

# Immortality and Boredom

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Received: 4 June 2014 / Accepted: 5 June 2014 / Published online: 29 August 2014  
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**Abstract** In this paper, we aim to clarify and evaluate the contention that immortality would be necessarily boring (the Necessary Boredom Thesis). It will emerge that, just as there are various importantly different kinds of immortality, there are various distinct kinds of boredom. To evaluate the Necessary Boredom Thesis, we need to specify the kind of immortality and the kind of boredom. We argue against the thesis, on various specifications of “immortality” and “boredom.”

**Keywords** Boredom · Immortality · Makropulos Case · Bernard Williams

*Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.—Susan Ertz.*

## Introduction

In his influential and provocative paper, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Bernard Williams argues that immortality (in the sense of living forever and never dying) would necessarily be unappealing for creatures like us.

He writes:

My title is that, as it is usually translated into English, of a play by Karel Capek which was made into an opera by Janacek and which tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, alias Emilia Marty, alias Ellian Macgregor, alias a

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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.<sup>1</sup>

Williams emphasizes that EM’s life had become boring:

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... (Williams 1973, p. 82)

Other philosophers have made similar charges against immortality to the effect that it would necessarily be boring.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we aim to clarify and evaluate this contention. It will emerge that, just as there are various importantly different kinds of immortality, there are various distinct kinds of boredom. To evaluate the thesis that immortality would necessarily be boring (call it the “Necessary Boredom Thesis”), we need to specify the kind of immortality and the kind of boredom. We shall argue against the Necessary Boredom Thesis, on various specifications of “immortality” and “boredom.” We hope that this exercise will be illuminating and we also dare to hope that it will not be entirely boring for the reader!

### Williams on Immortality and Boredom

As quoted above, Bernard Williams describes EM’s life as one of “boredom, indifference, and coldness,” and he goes on to say that “everything is joyless.” Because everything that could happen and make sense to a human individual has

<sup>1</sup> Williams (1973, p. 74). He goes on to write:

If one pictures living forever as living as an embodied person in the world rather than as it is, it will be a question, and not so trivial as may seem, of what age one eternally is. EM was 342; because for 300 years she had been 42. This choice (if it was a choice) I am personally, and at present well disposed to salute—if one had to spend eternity at any age, that seems an admirable age to spend it at.

Perhaps Williams was particularly fond of 42, insofar as he was 42 when he delivered the lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, which was the basis for the article. But Williams evidently did not get the “biological” and “chronological” ages of the main character exactly right. Rosati (2013, pp. 355–356) points out that “[w]e discover in the fourth act that the apparently 30-odd year-old Emilia Marty—a.k.a. Elina Makropulos, a.k.a. Ellian MacGregor, a.k.a. Eugenia Montez—has lived to the ripe old age of 337.” For the purposes of this paper we will assume that EM is “biologically” 37 years old and “chronologically” 337 years old.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, May (2009), Nussbaum (1994), Kagan (2012) and Cave (2012). Arguably, Jorge Luis Borges (1947) makes a similar point in his treatment of the “troglodytes.” Recently, Scheffler (2013, pp. 83–110) has expressed his agreement with Bernard Williams’ position on immortality. In her comments on Scheffler in this volume (pp. 143–146), Seana Shiffrin also lines up on the side of those who would not find immortality choice-worthy for reasons similar to those put forward by Williams and Scheffler.

already happened to her, she has apparently lost any projects that could give meaningfulness to her life. And this is exactly how Williams diagnoses her situation.

Williams introduces a distinction between “conditional” and “categorical” desires. (Williams 1973, pp. 77–78) A conditional desire presupposes that one will continue to live in the sense that it is a desire it makes sense to have only given the assumption of one’s continued life. Some examples would be: desires for adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. But a person who wants these things might not in fact desire to continue to live. One might want pain medication, on the assumption that one is going to go on living, while at the same time wanting one’s life to end. Having a conditional desire is compatible with entertaining the question whether one will continue to live. Insofar as it is an open question whether one’s life will go on, one may assume that it will and desire accordingly. A categorical desire, by contrast, implies a particular kind of answer to the question of whether the person will continue to live by providing one with a reason for going on. A categorical desire may settle the question whether one will go on living (as in the case where one is contemplating suicide), or it may forestall the question altogether (as in the normal case).<sup>3</sup> On Williams’ view, it seems, a categorical desire can be, or ground, a reason to continue to live. Without a categorical desire, one would appear to lack any motivation or reason to continue to live.<sup>4</sup> It is fair to attribute to Williams the contention that because an individual such as EM has simply lived too long (and experienced everything it is possible for someone with a determinate character to make sense of), she has lost any categorical desires that could propel her into the future. She has in this sense lost interest in her life.<sup>5</sup>

We shall call the state of boredom that is constituted by, or perhaps results from, the lack of categorical desires “content-boredom.” One who suffers from content-boredom is not engaged actively with life because he or she lacks any projects stemming from categorical desires. When such projects have been exhausted, the individual has no reason to continue to live. Williams’ claim is that EM suffers from content-boredom.

But it just seems implausible to us, and upon reflection, it can even seem remarkably pessimistic, to suppose that *anyone* in EM’s circumstances would have lost all categorical desires and thus all interest in life. It is certainly an interesting thesis about *infinitely* long human life, or even a human life that extended for millennia or more; but three hundred years (or a bit more) just seem like too few to necessarily result in a complete loss of projects that could provide (or ground) reasons to continue to live (or to want to continue to live)! Moreover, it is not clear

<sup>3</sup> There are different senses of the question whether one will continue to live, and the claim is not that categorical desires settle all of them. Consider the question whether one will recover from cardiac arrest. In one sense, this is clearly settled by matters having to do with one’s physiology. But in another sense, this is a question having to do with one’s psychology. Williams’ claim is that our answer to this question has to do with a certain category of desires that are connected to the rational continuation of a life.

