Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.5, No.2 (August 2015):62-81

Does Death Give Meaning to Life?

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Abstract

Some people claim that death makes our lives meaningless. Bernard Williams and Viktor Frankl have made the opposite claim that death gives meaning to life. Although there has been much scrutiny of the former claim, the latter claim has received very little attention. In this paper, I will explore whether and how death gives meaning to our lives. As I will argue, there is not sufficient support for the strong claim that death is necessary for one's life to be meaningful. However, there is support for the more limited conclusion that our finitude enhances or upholds the meaning in the lives of some individuals in four different ways.

1. Introduction

Some pessimists claim that death renders life meaningless. Conversely, Bernard Williams and Viktor Frankl contend that death is what gives meaning to life. There has been extensive analysis of the claim that immortality is necessary for one's life to be meaningful.[1] In contrast, there has been very little scrutiny of the claim that death is necessary for a person's life to be meaningful.

The thesis that immortality is required for one's life to be meaningful is unconvincing, but what about the opposite claim? Is death necessary for one's life to be meaningful or is this claim also doubtful? If death does give meaning to our lives, how does it do this? Because most people want to live a meaningful life, it is important to obtain a better understanding of what role, if any, death plays in giving meaning to our lives.

One might maintain, as did Williams[2] and Frankl,[3] that death is *necessary* for life to be meaningful. This is a strong claim and should be distinguished from the weaker claim that death, in some situations, can enhance the meaning in a person's life. As I will argue, there is insufficient support for the stronger claim, but there is support for the weaker claim. This paper will contribute to the

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** Thank you to an anonymous referee for helpful comments.
1 See for example, Metz (2003 and 2013, pp. 122-137) and Trisel (2004).
2 Williams (1973), p. 82.
3 Frankl (1986) p. 64.

literature by clarifying four ways in which our finitude plays a role in enhancing or upholding the meaning in the lives of some individuals.[4]

In sections two through four, I will explain how reflecting on one's finitude motivates some individuals to make the most of their lives. In section five, I will explicate how transcending one's lifespan, by leaving an enduring trace of oneself, adds meaning to one's life. In section six, I will explain how some virtuous actions are more meaningful because of our finitude. Then, in section seven, I will discuss Williams' argument that immortality would necessarily be boring and intolerable and will explain how death can prevent meaningful lives from becoming less meaningful.

2. Mortality Awareness as a Motivator

Before getting started, I should explain what I mean by "meaning in life." I will be discussing whether finitude can enhance the meaning in an *individual's* life. I will not be discussing questions about humanity as a whole. Second, I support the view that "meaning" is something that is worthy for its own sake, as opposed to being something merely of instrumental value. Third, I share the view of many others that meaning comes in degrees, such that it makes sense to say that some lives are more meaningful than others are. Albert Einstein and Nelson Mandela are examples of individuals who made great achievements and who led meaningful lives.

In response to those individuals who argue that death renders our lives meaningless, Frankl writes:

> If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now . . . . But in the face of death as absolute finis to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities . . . pass by unused.[5]

[4] Some philosophers (e.g., Noonan 2013, pp. 12-15) have pointed out ways in which death has instrumental value to life, such as by conserving scarce resources for future generations. I will not be discussing this topic here.

[5] Frankl (1986), p. 64. See Noonan (2013, p. 21) for another example of someone who argues that mortality awareness is necessary for a person to live a meaningful life. Jeff Malpas, in making a different argument, contends that our finitude allows us to have a 'grasp of one's various actions and attitudes as unified parts of a single, temporally extended, rationally connected and . . . causally integrated structure' (1998, p. 123). He asserts that an immortal life would lack such a narrative

By living forever, we would procrastinate or, in other words, we would be unmotivated to take action. Consequently, nothing would get done (Frankl assumes) and our lives would become meaningless. By having a limited amount of time to live, it *motivates us* to live our lives more fully, Frankl suggests.

