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Immortality, Memory and Imagination

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Abstract Immortality—living forever and avoiding death—seems to many to be desirable. But is it? It has been argued (notably by Williams, recently by Scheffler) that an immortal life would fairly soon become boring, trivial, and meaningless, and is not at all the sort of thing that any of us should want. Yet boredom and triviality presuppose our having powerful memories and imaginations, and an inability either to shake off the past or to free ourselves of weighty visions of the future. Suppose, though, that our capacities here are limited, so that our temporal reach is fairly significantly constrained. Then, I argue, these alleged problems with immortality will recede. Moreover, similar limitations might help us in the actual world, where life is short. If we cannot see clearly to its end points, both ahead and behind, life will seem longer.

Keywords Immortality · Memory · Imagination · Boredom · Triviality · Meaning

Many people believe they will live forever. Many more, while lacking this belief, nevertheless hope, or would like, to live forever. But there is a difference. Although the boundaries here are not sharp, belief in immortality is, typically, belief in some sort of endless life, often of a not altogether familiar kind, that comes to us after death. The hope, where there is not the belief, is often for an avoidance of death, and a continuation of the life we already enjoy. It is this second form of immortality—let us just say secular rather than religious—that I am concerned with here. Though many think that a life without end is desirable, and would like it to be offered them, there are well-known objections. How powerful are these? Several writers have

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claimed they are exaggerated, and that the problems with immortality are more fanciful than real. But rather than explore these alleged solutions to the immortality problem, many of them already well aired, I go on to offer a different solution which, or so I claim, is more buoyant.

Hoping to live forever is not very sensible. It is like hoping to fly, or to wake up one morning looking like your favourite film star. Immortality is, to put it mildly, a long way off. Even so, and sensible or not, we can profitably discuss it. The first sections here begin by treading what will for many be familiar ground. But then the solution I offer leads into territory less familiar. In later sections I consider the extent to which the strategies within this alleged solution can be redeployed in such a way as to offer assistance with our current and mortal lives. A final section, somewhat speculative, considers why it might be that we have need of such strategies.

1 Immortality

1.1 Preliminaries

Imagine you are offered the elixir of life. Will you take it? You need to get clear about three things, first, what it is you want, second what the elixir will deliver, and third what attendant circumstances might be like.

Some people are terrified by the thought of going out of existence. A world that ceases to contain them is not one they can bear to contemplate. Such people have no need of eternal life. We can claim that they will exist when dead, and suggest that mummifying or freezing, soon after death, will give them what they want.[1] Suppose, though, that being dead is what they fear.[2] Again, no elixir is needed. Utilise cryonics, and arrange—presumably at some considerable expense—to have your body frozen before you die, and thereafter to be forever maintained. You now have what you want. There is room for a question here. Are you, when in this frozen and non-dead state, alive? Or do you occupy some intermediate position? If the aim is simply to avoid death the answer to this question won't be of great concern.

Most of those wanting immortality are looking for more than to avoid death. They want more of life. Suppose those who are frozen remain alive. Then if the concern is simply with life, these people also get what they want. They get what they want, too, if the body is not altogether frozen but is nevertheless very much shut down, with vital functions perhaps aided and sustained by machines. But the concerns of those wanting immortality are rarely this meagre. Mere biological life is not the aim. Rather the concern, often, is with a psychological life also—people want more of the life of mind, they want to continue, and forever, to have experiences. Again, it might seem possible for such a desire to be satisfied in a somewhat attenuated fashion. Perhaps some will think that merely having

[1] See Belshaw (2009) for discussion and defence of the view that the dead exist.

[2] See Philip Larkin's 'Aubade' (in *Collected* Poems) for a moving articulation of this fear.

experiences is itself a good thing, and worth having, whatever their content[3] And perhaps things can be arranged so that you feel something or other just once or twice a day. Most, however, will want considerably more than this, looking for experiences which are first overall good and second constitute something like a human life. But suppose the choice is 30 more years of the life you are living, or an abrupt end to this and an infinitely long wholly new life, a good life, and a human life but one that is, however, psychologically disconnected from the life you live now. Very few, I think, will take the elixir under these conditions. How connected is this extra life to be? If you're very happy with your life now, you might want something closely resembling this life to be ahead, and into the distant future. If you are less happy you will countenance change. Still, what is very likely is that you want to remain, and continue as the same person. And you want to persist with something like the same life.[4]

Suppose an elixir appears to offer this. You might be tempted. But you should look more closely, before succumbing. Is it guaranteed to work? And does it work simply if it gives you eternal life? What about ageing? You probably will not want to live forever if anything like the familiar ageing process continues unabated. Ideally, perhaps, you will be able to select and stick at some favourite age from hereon. And there are two further issues, more complex, and related to each other that need also to be considered.

Not only do we age but we are susceptible to accidents and disease. Does the elixir give you also some sort of omnipotence—you simply cannot go blind, or lose a limb—some marvellous powers of recuperation—eyes recover, and limbs promptly regrow—or do such susceptibilities remain? The first two options are not easy in detail to imagine, and in any event take us a long way from a recognisable human life. The third option might appear to render this elixir distinctly unattractive. But there is here an important question about the modal character of your immortality. Are you going to be necessarily immortal, someone who simply cannot die, or is death something that might occur? If the former, then irreparable damage from outside certainly needs to be ruled out. You do not want to have to live on forever in a seriously incapacitated state. But again, forever without any possibility of damage is highly fanciful. Perhaps then we should suppose the elixir will offer only contingent immortality—ageing is gone, but other human frailties remain, so that in principle, and with excessive care, you could go on forever, while in practice your life might be considerably longer than now but might, depending what risks you take, equally be short. A different sort of contingent immortality is in possession of those who can choose to end life, but are safe from having an exit thrust upon them. Suppose damage occurs and cannot

[3] Nagel (1979) appears to suggest that having experiences, irrespective of its contents, is a good thing, and a reason to avoid death. Look more closely, however, and the strongly counterintuitive position—a life of wholly bad experiences is always better than no life at all—isn't advanced here. Rather Nagel claims only that the positive value of experience can offset *some* degree of badness to experience's contents. But perhaps this is counterintuitive nevertheless.

[4] These are, I suggest, the sorts of things most of those interested in immortality, here and now, are likely to want. But variety needs to be countenanced here. See, for example, Chappell (2015) for a rather different view as to what might be wanted.

effectively be repaired. These people can elect to carry on nevertheless or, instead, to call it a day. Going on forever is possible, but the opt-out is always available.

An elixir which, once taken, commits you irreversibly to living on should surely be approached with great circumspection. It might lead you to something very like the traditional hell. And if this danger is ruled out, either by super-strength or super-healing, the resulting life is still suspiciously different from anything we know now. In contrast, a life which is otherwise close to this, but where the inconvenience and indignities of ageing are removed, and where, as a result, death is no longer inevitable might seem altogether attractive. Even more attractive, for many, will be the intermediate position, where death is yours for the asking but is otherwise removed. Yet there is a caveat here. Giving up on a finite life, when things are not working out, is something that in some circumstances we have reason, and are able, to do. You will die anyway in 5 years, and it is pretty much certain that the intervening period will be bleak. Giving up on forever is going to be different—it might be exceedingly difficult not to suspect that in the long run things will improve.

I said that there is a third factor to consider, involving the attendant circumstances of your immortality. Assuming that you want something like your current life to continue, but forever, then you probably want some sorts of stability and familiarity to persist in the world about you, perhaps with some quasi-immortality for landscapes, cities, weather systems, and with food supplies, libraries and art collections to accompany you into the future.[5] And what about other people? Will they too be immortal, or will forever be yours alone? This is evidently an important question and will be revisited below. Right now it is enough to note the relations here. If others are immortal it might seem more likely that your surroundings will retain their familiar guise—they will have no more incentive than you to alter things. But if they live, age and die in familiar ways, with familiar patterns of innovation and disruption along the way, then your environment is perhaps likely soon to become unsettling and inhospitable.

