**Practical Identity**

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**1. Introduction**

Belief in an afterlife is a prominent feature of most religions. Some religions claim that people will ultimately go to either Heaven or Hell.[[1]](#endnote-1) Other religions claim that people will be reborn – perhaps as another person or another animal – endlessly (though there is often the possibility of escaping that cycle).[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, some surveys suggest that belief in an afterlife is widespread, even for those who do not identify with a particular religion.[[3]](#endnote-3)

There is one main question facing those who believe in the afterlife – namely, can anyone survive death? If it is logically impossible for anyone to survive death – if death is the end of personal existence – then the ‘afterlife’ would be an incoherent concept, and there would be no point in discussing such a concept.[[4]](#endnote-4) This book has considered three accounts of post-mortem survival, i.e. three accounts that attempt to make coherent the suggestion that we can survive death – and there are more of these accounts in the literature. Such accounts attempt to make coherent the concept of ‘afterlife’.

In what follows, I’m going to assume that there is an adequate account of post-mortem survival – that is, that the ‘afterlife’ is a coherent concept. Even with this assumption in place, I’m going to present a dilemma for those who believe in the afterlife: either we won’t survive death (or an eternal life) in the sense that most matters to us or we will become bored if we do. First, I’m going to argue that even if we – in a strict sense – survive death, there is practical sense in which we don’t survive death. This applies, I contend, to all accounts of the afterlife that: eventually, we lose our *practical identity*. I show that our practical identity is more important to us than our numerical identity. But, as we’ll see, our practical identity is not just lost in an afterlife, but also with an eternal or immortal life. Theists have a strategy to resist this line of argument: they can argue that God will help us to retain our current practical identities. However, those that pursue this line of argument fall onto the second horn of my proposed dilemma: if we cannot change our practical identities then it seems that eventually we will become bored, and eternally so.

My conclusion is not a purely negative one, however. While I present this dilemma, I end by noting that the first horn might not be so bad. Although changing our practical identities means that we – as we are now – won’t survive eternally, there still might be an individual who survives eternally. This individual, since they will change over time, will plausibly not become bored. So the moral of my argument is that while the fact that we look forward to the afterlife is absurd, afterlives might be meaningful for the people who live them (even though they are not practically identical to us). So we can’t say that afterlives are meaningless.

This essay is structured as follows. Before discussing the afterlife, I will spend §2 setting up the arguments to come by discussing Bernard Williams’ (1973) arguments on immortality, boredom, and personal identity. From his work – and the work of John Locke (1694) – I distinguish between two senses of ‘personal identity’ – namely *practical identity* and *numerical identity*. In §3 I distinguish between two broad accounts of the afterlife: transformation accounts and continuation accounts. I argue that the absurdity of anticipating an eternal afterlife is most vivid with transformation accounts, but that it is also occurs in continuation accounts. This constitutes the first horn of my proposed dilemma. In §4 I present the second horn of the dilemma.

**2. Immortality, boredom, and personal identity**

The afterlife is typically thought to guarantee immortality – that is, eternal life. For this reason it will be illuminating to start with debates that concern immortality itself before applying our findings to the afterlife. Importantly, this will bring issues concerning personal identity to the fore of our discussion.

While many people would likely claim that immortality is desirable, Williams (1973) argues that immortality is undesirable because it would be necessarily boring. His focus is on creatures like us – that is, creatures with what he calls ‘categorical desires’. These are desires that require us to continue to live, but which are not the mere desires for continued existence. Categorical desires are those desires that ‘drive’ us (so to speak) into the future; that is, they provide us with the impetus to continue living. Categorical desires are contrasted with *conditional* desires – these are desires that do not entail that we desire to continue living. For example, someone contemplating suicide may desire food and warmth, but she may still wish to end her life. In other words, her desires for food and warmth do not give her a reason to continue living. Examples of categorical desires are desires like wanting to travel the world, wanting to learn a new language, wanting to run a marathon, and so on. In short, these desires imply we want to continue living. According to Williams, we have a limited supply of such categorical desires; so if we live long enough we *will* run out of them. At such a time, life will become boring and tedious and we will have no reason to continue living at this point; so immortality is undesirable.

Williams supports his argument by appealing to the story of Elina Makropolus (EM) who is given an *elixir of life* – that is, a potion that renders her impervious to death (in a very qualified sense: she can still be killed, but she doesn’t age or deteriorate). EM stays biologically the same age for the next 300 years. About her, Williams writes:

At the time of the action she is aged 342. Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: ‘in the end it is the same’, she says, ‘singing and silence’. She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman among the protests of some older men. (1973: 82)

EM finds her prolonged existence boring because there is nothing new for her to do. For a person like her, she has done everything that she wants to, and she now finds that she is just repeating things over and over again. Because she has experienced everything she wants to experience, the state of boredom she now finds herself will be never-ending. Consequently, she chooses to end her life by not re-taking the elixir of life.

According to Williams, EM is bored because she has exhausted her categorical desires. She has done everything she wants to do – perhaps many times over now – and so she has lost the impetus for continued existence. This exemplifies for Williams why immortality is not desirable for creatures like us.