<sup>4</sup> For a thoughtful critical discussion of Williams’ views about conditional and categorical desires, and their connections with reasons (and also happiness), see Rosati (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Compare the summary of Williams’ argument given by Scheffler (2013, p. 94).

that *every* person who might be in EM's circumstances would suffer from her loss of interest in life. We agree with Connie Rosati's reflections on Williams' contention:

Williams is surely right that in virtue of having something like a human character, or at least a certain physiological and psychological makeup, we will each encounter some built in limits to the sorts of undertakings and lives that could hold any interest for us. Still, whether an extended existence would be problematic in the ways he describes would seem to be a purely contingent matter. ... We all know people, for example, who seem to find just about everything interesting, whose inquisitiveness and capacity for enjoyment seem nearly boundless. We all know people who are easily contented with what may seem to us meager offerings. Of course, some people do have a limited capacity for enjoyment and especially rigid aims and interests. But nothing necessarily stops even those of a more 'unfortunate' character from continuing to enjoy their narrow interests. Perhaps the moral, then, is not that extended existence would be undesirable simply because of what it is to have a human character and live a human life, but that it would be undesirable for those whose circumstances will be seriously impoverished or for those who have, as a matter of individual characters, both limited interests and a tendency to become easily and intolerably bored. (Rosati 2013, pp. 365–366)

So, at best, Williams might be right about *some* individuals. But his claim is about *all* persons: that *any* person would *necessarily* run out of categorical desires that could propel him or her into the future.<sup>6</sup> We find this implausible. In order to evaluate Williams' claim more carefully, it will be helpful to distinguish between what might be called "self-focused" and "other-focused" desires.

Self-focused desires have as their content some state or experience or perhaps condition of the agent himself or herself. Prime examples would be desires for oneself to have the pleasures of eating delicious food, listening to beautiful music, appreciating great art, and having sex. The desire to have (for oneself) the pleasures of delicious food—for that warm chocolate chip cookie and vanilla ice cream—is a self-focused desire; of course, the desire that someone else, perhaps one's spouse or child, enjoy a warm chocolate chip cook and ice cream would not be a self-focused desire.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Williams' claim assumes that sameness of personal identity over time requires being propelled by a stable set of categorical desires. His claim is that any set of categorical desires capable of underwriting persistence of the same person would necessarily run out of steam at some point in time, and thus it would no longer be able to propel this person into the future by giving him or her reasons to continue to live. Our focus in the text will be on the challenge of running out of categorical desires, which assumes sameness of identity. This is the problem of boredom. But Williams' claim also raises the problem of personal identity over time. If it is impossible for the same set of categorical desires to propel one indefinitely into the future and if personal identity requires a stable set of categorical desires, then it is impossible to remain the same person over an indefinite span of time. Because the problem of boredom presupposes sameness of personal identity (or else it would not be *one* who is bored, but rather someone else), we simply note the problem of personal identity and our skepticism about it. We are not convinced that sameness of personal identity over time requires the kind of stable set of categorical desires Williams thinks it does.

One of us (Fischer) has argued that certain compelling and significant self-focused desires, suitably varied and distributed over time, could indeed provide reasons to continue to live.<sup>7</sup> He essentially distinguishes, among the class of self-focused desires, between those that result in “self-exhausting” pleasures and those that result in “repeatable” pleasures. He further contends that repeatable pleasures could give us reason to live forever; the projects of cultivating such experiences would not necessarily be lost in an infinite life.

Corliss Lamont puts the point nicely:

I deny that repetition as such leads necessarily to ‘monotony and boredom.’ Consider, for instance, the basic biological drives of thirst, hunger, and sex. Pure, cool water is the best drink in the world, and I have been drinking it for sixty-two years. If we follow through with [the Necessary Boredom Thesis], I ought to be so tired of water by this time that I seek to quench my thirst solely by wine, beer, and coca-cola! Yet I still love water. By the same token, the average person does not fall into a state of ennui through the satisfaction of hunger or sexual desire. (Lamont 1965, p. 33)

It is important, however, to note that Fischer did not contend that all meaningfulness and value in human life, and all reasons to continue to live, can be reduced to pleasures or positive experiences or conditions of the agent. He simply wished to point out that some such features of human life could arguably give an individual a reason to continue to live, even in an immortal life. That is, some such features might well be *sufficient* to generate a reason to continue to live in such circumstances; Fischer did not contend, nor would he wish to contend, that pleasures, positive experiences or states of an agent are (or are parts of) *necessary* conditions for the agent’s having a reason to want to continue to live in an infinitely long life.<sup>8</sup>

Among considerations that can generate (or be) such reasons, there are, after all, other-focused desires and associated projects. And we contend that it is not at all evident that a human being would exhaust the projects that arise from other-focused desires.<sup>9</sup> Consider projects involving seeking cures for terrible diseases and health problems that afflict so many people worldwide, or understanding the underlying physics of the universe, or writing (or deeply appreciating) great novels or beautiful

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Fischer (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Imagine a life in which you are not deteriorating biologically and are otherwise in favorable circumstances. You live comfortably, and every week you have at least some very pleasant experiences—enjoying some good meals, listening to beautiful music, and so forth. Let us say once a month you have great sex. Forever. Now much of what we find meaningful and valuable and choiceworthy in human life—love, friendship, striving for great achievements, helping others, solving the great challenges of the planet—is missing from this picture. Indeed, Fischer would completely agree that much of what we really care about and value is missing from this scenario; he never wished to contend that we can reduce value and meaningfulness to pleasures, even “repeatable” ones. Rather, the issue he addressed was whether such a scenario includes factors that plausibly are or help to generate reasons to continue living an infinitely long life. It is implausible to Fischer to suppose, as apparently Williams must, that there would be no reason for an individual living such a life in what promises to be an immortal existence to prefer to continue to live, rather than to die. That is his point.

<sup>9</sup> For an earlier sketch of this view, see Fischer (2012, esp. pp. 535–536).

poetry, or producing (or appreciating) great (or just beautiful or compelling) art or music, and so forth. Why is it obvious—or even plausible—that we would run out of such projects, even in an infinitely long life (perhaps assuming relevant favorable conditions)?

