

# Williams and the Desirability of Body-Bound Immortality Revisited\*

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*Abstract:* Bernard Williams argues that human mortality is a good thing because living forever would necessarily be intolerably boring. His argument is often attacked for unfoundedly proposing asymmetrical requirements on the desirability of living for mortal and immortal lives. My first aim in this paper is to advance a new interpretation of Williams' argument that avoids these objections, drawing in part on some of his other writings to contextualize it. My second aim is to show how even the best version of his argument only supports a somewhat weaker thesis: it may be possible for some people with certain special psychological features to enjoy an immortal life, but no one has good reason to bet on being such a person.

In 'The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', Bernard Williams argues that it is good that humans are mortal because, if given enough time, we would all eventually fall into an intolerable boredom and have no reason to go on (Williams 1973a). *The Makropoulos Case*, which serves as the inspiration for Williams' argument, refers to a Janáček opera that details the life of Elin Makropoulos, a celebrated singer who loses all zest for life after taking an elixir that allows her to live for 300 years. Having fallen into a state of utter boredom with life, Elin refuses to take another elixir that would have allowed her to live an additional 300 years. Williams imagines that the same fate would befall us all, if we were to live long enough. The fact that we would fall into such an intolerable boredom, Williams thinks, means that any immortal human life would necessarily become a life marked by the fact that there would be no reason to go on living. Because of this, the fact of our own mortality is a good thing, he thinks, and we should neither want nor choose to live forever if given the option.

While Williams' argument has proven elusive to pin down, the paper has spawned a cottage industry, with its participants falling into one of two camps. Those in the first camp see something right about Williams' worries and agree that a body-bound immortal life would necessarily lead to an intolerable boredom, and those in the second see no reason an immortal life would be any less livable than a

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mortal one. Those falling into the second camp often allege that their opponents, the 'Immortality Curmudgeons' as they often call them, are driven by an unprincipled wariness towards the prospect of living forever.<sup>1</sup> There is no reason, the 'Anti-Curmudgeons' argue, to think that a person who finds mortal life enjoyable and worth living would not continue to enjoy life indefinitely.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will argue that the Anti-Curmudgeons' arguments rely on a misinterpretation of Williams' argument, and that *contra* the Anti-Curmudgeons there is a well-motivated asymmetry between the conditions for the desirability of a mortal life and the conditions for the desirability of an immortal life. Accordingly, the first part of my paper will be devoted to articulating a new interpretation of Williams' argument. Along the way I will develop the accounts of categorical desires and personal identity that are needed for what I take to be the strongest version of Williams' argument. Next, I will lend support to several of Williams' premises, paying special attention to what boredom would have to be like to play the important role it does in Williams' argument and arguing that there is an account of boredom that can play this role that is also independently plausible. Williams' argument is more forceful than many have supposed.

Finally, I hope to articulate an attractive middle-position by showing that, even granting Williams' framework, his argument only supports a somewhat weaker thesis: many lives would be intolerably boring if lived forever, and immortality does in fact present a unique risk to the desirability of living, but whether or not any particular life would come to the point of intolerable boredom is a contingent feature of certain identifiable broadly psychological features of that particular individual.

## 1. The Structure of Williams' Argument

To motivate his argument, Williams first draws our attention to a special kind of desire, which he calls a categorical desire. In 'The Makropulos Case' Williams gives a sort of rough-and-ready characterization of categorical desires, but he gives a much more thorough account in his paper 'Persons, Character, and Morality'. The starting point is an account of why we ordinarily think of death as a bad thing:

It might be wondered why, unless we believe in a possibly hostile after-life, or else are in a muddle which the Epicureans claimed to expose, we should regard death as an evil. One answer to that is that we desire certain things; if one desires something, then to that extent one has reason to resist the happening of anything which prevents one getting it, and death certainly does that, for a large range of desires (Williams 1981, 10).

Here he posits that the reason we think of death as a bad thing is that it frustrates our desires. There are outcomes that we want realized, and death prevents those outcomes from being realized.

Not all desires have that relation to death, however; I can have desires that are contingent upon my being alive. Imagine I have the desire *that if I am to live into my*

*nineties, I will continue to wear youthful clothing.* This does not give me a *reason* to live, just as a desire *that I eat food whenever I am hungry* does not give me a reason to live, as it is contingent upon the prospect that I will be alive to experience hunger. Williams calls these conditional desires, and initially, he defines categorical desires by their contrast to conditional desires:

Some desires are admittedly contingent on the prospect of one's being alive, but not all desires can be in that sense conditional, since it is possible to imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil, and if he decides to go on in life, then he is propelled forward into it by some desire (however general or inchoate) which cannot operate conditionally on his being alive, since it settles the question of whether he is going to be alive. Such a desire we may call a categorical desire (Williams 1981, 10–11).

So desires I might have to care for my child, or to travel the world; these are the kinds of desires that give me *reasons* to be alive. It is only on the basis of categorical desires, Williams contends, that any person 'has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided, and we, looking at things from his point of view, would have reason to regard death as a misfortune' (Williams 1973a, 88). This is in contrast to conditional desires, which I only have on the assumption that I will continue to be alive. For example, I will continue to desire to satisfy my hunger only on the assumption of my continued existence, so it cannot play a role in what value there is in my continued survival.

While there are problems with the way Williams defines his terms (for example, there are reasons to think his proposed dichotomy is not exclusive), I will set these worries aside for the present discussion.<sup>3</sup>

The intuitive distinction will serve our purposes here, as we can think of categorical desires as those whose targets are  $[X_0, X_1, \dots, \text{and } X_n]$  in the proposition 'I want to stay alive so that I can  $[X_0, X_1, \dots, \text{and } X_n]$ '. These desires most likely take the form of projects that one wants to complete, tasks to be accomplished, and things one wants to personally experience.