1.2 Approximations

Those tempted by the elixir are most likely wanting to be, and to know, that they are immortal. But it needs to be considered what value there might be in something falling short of this.

You want more life. And you want it to be good. An early issue of the elixir offers less than forever, but a considerable extension nevertheless, say to 10,000 years. You get a good deal of what you want. It might be suggested that you get here only an infinitesimal fraction of what you want—forever is a very long time—but it may be that this not quite right. 10,000 years is, compared with 80 or 90, a very long time. And as, perhaps, you might have some faint idea of what living 10,000 years would be like, but no idea at all of what living forever would be like

[5] One objection to immortality, not infrequently encountered, is that the whole notion is deeply incoherent. Nothing will go on forever—the laws of physics will see to that. This is not a good objection. We are—as most discussants acknowledge—already in fantasy land in imagining our living for even a thousand years. There is no reason not to take the fantasy further.

then this hyper-extended life might be as good as you can reasonably hope for. Suppose, however, the concern is not so much with gaining life as simply in avoiding death, then this long life fails to deliver. What you fear will come, and assuredly, even if its coming is delayed.

There's a further point to be made about what in one sense can be seen as just a partial success. We might at first think we want always to live, but on greater reflection find this not to be the case. Almost none us want to be alive forever, or at all times, but at most forever more, or at all future times. This connects, of course, with the earlier point that what we want is something approaching more of the same. Plausibly, the person I am can survive and go out of existence later, perhaps much later, perhaps never at all. But the person I am cannot have come into existence earlier.[6]

Those who want simply never to disappear or die might be puzzled by this. How can it be so very bad for there to be a future time when I do not exist, given that it is not bad that there is a past time from which I am equally absent? Those who want more life will be less puzzled—more of this life can only be located in the future. And now thinking on this may cause the death fearers to revise their view: simply not existing cannot be that bad, and so perhaps it is after all the loss of life, the ending of all this, that upsets them.

The contrast here, between forever, and forever more, links to a contrast that surfaces often in religion, or mythology. God, or the gods, are typically understood as living at all times, and neither coming into, nor going out of existence. Human being either both begin and end, or they begin and, acquiring then immortality, cease to end. But now it should be noticed that portrayal of the gods, especially when they have more, rather than fewer, human characteristics, is often made in such a way as to suggest that their lives are shallow, their moods fickle, and their concerns essentially meaningless. This might prompt some reservations about the value of immortality, and suggest that such reservations have long been around. What though, in religion and mythology, of humans who acquire immortality, becoming to some degree godlike? The picture here, obviously germane to what is to follow, is more complex, but it can be claimed that our attitude is ambivalent—it is not wholly clear that we can easily tell stories in which even acquired immortality delivers a satisfying and meaningful life.[7] And, of course, getting clearer here forms much of the business to follow.

Consider further respects in which things may fall short. You want to know, and thus to have at least the true belief, that you are immortal. You get a part of this if either you believe it (even though it is false) or it is true (even though you do not believe it). What should we think of these partial successes?

Suppose, as many claim, that an immortal life would be bad for us. I will suggest later that if we are immortal but do not know it then these alleged problems will recede. If, in contrast, we believe falsely in our immortality then there is a more

[6] See, for a defence Belshaw (2000). And for a different position on this, Brueckner and Fischer (1986).

[7] Rosati (2013) comments on this but insists also, in a lengthy footnote, that many people do long for an immortal, or at least an extended life. I am a little uneasy about lumping together those wanting to be around forever with those hoping to hit 100 in tolerable health.

complex picture: some of the alleged problems will arise anyway, while others will remain dormant.

Suppose instead, and as others argue, the immortal life might be good. If we are, but do not believe we are immortal some of its benefits will not be enjoyed. The fear of death, for example, will remain. If we believe falsely that we are immortal then here too we will gain some benefits while failing to gain others. The fear of death, for example, will be removed.[8]

Generally, then, we might expect a mixed picture. But, I have suggested, there are reasons for thinking it will be better to disbelieve in immortality, when it is present than to believe in it, when it is absent. Moreover, and as will emerge, it may be best overall if we are immortal, but in some ways do not fully believe it.

1.3 The Immortality Problem

Even if many want, or think they want, immortality, many more have doubts. Is this really a life for us? And these doubts have, at least in the recent philosophical literature, tended to cluster around two concerns in particular—first that the immortal life will be boring, second that it will be trivial. Live forever, the first objection goes, and inevitably you will find yourself doing the same things over and over again. Unendurable boredom is certain to set in. And you will want nothing more than to end it. Live forever, according to the second objection, and you will be overwhelmed by the endless opportunities ahead. If in any way you mess up—exams, relationships, careers—you can always try again. Nothing will really matter. The first of these objections is connected, and famously, with Bernard Williams; the second I will link in particular with some recent work by Samuel Scheffler.[9] Both need exploring in more detail. And there is a need, too, to consider the relationship between them.

1.4 Boredom

The setting is an early 20th century fiction. An elixir, and apparently in as good a form as one could possibly hope for, is in the possession of a middle-aged woman, the opera singer Elina Makropulos. I say middle-aged but though she appears and in many ways acts thus, she in fact 342, and has been taking this elixir for the last three hundred years.[10] Though it may seem that her life is good, she decides not to take her next dose, but to die instead. Why?

> Her trouble was, it seems, boredom: a boredom connected to the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of

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[8] In saying this I assume the model under consideration has us as either necessarily immortal or with death in our control. Immortals who can still suffer accidental death may fear it more than we do.

[9] Williams (1973). Scheffler (2013).

[10] Scheffler is puzzled by Williams' claim as to her age, and says the opera and play report her as being 337. Is this right? She is allegedly born in 1585. The dates of the first productions, 1922 and December 1926, might explain the apparent discrepancy.

> 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could happen to one woman of a certain character…' (Williams 1973: 90)

The qualification here—though I need to say more about it below—is important. Williams is not going to insist that boredom will accompany any and all versions of the immortal life. It might be avoided by those who already are dull, too boring to become bored, and might be avoided also by those whose character is frequently changing, who live 'psychologically disjoint lives.' (Williams 1973: 94) It might be avoided too by those who live always in the moment, and are never concerned to look forwards or back. But it will inevitably infect those whose lives are worthwhile, and who want those worthwhile lives to continue. Such people, and this is perhaps a feature of maturity, are of a somewhat settled disposition, have a more or less stable character and, as a result, have in turn consequently limited interests and concerns. For such people—and the assumption is that many of us are of this type—immortality holds only an illusory appeal. Or so it is claimed. Now there is certainly something in this, but there are several details that warrant more examination, and several respects in which Williams overstates his case.

First, he is misled, or at least is in danger of misleading, by the weight he attaches to this example. EM is bored beyond tears, and wants out, at 342. So her problem, apparently, is not with immortality as such but with a life only three or four times the length of those that many of us think are way too short.[11] It is hard not to suspect there is something about her particular situation, and her particular character, that leads to this early exit. Williams notes that her apparent age is his, at the time of writing, and it is hard too not to think he identifies somewhat with her, and might then be over-generalising from the peculiarities of their shared condition. Many, it can be supposed, will bore less easily. But Williams insists that hers is not a special case,[12] and that all of us, if immortal, would face the same problems. This is less than satisfactory, and somewhat puzzling, in two respects. It is just unconvincing about EM: if it were not special then *The Makropulos Case* would be rather less interesting as a work. And no invention of this kind is going to persuade us that a mere three and half centuries is, for all of us, unbearably long. Let me stress this. EM is not simply bored, but bored to a degree where she prefers, and chooses, death. That is extreme. And we might, I suppose, be persuaded that boredom is inevitable, without agreeing also that it will be intolerable.[13] But even granting that there is

[11] Might we suppose that the problem is immortality, and that if she had known she would in any event be dead before, say, 800, she would not have given up? This seems implausible.

[12] After first hazarding that 'perhaps she still laboured under some contingent limitations…' he writes, 'Against this, I am going to suggest that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies…' (Williams 1973: 89) This fits with the earlier claim (Williams 1973: 83) that the situation 'suggests that it was not a peculiarity of EM's that an endless life was meaningless'.

