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Singular Immortality: Desirableness through Technology and Liberty

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## Abstract

In this essay, I argue that an immortal existence could be desirable. Taking the accounts of Williams and Smuts under careful consideration, I agree with Fischer that an immortal existence could be gratifying. When Fischer argues that it is unfair for Williams to posit that an immortal life must have self-exhausting pleasures and, overall, a better experience than mortal life, he gets to the crux of the argument for immortality: as long as there are positive categorical desires for the individual, then such life-affirming desires will provide an impetus to carry on. In moving past the Teiresias model of a phenomenon that retains memories while changing characters, I argue that a life of intellectual inquiry – which essentially alters the character of the individual while maintaining memories – offers an outward looking existence which provides internal pleasures. Accordingly, with the use of technology, computer simulations have the potential to provide pleasures and experiences that escape reality. In this sense, technology has the potential to supplement an immortal life. We cannot say whether there will be a pinnacle of such learning and pleasure which leads to decreasing returns, but it seems plausible that an immortal being who incorporates learning and pleasure that could potentially lead to innovation and discovery would seek to continue such intellectual inquiry and varied experiences until all learning potentials were exhausted.

## **Introduction**

If afforded the opportunity to become immortal, Bernard Williams posits that we should not accept the offer. In “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Williams discusses three models of immortality, of which he argues against the desirability of each. I argue that Williams makes a strong case against each model, but he not only neglects the difference between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures – as pointed out by John Martin Fischer (1994) – but he was unable to foresee the potential of technology to enhance and supplement human life. In this essay, I will be arguing for the desirability of the immortality of human life, as the arguments both for and against the immortality of any other life form would entail such gross speculation that I could not effectively make a case.

## **The Case against the Desirability of Immortality**

The scope of Williams’s argument against the desirableness of immortality encompasses categorical desires. A categorical desire is a desire that provides an impetus to continue living. In this sense, there are both positive categorical desires – which are those that are life-affirming – and negative categorical desires – those that supersede life and make death imperative. For immortality to be a life-affirming experience, at least one positive categorical desire must be present. A contingent desire, such as an enjoyable hobby, would only be a supplement to life, and therefore a positive categorical desire must be present in order for an immortal life to be fulfilling. If only negative categorical desires are present, then immortality would induce anguish. If no categorical desires are present in the individual, then he or she may simply experience conditional desires that supplement life, yet do not provide a reason to carry on.

To understand Williams, we must note that a conditional desire is one that makes life more pleasant, such as the enjoyment of one’s favorite food, but the desire only requires that the

individual be alive in order to experience the pleasure, rather than providing a goal from which to carry on life. In this sense, a categorical desire provides a specific reason for an individual to continue life, and therefore the desire essentially makes life worth living.

When Williams presents us with the story of Elena Makropulos (EM), a subject of a play by Karl Capek, we learn that she is age 342, yet has been immortal for the last 300 years. This means that EM is perpetually at the physical age of 42, although her memories span the entire 342 years. Three hundred years ago, she began drinking a life-extending elixir. Yet, Elena's life does indeed end, when she chooses to no longer drink the elixir. The EM model, according to Williams, shows that immortality is not desirable because Williams views EM's plight of boredom and coldness as inescapable. EM is cold because while she is immortal, those around her are mortal, and therefore she suffers through cycles of birth and death, while she remains isolated, objectively viewing her extended life as meaningless. EM's nihilistic perspective reminds us of Thomas Nagel's (1986) point that loss of conviction is the problem of the meaning of life (p. 214). When an individual begins to view herself objectively, then there is the potential to realize that her life, in the broad scope of the events of the world, is meaningless. It is not that her life has no meaning to herself or those around her, but unless she played a crucial part in the shaping of the world, then her never existing would not have had a major impact on the direction of the world.