As Williams is clear to point out, at least in 'Persons, Character, and Morality', a person usually does not have a single categorical desire that provides a reason to continue living, but rather, it is the combination of various categorical desires that, together, constitute the person's reason to go on:

For a project to play this ground role [to give him a reason for living], it does not have to be true that if it were frustrated or in any of the various ways he lost it, he would have to commit suicide, nor does he have to think that. Other things, or the mere hope of other things, may keep him going... Of course, in general a man does not have one separable project which plays this ground role: rather, there is a nexus of projects, related to the conditions of life, and it would be the loss of all or most of them that would remove meaning (Williams 1981, 13).

So one condition on a meaningful immortal life, according to Williams, is that one has categorical desires, the pursuit of which one is able to find meaningful.

### 1.1. Asymmetry Objections

Williams introduces two conditions that would need to be met in an immortal existence in order for a person to have a reason to desire that immortal life. John Martin Fischer has termed the two conditions the 'identity condition' and the 'attractiveness condition' (Fischer 2009, 80). The identity condition requires that it is *me*, the same person who is now alive, who lives forever. The attractiveness condition requires that the interests I will have in the future be sufficiently related to the same interests that currently motivate me. It is because every person, on Williams' view, is 'propelled forward... by categorical desires' that 'what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires' (Williams 1973a, 91). The role these conditions are meant to play in Williams' argument is puzzling. He seems to indicate a tight relationship between these two conditions: a special relation must hold between my current and future set of categorical desires either in order to *be* the same person who is living forever, or in order to *care about* the continuing self who lives forever.

Williams is unfortunately frustratingly unclear about what relation must hold between a person's current set of categorical desires and future categorical desires to meet the identity and attractiveness conditions. I believe the ambiguity over what this relation is meant to be has caused Williams' argument to be too easily dismissed by many. We have already seen that, for Williams, one condition on the desirability of *any* life is that the person has and is able to pursue her categorical desires. On one interpretation of the identity and attractiveness conditions, these conditions place *additional* constraints on the desirability of immortal lives that do not constrain the desirability of mortal lives. On another interpretation, the conditions are conditions on what it is possible for an individual to come to categorically desire. Many participants in the debate so far have construed the conditions in the first way; this, however, is a mistake.

Certain interpretations of the identity and attractiveness conditions along the first interpretation seem to place a very high bar on securing enjoyment and meaningfulness in an immortal life. The Anti-Curmudgeons allege that this constitutes an unfounded asymmetry between the conditions for enjoyment and meaningfulness in mortal lives and the conditions for enjoyment and meaningfulness in immortal lives. Aaron Smuts, for example, reads Williams as arguing that the categorical desires a person has in her immortal existence must be identical to the categorical desires she has now (Smuts 2009). The attractiveness and identity conditions, according to Smuts, confine a person to having a reason to live forever only when a relation of identity holds between her current aims and her future endeavors. Williams' worry, he thinks, is that pursuing these very same categorical desires forever will become boring.

Smuts calls this criterion 'far too demanding' and accuses Williams of failing to provide an adequate reason for insisting that for a meaningful immortal life, all of a person's future categorical desires must be related to her current aims. Furthermore, Williams, he says, 'fails to take seriously the possibility of a life composed of an evolving set of overlapping categorical desires', the kind of life which many of us currently enjoy (Smuts 2009, 137). To argue against Williams, Smuts takes it,

we need only imagine the possibility of a person who takes on new categorical desires over time once she becomes bored with desires in her original set to find a counterexample. Call this the Smuts Objection. Notice that, based on the way he levels his criticism, Smuts seems to see Williams as arguing the following:

- (1) In order to live forever meaningfully it must really be you who lives forever.
- (2) You would be a different person if your categorical desires were, in any way, different.
- (3) Therefore, you must have a static set of categorical desires to live forever [From 1 and 2]
- (4) Having a static set of categorical desires would mean doing the same kinds of things over and over again in an attempt to fulfill these desires.
- (5) Doing the same kinds of things over and over again is boring.
- (6) Having a static set of categorical desires necessarily leads to boredom [From 4 and 5]
- (7) Therefore, if you live forever you will get bored [From 3 and 6]

But since, for Smuts, premise 2 is false, since we can acquire new categorical desires, he thinks Williams' argument fails.

It is understandable that Smuts reads Williams in this way. Interpreting the identity and attractiveness conditions as requiring that a person pursue the same categorical desires over the course of eternity paves the way for a clear role for boredom to play in the argument. However, this interpretation of Williams' argument seems fairly uncharitable. As Smuts points out, premise 2 seems extremely implausible. Premise 5 is also unhelpfully vague, since it seems doing the same kinds of things over and over again is boring sometimes, but other times it is not. For example, making scientific discoveries over and over again would arguably not be boring. In order to pursue almost any categorical desire over a range of finite time a person must do things over and over in some sense, and surely Williams does not mean to say that pursuing any categorical desire at all even in a finite life causes the kind of boredom we should be worried about.

Fischer (2009) also understands Williams' identity and attractiveness conditions as placing *additional* constraints on the desirability of immortal lives that do not constrain the desirability of mortal lives. Specifically, he puzzles over a particularly strongly worded statement of the attractiveness condition in which Williams seems to demand that those who live meaningful immortal lives must have one particular categorical desire that fends off even the possibility of boredom:

it might be useful again to consider Williams' demand for 'something that makes boredom *unthinkable*...something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing'. His claim is that 'nothing less will do for eternity'. But the justification for this demand is unclear. Why, in particular, should there be an asymmetry (of the sort implied by the demand) in the standards for the attractiveness of a finite life and an infinite life? (Fischer 2009, 83).

Here, Fischer interprets Williams as implying that someone living an immortal life would need some categorical desire to pursue that would make even fleeting boredom impossible at every moment. However, we are all familiar with boredom in our mortal lives, and this does not seem to jeopardize our lives' meaningfulness. Couldn't our immortal lives continue to have periods of time in which we are bored without sacrificing anything by way of meaningfulness or having reason to go on? Call this the Fischer Objection.