One might wonder why EM doesn’t just acquire new categorical desires when her old ones run out. After all, once we achieve one life goal we usually acquire new life goals. For example, say your life goal is to climb Ben Nevis. Once you’d done that you might then form the life goal of climbing Mt. Blanc. But, according to Williams, you are defined, in part, by your categorical desires. That is to say, sameness of categorical desires is a necessary condition on personal identity over time. This means that if you acquired new categorical desires, then you would become a *new person*. So if EM acquired new categorical desires, she would no longer *be* ‘EM’; she would rather be something other person in EM’s (former) body. While this new person might not be bored with existence – and it seems plausible that she wouldn’t be – it wouldn’t help us, so Williams claims, evaluate whether immortality is necessarily boring or not; this is because we wouldn’t be asking whether EM is bored or not, but rather we would be asking whether a different person would be bored or not, and that’s not a question about *our* immortality. Assuming that categorical desires are both finite and identity-defining, Williams concludes that immortality is necessarily boring for creatures like us.

Williams’s argument rests on two assumptions. First, that categorical desires are finite – that is to say, there will come a time that categorical desires are exhausted and no longer move us to action. Second, that categorical desires are identity-defining – that is to say, who we *are* depends, at least in part, on our categorical desires. Responses to Williams’s argument might then focus on either of these assumptions. I shall first focus on the claim that categorical desires are identity-defining.

The contemporary debate on personal identity stems from John Locke’s (1694) ground-breaking work. Prior to Locke, it was typical to hold that personal identity was a simply matter of sameness of soul or body – in other words, sameness of substance of one form or another. Through an appeal to various thought experiments, Locke sought to pump various intuitions about *treatment* – that is, on what grounds would we treat one person as if they were another person. In one case, Locke asks us to imagine that the consciousnesses of a Prince and Cobbler swap bodies. So we have Cobbler’s-consciousness-in-Prince’s-body and Prince’s-consciousness-in-Cobbler’s-body. Locke claimed that we would treat the former as Cobbler and the latter as Prince. From our intuitions about treatment, Locke inferred claims about personal identity: specifically, he claimed that Prince and Cobbler *swapped* bodies – that is, Prince awoke in Cobbler’s (old) body, and Cobbler awoke in Prince’s (old) body. Thus, according to Locke, personal identity consists *not* in sameness of some substance or other, but rather in sameness of *consciousness*. This, according to Locke, is shown by this and his other thought experiments.

There is lots of controversy surrounding Locke’s account of personal identity. One such controversy is that what Locke means by ‘consciousness’. Many of Locke’s early critics, including Thomas Reid and Joseph Butler, interpret Locke as meaning ‘memory connectedness’ by his use of ‘consciousness’. As his critics interpret him, Locke’s criterion of personal identity is over time says that: a person *A* at t2 is identical to a person *B* at t1 *if and only if* the person *A* remembers being and has the memories of the person *B*. This would explain why (say) Prince’s-consciousness-in-Cobbler’s-body *is* Prince – namely because the former remembers being and has memories of the latter.

Another controversy – and one that is relevant to our current discussion – is over what *sort* of account Locke intends his account of personal identity to be. This might seem like a strange question. An account of personal identity, you might think, is just that: an account of personal identity. But there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding the phrase ‘personal identity’. On one reading, it means simply an account of *numerical identity* – that is, an account that provides the conditions according to which a thing at one time is the same as a thing at another time, i.e. a thing’s persistence conditions. Interpreted in this way, Locke’s account is problematic. This is something Thomas Reid (1785) and Joseph Butler (1736) both point out.[[5]](#endnote-5) Reid’s objection is that Locke’s proposed identity criterion – i.e. memory connectedness, as Reid sees it – is not transitive. But since an identity relation *must* be transitive, Locke’s account of personal identity must be rejected. (I discuss the case Reid uses to support his argument below.) But it’s not clear that Locke intends his account of personal identity to be an account of numerical identity so, among other things, it’s not clear that Reid’s and Butler’s objections is in fact devastating for Locke’s account.[[6]](#endnote-6) Locke seems more interested in the relation that underpins *treatment* of ourselves and other persons – as indicated by the style of thought experiment he uses to support his view – and not in a criterion of numerical identity for persons.[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, on another reading, it seems that Locke means something like *practical identity* by his use of ‘personal identity’; an agent’s practical identity is, roughly, her character or psychology at a particular time.

Williams’ argument for the undesirability immortality depends on his account of personal identity. According to his account of personal identity – at least the one implied by his arguments against the desirability of immortality (more on this later) – sameness of categorical desires is a necessary for personal identity over time. But it’s not clear whether Williams intends his account of personal identity to be an account of numerical identity or one of practical identity, and this has ramifications for his argument against the desirability of immortality. Once we are clear on what his account of personal identity is intended to be, we shall see that this helps to highlight the absurdity with anticipating an eternal afterlife.