In claiming that *every* action could be postponed forever if we were immortal, Frankl overstates his case. Granted, many actions, such as writing a novel, could be postponed indefinitely. However, some actions would still need to be performed urgently. For example, if an immortal person is in an automobile accident, trapped in the car, and in excruciating pain, extracting this person from the wreckage and alleviating her pain is something that could not be postponed. As John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin indicate, "The realization that 'one will always have time' does not offer much comfort to someone in agonizing pain now."[6] Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin also point out that some of our actions (e.g., visiting a deteriorating landmark) cannot be put off too long because "the opportunities to do them will (or might) be lost over time."[7]

Many scholars, including Martin Heidegger[8] and Ernest Becker,[9] have argued that we live our lives in denial of death. Julian Young, in discussing Heidegger's view, refers to this denial of death as the "*illusion of immortality.*"[10] If it is correct, as I believe, that most people do live under the illusion of immortality, then our finitude will not serve to motivate them.

We hear about deaths on the nightly news and see the obituaries in our daily newspapers. How, then, are we able to live under the illusion of immortality? Becker and others have argued that the fear of death explains why people repress the thought of death. This might be part of the explanation, but it is not the whole explanation. There is another aspect of death that helps to explain what allows us to deny our own mortality. We can look at life expectancy tables to get a sense of the average life expectancy for our age cohort, but because there is variation in the length of our individual life spans, we do not know when we will

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structure and would result in the dissolution of one's identity. However, I am not convinced that an immortal life would necessarily have this result. Bortolotti (2010, pp. 41-45) is also unconvinced by this argument.

[6] Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014), p. 368.

[7] Ibid., p. 368.

[8] Heidegger (1962), pp. 293-304.

[9] Becker (1973).

[10] Young (2003) p. 116.

die. One might live shorter or longer than the average life expectancy. Even when individuals have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, they often do not know when they will die.

It is this *uncertainty* of knowing when we will die that helps to explain how people are able to live under the illusion of immortality. If we remove this uncertainty, as will be done in the following thought experiment, we can then more clearly see how "mortality awareness," as I will call it, has the potential to motivate a person to live a fuller life. Suppose, as was done in the film *In Time*, that when a person is born an expiration date emerges on one of his or her arms. But unlike the film, suppose that the expiration date cannot be prolonged by acquiring minutes from another person; it is a firm date of death. Finally, let us suppose that there is variability in how long individuals live. Some individuals, for example, know that they will expire in 30 years and others, for example, know that they will expire in 78 years. What effect would knowing how long we have left to live have on the meaning in our lives? Would our lives, on average, be more meaningful if the endpoint of our lives was known than if it was unknown?

I suspect that our lives, on average, would be more meaningful under these conditions. How would having a definite expiration date add meaning to our lives? Deadlines often motivate people to take action to achieve their goals. By knowing when we will die, it would provide a type of deadline that would motivate people to accomplish their goals. As Leon Kass writes: "To know and to feel that one goes around only once, and that the deadline is not out of sight, is for many people the necessary spur to the pursuit of something worthwhile."[11] Unlike project deadlines, death is not a deadline for just one thing, but for *everything* in one's life. By having a limited amount of time to live, one must prioritize what one wants to do in one's life and one cannot afford to procrastinate.

Many of the project deadlines that we face do not have serious consequences if we miss the deadline. In some cases, we are able to negotiate a new deadline. In contrast, because death marks the *permanent* end of one's existence, procrastinating about what one wants to do in one's life has serious repercussions. If a person, for example, knows that she has only two years left to live, and does not take action to achieve her goals, then she *never* will achieve

[11] Kass (2001), p. 21.

these goals. By failing to take action during her one and only lifetime, she would have squandered her *only opportunity* to achieve these goals.