### 1.2. Responding to Asymmetry Objections

Both the Smuts Objection and the Fischer Objection, if they were apt criticisms, would be *obviously* fatal to an argument that it would be intolerably boring to live forever, which seems to indicate that something has gone wrong in their interpretation of Williams. I will work backwards by assuming Williams must have intended to be making a stronger argument than either of these criticisms assumes. I'll look at what role Williams would need the relation between current and future categorical desires to play in the strongest version of his argument, and what kind of thing he would need to posit about the difference between boredom in finite lives and boredom in infinite lives to get the strongest version of his argument off the ground. I will then go about filling in accounts of these things that together can form a coherent picture of what I take the strongest reading of Williams' argument to be.

Let's return to the Fischer Objection. Fischer wonders why boredom is okay in finite lives but intolerable in infinite lives. One way our interpretation of Williams might avoid this worry is if we interpret Williams as positing that there is a distinctive kind of boredom that occurs in infinite lives that doesn't occur in finite lives. One clue that Williams intends to point to a special sense of boredom comes from the way he describes this boredom that would overcome the immortal person as not 'boredom, as [it] sometimes [is] in more ordinary circumstances... just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment' (Williams 1973a, 87). Whatever this special sense of boredom Williams has in mind is, it has a special connection to the state of lacking categorical desires. One commenter, Jeremy Wisniewski goes so far as to say that the most charitable reading of Williams' use of the term 'boredom' is to understand it as a term of art specifically designating 'the state of an agent in which no categorical desires are to be found' (Wisniewski 1985, 32). While I agree that the kind of boredom Williams is interested in a special kind of boredom and that it has a tight relationship to being in such a state, the relation cannot merely be one of identity. To see why this makes for a strained sense of boredom, imagine Eternally Sleeping Beauty who has no memory of past times of waking and has not developed any categorical desires. On Wisniewski's reading of Williams' special sense of boredom, we would have to ascribe boredom to Eternally Sleeping Beauty, but this seems wrong.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Williams' argument would be fairly weak if he merely meant to be talking about some special kind of boredom that has no real resemblance to our ordinary conception of boredom. Luckily, we do not need to posit a special term of art to explain the kind of boredom Williams worries about,

since it seems Williams' sense of boredom is not the state of having no categorical desires but an emotional reaction that *responds* to the state of having no categorical desires. I will return to this point shortly, but first I will demonstrate how positing a kind of boredom that would occur for anyone in an immortal life can be put to use to reconstruct a stronger version of Williams' argument.

On the interpretation in which we are at risk for a certain kind of intolerable boredom if we are to live too long, asymmetry worries can be assuaged because there are not unfairly different *standards* for the attractiveness of finite and infinite lives, just worries about an event that is inevitable in any life that goes on long enough. Williams' 'demand' that an immortal life would need something to make boredom 'unthinkable' alludes not to a different standard, but to a great crisis that he sees as inevitable for immortals: falling into a special state of boredom caused by running out of categorical desires. 'Nothing less would do for eternity' than something that could combat such a moment, and Williams sees such a moment as inevitable. The boredom Williams is worried about is not the boredom of pursuing projects over a long period of time, but rather the boredom of having no projects to pursue.

Given this interpretation, we can see that the role boredom is supposed to play in the argument must be something like the following:

- (1) If you have no categorical desires you will become permanently intolerably bored.
- (2) If you are permanently intolerably bored, you have no reason to live.
- (3) Therefore, if you have no categorical desires you will become such that you have no reason to live. [From 1 and 2]

One way to motivate the worry about running out of categorical desires is to posit that there are a finite number of pursuable categorical desires, each of which would be exhausted in a finite time. If we grant this assumption, the rest of the argument might run as follows:

- (4) Any particular categorical desire would be exhausted in a finite amount of time.
- (5) There are a finite number of pursuable categorical desires.
- (6) If a person pursued every possible categorical desire, she would run out of categorical desires to pursue in a finite amount of time. [From 4 and 5]
- (7) An infinite amount of time is greater than any finite amount of time.
- (8) A person who lives for an infinite amount of time spending the [beginning of this] time pursuing categorical desires will come to have no reason to live. [From 3, 6, and 7]
- (9) If you do not pursue categorical desires you have no reason to live. [From Williams' constitutive claim]
- (10) If you are immortal and do not pursue categorical desires you will have no reason to live, and if you are immortal and do pursue categorical desires you will come to have no reason to live.
- (11) You will have no reason to continue living if you are immortal. [From 10]
- (12) Living with no reason to live is undesirable.
- (13) Immortality is undesirable.

### 1.3. Alienation and the Finite Number of Paths

Now, though, it seems we have lost hold of the identity and attractiveness conditions' relevance to the argument. In the popular interpretation of Williams' argument we have now dismissed, the conditions played an important role in premises one and two: 1. In order to live forever meaningfully it must really be you who lives forever. 2. You would be a different person if your categorical desires were, in any way, different. In our new interpretation of Williams' argument, though, nothing about the individual's personal identity or relation between current and future set of desires feature in any of the premises. This would seem to make for a bad interpretation of Williams. I will argue, though, that an improved version of this argument does make use of the conditions.

Recall that there are two interpretations available of what the identity and attractiveness conditions are meant to be. On the interpretation explored in regards to Smuts' and Fisher's reading of Williams, the conditions function as a constraint on what immortal lives must be like to be desirable, *in addition* to the constraint (shared by mortal lives) that one must pursue categorical desires. But given our new interpretation of Williams' argument, we can get to the undesirability of immortal life just from the constraint that a person's life is only desirable if she is pursuing categorical desires. There is no role for the identity and attractiveness conditions to play if we interpret them as additional constraints.

But on the other interpretation of the conditions, they function as conditions on what it is possible for an individual person to come to categorically desire. Premise 5 is not all that plausible as stated, and by incorporating Williams' identity and attractiveness conditions to the argument at this stage, we can reconstruct a stronger version of premise 5. Even if it is not plausible to suppose that there are a finite number of potential categorical desires, it might be plausible to suppose that each person's own individuality in some way limits the set of potential categorical desires that are accessible to her into a finite set. If this is right, we can replace premise 5 with premise 5\*.

5\* *Each person* has a finite number of pursuable categorical desires that are genuinely accessible to her.

But what would make 5\* true?