If Williams intends his account of personal identity to be an account of numerical identity, then it is straightforwardly unsatisfactory. It seems to imply that we would go out of existence if we lost *one* categorical desire. But this seems absurd. We seem to survive despite such minor changes. We could modify Williams’s account so that we can change certain of our categorical desires, but we remain the same person only if we retain the same overall stable set of categorical desires. We might say, on this view, that a necessary condition on personal identity is categorical desires *connectedness* – that is, a person *A* is identical to a person *B* only if *B* shares some of *A*’s categorical desires via an appropriate causal connection (as we’ll see later, Williams holds that the appropriate causal connection is bodily continuity). But even this version of Williams’s account fails to be an adequate account of numerical identity, and it is for one of the reasons that Locke’s account is unsatisfactory if it is interpreted as account of numerical identity – namely that the implied identity criterion is not transitive, and so cannot a criterion of numerical identity.

To see this, consider Thomas Reid’s Brave Officer case which he uses to undermine what he claims is Locke’s account of personal identity: a young boy (x) steals from an orchard, a brave officer (y) in a war remembers stealing from the orchard, and an old man (z) remembers being a brave office. Because identity is transitive, any condition that violates transitivity is not an identity relation. According to the memory account of personal identity, a person *A* is identical to an earlier person *B* iff *A* remembers being and has the memories of *B*. This account entails that the old man is the brave officer, that brave officer is the young boy, but that the old man is not the young boy – that is x=y, y=z, but x≠z. Hence the memory account fails.

The same objection can be pressed on Williams’ account. It seems plausible that the old man has different categorical desires to the young boy because what we want from life is likely to change between from when we were young to when we are old; so the old man is not identical to the young boy according to Williams’ account. But the old man might share some categorical desires with brave officer, the brave officer might share some categorical desires with young boy. But this means that, on Williams’ account, the old man is the brave officer, the brave officer is the young boy, but the old man is not the young boy. Again, this violates transitivity.[[8]](#endnote-8) Hence Williams’ account of personal identity qua account of numerical identity is unsatisfactory.[[9]](#endnote-9) And if Williams’ account of personal identity is unsatisfactory, then it seems that immortality would not be necessarily boring. One easy way to make immortality not boring would be to acquire new categorical desires, because we have no reason to think that this would cause us to go out of existence. This point will be important later on.

But maybe Williams intends his account of personal identity to be an account practical identity. That is, an account of the relation that underpins our treatment of ourselves and others. There is some prima facie plausibility to such account. Suppose a friend of yours, Stan, loves pasta and has always planned to travel to Italy to be taught how to make authentic pasta by some real life, authentic Italians. Indeed, all of Stan’s other categorical desires are (let’s assume) dependent on his love of pasta and his desire to travel to Italy to learn how to make authentic pasta; so if Stan lost these categorical desires, he would lose all this other current categorical desires. One day, Stan is in a horrific car accident. After his body recovers from its injuries, Stan goes back to his job. But he no longer likes pasta or plans to go Italy. His central categorical desires have changed, and therefore so have his other categorical desires. Thus Stan-after-the-accident is not categorical desire connected to Stan-before-the-accident. According to Williams’s account of personal identity, Stan-before-the-accident and Stan-after-the-accident are *different persons*.

This might seem like another counterexample to Williams’s account, because it perhaps seems that Stan-after-the-accident is numerically identical to Stan-before-the-accident. That is, it seems that Stan does not go out of existence just because his psychology changes as a result of the car accident. But I think it actually helps us to see what *sort* of account of personal identity Williams defends in his paper about immortality – namely an account of practical identity, and not one of numerical identity. Stan-after-the-accident is a different person to Stan-before-the-accident in a practical (i.e. loose) sense, and not in the numerical identity (i.e. strict) sense of ‘same person’. And while Stan-after-the-accident might be the same person in the numerical identity sense, it seems that we might not *treat* him (in important respects) as we would Stan-before-the-accident. Notice that we sometimes say that someone is ‘not the person they used to be’ without meaning that this person is literally not the same person anymore. What we are saying here is that the person before us is numerically identically to an earlier person, but not practically identical to them. And when we say that someone is ‘not the person they used to be’ – that is, that they are not practically identical to their earlier self – we don’t treat them like that earlier person.

Under this interpretation, we can perhaps see what point Williams is trying to make when he claims we cannot acquire new (and presumably causally unrelated to the older) categorical desires without going out of existence. His point might be this. If some person in the future has entirely new categorical desires, then there’s no reason why we ought to *care* about the person with those desires – that is, in the special sense that we care about ourselves, which is what philosophers sometimes call ‘self-concern’. We care about ourselves and are concerned for our futures on the basis of current set of categorical desires. These make us who we are, in the practical sense that is most important to us. While ‘we’ might not go out of existence in a strict sense – i.e. our body, brain, animal, or soul might carry on existing – this not what we most care about; we care about our what drives us to act, according to Williams.[[10]](#endnote-10) Suppose, for example, that you discover that you will be granted an elixir of life. The downside is that elixir will cause a slow (i.e. numerical identity preserving) change of character, including your current categorical desires. In a few years’ time, you will no longer have your current character; rather, you will have a character of the sort of person you are most opposed to.[[11]](#endnote-11) That is, *you* will become everything you (currently) despise. Would you really want to take the elixir of life? I don’t think I would, and I suspect most people would agree. This suggests that we care more about maintaining our practical identities than we do about preserving our existence. Moreover, this suggests our self-concern for our future self is contingent on our future self sharing our current practical identity. We would rather cease to exist than become something we (currently) despise.