[13] A further point: her boredom will, absenting death, go on forever. Or will it? Williams does not, so far as I can tell, make it clear whether on his account boredom, once it sets it, is there forever. But on two counts this seems unlikely. First, our ordinary experience of boredom is of something that comes and goes, Moods tend to change. Second, the immortal life goes on for a very long time. On some readings, given enough time, everything that can happen will happen. And as there is nothing incoherent about supposing boredom some day might end, so we should expect this sooner or later to happen. Non-terminal boredom is, perhaps, something we might be more inclined to endure.

nothing special about her situation is not it, if a feature at all, a special, and contingent feature of human beings in general that they do eventually get bored? And if so, why can we not simply, as with ageing, write it out of the immortality scenario?[14] Williams has an answer to this: we will see below whether it is satisfactory.

A second concern derives from what appears a curious oversight in setting out the alternatives to boredom. Envisage your character remaining as it is, and boredom looms; envisage abrupt changes, something psychologically disjoint, and you have no reason to want to carry on. But what about a character that changes gradually, perhaps in response to shifting circumstances? Why cannot EM, and indeed any of us, prolong an enthusiasm for life in that way? Not only does this seem to offer a way through the difficulties, but it better corresponds to our psychologies in the actual world, where one and the same person will, over time, develop new interests and concerns, and undergo some considerable but nevertheless gradual changes in character, personality, outlook on life.[15] Neglect this, insist on fixedness, and boredom's threat will again loom larger than it should. Again, there may be some sort of explanation. Williams states, of someone hoping for immortality, and considering what it might bring, that

> …the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all. That is a vague formula… What we can say is that since I am propelled forward into longer life by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hope for those desires. (Williams 1973: 91)

This is not straightforward, and in part because a key notion here, that of categorical desires, is hardly perspicuous. Williams' distinctions between different sorts of desires have been much picked over recently.[16] There is neither space nor need to explore all of this right here, but I can make enough comment to help with the issue to hand.

Some of the things that we want, according to Williams, we want only on the condition or assumption that we are alive. But other things we want in such a way that this give us reason to go on living.[17] For example, I want steak for dinner tomorrow on the assumption I am alive tomorrow. The thought here is not simply that if I am alive tomorrow I will then want steak. It is, further, that I want now, to eat steak tomorrow, assuming I am alive then. Articulating the contrast similarly

[14] Moreover, it may be in part just one of ageing's side effects And nature may simply be kind in making us less inclined to new or even repeated enthusiasms as we are less able to pursue them. A younger person insists they will never tire of life. Someone considerably older plays the wisdom card—just you wait and see. There is, it might seem, little or no support for hypotheses about inevitable boredom to be gleaned from any observations about how things stand in the actual world.

[15] It may be that finer distinctions are needed here. Perhaps, after maturity, character changes little. But this is consistent with dropping whole series of long-standing interests, and developing others.

[16] See, for some examples, Bradley and McDaniel (2013), Rosati (2013), Belshaw (2014).

[17] One unclarity worth noting here is Williams' position towards the end of his discussion (Williams 1973: 86) on minimal categorical desires: 'Could it be *just* the desire to stay alive? The answer is perhaps "no"'. The comments that follow do not—to me at least—really pin this down. See, for more, the following footnote, and parts of the discussion in Sect. 1.6 below.

needs some care. I should not say that I want now to see *Hamlet* tomorrow whether or not I am alive then. Nor, of course, will I want then to see it whether or not I am alive. But suppose my life is currently under threat. Only with some difficulty and at some cost, say in terms of pain, can I escape the terrorists. My desire for steak tomorrow gives me no reason to bear this cost; my desire for theatre, in contrast, does. Hence only this latter desire, as Williams puts it, propels me into the future. There is, as I have suggested, much more that can be said on this, but the nub of the distinction lies around here, and plays an important role in characterizing our concerns for more life.

For Williams, then, someone who has no categorical desires is not propelled into the future, and has no reason, or at least can acknowledge no reason, to go on living. Someone who has such desires, and has things they want to do at some future time will, in contrast, have reason to take at least some steps to continue with life.[18] So far so good, but here, I think, Williams goes wrong, For we need not agree that someone who wants to be immortal must have, right now, things they want to do in a thousand, a million, a billion years time. And so we need not agree, further, that the desire for immortality makes sense only for someone whose character will be constant throughout. Consider Max, who wants to be alive in 30 years time, anticipates then that he will have desires relating to the next 30 years, and so on endlessly. Max believes he will never want to die. There is reason for him to take the elixir, even without long term plans. And this reason is sustained, even if he acknowledges that what, in the future will propel him into the further future are interests, projects, concerns, that right now leave him cold. Assuming that character changes gradually then it will be the same person—Max—who wants then to live, rather than someone else.[19]

There is a third concern. At one point Williams insists that ‘Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*’. (Williams 1973: 95) Someone is contemplating the elixir. A worry about boredom is raised. It is not enough, apparently, for them to insist that they will not get bored. They need to be persuaded that boredom is not remotely possible, not even imaginable or conceivable. That seems to be setting the bar uncomfortably high. How are we to understand this?

Start with an explanation of the point I left hanging earlier. We cannot simply eliminate the possibility of boredom (as we might, it seems, eliminate ageing) while holding on to the idea of a life worth living. Williams insists that such a life, by its nature, is one in which boredom may set in. You might think the possibility of the occasional dull afternoon one thing, that of limitless unendurable boredom another. Yet even assuming this further possibility also must feature in the worthwhile life there still is not so far a problem for immortality. For the possibility might not be realised. But perhaps the thinking is this: unless you can be altogether certain that

[18] My suggestion, then, is that the desire for some future state, in itself reasonable or not, gives us reason or grounds to pursue the means to achieving this state. And I am not clear, of course, that Williams would go this far.

[19] So I disagree here with Williams, and his insistence that ‘the state in which I survive should be one that, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims I now have in wanting to survive at all’. (Williams 1973: 91).

unendurable boredom will not set in you would be strongly advised against accepting any elixir. For a life in which boredom goes on and on without end would be worse than nothing. Now if we are considering a necessary or irreversible immortality there is something in this. But if even an immortal life can be ended—you are offered a package of the elixir and its antidote—then the mere possibility or thinkability of boredom is no obstacle whatever. The importance of the distinction here is perfectly general. As I have said, immortality with no opt-out is to be treated with great suspicion until all possibility of all serious evils—evils so great you would prefer death—is eliminated. With an opt-out such possibilities become manageable. A difficulty for Williams here is that he seems well prepared, evident in his discussion of EM, to acknowledge that immortality might be ended. And so the mere possibility of evils is, you would think, tolerable.

(There might seem to be a final overstatement that needs mention here. Williams appears to claim, at both ends of his essay, that there is something paradoxical in our dealings with death—on the one hand it seems always better avoided, on the other, and as the discussion purports to show, our mortality is a good thing.[20] We cannot win. But there is too much mystery-mongering here, and in fact space is left for the surely plausible claim that it is perfectly possible to die at about the right time; when one is done with the important business, and before tedium sets in).[21]

On various counts, then, it seems that Williams' bleak portrayal of immortality is less than persuasive. There is no reason to agree that boredom will affect people as profoundly or as promptly as it does EM; the restrictions on character change, and with this limitations on opportunities for new and different ventures, is unmotivated. And the demand that boredom be unthinkable is excessively stringent. The case against immortality is far less tight than it aims to be. Still, a case might be flawed while yet far from worthless. And, as I will explain below, a somewhat revised version of Williams' argument is by no means lacking in merit.