For Williams, the make-up of my categorical desires does not (just) play a role in constituting my identity over time, but it is also partly constitutive of my individuality. A tempting line of thought would be to interpret the relation that would have to hold between my current and future categorical desires as being a relation in which my future desires just cannot be antithetical to my current desires, as this would in a simple sense seem to prohibit me from retaining my individual identity or at least my ability to care about my future self. This will not work to restrict the potential categorical desires I can take on to pursue to a finite set, however. If I take the infinite set of potential human categorical desires and merely subtract a finite group of categorical desires and demarcate them as off-limits for *me*, I am still left



with an infinite set of potential categorical desires. This restriction would not be strong enough to support 5\*, so Williams would need to say something stronger than this.

A curious comment he makes in 'Persons, Character and Morality' can perhaps help us to understand the way in which he sees patterns of categorical desires as being partly constitutive of individuality:

We are here concerned with more distinctive and structured patterns of desire and project, and there are possible psychological changes in these which could be predicted for a person and which would put his future after such changes beyond his present interest. Such a future would be, so to speak, over the horizon of his interest, though of course if the future picture could be filled in as a series of changes leading from here to there, he might recapture an interest in the outcome (Williams 1981, 8).

A question now emerges: why should it matter whether or not a future picture be filled in with the details 'leading from here to there' that make the series of changes make sense from a first-personal perspective?

In one sense it seems there are an infinite number of paths each of us could take to move from project to project, pursuing categorical desires and acquiring new categorical desires. At any given time I am, it seems, perfectly free to take up learning Japanese, or playing tennis, or oil painting. Certain paths, though, naturally lead to taking interests in certain other pursuits. These pursuits only fend off boredom and make my life meaningful if I am able to *take an interest* in them. To be able to take an interest in a pursuit seems to require more than just being free to do it. Given what I have already pursued, at any given time there may be a finite or even a small number of pursuits I could take an interest in, and this concern is ever more vivid when we imagine what one can take an interest in given hundreds or thousands of years of already pursuing interests. The worry is that certain paths will lead to a state in which I am not able to take an interest in any of the pursuits that present themselves to me as possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Some may protest that the project of trying to live a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life may provide me with a reason to take an interest in things that I would not normally be interested in. One way I might acquire a new 'interest' in A might be when A is a means to B, which already interests me. If it is normal to have an interest in having a reason to live, then I might take an interest in any number of projects by this route. But we should be very wary of the idea that these 'interests' would be robust enough to sustain actual reasons for me to live. I might take an 'interest' in finding my seat on the airplane and sitting in it if I have an interest in flying to London, but this 'interest' is not independently motivating. What we're after is a stronger sense of interest.

When we come to our interests derivatively from the desire to live a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life, there are two possibilities: either the source of motivation for those desires is not distinct from the desire to live a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life or it is distinct. The suggestion was that *even if all other sources of coming to take an interest in something had run out* we might recapture an interest in a

project via a desire to live a meaningful and enjoyable life, so we can set the desires that are motivated by something distinct from this desire aside. Focusing now on the desires that do not have a distinct motivation from the desire to live a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life, in order to see if they could be for us categorical desires, desires which give us a reason for living, we can consider whether or not the desire for a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life could be a categorical desire in the relevant sense. Williams does not address this point, but he does address the related question of whether or not a bare desire to remain alive could serve as a categorical desire to play this role. On this prospect, Williams is rightly skeptical:

But the question might be raised, at the impoverished end of things, as to what the minimum categorical desire might be. Could it be just the desire to remain alive? The answer is perhaps 'no'. ...if the question is asked, and it is going to be answered calculatively, then the bare categorical desire to stay alive will not sustain the calculation – that desire itself, when things have got that far, has to be sustained or filled out by some desire for something else (Williams 1973a, 86).

Williams' reply here is suggestive, and seems to generalize so as to apply also to the prospect of having a desire to live a meaningful and enjoyable immortal life play the relevant role. What he gestures at is that there are certain psychological conditions that make it so that someone can genuinely take an interest in a project such that it becomes a reason to keep living. Interests cannot be arrived at merely from considering what sorts of interests one would have to have in order to be best poised. One explanation for this can make sense of the role Williams' identity and attractiveness conditions can play in this stage of the argument. Pursuits acquired by means of assessing one's situation from a third-personal perspective and deciding what one ought to be interested in to fend off boredom will be fundamentally alienating. Williams' notion of alienation, as developed in his famous attack on Utilitarianism, might play an interestingly similar role in this context. Consider what Williams says in response to the idea that a man ought to step away from the pursuit of his own genuinely acquired projects in order to take on projects that facilitate greater utility:

It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimistic decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his actions and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified (Williams 1973b, 116–117).

It seems plausible that such identification is a necessary feature of taking an interest in a particular pursuit. If so, it seems my individuality sets the kinds of reasons I have for genuinely taking an interest in things and so will demarcate which pursuits would be alienating *for me* to adopt. My current categorical desires function as part of a path that helps to determine which things I can take an interest in, the future, in a non-alienating way. As Williams writes in his Postscript to *Ethics*

and the Limits of Philosophy, 'We must reject any model of personal practical thought according to which all my projects, purposes, and needs should be made, discursively and at once, considerations *for* me. I must deliberate *from* what I am' (Williams 1985, 200). Without these concerns we might be able to take an interest in and pursue an infinite number of pursuits to fend off boredom, but due to the constraints of identity there is a real concern that we may run out.

Williams, as I have argued, needs something a bit stronger for his argument, though; he needs it to be the case that anyone would run out of non-alienating categorical desires to pursue.<sup>6</sup> My proposal is that Williams believes this is just a feature of human psychology. This reading is supported by the way Williams describes his project at various points:

I shall...pursue the idea that from *facts about human desire and happiness* and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil (Williams 1973a, 82, emphasis mine).

The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM's [Elin Makropulos's] unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did. That it is not a contingency, is suggested also by the fact that the reflections can sustain themselves independently of any question of the particular character that EM had; it is enough, almost, that *she has a human character* at all (Williams 1973a, 90, emphasis mine).

