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Taking Stock of the Risks of Life Without Death

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Abstract: In this chapter I argue that choosing to live forever comes with the threat of an especially pernicious kind of boredom. However, it may be theoretically possible to circumvent it by finding ways to pursue an infinite number of projects consistent with one's personality, taking on endlessly pursuable endlessly interesting projects, or by rekindling old projects once you've forgotten about them. However, each of these possibilities is contingent upon having certain traits that you are likely not currently in a good position to assess. I therefore argue that no one is in a good position to be confident about her prospects for living forever.

Keywords: immortality, boredom, death, value, memory

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I. Introduction

We usually take it to be a bad thing when someone dies. But is the general fact that humans die a bad thing? Some have argued that our own mortality is for the best; if we lived long enough each one of us would become fatally bored and, as a result, find nothing meaningful in the prospect of continuing to live.¹

Others claim that they would very gladly take an elixir that promised them eternal life on earth, and accuse those who think immortality would be a bad thing of being merely curmudgeonly. If we enjoy our lives right now even though we sometimes get bored, they reason, what difference should it make how many days, months, years, or centuries we extend them by?² Call this the Anti-Curmudgeon position.³

In this chapter I defend a middle position between the Curmudgeon and Anti-Curmudgeon positions: I believe that there *is* a special worry about boredom for immortal lives, but there are several ways that a person might be able to avoid it, in theory. However, none of us are in a very good position to determine whether or not we are one of the lucky few that would be able to avoid it via any of these ways. Because of the structure of this decision, I argue that it would be irrational to approach the choice to take (or pass on) an immortality elixir with anything approaching confidence.

II. Boredom and the Threat of Running Out of Life's Pages

In order to assess whether or not we would fall into an intolerable boredom if we lived forever, we'll need to get a clearer understanding of just what boredom is, exactly, and what sorts of things it is sensitive to. Although boredom is a near-ubiquitous experience, it is surprisingly puzzling. Think about watching your favorite movie five times in a row. Your favorite movie is something you presumably care about, so why on the fifth watching in a row does it appear to you as something you don't care about? It's not as if something has changed about the movie itself or about your ability to appreciate it, in theory. If you wait a few months and watch it again you might find that it's not boring at all. You come to care about it all over again.

The same can be true of boredom with life in general. One day you might feel like there is nothing in the world that could possibly hold your interest, but the next day the world opens itself up to you again and everything feels full of possibility. It temporarily *appears* to you as though you have run out of ways to take an interest in your favorite movie, or run out of things in life to participate in that you could take an interest in. But as we all know, perceptions can be deceiving. We might perceive there to be water by the horizon on the street in front of us, but it is only the reflection of sunlight on the pavement.⁴

What causes the illusion in everyday sorts of boredom? One conjecture is that we acquire a sort of evaluative tunnel vision when we engage with something in the same manner over and over again. In doing so, we temporarily close ourselves off to engaging our other capacities for interacting in a way that will hold our interest.⁵ Maybe we can't possibly listen to the lilting in Judy Garland's voice as Dorothy when she says "there's no place like home" any more after the fifth watching and this temporarily overshadows how much there is left to discover about the symbolism of the Wizard, or the cinematography of the Yellow Brick Road scenes. Getting too accustomed to a narrow set of life activities might also produce a sort of tunnel vision towards the value of life itself.

What, then, is the particular worry about boredom in a life without death? Curmudgeons sometimes talk as though we would need to find some sort of life-project that could stave off boredom at every moment. Here I think Anti-Curmudgeons are right to point out that there is no more reason to worry about the ordinary fleeting sorts of boredom in an immortal life than there is in a mortal one.

But sometimes boredom isn't fleeting; the perception that there's nothing about a particular pursuit left that one cares about is accurate. *The Wizard of Oz* on not the fifth, but the hundredth watching might be an example. You might have actually exhausted all of the things about the film that you would find worthwhile to engage with. Call this "insurmountable boredom." The real concern with boredom in immortal life, as I see it, is that a person might come to find herself insurmountably bored with life itself. Such a person would believe that she has run out of pursuits that she would find worthwhile to engage in, and she would actually be right about this.

Anti-Curmudgeons John Martin Fischer and Ben Mitchell-Yellin describe those who are worried about this kind of boredom as being almost as if they were "caught in the grips of a problematic metaphor." According to Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, Immortality Curmudgeons

sometimes seem to think of the relevant projects as though they were books in a library that contains a large but finite number of books. The idea is that, given an infinite amount of time, a human being could read all the books in the library (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014, 358).

What, exactly, is meant to be problematic about this metaphor? Well, for one, you might question why you need *projects* to have an enjoyable infinite life in the first place. Some Anti-Curmudgeons allege that they would be very happy to live an infinite life of just enjoying the pleasures of nice meals and kissing their spouses, no projects required. And these sorts of pleasures are not the sorts of things we need to worry about running out of.