Death is more than just a deadline with serious repercussions for those who fail to pursue their goals. Death also reveals to us that human life is fragile which, in turn, may prompt us to appreciate our lives. As Karl Popper writes, it is "the ever-present danger of losing it [i.e., life] which helps to bring home to us the value of life."[12]

3. Empirical Evidence

Robert Nozick disputed Frankl's argument that death is necessary for one's life to be meaningful. He writes: "The dual assumption that some limitation is necessary for meaning, and limitation in time is the only one that can serve, is surely too ill established to convince anyone that mortality is good for him . . . ."[13] At the time that Nozick wrote these words, there was not much empirical support for Frankl's hypothesis. However, recent psychological studies provide preliminary evidence that explicit reminders of mortality motivate people to reprioritize their goals by turning away from status-oriented goals (e.g., achieving wealth and fame) and orienting themselves toward more meaningful goals such as having close personal relationships and helping the world be a better place.[14] More research will be required to determine whether mortality reminders lead to lasting behavioral changes.

Randy Pausch, who died at the age of 47, exemplifies how mortality awareness can motivate a person, thereby playing a role in enhancing the meaning in that person's life. Pausch, who was a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, was invited to give "The Last Lecture." It was a tradition at the university that professors were asked to imagine that they were dying and then to speak about what matters most to them. Pausch did not have to imagine that he was dying. He had recently been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. On September 18, 2007, Pausch delivered an inspiring last lecture, in which he spoke about the importance of achieving childhood dreams. This lecture has been viewed more than 17 million times and the book about his lecture, which Pausch co-authored, has sold more than five million copies. In the foreword to

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[12] Popper (1992), p. 186. See also Noonan (2013), pp. 15-18.
[13] Nozick (1981), p. 580.
[14] See Lykins et al. (2007), Kosloff et al. (2009) and discussion by Vail et al. (2012).

the book, Jai Pausch, who was Randy's wife, writes: "The lecture and subsequent book had been one method to communicate the life lessons he would have taught our children. But now Randy could see his efforts affecting not just his small family circle, but a much larger community than he ever could have imagined."[15]

Ironically, when people do learn that they will die soon, such as receiving a diagnosis of a terminal disease, reflecting on their impending deaths may motivate them to make the most of their remaining days, but their disease often prevents them from doing so. As Deborah Carr indicates: "Death [in the United States] typically occurs at the end of a long, often debilitating, and painful illness where the dying patients' final days are spent in a hospital or nursing home, and life-sustaining technologies are used."[16]

4. Is Mortality Awareness Necessary for One's Life to Be Meaningful?

Reflecting on one's finitude can be motivating, but is it necessary – as Frankl thought – for one's life to be meaningful? The *Mortality as Motivator* argument, as I will call it, is as follows:

(1) If we were immortal, we would be unmotivated.
(2) Reflecting on one's finitude motivates us to make the most of our lives.
(3) Therefore, reflecting on one's finitude is necessary for one's life to be meaningful.

One way to determine whether mortality awareness is necessary for one's life to be meaningful is to examine the lives of people who led meaningful lives to see what role, if any, mortality awareness played in making their lives meaningful. What motivated Einstein and Mandela? Was it mortality awareness or something else?

In reply to someone who asked Einstein what motivated him to pursue science, Einstein wrote: "My scientific work is motivated by an irresistible longing to understand the secrets of nature and by no other feelings."[17] Mandela,

[15] Pausch and Zaslow (2008), p. x.
[16] Carr (2012), pp. 185-186.
[17] Dukas and Hoffmann (1979), p. 18.

at his famous trial, explained what had motivated him. He recounted how in his youth he would hear stories about how certain individuals were praised for defending the homeland. He then indicated that "I hoped then that life might offer me the opportunity to serve my people and make my own humble contribution to their freedom struggle. This is what has motivated me in all that I have done in relation to the charges made against me in this case."[18]

It is not possible to know all of the factors that motivated Einstein and Mandela, but based on their writings, it does not appear that mortality awareness played a role in making their lives meaningful. How, then, do we explain what made their lives meaningful? Thaddeus Metz argues that one accrues meaning in one's life by contouring one's rationality, in a substantial way, toward fundamental conditions. By "fundamental conditions," Metz[19] means conditions that are largely responsible for bringing about many other events in a given domain. Specifically, regarding Einstein, Metz indicates that "Einstein discovered basic facts about the spatio-temporal universe, ones that account for a large array of events in it."[20] Mandela, using his rationality in a positive way, liberated people from discrimination and tyranny, which, in turn, allowed these individuals to more fully live their lives, Metz argues.[21]

Einstein and Mandela led meaningful lives and were motivated by factors other than mortality awareness. Psychologists distinguish between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation. By understanding the differences between these two types of motivation, it will help to demonstrate that mortality awareness is unnecessary for one's life to be meaningful.