To sum up, the claim is that the realities of human psychology are such that our individual identities set limits on which categorical desires we can identify with, and the categorical desires we can identify with set limits on which categorical desires we can actually acquire given the path we've gone down. This allows us to make the plausible claim that there is an infinite number of pursuits, while maintaining that each individual will reach a point at which she cannot actually acquire an interest in any of the pursuits remaining.

## 2. Immortality and Boredom

Now that I have reconstructed what I take to be the best version of Williams' argument, I will return to the special sense of boredom that's at play in this argument. So far all I have said is that this sense of boredom has a special connection to the state of lacking categorical desires, and that people are particularly prone to this state of boredom if they are living immortal lives. But this will be plausible only if we can independently motivate the idea that there is such a type of boredom.

First, I want to make two distinctions about boredom that will prove useful here. The first is a distinction between 'boredom *with*' and 'overall boredom'. Whereas boredom *with* something would indicate that I have seemingly lost the ability to sustain an interest in a particular activity, overall boredom would

indicate that I find myself unable to think of anything at all that would engage and sustain my interest, at least for the time being. This is the difference between, for example, being bored with doing calculus problems, preferring instead to do something else more engaging, and being bored all day, not knowing what to do. The second distinction is a distinction between 'fleeting boredom' and 'insurmountable boredom'.<sup>7</sup> Whereas fleeting boredom is a state that relates a temporary seeming that I cannot keep myself engaged, insurmountable boredom would be a state that occurs in reaction to a veridical perception in which I would realize that there remain no more possibilities to engage myself.<sup>8</sup>

Given these two distinctions, there are at least four possible types of boredom:

Fleeting boredom <i>with</i>	for example, being bored with a television show after watching four episodes in a row, but finding it to be engaging, once again, after some time has passed.
Fleeting overall boredom	feeling like there is nothing to do, and each option considered seems to be uninteresting, but the feeling passes, usually in a matter of hours or sometimes days.
Insurmountable boredom <i>with</i>	for example, being very interested in coin collecting, but after devoting significant energy and attention to coin collecting over the years, finding that it is no longer able to hold your interest.
Insurmountable overall boredom	having exhausted all possible things that one could be interested in doing; feeling like there is nothing that will be worthwhile for you to do that will hold your interest and being correct about this.

I will suggest that it is this final kind of boredom that is at play in Williams' argument, but in order to fully understand its role we will first need to understand the nature of the connection between categorical desires and the ability of something to hold one's interest.

### 2.1. *An Account of Boredom*

In order to explore this connection, we must first ask a prior question: what causes boredom as a response to anything? Boredom, even in our everyday sense, is puzzling. We can be engaged in an activity we deem to be worthwhile and fascinating, and yet given enough time spent engaging with it we suddenly come to no longer be able to care. Even the most dedicated mathematician will find herself looking at the numbers on the page after 6 or 7 straight hours and feel she has had enough. While boredom seems to have something to do with one's perception that she can be brought to care about or take an interest in something, nothing about the nature of mathematics changes on the 7<sup>th</sup> hour such that it would seem less worth caring about. Even in the case of insurmountable boredom *with*, where a person has watched her favorite movie hundreds of times and can no longer 'get anything

new out of it' it is not as though she changes her mind about the merits of the film itself. But in other cases, we might find a movie boring precisely because it fails to have any qualities we deem worth caring about.

We can make sense of this by proposing an account of boredom as not just a response to some independent quality of that with which one is bored, but rather as a response to something that is insufficient for engaging certain capacities we are able to engage when we come to care about or take an interest in something.<sup>9</sup> To be interested in something involves engaging one's capacities such as our abilities to decide how to deal with, attend to, store in our memory, and assess. While our favorite movie may have the same qualities on the hundredth time, we may have run out of ways to engage with it. If we conceive of all of the aspects of a thing as that with which a particular person, given her dispositions, can come to care about or take an interest in, we can understand these care-qualities as consumable items.

In order to stay engaged with some activity, not only do I need there to be some aspects of it that I perceive that I am able to care about, but I also must have ways of engaging with these aspects by making use of them somehow, and once I have engaged with them in every possible way, I have run out of ways to engage my care. We are now in a position to see which kinds of repetition are bound to bore, and which are not, which is crucial to answer the question of whether or not pursuing some limited number of projects over an infinite amount of time would doom us to boredom. As Timothy Chappell worries:

We could... go a little deeper, and point out that the notions of 'repetition' and of 'things that can happen' that are in use here are fatally indeterminate. If I climb the same mountain or hear the same opera twice, is that repetition? If I climb the same mountain twice by the same route (in the same weather?), or hear the same production of the same opera twice (with exactly the same cast?), is that repetition? Yes and No are equally good answers to both questions, because whether two time-ordered items count as instances of the same type, so that the latter item is a repetition of the former, depends on how we describe them. It might be replied that the notion of sameness, and hence of repetition, that Williams' argument needs is simply whatever notion of repetition justifies boredom as a response to it. But this just opens up a different question, and a rather difficult one, as to what justifies boredom as a response to anything, repetitious or not (Chappell 2007, 40).

If we plug in the theory that what justifies boredom is a lack of remaining consumable care-qualities, that is, what justifies boredom is a lack of new data with which one can come to take an interest in, think about, and assess, then we can understand 'repetition' as it is relevant to Williams' project. Repetition is, insofar as it relates to the present discussion, that which for a particular person presents itself with only care-qualities that she has already consumed, therefore causing her boredom to be insurmountable.

Why then, we might wonder, is ordinary boredom usually fleeting? Perceptions of a lack of consumable care-qualities, like perceptions in general, are not always veridical. The nature of the way we tend to experience the repetition of an activity might shed some light here. As we repeatedly engage with something in the same manner over and over again, we temporarily close ourselves off to engaging our other capacities for interacting with it in a way that will hold our interest. Similarly, for fleeting overall boredom, we become so accustomed to engaging with a certain set of activities with a certain subset of our capacities to engage, that our realm of possible meaningful interactions with the world seems to be temporarily shrunken, causing evaluative tunnel vision around that which we care about.