So: while Williams says that he is arguing that immortality is necessarily boring, we can find another lesson in his paper – namely, we have little reason to care about future persons who are numerically identical to us if they have entirely different characters (i.e. different categorical desires) to us. This would seem to align Williams closely with Parfit’s (1971, 1984) views on personal identity. According to Parfit, personal identity is not what matters in ‘survival’; rather, what matters is psychological connectedness and/or continuity. Psychological connectedness holds between (for example) an experience and a memory of that experience, the formation of a belief and one continuing to hold that belief, the formation of an intention and agent acting on that intention, and so on. Psychological continuity is the ancestral relation of psychological connectedness, and holds when there are overlapping chains of *strong* psychological connectedness; strong psychological connectedness holds between two person-stages when those person-stages share *more than* 50% of the psychological connections that typically hold from day to day in normal persons. Parfit appeals to a range of thought experiments – most notably hemispherectomy-transfer (i.e. fission) cases[[12]](#endnote-12) – to show that personal identity is not what matters. But it’s clear that what Parfit means is that *numerical identity* is not what matters; indeed, he accepts that what I am calling practical identity is what matters – though, to be clear, practical identity is not an identity relation like numerical identity is.

It’s not clear why Parfit holds that psychological continuity matters in survival because this is only invoked in order to craft an adequate psychological criterion of numerical identity, and his arguments undercut the motivation for holding that numerical identity of persons over time is a psychological relation; in places he even suggests that psychological connectedness is what really matters, but he mysteriously doesn’t commit to this (e.g. Parfit 1984: 205, 301). Given that there is no motivation for Parfit holding that psychological continuity matters in survival, I will simply assume that he holds that what matters in survival is psychological connectedness. Given this, the only significant difference between Parfit and Williams on practical identity is the *kind* of psychology that matters. (But this might not be that big of a difference on closer inspection: Parfit holds that character-involving psychological connections have a greater weighting than more general psychological connections, such as those to do with beliefs that we all share, e.g. that the external world exists.) I won’t attempt to settle the disagreement between Parfit and Williams on practical identity; rather, I shall agree with Williams that *categorical desire connectedness* is a necessary condition sameness of practical identity. This is not the place to determine the correct account of practical identity; we only need to see its general importance before we proceed.

It’s worth noting that this also helps to make sense of an apparent disparity in Williams’ view of personal identity. In other papers (i.e. ones other than his immortality paper), Williams appears to defend a bodily continuity account of personal identity, whereas he appears to defend a psychological account of personal identity – i.e. the one that makes categorical desires the most important psychological state – in his immortality paper. Once we distinguish practical from numerical identity, we can now say that Williams holds that bodily continuity is the criterion of numerical identity whereas categorical desires are necessary for practical identity. As I discuss in more detail below, it seems that while Williams thinks that bodily continuity is necessary *and* sufficient for numerical identity, he also thinks it is necessary for practical identity. In other words, practical identity presupposes numerical identity – but numerical identity does not presuppose practical identity. This is compatible with my interpretation: I’ve argued that Williams holds that categorical desire connectedness is only a necessary condition on practical identity, so it’s fine that bodily continuity – or any criterion of numerical identity – is also a necessary condition on practical identity. This does mark a significant difference between Williams and Parfit: Parfit holds that numerical identity is not *at all* important – that is, practical identity does not presuppose numerical identity – whereas Williams denies this. So, on Williams’ view, categorical desire connectedness and bodily continuity are both individually necessary – and perhaps jointly sufficient – for practical identity over time.

**3. The first horn**

Most discussions of the afterlife take questions of personal identity to concern only numerical identity. That is, discussants aim only to show that a post-mortem being is numerically identical to an ante-mortem being in their effort to show that post-mortem survival is coherent. But it’s one thing to survive death in the sense that there is a post-mortem being numerically identical to your current self, and it’s another thing to survive death and for a post-mortem being to be practically identical to your current self. Now we can turn to the first horn of the dilemma that I’m going to propose: when we survive death, do we get what we care about in survival? That is, does post-mortem survival ensure sameness of practical identity?

According to one account of the afterlife, *nothing* (or next to nothing) about our characters survives death; we are completely (or almost completely) *transformed* from our existence in this life to our existence in the next. This is the rebirth (or reincarnation) account. On this view, what survives death is a part – perhaps an immaterial part – of a person, such as her soul. The soul then goes on to inhabit another person or thing, and our afterlife is the life of that person or thing. When that person or thing ceases to exist, the soul then moves on to a new person or thing, and so on. The idea is that our numerical identity is constituted by the continuation of our soul. Since this soul can survive the death of our bodies, then it seem we can do so.

