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Immortality and boredom: a response to Wisnewski

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Abstract This article contributes to the ongoing debate initiated by Bernard Williams' claim that, due to the non-contingent finitude of the categorical desires that give meaning to our lives, an immortal life would necessarily become intolerably boring. Jeremy Wisnewski has argued that even if immortality involves periods in which our categorical desires have been exhausted, this need not divest life of meaning since some categorical desires are revivable. I argue that careful reflection upon the thought-experiments adduced by Wisnewski reveals that they do not substantiate his proposal, and hence that a plausible reason for rejecting Williams' position has not been provided.

Keywords Bernard Williams · J. Jeremy Wisnewski · Immortality · Boredom · Death · Desires

In his much-discussed essay, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," Bernard Williams argues that immortality, understood as endless temporal existence as an embodied human being, would necessarily become intolerably boring. He bases this claim on reflections inspired by the fictional story of Elina Makropulos, who, having lived for 300 years at the biological age of 42, refrains from drinking any more of the elixir that would give her a further 300 years of life because she has grown weary of all that life can offer her. In setting out his argument, one of the points that Williams makes is that "Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*" (let us call this Williams' unthinkability demand).[1]

[1] Williams (1993, p. 87); emphasis original.

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John Martin Fischer has taken Williams up on this point and argued that the demand for unthinkability is too stringent: we would not demand of a finite life that it is worthwhile only in so far as its containing instances of boredom is unthinkable, so why should we demand this of an infinite life?[2]

More recently, while concurring with Fischer that Williams' prognosis is unduly gloomy about the desirability of immortality, Jeremy Wisnewski has proposed that Fischer's argument needs to be modified by the introduction of a distinction between two kinds of boredom, or two senses of the term "boredom," one relatively broad and the other relatively narrow.[3] With this distinction in place, Wisnewski interprets Williams' unthinkability demand as applying only to boredom in the narrower sense, and maintains that Fischer's approach has not adequately resisted this demand. Wisnewski then goes on to argue that Williams' demand *can* be resisted, and he bases his argument on two thought-experiments, which he thinks illustrate the point that he is making.

In this article I will not be concerned with Wisnewski's criticisms of Fischer except in so far as they help to illuminate the distinction that Wisnewski introduces; I am happy to accept that Wisnewski's interpretation of Williams' unthinkability demand is correct. Rather, I want to consider Wisnewski's argument against Williams, and to examine whether the imaginary scenarios he adduces are capable of doing the work that his conclusion requires. By critically evaluating Wisnewski's reading of his own thought-experiments, and by introducing a couple of further imaginary cases of my own, I will argue that Wisnewski has not satisfactorily answered Williams' unthinkability demand, and hence has not provided a plausible account of a desirable immortality.

Wisnewski's distinction

The distinction that Wisnewski makes between broader and narrower senses of "boredom" can be spelt out as follows. The broader sense is the everyday one in which, if I'm feeling bored (whether this be with some particular activity or with things in general), this need not entail that I am chronically and incurably bored; that is, it need not entail that I have entered a state of profound boredom from which I can never emerge. When we talk about being bored in this broad sense, we typically presume it to be a temporary state that has the potential to be alleviated once we have taken a break from our current occupation or perhaps found some more invigorating activity to pursue. Wisnewski takes it that Fischer's puzzlement about Williams' unthinkability demand derives from Fischer's assumption that it is boredom in this broad, or everyday, sense with which Williams is concerned. Wisnewski concurs with Fischer that it would indeed be unreasonable to demand of any life—whether finite or infinite—that it could be worthwhile only if its including moments of boredom in the broad sense were unthinkable. But Wisnewski thinks the prima facie reasonableness

[2] Fischer (1994, p. 261).

[3] Wisnewski (2005, esp. pp. 30–33).

of Williams' demand (though not, ultimately, the soundness of Williams' argument) can be saved by introducing a more technical sense of "boredom."