Start with the health challenges. Consider all the different kinds of cancer, just to begin. Then heart disease and lung disease and kidney disease and liver disease... Think also of diabetes, Lou Gehrig's disease, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, AIDS, malaria, infectious diseases of all kinds, and so forth. Of course, we have just scratched the surface. Is it really plausible that we will be able to cure *all* of these diseases, leaving human beings nothing to work on (in this realm)? Suppose that we do someday find cures for *all currently existing diseases and health maladies*. Surely, by that time, countless other *new* diseases and health challenges will have popped up—new viruses and bacteria are emerging with depressing regularity. Is it really plausible that these will also all be cured and successfully addressed prior to even *newer* diseases and afflictions emerging? Why think that there will *ever* be a time when we will have banished all serious health challenges that would generate projects that could propel people into the future?

Or let us suppose that you wish to write a novel. It is frankly bizarre to suppose that humans will ever get to the point where all the novels, or all the interesting novels, or all the novels worth writing will have been written. Or imagine that you set out to read and appreciate novels. Perhaps you are ambitious, and knowing that you are immortal, you set out to read and appreciate all the interesting novels that have ever been written. Let us suppose that somehow a complete list of these novels is generated at the time you undertake this project. Of course, it will take a long time to get through the list—so long that it is plausible to suppose that a new list, reflecting the interesting novels at the time of completion of the original list, will contain many *new* entries. Again, why suppose that there will not be *new* interesting novels emerging over time, and why think that there will *ever* be a time when there are no new such novels to read? Further, we often can appreciate a great work of art—such as a novel—in new ways when we return to it perhaps after an accumulation of life experiences. Why suppose that once we have read a book on the list (or lists), it is exhausted as a source of enjoyment and insight?

It is almost as though Williams and other proponents of the view that we would lose all our categorical desires and associated projects in an immortal life are in the grips of a problematic metaphor. They sometimes seem to think of the relevant projects as though they were books in a library that contains a large but finite number of books. The idea is that, given an infinite amount of time, a human being could read all the books in the library. (Leave aside the question of the intellectual challenges of reading complicated or technical books, and so forth.) In the grip of this metaphor, one might think that eventually human beings would run out of projects—either other-focused or self-focused.

Consider this passage from Shelly Kagan's provocative and highly stimulating treatment of these issues:

Essentially, the problem with immortality seems to be one of inevitable boredom. The problem is tedium. You get tired of doing math after a while.

After a hundred years, a thousand years, a million years, whatever it is, eventually you are going to say, ‘Yes, here’s a math problem I haven’t solved before, but so what? I’ve just done *so much* math, it holds no appeal for me anymore.’ Or, you go through all the great art museums in the world (or the galaxy) and you say, ‘Yes, I’ve seen dozens of Picassos. I’ve seen Rembrandts and Van Goghs, and more. I’ve seen thousands, millions, billions of incredible works of art. I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?’ And the problem is that there isn’t. There are, of course, things that you haven’t seen before—but they are not new in a way that can still engage you afresh. (Kagan 2012, p. 243)

But why exactly suppose that math would lose its appeal? Of course, as Kagan recognizes, one would need to spread out one’s activities in an immortal life (just as it is sensible to do in a finite life). Under these circumstances, why think that the joy of doing math would disappear, any more than (say) the pleasures of eating fine food, listening to beautiful music, or having sex?

For example, it would be very odd to say, ‘I’ve tried all of the positions in the *Kama Sutra*, and even more, and I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?’ This is jarring for many reasons, not least of which is that sex is not all about different positions or partners: there is something compelling and rich and deeply engaging about the experience itself. We do not think that once the different positions have been tried out, and the experience shared with different partners in various contexts, there is just “nothing to get out of sex”—nothing new or nothing that can “still engage you afresh.” It just is not like that—and it is not like that with any of a variety of evidently “repeatable” pleasures and positive experiences (such as prayer and meditation, engaging with art and music, and, well, perhaps even math).

When Kagan writes, “I’ve seen thousands, millions, billions of incredible works of art. I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?” And the problem is that there isn’t,” it might suggest that he is in the grips of the metaphor of the library with the large but finite collection of books. Our point would be that there is no reason to think that the collection must be fixed. He does however continue, “There are, of course, things that you haven’t seen before—but they are not new in a way that can still engage you afresh.” But why think this? It is almost as if Kagan is thinking that what we “get” from a work of art is purely cognitive—a new piece of information or a new purely cognitive insight. As he puts it, “I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them.” But this is an unduly narrow conception of what we derive from appreciating a novel or a work of art. The experience cannot be reduced to an insight or piece of information. The experience itself may be valuable, and this value may be inexhaustible. Moreover, even if we assume (for the sake of the argument) that the experience is reducible to an insight, why suppose that we can’t get new insights from great novels and works of art, when we come to them anew after the accumulation of more experiences in life?

Think also of friendships. Would it not be weird to say, “I’ve had many, many friends. I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?” This would be bizarre in part because what we get out of friendships (and other personal relationships) is not primarily, and certainly not exclusively, something purely cognitive—an insight or set of insights or bits of information. The richness, beauty,

and meaningfulness of friendships and deep personal relationships cannot be reduced to factors that can “run out,” as it were. When human beings form a new friendship, or appreciate a deep and old one, they experience something very special and unique to this relationship. We do not think that it is obvious that the important characteristics of such relationships would necessarily be gone in an immortal life—even after “thousands, millions, and billions” of friends.