This is, of course, in stark contrast to insurmountable boredom *with* and insurmountable overall boredom. When I experience insurmountable boredom *with* something, I do not have tunnel vision, but rather, I see that I have actually consumed all of the care qualities that I can from a given thing, and thus there is nothing left that I can take an interest in. If I, for example, have a categorical desire to try to learn German, I may reach a point in time at which what interested me about learning the language becomes completely exhausted, perhaps when I finish learning the grammar, if that is what initially drew me to the project, and thus I will find myself having exhausted my evaluation-related capacities related to the project for good. Alternately, I might just complete the task and become fluent in the language, and this too would result in my having no more ways to evaluatively relate to the task.

As long as we hold that agents might not have inexhaustible capacities for engaging with the care-qualities they encounter, and there are only so many things a single person can find herself capable of becoming interested in, the possibility of insurmountable overall boredom comes into clearer focus. If evaluators never have inexhaustible capacities for engaging with the care-qualities they encounter, we can reason that a person, if given an infinite amount of time, will experience insurmountable boredom with each of the things she previously was interested in engaging with as she finishes consuming all of the available care-qualities.

Insurmountable overall boredom is a natural consequence of running out of categorical desires to pursue. When we experience fleeting overall boredom, we temporarily feel as though there is nothing meaningful that is worth our efforts and attention. But usually we snap out of boredom; we continue pursuing the satisfaction of a categorical desire we had temporarily forgotten about, take up a new pursuit, or take a break from pursuing categorical desires only to resume the pursuit of something that had seemed boring just a short time ago. If all of our potential categorical desires were exhausted, though, there would be nothing to snap back into. Our perception that there is nothing left to hold our interest would track reality.

### 3. The Contingencies of Immortal Boredom

I'm now going to turn to my negative argument against Williams. I will argue that insurmountable permanent boredom does not necessarily follow from immortal

existence because there are certain inexhaustible categorical desires—and inexhaustible capacities for engaging with the care-qualities provided by particular kinds of pursuits. In other words, I am going to take issue with premise 4, which states that any particular categorical desire would be exhausted in a finite amount of time. Williams seems to just assert that categorical desires are all exhaustible as a matter of course, but here there is room for doubt.

Now, Wisnewski presses Williams' argument on this same point by noting that even categorical desires that get exhausted might be able to be revived if new possibilities for fulfilling the desire become available (Wisnewski 1985, 33–34). He uses the example of a desire to 'be the best musician ever by mastering every instrument'. After I achieve this goal by mastering every existent instrument, I would find myself with nothing more with which to invest my time in order to reach my goal since my goal would already have been reached. Wisnewski thinks this leaves out the possibility that in another few hundred years a new instrument might be invented. He thinks there's no reason to suppose that my previously exhausted categorical desire might not be revived in light of the new possibility. In fact, he says, hundreds of instruments might be invented over the years or I could even perpetually invent my own new instruments to serve the purpose of filling my categorical desire.

This will not do the trick of fending off boredom, though, because it seems as though a categorical desire of mine only persists if I continue to find the goal to be something I find myself able to continue to care about. So if I have a desire to master every instrument, I must find something care-worthy in learning each new instrument, otherwise I would only want to master the first instrument. So I think that there would need to be not just an infinite number of different possible instruments, but an infinite number of *interestingly* different instruments.<sup>10</sup> An interestingly different instrument might be a guitar with twice as many strings. Mastery of this instrument would probably require different skills, and would provide a unique challenge. But what about other variations? Would a trumpet with a slightly longer bell that produces a slightly lower sound be interesting to master after already having mastered a regular trumpet? Would a flute that was shaped differently be interesting? Even if these instruments would be initially interesting, would more and more instruments with slight variations on them each be interesting to learn? I am skeptical that these instruments I would invent only for the sake of being different would provide endless new opportunities to engage my care capacities.

It is here that I part ways with Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's recent Anti-Curmudgeon defense of the livability of the immortal life (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014). They cite, for example, doing math, eating fine food, listening to beautiful music, and having sex as possible activities that could make a person's immortal life meaningful. They contend that repeatable pleasures can provide sufficient reason to live forever. While I am open to the possibility that certain kinds of mathematical, culinary, or even sexual pursuits might provide meaningful infinite existences, I disagree that they can do so merely by virtue of repeatedly providing us with pleasure. Boredom is a response not to a lack of

pleasure, but to a lack of interestingness, as we can only come to care about that which appears to us as interesting. These pursuits could only stave off the threat of insurmountable overall boredom by being suitably diversified in terms of what it takes to accomplish them.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin give the following diagnosis of the problem with those who argue the immortal life would necessarily lead to boredom:

It is almost as though Williams and other proponents of the view that we would lose all our categorical desires and associated projects in an immortal life are in the grips of a problematic metaphor. They 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).

But if we take the threat of insurmountable boredom seriously, the library metaphor is apt. We need new care-qualities to consume to make living interesting enough to be worthwhile.<sup>11</sup> As previously argued, if we are to suppose that our personal identities make finite the bounds of what activities we can identify with then our identities do put finite bounds on which books are in our personal libraries. The question of whether or not our lives can be infinite without leading to boredom is then a question of whether or not any of the books are both infinitely long and exciting enough to keep us consistently engaged nonetheless.

### *3.1. Endlessly Pursuable, Endlessly Interesting Categorical Desires*

So what we need is to find examples of types of categorical desires, the pursuit of which would produce not just endless but also endlessly interesting opportunities for engaging one's evaluative capacities. However, of course, the desire type must be narrow enough as to maintain its integrity as a single kind of pursuit; it must provide enough coherence that it proscribes and could reasonably be thought to motivate a certain group of actions. I think there are actually a few kinds of categorical desire types that are like this. While the infinite pursuit of these categorical desires might be repetitive in a certain sense, they would not be repetitive in the sense relevant to causing insurmountable boredom just as long as they continue to present a person with care-qualities that are different from the data she has already consumed. For now, I'll just mention two kinds.