1.5 Triviality

A different critique of immortality, less familiar, is overall more successful, even if in one guise, it does get off to a bad start. Williams, I have argued, overstates his case. Scheffler in some ways does the same. But there is also a key respect in which he rather underplays his hand, and is less persuasive about the downside than he might have been. Perhaps a part of the explanation for this is that he seems, from the outset, curiously keen to pick a fight with the alternative account, insisting that Williams fails to identify any problems with immortality as such—any difficulties that boredom throws up attach themselves just as well to the extended life.[22] This is fair enough, but does Scheffler do any better? Certainly that is his intent:

[20] Thus we should believe that '…immortality would be, where conceivable, intolerable and that (other things equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil'. (Williams 1973: 82). And of death's timing, 'Necessarily it tends to be either too early or too late'. (Williams 1973: 100).

[21] For there is no necessity to bad timing. As well as simple good luck, we can imagine that we are all able—perhaps encouraged—to choose when to die and so to exit when interest wanes and before boredom sets in.

[22] See, in particular p. 91, and then the reiteration at p. 93.

> By contrast, I want to consider some difficulties with immortality itself. In other words, I will advance reasons for thinking that we need to die, not because otherwise we would eventually succumb to a problem that is already inherent in the conditions of human life, but rather because an eternal life would, in a sense, be no life at all. (Scheffler 2013: 95)

How will we get to this? His basic idea is, as he argues, fairly straightforward. Life as we live it has a beginning, a middle and an end, with many activities, challenges, pursuits intimately related to these different stages. Most if not all sexual practices are inappropriate for young children, while jumping into puddles, with or without the proper footwear, is unbecoming in an adult. There are time-related differences regarding 'joys and accomplishments', then, but other things—'loss, illness, injury, harm, risk and danger' are also in important respects linked to our being in, and our experience and awareness of, time. Our grip on such terms, Scheffler states, is sustained only because life ends with death.

There is something in this, and something of importance, but in wanting so much to stress the difference between his account and that of Williams, Scheffler misses parts of his target. Having, or not having, an end to life might sound like a critical distinction, but is this really so? A life of a million years might easily be supposed to have a childhood and an old age very much like, and as abrupt as, those we live through today, but yet with a vastly extended period of maturity. Knowing this, my life today—how I think about time, what I do, what plans I make for the future, what joys and satisfactions I might anticipate—will be vastly different from how things actually are when, as now, the end is always near. It is hard to see how there will be any significant further difference attendant on my learning that rather than a million years, I have forever.

Similarly, it is hard to see how death is going to make all the difference where ills or evils are concerned, such that just when it is absent our lives become critically changed. Imagine a world where all those alive today will survive not forever, but just for a million years. The young age as now until they hit adulthood, while the old are rejuvenated and the sick are healed. And damage—you walk in front of a bus, or fall off a cliff—is quasi-miraculously repaired. Loss, illness, risk, danger are, in this new world, all thin on the ground, and this is so even if in a million years it will come to an end.

Scheffler goes wrong, then, in not wanting both unending and distantly ending lives under his purview. And then after unnecessarily narrowing the target he hits it too hard. Why would a life without death be, as he claims, 'no life at all'?[23] Would it be no life from the outset, as soon as I take the elixir, or would it cease to be a life, after say the first billion years? If the latter, why would not a two billion year life similarly stall after a million years? And if, as with EM, I have access to an opt-out would this give me back a life? Or only if I avail myself of it? Similarly, why would the very meaning of terms like loss, injury, risk 'be called into question'(Scheffler 2013: 97) by the absence of death? And are the meanings here in contrast fully secure if I live for just millions of years?

[23] Susan Wolf is particularly good, in her commentary, at identifying and querying these excesses in Scheffler's account. See Wolf (2013: 119–123 in particular).

There are extravagances here, then. Yet behind them there lurk more modest, defensible, but nevertheless interesting claims. These centre, as I have stated, on triviality, and it is enough to bring that to the forefront that our lives are very much longer than they are now. So consider a world where the familiar pressures of time are off. And focus first on that version where everyone is in the same boat, and the long life is enjoyed by all. The same accomplishments—learning the piano, or golf, or making the perfect omelette—will count for less, and perhaps bring us less joy, less satisfaction, when we have more than enough time to devote to them. What might now seem to offer important and worthwhile career paths or life projects—medicine, or counselling, or reducing global inequalities—will be less attractive, because less needed, in a world where physical and psychological ills are less evident, and where attending to them is less urgent. Choosing the right partner in life is less important when, if you get it wrong, you can have countless further liaisons, and when there is no need anyway to think in terms of lifetime commitments. Encounters with the arts of the past will have at best mild entertainment value, as the concerns that lay behind their making—with death, ageing, war, the difficulties and importance of love, adapting to fast changing worlds—become increasingly alien and hard to understand. Further additions to the art canon, lacking engagement with such psychological complexity, will be somewhat facile, thin, and tending to the decorative. And though losses, harms, risks, dangers will all remain, their frequencies and importance will be much diminished.

With Scheffler then, as with Williams, there are, despite the excesses, sound points remaining. A world where everyone is pretty much secure through a vastly extended adulthood, whether or not there is an eventual ending with death, is one in which life promises to be mostly trivial, shallow, and less than engaging.

The relation between these two critiques should be noted. Start with an apparent structural similarity. Boredom is a feeling in us, elicited in reaction to a perceived feature of the world—the repetition of events. And the feeling that our lives are shallow, and decisions unimportant is also brought on by a perception—here of the endless time ahead. But there are important differences. First 'feeling' is notoriously ambiguous, and picks out, in the first of these cases an emotional condition in us, and in the second a belief or recognition. So, it might be said that once you become aware of the vastness ahead then you will believe, and it will be true, that triviality sets in—pressures to act are relieved, and your deliberations become unimportant—whether or not you are distressed about it. Awareness of repetition, until it leads to boredom, is not similarly problematic. A second difference follows. Boredom, we should think, will take some time to surface. Even if you know that you will, eventually, have seen *Hamlet* countless times, your first encounters will be as novel and as involving as they are now, when death is close. Triviality, in contrast, will threaten early in your life.[24] Once you realise you have centuries or more to master your scales—there is no pressure to get to music college soon, your fingers will not stiffen within decades, there will always be free time in your diary—then the

[24] Scheffler himself notes this difference, saying of EM's predicament that it derives from the backward- rather than forward-looking features of her situation.' (Scheffler 2013: 91).

pressure is off. And thus there's a third difference, related to opt-outs. If life can be ended then perhaps there is no reason not to take an elixir now, just because eventually you will be bored. But as the triviality problem will be evident from the outset, so too are reasons against. Consider also the still unsettled question of whether immortality is yours alone or whether it's a shared condition. The assumption has been that we are in this together, but if we are not, then this will make for significant differences where triviality is concerned, but interact with boredom to a lesser degree. Insofar as others continue to be injured, to suffer and to die in familiar ways then the immortal has ample opportunity for non-trivial engagement with their lives, and is perhaps susceptible himself to feel estrangement, grief and loss. And as further generations come and go so will change, invention, additions to history and culture continue as now. You are in this case perhaps less likely to think of existence overall as trivial or shallow. But your life, and the lives of others contrast markedly, and so loneliness and alienation are likely to increase. Boredom, in contrast, might affect you whatever the fate of others. If they remain mortal it may take a little longer for boredom to set in, but you can be bored by endless innovation as much as by stasis. And even if there are worthwhile things to do, in helping others, you might find these endless demands unutterably tedious and dull

1.6 Objections and Counters

These arguments against immortality have by many been thought unimpressive. Surely life is a good, and it is only natural, and rational, to want more and more of it. And against the immortality sceptics or curmudgeons[25] it has been insisted variously that different sorts of boredom, and then again different sort of pleasures, need to be distinguished; that personal idiosyncrasies are playing a bigger role than is acknowledged, that less familiar visions of an immortal life need to be considered; and that we have more inner resources, adaptability, imagination, than is allowed.[26]

These objections, to varying degrees, all carry some weight, but neither alone nor together do they demolish the arguments against. There are two counters to be made; one of them can be stated briefly, while the other will take more time.