A person is intrinsically motivated when he or she does something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. As Richard Ryan and Edward Deci write: "When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards."[22] In contrast to intrinsic motivation, one is extrinsically motivated when one does something to realize an external reward or to avoid an external sanction.

The notion of intrinsic motivation has a meaning similar to that of intrinsic value. The difference between these concepts is that intrinsic motivation pertains

[18] Mandela (1995), p. 364.
[19] Metz (2013), p. 226.
[20] Ibid., p. 229.
[21] Ibid., pp. 227-228.
[22] Ryan and Deci (2000), p. 56.

to the *reason* that one performs an activity, whereas intrinsic value means that the *activity* or *object* is valuable in and of itself. Ryan and Deci indicate that "In humans, intrinsic motivation is not the only form of motivation . . . but it is a pervasive and important one. From birth onward, humans, in their healthiest states, are active, inquisitive . . . displaying a ubiquitous readiness to learn and explore, and they do not require extraneous incentives to do so."[23]

Externally imposed deadlines are a form of extrinsic motivation. As discussed earlier, death is a type of deadline and procrastinating about what one wants to do with one's life has serious repercussions. Mortality awareness is an extrinsic form of motivation.

When one is intrinsically motivated, one is motivated to do a *specific* activity, such as study science. In contrast, mortality awareness is a *non-specific* form of motivation. In other words, thinking about death does not motivate a person to do a specific activity. Rather, it just prods a person to make the most of his or her life – before it is too late. Thus, even if one is motivated by thinking about one's eventual death, this does not necessarily mean that the person's life will be meaningful. Mortality awareness can provide the impetus for a person to take action. However, for one to lead a meaningful life, one must also know what will give meaning to life, engage in meaning-conferring activities, and persevere in one's efforts.[24]

Theories of meaning, such as Metz's "fundamentality theory," seek to explain what gives meaning to our lives. Because knowing what gives meaning to life is not sufficient for a person to lead a meaningful life, it is also important to obtain a better understanding of what factors can motivate (or demotivate) a person from engaging in meaning-conferring activities or projects. With this understanding, people can then, where possible, nurture the motivating factors and eliminate or mitigate the demotivating factors.

Interestingly, mortality awareness motivates some people and demotivates others and may even simultaneously motivate and demotivate the same person in different ways. For example, a person with a diagnosis of terminal cancer may contemplate undertaking a new project, such as writing a short story. However, if the writer wants to see how her work is received by others, she might reason to herself as follows: "If I will not live long enough to see how the work is received, then why bother writing it?" Thus, in this example, mortality

[23] Ibid., p. 56.
[24] For discussion about the importance of perseverance as it relates to meaning, see Levy (2005).

awareness provides conflicting motivations.

In summary, there are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Mortality awareness – an extrinsic form of motivation – is only one of many factors that may motivate a person. Therefore, this awareness is not necessary for a person to lead a meaningful life – as evidenced by the lives of Einstein and Mandela.

Psychologists differentiate between conscious and nonconscious thoughts of death.[25] Even though nonconscious thoughts are outside of conscious awareness, they are believed to have the potential to influence a person's behavior. In response to my claim that mortality awareness played no role in making the lives of Einstein and Mandela meaningful, one might argue that perhaps they were motivated by nonconscious thoughts of death. Because the awareness of death is a non-specific form of motivation, as I point out above, it seems doubtful that nonconscious thoughts of death played a necessary role in making their lives meaningful. Even if Einstein and Mandela had nonconscious thoughts of death, it is unclear how this would have led Einstein to pursue science or Mandela to promote justice in South Africa. Perhaps nonconscious thoughts of death – assuming they had some - might have given their work more urgency, but these thoughts of death do not explain what motivated them to pursue their work in the first place or to continue their work for decades. If nonconscious thoughts of death did give their work more urgency, there are likely other extrinsic motivators that could have given their work this same urgency (e.g., wanting to be the *first* person to do something, such as the first scientist to explain a previously unexplained physical process).