However, I think our inquiry into the nature of boredom helps illuminate why we might think we would need projects of some sort to live a worthwhile life. While it might be that if we're going to be alive we prefer to have a life filled with these sorts of pleasures, I doubt that if it were to really come down to it, they could give us a *reason* to want to continue living for billions of years. In our mortal lives, the kinds of pleasure we get from these sorts of things can be temporarily interrupted when we feel an overwhelming sense of boredom. And boredom, it seems, is not sensitive to the availability of pleasant activities, but the availability of activities that we see as interesting and worthwhile. So having something novel to give you a reason to go on does seem to be crucial, since insurmountable boredom could permanently impinge on our ability to enjoy life.

This is why I think the idea of a library of pursuits is somewhat apt, after all. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore the different ways a person might nevertheless avoid running out of pages to read.

III. Is there really a finite number of books in the library?

Even if we concede that we need life projects in order to stave off the threat of boredom, we may legitimately wonder whether or not there is really any risk of running out of possibilities. Aren't there an infinite number of pursuits any one person could take on? And even if there aren't now, with an increasing number of inventions and the progress of technology, won't there constantly be new activities to pursue? In 1950 no one could have anticipated that becoming a skilled hacker could be a life project someone could choose, and our current imaginations may be severely limited in terms of predicting what may become possible over the stretch of eternity.

But even if in one sense anyone is free to take up poker, or linguistic anthropology, or competitive dog grooming at any time, only certain pursuits will be ones that a particular person will be able to get herself to actually come to take a genuine interest in. I am not sure whether or not our personalities constrain our interests to the point in which the field of possibility for potential interesting pursuits such that it includes only a finite number of things, in the first place. But I think there is a real risk here that they do. In other words, it's not a library of all the pursuits a person could take on in theory that we have to worry about being finite, but our personal libraries of possible pursuits.

You might think that being faced with the necessity of finding new pursuits is a special sort of case that would enable new paths forward. Perhaps we could build our personal libraries to be larger out of necessity. I think these circumstances might encourage us to look beyond the obvious candidates for projects towards other things that we would realize we do have genuine interest in if we were to try them. That said, a long list of things you can do on a rainy day does not stave off a severe case of everyday boredom, a case in which you merely perceive yourself to have run out of things that would actually engage you. Similarly, the mere availability of things you can, in theory, do with your life won't magically make you genuinely interested in any of them. No matter how much I may want to become interested in opera in order to share in my grandmother's passion, I can still fail to take an interest in it. This may be the case even if I have willingly repeatedly exposed myself to the art form; it might, for me, just never 'take.'⁶ Similarly, the sheer necessity of taking up new pursuits to stave off boredom would not enable us to jerry-rig new interests. Our personalities, it seems, sometimes set narrower bounds on what we can come to take a genuine interest in than the circumstances we find ourselves in.

IV. Do all of the books really have a finite number of pages?

Another way we might circumvent insurmountable boredom is by having at least one book in our personal library that is infinitely long. Some Anti-Curmudgeons claim that it would be very easy to acquire one, or even to write more pages yourself. They draw on the idea that new opportunities for fulfilling desires related to old projects can refresh old desires. For example, Jeremy Wisnewski imagines a case in which a musician has the goal to "be the best musician ever by mastering every instrument" (Wisnewski 2005, 33-34). Even after this goal is completed, in a few hundred years, he reasons, a new instrument could be invented and it could revive the old project. Furthermore, the musician could actually invent her own instruments for this purpose, and could do so infinitely.

I think this is a bit too fast, though. Not every new instrument that could be invented would provide a musician with an interestingly different challenge. And in order to successfully stave off boredom, a person needs a project to have available ways of engaging with it that haven't already been exhausted. Now, there is surely a large number of variations on musical instruments that would be interestingly different to try to master, but I'm not sure how we could come to know that it would actually be an infinite number. The risk here is that what sustained the initial interest in the pursuit may not persist and that the musician would be left with the desire to pursue mastery of each new instrument *only because* it provides her with a life project that in theory could keep her busy throughout eternity. But it's not as though just having the desire "I want to master every instrument" sustains one's genuine interest indefinitely independent of the conditions that made it seem like a worthwhile pursuit in the first place.

This raises an interesting question, though. Could there be a pursuit that a person could both pursue infinitely and also find infinitely interesting? If there are any such pursuits, they would need to involve repetition in the sense that in your 5000th year doing it, what you're doing is still describable under the same description as when you started doing it. That is, if your pursuit is to

become an experienced bird-watcher, you can't have avoided boredom just by moving on to watching squirrels instead; "becoming an experienced bird-watcher" still has to be the goal you're aiming at. But somehow, this repetition has to be such that it wouldn't cause boredom. What bores though, as we've discovered, is not just repetition of any sort, but rather, running out of ways to engage with something. So the things a person would do in order to satisfy her desire to engage in this pursuit would have to be topically linked while producing an infinite number of ways to engage.