First, it may be that several of these objections just do not take seriously enough the vast differences between shorter and somewhat longer lives, on the one hand, and very long or endless lives on the other. It is easy enough, to say, for example, that you cannot imagine tiring of sex and/or ice cream, but as you very probably cannot begin to imagine living for a million years in any event, this is not a very weighty reply. Similarly, you might suppose there are countless interesting and important things to do, places to visit, people to meet. But the numbers here are all of them finite, and low: centuries, rather than millennia will allow for considerable inroads.

[25] Fischer is, I believe, responsible for introducing this fine term (subsequently taken up by many) into the immortality literature. See Fischer (1994).

[26] So see Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009), Bortolotti (2010), Burley (2009a, b), Chappell (2007), Fischer (1994, 2013), Wisnieski (2005), for various attempts to counter the curmudgeons.

Williams' emphasis on the case of EM—someone who gives in really rather soon—may in part be responsible for his critics neglecting properly to consider the vastness of time ahead. And his insistence on inevitable and intolerable boredom similarly allows for objections which, however, sidestep the proper target. But attend instead to a different strand, one that has not so far been foregrounded, and the case against immortality might become more secure.

Right at the essay's opening, and on several occasions later, Williams insists that a life without death would be meaningless,[27] and thus not one that we could have reason to want. Scheffler claims to have offered a different route to the same conclusion, but stresses instead the related notion that all our key values, those that make life worth living, are threatened or undermined when that life has no end.[28] The contentions here need some unpacking. And we can ask three questions. What is meaning? When is it lost? And why does it matter?

Even though neither writer spells out in any detail what he takes a meaningful life to be, it can, I think, be understood as one involving, to a considerable degree, commitment, involvement and success in some worthwhile projects. A most obvious example might be in working to advance the cure for cancer but worthwhileness need not involve helping or even engaging with other people—wanting just for your own satisfaction to understand how Greek thought spread through the ancient world might well be worthwhile. So there are, as has been suggested, both subjective and objective components in a meaningful life—you need the right attitude to appropriate things.[29] This is only a sketch of what meaning will involve: a little more detail is added in the section below.

If, as I have suggested, there are two components essential to the meaningful life, it might be thought that meaning is lost when either is absent. But there can be much debate about the issues here[30] and, avoiding this, I will focus only on the surer situation: life is meaningless, I will say, when you become aware that there is not much that is really worth doing. And, of course, the project here alleges that not much is worth doing when you have forever to do it: meaning and value in our lives in part depends on their current temporal boundaries, or something reasonably

[27] 'Immortality, or state without death, would be meaningless…' (Williams 1973: 82), 'It was not a peculiarity of EM's that an endless life was meaningless…' (Williams 1973: 83) 'an endless life would be a meaningless one…' (Williams 1973: 89).

[28] See the argument from pp. 99–101, and then its conclusion: 'I have been arguing that our confidence in our values depends on our status as mortals who lead temporally bounded lives and that immortality would undermine that confidence. This argument provides a different route to Williams's conclusion that death gives meaning to life'. An important detail: on my interpretation of the immortality problem it needs to be emphasised that it is not the mere fact that we have an endless life, but our recognizing this that leads to meaningless. Neither Scheffler here nor Williams in the claims in the previous note make this clear. Nevertheless, I do not suggest there is any disagreement here: this is, I think, implicit in their accounts.

[29] See Wolf (2010). Though the claim about objective and subjective elements (one example—a meaningful life will be 'actively and lovingly engaged in projects of worth') is compelling, other details of her account, such as her efforts to impact and emphasise notions of independent value, might elicit reservations.

[30] Consider, for example, claims first that life in the experience machine is meaningless because based around illusion [and see Belshaw (2014)] and second that your helping others is meaningful even if you are disengaged. Both can be profitably debated.

closely resembling them, being in place. Recognise that, with the elixir, you have ahead either endless or massively extended time, as both Williams and Scheffler think you should, then you ought to acknowledge your life as lacking in meaning.

Why think that meaning matters, such that a life where it is threatened is a lesser life? It may just be a brute fact about us that we want, or most of us want, a meaningful life. But it may be said further that we ought to want such a life—anyone satisfied with less is selling themselves short. I do not aim to defend this, but offer it here as a not implausible view. But now insofar as this is true we ought also not to want something that threatens meaning. And we ought not to want an immortal life if it is certain, or even very likely, that in such a life meaning will not be ours.

Think along these lines and many of the defences of immortality are revealed as inadequate. For the contention is not so much that an immortal life is unliveable as that it is not something we ought to want. And so it is not enough to argue that there may be instances of such a life that are better than nothing, not suffused with boredom, are perhaps pleasant, and perhaps ones we might be able to imagine ourselves living. An animal might live such a life, and so too might someone who '*truly* lives in the moment'.[31] Even someone who is more aware of time's passage, who makes plans and has some categorical desires might want such a life, hoping for example to enjoy forever a heady mix of music and drink.[32] Someone might, I suppose, simply want and gain pleasure from the mere fact that they stay alive. But Scheffler can still object that such a life is trivial and shallow, and Williams can reiterate his claim that even if boredom does not kick in—for absent from such lives are the levels of engagement and commitment which, when too often aimed at the very same objects, lead to ennui—this life lacks meaning. Moreover, this can and should be acknowledged by those happy to live such a life—I can surely want the good times to continue even while granting that it's not really important that they do

[31] See Elizabeth Harman (2011: 730). Harman considers this in relation to the badness of death. It seems to me that the impoverishments of such a life are underestimated, and that for one who lives this way it is true both that death is not bad and that life is meaningless. Fischer suggests that if we live a bit more like animals and 'chill our a bit' (Fischer 2013: 352) we might better cope with an immortal life. Well, yes, but again I doubt this is the life for us. And see Scarre (2006: 60) for similar distinctions between pleasant enough lives, and lives for us.

[32] Jeremy Wisnewski has suggested that someone might happily enough spend an immortal life learning to play, to a virtuoso level, whole orchestras of musical instruments. This might be engaging, constantly absorbing, and charges that it will inevitably become boring might be resisted. There are a lot of instruments, many will take decades to master, new ones will be developed as time goes on. Suppose we accept all this. Is this not still, no matter how much fun, a pretty pointless life? It is not the life of Heifetz or Casals or Brendel, but longer and better. Someone devotes their life to an instrument now. This involves commitment and sacrifice, a constant struggle, an inevitable and foreseen decline, with perfection always just out of reach. They select and engage with a repertoire, just some part of what is available, that itself derives from and reflects similar struggles, and attempt to convey some of this to an audience that shares with them this ambivalent and uneasy relationship to the human condition. The immortal counterpart, where all such compromises and constraints are absent, reduces this profound and deeply demanding art to a mere hobby or pastime. And Corliss Lamont insists that even after drinking it for 63 years he still 'loves water'. (Lamont 1965: 33) Even if he loves it (or loved it) enough to want to go on living in order to love it some more, this doesn't strike me as making any significant contribution to a meaningful life.

so. So the objections to immortality—it is incompatible with meaning—remain in place.

2 Memory and Imagination

2.1 Solutions

Living a life has us situated in some world—at some place and time in the panoply of things, people, events that are there to be encountered—and then responding, reacting to this world in some way. We can select for ourselves neither the world, nor our reactions to it, even if we can play some part in the shaping of both. Living an immortal life, the claim has been, will not altogether work for us, and will deliver us to an existence which even if pleasant will lack meaning. If matters here are to be improved then either the world—and thus the sorts of interactions that are on offer—or our reactions and responses, need to be changed.

For Williams one thing that cannot in any satisfactory way be altered is the tendency, in any long-lasting life, to boredom. Given a world of repetition, some limits relating to character change, and, as I have added, some proper attempts at engagement, then boredom sooner or later is inevitable. Most of the alleged solutions to the immortality problem tinker with this, imagining circumstances where repetition is diminished, or fashioning accounts where, though fully aware of repetition, our boredom threshold is lowered. Here is a different response.[33]

My boredom at seeing *Hamlet* for the twentieth time depends not just on repetition, and my having seen it those nineteen times before, but also, to some considerable extent, on remembering, and in some detail, what I have seen. Wipe out the memories and I see it each time as something new. And of course it is the same for visits to Paris, Beethoven's 9th, games of chess, breakfast cereal, seminar discussions. So much, then, for boredom. Obliterate memories of the past and there is no reason not to go on, and in the same vein, forever. This, though, is a too radical solution—someone with no memory is again someone who lives too much in the moment. That life is not one we want, and perhaps not even a life for one of us, a person. But one needs, to get this solution off the ground, not an entire absence but only some failures of memory. I can remember having seen *Hamlet* a handful of times before, and still enjoy seeing it again. Indeed it may be better this way—for many of the things we experience subsequent encounters are richer and more satisfying than the first, with complexity in our response depending on memory's operation.