Similar considerations apply to love, which is arguably even more compelling, meaningful, and transformative than even deep friendships. It is sometimes said, with no small measure of insight, that “love makes the world go around.”<sup>10</sup> Could you imagine saying, “I have loved many, many people. At this point I’ve gotten what there is to get out of love. Isn’t there anything new?” This again would seem to be off the mark and inappropriately reductionistic. It leaves out the “particularity” and wonderful magic of love—its ineffable or perhaps irreducible experiential qualities. And it is not at all evident that love—either new love or old love—would lose its beauty and transformative, uplifting power in an immortal life.<sup>11</sup>

Thus far we have considered intellectual challenges such as curing various diseases and addressing health challenges, writing novels, doing math, appreciating works of art, and activities such as participating in meaningful relationships, like friendship and love, and so forth. The metaphor of the library with a finite collection seems particularly inappropriate for these kinds of projects and activities. For instance, why suppose that there is simply a finite and fixed set of diseases and health challenges? Similarly, why suppose that there is a finite and fixed set of environmental and economic problems or math puzzles? Or appealing works of art? Or people for potential friendships and loving relationships?<sup>12</sup>

The metaphor might be more apt with respect to what might be called “fundamental truths.” So, for example, perhaps we will someday have what has thus far proven to be elusive: a comprehensive and accurate physics—a “theory of everything.” Maybe all other sciences would be “reducible” to this fundamental physics, or maybe they would be “autonomous.” But even if they were autonomous, perhaps we would someday have all the truths of these sciences—biology, chemistry, and so forth. If these truths were all fixed and finite, then presumably we could in principle know them, given an infinite amount of time. (Again, leave aside the potential difficulty of grasping such truths

<sup>10</sup> Harry Frankfurt argues essentially that love makes the normative world go around. See, for instance, Frankfurt (2006).

<sup>11</sup> We do not mean to suggest that Kagan is guilty of the confusions we have noted above in the text. Rather, we have sought to identify some possible confusions suggested by some of his formulations, and we are issuing an admonition to his (and our) readers to be aware of the possibility of dismissing the potential desirability of immortality too quickly. We wish to commend Kagan’s book, which is designed in part to introduce students and a broader audience to the fascinating and difficult issues pertaining to death and immortality without exploring all the nuances.

<sup>12</sup> The character, Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged, in Douglas Adams’ series, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, finds himself bored. He thus decides to insult everyone in the universe one at a time in alphabetical order. (Adams 1966, p. 317 f.) We have argued that Wowbagger need not have been bored in virtue of living forever. We note however that his bizarre “solution” seems to presuppose the model of the library with a finite collection. How is it supposed to work given that there would be many new people to insult coming into existence all the time, and at least some of their names would begin with letters he had already gone through?



individually or in their totality.) And then there would arguably be nothing new, or nothing new of interest, to learn.

But this application of the metaphor of the library with a fixed and finite set of books is surely contentious in various ways. First, how do we know that we will *ever* develop the theory of everything? There is no *guarantee* that we will ever a comprehensive general theory of the universe, even given an infinite amount of time. But even if we assume that someday we will have such a theory, and we also assume that human beings (or certain human beings) will be able to grasp the theory, why assume that the *only* projects of interest will pertain to (or be exhausted by) the *basic* or *fundamental* truths? Why will it not be both deeply intellectually interesting, and also important, to apply those truths to pressing social problems, such as economic, environmental, and health challenges? It seems to us a gratuitous and implausible supposition that the only things of intellectual or personal interest would be the fundamental truths of the theory of everything (or the autonomous sciences). In the realm of human interest, there is surely no hegemony of the abstract or fundamental over the more concrete or applied.

### Immortality and Motivation-Boredom

One way in which an individual might be bored is that he or she just does not care about anything—the individual lacks any categorical desires that propel him or her into the future and give him or her reason to continue to live. We have dubbed this sort of boredom “content-boredom,” and we have pointed out that Williams argues that all human beings would necessarily suffer content-boredom in an immortal life (as did EM, on Williams’ view). Another way in which one might be bored is that, although one has categorical desires and projects, one just cannot tap into the energy required to seek to fulfill the desires and implement the projects. It is a kind of listlessness or ennui that we might call “motivation-boredom.”

There are various different formulations of the basic idea of motivation-boredom. One central thought is that, given immortality, our lives would no longer be constrained by time and our decisions would, therefore, lack a certain urgency. Consider this passage from Todd May:

We learn as we grow older that one cannot be everything one wants to be. One must make choices. I would have liked to be a novelist, and have even written a couple of manuscripts. However, I could not become a novelist and a philosopher, and circumstances led me towards the latter. All of us, at some point or another, let go of futures we have envisaged for ourselves...

If we were immortal, we would not face those choices. Our lives would not be constrained by the choices we do make, because we would be able to make others. I could be a philosopher and then be a novelist. I could ride a bike from New York to Arizona, as I once hoped I would... In this sense, it would eliminate one of the great sadnesses of life: regret. It would not eliminate all regret, of course. I could still, for instance, do things to others that I would come to regret. However, there is a certain and devastating kind of regret that immortality would eliminate... associated with who or what one *tried* to become or, better, *allowed oneself* to try to become. To fail

to become something one works or trains or educates oneself for is a disappointment. But it pales in comparison to the regret of wondering whether one could have been *that* if one had only taken one's chances.

If we were immortal, we would not be subject to those regrets. ... There would always be time to try something. ... Personal relationships would change as well. They would become less serious, since less would be at stake. The bonds between parents and children would probably slacken if children were no longer dependent on their parents for survival. ... The same would be true of friendships. The activities I perform with a friend, the confidences I share, the vulnerability I display, the competition we provide for each other: all these things could still happen, but their significance would be diminished by the limitations my immortality places on my ability to sacrifice for him. Moreover, given an infinite amount of time, there would always be the possibility of the same kind of friendship with someone else: if not sooner, then later. There would always be time. (May 2009, pp. 60–63)

And here is a passage from Martha Nussbaum that expresses similar ideas:

... the intensity and dedication with which very many human activities are pursued cannot be explained without reference to the awareness that our opportunities are finite, that we cannot choose these activities indefinitely many times. In raising a child, in cherishing a lover, in performing a demanding task of work or thought or artistic creation, we are aware, at some level, of the thought that each of these efforts is structured and constrained by time. (Nussbaum 1994, p. 229)

Both May and Nussbaum are describing a feature of immortality that may lead to “motivation-boredom.” They allege that in an immortal life one would lack a certain urgency in carrying out one's plans and bringing one's projects to fruition. As May puts it, “There would always be time.” Our finite lives are “fraught” insofar as they are “structured and constrained by time” and the explicit or implicit awareness of death. Relatedly, the significance of some of our projects and relationships are shaped by our awareness of death. Though May and Nussbaum do not explicitly draw the conclusion themselves, one might think that this lack of urgency and time-constraint would sap (some of) one's motivation to pursue various of one's projects, and perhaps even (all of) one's motivation to pursue all of them. This is a different worry from the worry developed by Williams.<sup>13</sup> Williams' concern is that human beings would lose their

