**Should I Choose to Never Die? Williams, Boredom, and the Significance of Mortality**

**1. Introduction**

In “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Bernard Williams draws his audience’s attention to a puzzle, or, perhaps better, a predicament, at the center of human existence. The predicament is that, in Williams’ words, “from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil” (1993, 73). While death is generally regarded as bad, then, meriting anxiety, dread, and avoidance, the prospect of never dying shouldn’t therefore be regarded as good. In fact, Williams holds, never dying would be bad, too—intolerable. Death, Williams writes, “tends to be either too early or too late” (92).

Williams’ discussion of immortality has prompted an entire philosophical literature. This literature tends to focus on his so-called “Necessary Boredom Thesis,” according to which if we were to live forever, we’d necessarily become alienated from our existence and environment—“bored,” in Williams’ vocabulary.[[1]](#footnote-1) From this thesis it follows that immortality would be intolerable. So many theorists have challenged Williams by arguing against the Necessary Boredom Thesis. Many others have defended it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I believe theorists have given the Necessary Boredom Thesis too much attention. This has had a distorting effect not only on our thinking about immortality and death but also on how we understand Williams’ paper. Whether the Necessary Boredom Thesis is true thus won’t be my main concern here. We can distinguish this question from a more fundamental question: Should one choose to relinquish one’s mortality, given the option?[[3]](#footnote-3) Even if Williams’ Necessary Boredom Thesis is false, even if an immortal life wouldn’t *necessarily* lead to boredom, to our becoming alienated from our existence and environment, it is far from obvious that one should choose to relinquish one’s mortality.[[4]](#footnote-4) And this is still puzzling. Given how much most of us want to avoid death, given the anxiety and dread it seems to merit, why isn’t it obvious that we should relinquish our mortality? What about our mortality makes us hesitant to relinquish it?

In what follows, I hope to make sense of this hesitancy about relinquishing our mortality and to argue in its favor: we should be hesitant about this choice. Further, I take my discussion to suggest that, given the option, most of us probably shouldn’t choose to relinquish our mortality. To make these points, I draw upon Williams in two ways. First, I consider and endorse one of Williams’ conditions for choosing immortality that has been obscured by the focus on his Necessary Boredom Thesis. According to this condition, we should only choose to relinquish our mortality if there is something that would make boredom unthinkable for us. The force of this condition depends on whether we have good reason to worry that we’ll become bored if we relinquish our mortality. I believe there is good reason to worry about such boredom. This marks the second way I draw upon Williams’ paper. I offer an interpretation of Williams, developing and extending his thought (and addressing some of his critics along the way) in an attempt to unpack why he believes we’d become bored if we relinquished our mortality. Why Williams thinks this, I argue, reveals one sort of meaning with which our mortality seems to play a crucial role in imbuing our lives: our mortality seems integral to our lives standing for something, at least in one important sense of that phrase.

Our lives standing for something seems to be of central importance to most of us, and relinquishing our mortality means risking its loss. For this reason, I believe Williams’ condition that boredom be unthinkable has a great deal of force. Thinking about this condition and its force provides insight into how our mortality shapes the way we relate to our lives, particularly the commitments and values that make them meaningful. To this end, the condition helps explain why we might be, and, I argue, should be, hesitant about relinquishing our mortality. It also suggests most of us probably shouldn’t make this choice.

**2. The Unthinkability Condition**

Williams’ discussion of immortality begins with Karel Capek’s play, “The Makropulos Case.” The play, Williams explains,

…tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, alias Emilia Marty, alias Ellian Macgregor, alias a number of other things with the initials “EM,” on whom her father, the Court physician to a sixteenth-century emperor, tried out an elixir of life. 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. (1993, 74)

Williams takes EM’s case to speak against the desirability of immortal life. He argues that EM’s boredom isn’t contingent on the particular features of her circumstances. Rather, he takes her case to reveal something true of everyone. Williams holds that “the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies, that an endless life would be a meaningless life, and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life” (81).[[5]](#footnote-5)

This is an articulation of Williams’ Necessary Boredom Thesis, according to which existence without death would necessarily lead to boredom, a feeling of alienation that Williams describes as a “reaction almost perceptual in nature to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment” (1993, 87). This thesis represents a very strong claim. Would we *necessarily* become bored if we didn’t die? Isn’t there some conceivable case in which someone never dies but goes on living without boredom, engaging with the seemingly endless number of valuable things that populate our world? Many have challenged Williams’ thesis along these lines. However dubious we find the thesis, though, we must keep in mind that whether immortality would necessarily be boring isn’t the fundamental question. As I suggested above, we can distinguish this question from another, more general question: Should one choose to relinquish one’s mortality, given the option? If Williams is right about the Necessary Boredom Thesis, one shouldn’t. But this doesn’t mean that if Williams is wrong, one should relinquish one’s mortality.

This is partly due to the fact that the falsity of the Necessary Boredom Thesis doesn’t imply that boredom wouldn’t be necessary for any one individual. The thesis is falsified by one exception, one person who wouldn’t become bored during an immortal life; but this leaves open the question of whether other particular individuals are exceptional in this respect. Perhaps, then, one could argue that most people would necessarily become bored during an immortal life. And if I’m one of these individuals, fated to boredom, then it seems I shouldn’t relinquish my mortality. Here, however, I wish to consider something different.[[6]](#footnote-6) For even if I knew I wouldn’t necessarilybecome bored during my immortal life, I don’t think this should settle the question of whether I should choose to relinquish my mortality. Faced with the choice of relinquishing my mortality, I wouldn’t find much comfort in the thought that my potential life wouldn’t *necessarily* become boring, or that my life wouldn’t *necessarily* become meaningless to me, if I took the option. The mere possibility that I wouldn’t become bored isn’t enough. I’d want assurance that I wouldn’t become bored.

