolerance is consistent with Williams's reasoning about boredom; his argument that we are all vulnerable to boredom is not the claim that we are all equally disposed towards it.³¹ The same may be said of curmudgeonliness.

Hence, I am not saying—as Williams ultimately does of boredom—that given sufficient time curmudgeonliness is inevitable in even the best conceivable circumstances. Williams's insistence on the necessity of boredom for the immortal is as recalcitrant as it is unverifiable and has generated a surfeit of attempts to out-imagine him when it comes to the desirability of eternal existence. But, as suggested in my introduction, Williams's arguments are of less interest, practically speaking, as a case against immortality than they are as an indictment of longevity. And once we shift our concerns from the mythical immortal to that of the all-too-palpable long-lived individual, the various contingencies of such lives cannot be swept off the table. Is there no possible world in which curmudgeonliness is avoidable? I do not know. But nor do I think an answer to this question would serve to enhance our understanding of the many, much nearer, possible worlds in which, upon my extension of Williams's reasoning, opportunities for both boredom and curmudgeonliness abound and may increase with longevity.

Keeping in mind individual differences in disposition towards curmudgeonliness helps us clear up another potential source of confusion. I am not suggesting that the bored and the alienated long-lived person inhabit different worlds. It is true that complete, all-encompassing terminal boredom and alienation rule one another out on my account since *ex hypothesi* the one involves complete loss of categorical desires and the other the possession/protection of them. However, opportunities

³⁰See, for instance, those belonging to the “first category,” footnote 13 above.

³¹Indeed, he implies that disposition varies across persons depending on the richness or impoverishment of their reflective consciousness; see Williams (1973, 95).

for boredom and curmudgeonliness are together present in our world. Apart from character, circumstance will share a part in shaping to which of these one may be more susceptible. Someone may be in an environment where they are insulated from many of the changes going on at the local and global scale; alternatively, they may be regularly exposed to those changes. And there is no reason why one individual might not succumb to both boredom and curmudgeonliness to a degree, as some categorical desires, goals, and interests die due to overexposure while others stagnate in the face of the encroaching indifference of others.

Countless variables are involved in determining which of these might prove terminal for the sufficiently long-lived person. Rather than trying to promote our standing at the far end of the boredom resistant and/or change tolerant end of the spectrum, we might do better to keep sight of the larger point that Williams makes and the phenomenon of curmudgeonliness corroborates, namely that so long as some fixity of character is presupposed, time itself becomes a problem for agents in their quest to formulate and pursue reasons for continuing to live.

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