First, consider desires based in self-improvement. While one might worry that such self-improvement might effectively 'max out' over a long enough span of time, I see no reason for such pessimism. While certain kinds of self-improvement might seem to reach a point of diminishing returns from our perspective, we may be limited in our imaginations about what kinds of self-improvement would become possible in an infinite life. Suppose that I have a categorical desire to paint the best painting I have ever painted. The first thing to note about this kind of a



desire is that once it is satisfied, it does not close off the possibility for my satisfying a desire to paint the best painting I have ever painted, again. At  $t_0$  I could form the desire to paint the best painting I have ever painted, at  $t_1$  I could finish painting a masterpiece and deem it the best painting I have ever painted and still have a desire to paint the best painting I have ever painted. The same thing can hold as I continue to produce paintings that are better and better yet. In this way, satisfying the desire to paint the best painting I have ever painted does not preclude my continuing to pursue satisfaction of a desire that to paint the best painting I have ever painted. So in a sense, this pursuit is open-ended in that it can infinitely provide me with a reason to go on. The means satisfaction of this type of categorical desire is also crucially different from the means I would use to satisfy the goal of being a master musician by inventing instruments for the purpose of being able to continue to satisfy my desire. With each time the desire is temporarily satisfied (I paint a painting that is my best yet), and each time the desire is attempted to be satisfied (I paint a painting) I engage myself with something that presents itself with new care-qualities.

A second class of categorical desires that might be infinitely pursuable and infinitely interesting are categorical desires that depend on the changing state of the world and the people in it, for example, the categorical desire to do one good deed per day. I think it is more than reasonable to say that running out of good deeds that can be done is not a very realistic possibility, so this does not cause a problem. Good deeds of a large variety are appreciated, and the opportunities for good deeds to be done are always changing, with new opportunities springing up daily. Because of this, if I were motivated by this desire I could be doing various things that are very different each day, while they would still be united by a common goal. It would not become boring because although each day I would repeat the action 'do one good deed', this is not the kind of repetition relevant to boredom, since the kinds of activities I would engage in would present a variety of different kinds of care-qualities.

### *3.2. The Role of Forgetting*

There is another way of pushing back against premise 4 that Williams seems not to address directly. Even if an immortal person does not have any of these special kinds of categorical desires to pursue, perhaps there is another way she might take an interest in some of her old categorical desires again even after having exhausted what she takes to be ways to meaningfully engage in what is interesting about the pursuits. Since our memories are finite but immortal lives are infinite we might forget exhausting what we take to be the reasons to care about engaging with the pursuit of any given categorical desire, such that we could return to the same projects that interested us earlier in life with a renewed sense of interest and excitement.<sup>12</sup> After a 1000-year break, there's no reason I would not take an interest in learning how to play the piano once again.

Anti-Curmudgeons may allege that the finite nature of human memory gives us reason to think the immortal life would be just as fulfilling as a mortal life. For any

given pursuit that staves off boredom in mortal life, we would have access to this same effect in immortal life given enough time. One worry about this kind of unfettered optimism is that while it is relatively uncontroversial that human memory has some limits, it is not clear what kinds of limits it has. What is needed to sustain the optimism is the empirical claim that after enough time a person's earlier memories are erased, perhaps to make room for new ones. However, it seems that memory prioritizes, and if there are a finite number of categorical desires you can meaningfully pursue in a non-alienating way it may be that the interesting aspects of these pursuits are not the kinds of things you are liable to forget.

Even if we grant that we might forget all previous pursuit of our categorical desires, there is still a worry we might have about the ability to take an interest in pursuits that we came to be veridically bored with in the past. For many people an immortal life devoted only to the pursuit of projects that one has already accomplished may seem disconcertingly futile. Williams' framework gives us the resources to explain why this should matter. A person's set of potential categorical desires she can pursue in order to give her life meaning are restricted to those which she can come to take an interest in in a non-alienating way. Just what these dispositions to take an interest in something are and what sorts of things these dispositions are sensitive to is a matter of human psychology. It may be that the sort of futility of having to repeat pursuits previously deemed no longer interesting in order to have a meaningful existence would hinder some people's ability to take an interest in these pursuits, but the same may not be true for everyone. Again, this makes the desirability of immortality a highly contingent matter.

Anti-Curmudgeons may counter that memory is finite in such a way that a person would not only forget about the aspects of a given pursuit that made her bored with it but also that she had involved herself with the pursuit at all in the past. My worries about memory being finite in this kind of way aside, I doubt this fact would truly help most people live meaningful immortal existences. Given an infinite amount of time the astute immortal will recognize that there are likely to be pursuits she now takes an interest in that she probably has pursued before. Just as concerns about futility may have an effect on the current interests of a person who *knows* she has pursued something to the point of boredom, so too may they have such an effect on the interests of a person who *believes it is very likely* that she has pursued something to the point of boredom.

#### 4. What Then Should One Do if Offered an Elixir of Immortality?

I have argued that the question of whether or not someone would fall into an insurmountable fundamental boredom over the course of an infinite life is a contingent matter that depends on contingent features of a person's psychology. In order to enjoy a meaningful existence a person must be able to satisfy one of the following two conditions: 1) She must have at least one infinitely pursuable and infinitely interesting categorical desire or be able to adopt one in a non-alienating way. 2) She must be the kind of person who will not find it futile to pursue projects

in which she has already exhausted her interest should she forget about having engaged in those projects even if she deems it likely that she has already engaged in these projects to the point of exhausting her interest.

In a certain way, we might think this might vindicate a version of the Anti-Curmudgeonly view: while Anti-Curmudgeons can grant that Elin Makropulos was in a situation in which she was insurmountably bored, Anti-Curmudgeons often believe that *they themselves* might lead meaningful and interesting infinite lives.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps these Anti-Curmudgeons are in this sense, at least, right. They would in fact live such worthwhile infinite lives if given the chance. However, I think a certain amount of skepticism is called for as to these Anti-Curmudgeons' self-knowledge that's vital to being able to accurately answer the question.

For both conditions, it seems the only way to know about whether or not one satisfies them is to have already lived far longer than an ordinary mortal life allows for. Is your ability to take an interest in something contingent on being able to be confident that the only reason you're interested in it (again) is the fact that you've forgotten about having grown veridically bored with it? Even if you know about yourself that you have been able to take an interest in things again due to having forgotten them in the past, you will not be able to judge whether or not the sense of futility that does not have a negative effect on your ability to become interested in something in general will have a different effect when the kind of interest you need to be able to sustain must be strong enough to provide you with a reason for living. Do you know whether your current or future projects could be of the right type to sustain an infinite meaningful existence, in the way I have suggested such projects would need to? Mortals seem to be far from epistemically qualified to answer this question.