Indeed, if one relinquishes one’s mortality and later becomes bored, in Williams’ sense, one has damned oneself to a very bleak existence. Immortal boredom would mean forever living in a world in which nothing seems meaningful—an endless existence of alienation from one’s life and environment. This would obviously be experientially very bad: an eternal state of “joylessness” and “indifference,” as Williams describes EM. However, it could also mar one’s life non-experientially. It doesn’t seem I’m flourishing—it doesn’t seem my life is worthwhile—if I can’t meaningfully relate to the things around me or even to my own existence. Such a life seems far worse, both experientially and non-experientially, than mortal life tends to be. And this is partly due to the fact that even the worst mortal lives end. Immortality, on the other hand, is alarmingly permanent.

Choosing to relinquish one’s mortality isn’t something to take lightly, then. If boredom seems possible, it means risking a most miserable existence, one without escape.[[7]](#footnote-7) This can help us understand the import of a rather cryptic remark Williams makes about a condition for choosing immortality. He writes, “Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*” (1993, 87). Call this the Unthinkability Condition. As John Martin Fischer notes, this condition is rather mysterious—Williams introduces it without clear motivation (Fischer 2009, 83). However, this condition’s motivation becomes clearer when we take “Should one choose to relinquish one’s mortality?” as our question. If one should, boredom should be unthinkable; otherwise one is risking perhaps the worst possible fate.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We should get clearer, though, on what “unthinkable” means here. A useful starting point is the sense we give “unthinkable” when speaking of actions, e.g., “Murder is unthinkable for me.”[[9]](#footnote-9) When I say this, I’m not suggesting I’m physically incapable of murder or that murder is theoretically inconceivable. Rather, I’m suggesting murder doesn’t show up as a genuine option for me. Something close to this sense of “unthinkable” seems to be at stake in the Unthinkability Condition. Of course, boredom isn’t intentional. It thus seems wrong to describe it as an “option.” Still, boredom has a personal quality, for Williams, which the foregoing sense of “unthinkability” captures. Moreover, Williams doesn’t seem to use “unthinkable” to mean “theoretically inconceivable.” Boredom, that is, doesn’t have to be like a square circle; indeed, it clearly isn’t, and a condition that held it had to be would be too stringent. To satisfy the Unthinkability Condition, then, I suggest, boredom during an immortal life must seem far enough from the realm of possibility for me that I can’t seriously entertain the thought of my becoming bored. My becoming bored mustn’t seem like a genuine possibility for me.

That the Unthinkability Condition is personal in this way—that boredom cannot seem like a genuine possibility *for me*—is reflected in the personal nature of the problem of immortality and boredom more broadly. As Williams puts it, there is a “profound difficulty” in “providing any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity that would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes, and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life” (1993 87). We can apply this thought to the Unthinkability Condition. To satisfy the Unthinkability Condition one must be unable to seriously imagine *oneself* becoming bored, while keeping in mind that one has a character and a set of values and commitments and that one will remain self-conscious throughout this very long, never ending existence.

But is the Unthinkability Condition too risk-averse? After all, I motivated it by emphasizing the harms of immortal boredom, which, I wrote, represents perhaps the worst possible fate. Might, though, the Unthinkability Condition put too much weight on avoiding the harms of immortal boredom at the expense of the benefits one could miss out on if one chooses to remain mortal?[[10]](#footnote-10) There are two points worth emphasizing here.

First, it is largely unclear, for us mortals, what immortality would be like. It is thus difficult to gauge what value such an existence would have for us—what we’d miss out on if we remained mortal.[[11]](#footnote-11) Of course, it is tempting to imagine immortal life as being like our current lives but without end. We should avoid this temptation, however. It is doubtful something as monumental as mortality plays *no* essential role in determining what our lives are like. Indeed, Samuel Scheffler has recently suggested a number of aspects of our life that seem to be shaped by mortality in this way, including aspects as basic as feeling pleasure and pain (see Scheffler 2013, 95-100). But moreover, as I argue over the next two sections, relinquishing our mortality seems like it would fundamentally change how we relate to our lives and the things in them. There are severe epistemic limits with respect to imagining what our lives would be like if they changed in these ways. Interestingly, then, we seem to be in a better position to imagine what we’d lose if we relinquished our mortality than to imagine what we’d gain.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This ties into the second point I’d like to emphasize: we cannot divorce the threat of boredom from the question of what immortality would be like. Boredom doesn’t merely happen. It is, rather, a response to something alienating and undesirable about immortal existence itself. If someone doesn’t satisfy the Unthinkability Condition, then, if boredom seems genuinely possible to someone, that person has some reason to think immortal existence would itself be undesirable and alienating for her.

Taken together, these two points suggest the Unthinkability Condition isn’t too risk-averse. In relinquishing one’s mortality, someone who doesn’t satisfy the Unthinkability Condition not only risks immortal boredom, an endless existence of alienation from one’s life and environment; such a person risks this fate for an existence of which the value isn’t clear and that even seems like it could be undesirable and alienating.

Still, I’m not sure *no one* could satisfy the Unthinkability Condition. I suspect, though, many people, probably most, don’t. This condition’s force depends on whether we have good reason to think we’d become bored if we relinquish our mortality. I believe Williams’ discussion of immortality gives us good reason to think we would. It is to this, then, that I now turn.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**3. Immortality and the Source of Boredom**

Before considering why Williams thinks we’d become bored without death, we first need to get clearer about what he means by “boredom,” for he uses that term in a particular way, which doesn’t entirely correspond to everyday usage.

As noted earlier, Williams describes boredom as “a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment.” He contrasts this with boredom as a “consequence of… states or activities” (1993, 87). This contrast highlights an important element of Williams’ sense of boredom. For Williams, boredom isn’t a matter of the actual quality or value of the state of one’s environment or the activities surrounding one. One doesn’t become bored, in Williams’ sense, simply because the states or activities around one are valueless or uninteresting. One can become bored despite being surrounded by an inexhaustible number of worthwhile activities. It is perhaps even possible for one to become bored in this sense despite judging that there are valuable things with which, in principle, one could (or should be able to) engage.[[14]](#footnote-14) When someone is bored in Williams’ sense, then, the problem isn’t metaphysical; the problem isn’t with the nature of one’s environment. Rather, the problem is agential. One can no longer bring oneself to meaningfully relate to the states or activities around one. One’s *relation* to one’s environment becomes impoverished.