The second model of immortality that Williams argues against is one of a changing character in the same physical body. In this model, the individual does not retain the same personality because she does not retain her identity or memory, and therefore she is, essentially, born over and over again. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, yet the eternal recurrence aspect need not apply. In a sense, this character is more similar to that of

reincarnation, yet with the same physical body. I agree with Williams that it is not possible for such an individual to retain a personal identity when she does not remember her past; she just faces coterminous lives in the same body.

The third model of immortality that Williams argues against is the Teiresias model. This model consists of an individual who, like the second model, exists immortally as a series of characters, but he is able to retain his memory. In this sense, the individual is living a fantasy (p. 86) and becomes a “phenomenon” (p. 86), rather than possessing an individual identity. In ignoring the connection between the coterminous lives, yet retaining the memory of experience of each of the lives, the phenomenon of Teiresias is one of a fantastical nature, and therefore difficult to equate to our desires. While Williams considers this model as a possibility worth arguing both for and against, I do not see it as realistic enough to argue for.

### **The Desirability of Immortality**

The desirability of immortality greatly depends on the surroundings that the individual is subjected to. In this sense, one must be free to live as she wishes, and this means that she is at liberty to create her own future. Liberty is very important in the desirableness of our current mortal life, but it is doubly important to an immortal being. For if I am a slave or political prisoner, or if I am a prisoner of a disease-ridden body, then, as a mortal, I will eventually die and return to nothingness as my only escape. To be immortally under these negative conditions would be horrendous. It seems to me that Williams is partially arguing that in living an eternal life, we would become so bored that we would live as prisoners of our own bodies, similar to a ghost who might be believed to eternally haunt a location, or the un-living creatures Daniel and Cassiel in Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987), of which Aaron Smuts (2008) states that they are “unable to fulfill the truncated set of desires they barely feel.”

If a case can be made for the desirableness of immortality, then the affirmation must hinge upon the ability to experience new events – or at least, we must think that they are new – and, therefore, our categorical desires must continue to be life-affirming throughout eternity. Williams argues that the only experiences that could keep us occupied at a level to wish to continue living eternally would be those that require great concentration, such as an intellectual pursuit. Yet, he continues by stating that “those who totally wish to lose themselves in the movement can consistently only hope that the movement will go on...the consistent Spinozist...can only hope that the intellectual activity goes on” (p. 90). I take this to mean that an immortal being who focuses on intellectual activity is so tied to her studies that they consume her, and therefore the situation is less than symbiotic; she becomes a parasite to her studies and needs them to carry on. I disagree with Williams on this condition of intellectual activities causing the immortal individual to latch on or perish in anguish. It seems possible to entirely focus on an activity and project one’s direction outward without losing identity and becoming reliant upon the external source. Fischer (1994) argues that it is possible for one to become heavily invested in activities to the point of “losing oneself,” while remaining the owner of the experiences (p. 352). If the individual has the liberty to create experiences, then she is not necessarily reliant upon them. I see no need for intellectual pursuit to become an addiction that once ended, results in negative categorical desires.

Williams argues for the defender of the desirability of immortality to come up with an experience that renders boredom to be “unthinkable” (p. 88), and I see no reason for this to be the case. In our mortal lives, there is the possibility of boredom, and I can understand that an eternity of boredom would be torture, but it seems to me that there could be periods of boredom in the immortal life without a definitive loss of positive categorical desires. Fischer argues that a

mix of activities could be part of a package in an immortal life (p. 353), and I think that this line of thinking gets to the crux of the desirableness of immortality: an individual with the liberty to create experiences, combined with the technology to do so, has the potential to become absorbed in a life of intellectual pursuit that does not become parasitic to the pursuit. Next, Fischer differentiates between self-exhausting pleasures – those which might be pursued once or twice and then desire is fulfilled (p. 355) – and repeatable pleasures, which are those that, if spaced out accordingly, can provide a continued source of pleasure throughout the life of an immortal individual (p. 356).