Consider now the triviality problem. The world offers me endless opportunities to revisit my career, my friendships, my travels.[34] There is thus less pressure now to get things right. Recognising this, I see that my decisions about what presently to do

[33] Bruckner (2012) is someone who has in a not dissimilar fashion considered the workings of memory in the immortality debate.

[34] Again there is an assumption here that the world is pretty much stable, with other people in the same immortality boat.

are lacking in importance. The danger, then, is that life seems trivial and shallow, and lacking in meaning. Again there are several well-known attempts to deal with the problems here,[35] and again there is a simpler solution. If I am simply unable fully to grasp that these opportunities lie before me, unable to anticipate or see ahead of time how they offer me endless scope for trying again, revising, making amends, and how therefore they cancel the importance of what I am to do now, then triviality will recede. Again, there is no need to rule out all hope of anticipating one's future situation. It is only when this vision is unimpeded, and stretches a long way forward that the problems emerge.

These solutions are, of course, linked. Both the differences between knowing about and remembering the past, on the one hand, and knowing of and anticipating the future, on the other, depend on our abilities imaginatively to see ourselves at times other than now, to recollect or foretell, and in some detail, how it was, or will be for us then. Imagine, then, that you have less imagination. These abilities will be reined in, and resultant feelings of boredom and the shallowness of life will be reduced. The links go further. Consider again Williams' claim that someone of a fixed character has, in effect, limited opportunities for what they might meaningfully pursue. I queried, but did not outright reject this claim. But insofar as it is defensible, and in effect rules out some possible futures as, for me, live options, it brings together memory and anticipation. It is not simply that these two forms of projection stimulate roughly parallel but independent negative responses in us. Rather, detailed memories of countless past repetitions promises, as I see ahead, to repeat itself into the future. My problem is not just that I am bored now, nor even that I will be bored in times to come, but that I see now how longstanding this boredom has been, and see no alternative to its endlessly continuing. Loosen memory's hold, and reduce the efficacy of anticipation, and this palpable threat to meaning very much recedes.

There are surely real strengths to this, as a way of addressing the immortality problem. For to suppose there might be significant limitations to our powers of imagination does not involve any radical and fanciful departures from either the actual world or those versions of the immortal world that are most likely to offer what we want. On the contrary, we already possess just modest powers of projection and recall. And what might be taken often to be present as a subtext in discussions of immortality—creatures thousands of years old remembering all they did before, seeing themselves way into the endless future—involves a double fantasy, offering a gratuitously altered model of what these hyper-extended lives would be like.

Here is a second strength. A familiar objection to the experience machine, as, like the elixir, a device to give us more of a life that we want, is that it will involve us in having false beliefs—I think I am in Arabia, wearing silk, eating sherbet, and hostage to dancing girls when in sad truth I am in some laboratory hooked up to a machine. Should we mount a similar objection here? No. I do not claim, falsely, to have seen *Hamlet* only a couple of times before—I know I have seen it on hundreds rather than a handful of occasions. But it is simply that I do not remember.

[35] See Nussbaum (2013) for valuable reflections on this.

Similarly, I know I can some centuries hence be a priest or politician, but cannot imagine myself in these roles, cannot see how they offer me genuine opportunities. And so they do not interfere with my choices, and the perceived importance of those choices, now. Links with reality are, then, maintained.

There is, it will seem, a downside. For surely the powers of memory and imagination are goods—it is reasonable and natural to want more of them. So having to posit the cultivation of handicaps, in order to cope with immortality, has something unsatisfactory and self-sacrificial about it. We should not, however, be too quick in agreeing with this. First, the context here, where, in a nutshell the worry about immortality is that we can have too much of a good thing, is one that itself should warn against any facile and thoroughgoing assumption that more is better. Second, a poor memory, understood as an evil, typically has two prominent features. It involves inequalities—the degree of memory failure varies considerably from person to person—and, understandably, we do not want to have a worse memory than those around us, suffering the relative disadvantages that will bring. Nor do we want to suffer its unpatterned and unpredictable occurrences—detailed memories of the distant past, only a blur for yesterday, sudden losses of important information that just moments ago were accessible. There is a similar unhappy randomness that can impact, if to a lesser extent, on the imaginative grasp of time ahead. It is not, for example, helpful for a sufferer from some terminal disease to be captive to clear visions of an unhappy death, and not to apprehend the several good years still, and before that, to come.

What I am supposing might be of real assistance where the immortality problem is concerned is, then, not simply an extension of what we have, or how we are, now. There are tweaks to be made. And I am supposing that we might all undergo equal and systematic failures of memory and imagination, such that the more distant the past, and the further away the future, the less precise our grip. I remember, let us say, very well all of last year, reasonably well a decade back, nothing at all from a century ago. And though I anticipate in some detail certain events of next week, medium and longer term futures are proportionately less accessible, and of lesser concern. The result here amounts to what we might call a *moving envelope* model of time. Rather than seeing always that we have forever ahead and, as time passes, an always increasing expanse behind, our horizons will, though always shifting, always be limited. Simplifying a little, we can suppose that we will always remember, though fading to the margin, the last fifty years that have passed, and always imaginatively project ourselves, again with declining precision, into the fifty years ahead. The horizons move as we move, and the vistas never overwhelm.

Utilise such a model, and immortality's promises are in large part fulfilled, its problems in the main dispensed with. You will never die, and you know this. Insofar as that was a prime concern, in contemplating the elixir, you get here what you want. You live forever, and know this. But perhaps you do not get here all of what you want. It does not seem to you as if you are living forever, or even for a very long time. It seems, from the envelope, as if your existence is bounded, and, other than in some abstract fashion, as if there is only limited time to come. Is this a shortcoming? My suspicion is that more people simply want life to go on and on, never ending, than want not only the reality but also the appearance of a very long life. Remember

Max, who takes the elixir as he predicts he will never want to die, rather than because he has detailed plans for the long term future in hand. If what he does makes sense, and many are like him, then, after all, many are getting what they want here. The model allows too for the sorts of gradual change, and thus changes in interests and concerns, that occur within our current and limited lives. If you live forever, rather than 80 years, you are likely over time to change much more than is now the case. But that is not a problem. Nor is boredom a problem. As awareness of repetition is now seriously limited so being bored does not get a grip. Nor, as I presented it, does the triviality problem remain. It no longer seems to you that you have endless opportunities ahead. And it does seem that what happens soon matters much.

Can this envelope existence not only sidestep some problems, but really offer us a meaningful life? This is harder. Consider some variants. Suppose you are alone as an immortal. Many activities that are now often meaningful—fighting disease, helping the poor—are available. Nor are the immortals hampered by acute feelings of having done this countless times before.[36] As an immortal among mortals you are perhaps able to have children, and find meaning in seeing them develop and grow. You will see them die too, of course. That may well be sad, and bad for you, but is unlikely to strike at meaning. Suppose everyone is immortal. These sorts of meaningful lives are unavailable, but perhaps there are others, linked, say, to advancing maths or science or philosophy, or writing valuable novels or plays.[37] Suppose such options dry up as progress is made, and stimuli for innovation and creativity in artistic endeavours become infrequent. Still, the immortal can forever struggle with Beethoven, or find new things in *Hamlet.* Is this meaningful? Imagine yourself in this situation. You are seriously engaged with worthwhile and valuable works. But you know, though there is no detailed recall, that you have done this many times before. And only because you lack this recall can you enjoy your activities now. It may be that we just lack firm intuitions about what to say in such a case. But this life is not in any obvious way one that lacks meaning.

