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Immortal Curiosity

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IMMORTAL CURIOSITY*

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I. THE MAKROPULOS CASE

In his article “The Makropulos Case,” Bernard Williams claims that “immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless” and “that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life.”¹ This is so because such a life would have nothing in it that would propel the immortal forward to the future; an endless existence would be inevitably beset with insufferable boredom. We should therefore cherish our temporal finitude, and invest our energies into bettering or enhancing our lives. We should consider ourselves to be “lucky in having the chance to die.”²

Williams uses as a starting point for his argument a fictional case, figuring in a play by Karel Capek, which was made into an opera by Janacek. This concerns a woman, Elina Makropulos, who by means of an elixir of life has the opportunity to halt the aging process. She thus lives, for as long as she chooses, a life in which her biological age is 42. After having lived for 300 years in such a state of arrested development, she decides to cease taking the elixir and dies. The reason for this suicide of sorts is that “[h]er unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: ‘in the end it is the same’, she says.”³ This is because “everything that could happen and make sense to one

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¹ In his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 82–101, at 89.

² *Ibid.*: 100.

³ *Ibid.*: 82.

particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character.”⁴ Williams claims that this case is of general applicability, because of the inescapable monotony of an extended existence. Any individual whose character remains constant, will, sooner or later, make the same choice as Elina Makropulos; or so Williams argues.

Williams’s reasoning is best spelled out in the form of a dilemma. Start with the notion of character without which his reasoning loses its bite. The “character” that a person has, involves, for Williams, the “projects and attitudes which [a person] takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about.” He calls these projects and attitudes “commitments,” “categorical desires,” or “ground projects” at varying places in his writings.⁵ In the “Makropulos Case,” he understands character in terms of *categorical desires*, and we will also use this terminology in the article. These are desires that are not conditional on one’s being alive, differing in this way from what he calls conditional desires. Categorical desires determine whether one should keep on living in the first place: they are desires that propel one forward, into the future, by giving one a reason to live.

Once the notion of character is in place, the dilemma unfolds. It has the following form. Either the envisioned immortal life consists of an infinite sequence of character shifts, of periods characterized by significant differences in personality, interests etc., or the life is one constituted by a stable character. The former option Williams rules out as not being something that an individual can rationally look forward to. The second option will, according to Williams, lead to repetitive monotony: the immortal will continue repeating the same set of experiences, as her character, which determines what experiences are worth for her to live through, will remain constant and thus finite. In this way she will satisfy all her categorical desires, leaving her in a state of boredom and without any reason to continue living.

Many have criticized Williams’ argument, and we shall join their ranks. At the same time, we shall try to make the argument as viable as possible in the face of objections made to it. In doing this, we shall appeal to notions and arguments in other parts of Williams’ *oeuvre* while holding onto to his most important background assumptions. This strategy we take to be warranted. For our aim is not to give the most accurate exegesis of Williams’s argument, but to investigate ways of defending it, and to do so, if needed, by means of modification and extension of his central claims. In this way we will be in the position to attack the strongest version of Williams’s argument, which is also what charity demands from us.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 90.

⁵ See his “A Critique of Utilitarianism” in J. J. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 111; Williams *op. cit.*, p. 86; “Persons, Character, and Morality” in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 13.

The plan of the article is the following. We will begin with the first horn of Williams's dilemma: the requirement that the immortal's character should remain constant. We will show that this requirement is defensible contrary, perhaps, to appearance (section II). Next, we will discuss and reject a recent attack on Williams's argument, by Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa. They argue that Williams's conclusion that immortality is rationally undesirable does not follow, even if one accepts the dilemma he proposes (section III). From these we conclude that rejecting the second horn of the dilemma is the best way to respond to Williams. Our objection contends that Williams overlooks a basic feature of human existence, namely curiosity, and that his negative evaluation of an eternal life is therefore unconvincing. We shall also briefly show why our response is superior to other responses of the same kind (section IV). In the closing section (V), we will recap the main points of our discussion and add some (very) speculative remarks about how Williams may escape our objection.

II. CHARACTER: CONSTANCY, CONTINUITY, MORALITY

Let us begin with reconstructing Williams's reasoning for the first horn of his dilemma. There are two crucial steps here: the turn to character and the focus on its constancy. As for the first, the question is what justifies Williams's choice of putting his dilemma in terms of character, and not in terms of personal identity. This is an important move because were Williams to defend his demands for constancy by relying on issues of personal identity, on the requirement that it be the same *person* whose existence is prolonged indefinitely, his argument would be unconvincing.⁶ For one could then argue that Williams has too narrow a view of personal identity, that allowing considerable shifts over time in the agent's categorical desires is perfectly compatible with many appealing conceptions of personal identity. Thus, on theories that rely on psychological continuity of a less demanding kind, one can establish the sameness of personal identity on the basis of, for example, the continuity of memory while allowing (almost) any kind of change in the agent's character. Alternatively, on theories that take personal identity to consist in physical continuity, changes in categorical desires, at least normally, have no effect on the agent's body, thus on her identity.