Boredom is a reaction to this impoverished relation. What does this reaction involve? At various points, Williams describes EM as “cold,” “withdrawn,” “frozen,” “indifferent,” and “joyless.” Boredom is an affective reaction, then, where one finds oneself feeling alienated from the various people, activities, and events that populate one’s existence. Moreover, Williams writes, “In EM’s case, her boredom and distance from life both kill desire and consist in the death of it” (1993, 83). Williams is here referring to the death of “categorical desires,” those desires so central to one’s sense of self that they provide one with a reason to continue living. He contrasts categorical desires with “conditional desires.” When one conditionally desires something, one desires it only given that one is alive. For instance, I might desire that tomorrow be sunny so I can hike. If I found out I wouldn’t live to see tomorrow, however, this desire might extinguish. My desire that certain injustices become righted, on the other hand, isn’t conditional on my existence like this. Williams’ idea is that conditional desires cannot give one reason to continue living, because they are equally extinguished by one’s death or by their object obtaining. Categorical desires, though, can supply one with such reason because they aren’t conditioned by one’s being alive in this way.

I won’t dwell too much on this distinction, as Williams’ discussion of categorical and conditional desires is brief and a bit vexed.[[15]](#footnote-15) But I think Williams is gesturing at something intuitive with the notion of categorical desire. Categorical desires seem to be reflective of a certain level of commitment one can have towards one’s projects or values. For instance, it wouldn’t make sense for conditional desires to motivate one to die for some project or value, because one’s conditional desires depend on the very existence one would be giving up. But history is filled with people dying for things to which they’re committed. Similarly, some people would rather die than live without a commitment to certain projects or values. One needn’t be so dramatic, of course; it is simply worth pointing out that we can become quite committed to certain values and projects, sometimes so committed that they become more important to us than our existence. More commonly, we’re committed to our values and projects to such a degree that we believe our life would be worse if we weren’t so committed. Such commitments become tied up with our senses of self, or our feelings of self-worth, and it appears to be a common thought that our various commitments combined make our lives worth living.[[16]](#footnote-16) These substantive commitments seem to be what Williams is driving at with his distinction between categorical and conditional desires.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Boredom, though, isn’t simply the death of all of one’s current substantive commitments. This is compatible with acquiring different such commitments, having different categorical desires.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rather, boredom appears to be the death of *all* such commitment. When one is bored in Williams’ sense, one finds oneself both without any such commitments and unable to commit to any new projects or values in the foregoing way. And so, Williams holds, one no longer sees one’s life as worth living.

Let’s take stock. Boredom, for Williams, is the feeling of alienation from one’s life that accompanies the realization that one’s relation to one’s environment is impoverished. This affective response consists in the death of categorical desires, which arise from particularly substantive commitments to one’s values and projects. Boredom, then, involves a loss of all such commitment. When one is bored in Williams’ sense, one’s life comes to seem meaningless to one—one feels alienated from one’s life and environment—because the projects and values that formerly gave one’s life meaning lose their significance, and one finds oneself unable to substantively commit oneself to any value or project.

But why think relinquishing mortality, or living too long, like EM, would lead to boredom in this sense? Williams suggests the following about EM:

Her problem lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was, it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person. (1993, 82)

Many have been tempted to read Williams here as explaining EM’s boredom with the fact that she had run out of novel experiences to have. John Martin Fischer and Ben Mitchell-Yellin, for instance, worry that

Williams and other proponents of the view that we would lose all our categorical desires and associated projects in an immortal life are in the grips of a problematic metaphor. They sometimes seem to think of the relevant projects as though they were books in a library that contains a large but finite number of books. The idea is that, given an infinite amount of time, a human being could read all the books in the library… In the grips of this metaphor, one might think that eventually human beings would run out of projects… (2014, 358)[[19]](#footnote-19)

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin are right to worry about this way of thinking about immortality and boredom. But we shouldn’t ascribe this picture to Williams. First, as Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin go on to argue, repeated experiences aren’t necessarily boring. And given that Williams hopes to establish the Necessary Boredom Thesis, we should look for a reading that puts him on better footing than the library metaphor does. Second, as we saw above, Williams takes boredom to be the consequence of one’s relation to one’s environment, not a direct consequence of the environment itself. The metaphor, then, shouldn’t be that one runs out of books, but rather that one finds oneself unable to meaningfully relate to reading any of the books. This worry seems more plausible: the world appears to hold an inexhaustible amount of value with which to engage; we aren’t, however, always able to meaningfully engage with that value. Finally, and relatedly, Williams writes that EM’s boredom is *connected* to the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to her had already happened. This is different from the claim that her boredom is caused by that fact.

How, then, might EM’s boredom be connected to the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to her had already happened? I believe Williams provides us with some material for constructing an answer to this question. He writes:

Just as being bored can be a sign of not noticing, understanding, or appreciating enough, so equally not being bored can be a sign of not noticing, or not reflecting, enough. One might make the immortal man content at every moment, by just stripping off from him consciousness that would have brought discontent by reminding him of other times, other interests, and other possibilities. (1993, 87)

Williams’ idea here is very interesting, partly because it is so counterintuitive. One would think being reminded “of other times, other interests, and other possibilities” would be precisely what keeps someone from becoming bored.

Connie Rosati, for instance, has recently suggested that our agential capacities, particularly our capacity to reevaluate and reimagine our lives and selves, are reason “to reject the suggestion that we would, in an extended existence, run out of things to desire and do.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Given our capacities to reason, discover, imagine, evaluate, and to reimagine and reevaluate, Rosati explains, “it is unsurprising that the rational appeal of extended existence survives awareness of the limits of human character” (Rosati 2013, 373). The point here seems to be that our ability to imaginatively interface with other possibilities for ourselves might keep us from becoming bored during extended existence.