<sup>13</sup> It is also different than a worry in this ballpark raised by Scheffler (2013, p. 99). Scheffler's claim is that “temporal scarcity” is a condition on our valuing attitudes playing an important role in our lives. In short, we could not engage in our current practices of valuing if we lived forever because those practices presuppose various time limits. Because there is a tight connection between valuing and motivation, however, Scheffler's worry about valuing may be more similar to the worry about motivation-boredom than Williams' worry about content-boredom is. Nevertheless, it is clear that not all motivation is connected to valuing, so even if Scheffler is correct that we could not value given immortality, it may remain the case that we could be motivated in relevant ways. Moreover, as Scheffler (2013, p. 17) acknowledges, the concept of valuing is not identical to the concept of caring. So it is not clear that his view poses a challenge to our claim that one might be able to care about things in an immortal life. But we grant that the issues here are complex.

projects in an immortal life: they would not care about anything. The current worry is that human beings would lose the energy to do anything about what they care about in an immortal life. Though our projects may still be dear to us and provide us with reason to go on living, the worry is that in the absence of time constraints, caring about things is not enough to propel us into the future (in the relevant sense). At any given time, we may not be moved to do anything about what we care about because there will always be time to do something about it later. The pessimist's thought is that, given immortality, a deep boredom ensues either because we could no longer care (content-boredom) or because we could no longer get ourselves going (motivation-boredom); life would become, as it were, deady dull.

We think that the key to responding to the concerns about motivation-boredom involves a distinction between several kinds of immortality. Just as there are different kinds of boredom, there are different kinds of immortality, and distinguishing between importantly different kinds of immortality will help us to assuage the concerns about motivation-boredom.

Rosati emphasizes the importance of various different conceptions of what a putatively immortal human life would be like:

Consider the difficulty of determining what we are to imagine. Would the person living an immortal life age as we do in our finite lives but very slowly? Would she repeatedly undergo cycles of development, decline, and renewal? Or would she live indefinitely at a particular age, and what age might that be? If at a particular age, how would her development—physical, intellectual, and emotional—be affected? Would she have a body? If so, would her physique and psyche be in or out of sync? And what of her relations with others? Would she be alone in her immortality? A member of some small group? Or would all humans be immortal? And, finally what other features of our world, if any, would remain fixed as those immortals among us carried on endlessly?

The terms of a person's existence make all the difference to its desirability. (Rosati 2012, p. 358)

Indeed.<sup>14</sup> But what has perhaps not received as much attention as it should is the distinction between different kinds of immortality, not just different forms an immortal life might take. We can, and should in this context, distinguish between different kinds of immortality.

The first kind of immortality to consider is what might be called “medical immortality.” This sort of immortality consists in immunity to death by disease or biological deterioration. A medically immortal individual will not die from natural causes. We might conceive of the case in terms of one's body being “biologically frozen” at some relatively felicitous age (in EM's case it was 37) and not subject to deterioration or the contraction of a fatal illness or disease. Medical immortality is to be distinguished from “true immortality,” which consists in invulnerability to death *by any cause*.<sup>15</sup> Someone

<sup>14</sup> For a taxonomy of various models of immortality, especially as they are treated in science fiction, see Fischer and Curl (1996).

<sup>15</sup> We borrow the terminology of “medical immortality” and “true immortality” from Cave (2012, pp. 63, 74–78, and 267–268).

who has true immortality *cannot* die, even if he were to fall off a high cliff or be shot at point-blank range by a machine gun or even hit directly by a powerful bomb. Such an individual would be literally invulnerable to death. These two kinds of immortality do not constitute an exhaustive list (indeed, we will introduce a third kind of immortality below), but the distinction between them has some interesting applications in this context.

One important application of this distinction has to do with our ability to even conceive of an immortal life. Whereas it is at least relatively easy to understand how someone could be medically immortal, it is difficult to comprehend how someone could be truly immortal, apart from theological contexts. A secular version of true immortality (that is, not positing an afterlife in the theological sense)<sup>16</sup> would imply that if someone were to be directly hit by a nuclear bomb, and his body were pulverized, he would somehow not die—perhaps the body could be reassembled from the materials from which it had been made, or from similar materials, or from materials good enough to assure personal identity.<sup>17</sup> It seems exceedingly difficult to begin to imagine how we might bring about the existence of truly immortal individuals. How could it be supposed that, even if we could cure all the currently existing diseases or somehow render human beings immune to their ravages and otherwise eliminate biological deterioration, we would thereby also render human beings able to survive multiple stabbings, severe car crashes, gunshots at point-blank range, being directly hit by bombs, being struck by tornadoes, earthquakes, and so forth? For this reason, we think that medical immortality, rather than true immortality, is the kind of immortality to which it is reasonable for human beings to aspire (if *any* form of immortality is). It follows that discussion of the desirability of immortality (religious contexts aside) should focus on medical immortality.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The theological sense of “the afterlife” is to be distinguished from the nonstandard, yet very interesting, sense of “the afterlife” introduced by Scheffler (2012, p. 15): “that others will continue to live after I have died.”

<sup>17</sup> It might be helpful to distinguish two forms of true immortality. In the first form, one is invulnerable to death in virtue of one’s *intrinsic* features. Here we suppose that one is so strong that one cannot be pulverized, and so forth; perhaps one has an extremely strong protective membrane or skin that renders one invulnerable to death. In the second form of true immortality, one might be molecule-for-molecule isomorphic to a medically immortal individual, but nevertheless be invulnerable to death because of the actual or hypothetical behavior of some other agent. So perhaps God has situated the individual such that he will never be killed, or perhaps God would intervene to reassemble him, should he be hit by a bomb, and so forth. It is not clear whether one would deem such individuals medically immortal but in maximally safe places (or with “guardian angels”), or truly immortal; for our purposes nothing hinges on whether to so construe such individuals or to consider them truly immortal in virtue of extrinsic properties (as above).