Williams is explicit that personal identity is not enough to make his argument work. He distinguishes between two conditions that any account that wants to show that one has a reason to live forever, which he calls the "anti-Lucretian hope"

⁶ For recent examples of interpreting Williams in this way, see Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa, "Immortality Without Boredom", *Ratio* 22:3 (2009): 262, 265, 273, and A. W. Moore, "Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaninglessness of Immortality", *Mind* 115 (2006): 458.

for continuing life, must fulfil. Of these two conditions, personal identity is only the first: “it should clearly be *me* who lives forever,” he says, adding that bodily continuity is minimally sufficient for personal identity.⁷ The second condition brings in the appeal to character. Here the idea is that “the state in which I survive should be one in 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.”⁸ Why invoke this second condition? Williams’s underlying idea must be that when we ask the question whether to continue our life, we are asking a question about our categorical desires, because it is these desires that decide the question. And asking questions about our categorical desires is the same as asking questions about our character, which they constitute, and not about our personal identity, which, for Williams, is a merely physical matter. Hence, the turn to character and the invoking of the second condition.

The next question is the more difficult one: why demand constancy of character, that is, why invoke the condition of adequate relatedness? Williams’s answer seems to be this: it is an essential aspect of the immortal’s choice situation that the prospect of a non-related, psychologically disjointed, infinite series of lives is not available as a rational choice to the immortal. Because these lives comprise different sets of categorical desires, the immortal will not suffer from the boredom that embittered the life of Elina Makropulos. Unlike Elina, she never gets bored in this way because she will always have new categorical desires to satisfy. This sort of immortal existence is thus not undesirable; however, it is not a rational choice, according to Williams. The question is why.

Williams gives the following argument.⁹ What interests us is the situation when someone is rationally contemplating the choice of immortality. For the prospect of a never-ending series of psychologically disjointed lives to make sense as an option for the immortal, this prospect must offer her the possible existence of characters and desires that can be, as Williams puts it, “objects of hope” *now* for her, that is, when she decides. However, this is only possible if these characters and desires are “adequately related” to her present character and desires; yet, this is just what the idea of psychological disjointedness denies. Only categorical desires of the immortal can propel her into the future. But when these desires are there, the future life is not there; and when the future life is there, the desires are not there (nor is anything properly related to them, given the absence of any psychological connection). Hence there is nothing to propel the immortal into the

⁷ Williams *op. cit.*, p. 92. This is also in line with his view of personal identity elsewhere. See his “The Self and The Future” in his *Problems of the Self*, pp. 46–64.

⁸ Williams *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 92–93.

future other than her existing character or desires that are adequately related to it: constancy of character is in this way an essential feature of the immortal's decision situation.¹⁰

However, a psychologically disjointed, infinite series of lives is not the only alternative way of picturing the immortal's existence. We will discuss two possible scenarios.¹¹ One might point out that it seems possible to maintain an existence of constant character changes without these being "inadequately related." All that is needed is that we can understand "adequately related" as making reference to the *continuity* of the agent's character: as a chain of psychological connectedness, understood as, say, the counterfactual dependence of the categorical desires of temporally contiguous pairs of characters of the same person. In this way, the immortal's present character can be adequately related to a different character by establishing a chain of psychological connections between them. The result is that we can picture the immortal's existence as a series of lives each with its own distinct character that are however adequately related to, that is, psychologically continuous with the immortal's present self. There seem to be no conceptual or metaphysical reason to rule out this possibility and, given the potentially infinite length of the immortal's existence and the infinite number of experiences she can go through during this existence, it is at least unclear why such a scenario would even be psychologically impossible.

By having a closer look, however, it can be shown that this scenario is far from serving as an obvious counterexample to the first horn of Williams's dilemma. There is, first of all, good reason to believe that the liberal understanding of "adequately related" mentioned earlier is not something Williams would be willing to accept. Although, as was already noted, in "The Makropulos Case" Williams does not tell us what he takes the notion to cover, from his later writings we can get a clearer idea. We just have to notice what Williams uses the notion for: to determine what can give someone reasons to choose immortality. This naturally takes us to his later theory of reasons: to his idea that all reasons are internal in the

¹⁰ Note although, that as Elijah Millgram ("On Being Bored Out of Your Mind", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2004): 165–86) has pointed out, in defending the first horn of his dilemma, Williams is presupposing a particular view of rational agency, on which leaving one's categorical desires behind is the same as leaving *oneself* behind. This idea, however, can be disputed, as Millgram demonstrates. As noted in the introduction, we do not, however, question the assumptions that anchor Williams's dilemma. This would have to be done in another article, because, in the particular case, it requires independent discussion of rational agency.

¹¹ For a thorough critical discussion of other scenarios, see Roy W. Perrett, "Regarding Immortality", *Religious Studies* 22:2 (1986): 219–33. For a recent, more sympathetic discussion, see Christopher Belshaw, *Ten Good Questions About Life and Death* (London: Blackwell) 88–90.

sense that they must be connected to what the agent cares about.¹² In a still rough, but more precise formulation, what Williams holds is that it is either the agent's actual motivations that give her reasons to act, or those motivations that she can reach via a "sound deliberative route" on the basis of her actual motivational set. Admittedly, even this substantial reading of "adequately related" does not eliminate the vagueness of the notion because Williams deliberately leaves open the content of the notion of a "sound deliberative route." Nevertheless, it is clear from his writings that brain surgery, hypnosis, moving rhetoric, religious indoctrination, or conversion are not admitted in the notion. In short, we can regard this idea as shorthand for rational deliberation, where the account of rationality is left sufficiently undetermined.