Some might contend that there is no reason to hold sameness of soul is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity over time. But the same sorts of reasons that make Williams hold that bodily continuity is necessary for numerical identity (and practical identity but, as we’ll see shortly, there’s nothing to motivate this part of his view) can lead us to the view that sameness of soul is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity over time. We won’t be able to settle the dispute concerning the nature of numerical identity here since the same sorts of cases support mutually exclusive identity criteria, but we will have evidence for the general claim that: sameness of substances – whether it’s body or soul, i.e. material or immaterial – is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity, but not alone sufficient for practical identity.

While there are lots of thought experiments that seem to show that bodily continuity is not necessary or sufficient for personal identity, Williams (1970/1973) argues that there are equivalent thought experiments that support the denial of this conclusion – that is, they support the claim that bodily continuity is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity. One case that Williams discusses that seems to show that bodily continuity is *not* necessary or sufficient for numerical identity goes as follows (it is a version of Locke’s Prince and Cobbler case that I discussed earlier). Suppose that persons A and B are part of an experiment. They agree to be attached to a machine that will upload their psychological contents onto a computer and then transfer it into a different body. The machine, in effect, moves A’s psychology into B’s body and B’s psychology in A’s body. The result is that we have B’s-body-with-A’s-psychology and A’s-body-with-B’s-psychology. The important questions, then, are these: (1) who is A and who is B? That is, does A survive as B’s-body-with-A’s-psychology or as A’s-body-with-B’s-psychology? And (2) does B survive as A’s-body-with-B’s-psychology or as B’s-body-with-A’s-psychology?

Williams accepts if you ask the question a particular way, then it seems that A survives as – that is, A is identical to – B’s-body-with-A’s-psychology and B survives – that is, B is identical to – as A’s-body-with-B’s-psychology. Williams imagines that A and B are asked prior to the experiment to decide who will get £100,000 and who will be tortured. He expects that A will ask that B’s-body-with-A’s-psychology receive the money, and that A’s-body-with-B’s-psychology be tortured. B will ask for the converse to happen. So, this seems like evidence in favour of the thesis that bodily continuity is *not* necessary or sufficient for numerical identity because A cares about a different body with her psychology, and the same is true for B.

Williams’ makes an interesting move here. He instead sets up the case so that A is told that *she* will be tortured, but that she will have her psychology erased and replaced with a different psychology. Williams (1970/1973: 52) claims that it is rational for A to fear being tortured. But if bodily continuity were not necessary or sufficient for numerical identity, then it would be *ir*rational for A to fear being tortured because, after all, she would be fearing someone else’s torture. So it seems that bodily continuity is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity.

But if Williams thinks that bodily continuity is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity, then doesn’t this conflict with his view categorical desire connectedness is necessary for personal identity? When discussing immortality, Williams is clear that bodily continuity is not sufficient (but is perhaps necessary) for personal identity. But when discussing the psychology transfer cases, Williams seems to hold that bodily continuity is (necessary and) sufficient for personal identity. The confusion lies, I contend, in the conflation of numerical and practical identity. We can make sense of Williams’ two views in the following way, as I’ve previously alluded: on his view, bodily continuity is necessary and sufficient for *numerical* identity, and bodily continuity is only necessary – but not sufficient – for *practical* identity. Bearing in mind this distinction, Williams’ view is consistent.

I think that Williams’ case in favour of bodily continuity as necessary and sufficient for numerical identity can be adapted to show that any form of substance continuity is necessary and sufficient for numerical identity. I shall only consider how it can support a substance dualist account of personal identity, but it seems it could be generalised to other such accounts. Let’s reconsider Williams’ thought experiment. The basic structure is that a person is told they will be tortured, but they are then told that they will be changed significantly before this torture occurs. The torturer, in effect, ‘strips’ off parts of the person, leaving what they claim to be the ‘bare’ self and then adds new parts to that bare self.[[13]](#endnote-13) In Williams’ case, which he designs to show that bodily continuity is necessary and sufficient for personal identity, A is told her psychology will be erased and replaced with a new psychology. This time, let’s again suppose that A is told that she is going to be tortured. However, let’s now suppose A is told that (a) her psychology is going to be erased and replaced and (b) her *body* is going to be destroyed and replaced. Just as it seems that A might still fear being tortured in Williams’ version of this case, it seems that A might still fear being tortured in this version of the case.

While this conflicts with the result that Williams gets, I think sense can be made of it. Again, much of this rides on bearing the numerical/practical identity distinction in mind, something which using the term ‘personal identity’ often – and I think more often than not – clouds. A defender of substance dualism and of rebirth could use my modified version of Williams’ thought experiment in favour of their view. They might argue that we have some intuitive evidence that we survive with our souls and not our bodies or psychologies in the fact that we fear the suffering that our souls will undergo with new bodies and psychologies.[[14]](#endnote-14) Of course, there are different cases that seem to support different accounts of numerical identity, so there’s no knockdown case for one account of numerical identity over another. And, therefore, we’ve come no closer to determining what the right account of numerical identity is. (Indeed, the malleability of the results with these cases perhaps suggests we ought to be agnostic about numerical identity – though I’m not arguing for this claim here.)