While repeatable pleasures provide a source of amusement, they are generally conditional desires that do not provide an impetus for living. In this sense, repeatable pleasures might help to quell boredom, but they are supplemental to categorical desires. It is understandable that Fischer is arguing against Williams's statement that boredom must be unthinkable for the immortal being, but I'm not quite satisfied with repeatable pleasures as providing a foundation of a positive immortal experience. Contingent desires are not life-affirming, and therefore positive categorical desires are necessary in order for the immortal being to continue living a fulfilled life. Yet, if we can show that liberty and technology are harbingers of new categorical desires, then repeatable pleasures are the perfect supplement.

Liberty and technology as harbingers of new categorical desires open doors to further insightful possibilities. Smuts (2008) argues that the Teiresias model need not be as fantastical as described by Williams. Humans enter stages of developmental progression, passing from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, and therefore we possess memories of each stage, yet may be a radically different person at any stage. To be sure, we formulate character through our experiences and progression, and therefore when we look back at previous stages of life, we may

hardly recognize our former selves. I find Smuts' argument to be insightful, as the liberty of proceeding through life as a free, self-actualizing person makes the possibility of owning technology and using it as a mode of life-affirming categorical desire creation both attractive and realistic.

### **Individual versus Group Immortality**

It is important to differentiate between the immortality of one particular being versus that of an entire race or group of beings because each has different necessities for desirability. I find it less convincing to argue for a group of beings to be immortal and desiring of such, yet it seems to me that an individual could desire an immortal life. Smuts (2008) argues that immortality "would threaten to deplete our actions of their significance," and I take this to mean that on a singular level, an individual's actions could become as meaningless as Nagel describes them, but on a group level, the entire race faces a tortured nothingness that deadens the personality and eliminates categorical desires.

An immortal individual who is surrounded by mortals faces the same life and death cycles of friends and families that we experience, but she would face them on a much greater level. Boredom is a possible negative experience of an immortal life, but I think that the emotional burden of living around mortals is the major hurdle. Any type of relationship formed between immortal and mortal beings is ultimately broken by the death of the mortal. The immortal being stands subjected to the miracle of life and the agony of death over and over again, all while becoming further and further isolated. At this point, we must consider whether the immortal being suffers pain. I see no reason for an immortal being to be immune to pain. In a sense, pain and suffering shape us as individuals, and therefore experiencing pain or suffering on some level might be a part of the human experience.

James Tiptree Jr. imagines the immortal to be a painless being who would be subject to biological experiments by mortals because the inability to feel pain would be beneficial to mortals. In “Painwise,” the main character is forcefully sent through space, away from Earth, in order to have tests run on his mental and physical states. Tiptree has us believe that, for mortals, an immortal being would be such an amazing source of information that they would be prepared to affect his own liberty for their benefit. Because of this subjugation of the immortal, mortals would be willing to subject him to testing in order to learn more about immortality and how mortals might benefit from his inability to feel pain. In “Painwise,” the tests, and sense of distress, cause the main character to attempt suicide, but his attempts are futile. Eventually, he is able to return to Earth, but in doing so, he learns that he has been programmed to only feel pain *on Earth*, which implies that mortals have been able to affect him in a way that would make Earth seem to be a forbidden place. Such a situation as experiencing pain on Earth would seemingly lead to a willingness of the immortal to continue the tests while benefitting the mortals. Yet, the immortal character chooses a death on Earth, as this is his only chance at liberty – his negative categorical desire, created by the mortals, comes to fruition.

The choice of the main character to end his life implies that Tiptree views liberty as a categorical desire, and in this case, a negative one. It is only possible for the main character to obtain freedom through self destruction, and he chooses to do so rather than living as a meaningless immortal. Yet, I argue that his life is meaningless because his situation is one whereas he is an object to mortals, and therefore does not truly establish himself as subject. This situation of imprisonment is similar to de Beauvoir’s argument that woman behaves as “Other” because of a patriarchal culture thrust upon her. In “Painwise,” the main character is thrust into a

situation of becoming a specimen of testing, and therefore can only view the future as one of restriction, and thus he is reduced to a meaningless life as object of subjugation.