The more technical, and hence narrower, usage of "boredom," which Wisnewski thinks needs to be attributed to Williams if Williams' unthinkability demand is to be plausible, is that in which one can be said to be bored if and only if one's categorical desires have been exhausted. Before saying more about this, I first need to explain Williams' conception of categorical desires. For Williams, "categorical desires" denotes those of our desires which are capable of being frustrated by death. The contrast that Williams wants to make here is between categorical desires, on the one hand, and on the other hand those desires that death cannot, strictly speaking, frustrate because the object of the desire is something that is desirable only on the implicit assumption that one remains alive. Although Williams does not adduce specific examples, it is probably fair to assume, with Fischer, that conditional, or non-categorical, desires comprise desires for "adequate clothing, food, shelter," and other basic necessities.[4] If one were to die, desires of this sort would not be best described as having been frustrated; they simply die with us.[5] Categorical desires, meanwhile, are such that, if death prevents one from fulfilling the desire, then it makes sense to say that the desire has been frustrated. The contrast could be expressed in this way: in the case of conditional desires, one has the desire in order that one may remain alive, whereas in the case of categorical desires, one desires to remain alive in order that the desire may be fulfilled. It follows from Williams' understanding of categorical desires that, were a person to exhaust all of her desires of this kind, then her reasons for remaining alive would dry up; and since Williams considers it to be a non-contingent fact about human beings that our categorical desires are finite, he concludes that the reasons for remaining alive would, necessarily, eventually dry up for all of us.

Now, returning to what Wisnewski regards as the narrower sense of "boredom," we can say that, given Williams' contention that the possession of categorical desires is what provides someone with a reason for living, a state in which all of these desires have been exhausted would be one of desperate boredom; indeed, Wisnewski dubs it (with irony that is not obviously intended) "*fatal* boredom"—a boredom so bottomless that one would have no further purpose for being alive.[6] Of course, the irony of the expression "fatal boredom" is that, if we are supposing this to be a state in which a genuine immortal might, or would, find herself, then it necessarily cannot be *fatal* (in the sense of lethal), although it may nevertheless be extreme, intense, or interminable.[7]

Wisnewski's distinction between broad and narrow, or everyday and fatal, boredom closely parallels one that Hunter Steele made much earlier. Steele distinguishes

[4] See Fischer (1994, p. 267) .

[5] This is not to say that one could not die *as a result of*, say, a lack of food, in which case one's desire for food would indeed have been frustrated. The point is that, after one's death, it makes no sense to say that one's desire for food is frustrated *then*.

[6] Wisnewski (2005, p. 32).

[7] In making this point, I am assuming that "immortality" denotes what Hunter Steele has called "necessary" as distinct from "contingent" immortality. The former expression denotes a lifetime that *cannot* end, whereas the latter denotes one that, though potentially endless, could be brought to an end by, for example, severe bodily injury. See Steele (1976, pp. 426–27).

between "(*a*) being bored at some points during eternity, and (*b*) eternal boredom,"[8] and employs this distinction to raise the following objection to Williams:

> We do not demand of our finite existences that we should never be bored; only that the number of our moments spent in boredom should not exceed a certain proportion. Why then should we expect any more of eternity? If a reasonably normal and happy man were offered an eternal existence in which he would be no more bored, proportionally, than he ever had been, would he not accept with alacrity? I am convinced that he would; but, according to Williams, the man should refuse.[9]

This is essentially the same as the objection that Wisnewski raises. Wisnewski wants to argue that intervals of boredom need not be eradicated from a life in order for that life to remain worth living; all that is required is that the boredom not become unending. Of course, merely highlighting the difference between a temporary kind of boredom and a permanent kind of boredom is not sufficient to substantiate any objection against Williams. It is, I think, a fairly uncontentious matter that the kind of boredom that Williams had in mind when he made his unthinkability demand was what Steele calls "eternal boredom" and what Wisnewski calls "fatal boredom." The crucial element in Williams' position that needs to be contested is his claim that our categorical desires are, necessarily and permanently, exhaustible. Steele does not confront this claim, whereas Wisnewski recognizes its central place in Williams' argument, and tries to resist it. And it is to this purpose that Wisnewski adduces his two thought-experiments, to which I will now turn.

Revivable categorical desires?