5. Transcending a Temporal Limit

Following his critique of Frankl's argument, Nozick[26] goes on to argue that transcending limits gives meaning to our lives – a view that has become well known. Transcending one's finitude, by leaving an enduring trace of oneself in one's writings, artwork, music, or in the memory of others, makes one's life meaningful, Nozick suggests.

In response, Metz asks: "why believe that the limit of time is a boundary that specifically must be crossed in order for one's life to be meaningful? Why

[25] For discussion, see Vail et al. (2012), pp. 5-13.
[26] Nozick (1981), pp. 582-585, 594-600.

would loving another person or creating a work of art not suffice."[27] For transcending a limit to add meaning to one's life, one must also overcome the temporal limit, or other such limit, in the *right way* by connecting with final value beyond the animal self, Metz argues, and I think that this is correct.

If transcending one's finitude to connect to final value gives meaning to one's life, then this demonstrates a second way in which our finitude can have a positive impact on the meaning in the lives of some individuals. Plato transcended his finitude and his works have influenced people for over two thousand years. But if Plato had not died and were alive today, it would likely still be true that he influenced people for over two thousand years. How, then, did transcending his finitude add meaning to Plato's life? Although Plato's impact on the lives of other people is the same in both scenarios, there is one important difference between the two scenarios. In the first scenario, Plato overcomes a significant challenge; he influences the lives of people even though *he no longer exists*, which made his life *more meaningful* than if he had not overcome such a challenge.

Transcending one's finitude is a challenge, but there is nothing special about a temporal limitation. It is just one of many different types of challenges that we face. If Plato had overcome a different type of obstacle (other than transcending his finitude) and made a lasting impact, his life would still have been more meaningful than if he had not overcome an obstacle on his way to making a lasting impact. For example, suppose that an immortal Plato had severe and persistent headaches and, despite these headaches, had written his great works. He would have overcome a challenge and made a lasting impact on the lives of other people in the same way that the mortal Plato overcame the obstacle of finitude and made a lasting impact.

6. Virtuous Actions

Some scholars have argued that immortal human beings could not exhibit important virtues or at least could not exhibit them in the way that we do. Kass writes: "To be mortal means that it is possible to give one's life, not only in one moment, say, on the field of battle, but also in the many other ways in which we are able in action to rise above attachment to survival."[28] He concludes: "The

[27] Metz (2013), p. 131.
[28] Kass (2001), pp. 21-22.

immortals cannot be noble."[29] To give a second example, in contrasting the lives of mortals and immortals, Martha Nussbaum writes: "The profound seriousness and urgency of human thought about justice arises from the awareness that we all really *need* the thing that justice distributes . . . . If that need were removed, or made non-absolute, distribution would not matter, or not matter in the same way and to the same extent . . . ."[30]

Even if we were immortal, distribution would still matter, but Nussbaum is correct that it would not matter to the same extent. Immortal people who were hungry and malnourished would still need a distribution of food. But because they would not be at risk of dying, there would be less urgency to send them food.

Although Kass' and Nussbaum's arguments do not demonstrate that immortal people could not be virtuous, they do point out a third way that our finitude enhances the meaning in the lives of some individuals. A soldier dives on a grenade to save his fellow soldiers and makes the "ultimate sacrifice." In a world without death, there would be no ultimate sacrifice. By diving on a grenade, an immortal soldier would still be risking serious harm and exhibiting the virtues of courage and beneficence, but he or she would not be making as much of a sacrifice. Furthermore, because the soldier would not be saving fellow soldiers from death, but only saving them from injury, the courageous soldier would be making less of an impact on the lives of fellow soldiers.