It is interesting to consider whether in Heaven the individuals are immortal in virtue of intrinsic or extrinsic properties. Either way, they cannot die. On one way of thinking about such individuals, they will live (or exist) forever in virtue of their intrinsic properties (perhaps they are souls and by their very nature cannot be destroyed). Such individuals would be true immortals (of the first form). On another way of thinking about the individuals in Heaven, they will live (or exist) forever in virtue of their extrinsic properties—God has so arranged an environment in which they will never be attacked or “killed” (or caused to go out of existence). These individuals are either medical immortals in maximally safe environments or true immortals (of the second form).

<sup>18</sup> Of course, there is indeed considerable interest these days in enhancing longevity and even achieving a kind of immortality. For a helpful discussion, see Weiner (2010).

This focus on medical immortality is, to some extent, borne out in the literature. Williams' famous discussion of EM is a case in point. She surely did not have true immortality; the elixir did not render her invulnerable to a whole host of natural disasters and other contingencies. She could have fallen off a horse or been murdered by one of her many former lovers or died in myriad other ways. She did not even have medical immortality, strictly speaking, insofar as the elixir only secured medical immortality for three hundred years; she would presumably need to take it every three hundred years to get medical immortality (a possibility forestalled in the play by the destruction of the formula).<sup>19</sup>

The kind of immortality represented in the case of EM is relevant to the question whether it was inevitable that she became bored. Given that EM had at best a form of medical immortality, and not true immortality, she would have been vulnerable to a range of contingencies that should have banished motivation-boredom. It is simply not the case that her life was unconstrained by time. Given her relatively expansive time-frame, her projects may not have been as urgent as yours or mine, and her relationships may not have been structured by time in exactly the same ways as ours are. But, then again, our lifespans are much longer than those of our ancestors who lived only a hundred and fifty years ago.<sup>20</sup> The relation of EM's situation to ours is not unlike the relation of our situation to that of several generations ago. If we do not suffer from motivation-boredom, why should we suppose that she would?

The more general point, we contend, is that the problem of motivation-boredom would only arise given true immortality, not medical immortality (the only sort to which human beings could reasonably aspire—apart from religious views about the afterlife). This has not been noticed or sufficiently appreciated by many who have discussed the relationship between immortality and boredom.<sup>21</sup>

About medical immortality, Stephen Cave writes:

<sup>19</sup> In allowing the elixir to be destroyed, EM chooses to give up her medical immortality. In Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*, the "half-elf," Arwen chooses to give up her *true immortality* because she is in love with the human being, Aragorn. In the movie, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Arwen says, "I would rather share one lifetime with you [Aragorn] than face all the ages of this world alone. I choose a mortal life." Note that for Tolkien hobbits and humans are mortal, elves truly immortal, and half-elves must choose between mortality and true immortality. We have benefited here from Davis (2003). We thank Garrett Pendergraft for bringing Tolkien's treatment of these issues to our attention.

Of course, there are countless fictional treatments of these issues in which characters feel trapped by the prospect of immortality and choose to "escape it." For a theological allegory in which Mr. Weston, who (it turns out) is the creator of the world, voluntarily gives up his immortality (in the face of boredom and despair), see Powys (1925).

<sup>20</sup> Weiner (2010, pp. 10, 11) writes:

... we live in a new time, with a somewhat different sense of time. Our life expectancies are increasing by about two years per decade, or about five hours per day, according to the standard estimates of scientists who study human life spans. That is to say, for every day we live now, we are given the gift of another five hours to live later on. While time runs out today, time pours in tomorrow...

By 1900, in the most developed countries of the world, including England and the United States, life expectancy had crept up to forty-seven years. ... By the end of the twentieth century, babies could expect about seventy-six years....

<sup>21</sup> An exception is Cave (2012, p. 267), whose treatment we go on to discuss in detail. But see, especially, the quotation in note 23, below.

The tricky thing about staying alive forever is that it just takes one little fatal accident and it is all over. Surviving is not something you do once then take it easy; you have to do it every day, every hour, every minute. You might feel you are just hitting your stride after your first few million years, but still anything from a faulty brake cable to a herd of angry elephants could end it all in a second. When it comes to ways to die, your imagination is the limit—as the infamous tramway authority sign reminds us: ‘Touching wires causes instant death—\$200 fine.’

One longevity researcher, Professor Steven Austad of the University of Texas, calculated in 2010 that the average lifespan of a medical immortal would be 5,775 years. In other words, if you were immune to aging and disease, this is roughly how long you could expect to live before you accidentally drove off a cliff or fell down a well. (Cave 2012, p. 74)

He continues:

Even in the United States, living to such a ripe old age would require something like the normality of contemporary American life to continue for thousands of years—and that in itself is extremely unlikely. The greater part of human history has not been spent in peace and prosperity with a stable climate—and the future does not promise to be any different. On the contrary, there are many threats to our existence—individually and as a species—that are likely to ambush us on the long road to eternity. (Cave 2012, p. 75)

Return to May’s claim that in an immortal life our activities would be sapped of their “urgency”; insofar as “there will always be time,” our lives would not be “fraught.” Similarly, recall Nussbaum’s claim that the “intensity” of many human activities depends of our lives’ being “structured and constrained by time.” It should now be obvious that even if a human being were to achieve medical immortality, he or she could not be confident that there will always be time (or that there are not very real constraints on the time remaining to him or her). A medically immortal individual could not safely assume that there will always be more opportunities to succeed in any undertaking—intellectual, artistic, athletic, or in the realm of human relationships. Thus, motivation-boredom would not necessarily be a problem for a medically immortal human being; this individual’s life could still be fraught and his activities urgent.<sup>22</sup> Time would still be finite and precious, even though he would have more of it. Our lives would still be structured and constrained (perhaps unconsciously) by an awareness of the finitude of our opportunities, even if we could expect longer lives and were subject to fewer mortal perils.