Given these ideas, it is fairly easy to reformulate Williams's position in "The Makropulos Case." For the immortal's choice the relevant motivations in her actual motivational set are her categorical desires, plus those categorical desires that are adequately related, that is to say, reachable via a sound deliberative route on the basis of this motivational set. The corresponding requirement of *constancy* of character is then the condition that the future character, that is, the set of categorical desires that supposedly hold hope for the immortal at the moment of her choice, must fall within the set of reason-providing desires as defined earlier. Thus, for instance, Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus would not "produce" a new character that could give any reason for Saul to continue life, were he to have such doubts and were he to consider the religious character of someone like Paul as an option. There is also a corresponding notion of *continuity* of character: when the immortal's future selves are reachable via rationally constrained chains of connections ("sound deliberative routes") from her present self. It is this latter notion that we are now interested in.

At this point, it is a good idea to invoke a distinction between serial and total immortality.¹³ There is a difference, between maintaining that we would, given the choice between a mortal existence and an immortal one opt for the latter (total immortality), and maintaining that we would, if given the choice at regular intervals to prolong our existence a certain period of time make indefinite use of this latter option (serial immortality). In the former case, the immortal makes a choice for eternity: this is then a once-and-for-all decision. Therefore the series of rationally constrained links to her future selves is further restricted by her actual motivational set. This makes it dubious that we could recreate the kind of picture

¹² For Williams's account of internal reasons, see his "Internal and External Reasons" in his *Moral Luck*, pp. 101–14, and the several follow-up articles that were later published both by him and others.

¹³ Compare the distinction between necessarily body-bound and contingently body-bound immortality in Hunter Steele, "Could Body-Bound Immortality Be Liveable?", *Mind* 85 (1976): 424–27.

the present proposal needs: to present the immortal's existence as an infinite series of rationally connected lives. It seems that chains of psychological connectedness as defined earlier take one much farther away from one's existing motivational set than a series of sound deliberative routes, no matter how flexibly defined, would ever do.

The suggestion then, would be that serial immortality—which, presumably, is Williams's preferred version—is different because in this case, the repeated choice situations can make use of different sets of reason-grounding desires: because, as time progresses, the immortal, in responding to the different circumstances (e.g., by making important decisions), changes, that is, her motivational set changes. In this way, by making use of her changing motivational set and the idea of rationally constrained chains of connections, the immortal can always find something to look forward to in the future.¹⁴ That is, perhaps the immortal will change continuously, and therefore at each and every instance of her infinite series of choices, she will have something to look forward to in the future, given her categorical desires at the time of her choice and the chains of rational connections they may partake in.

However, another idea of Williams can be used to constrain infinite change in the immortal's character: practical necessity.¹⁵ According to Williams, certain of our choices are governed by such necessities: we *must* choose and act in certain ways in certain situations. This is because we cannot but make these choices, and we cannot but act on them (at least, intentionally): practical necessities are best understood in terms of the agent's incapacities. In discovering these necessities, moreover, the agent makes discoveries about her *character*: not only about its limits, but also about its content. Given this, and given that practical necessities cannot be cast aside, there is significant rigidity in our character. Character change is a discovery procedure; it is a discovery of the limits as well as the substance of one's character, among them such rigid elements as practical necessities. If this is so, although the immortal has an infinite range of opportunity for character change, she cannot change limitlessly: certain aspects of her character she will not be able to overcome, no matter how hard she tries. Hence the idea that given serial immortality and continuously changing circumstances, the immortal can escape, the first horn of Williams's dilemma, collapses.

However, one could still point out that it is unclear what practical necessities—and the corresponding incapacities—consist in; hence, it is unclear how rigid these

¹⁴ Martin Hollis ("The Shape of a Life", *World, Mind, and Ethics*, ed. J. E. J. Altham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 170–85, at 179–81) appears to raise just this possibility, although not in the context of immortality.

¹⁵ See his "Practical Necessity" in his *Moral Luck*, pp. 124–31, esp. at pp. 129–31.

elements of one's character really are.¹⁶ We admit this. What is clearly included in the notion of a practical necessity is that these elements of one's character are not under the agent's rational and voluntary control. But then, the objection goes, this does not rule out every kind of psychological change. In particular, it is possible that certain non-rational psychological events, such as conversions, can so "shake up" the agent's psychology, that even the agent's incapacities would be eliminated—or created—in the process. Again, we admit this to be possible. However, if this is what is supposed to save the present idea, then it is built on sand, for radical psychological events like conversions, will arguably create a character that is discontinuous with the previous one. Hence, the resulting existence of the immortal would be like the alternative Williams originally considered: an infinite series of psychologically disjointed lives. And the choice of immortality, at any point of the series, would involve choosing this existence—and it was already shown that this is not a prospect that the immortal can rationally look forward to.