Can such an existence be preferable to one we might, let us say if lucky, enjoy today? The key difference is that, right now, death gets closer, and comes to us, whether or not we want it, in the end. Can this be a good thing, making this mortal life better than the alternative? That alternative no longer threatens us with boredom or feelings of triviality, but even so, we might write in, as an additional safeguard, the opt-out option. Is a life where death is within your control, and can always be delayed better than one where it is not? Many will suppose it is.

2.2 Reality

There is no elixir of life, nor will there ever be. The problems of immortality are ones we will never have to face. And even if significant life extensions for some of

[36] You know you have done such things countless times before, but people today know that others have done such things countless times before. What impacts there might be on meaning are perhaps roughly comparable.

[37] See again Wolf's critique of Scheffler, and her suggestions for doomsday activities: Wolf (2013: 122).

us may be on the cards, surviving for thousands of years is perhaps still thousands of years away. Most of us will have, at best, a life of something under a century. That is supposed often, to be in some respects a bad thing, and hence the impetus to immortality as a means to a remedy. Is it bad? And can it, by less extravagant means, be made better?

A life of 80, 90, or 100 years is not a short life. It is, of course, short relative to the life of an oak tree, but compared with a butterfly it is long. It is much shorter than, conceivably, a human life might be, but it is much longer than many such lives actually are. The problem, for many, is that life *seems* short. It seems to us that we are just for a brief time upon the stage. This actual life will end with death. Insofar as that is a problem it is one we cannot do much about. But also, it *seems* as if it ends in death—we are too often aware of this, affected, perhaps weighed down by it. Consider the sorts of things people say when, for some reason or other, they become aware of life's apparent brevity: 'It will soon be over', 'Where did all the time go?' 'It seems like only yesterday…'. And, of course, there are connections here. Near the beginning of life, when there is little behind, there can seem to be a good long time ahead. Notoriously, things seem to speed up with age. As, say the last thirty years, on looking back, seem to have passed so quickly, so the thirty ahead will, we fear, too soon have gone. Are there things we can do, strategies we might adopt, that could impact on how things seem to us, such that life does not seem so short? I am going to suggest, of course, that some version of the moving envelope model, some restrictions on the powers of anticipation and recall, will aid us here. But certain other suggestions need first to be aired.

It is simple. We should do more, pack more into the time available. Perhaps we can sleep less, move more quickly, multi-task. Then there will be more to look back on, and more to be fitted into any period ahead. Does this help? Not with the short term. The more you cram into the day, or the week, the more quickly it will seem to pass. Nor is it clearly better in the longer term. Having had a busy life is unlikely, surely, to hamper the feeling that time has just rushed by. And believing you will be busy until you die is not going to make death seem right now to be further away. Nor, in a hasty overreaction to this, should we do less. Try this, and time now goes more slowly, indeed might seem to drag, but in looking back and ahead still the end points are close.

A considerably different strategy will have us planning less, living more like an animal, or in the moment. But this is not a life for us. An animal is not a person. And to live just in the moment is not to live the life of a person.

A third option, more complex and demanding, might be to plan out the future in some detail, arranging matters, as far as is possible, so that desires end more or less as life ends. This will make death less bad when it comes, and the apparent brevity of life more tolerable. And the approach here might be combined with procedures recommended by Parfit,[38] wherein, as we get older, redirecting our gaze can compensate for the evidently limited time ahead by attending more steadily to times

[38] See Parfit (1984: Part II, Section 67). The suggestion there, that we might profitably be selective in our memories, choosing to remember the good, interestingly compares with mine, that we should come to remember the relatively near.

past. Memory, and accessing memory, is a source of pleasure, and one that we might take advantage of as we age. Perhaps, though, there is something desperate and calculating about this—clearly we are attempting to make the best of a bad job.

The approach advocated here borrows elements from several of these suggestions. I might call it the *double envelope model.* We live, all of us, within a limited period of time and are often aware, to some considerable extent, of both its ends. Through much of our adult lives we can both remember a fair bit of childhood, and at the same time anticipate the years, and the decline, ahead. As time passes we shift further from the beginning and closer to the end. It might be said that we move through this unmoving envelope. Suppose now that even though we know about these end points our powers of memory and anticipation, as before, are limited. We have a clear grasp of thing, say, just 15 years either side of now, while events of 25 years away are always inaccessible. We are in some sense within a moving envelope which is itself within, and smaller than, the still envelope constituting the whole our life. What effect does this have? The suggestion is that life will seem longer than it does now, when, at least often, we grasp more, and more sharply. When those boundaries, which though we know them to be there, are accessed either unclearly, or not at all, they will seem to us to be further removed. Consider a spatial analogue, and looking over a landscape on a somewhat foggy day. You see less, and less clearly, as trees or hills are further away. The effect is to increase the apparent distances between things, and to make the space in front of you seem bigger. See things clearly, see more, and the prospect is flattened; distances disappear.

There might seem to be a puzzle now, in considering together this suggestion, along with the earlier discussion of immortality. Limit memory and imagination and an immortal life will, I have argued, seem shorter than otherwise it would. The suggestion here is that if the starting point is an actual and mortal life, adoption of the same strategy will make life seem longer. That can seem paradoxical in its own terms, and at odds with what allegedly happens where immortality is concerned. How is this resolved? The critical points are first the blurring of boundaries, and second the different relations between the time available and the reach of our desires. In both models, I am supposing, we will not see clearly where life begins and ends. The effects of this differ when coupled with different end points. The fear, with immortality, is that there will seem too much time to fill, at least if we are to sustain psychologies appropriately resembling those in our current life. The envelope model, limiting our gaze, brings down the apparent time to manageable proportions. An actual life can seem too short. The model here, though operating in the same way, starts from a different position. Focusing again on what is near to hand, the view of more distant periods is occluded, and their true location—here alarmingly close—is disguised.

2.3 Nature and Culture

I have said that life seems to us to be short, and that we want more of it. But how widespread are such desires? And what accounts for them? We might wonder whether people in all places are as concerned as many of us are to extend their lives. We might wonder too—and this will be my focus here—whether such concerns

have been prevalent at all times. I will suggest that this hankering after immortality is relatively recent (and perhaps also relatively local) and is linked with changes or developments in both ideology and technology. There's a second concern here. The argument has been that although our powers of memory and anticipation are goods, and indeed constitutive of our being persons, one might have too much of a good thing. And, I have claimed, it might in some ways be better for us if these powers are reined in. So we might ask, are these concerns to access times other than now generated just by our human natures? Or does culture play a role? I will suggest it does. These concerns are, of course, connected: it is because we have come to want to explore distant times, and we need time to do that, that the long or endless life is increasingly attractive.

Start with the hankering. It might at first seem that interests in immortality are wide-ranging and long-standing. Are not there evident concerns in religions and mythologies, with our gaining, in one way or another, immortal lives? And should we not see our current concerns as just a secularised version of the same hope? It is more complex. While belief in some afterlife has a central role in many traditions this, as I suggested above, is usually construed as a very different kind of life from anything we might have on earth. Moreover it is to be seen as a separate and detached existence—beyond our understanding, and failing to intersect with our current life. We are not going to have, nor should we hope for, encounters or conversations with the dead. This is not, of course, an altogether uniform picture—there have, for example, long been beliefs in ghosts, visions of Jesus, Mary and saints, and the rituals and festivities of hallowe'en. But in the main the dead involved here are troubled spirits, perhaps temporarily escaped from purgatory, and needing some help from us to move on. Moreover, many such beliefs reveal pagan influences, and are often met by established churches with suspicion. The happily dead, within at least the prevailing Western traditions, are far gone.