If the only way to find out for sure whether or not these projects have such characters is to actually pursue them over a long enough time to find out, the question of whether or not one should take an elixir that makes one immortal is particularly vexed. Suppose the following three things are true: (1) The value we'd assign to living a year insurmountably fundamentally bored is negative. (2) The value we'd assign to living a year pursuing meaningful categorical desires is positive. (3) The value we assign to living meaningful mortal lives is positive and finite. We now end up with something like the following decision matrix:

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	Are psychologically such that over an infinite amount of time you would become insurmountably bored	Are psychologically such that over an infinite amount of time you would be infinitely engaged in the pursuit of categorical desires
Take the elixir	$-\infty$	$\infty$
Do not take the elixir	100	100

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But, decision theory seems unable to say anything meaningful about situations with infinite values. At the very least its ability to do so has come under fire at least since early discussion of Pascal's Wager. If this gives us reason to worry about decision theory's ability to say anything meaningful about this choice, perhaps the best

we can say is that we ought to proceed very cautiously towards choosing immortality.

## 5. Conclusion

While Williams' necessity claim about falling into intolerable boredom in an immortal life may have been too strong, I have argued that the Anti-Curmudgeons' betting on having a meaningful immortal life from the fact that they enjoy meaningful mortal lives is far too optimistic. To sum up, I have argued that on the strongest interpretation of Williams' argument we need not retain all or even any of our current categorical desires in the future in order to have meaningful immortal lives. Rather, I have argued that we should interpret the role of the identity and attractiveness conditions as setting limits on the interests we can come to acquire in a non-alienating way, and that Williams sees it as a fact about human psychology that these limits place a finite bound on what projects we can come to genuinely take interest in. On my interpretation, Williams targets a special kind of boredom that is a fitting response to running out of categorical desires, and I have argued that the existence of this kind of boredom gains independent plausibility via its relation to ordinary kinds of boredom. However I have also argued, against Williams, that running out of categorical desires does not follow inevitably from general facts about human psychology, for certain individuals may be able to pursue certain categorical desires over an infinite span of time if the pursuit of such desires provides them with infinitely interestingly different care-qualities to consume. Furthermore, this may not even be necessary if one's ability to take an interest in something is not sensitive to whether or not one has already pursued it to the point of veridical boredom. Any immortality optimism this may allow for, however, should be seriously tempered. While it may be possible for some people to have meaningful infinite existences, no one has much warrant for believing that she herself is such a person.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This language first appears in Fischer 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of those mounting a defense of Williams' position see Moore 2006, Temkin 2008, Burley 2009a and Altshuler 2015. For examples of defenders of meaningful immortal existence see Wisnewski 1985, Chappell 2007, Smuts 2009, Fischer 2009, Bortolotti and Nagasawa 2009, Bruckner 2012, Galloway 2012, Tanyi and Karlander 2013, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014, and Lauinger 2014. For critical discussion of the state of the literature see Burley 2009b, Burley 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For excellent discussions of these worries, see Bradley and McDaniel 2013, and Rosati 2013.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this example to Stephen Finlay.

<sup>5</sup> For Williams, such dispositions to take an interest in some pursuit or another play a key role in meaningful individual existence. In his Postscript to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* he writes, 'My ... belief is in the continuing possibility of a meaningful individual life, one that does not reject society, and indeed shares its perceptions with other people to a considerable depth, but is enough unlike others, in its opacities and disorder as well as in its reasoned intentions, to make it *somebody's*'. (Williams 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Some people will be unsatisfied with what I take to be Williams' argument for the stronger claim. I want to note here that since I will ultimately be defending the conclusion that Williams' framework can be used to support the conclusion that it is a contingent matter based on psychological features of the individual whether or not she will fall into a state of intolerable boredom if she lived forever, I need only advance the weaker claim. I try to motivate the stronger case here for two reasons: 1. Since Williams argued for the claim that *all* human lives would lead to intolerable boredom, I want to show that there is a way of arguing for that using the set-up I have provided. This supports the fact that what I am arguing here is an argument that can be found in Williams. 2. I want to grant all of Williams' premises and show that, for another reason, it is still a contingent matter whether or not any particular person would end up with no reason to go on living. I am perfectly happy to concede that the failure of the stronger claim here is yet another reason that the question of intolerable boredom is a contingent matter based on individual psychology.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Taylor Cyr for suggesting this label. In earlier versions of this paper I referred to this as 'justified boredom' to refer to the fact that one is justified in perceiving that one has run out of things to hold one's interest, but the word 'justified' also has certain connotations that seem to confuse rather than clarify the discussion at hand.

<sup>8</sup> This dichotomy is not, strictly speaking, exhaustive. There remain possible states of boredom in which I cannot come up with any more possibilities to engage myself, though these possibilities exist, on various readings of 'cannot.' Here I only mean to distinguish insurmountable boredom from our every day concept of boredom.

<sup>9</sup> This account is strongly influenced by the account put forward in Calhoun 2011. Calhoun proposes a similar account that focuses on capacities of evaluators (rather than carers) to engage with consumable value-data.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Jarae Rice for helpful discussion on this point.

<sup>11</sup> I am also assuming that there are a finite number of ways to relate to any particular care datum. I take this to be a reasonable assumption. I am thankful to Ben Mitchell-Yellin for pointing this out to me.

<sup>12</sup> This possibility is also raised in Bruckner 2012.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Larry Temkin notes the tendency of Anti-Curmudgeons to claim that while some people may have intolerably boring immortal lives, this would never happen to them. After noting that he himself would find such a life tedious, he reports that 'Francis Kamm informs me that *she* never tires of visiting art museums, and Derek Parfit tells me that *he* never tires of hearing *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Tristan and Isolde*', (Temkin 2008, 203).

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