In a world with death, besides front-line soldiers, there are many other people who risk their lives helping others, including firefighters, police, and some physicians and nurses. *Time* magazine named the Ebola Fighters as the "Person of the Year 2014." Nancy Gibbs, the editor, explains why, when she writes: "For tireless acts of courage and mercy, for buying the world time to boost its defenses, for risking, for persisting, for sacrificing and saving . . . ."[31] The Ebola Fighters would be heroic even if everyone were immortal, but they are more heroic, and their actions are more meaningful, for risking their finite lives to save the lives of other people.

Granted, not everyone is involved in a profession in which they risk their lives to save the lives of other people. However, even if we do not put our lives on the line, because of our finitude, we sacrifice more, and potentially have

[29] Ibid., (2001), p. 22.
[30] Nussbaum (1989), p. 338.
[31] Gibbs (2014).

more of an impact on the lives of other people, than we would if we were immortal. To see this, let us compare two scenarios – one in which a mortal person volunteers for two years in the Peace Corps to serve other mortals and one in which an immortal person volunteers in the Peace Corps to serve other immortals for the same amount of time. By choosing to volunteer, the mortal person is sacrificing part of her limited life span to help others. In contrast, because the life of the immortal person is unlimited, he does not make this sacrifice. Through their efforts, both of these individuals can improve the quality of the lives of other people, but only the mortal volunteer can prolong the lives of other mortal people. Both of their actions are virtuous and meaningful, but, because of our finitude, the actions of the mortal person are more virtuous and meaningful.

7. Death as a Preventer of Intolerable Boredom

To summarize the prior sections, reflecting on one's finitude can extrinsically motivate a person to take action. If that action involves engaging in meaning-conferring activities, then our finitude will have played a role in enhancing the meaning in that person's life. Second, overcoming a substantial obstacle, such as one's finitude, to connect to final value, adds meaning to one's life. Third, because of our finitude, when we help other people, we make more of a sacrifice, and potentially have more of an impact on their lives, than we would if everyone were immortal. In this section, I will explain a fourth way in which death can have a positive impact on the meaning in the lives of some people.

In a well-known essay, Bernard Williams disputed the Epicurean argument that death is never an evil. He argues that premature deaths are a misfortune, but that it is a good thing that we do not live forever. Williams discusses a play by Karel Čapek. In the play, Elina Makropulos was given an elixir by her father that extended her life by 300 years. At the age of 342, her life, as Williams writes, "has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness."[32] Elina refuses to take the life-extending elixir again and she dies. Williams contends that immortal human beings would necessarily be bored, as a result of repetitive experiences, or would lose their sense of identity in trying to overcome the

[32] Williams (1973), p. 82.

boredom – either of which would make their lives unappealing and not worth living.

Williams asserts that "Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life."[33] Williams provides very little support for his second claim that "death gives the meaning to life." Even if it were true that an immortal life would be intolerable and meaningless, the conclusion that death gives meaning to life does not necessarily follow. For example, if a mortal person did nothing more in his life than twiddle his thumbs, then his life would be meaningless. When this person dies, *in no way* does death add meaning to his life.

Death does not have a positive impact on the meaning in the lives of individuals who have led a meaningless life, but what about individuals who have led a meaningful life? If Einstein had become immortal, what impact would that have had on the meaning in his life? A proponent of the view that death gives meaning to life might concede that mortality awareness played no role in motivating Einstein to lead a meaningful life, but then argue that if Einstein had not died and became immortal that his life would eventually become meaningless. Is this correct? Suppose that Einstein was still alive and took an elixir that would allow him to live forever. At the time he ingested the elixir, his life would still have been meaningful. But over countless thousands of years, the meaning in his life would be on a downward trajectory, Williams would argue.

Some philosophers maintain that the only bearer of meaning is a *part* of a life. At the other extreme, some philosophers maintain that the only bearer of meaning is an *entire* life. Metz[34] argues that a part of one's life and one's life, as a whole, can be bearers of meaning, and I share this view. As Metz points out, if a part of one's life and one's life as a whole can be bearers of meaning, then this raises the question of how the parts relate to the whole – a question that I will now briefly discuss.