The second scenario combines elements from both horns of Williams's dilemma. The idea is to consider an immortal who has the desire to bring new selves into being, no matter what they are like, no matter what character, desires etc., they will have. The question here is what carries the weight of the response to Williams. One option is that this desire helps us dissolve Williams's dilemma because it ensures that the immortal looks forward to her infinite future existence because that will be filled with (the satisfaction of) the desires of *her* future selves. However, this idea stumbles on Williams's second condition, which demands relatedness of character, in a way different from what we have seen so far.

The idea is that only those self-regarding desires, which involve the prospect or image of some kind of a relatedness of character between the immortal's present and future selves, can make eternal life rationally desirable for the immortal. Williams is explicit about this criterion. His example is similar to ours: the immortal's desire that future desires of hers be born and satisfied. "[I]f that were the only categorical desire that carried me into it [the future life]," Williams points out, "at least this seems demanded, that any image I have of those future desires should make it comprehensible to me how *in terms of my character* they could be by my desires."¹⁷ That is, it is not enough if a self-regarding desire is categorical; for it to establish the right kind of, that is, character-based relation between the immortal's present and future lives, it must itself involve the prospect or image of such a relation.

¹⁶ See Robert J. Gay, "Bernard Williams on Practical Necessity", *Mind* 98 (1989): 551–69, for a thorough discussion of this question.

¹⁷ Williams *op. cit.*, p. 92, our italics.

This appears to be a sensible extension of Williams's condition of character-relatedness. However, the desire in our example cannot satisfy it because this desire cannot relate the immortal to her future selves, for the simple reason that they are not character-related to her as she is now. They are not, in this sense, *her* descendants; they are strangers whose existence she cannot look forward to. True, they are not entirely strangers since they are bodily continuous with her; hence continuity of personal identity, in Williams's view, is secured. The question whether immortality is a rational choice, however, concern character-relatedness and this condition, in its extended understanding as presented earlier, is not met by the desire to bring new selves into being.¹⁸

In response, one might then interpret the desire in question as a peculiar moral desire: as an intra-personal case for caring for *others*. In this case, however, another aspect of the desire will gain center stage in the response to Williams: that it is supposedly unsatisfiable. Some claim that this is so, that moral desires, for one reason or another, cannot be satisfied. However, we do not want to discuss this matter at this point; we will make some speculative remarks later about an immortal life that is solely devoted to the cause of morality. Our point now is only that this reading of the idea is no rejection of the claim that the immortal's character must be considered constant for her choice of immortality to make sense to her. It instead rejects the second horn of Williams's dilemma, concerning boredom. The idea, therefore, although intriguing, is irrelevant in the present context.

III. VARIETIES OF BOREDOM

We think, therefore, that the first horn of Williams's dilemma is, perhaps contrary to appearance, defensible. This suggests that the best way to respond to Williams is to focus on the second horn of his dilemma. This is indeed what we will ultimately do; before this, however, we would like to consider a very recent attempt that takes neither of these routes.

The idea is to show that Williams's argument founders on a lack of attention to the nuances of boredom. Thus Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa have promoted the distinction between habitual and situational boredom as a means of circumventing Williams's conclusion.¹⁹ Habitual boredom consists in disaffection with one's possible life projects: one is bored with life as such. It is a form of

¹⁸ This is also a response to John Martin Fischer's objection to Williams in his "Why Immortality is Not so Bad", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2:2 (1994): 262–67. Pleasure involves no relatedness of character, only continuity of personal identity, hence it too cannot pass Williams's second condition, as now understood. Cf. Williams op. cit., p. 93 on pain.

¹⁹ Bortolotti and Nagasawa op. cit., pp. 268–74.

macro-boredom to be contrasted with the micro-boredom of situational boredom. The latter consists in a sense of tedium associated with the repetition of specific experiences. To put it in a more Williamsian language, situational boredom is the result of the satisfaction of one's categorical desires, whereas habitual boredom arises from the loss or outright absence of these desires.

The suggestion is that situational boredom need not engender habitual boredom, and that this is sufficient to block Williams's argument. The reason for this is that the phenomenology of an immortal life that Williams cites is related to situational boredom, whereas the conclusion he wants to draw is one that concerns habitual boredom. An immortal life, on Williams's account, involves inactivity, withdrawal, anxiety, alienation, and the like—and these are features of habitual boredom and not situational boredom; or so Bortolotti and Nagasawa claim with reference to empirical research. In this way they accept most of Williams's dilemma (the immortal's character remains constant and she will become bored in the course of time), but hold that this is not enough to take us to his intended conclusion: that an endless life would be meaningless and undesirable.

This response brings into view a crucial aspect of Williams's argument. He in effect makes two claims when discussing the question of boredom: one, since an immortal life will be beset with boredom, there is strong reason *against* choosing it; two, assuming the immortal maintains a constant character and can have no unsatisfiable categorical desires, there is no reason *in favor of* pursuing an immortal existence. What Bortolotti and Nagasawa do is to accept that boredom ensues, but claim that this does not make ending life the rational conclusion. However, if one accepts Williams's second claim, that there is *no* reason that would favor an immortal life, it is arguable that situational boredom would still do the work. For it could be claimed that this kind of boredom is also reason-providing: it is bad to be in this state, one does not want to be in it. Hence, the balance of reasons would still clearly favor a choice against immortality.