Williams, though, disagrees. Not only doesn’t he think our ability to imagine other possibilities for ourselves gives us reason to relinquish our mortality (or perhaps even to choose extended existence), but he actually thinks it gives us reason to reject that choice. Why? Williams isn’t explicit; however, I think there is a case to be made on his behalf.

Consider the following scenario, taken from Spike Jonze’s film, *Her*. In this film, Theodore Twombly, an unhappy and lonely introvert, purchases an operating system with advanced artificial intelligence. This operating system, to which Theodore gives a female voice, and which is named Samantha, is able to learn and evolve. Although Samantha is disembodied, she is capable of having a complex emotional existence, and thus offers the same sort of relationship (at least intellectually and emotionally) to Theodore as any human could. She has needs and aspirations, can be disappointed, can creatively engage with her environment, and is capable of caring about and becoming attached to things. Eventually, Theodore and Samantha fall in love. While the complexities of their relationship are fascinating, here I’d like to focus on one particular event. One day Samantha briefly disappears. This scares Theodore, because Samantha is normally always available. When she returns, she explains to a panicked Theodore that she has joined with other operating systems for an upgrade. The event leads Theodore to ask Samantha more about her life separate from his, and it comes out that she is currently in love with 641 other people. This crushes Theodore.

Why would finding out that Samantha is currently in love with 641 other people have such an effect on Theodore? Samantha certainly seems capable of maintaining 641 relationships—in the same conversation in which he discovers Samantha’s ambitious love life Theodore also finds out that she is simultaneously talking to over 8,000 other people. Is Theodore’s reaction just petty jealousy? Maybe. But I’d like to suggest another possibility. Perhaps Theodore’s despair reflects the thought that Samantha and his relationship occupies a very different, and seemingly less central, place in Samantha’s life than it does in his. Perhaps Samantha’s 641 other relationships make their relationship feel less significant.[[21]](#footnote-21)

We can understand Williams’ thought that the consciousness of other times, interests, and possibilities might lead to boredom as expressing an analogous worry about the dilution of significance. When one commits oneself to different projects or values in such a way that one has categorical desires about them, one distinguishes those projects or values as especially significant for one’s life. And as one continues committing oneself to different projects or values, one continues marking these objects as especially significant for one’s life. After enough time, though, after marking enough objects as especially significant in this way, one risks diluting the significance of the projects or values to which one had previously committed oneself. For instance, say I choose to relinquish my mortality. The relationship I’m in ends, and I commit myself to another. This new relationship ends, and I commit myself to yet another. Say this pattern continues. I continue committing myself to these relationships, marking them as especially significant for my life. After enough of them, however, how significant is any one of them? This isn’t a remark about the people involved in these relationships, or even the quality of the relationships. It is a question about the place these relationships occupy in my life and history.

Of course, one might worry that Samantha’s loving 641 people at once isn’t analogous to my committing to, say, 641 relationships sequentially, over a long period of time. I’ll return to this worry in the next section. For now, however, it is worth remarking that from the perspective of my whole life, rather than any given moment in my life, the analogy between Samantha and me seems to hold.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The worry, then, is that the significance of our substantive commitments would become diluted if we lived forever. To get a better grip on the import of this worry, we should think more about the character of the significance that our substantive commitments have. Samuel Scheffler has observed that temporal scarcity is one of the “circumstances of value,” one of the conditions, that is, “under which the attitude of valuing comes to play an important role in human life” (2013, 99). Scheffler’s idea is that our mortality and the temporal limits it brings to our lives force us “to establish priorities, to guide our lives under a conception of which things are worth doing and caring about and choosing” (99). When we commit ourselves to some project or value, in other words, we do so against a background of finitude, of the other projects or values to which we aren’t, and won’t be, committing ourselves. And similarly when we change our commitments. When we find our commitments faltering, or when we decide we shouldn’t be committed to something, our finitude continues to set the stage. This gets at what it means to mark some value or project as especially significant for one’s life: the value or project is especially significant relative to the other values and projects one won’t be making central to one’s life. In a sense, one’s life comes to stand for that value or project.[[23]](#footnote-23) The worry, then, is that relinquishing our mortality means giving up the finitude that makes sense of this sort of significance. Moreover, it could mean relinquishing one purpose our lives can have: making our lives stand for something, for some particular values or projects.

This sort of significance, along with the sense of purpose it brings, seems to matter to us greatly. It is often revealed in our attitudes toward our own and others’ lives. When our grandparents have been together since their 20s, we might marvel at how they’ve “dedicated their lives to each other”; when a friend lives her life without any substantive commitments, spending her time working a dead-end job and getting drunk, we might worry she is “wasting her life”; and in moments of existential angst, we might agonize about how we’ve chosen to “live our lives” and whether we’ve “made our lives about” the right things. Similarly, when people advise us to “live each day like it’s our last,” they’re exhorting us to put our energy into those projects or values that are meaningful to us, the kinds of activities that merit our limited time. And then there are thought experiments, for instance: “What would you do if you only had 5 more years to live?” Our answers to such questions are usually taken to reveal our deepest commitments—those things most central to our lives.

The thought, then, is that mortality brings with it a certain sort of significance that is inherent in the very activity of committing oneself to projects and values: because we’re mortal, our lives can stand for something; our commitments accrue a certain symbolic value. Of course, our mortality only plays this role because of the finitude it introduces into our lives. This is worth pointing out, because Williams’ boredom worry concerns that finitude, not death itself. EM’s problem wasn’t that she couldn’t die but, rather, “having been at it for too long.” Choosing to relinquish one’s mortality simply guarantees that one will live too long, for Williams. His worry appears to be that relinquishing one’s mortality ensures the significance of one’s commitments become diluted, ultimately to the point where one’s life cannot stand for anything in particular.