The English language can deceive one into thinking that a person's life can only be *meaningless* or *meaningful*. But most of our lives are neither meaningless nor meaningful, but lie somewhere between these two extremes. Most lives are "somewhat meaningful." If Einstein took the elixir and became immortal, would his life, as a whole, be meaningless, somewhat meaningful, or

[33] Ibid., p. 82.
[34] Metz (2013), pp. 37-58.

meaningful? Let us assume that his immortal life did become intolerable. If we look at the different parts of his life, the part of his life where he made scientific discoveries was meaningful, but the later part of his life was meaningless. Because part of his life contained great meaning, it would not seem correct to say that his life, as a whole, was meaningless. If the meaningful part of his life were followed by a meaningless part, then his life, as a whole, would neither be meaningful nor meaningless, but would be "somewhat meaningful." In this scenario, becoming immortal made Einstein's life, as a whole, *less meaningful* than it would have been if he had died.

If Williams is correct that an immortal life would necessarily be unappealing and not worth living, then this suggests a fourth way in which death can have a positive impact on the meaning in the lives of some people – namely those individuals who have led a meaningful life. By preventing them from experiencing the boredom that would result from living forever, death prevents their lives, as a whole, from becoming less meaningful.

I have clarified four ways in which our finitude has a positive impact on the meaning in the lives of some people. The manner in which finitude has this impact, and whether our finitude contributes to the addition or the preservation of meaning in one's life, varies among the four scenarios, as discussed below.

Suppose that a person is immortal, but thinks that he is dying. His belief that he is dying might motivate him to take action and, consequently, his life might become more meaningful as a result. Thus, it is his *belief* that he is dying, and not death itself, that plays a role in adding meaning to his life. In contrast, it is our finitude, and not simply believing that one's life is finite, which provides a temporal limit – a limit that if transcended in the right way can add meaning to one's life. And it is finitude, and not a belief in finitude, that makes some of our actions more virtuous and meaningful than if we were immortal. An immortal person, who mistakenly believes that she is mortal, might serve for two years in the Peace Corps. But she would not be making the same sacrifice as someone who was mortal and gave up two years of her limited life.

Finally, it is "death itself," and not a belief in finitude, that can prevent individuals who have led a meaningful life from experiencing a boring, later part of their lives, which, in turn, can prevent their lives, as a whole, from becoming less meaningful. In contrast to the first three ways in which our finitude impacts the meaning in our lives, in this scenario, death does not play a role in *adding* meaning to the person's life. Rather, death simply *upholds* the meaning in the

person's life by preventing it from becoming less meaningful.

8. Is Death Necessary to Prevent a Meaningful Life from Becoming Less Meaningful?

By preventing intolerable boredom, death would prevent meaningful lives from becoming less meaningful. One might argue that not only does death uphold the meaning in their lives, but also that death is *necessary* to prevent their lives from becoming less meaningful. In this section, I will construct an argument for this stronger claim to see how it holds up to scrutiny. The *Death as a Preventer of Boredom* argument, as I will call it, is as follows:

(1) An immortal life would necessarily be boring, intolerable, and meaningless.
(2) If a person lived a meaningful, finite life and then became immortal, the meaning in this person's life would begin to decline and eventually this person's life, as a whole, would no longer be meaningful, but only "somewhat meaningful."
(3) Therefore, death is necessary to prevent a meaningful life from becoming less meaningful.

As outlined, this argument is applicable only to those individuals who have led a meaningful life. Is this a compelling argument? Many philosophers have disputed Williams' conclusion that an immortal life would necessarily be boring.[35] They concede that the lives of some immortal people could be boring, but deny that *everyone's* immortal life would be boring.

Stephen Cave[36] distinguishes between two types of immortality – "true immortality" and "medical immortality." A person with medical immortality would be immune to disease and aging, but could die from accidents, such as being hit by a bus. In contrast, a person with true immortality would be unable to die. As Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin indicate,[37] in a world without God, it is implausible to think that someone could survive a direct hit from a nuclear bomb.