However, Bortolotti and Nagasawa can at this point complain that this account of Williams's argument does not take seriously their main point: that, contrary to Williams, immortality would not be *meaningless*. This is relevant because the meaning of a life is typically considered as a positive final value, that is, desirable for its own sake. If this is so, we have found the missing property Williams claims the immortal life not to possess.²⁰ It is, moreover, plausible to attribute to people the desire to lead a meaningful life; hence, there can be good reason for us to choose immortality, despite the kind of situational boredom that will sooner or

²⁰ Williams op. cit., p. 89. For the view that the meaning of life is a positive final value, see Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/life-meaning/>>.

later ensue in that life. For an immortal life to be meaningless, it would have to be spent in habitual boredom; situational boredom is no threat to meaning, or so Bortolotti and Nagasawa claim.

We disagree. We think that the question of the *phenomenology* of boredom is really just consequential upon, or indicative of the main issue: the severely impoverished existence of the immortal. As Williams at one point puts it:

The point is not that for such a man boredom would be a tiresome consequence of the supposed states, or activities, and that they would be objectionable just on the utilitarian or hedonistic ground that they had this disagreeable feature . . . The point is rather that boredom . . . would be . . . a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment.²¹

This passage clearly downplays the significance of the phenomenological aspect of boredom, putting emphasis instead on its nature as a reaction. The “deep” problem with the immortal life, the passage suggests, is not that it is felt boring, that it is characterized by feelings of (perhaps, unbearable) tedium, but that it is an impoverished and thus rationally undesirable existence. Boredom is a reaction to this existence, but it is not what makes it impoverished, hence meaningless. In other words, boredom is consequential upon and is therefore evidence of the meaninglessness of the immortal's existence, but it is not what makes this existence meaningless. To decide whether the immortal's life is indeed meaningless, we must focus on its “meaning-making” features, and these are not given by the phenomenology of boredom.

The argument of Bortolotti and Nagasawa, therefore, does not really decide anything of importance. They do not tell us anything about the relevant “meaning-making” features, nor do they provide any argument to the effect that only habitual boredom could be evidence of a meaningless life. To point out that situational boredom is a common phenomenon or that habitual boredom is more radical in its phenomenology, does not seem to decide anything. All sorts of lives can be meaningless, not just the immortal's; and it is not clear, to repeat, how and why the supposedly more radical phenomenology of habitual boredom would be evidence for a meaningless existence. Because of the description Williams gives, at certain points, of Elena Makropulos, he too is to be blamed for this mistake. Yet, to repeat, we see no reason why, without any argument given, the phenomenology of

²¹ Williams *op. cit.*, p. 95. Notice, further, that already this passage (because perception is subject to standards of correctness) and even more its continuation (where Williams alleges that one who is not bored, would be bored in certain circumstances), suggests that Williams is willing to objectivize boredom: the idea being that given her situation, the immortal should be bored, and would be bored, were she to reflect more upon her situation. This suggests an alternative response to Bortolotti and Nagasawa: that given the immortal's impoverished situation, she has reason to be *habitually* bored, even if this goes against the empirical research they appeal to.

boredom would decide anything about the meaning of life, notwithstanding the wording Williams at points gives of the problem. And without a clear statement on the meaning of life, the argument of Bortolotti and Nagasawa collapses, as we have shown earlier.

Bortolotti and Nagasawa might have a way to respond. They could accept what we say earlier, pointing out that, indeed, Williams's account of the meaning of life concerns the state of the agent's categorical desires, and her state of boredom is only indicative of this. However, this is not decisive. For what becomes crucial then, is to decide whether meaning only pertains to a life that has aims to achieve, that is, categorical desires to satisfy, or it also pertains to a life that has no more aims to achieve, but there still are aims in it, that is, all categorical desires are satisfied, but they are not absent. The claim of Bortolotti and Nagasawa would have to be that the latter is true and this is why Williams's argument does not work. There are two issues here. The first is whether this is the correct description of Williams's views; the second is whether it is the kind of account that Williams's argument must involve. As to the first, they might be right;²² as to the second, we have serious doubts.

The question is: does an eternal life have meaning if the immortal has achieved all that she has ever wanted to achieve? An affirmative answer is far from obvious; it is certainly an open debate whether a negative or positive answer is the correct one. Then, perhaps, the view should be that the immortal can, for the rest of infinity, keep achieving these aims over and over again (if this is at all possible). However, this parallels strongly the absurd life of Sisyphus, endlessly achieving the same aim again and again. True, the reference to Sisyphus is also not decisive, because some claim that such an existence is not devoid of meaning. However, this too is an open debate and no considerations of the phenomenology of boredom can decide this matter—yet, this is all the Bortolotti and Nagasawa provide us with.²³

²² We have found one reference in his "Persons, Character and Morality", p. 13. Note, although, that Williams clearly thinks that satisfied categorical desires, at least in the course of an infinite existence, will disappear. See his remarks about how categorical desires are killed by boredom in Williams *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 100.