Borges (1949) wrote a short story titled “The Immortal,” whereas the main character becomes immortal by drinking from a magical river, and then finds himself in a City of Immortals. Through Borges, we see the possibility, once again, that an immortal life without categorical desires could become nothingness. The main character comes to the realization that the immortals were “determined to live in thought, pure speculation” (p. 113). In this sense, the immortals view physical activities as meaningless, and they live in a world of deep thought that separates their existence from reality. This is the condition that Williams alludes to, whereas immortals could only become content in losing themselves through an intense focus on a mental activity, and he argues that such focus separates the individual from reality. When Fischer argues that intense focus need not be a separation of an individual’s thoughts from reality, I agree when we come back to the singular level of immortality. A society of immortals has great potential to eventually view all activity as meaningless, and therefore, rather than face an attempt at mass destruction, it seems plausible that they would immerse themselves in thought. A society of immortals would simply have no motivation to carry on.

Borges describes the city as full of dead-end doors, high windows out of reach, and stairways that “would die without leading anywhere” (p. 111). Later, he argues that the immortals “knew that in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men” (p. 114). I take this to mean that Borges views immortality as a continuous walk down dead-end pathways and a feeling of apathy because every possible situation will occur at least once and therefore the immortal has no reason for desires. It would make no sense, to Borges, for an immortal to have

initiative, as everything that can happen to a person will occur to an immortal, and therefore thought provides the avenue for a mind's duration.

It seems to me that a singular immortal would not be stuck in a rut of deep thought without passion for anything in life. Earlier I talked about the possibility of an immortal feeling pain; I think that pain is a necessity for the singular immortal. Through suffering, the singular immortal is able to grow from experiences. Through the pain of watching the life cycles of other unfold, combined with intense intellectual study enhanced by technology, it would be possible for the suffering of EM to be a growth tool, and combined with the deep thought of the immortals in Borges' story, an individual immortal would have the potential to formulate categorical desires.

### **Technology and the Desirability of Immortality**

The use of technology has the potential to both boost and destroy human existence. For the singular immortal, I argue that a life of autonomy is the only way that life-affirming categorical desires can continuously exist. Huxley would have us envision a future of soma-induced tranquility and Stephenson's *Snow Crash* raises the potential of a virus that could wreak havoc in a human-created metaverse. Also, Philip K. Dick, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, asks us to question our humanity in a world in which we mix with androids, and Francis Fukuyama, in *Our Posthuman Future*, argues that we should not only proceed with caution into posthumanity, but we must acknowledge that our posthuman future has already begun. In a sense, these stories are palpable versions of potential dystopia similar to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and perhaps an extension of our fears. In order to truly actualize immortality, we must consider the future and how it would affect an immortal being who will experience all of eternity.

As virtual reality becomes more of possibility, already existing in the form of video games and internet lifestyles, it seems plausible to consider the affect of Nozick's experience machine on the immortal. An experience machine, or a machine in which the user can enter a simulated reality directed toward pleasurable experiences, offers the potential for the immortal to create a life – whether temporary or permanent – in which she can experience goals, pleasures and desires that may not exist in reality. Smuts (2009) argues that a journey of eternal frustration would not be desirable, and that “only those of heroic perseverance or supernatural powers of self-deception” (p. 16) would have the will to continue seeking new challenges in a “motivationally devastating” immortal life where abilities are fixed. Smuts's argument is entirely rational: in living an immortal life with fixed abilities, an individual would be continuously frustrated because she could never surpass certain hurdles, whether they are to grow wings and fly to a neighboring planet, or reach the high windows described by Borges or, perhaps emotionally, to overcome the strife suffered by EM.