The difference between Wisnewski's argument and that of several other opponents of Williams' thesis can be articulated as follows. Other opponents[10] have rejected Williams' contention that our categorical desires need dwindle to nothing, whereas Wisnewski wants to say that, even if they *do* dwindle to nothing, there is good reason to suppose that they can be revived. In other words, some philosophers have accepted Williams' conditional statement that, if a person's categorical desires are extinguished, then her life becomes meaningless, but have denied that the antecedent need be actualized; Wisnewski, meanwhile, wants to reject the conditional, and to claim that the extinguishing of a person's categorical desires is consistent with her life's remaining meaningful, because there are at least some categorical desires which can be revived. Wisnewski thus wants to affirm the possibility of fatal boredom (defined strictly as a state in which a person's categorical desires have burnt out) while denying that fatal boredom need be permanent.

[8] Steele (1976, p. 425).

[9] Ibid., p. 426.

[10] Most notably Fischer (1994); but those who might also be mentioned include Glover (1977, p. 57), Momeyer (1988, p. 19), and more recently Chappell (2007).

In order for Wisnewski's line of argument to go through, and amount to more than a mere begging of the question against Williams, he needs some way of substantiating the claim that there are at least some categorical desires that can be revived after periods of dormancy (or temporary extinction). Since there are no real-life embodied immortals to whom we can appeal as examples, Wisnewski adopts an imaginative approach, and presents a couple of imagined scenarios to stand as counter-examples to the view that categorical desires, once exhausted, are gone forever. As will become apparent, I am doubtful that either of Wisnewski's thought-experiments provides a plausible counter-example; but let me first sketch them both.

The first of Wisnewski's putative counter-examples is "the desire to be the best musician ever by mastering every instrument."[11] Wisnewski depicts a scenario in which, after having devoted a little under a million years to practising, he (*qua* immortal) has become more virtuosic on every known instrument than any mortal could hope. With the desire satiated, he slides into a state of boredom, which, given that he has no other categorical desires remaining unfulfilled, meets Williams' criterion of boredom in its narrow, technical sense. Then Wisnewski imagines that, once a few hundred years of boredom have elapsed, his categorical desire is revived by the invention of a new instrument, which he can learn to play and, in time, become maximally accomplished at. Wisnewski supposes that, in principle, this process—of new musical inventions refreshing the old desire—could continue indefinitely, thereby rendering the life purposeful (and hence desirable) despite its periods of profound boredom.

Wisnewski's second example, which he admits at the outset to be "rather debaucherous," is that of "a categorical desire to experience every possible bodily pleasure."[12] In this case, boredom ensues for the immortal after he has pleasured himself by all known means; but as in the previous example, he is rescued by developments in technology: "With film, video, and eventually virtual reality, a new field of possibility opened up …."[13] The immortal's desire is restored at the thought of the pleasures that these new devices have to offer, and again (given human inventiveness) there is, Wisnewski holds, no reason to presume that the possible ways of accruing hedonic stimulation should ever be permanently exhausted.

Although Wisnewski does not say so explicitly, it is evident that his examples of putatively renewable categorical desires are capable of resisting Williams' thesis only if accompanied by implicit desires that a host of auxiliary conditions be met. For instance, claiming that the desire to be the most accomplished musician on every instrument could be perpetually renewed, and that this perpetually renewable desire can make immortal life desirable, makes no sense unless one assumes it to be conceivable, and desirable, that a world could exist forever in which a culture of musical appreciation and musicianship flourishes. In the absence of such a culture, the desire in question would be senseless. To try to imagine an immortal life is, at the same time, to try to imagine a world in which that life could obtain. I have my doubts that such an

11 Wisnewski (2005, p. 33).

12 Ibid., p. 34.

13 Ibid., pp. 34–35.

imaginative project is feasible, but I will not pursue those doubts here;[14] rather, I shall grant Wisnewski the conceivability of the scenarios he presents, and question whether these constitute persuasive support for his contention that immortality could be desirable. A key feature of the first example is that it is a desire to achieve a status that is both social in nature and one of superiority, in a certain respect, over mortal humans. It seems reasonable to suppose that mastering an instrument, or series of instruments, can be satisfying for its own sake; but Wisnewski explicitly presents the desire as a competitive one: "to be the best musician ever by mastering every instrument," where "mastering every instrument" is to be understood as developing the ability to "play any instrument on the planet … more brilliantly than anyone with a finite life could hope."[15] In my view, such a desire is not one whose fulfilment an immortal would, or should, find satisfying, for the following reason.