Parallel with this understanding of what is to come are implicit prohibitions on our wanting life extensions or immortality on earth. Although literature has many stories in which mortals gain superhuman powers—often, but not exclusively related to a longer life—these often end badly, with their protagonists, and also their readers, having learned something of the hubris in wanting to overstep long-standing and God-given boundaries.[39]

There is considerable shifting of the ground in the post-enlightenment period, where both growing religious scepticism and enthusiasms for scientific and technological innovations encourage greater probing of the limits on our existence. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, though not concerned with immortality as such, should be seen as a relatively early exploration of our increasing but non-magical powers over matters of life and death. With Darwin orthodoxy takes a serious hit, and it is increasingly difficult to counter optimism about what naturalistic and rational investigation might uncover. It is within this new, different, and in many ways liberated mindset that an interest in spiritualism develops. With its claims

[39] Consider, for example, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and, more directly connected with immortality, Swift's Struldbrugs in *Gulliver's Travels* and Tennyson's eponymous protagonist of *Tithonous.* The interest here, with respectively comic and tragic overtones, is in winning immortality without at the same time putting a halt on ageing.

allegedly supported not by faith but reason, belief in meaningful encounters with those beyond the grave spread widely in the late Victorian period. The crucial point here is that the dead are understood to be both able and willing to contact and converse with the living. So even though disembodied, their psychologies are the same as ours—immortality no longer in all respects calls for a new beginning.

If in the English speaking world the half way house of spiritualism retains its middle class respectability well into the 20th century, elsewhere the vestiges of religion are more thoroughly overthrown.[40] In the avowedly materialistic Soviet Union, (and, before the revolution, in the thinking of some its key supporters) an arguably more consistent version of immortality is pursued. A hope, in embalming Lenin's body after his death in 1924, was that not many years would pass before science and medicine would permit his resurrection. And there were similar aspirations for the larger population, with government encouragement for scientists in many fields to overcome biological limitations and to conquer death.[41]

The general picture, then, around the turn of the century, is one in which many are increasingly concerned with living on, either in a disembodied or an embodied form. Optimism is far from thoroughgoing, however, and reservations about the project remain. So although there is a substantial increase in the literary fictions dealing with immortality—with most of these given a contemporary and quasi-real world setting—in many of them, including *Dracula,* Rider Haggard's *She, The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, in both its versions, *The Makropulos Case* itself—the endless life is far from unambiguously good. Even if there has been some shifting since, with fictions more often upbeat, and cryonics, transhumanism and various life extension schemes getting, apparently, increasing support, this ambivalence persists, with the recent philosophical debate for and against immortality itself good evidence of this.

If a concern with the self is, as often alleged, a feature of the modern period—say, from the Renaissance on—then so too are adjunct ways of noting and identifying this self and recording its changes over time. Autobiographies, journals, diaries and the roman à clef emerge as important literary forms at the beginning of the period, and comprise a significant, and much encouraged part of writing today.

Words provide access to many aspects of the past, but pictures, even if they cannot do more, do it differently, and with a detailing and immediacy that is hard to surpass. Until relatively recently very few people would have had any image at all of their younger selves, and the skills of portrait painters, for those who could afford them, were often neither aimed at, nor succeeding in, genuine likenesses. Again, the

[40] So it seems to have seemed to many of those involved. But, of course, parallels between communism and religion have been much explored.

[41] See, for much more on both spiritualism and communism—and we might think of these as concerned, respectively, to discover and to create immortality—(Gray 2012). *The Immortalization Commission* is both fascinating and frustrating and, driven by Gray's sceptical and debunking agenda, not always convincing. One telling example: the full title of the body referred to here is *The Commission for the Immortalization of the Memory of V.I. Lenin* and this, coupled with the slicing of dead leader's brain in 1925, itself described by Gray, rather undermines the claim that attempts at a full scale revival were ever seriously attempted. That stated, the commission member most central to the embalming project, Leonid Krasin, did hold out hopes for eventually conquering death, and was an early experimenter in cryonics (Dickerman 2001).

nineteenth century, and the invention and rapid spread of photography changes this, with the situation today one in which most of us have more images of ourselves than we can manage, catalogue or recall. It is hardly surprising that there is increasingly a concern with aging when ones past and prettier self is now (and for increasing numbers publicly) forever on view.

The focus thus far is on what we know of our earlier selves, and how technology now buttresses memory to such an extent that some effort, and some rejection of prevailing social norms, is needed to let the past go.[42] And it is the same with the pasts of others. The proliferation of books (and within them the number and quality of illustrations), films, sound recordings and TV programmes provide now detailed and penetrable accounts of how things—both momentous events and the humdrum of daily life—were in earlier times. In the internet age digitised versions of these resources are even more readily available, often at effectively no cost, and in a manner that seems to encourage constant browsing. Many of us probably know more about ancient Rome than did any of the Romans; we have seen more good art than anyone alive before the 20th century; we have heard more, and better, performances of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms than the composers or their contemporaries.

What is the effect of all this? The upshot is that in many ways what was until recently an unavoidable focus on the here and now is replaced by a milieu in which a form of time travel (and space travel also) is available to, and hopes to capture, all of us. For some the choices are unmanageable, resulting in either endless and indiscriminate picking at surfaces, or—in reaction to this—staying just with the comfortable and familiar. For others sustained and coherent exploration of both times and places distant from now is possible to degrees undreamt of previously. And there is, of course, just a lot more stuff that is, or seems, worth exploring. Whereas until relatively recently persons of learning could hope to make considerable inroads into their culture's resources—there were overall simply fewer things in existence, and much of it was of little contemporary interest—all of us today are fully aware that we know only a very little of what is worth knowing.

This quasi-time travel can, even if to a considerably lesser degree, take us forward as well. It might seem at first that we have today few projects as long term as paving the Roman Empire, or building a gothic cathedral, but the same technologies that access the past can look into future also. We have some, and want more, knowledge regarding climate change, the management of nuclear waste and energy more generally, population issues, the trajectories of asteroids. And popular culture—perhaps film in particular—feeds and feeds on these concerns, such that many of us today are much more habituated to speculating on the future of life on earth and, of course, imagining ourselves there.

Earlier I suggested how looking into a foggy landscape, where impeded vision distorts and increases apparent distances, might serve as metaphor for limits to memory and anticipation, and a focus more towards the present. I can revisit the image. With current technologies, it is as if we can, in a helicopter, zoom up close to

[42] Here Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tapes,* concerned, of course, with sound rather than vision, constitutes a notable investigation of this backward concern, aided by technology.

and investigate any point, and as if too, with all this hovering, there is no longer for us any firm base or home. Much of this is undoubtedly attractive. It is hardly surprising if, given now so much we might do, so many times and places we might explore, we want to remain alive, and young and in good health, in order to do it.

3 Conclusion

I have come down here, though tentatively and with qualifications, in favour of immortality. Many of those who oppose it, and certainly the writers most focussed on above, adopt the curious position of holding that life as we live it now, with disease and death ever present, and often much earlier than we would like, is probably the best we can hope for—any substantial change and we forfeit meaning. There are perhaps the residues of religion in this—it is and should be thus. But it would be a strange coincidence if such harmony were naturally to prevail. And it is hard to believe that living forever would be intolerable, worse than nothing and, in all its guises, altogether meaningless.

Things might be better, then. And I have wanted to suggest that we can construe either an immortal life, or even a much extended life, in various ways—matters involving ageing, illness, control, and company might all be modified to improve what, in fantasy, is offered. And in particular I have argued that relatively modest adjustments to our already faltering memories and imaginations will take the sting out of the best known objections to immortality. The threats of boredom and triviality are at their most acute where recall and projection are improbably effective. Impede these, and the threats recede.

There is no need to think that what we have is the best there might be. Nevertheless, what we have we are, perhaps, more or less stuck with. And so, in later sections, my concern has been to explain how just those adjustments we might make to better cope with immortality will serve also to improve for us the limited lot we now enjoy. Rather than fully remembering our pasts, and in detail anticipating our futures it will be better for us if we are more inclined to live, not in the moment, but closer to the here and now. And such localising of our perspective, I claimed, is even more likely to benefit us given recent and increasing cultural pressures to look further, live longer, stay younger. For us, at least, not much of this is going to happen.

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