²³ For an overview of both debates, see Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life", *Ethics* 112:4 (2002): 781–814, at 792–96. One might think that there exists another version of their strategy—embracing both horns of Williams's dilemma and still claim that his conclusion does not follow—that works: namely, that a life lived eternally in devotion to a great moral cause would not be a rationally undesirable one, despite the boredom that besets it. However, given Williams's theory of internal reasons, unless one proves that moral desires are unsatisfiable (a claim that is not part of the suggested response and if it was, the response would have a different character, being primarily an attack on the second horn of the dilemma), the immortal has no reason to pursue an eternal existence for the sake of a moral cause, however great that is. Cf. Williams *op. cit.*, pp. 95–96.

IV. IMMORTAL CURIOSITY

Recall Williams's dilemma. The immortal either goes through an infinite series of character changes and this is incompatible with the condition of constancy of character; or she maintains a more or less fixed character, but then boredom sooner or later ensues. We have defended the first horn of this dilemma and rejected a response that would endorse both horns. This leaves us with the second horn of the dilemma. In what follows, we will provide considerations, focusing on the virtue of curiosity, which aim to do away with the threat of boredom.

Elias Baumgarten has recently discussed the idea of curiosity as a meaning-giving antidote to boredom. In the context of a defense of curiosity as a virtue, he claims that, "curiosity helps people avoid a crippling obstacle to living well, the tendency to see one's life as meaningless." Furthermore, "[curiosity] makes possible an engagement with the world beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states . . . It successfully avoids boredom and indifference".²⁴

Baumgarten defines curiosity as a "desire for knowledge." He admits that not all forms of curiosity are virtuous. This, he thinks, is tied to the object of curiosity. Certain topics—for example, the private lives of strangers—are not fit objects for virtuous curiosity. We think that it is also of importance how curiosity manifests itself, not just what its object is. This is vital for our response to Williams. To see this it is helpful to consider the notion of desire that is operative in Baumgarten's account. He says that "[t]he curious person will experience a lack before the desire for a particular kind of knowledge is satisfied."²⁵ The kind of curiosity pictured here is of a driven, restless kind. It is the curiosity of the fact collector, who amasses knowledge in a field until he has exhausted the relevant facts. This form of curiosity manifests itself in an impatient thirst for knowledge. Here one may think of the individual who ceaselessly engages in new interests, amassing knowledge about a subject, and then moving on to new ones. To be contrasted with this, there is also the curiosity that is oriented toward the unfolding of the events of the world. This is related to the unforeseeable nature of the course of events. Here we find the curiosity about human progress, social, scientific development etc. "What will happen?" is the question foremost in the mind of such an individual.

Let us distinguish, thus, between what we may call acquisitive and observational curiosity. The two kinds of curiosity also differ *in the way* they prompt us to gain knowledge. Acquisitive curiosity is a desire to gain knowledge actively, against impediments, via a strain of thought. This follows from the restless, driven nature of the desire. Observational curiosity is a desire to gain knowledge

²⁴ See his "Curiosity as a Moral Virtue", *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15:2 (2001): section 4.

²⁵ *Ibid*: section 2.

passively, mostly because we have no other choice in the situation: this kind of knowledge typically concerns the future or other things that are not under our control. The desire that underlies this kind of curiosity is therefore the contemplative, perhaps even stoical kind.²⁶

Arguably, both kinds of curiosity are able to avoid Williams's challenge—by blocking the second horn of his dilemma—because they both harbor on the unsatisfiable nature of the desire that underlies them: a desire for knowledge. This desire is unsatisfiable not necessarily because there exists no complete system of knowledge. Perhaps it does. Even so, the desire for knowledge, as Neil Levy has recently pointed out, is constitutionally open-ended in the sense that “we cannot get a grip on what a completed system of knowledge might be.”²⁷ That is, even if it exists, we cannot *conceive* of a completed system of knowledge because “[w]e develop the tools for understanding the knowledge we might develop as we pursue that knowledge, in such a manner that the future directions our understanding might take are, in principle, ungraspable by us in anything more than the most hazy outline.”²⁸ Because in this way the desire for knowledge is open-ended, the threat of boredom is eliminated: “[s]ince we cannot know what the final goal might be like, we cannot imagine completing our project, and therefore we cannot be shaken by the image of its completion.”²⁹

However, if indeed both types of curiosity involve some kind of desire for knowledge and this is how they answer Williams's challenge, then why does distinguishing between them matter for our response to Williams? The answer is that, rooted in their differing—in part: phenomenal—natures, observational curiosity has certain advantages over acquisitional curiosity both in the context of Williams's thought experiment as well as in respects independent of it. Merely focusing on the desire that they both involve, blurs those differences between them that makes one a good or, in any case, better candidate to serve in the response to Williams, than does the other.

To begin with, acquisitive curiosity can make it difficult for the immortal to maintain a character. This might be so for two reasons. There is, first, the *threat of variety*. Williams at one point argues that an immortal existence of very varied lives, that is, an existence resulting from an indiscriminate range of experiences,

²⁶ For these reasons we do not think that Baumgarten is right when he focuses solely on acquisitive curiosity, although he is not alone with this approach. See also Walter Brand (“Hume's Account of Curiosity and Motivation”, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 43 (2009): 83–96) who attributes the same notion to Hume. Compare, however, Jonathan Glover (*Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin, 1977) 57) whose words might indicate that what he has in mind is something like observational curiosity.