But we still get an interesting result – namely there are some practical concerns that go with numerical identity, viz., fear of suffering. More generally, we might call this ‘anticipation of experience’. Anticipation of experience is one form of self-concern – the special sort of concern that one has for oneself rather than the concern that one has for other people. However, this does not entail that *all* practical concerns are linked with numerical identity; it does not even show that all forms of self-concern are linked with numerical identity. It still seems that lots of practical concerns – and, indeed, other forms of self-concern – are linked with practical identity.

Williams’ first case, for instance, shows us that other forms of self-concern are linked with practical identity. When asked who should receive the money, Williams agrees that we would pick the person who best represents our interests – i.e. the person we are practically identical to. Now, some take such cases to show that numerical identity is a psychological matter. But we can’t move this quickly. This assumes that these cases show that (nonbranching)[[15]](#endnote-15) psychological continuity is the relation that underpins our self-concern. But it seems that the only practical concerns that go with psychological continuity are those that might go with bodily continuity or soul continuity – i.e. the concern with mere existence.

Consider the case I presented earlier: you are given the choice to take the elixir of life with the catch that it will slowly change your character into that of someone you currently oppose. I said that I wouldn’t want to take the elixir, and that I think others would agree with me. But suppose you are forced to take the elixir. I think it make sense for you to anticipate the experiences of the post-transformation person while at the same time *not* caring about their *flourishing* in the sense that you care about your current self (i.e. your current practical identity) flourishing. After all, the post-transformation person might like torturing puppies (something that I assume you don’t like; if you do like that then substitute this for whatever you currently oppose) and you wouldn’t want them to do well at torturing puppies or even to get the opportunity to do so. Indeed, we might imagine you are asked to choose who gets to look after your family (or whoever you hold most dear): the post-operation person or a being who is created with your current practical identity (by some powerful scientists or God).[[16]](#endnote-16) Given that the post-operation person is currently opposed to everything you currently hold dear, it seems to be a no-brainer that you wouldn’t pick the post-operation person and that you would pick the newly created being with your current practical identity. The catch is that, according to all the leading accounts of numerical identity – including the psychological continuity theory, the bodily continuity theory, and a substance dualist theory – you are numerically identical to the post-operation person, and not the newly created being. So psychological continuity – or bodily continuity or sameness of soul – can’t be the criterion of practical identity over time. This leaves psychological connectedness, of which categorical desire connectedness is a version.

So, we have two sorts of self-concern: anticipation of experience and desire for flourishing. It seems that the former goes only with numerical identity, while the latter goes with practical identity. Of course, for most of us, practical identity goes with numerical identity; so these two forms of self-concern normally go together. But there are cases, such as the one I have discussed, that show that these two forms of self-concern come apart.

Now, let’s return to transformation accounts of the afterlife. We have seen that it might be rational to anticipate the experience of a future person who has your soul – after all, you would be the same subject of experience as this future person, though the future person wouldn’t be aware of this and the only reason you are aware of this is because of the thought experiment where this detail has been stipulated. But just because it’s rational for your anticipate the experience of some person who has a different body and psychology for you doesn’t mean that you get what’s important in survival; it shows that you survive in some sense, but it’s not the most important sense. If given the choice between surviving as some future person with a different body and psychology or surviving as a person with your current body and psychology, then I think it’s clear – as long as you weren’t suffering from a debilitating disease (either mental or physical) – that we would choose to survive as a person with our current bodies and psychologies. So while a substance dualist view gets us some sort of survival, it doesn’t get us what’s most important in survival – namely the continuation of our current practical identities. This, I contend, leads to an absurdity for the transformation account of afterlife: namely, it’s absurd (if this view is true) to anticipate the afterlife; we might survive, but not in a way most matters.

But what about a ‘continuation’ account of the afterlife – that is, one where we continue to exist with our current practical identities. This sort of account could be guaranteed by Abrahamic monotheistic conception of the afterlife, particularly a conception according to which (good) persons go to Heaven.[[17]](#endnote-17) We need not delve into the details or the metaphysics of surviving death to see that the same problem that affects transformation accounts of the afterlife affects continuation accounts. This problem also stems from the nature of practical identity.

As we’ve seen, Williams holds that practical identity is constituted by categorical desire connectedness. What this requires is that a person maintains a stable set of categorical desires – i.e. desires that give her the drive for continued existence. But we’ve already considered a case (Reid’s Brave Officer case) where a person *over the course of a normal human life* changes her categorical desires entirely. So, while the young boy is numerically identical to the old man, he is not practically identical to the old man; for instance, we wouldn’t blame the old man for the young boy’s actions.[[18]](#endnote-18) This has implications for any continuation account of the afterlife: given long enough, each and every post-mortem person will change so much that, while they are numerically identical to their ante-mortem self, they will not be practically identical. And this means that, eventually, no matter what accounts of the afterlife we are dealing with, we lose what’s important in survival; we lose our current practical identities. Notably, this isn’t a special problem for accounts of the afterlife: it is also something that might happen over normal human lives, and it seems would definitely happen for extended human lives. But just because it isn’t a special problem for accounts of the afterlife, this doesn’t mean that it isn’t a problem. Just as any proponent of the desirability of immortality must confront this problem, so must any proponent of an account of the afterlife. Hence it seems that no matter what type of afterlife account is true that it is absurd to look forward to eternal afterlife.