Perhaps there are such pursuits. Consider certain kinds of desires of self-improvement. For example, maybe a person could spend a lifetime attempting to satisfy a desire to paint the best painting she has ever painted. With just the assumption that you won't paint a painting that you will know is the best that you could ever paint, it is enough to guarantee that this could be an infinitely pursuable goal. This stands in contrast to the leap of faith you would have to make to bank on being able to infinitely artificially extend a pursuit like mastering every instrument. While it seems *likely* that there are an infinite number of instruments we could invent, we already know that once you've painted the best painting you've ever painted you can still aim to do better.

What's more, it doesn't seem outside of the realm of possibility that this pursuit could be not only endlessly pursuable but also endlessly interesting. While each painting you would paint would be motivated by the same desire — the desire to paint the best painting you have ever painted — the things that you might do to go about fulfilling that desire might drastically differ over time. The varieties of technique and style, subject matter and color scheme that that you might employ to create an infinite array of compositions seems like a good candidate for the kind of thing that could stave off boredom of the worrisome sort.

That said, we can only speculate about a human's ability to genuinely take an interest in one of these sorts of pursuits for eternity. I doubt that our intuitions about whether or not there are people who could take an interest in these sorts of projects will be reliable when we scale up to think about eternity. Even less reliable, I imagine, are our intuitions about whether any of us *as an individual* is in fact a person who could come to genuinely take an interest in such a pursuit and sustain it indefinitely.

V. Couldn't we just reread the books once we've forgotten them?

Why though, do we need infinitely long books, when we could just read old books where we've forgotten the story or perhaps even forgotten that we read them in the first place? In practice, after a long enough time wouldn't we forget all about what we've pursued in the past, allowing us to resurrect an interest in our old pursuits, even those not infinitely pursuable or infinitely interesting, by coming to them afresh?⁷

There seems to be something to this thought. After all, our memories are certainly finite, whereas our lives would be infinite. Why couldn't I take up playing chess again one thousand years later after having previously mastered it to the point where I exhausted everything I found interesting about it?

Are you bound to forget everything that was interesting about learning to play chess, though? It would be a massive oversimplification to think of memory loss in mortal lives like a disk drive that just erases the earliest years to make room for the new ones once its full up. Instead, we find that memory retention is often selective. You likely remember the day you graduated from high school, whereas it's much less likely you remember what you did ten days later. The risk here is that the sorts of pursuits we would come to genuinely take the most interest in, or least the aspects of them that most command our attention, are not the sorts of things that are easily forgotten. It's hard to say what memory loss would look like over the span of thousands of years. Perhaps we might even develop increased capacities for retaining what's most valuable to us with practice over thousands of years! This should give us pause.

But say we are able to forget what it was like to master chess playing after enough years. Would there be something futile about living only to become good at chess when you know that you've already gotten everything there was to get out of it way back when?

Consider a brief thought experiment. Imagine you're feeling like there is no way for you to enjoy life and you go to a therapist. The therapist tells you that there is only one way that she can help you. She can offer you a pill that will erase part of your memory so that you can have the opportunity to re-enjoy what you once did before you felt like there was nothing left to enjoy about living. If this idea bothers you, then you should worry that in the scenario in which you want to live forever only to pursue things you've forgotten you'll similarly start to find these pursuits to be futile.⁸ This is a problem because this feeling of futility can potentially interfere with your ability to genuinely take an interest in your activities.

Now, intuitions may vary quite a bit here due to different natural propensities: some people reread *Harry Potter* any time it starts to fade from memory, and some people don't see the point.⁹ But it's not just this difference in personality as it manifests in mortal life that comes into play. It is, I think, quite difficult to know how one would react when running up against the enormity of facing a justified inability to find anything in life meaningful for the rest of eternity.

What if we could take a pill that would make us forget not only what it was like to become a chess master whether or not we ever pursued learning to play chess, but also forget the fact that we ever erased our memory in the first place? While this cordons off the futility worry, it introduces a new worry. On this view, the only way that immortality would not be intolerably boring would be to take a pill that so interrupts the psychological continuity of our selves to a rather large degree. This sort of break in psychological continuity threatens to sever our very identities. We might then wonder what interest we really should have in these futures if it may not even really be *us* who survive.