Interestingly, Smuts argues that immortal individuals with god-like powers would either be self-destructive in a manner that causes frustration due to competing goals, or the beings would work together cohesively and “accomplish anything that is logically possible” (p. 17). Yet, it is this very ability to accomplish anything that Smuts views as ultimately leading to insignificance. We should recall Fischer, who argues the difference between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures. While it is true that the immortal would get tired of repeated desires or, in this case, accomplishments, I argue that an immortal individual could consistently create new challenges and that, spaced out enough, even repetitive challenges could be desirable. However, I agree with Smuts that an immortal race or group would, even without fixed abilities, become bored with success or counter each other's powers, resulting in anguish.

Virtual realities create an outlet for the mind to enter a simulated world and, similar to Poul Anderson's 1957 science fiction story, "Call Me Joe," it seems plausible that we will ultimately be able to upload our minds into a simulated environment, or an experience machine, and then live out fantasies or create challenges in a manner that ignites categorical desires. Proponents of mental statism will argue that the mental state of the individual determines value, and therefore if our simulated reality machine creates categorical desires within the individual, then it is possible that the immortal being could live a continuously fulfilled life. Yet, I include the caveat that an immortal individual may not be eternally fulfilled if she is *only* living in the virtual world, or is, perhaps, a brain in a vat. She would require the liberty to leave the virtual world at any time, and therefore she would retain the memory of her life in reality upon entering the simulation.

Perhaps it would be effective to erase her memory upon leaving the virtual world, as this erasure would consistently bring her back into reality with the memory that she had before entering the virtual world. In a sense, if she were to keep returning to reality and then re-entering the virtual world to begin another simulation, then she would have a condition similar to anterograde amnesia, such as Guy Pearce in the movie *Memento*. With each return to reality, she would begin again as the person she was before she entered the virtual world. Yet, in the virtual world, she would have the liberty to return at any time because of her memories. Accordingly, our immortal would create new categorical desires if she so chose to advance humankind through rigorous study. I consider it plausible that an immortal being who is aware of her immortality and the possibility of boredom could become so engulfed in intellectual rigor, mostly through the virtual reality, that she would wish to retain her memory through most cases, but she would have the liberty to delineate from this method of memory loss if the particular experience was

pleasant. For instance, if she were to improve mankind through the curing of a disease of in providing understanding of a subject that only her depth of knowledge could resolve, then her down time could involve a series of pleasurable experiences in virtual reality sessions until her mind recovers from the strain and her body completes replenishment.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that immortality could be desirable if the immortal being is surrounded by mortals, rather than other immortals, and if she has fixed abilities. In retaining her liberty, she has the freedom to create and act upon her categorical desires, and these desires could be supplemented by repeatable pleasures. Our immortal would live two lives: one in the reality that we know, and another in a virtual reality. The caveat here is that she may elect to have her memory from the simulations erased, and therefore she experiences self-induced anterograde amnesia. It would be possible for others to argue that she is not living a fulfilled life because generations of mortals are helping her trick herself into believing that some repeated events in virtual reality are actually new to her, but if these repeated experiences are valuable to her, then we cannot say with certainty that she is not living a fulfilled life.

It is of primary importance that an immortal individual not obtain negative categorical desires, as she will then live a life of anguish. It is also of importance to not allow her to lose all desires, or subsequently end up in a mode of thought that is so deep that she escapes reality and becomes apathetic to her surroundings. It is in conjunction mortals, not in spite of, that our immortal would live a life of fulfillment. If she were to use her extended memories and accumulated wealth of knowledge to enhance the human condition, then her success would coincide with the success of mortals, and thus produce a symbiotic relationship.

I readily acknowledge that a symbiotic relationship between an immortal being and mortals could create a situation whereas either party could be in a position to harm the other, but it would make little sense for mortals to harm the immortal when she could assist them in living longer and better lives, and it would make even less sense for the immortal to harm the only contacts that she knows – mortals. While technology might appear to distance humans from one another because of the indirect contact, our immortal would be eternally living proof that technology, coupled with liberty, has the potential to bring us together.

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