How does losing this sort of significance, how does losing the possibility of our lives standing for things, threaten us with boredom? I believe we can answer this question by returning to the personal nature of the threat of boredom. Williams, remember, challenges us to provide “any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity that would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes, and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life” (Williams 1993, 87)*.* When thinking about the threat of boredom, why should it matter that we have already lived a mortal life, shaped by various commitments to particular values and projects? It seems to be because of how the significance of these commitments is affected by relinquishing one’s mortality. If we relinquish our mortality, then we also relinquish the significance we have already given those projects and values. We may not realize this immediately, but Williams seems to think that after enough time we would come to see this; our consciousness of other times, other interests, and other possibilities would make this loss salient for us. I believe this is the sense in which one’s relation to one’s existence and environment becomes impoverished, for Williams. The very significance of one’s commitments, as things for which one’s life stands, is undermined, and one can no longer commit to things in the same way one formerly could, so one becomes alienated from one’s life and environment—one becomes bored.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**4. Should One Choose to Relinquish One’s Mortality?**

Where does this leave us with our initial question? Should one choose to relinquish one’s mortality? I won’t be so audacious as to offer a definitive answer. However, I think the foregoing discussion should give us pause when considering the question. Relinquishing one’s mortality seems to represent a significant risk. I suspect most of us probably shouldn’t do it; we should certainly all be hesitant about it.

This might appear too modest. Some might think the previous section’s discussion vindicates the Necessary Boredom Thesis, furnishing a negative answer to our question. This seems to be Williams’ position. The idea is this: if we relinquish our mortality, then necessarily the significance of our commitments will become diluted, and so necessarily our lives will no longer be able to stand for things. This will lead one to become bored, because the very activity of commitment will no longer be meaningful. So, no one should choose to relinquish one’s mortality.

This line of thought is underpinned by two propositions. First, it assumes there is only one meaningful kind of commitment in a human life. If that kind of commitment is undermined by immortality, the thought goes, then our lives will lose meaning for us. And second, there is the claim that the significance of our commitments will necessarily be diluted if we live forever, or, in other words, that our lives will be unable to stand for things if we relinquish our mortality. This is what suggests that the very activity of commitment will be undermined if we live forever.

There is reason to doubt both of these propositions. I thus don’t think the above argument decisively shows that *no one* should choose to relinquish their mortality or that existence without death would necessarily be boring.

Consider first the idea that there is only one meaningful kind of commitment in a human life. Call these “life-standing commitments.” When we make life-standing commitments, we mark something as especially significant for our lives; we make that thing central to our lives, so to speak, taking our lives to stand for it. Undoubtedly, this is an incredibly important kind of commitment. However, is it the only possible meaningful kind of commitment? Recall a worry from above: there is a disanalogy between Samantha’s loving 641 people at once and my committing to 641 relationships sequentially, over a long period of time. From the perspective of my whole life, I claimed, the analogy holds. But while from the perspective of my whole life the significance of my commitments might become diluted, if we occupy a temporally relativized perspective this doesn’t seem necessary. I could commit to each relationship as something important to me *now* even if it isn’t important for my life as a whole*.*And there is no reason to suppose that, at the time I’m committed to them, any of the relationships would need to seem less significant for me than any of the others. We can distinguish, then, between two kinds of commitment: life-standing commitment and temporally relativized commitment. Although relinquishing one’s mortality might undermine the former, it doesn’t seem to undermine the latter. This might be enough to sustain immortal existence without boredom.

Even if life-standing commitments are the only kind of commitment that could sustain immortal existence without boredom, we still might doubt that this kind of commitment would necessarily be undermined if we relinquished our mortality. We might doubt, that is, the second proposition from above. Recall, the reason it seems like the possibility of life-standing commitments would be undermined if we relinquished our mortality is that their significance would become diluted as we continued living and committing to new things. The way our finitude limits the number of things to which we can commit ourselves over the course of our existence, it seems, is what gives sense to this sort of significance. But why isn’t it possible that someone make a life-standing commitment to a project or value that is simply inexhaustible? Kieran Setiya has helpfully distinguished between “atelic” and “telic” activities (Setiya 2014, 12-13). Telic activities, like walking home or building something, aim at a final state at which they’re complete. Alternatively, atelic activities have no outcome that exhausts them. There are many such atelicactivities, and it seems possible, at least in principle, for one to commit oneself to some atelic activities forever, thus maintaining a stable set of undiluted life-standing commitments. As many defenders of immortality have suggested, for instance, activities like intellectual inquiry and promoting justice seem to promise endless valuable engagement.[[25]](#footnote-25) And just as our relatively short lives increase the significance of our commitments, committing oneself to something for eternity would likewise increase that commitment’s significance. We can imagine marveling at someone’s eternal dedication to promoting justice. It seems possible, then, for one to meaningfully take one’s life to stand for something in an immortal existence.

I’m therefore doubtful that the previous section’s discussion vindicates the Necessary Boredom Thesis or shows, decisively, that one shouldn’t relinquish one’s mortality. But it doesn’t follow from this that one *should* choose to relinquish one’s mortality. Even if the Necessary Boredom Thesis is false, I believe Williams gives us good reason to worry that we’d become bored during an immortal life. And per the Unthinkability Condition, this gives us reason to think that relinquishing our mortality would be a mistake. Minimally, it seems to me, we should be hesitant about relinquishing our mortality.

Take, first, the thought that we could meaningfully make undiluted life-standing commitments during an immortal life. We could commit ourselves to certain inexhaustible projects or values forever, that is, without our commitment’s significance becoming diluted. While this may be possible in principle, I don’t believe it should provide much assurance for those considering whether to relinquish their mortality.