VI. How do these contingencies bear on what we should choose for ourselves?

I have argued that there are more contingencies to whether or not someone would enjoy immortal life than either Curmudgeons or Anti-Curmudgeons have generally conceived of. And the sorts of things that make a difference to whether or not you are the kind of person who could enjoy a meaningful life without death are very difficult to assess without already having lived for a

very long time. I have focused on the contingencies related to whether or not you would face intolerable boredom, but there are other possible contingencies. (Just to name one: are you the kind of person who needs a due date to get motivated to do anything? If so, you might spend a lot of time procrastinating with the entire expanse of forever stretched out before you to fulfill your dreams.)

This leads to an interesting question: what, then, should you do if faced with the opportunity to take an elixir that would make you live forever? This question is particularly vexed because the structure of the decision runs into two somewhat notorious problems for decision theory.

First, there is the fact that, as I have argued, there are various features that affect what it's like to live forever that you wouldn't be privy to without having actually lived for a very long time and/or lived with the understanding that you'd continue doing it forever. This is potentially an example of what L.A. Paul calls a "transformative decision" (Paul 2015).¹⁰ According to Paul,

in cases of transformative choice, the rationality of an approach to life where we think of ourselves as authoritatively controlling our choices by imaginatively projecting ourselves forward and considering possible subjective futures is undermined by our cognitive and epistemic limitations. If we attempt to fix the problem by adjusting our decision-theoretic models and eliminating the role for imagination and first personal assessment, the authenticity of our decision-making is undermined (Paul 2015b).

Even if you *were* able to imaginatively project yourself into the future in order to ascertain exact probabilities for the chances that you would be able to pursue interesting projects indefinitely, assuming the probabilities are somewhere in between 0% and 100%, the decision would still not be straightforward. This is because decision theory runs into a number of paradoxes with infinite values, and so seems unable to give us straightforward answers in these sorts of cases. Notice, for example, that the value of a choice that leads to a 3% chance of an infinitely bad outcome is still $-\infty$ and the value of a choice that leads to a 97% chance of an infinitely good outcome is still ∞ . Given these problems, unless you are willing to bet all your chips on some form of transfinite decision theory, it strikes me that it would be somewhat irrational to be confident about how to proceed.¹¹

VII. Conclusion

To summarize, while I have agreed with Anti-Curmudgeons that it might be misleading to think that the library of potential pursuits that exist in general has a finite number of books, each of which has a finite number of pages, there are still several reasons to worry about running out of pages to read that will genuinely sustain your interest. Whether or not any one individual would run out of pages is contingent on the contents of their personal library, which contains only the pursuits she would be able to genuinely take an interest in that would, for her, effectively stave off insurmountable boredom. While it is theoretically possible that a person might have an infinite number of books, books that are infinitely long, or books that are infinitely re-readable, it

would be a real gamble to bet on any one of those things being the case. Given the presence of these sorts of contingencies,

I have left open the possibility that it may be theoretically possible for a person to live an infinitely long life on earth free of insurmountable boredom. However, I believe that you should proceed very cautiously, as you have no reason to be confident that that person is you.

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Endnotes

¹ For one of the most famous versions of this argument, see Williams (1973). For a similar take on the argument I provide in this paper that builds off of an interpretation of Williams' argument, see Gorman (2016).

² Nagel (1987) writes that, "given the simple choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes I would always choose to live for another week.... I conclude that I would be glad to live for ever" (224). Coren (2018) provides a criticism of this argument.

³ Curmudgeons (of both stronger and weaker varieties) include Williams (1973), Moore (2006), Temkin (2008), Burley (2009a), Altshuler (2015), Cholbi (2015), and Beglin (2017). Anti-Curmudgeons include Wisnewski (2005), Chappell (2007), Smuts (2009), Fischer (2009), Bartolotti and Nagasawa (2009), Bruckner (2012), Galloway (2012), Tanyi and Karlander (2013), Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014), and Lauinger (2014).

⁴ Without arguing for it here, I assume something like a perceptual theory of emotion. For more on perceptual theories of emotions, see Helm (2001), Roberts (2003), Prinz (2006), and Tappolet (2012).

⁵ My account of fleeting boredom here is greatly influenced by Calhoun (2011).

⁶ I owe this example to Michael Cholbi.

⁷ For more on the role of forgetting see Bruckner (2012), Belshaw (2015), and Felder (2018).

⁸ See Blumenfeld (2009) for additional motivation for the futility worry. Blumenfeld gives several cases that aim to elicit this intuition via illustrating the way in which many of us seem to value new genuine achievement rather than merely having the experience of having achieved something. He also notes and diagnoses the diversity of responses to the futility worry.

⁹ Temkin (2008) points to the extreme variation as a factor in the stratification of views in the literature about the desirability of living forever.

¹⁰ Beglin (2016) also makes this connection.

¹¹ See Cholbi (2015) for an argument that, given the probabilities, mortality is the better bet.