If we had true immortality, our lives really would be unstructured by time in the ways noted by May and Nussbaum. And this *may* make it the case that we would be subject to motivation-boredom in *certain* aspects of our lives. Cave illustrates the problem in terms of rational choice:

<sup>22</sup> More precisely, motivation-boredom would not be a *special* problem for a medically immortal human being. There is no reason to suppose that there are no mortal humans who suffer from motivation-boredom. Our point is that medical immortality would not render one especially vulnerable to this affliction simply in virtue of one’s (medical) immortality.

The deep problem is this: the value of a thing is related to its scarcity—people conscious of their mortality value their time and aim to spend it wisely because they know their days are numbered. But if our days were not numbered, this incentive would disappear: given infinity, time would lose its worth. And once time is worthless, it becomes impossible to make rational decisions about how to spend it. The consequences of this for an individual would be bad enough; for a civilization of such ditherers it would be disastrous.<sup>23</sup>

If one were truly immortal, one might be able to be confident, in any case, that there really would be more time. For any decision whether to do something at a time  $t_1$ , it might seem that one could be confident that there would be some future time,  $t_2$ , at which one could do that thing instead. To recall one of May's examples, one who wanted to become a novelist could put this off in order to become a philosopher first. In fact, there may be some other pursuit in favor of which one might rationally put it off any time one faced the decision whether to begin working on becoming a novelist. One might think that one could be confident that there would always be time to work on writing in the future, and so one might never be moved to pursue the project of becoming a writer, even if one cared about becoming a writer. The point seems to generalize. For any project  $P_1$  and time  $t_1$ , it would seem that there would be some other project  $P_2$  that one could do at  $t_1$  and a later time  $t_2$  at which one could begin project  $P_1$ . So there is the danger that one might never be moved to pursue  $P_1$ .<sup>24</sup>

It is not clear that the difficulty Cave identifies is the same as, or entails, motivation-boredom. There are after all some projects that would be time-sensitive even given true immortality.<sup>25</sup> Consider, for example, a desire to visit the pyramids of Egypt. It is plausible to assume that these landmarks would continue to disintegrate, even if one (or all) of us has achieved true immortality. There will not always be time to visit them in the future because they will not always be there. If one wants to visit the pyramids, one had better not put it off for too long. This is one among many projects that would be constrained by time independently of the

<sup>23</sup> Cave (2012, p. 266). Later, Cave insightfully adds:

What is particularly interesting about this problem—the problem of an infinite future—is that it does not affect all immortality narratives equally. If, for example, one of Linus Pauling's successors formulates a medical elixir that could stave off aging indefinitely, they would not thereby make us immune to death in all its forms. So-called medical immortals could always hope to live to the next year or decade or century, yet the Reaper's scythe would still be hovering. Given all the things that could go wrong, from a piano falling on their head to the heat death of the universe, the medical immortals would not therefore be faced with a truly infinite future. They might have a challenging time planning their lives, not knowing if those lives would last fifty years or fifty thousand, but it would not be impossible.

The situation of what we might call a "true immortal" who cannot die would be quite different... and the aimlessness of unceasing eons beckons. (Cave 2012, pp. 267–268).

<sup>24</sup> This situation obviously poses a serious risk of procrastination. The possibility of pursuing project  $P_2$  at  $t_1$  at least offers the possibility of what John Perry (2012) calls, "structured procrastination," in which we do get *some* things done, even if they are not the things about which we are procrastinating.

<sup>25</sup> Niko Kolodny makes some similar points in his comments in Scheffler (2013, pp. 167–268). For Scheffler's reply, see Scheffler (2013, pp. 201–207).

timeframe of one's existence. It is not clear that the mere fact that one will always have time in the future entails that one will never be motivated to do anything. There are things one might want to do that require action now (or in the near future). Some of these require action now because the opportunities to do them will (or might) be lost over time. Other activities require action now because of their nature—such as the pursuit of certain pleasures or the avoidance of pain, suffering, alienation, depression, and so forth. The realization that “one will always have time” does not offer much comfort to someone in agonizing pain now.

A second reason that Cave's problem about rational choice given true immortality may not entail motivation-boredom is that, as Rosati points out, it is unclear how we are supposed to conceive of a truly immortal human life. Suppose that a truly immortal human being would age until a certain age—say, 37—and then age no more for eternity. This would not seem to obviate the special significance of one's early childhood relationship to one's parents. A true immortal would still have formative years, they would still come at a specific time (namely, early in the child's life), and this would provide a temporal structure for his or her parents' lives. Perhaps given the relevant desires, a parent would have special reason and motivation to do certain things at certain times. For example, a father who cared about seeing his child roll over or walk for the first time would have special reason and motivation to be around his child for the first year of life. The fact that they will both live forever would not change this. (It would be absurd to reply that there will always be time to roll over and walk later.)<sup>26</sup>

In sum, it seems to us that the puzzle of rational choice facing true immortals (as articulated by Cave) does not clearly entail a generalized motivation-boredom. And even if it were established that true immortals would be necessarily motivation-bored, this would *not* entail that medical immortals would be. Since medical immortality is the only type of immortality it is reasonable for us to aspire to (religious contexts aside), we can reasonably put to one side concern about motivation-boredom as it pertains to human immortality.

But there is a potential objection to our claim that motivation-boredom is not a problem for medical immortals that it is worth considering. And here we arrive at a third kind of immortality. Call it “robust immortality.” A robustly immortal individual is vulnerable to death, so he or she is not truly immortal, but will never die, so he or she is not merely medically immortal. We might conceive of a robustly immortal individual as a medically immortal individual with an incredibly felicitous (and never-ending) actual life path. This individual can die, but she never will die because, as things actually turn out, no mortal harms will ever beset her. Because she will never die of natural causes (given her medical immortality) or of mortal

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed discussion and defense of the claim that our reasons would be “time-sensitive” (or urgent) even in true immortality, see Fischer (2005, esp. pp. 156–160).



harms (given her lucky life path), she simply will live forever. Her longevity is identical to that of a true immortal.<sup>27</sup>

The objection we want to consider begins by positing a robustly immortal individual with perfect knowledge of the future.<sup>28</sup> This person, by whatever means we want to imagine, comes to know that she will never die. Even though she could die, and we may suppose that she knows this, she can rest assured, given her knowledge that she will not die, that her life will go on forever. She knows, and we may suppose that it is true, that none of the possible ways in which she might die will actually obtain. She will never be hit by a bus or a bomb or be shot or stabbed, and she knows this. What we have here is an individual who is not truly immortal but also knows that her life is not bounded by time, and it may seem as though this robustly immortal individual is just as subject to motivation-boredom as a truly immortal individual would be. That is, we seem to have a counterexample to our claim that motivation-boredom is only an issue (if it is an issue at all) given true immortality.