²⁷ See his “Downshifting and the Meaning of Life”, *Ratio* 18:2 (2005): 185.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

would be incompatible with having a character: variety in this way poses a threat to one's character.³⁰ Acquisitive curiosity might have this effect. The acquisitively curious person seeks to amass knowledge; she does not merely let herself to be part of the events, but seeks to actively participate in them. In this way, she is continuously affected, not just epistemically, but in all sorts of other ways. In short, by actively participating, she not only engages with variety, but also yields to its whims. And this constant change might lead to the dissolution of her character; she might, as Williams puts it, cease to be a person and become a phenomenon.

It is however difficult to see what could be characterless about the observational kind of curiosity. Observational curiosity is neither greedy nor impertinently inquisitive; it is a curiosity that does not seek to amass knowledge as if it were a commodity, but rather derives from letting one's consciousness flow along with the unfolding of the events of the world. The person who has an observational sense of curiosity is characterized by an openness to experience that does not involve an openness to being changed by the experienced; it is rather an openness to being able to be carried along by the current of history, to be a participant, if a passive one, in the flow of events. It seems rather to be associated with a virtuous and humble form of openness. Being observationally curious about what will happen next is a way of caring about the world without yielding to its whims.

Paradoxically maybe, but the opposite effect on character might also come into play. This is our second problem: the *threat of single-mindedness*. This, we think, could be a problem for many kinds of pursuits—moral, esthetic, hedonistic—if they are stretched to infinity. Our worry is whether, in the special context of the immortal's life where the active, impertinent, even greedy acquisition of knowledge (pleasure, moral goodness, beauty) is the sole ground for the immortal's continued existence (by helping her to avoid boredom), it is really possible to pursue this activity without being absorbed in it in a single-minded way. It seems to us that for the immortal to survive, her attention must be focused on, and her life must be organized around this activity. This would, however, crowd out other activities, pursuits and character traits of the immortal, leaving her merely with the pursuit of knowledge (pleasure, moral goodness, beauty), and a one-dimensional character. Whether or not such a simple character indeed qualifies as one, may be an open question (e.g., one could argue that character requires some complexity), but what certainly poses a threat to the agent's character is the lack of an identifiable, personal self. For the single-minded pursuit of such impersonal goods as knowledge (pleasure, moral goodness, beauty) does not merely override other interests, pursuits or even non-moral virtues of the agent, but subsume, remove,

³⁰ Williams op. cit., pp. 93–94.

suppress and demote them. The result is an agent who lacks entirely a personal point of view, and, arguably, has no character.³¹

Observational curiosity, because of its passivity, does not seem to run into this problem. The observationally curious person remains at a distance, yet is not withdrawn. She cares, but she is not involved, thus allowing her other desires, character traits etc., to play out their course. Even in an immortal existence observational curiosity retains the potential that also acquisitive curiosity can have in an ordinary, finite life (if it has not grown to dominate the agent's life in the way described earlier): to lead to a complex character. As Baumgarten points out, this is because of the *fecundity* of curiosity: that it leads to other virtues, in particular caring and concern, and that it is therefore an important aspect of close relationships and autonomy. To put it in the language of desires, curiosity breeds new desires—both categorical and conditional—in its wake.³²

Another reason why it is better to focus on observational curiosity is independent of Williams's argument. Baumgarten struggles with this problem, but we think there is a simple answer to it.³³ In distinguishing between virtuous and non-virtuous forms of curiosity, he makes the observation that curiosity has typically been regarded with suspicion from a religious perspective. Regardless of exactly how such a distinction should be drawn it seems clear that observational curiosity has none of the problematic aspects that have been cited against the idea of curiosity as a virtue. For these aspects all center on the idea of knowledge acquisition, which is exactly what the notion of observational curiosity does not need. Curiosity of the observational kind is, then, unproblematic from a religious point of view.

Finally, relying on observational curiosity crucially complements another possible response to Williams. Jeremy Wisniewski has recently argued that even in the immortal life new situations can emerge that give opportunity for the immortal to continue pursuing her projects in life, thus to avoid permanent boredom.³⁴ He uses as example a man who has the categorical desire to be the best living musician and, in order to satisfy his desire, he learns to play all musical instruments to perfection. Wisniewski argues that this desire helps the immortal avoid permanent boredom because there is always the possibility that a new musical instrument will be invented. The idea here is that although the man may satisfy his desires at a certain point in history and thus become temporarily bored, the desire will be

³¹ What one is reminded of here, of course, is Susan Wolf's famous picture of the moral saint in her "Moral Saints", *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (8): 419–39, esp. at 424.

³² Baumgarten op. cit., section 3. See also Brand op. cit., p. 94, for Hume's similar views.

³³ Baumgarten op. cit., section 5.