**4. The second horn**

I’ve argued that it is absurd to look forward to an eternal afterlife because while ‘we’ might survive ‘we’ ultimately might not. That is, there might be a future person who is numerically identical to us but who is not practically identical to us. Given that what’s important in survival goes with practical identity and not numerical identity, it follows that survival purely in terms of numerical identity is not something we should care about. But given that the afterlife can only guarantee survival in terms of numerical identity, the afterlife doesn’t guarantee what matters in survival. One move to make here is to claim that we simply need not develop our characters in an afterlife. Perhaps this is something that God can ensure that we don’t do. This would avoid the absurdity I’ve claimed results from any account of the afterlife. Note that this response is not open to anyone who endorses a transformation account of the afterlife. Such accounts say that we are completely (or near completely) transformed between our current existences to post-mortem existence. Those who can endorse this move are, however, forced onto the second horn of my dilemma.

On the proposed view, when we reach the afterlife – say, Heaven – God sets things up so that we won’t change our characters. The problem is that if we don’t develop our characters, then we risk becoming *bored* – which is what Williams claimed is necessarily the case for those who live long enough. Many philosophers have responded to Williams’ argument that an immortal life would be a boring one. Due to space constraints, I shall consider just one of the many responses to Williams’ argument – viz. John Fischer’s (1994/2009). He argues that there are *repeatable* *pleasures*. These are pleasures that we do not cease to get bored of performing them. Examples of such pleasures include eating nice food, sex, reading, doing philosophy, and so on. Importantly, Fischer points out that we wouldn’t have to do just one these activities. We could enjoy a range of activities in variety of orders such that we stave off boredom eternally. While there is some plausibility to his point, I ultimately don’t find it persuasive. If we assuming that an afterlife is eternal – that is, we will continue to exist forever – then it’s not obvious that we wouldn’t become bored of even these pleasures. In other words, it’s not clear that such pleasures are in fact repeatable. Notice that the plausibility of these pleasures being repeatable stems from the fact we *currently* find them repeatable. But we’ve only got experience of a very short life so far. To determine whether they are infinitely repeatable, we would have to live for an infinite time. We just don’t have enough experience of life – and perhaps could never have enough experience of life – to infer that just because we find pleasures repeatable over our current lives that we would find these pleasures to be repeatable throughout an infinite life. So it seems that even apparently repeatable pleasures might not allow us to sustain the same character/practical identity forever. Therefore, even if making this move avoids one absurdity with the afterlife, it simply does so at the cost of exposing the defender of this move to another absurdity of the afterlife – namely boredom. Indeed, both horns of my dilemma support the same point: it is absurd – on any account of the afterlife – to look forward to an eternal afterlife.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**5. Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored the relationship between practical identity and post-mortem survival. I argued that there is a sense in which even if we survive death, there is another sense in which we might not survive death. Here I distinguish between two senses of ‘personal identity’: numerical identity and practical identity. The former concerns our persistence as entities through time; the latter concerns the persistence of our characters through time. I argued that it is not enough that we survive merely as entities of some sort – that is, it is not enough that there is an individual (whether it is a person, soul, or animal) after our bodies’ die who is numerically identical to us. It also matters that our practical identities continue – that is, it matters that our characters survive too. On one view of the afterlife, our characters are destroyed when we die. On another, I argued that they will eventually be destroyed as we change our characters over time. Either way, while we might anticipate our future experiences, there will be no surviving individual whose flourishing we have a special reason to care about. It might be that our characters are kept fixed in the afterlife – perhaps by God or some other mechanism. But I argued that if this happens we risk and perhaps guarantee being eternally bored. Thus there is a dilemma: either we survive death numerically or we survive death practically. I have argued that neither option is something we ought to look forward to. That is, it seems absurd for us to look forward to an eternal afterlife.

But this only affects us *now*; at those future times, we might be entirely fine. Given that we might still survive into an afterlife, this is only a *practical* absurdity, in the sense that we wouldn’t have much reason to be invested in the flourishing of our future self, as they will be so different from how we are now. The lives ‘we’ live in the future might be just as meaningful as the lives we live now. It’s just not something we ought to look forward to. Indeed, for all we know, we might now be living someone else’s afterlife. But this shouldn’t render our lives any less meaningless. Our lives are just not something that this earlier person, who we might be numerically identical to, should have looked forward to.[[20]](#endnote-20)