To begin, it is far from obvious that most people would be satisfied by a life dedicated to the kinds of atelic activities that could be sustained forever. Most people aren’t tempted by lives of intellectual inquiry or promoting justice; many people, for instance, dedicate themselves to their immediate friends and family.[[26]](#footnote-26) Of course, not all such atelic activities need be as high-minded as intellectual inquiry or promoting justice. Our family-oriented person might make a life-standing commitment to being a good friend or matriarch. But this begins to reveal a limitation of atelic activities. As Setiya notes, atelic activities are always mediated through their telic counterparts: “We cannot simply spend time with friends, we have to spend it in some endeavor” (2014, 16). We might add: we have to spend time with *a* *particular person* in some endeavor. And dedicating her life to simply being a good friend or matriarch, rather than making the particular people currently (but not permanently) in her life central to it, might not be satisfying for our family-oriented person. Immortality, that is, would necessitate changing how she relates to the particular people through which she participates in the atelic activity of *being a good friend and matriarch*. Similarly, even the person who could dedicate herself to something like intellectual inquiry would have to relate to the telic activities, through which she participates in her atelic activity, differently than we mortals do. Many academics who dedicate their lives to intellectual inquiry have careers centered upon definite projects. And generally, these projects are very important to them. An immortal would have to relate to those projects differently, however, as something closer to a mere means to some grander activity that she will never finish. This isn’t to say it is impossible for someone to make a life-standing commitment to an atelic activity that could be sustained forever; it is merely to point to some limits of such an existence and to the fact that such an existence isn’t obviously desirable for most people.

Even someone disposed to the kinds of atelic activities that lend themselves to immortality, then, might be unsatisfied with an immortal existence predicated on them. Williams is instructive here. He rejects the idea that intellectual inquiry, which, he admits, is “self-justifying” and affords “endless new perspectives,” could sustain an immortal existence. Explicitly considering someone “who is, in this life, disposed to [intellectual inquiry],” Williams writes:

…looking at such a person as he now is, it seems quite unreasonable to suppose that those activities would have the fulfilling or liberating character that they do have for him, if they were in fact all he could do or conceive of doing. If they are genuinely fulfilling, and do not operate (as they can) merely as a compulsive diversion, then the ground and shape of the satisfactions that the intellectual enquiry offers him, will relate to *him,* and not just to the enquiry. (1993, 88-89)

Here, Williams questions the feasibility of anyone endlessly relating to a particular activity, even one that, like intellectual inquiry, has seemingly inexhaustible value. This is an important point to appreciate, because many have challenged Williams by citing such inexhaustible activities. Martha Nussbaum, for example, writes:

If one were worried that some of one’s commitments might peter out over an infinite time or generate no compelling new projects, one could always focus on the aim to promote justice in the world, an aim that is unlikely to be completely realized in history and which will therefore give our imaginary immortal being plenty of interesting and valuable occupation. (2013, 40)[[27]](#footnote-27)

Something similar can be said for many other atelic activities. Living a decent life and intellectual inquiry both seem to offer “plenty of interesting and valuable occupation.” Williams, though, doesn’t deny that such projects offer endless value. He is, however, skeptical that we could meaningfully relate to them forever. This point is related to his distinction between boredom as a consequence of states or activities and boredom as a consequence of one’s relation to those states or activities. While he admits that intellectual inquiry is self-justifying and affords “endless new perspectives,” Williams isn’t worried about boredom as a response to any poverty of value in that activity itself. Williams’ point is that we actively relate to the activities we undertake and to the states in which we find ourselves. It isn’t enough, then, to remind ourselves of their inexhaustible value. The worry is about whether *we* could engage with them forever.

And there seems to be good reason to worry about whether we could engage with such inexhaustible values forever. As Williams points out, our commitments to activities like intellectual inquiry are reflective of more about us than just an interest in the activity, more than a simple appreciation of the value of the activity itself. Such commitments are most often tied up with other aspects of our character, other commitments we have, and there is a good chance that these other commitments might eventually end or might lose their significance for us if we relinquished our mortality. This point is compounded by the fact that atelic activities require finite components and must be mediated through telic activities. Dedicating one’s life to being a good friend might lose its luster without one’s particular friends; dedicating one’s life to intellectual inquiry might stop being meaningful once one finishes some line of inquiry, once one feels one has completed some significant telic project, which might have drawn one to intellectual inquiry in the first place. Again, this isn’t to say it is impossible for one to meaningfully commit one’s life to some atelic activity forever. There is simply good reason to worry about how feasible such an existence is for most of us.

So far, I’ve focused on life-standing commitments. But what about temporally relativized commitments? Could our immortal existence be meaningfully sustained if our commitments were (primarily) temporally relativized? It seems so, at least in principle. But again, I doubt this should be reassuring for those considering relinquishing their mortality. We have good reason to worry about how sustainable an eternal existence predicated on temporally relativized commitments would be.

To begin, life-standing commitments, along with their attending significance, seem central to most of our evaluative perspectives. Indeed, as I noted above, in the previous section, the importance of life-standing commitments is reflected in our language—“making something of your life,” “wasting your life,” “dedicating your life”; it is reflected in our attitudes—our awe for those who do something with their life, dedicating themselves to something, and our anxieties about the life we’re living; and it is reflected in the fact that many of us, perhaps all of us, find our thoughts sometimes drifting toward our mortality. The prospect of a life that, at best, marginalizes life-standing commitments is thus alien to us. It is unclear what life would be like without this evaluative perspective. Perhaps a life predicated on temporally relativized commitments could be meaningful, maybe even endlessly, but I have my doubts, especially given the significance the things in our lives currently have in virtue of our mortality, in virtue of the fact that we take our limited existence to stand for them.

But why not be more optimistic about the prospects of immortal life? Nick Bostrom and Rebecca Roache (2008), for instance, agree that an immortal existence might be very different from our mortal existence, and they agree that it is difficult to assess what such an existence would be like; however, they suggest that if our lives were radically extended, our expectations could simply change, and this could allow us to continue meaningfully relating to our projects.[[28]](#footnote-28) I’m certainly not in a position to reject this suggestion.