While this is an interesting objection, we do not think that it poses a problem for us. The first thing to note is that we have already claimed that it is unclear that a truly immortal individual would necessarily be motivation-bored. It is simply not clear that a truly immortal individual would approach matters with the attitude that there would always be more time. There are certain projects (e.g., raising a child, visiting the pyramids) that are time-sensitive, irrespective of one's own longevity. This point holds just as well in the case of the robustly immortal individual. She may be motivated to do certain things now because it will not be possible to do them later. And this imposes temporal constraints on her deliberation and life planning. The thought that her desire to see the pyramids must be satisfied before they disappear makes it rational for her to get moving sooner rather than later. Thus, and for the same reasons as in the case of a true immortal, it does not seem to be the case that a robustly immortal individual would necessarily be subject to motivation-boredom.

Our second response to this objection is compatible with granting that truly immortal individuals would necessarily be motivation-bored. Even so, we think that

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<sup>27</sup> Note that robust immortality is distinct from true immortality due to extrinsic factors, considered above in note 17. A robustly immortal individual can die, whereas a truly immortal individual cannot. One might put this difference between them in terms of accessible possible worlds representing future possible circumstances involving them. There are accessible possible worlds in which the robustly immortal individual dies, but there are no accessible possible worlds in which the truly immortal individual dies. What these two individuals share in common, it seems, is that the fact that neither will die is due, at least in part, to extrinsic factors. In the case of the truly immortal individual, of course, the extrinsic factors ensure that he cannot die, not just that he will not die.

Note also that it would not seem reasonable to aspire to achieve robust immortality. The kind of luck with respect to external factors required for it to be the case that no mortal events ever obtain in one's case is not something it seems one could reasonably aspire to bring about. One might aspire to take reasonable care and to be safe, but there is only so much one can do. It would be unreasonable to aspire to obviating all possible harms forever. So the possibility of robust immortality does not challenge our claim that medical immortality is the only kind of immortality it is reasonable for us to aspire to (putting aside theological contexts).

<sup>28</sup> We would like to thank Jonah Nagashima and Michael Nelson for raising this objection and related considerations in response to an earlier version of this paper.

the way in which a robustly immortal individual might approach her life, given her knowledge that she will not die, may serve to combat motivation-boredom in her own case. It is not implausible to suppose that such an individual might feel quite lucky. After all, she could die from any number of causes, but she will not. What is more, she knows this about herself. She need not worry about leaving behind loved ones or unfinished business. Every relationship she enters into and every project she begins is one she knows she will be able to see through. Whether or not one should or must feel lucky in these circumstances, it is at least conceivable that one would. And this, we think, is enough to block the claim that a robustly immortal individual would necessarily be subject to motivation-boredom.

It is not only conceivable that such an individual might feel lucky about her circumstances and her knowledge of them, but it is also plausible that this sentiment might motivate her to really make something of her life. This thought would be even more compelling if her circumstances were exceptional—that is, if she were the only individual, or one of only a few individuals, who not only would not die but also could be certain of this. She might feel as though she should repay her good fortune to the universe, as it were. “Given that I can be certain that I will live forever, I am going to be sure to make the best of it,” she might say. And surely it is not compatible with making the best of things to continuously put them off and never get anything done. If this approach to a robustly immortal life is even a remote possibility, then it shows that motivation-boredom is not inevitable for a robustly immortal individual.

## Conclusion

Many philosophers have thought that immortality, even under relatively favorable circumstances, would necessarily be boring and thus unattractive. Williams famously invoked the story of EM to bolster the Necessary Boredom Thesis. But we have argued that the thesis cannot properly be evaluated without distinguishing different kinds of immortality and different kinds of boredom.

Williams argued that EM suffered from content-boredom and that any immortal human being would have to suffer from such boredom. We have called this claim into question. If we consider self-focused desires and their associated projects, it is just not at all clear that these couldn't be connected to *repeatable* pleasures (and rewarding experiences) that could well banish boredom and give rise to reasons to want to continue to live. And if we consider other-focused desires and their related projects, it is again just not clear that they would be exhausted in an immortal life. One could mistakenly think so if one were unduly influenced by the metaphor of the library with a large but finite collection of books, or if one conceptualized the value of experiences reductively in terms of insights or bits of information.

Others, such as May and Nussbaum, have offered considerations that suggest that any immortal human being would have to suffer from motivation-boredom. It is not as though such individuals would not care about anything; rather, they would not be able to (or be inclined to) tap into the energy required to get anything done. (They could perhaps be thought of as chronic procrastinators.) But if this is indeed a

problem (and we have provided reasons to think it is not), it is a problem only for those with true immortality, as opposed to medical immortality (or robust immortality). And medical immortality is the only sort of immortality human beings could reasonably hope for, apart from religious conceptions of the afterlife. Even though it is admittedly an imaginative stretch to suppose that human beings could someday achieve medical immortality, it is just not at all plausible that we could achieve true immortality (in this world).

So even if on *some* models of immortality, some or even all individuals would be bored, this in no way implies the Necessary Boredom Thesis. And that's what Williams and others have insisted upon: the contention that no matter how one tells the story of a putatively immortal human life, it would necessarily be boring (if it really is the story of a single human's life).

**Acknowledgments** For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper and the issues discussed here, we would like to thank Dave Beglin, Taylor Cyr, Heinrich Hellwig, Maxwell McCoy, Chris McVey, Jonah Nagashima, Michael Nelson, Carlos Ruiz, Travis Timmerman and Mark Wrathall. The writing of this paper was supported in part by the John Templeton Foundation but does not necessarily reflect its views or stances on any of the issues discussed.

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