We typically regard the fulfilment of some competitive desire—that is, a desire to be the best at performing some activity—as being satisfying only in cases where this does not result from a colossal advantage that someone has over her rivals. When the advantage is a natural one, and is relatively minor, we do not typically take it to be undermining of one's entitlement to feel satisfied at having fulfilled the desire. But in a case where the desire is to actualize a potential that takes time to achieve, and is possessed by someone who has an infinitely great temporal advantage over anyone else, then the advantage seems to be of a magnitude so immense as to radically deflate the degree of satisfaction that the person is entitled to enjoy. Since the point I am making here relies heavily upon some basic intuitions that we have about entitlements to feel satisfied, I will provide a couple of contrastive examples which are intended to highlight the plausibility of the intuitions.

First, consider the case of a basketball player, Alex, who is an inch taller than any other player in the league. Alex desires to be the highest scorer in the league, and he succeeds in fulfilling this desire. I take it that we would not begrudge Alex the right to feel satisfied at having achieved his goal. The fact that he has a height advantage over other players is of relatively minor significance in this case, since the advantage is too small by itself to ensure his becoming the highest scorer.

Second, consider the following, more fantastical, scenario. Gulliver, without having undergone any prior training, enters into a running race against several Lilliputians. Gulliver desires to win the race, and he does win it—by a long margin. In order to win, Gulliver (due to his comparatively gargantuan size) has merely to walk at a brisk pace, while his relatively diminutive competitors, each of whom has undergone many years of intensive training, sprint as fast as they can. Do we think Gulliver is entitled to feel satisfied that he has done what he desired to do? If we think he has any such entitlement at all, then I suspect we would concur that the amount of satisfaction he is entitled to feel is very minimal, and this is because his antecedent advantage was so overwhelmingly great.

Now, to which of the above two cases is that of Wisnewski's immortal musician closest? It has some features in common with each. What it has in common with

[14] I question the conceivability of human immortality further in my 2008 paper.

[15] Ibid., p. 33.

the case of Alex the basketball player is that becoming a virtuosic musician, like becoming a high-scoring basketball player, requires diligent practice. Unless Alex, or the musician, sticks determinedly to a disciplined regimen, it is unlikely that the advantage of height alone, or extreme longevity alone, will guarantee the desired outcome. Meanwhile, what it has in common with the Gulliver case is that the advantage of longevity that the immortal has over his rival musicians is enormous, just as is Gulliver's advantage of size over his Lilliputian competitors. In my view, however, the Gulliver case constitutes a closer analogy than does the basketball player case; for someone who has an infinite (or even just a finitely immense) amount of time on his hands is at such a superlative advantage over his rivals that, whatever task he were to set his mind to becoming best at, we should say that his initial advantage radically undercuts his entitlement to feel satisfied at having achieved the desired goal.[16]

If the intuition that I have just expressed, and which I take to be supported by the two preceding imaginary examples, is plausible, then we have grounds for supposing that Wisnewski's renewable categorical desire to be the best ever musician fails to exemplify a desire that could imbue an unending life with any high degree of satisfaction. I leave it to the reader to decide whether a life so patently lacking in satisfaction could count as desirable.

Turning now to Wisnewski's other example, that of the desire to experience every kind of bodily pleasure, we must ask whether this constitutes a desire capable of sustaining a potentially unending life that is itself desirable. I do not think it does. Indeed, if anything, it seems even more shallow, and hence less sustaining, than the previous example. Perhaps one advantage that it has over the musical desire is that the fulfilment of "a desire to experience every possible bodily pleasure" does not depend upon a comparison between one's own achievements and those of other, far less longevous, persons. But this advantage appears negligible in relation to the example's detrimental features.

An initial problem is Wisnewski's assumption that there is a potentially inexhaustible number of possible bodily pleasures. He builds into the example the potential for inexhaustibility by sliding from "every possible bodily pleasure" to every possible *means of acquiring* some bodily pleasure. Having made this slide, he is then able to appeal to the possibility of ever-new technological innovations in order to support the claim that the desire could never be finally expended.