[35] See, for example, Fischer (1994), Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009), Chappell (2009), Bruckner (2012), and Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014).
[36] Cave (2012), pp. 63, 74-78, 267-268.
[37] Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014), p. 364.

Thus, we will never attain true immortality but, in the future, human beings might have much longer life spans than we do. For this reason, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argue that the debate should focus on whether medical immortality would result in intolerable boredom.

Donald Bruckner[38] has argued that the following three characteristics would ward off the boredom of immortality: the natural decay of our memories, human ingenuity, and our ability to regain interest in an activity after a sufficient time has lapsed. One idea that has not been considered in the literature is that of sleep. When we sleep, we are not bored and people often feel refreshed after a good night's sleep. Of course, getting eight hours of nightly sleep will not prevent the boredom of immortality. But what if we could sleep for six to nine months at a time whenever we wanted? Would memory decay, desire rejuvenation, ingenuity, and periodic, prolonged sleep be enough to prevent an immortal life from becoming intolerably boring? Or is death truly necessary to prevent a meaningful life from becoming less meaningful?

This idea of prolonged sleep is not as far-fetched as it might sound. For the purpose of sending astronauts on a mission to Mars, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the aerospace company SpaceWorks, are currently researching a new technology that would allow human beings to enter a deep sleep for a period of six to nine months.[39] This "cryosleep" technology involves lowering the body temperature of the astronauts and providing them with nutrients intravenously. If the technology proves successful, it would be used to overcome some of the challenges involved in sending astronauts on a deep space mission. One of these challenges includes transporting enough food and water to keep the astronauts alive for months or years without overloading the spacecraft. In addition, prolonged spaceflight can result in anxiety, boredom, claustrophobia, insomnia, and depression.

Placing the astronauts in a sort of hibernation would lessen the need for food and water, thereby reducing the weight of the spacecraft and the cost of the mission. In addition, NASA hypothesizes that this hibernation would counteract psychological distress, such as anxiety and boredom, and allow the astronauts to wake from this prolonged sleep feeling refreshed and energized.

Would this cryosleep technology help prevent the boredom of medical immortality? When an immortal person awakens after a prolonged sleep, things

[38] Bruckner (2012).
[39] For further discussion, see Bradford (2013) and Williams (2014).

would have changed in the world and it would take some time for this person to learn about and adapt to these changes, which would introduce some novelty in this person's life. If the person worked on a team, he or she would have some catching-up to do on their work, which could be invigorating or stressful. Whether one would feel more refreshed after a nine-month sleep than after an eight-hour sleep is unclear.

Williams' hypothesis that an immortal life would necessarily be boring is an empirical claim. Thus, if we reach a point at which human beings have much longer life spans, such as living, on average, for 300 years, then this hypothesis could be empirically tested. One of the ways that it could be tested is by studying the rates of depression and suicide in the long-lived population.

9. Conclusion

Many philosophers have argued that death is harmful and evil. Others have tried to counterbalance these arguments by pointing out ways in which our finitude is good for us. I have analyzed the claim that death gives meaning to "life." There is not sufficient support for this far-reaching claim, but there is support for the more limited conclusion that our finitude enhances or upholds the meaning in the lives of some individuals under certain circumstances.

Upon first hearing a statement such as "death gives the meaning to life,"[40] some people might be consoled thinking that death gives their lives meaning. But, as I have attempted to demonstrate, our finitude does not necessarily give meaning to a person's life. Before finitude can enhance the meaning in one's life, one must first: (1) face up to one's mortality and engage in meaning-conferring activities or projects; (2) transcend one's finitude to connect to final value; or (3) devote some of the limited moments in one's life to help other people (a sacrifice that only a mortal person can make).

At this time, for most people, intrinsic motivation probably plays a more substantial role in giving meaning to their lives than does our finitude. But if more people begin to face up to our finitude, or if human beings have much longer life spans in the future, then death could play a larger role in enhancing or upholding the meaning in our lives.

[40] Williams (1973), p. 82.

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