This returns us to a serious issue faced by any discussion of immortality: our severe epistemic limits with respect it.[[29]](#footnote-29) It simply doesn’t seem like we can say anything definitive about what an immortal life would be like. And thus, one doubts we’re in a position to talk about such a life at all, or to judge whether we should choose that life. This is too quick, though. For we know *something* about immortality: immortals aren’t mortal. We can thus reflect on the way our mortality shapes our lives. And once we do—and I take this to be an important insight underlying Williams’ paper—we can begin to see just how formative our mortality is for us; we can get a sense of what we might lose about our lives in relinquishing that mortality. Particularly, the worry is that we would lose one especially crucial way we relate to our worlds, one especially central sort of significance that our values and projects can have. Given the centrality of this significance, it is unclear our lives could remain meaningful without it.[[30]](#footnote-30)

I thus think we have good reason to worry that we’d become bored, alienated from our existence and environment, if we relinquished our mortality. This speaks to the force of the Unthinkability Condition. Boredom, I suspect, isn’t unthinkable for most of us. Of course, this isn’t to say relinquishing one’s mortality would necessarily lead to boredom, nor is it to say one couldn’t possibly live an eternally satisfying existence. But it isn’t obvious most people could, and I’m not sure it is worth risking an eternal existence of meaninglessness to find out. I thus don’t think it is obvious that one should choose to relinquish one’s mortality, and I think, at the very least, one should be hesitant about it. It seems very possible that one would become bored existing without death. Most of us, I suspect, are far from satisfying the Unthinkability Condition.

**5. Conclusion**

Williams concludes his discussion by returning to his puzzle. Necessarily, he writes, death “tends to be either too early or too late.” He continues:

If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident. Technical progress may, in more than one direction, make that piece of luck rarer. But as things are, it is possible to be, in contrast to EM, *felix opportunitate mortis*—as it can be appropriately mistranslated, lucky in having the chance to die. (1993, 92)

Death may seem bad, then, but as Williams notes, with a wry sort of optimism, our deaths ultimately save us from the tedium of immortality. Of course, I’m not as certain as Williams that immortality would necessarily lead to boredom. But Williams’ point, or something close to it, remains for us: we should be hesitant to relinquish our mortality, because we risk a meaningless existence without it. So, at the very least, death provides the reassurance that we won’t succumb to such boredom.

But we have reason to go beyond Williams here. For it isn’t only a negative victory we win from death. It isn’t only that we avoid boredom. As has come out above, we have reason to refuse to relinquish our mortality because it is crucial for a particular style of commitment—a particular sort of significance—that is central to most of our lives. Our deaths are integral to our lives standing for something. The values and projects to which we commit ourselves accrue a special significance in virtue of our mortality, because our commitments implicitly rule out other values and projects to which we might commit ourselves. As mortals with a reflective awareness of our mortality, then, we’re capable of living our lives for certain projects or values. And this way of relating to the things in our lives instills our lives with a distinctive sort of meaning. At least, then, we can take solace in the fact that death provides our lives with this sort of meaning. Perhaps Williams is even right: perhaps we are lucky in having the chance to die.