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1. Heaven and Hell is prominent in most versions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. See Chapters 5, 6, and 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is a feature of both Buddhism and Hinduism, see Chapters 3 and 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2012/12/more-people-may-believe-in-an-afterlife-than-believe-in-god-according-to-a-nation-wide-survey-of-britons-born-in-1970. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Note that I am focusing here on *theological* accounts of the afterlife, and not secular accounts of the afterlife such as Scheffler (2012). On Scheffler’s view, even if there is no personal afterlife, there is a *collective* afterlife – that is, when we die other people live on. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Butler’s objection was that the memory criterion is circular: it depends on being able to distinguish genuine from non-genuine memories, but to distinguish these we need to some criterion of personal identity – i.e. a genuine memory is of an experience actually had by the person, and a non-genuine memory is of an experience *not* had by the person. I won’t discuss this objection in what follows. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Galen Strawson (2011) has recently argued this. See his book for a full defence of this claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Strawson (2011) argues that Locke was in fact defending an account of moral responsibility, not one of numerical identity. So the term ‘personal identity’ as Locke uses it, according to Strawson, denotes the conditions on moral responsibility over time, not a criterion of numerical identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Any connectedness condition also comes in degrees – e.g. the old man will categorical desire connected to the brave officer to the degree he shares (via an appropriate causal connection) the brave officer’s categorical desires. But identity does not come in degrees. So it is overdetermined that a connectedness condition cannot be a criterion of identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Williams’s account fails even more spectacularly if we interpret ‘sameness of categorical desires’ literally. On this reading, it also follows that the old man is not the brave officer and the brave officer is not the young boy. And, more implausibly, even losing or gaining one categorical desire would cause us to go out of existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This point might be at odds with other points that Williams makes about personal identity. But I’ll set that aside in this paper, as I’m not seeking to defend Williams’ account. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Note that such a change of character is compatible with all adequate accounts of numerical identity. Sudden and radical changes of character lead to the creation of a new person, according to the psychological continuity theory. But slow and steady character changes do *not* lead the creation of a new person according to the psychological continuity theory, or any other adequate account of numerical identity. This is because an adequate criterion of numerical identity must be a transitive relation, and this means that we can remain the same person even if we radically change our characters over a long period of time. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This case involves a person having two hemispheres of his brain divided and then transplanted into different bodies. Detaching the hemispheres is sometimes used as a treatment for severe epilepsy. And while brain transplants are not currently possible, it seems they could be in future. Now, given the conceivability of this scenario, it seems that we have two qualitatively identical persons – call them ‘Lefty’ and ‘Righty’ – that result from one person. Neither Lefty nor Right can be numerically identical to the original person because numerical identity only holds one-one – that is, there are can be no more than one of any particular thing or person. See Parfit (1984: 253-266). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. In the ethics literature, a distinction is sometimes made between an individual’s *thick* and *thin* self. Her thick self is like her practical identity, and her thin self is like what I’m calling her ‘bare’ self – i.e., that part of her that is minimally necessary and sufficient for numerical identity; in other words, persistence through time. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I’m assuming here that the substance dualist hold that our psychologies are not identical to our souls. If they held that, then it would imply that *any* change to our psychology – that is, our practical identity at a particular time – would result in us, and our soul, going out of existence. I shall assume that the substance dualist sees our soul as a kind of ‘thinking substance’ so that it is compatible with our practical identities changing completely. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The non-branching stipulation is intended to rule out fission cases, as discussed earlier. But this the plausibility of such a stipulation has been questioned. See, for example, Schechtman (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. We can suppose that the duplicate is created based on your composition just prior to taking the elixir so that there is some sort of causal connection between you and the duplicate. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Some Christian accounts of the afterlife are, in fact, hybrid continuation/transformation accounts. On these views (defended by, for example, Timpe 2014 and Walls 2002) entrance into heaven requires that a person is heavenly; since most of us are not heavenly, this requires that we go through a moral and spiritual transformation process. One way to make sense of this process is to invoke notion of ‘purgatory’ – a place where those ‘on the way’ to heaven, but not quite ready yet are purged of their moral and spiritual faults. Once a person has been through purgatory, she is then heavenly and worthy of admittance to heaven. Such accounts face the practical identity problem somewhat more acutely than mere continuation accounts because there is significant change in practical identity before one has properly enjoyed the afterlife. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Some might disagree. But this point can be made clearer by imagining that the old man is 1000 and that this person has gone though many different characters – while maintaining psychological and bodily continuity – over the course of his life. It seems clear that the old man is not blameworthy for the young boy’s actions in this case; they are, after all, completely different psychologically – even though they are strictly speaking the same person. See Matheson (2014: 330). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. A further objection might focus on the fact that heaven is supposed to be so good that we could never become bored. A Christian might here appeal the beatific vision (i.e. being in the presence of God), or some such. I think this objection is problematic. It implicitly defines heaven as a place that is so good that we would never become bored, but it’s not clear that just because it is *said* that a place is so good that we will never become bored that we will in fact never become bored. To compare, suppose I name my house the ‘fun house’. I expect everyone who comes to my house to have fun. I might even fill my house with ‘fun’ things so that my house lives up to its name. Now, it seems that someone might still come to my house and *not* have fun, despite it being the ‘fun house’. Likewise, even if is supposed to be the place that is so good that no one ever gets bored, it still seems plausible that someone goes there and ultimately gets bored. So it seems to me that a person could still get bored in heaven. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Thanks to Natalie Ashton, Yujin Nagasawa, and audiences at Heythrop College, the University of California Riverside, and the University of Sheffield for comments and discussion on this and earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)