But either way—whether it is bodily sensations, or means of inducing such sensations, that we are talking about—is it not the case that the example merely begs the question against Williams? Pleasurable bodily sensations strike me as being just the sorts of things that Williams would suppose an immortal is going to get bored of after a while, and I see no sign of Wisnewski's having said anything to counter this supposition. Perhaps there is a clash of brute intuitions afoot, and the issue is irresolvable either way. As Adrian Moore has suggested, one's response to the question whether it is conceivable that an interest in life could be sustained perpetually throughout everlasting time may come down to a personal disposition, or

[16] This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that someone lacking all talent for a particular activity could fail to become proficient even when given unbounded time in which to practice.

"temperamental divide," which cannot be argued away.[17] But, with particular reference to the present example, even if we can regard as possible an immortal existence sustained by the desire to experience one pleasurable sensation after another, can we really also regard it as *desirable*—could anyone, after deep reflection, consider this a desirable way of living a *human* life?[18]

In connection with the above point, it is apposite to note the view of certain commentators that immortality could be tolerable (and perhaps enjoyable) for at least some animals, or other kinds of non-human beings, but not for creatures such as ourselves. Geoffrey Scarre, for example, says of those beings who could withstand immortality "that they would have to be either much duller than we are (an immortal sheep or rabbit might never get bored) or more godlike, possessing infinite patience and tranquillity of spirit (although this condition too might be rather hard to distinguish from dullness)."[19] And Christine Overall speculates about an immortal dog, that "if he could awake every day with the prospect of breakfast and a walk, he could probably be happy to go on awakening every day for eternity."[20]

Points of this sort force us to reflect upon what we take a desirable human life to consist in, and it is not at all evident that Wisnewski has thought this through. Merely stipulating that a certain kind of desire, with an open-ended objective, could be part of a human being's psychological inventory is insufficient to establish that a life propelled by such a desire would itself be desirable. Indeed, the two imagined instances of such desires adduced by Wisnewski appear closer to forms of pathological compulsion than to manifestations of a well-adjusted constitution. Perhaps some will contend that a life of unending pathological compulsion could be desirable from a subjective point of view, but I cannot see the point in that contention.

Conclusion

One thing that has become clearer over the course of the above discussion is the difficulty of arriving at an objective answer to the question whether an immortal life could be desirable. When Williams asserts that the categorical desires of human beings are non-contingently finite and exhaustible, his assertion is based primarily upon his own reflections on the fictional predicament of Elina Makropulos. He cannot envisage a worthwhile human life going on forever, since he cannot envisage projects and commitments potent and valuable enough to be the targets of categorical desires capable of sustaining our interest interminably. His demand that, for an immortal life to be desirable boredom must be unthinkable therein, may be taken as a challenge to the

[17] See Moore (2006, p. 314).

[18] Naturally, this is difficult to answer without knowing more about what Wisnewski would include under the expression "bodily pleasure." If this just means "pleasure," and "pleasure" just means "enjoyable experience," then there may be a sense in which a life comprising an infinite succession of these would be desirable (but more would need to be said about the kinds of experiences in question). However, I take it that, by referring to his example as "rather debaucherous," Wisnewski means to include only the sorts of pleasures that we might describe as instances of short-term gratification.

[19] Scarre (2007, p. 60).

[20] Overall (2003, p. 147).

reader to think through what endless existence might be like and to picture to oneself something—anything—that would, necessarily, never lose its charm. Wisnewski has responded by positing two examples of goals that I, upon reflection, find to be insipid. I cannot see the point of the lives Wisnewski is envisaging, and hence I cannot concede that he has offered counter-examples to Williams' proposal.

One final point that deserves to be noted is the incoherence in the suggestion, explicitly made by Steele and implicit in Wisnewski's argument, that an endless life containing periods of boredom need not become intolerable provided those periods are (roughly) proportionate to the periods of boredom experienced in an ordinary finite life. This is incoherent because it presupposes that a finite duration is commensurable with an infinite one. But imagine any finite period situated within infinite time, and compare it with a finite period situated within a relatively longer finite period, and you will surely find that it is nonsense to speak of proportionality here. We might say of any finite life that it would remain tolerable provided its periods of boredom amounted to no more than, for example, ten or fifteen percent of its total duration. But percentages do not apply to infinities. An infinite duration can encompass any finite duration and still have room for more, and thus there is no limit to the length of a period of boredom that an infinite life could contain without the life's being entirely composed thereof. I take it that this is among the reasons why Williams maintains that "Nothing else will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*."[21]

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