³⁴ In his "Is the Immortal Life Worth Living?", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 33–36.

revived—and boredom will end—when a new instrument is invented, and so on to infinity. However, as noted, in Wisniewski's example there is a moment when all categorical desires of the immortal are satisfied and boredom ensues. In this moment there is only the *uncertain prospect* of a new development, and this can only help avoiding permanent boredom if the immortal has the hope that there will indeed be situations in which he can take up the pursuit of his dear project again. To be observationally curious—to be open and looking forward to future events—is, we submit, essential to ground and enforce such a hope.³⁵

In ending our article, we would like to consider possible objections to our response to Williams. Consider, first, the complaint that our response cannot in fact block the second horn of Williams's dilemma. To test this complaint in the context of Williams's thought experiment, one should ask whether there is inevitably a point where a person would no longer be curious about what will happen next, where, in fact, he would rather choose mortality than stay around another day to follow the unfolding events. However, the idea of curiosity as involving an open-ended desire for knowledge assumes that the motivational energy of a desire is assessed on the basis of the desire's satisfaction conditions. Hence the answer to the complaint is straightforward: insofar as this assumption is correct, the motivational energy of the desire will never be exhausted. Now, of course, we are here talking about psychology, so this claim is contingent: there can be many factors affecting the motivational energy of a desire. But then the complaint too is contingent. It seems implausible to claim that this kind of lack of interest would *necessarily* appear sooner or later. And nothing less is enough to question the force of our response to Williams.

The next objection points out that human history is predictable, because circular, and this is enough to bore the immortal to death at some point in her life. However, the claim about the circularity of history is substantial; it follows neither from the concept of history nor from obvious logical or metaphysical considerations. One needs a substantive theory of history to go along with it, to make it at all believable (we would say the same about another version of this objection: that even if history is not circular, the same *kinds* of events would occur in it repeatedly for eternity). Besides, Levy's explanation of the open-ended nature of the desire for knowledge still stands: it is not clear how human immortals would be able to *grasp* the fact about circularity beforehand, so that it really sinks in and saps away their motivation.

Of course, there is a perfectly reasonable methodological objection to make to psychological speculations in the context of immortality: that we are talking about

³⁵ Cf. Mikel Burley ("Immortality and Boredom: A Response to Wisniewski", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 65 (2009): 77–85, at 81) on the "implicit desires" that Wisniewski's schema needs in order to make its point.

a being who does not, and probably will never exist (or, in any case, that we are not aware of its existence), so how can we make any claims about its psychology? However, what else can we do but to take existing human psychology and extrapolate from this case to that of the immortal? As pointed out earlier, a positive answer to this question clearly serves as a background assumption to Williams's thought experiment. If, however, someone is unwilling, on principled or unprincipled grounds, to accept this assumption, then nothing really is left for her/him to say, and (s)he had better remain silent.³⁶

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have done four things. One, we have argued that on its best interpretation, the first horn of Williams's dilemma is defensible. Two, we have shown that focusing on the phenomenology of boredom does not help to answer Williams. Three, we have presented our own response to Williams that focuses on the virtue of curiosity. We have argued that a particular form of curiosity, which we have called observational curiosity, can be a standard element of immortal life and is immune to the threat of boredom. Four, we have shown why our approach is superior to other similar approaches in the literature.

At the same time, it is worth briefly considering what ways are open to Williams to escape our charge. We see two routes. Both concern the larger context of Williams's argumentation. First, Williams can weaken the strong modality of his position. His claim is that given human psychology, boredom *necessarily* ensues in an immortal existence. However, the general argumentation of his article does not need this strong claim. After having shown that, contrary to Lucretius, death can be an evil, he sets out to prove that it does not follow that more life is better than less life, hence that living eternally is necessarily the best thing to do. But this inference is refuted by showing that *sometimes* immortality is not rationally desirable; nothing stronger is needed. And this much his argument can achieve if, as we have shown, the first horn of its dilemma can be defended.

Of course, this weaker claim is, while psychologically interesting, philosophically less exciting. A philosophically more interesting way to proceed would be to deny that unsatisfiable desires, such as the desire for knowledge that curiosity involves, do indeed avoid the threat of boredom. The following line of argumentation might work. Let us distinguish between three things: the fulfillment, the satisfaction, and the exhaustion of a desire. The first is a technical notion: fulfillment conditions are determined by the intentional content of the desire.

³⁶ As indeed, Mikel Burley ("Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate", *Philosophy* 84 (2009): 529–47) counsels us, philosophers, to do (without ruling out talk of immortality in religious uses of language).

Satisfaction is fulfillment plus something subjective, which we can call contentment: pleasure is a good candidate. The desire for knowledge is a desire that cannot be fulfilled, hence it cannot be satisfied. The desire in Wisniewski's example, on the other hand, is a desire that is revivable, hence repeatedly satisfiable. Williams's claim should then be that exhaustion of a desire is something importantly different from these two; hence that it is possible that an unfulfilled (unsatisfied) or repeatedly satisfied desire gets exhausted in the course of an infinite existence. Of course, the question is how to show that this is so. Perhaps, if what gets exhausted is the motivational power of the desire, which is shown to be different from the desire's satisfaction conditions, and boredom can be demonstrated to be connected to this power, the idea could go through. How to do this is, of course, far from clear, posing sufficient challenge to further research on the matter.

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