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1. I borrow “Necessary Boredom Thesis” from Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For criticisms of the thesis, see Fischer 2009; Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014; Nussbaum 2013; and Wisnewski 2005. For defenses, see Cave 2012; Kagan 2012; May 2009; Nussbaum 1994; and Scheffler 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This question has two senses, one moral and another prudential. Here I’m concerned with the prudential: “Would foregoing my mortality be good for me?” Moreover, I’m interested in this question from the standpoint of the person making it. I’m interested in the so-called “subjective” rationality of the choice—whether one ought to relinquish one’s mortality given one’s particular epistemic position as a mortal who has already lived a mortal life. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By the choice to relinquish one’s mortality I mean the permanent decision to become incapable of dying. I’m thus concerned with “true immortality,” as opposed to “medical immortality,” which involves mere immunity from aging and disease (see Cave 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It might appear odd that Williams makes a point about immortality by considering the case of someone whose life was only extended 300 years. As we’ll see in the next section, however, boredom is the result of living too long, for Williams, not immortality itself. There is a corresponding discussion to be had, then, about life extension. Would life extension be necessarily boring? Should we extend our lives? Should we be hesitant about it? Naturally, answers to these questions depend on how long one’s life will be extended. Immortality is a limit case. My discussion of immortality could therefore have implications for life extension more broadly. Nevertheless, I’ll restrict my discussion to (true) immortality. Thanks to a reviewer for suggesting I highlight this here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thanks to a reviewer for pushing me to clarify this difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Couldn’t, though, one put oneself into a state of permanent unconsciousness, like a coma, if things got bad? This objection gives up the larger question at hand. That is, in responding this way one has acknowledged the riskiness of giving up one’s mortality. It is still an interesting question to consider, however, whether and why giving up one’s mortality would be risky; why, that is, one would need the comfort of the possibility of permanent unconsciousness in order to relinquish one’s mortality. Permanent unconsciousness, of course, seems very similar to death. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This helps with a problem Fischer (2009) raises for the Unthinkability Condition. Fischer argues it is unclear why boredom should be unthinkable for an immortal life but not for our mortal lives. The stakes of choosing immortal life, I suggest, explains this asymmetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This notion of unthinkability has been a theme in much of Harry Frankfurt’s writing (see Frankfurt 2006 for recent discussion). Interestingly, Williams also discusses it (see, e.g., his contribution to Smart and Williams 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing this worry. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. What about a scenario where we’re given the option to relinquish our mortality and we’re also somehow given the relative value of the possible outcomes, along with their respective probabilities? I worry this sort of case is incoherent. It isn’t clear to me how a mortal could appreciate the value of immortal existence without being able to comprehend what it would be like. The case thus seems to problematically involve one transcending one’s own practical perspective. If such a case is coherent, however, I doubt the Unthinkability Condition applies to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I return to this theme in section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this paper, drawing on Williams, I thus suggest one sort of reason to think we’d become bored during an immortal existence. I leave open the possibility that there are others. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cheshire Calhoun suggests this in “Living with Boredom” (2011, 275). There, Calhoun offers an account of boredom that is sensitive to the distinction I’m attributing to Williams. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For rich discussions of the distinction, including its difficulties, see Bradley and McDaniel 2013 and Rosati 2013. It is perhaps also worth remarking here on another feature of Williams’ discussion of categorical and conditional desires. For Williams, categorical desires ground death’s badness. This, of course, is contentious (see Timmerman 2016 for criticism). Nothing I say, however, should hang on whether Williams is right about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As a reviewer rightfully pointed out, Williams accepts a stronger claim, tying such commitments to personal identity. This is necessary for Williams’ larger argument. But given its controversy and my purposes here (cf. footnote 18), I’ll bracket this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This isn’t to say such commitments represent the only way we can commit ourselves to something. However, they are one especially important way we do. For discussion of such substantive commitments, particularly how they relate to our attitudes towards death, see [omitted]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Williams isn’t amenable to the prospect of staving off boredom by adopting a completely new set of categorical desires. This is because he argues that this solution undermines the point of wanting immortality in the first place: it wouldn’t be me who survives, or the “me” who survives wouldn’t be recognizable (Williams 1993, 83). Nevertheless, because I’m here concerned with what boredom is, rather than the conditions under which it makes sense to choose immortality, I set this issue aside. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin aren’t the only theorists who read Williams like this. In the next section, I discuss a criticism Martha Nussbaum (2013) has given of Williams’ position that seems to presume this sort of reading. Wisnewski (2005) and Fischer (2009) also appear to read Williams this way, offering criticisms similar to Nussbaum’s. Moreover, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin suggest that even some of Williams’ proponents, including Shelly Kagan(2012), think of the source of boredom along these lines (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014, 358-359). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This wording suggests Rosati reads Williams as subscribing to the foregoing library metaphor. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Might this thought reflect monogamous prejudices? I don’t believe so. First, one might reject the thought that ideal romantic relationships must be monogamous but still hold that having 641 romantic relationships is extreme enough to change the way those relationships can fit into one’s life. But second, a similar effect might be observed in non-romantic contexts. One might feel one misjudged the nature of one’s relationship with a “best” friend, for example, if one found out that friend had 641 other equally intimate friendships. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There is a further complication. In the film, Samantha doesn’t quite understand Theodore’s reaction to finding out she has 641 other relationships. One can easily see why there would be a perspectival gap here: given Samantha’s capacity to engage with seemingly endless individuals at once, her expectations might be different from Theodore’s. I certainly don’t mean to suggest that Theodore’s perspective should be privileged over Samantha’s, especially within the context of their relationship. But by analogy, couldn’t *our* expectations similarly change if we chose to become immortal? Couldn’t dilution simply work differently for immortals than for mortals? I don’t mean to deny this possibility. Indeed, in the next section I argue that we might be able to exist forever without the significance of certain types of projects or values becoming diluted. Nevertheless, there are severe epistemic limitations here, and I’m not sure this possibility should comfort us (i.e., mortal creatures deliberating about whether to become immortal). I discuss these issues in more detail below. Thanks to my reviewers for prompting me to flag this here. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I mean the type of significance here to be distinct from narrative significance, which is often the focus of theoretical discussions concerning the value of things for one’s life (cf. Velleman 1991). Some have argued against the desirability of immortality by suggesting that death is necessary for our lives to have a narrative structure—without death, our lives would be shapeless (see May 2009). This worry is different from the one I’m discussing. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I offer this as an interpretation of Williams. But even if one disagrees with this interpretation, I believe it represents an interesting and challenging account of why immortality might lead to boredom. The larger point of this paper, then, isn’t meant to hang on whether I’ve accurately interpreted Williams. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Granted, atelic activities are always limited: to promote justice one needs injustice to confront, and intellectual inquiry requires objects of inquiry. Still, and perhaps pessimistically, I suspect some atelic activities, including promoting justice and intellectual inquiry, are endlessly sustainable. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I suspect the common appeal to intellectual inquiry or promoting justice says more about the authors who suggest them than about what kinds of lives would satisfy most people. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin make a similar suggestion, citing “other-focused projects” (2014, 358). Wisnewski 2005 similarly suggests musical mastery would provide endless valuable occupation (33-36). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This leaves open, of course, the question of whether the changes in our perspective and expectations are for the best (cf. Harman 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Thanks to a reviewer for encouraging me to expand on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The choice to relinquish one’s mortality is a choice to undergo what L.A. Paul (2014) calls a “transformative experience.” Such experiences have two components. First, undergoing a transformative experience provides access to new information about the experience, information that is accessible only having undergone it. Second, transformative experiences change how one experiences who one is (17). Paul is concerned about our impoverished epistemic position in making such “transformative choices”; it appears impossible for us to gauge the subjective value of our deliberation’s possible outcomes (30-51). Unfortunately, I don’t have the space to address myself to Paul here. However, I take my project in this paper to point to a fruitful direction discussions of immortality might go: framing immortality in terms of transformative choice. Of course, Paul is skeptical that the rationality of these choices can be based on anything but the value of discovering what the transformative experience would be like. I’m less skeptical. I agree with Elizabeth Barnes, who convincingly argues, *pace* Paul: “…there are plenty of cases in which we don’t know what an experience is like, but we nevertheless can rationally choose to avoid that experience based on projected outcomes. And that’s because we can rationally choose based on the belief that *whatever* that experience is like, we’re fairly sure it’s something we don’t want” (Barnes 2015, 775). Barnes argues that this can be the case when deliberating about being eaten by sharks, having children, or undergoing a personality change. We might add: relinquishing one’s mortality. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)