

Immortality, Identity, and Desirability

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Williams's famous argument against immortality rests on the idea that immortality cannot be *desirable*, at least for human beings, and his contention has spawned a cottage industry of responses. As I will intend to show, the arguments over his view rest on both a difference of temperament¹ and a difference in the sense of desire being used. The former concerns a difference in the perspective one takes on personal identity; the latter a distinction between our normal desire to continue living and the kind of desire implied in desiring immortality. Showing that there is some sense of identity and desire that support Williams's conclusion goes some way toward providing support for his argument, if not a full-fledged defense of it.

Williams develops his argument in two steps. The first replies to the Lucretian (and Epicurean) argument that death cannot be an evil for us. In response, he argues that what gives us reason to live are our categorical desires, and these in turn give us reason to think death undesirable. Unlike

¹ See [Moore 2006].

some desires that are conditional on our being alive to witness their satisfaction, many of our desires are categorical: we want to finish our projects, see our friends and family thrive, or witness the dawning of the Singularity. Desires of this kind are not ones we hold merely to pass the time while we wait for death; they are desires that give us a reason to live in order to see them through to their completion. But as long as we have such desires, this implies that we desire to see them fulfilled. Anything that would prevent their fulfillment thus runs counter to our desires. Death, then, is an evil for us in the way that anything that frustrates our desires—*all* of our desires—appears to us as a misfortune to be avoided.

But in the second step of the argument, Williams rejects the seeming implication of the first step, namely that since we ostensibly always have reason to desire to postpone death, we thereby have a reason to desire to postpone it forever, that we have reason to find immortality desirable. Williams argues for this conclusion by means of setting up two conditions that immortality must meet in order to be desirable and then presenting a dilemma for fulfillment of the second condition. The first condition is that “it should clearly be *me* who lives for ever. The second important condition is 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".² The first condition, in other words, is that in order to be desirable, the eternal life in question must be *my* eternal life, not the eternal life of another person. But Williams does little with this first condition, since he takes a broad view of personal identity, one which will allow for all but the most exotic kinds of immortality. It is the second condition that drives his argument.

What makes continued life desirable is that we are propelled into it by our categorical desires. It is because I now have desires that can only be satisfied in four to eighteen months—the desire to publish a paper, for example—that I have reason to want to still be alive in four to eighteen months. Williams takes his second condition to be an adaptation of this model to the desirability of immortality: in order for *immortality* to be desirable, my immortal life must to some extent satisfy my current categorical desires. Phrased this way, of course, the condition looks suspicious: mortal humans seemingly have no desires that require an infinite amount of time to satisfy. So we can better interpret Williams's condition as a requirement that, in order to be desirable, my immortal life must be continually propelled forward by categorical desires or projects that are connected to those I now have in a foreseeable way. Were my future desires *not* so related to my present ones, I could have no more reason to care about their indefinite continuation and possible fulfillment than I do about my neighbors' desires. Even if my personal identity—on a conservative enough reading of that

² [Williams 1973]

fraught notion—could persist through a complete change in my aims and desires, my desire for the satisfaction of those aims and desires could not.

Williams raises a dilemma for this second condition by noting that, given that human beings have characters of some sort that stand in a close conceptual relation with their aims and desires, an immortal life must be either one with a fixed character or a variable one.³ Should an immortal have a fixed character her range of possible aims and projects would be circumscribed and, over a sufficiently long period of time, exhausted, such that the result would be an endless boredom. Much of the response to Williams has focused on this claim.⁴ Though I think critics of this move tend to overlook just how many of our experiences are easily reduced to patterns that over time appear to look like more of the same,⁵ here I will focus instead on the second horn of the dilemma: the life of an immortal with a changing character. In a sense, the second horn appears more realistic: our characters undergo changes, minor and sometimes major, throughout the course of our natural lives. Williams, focusing on the fictional case of Elena Makropulos, who became immortal at 42, emphasizes that her boredom is “connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had

³ For a discussion of the relation between character, desires, and projects, see Altshuler [2013].

⁴ See [Wisnewski 2005; Bortolotti and Nagasawa 2009; Fischer 2009a]

⁵ The line between categorical and conditional desires is a thin one, and desires can cross over from one to the other; what begins as a fervent categorical desire to go on a second date may, after enough dating experiences, turn into just another thing to do as long as there is a Saturday night to fill. It is not inconceivable that many, if not all, of our categorical desires might cross over into conditional ones in this way given enough time.

already happened to her".⁶ This assumes that aging is the only driving factor in character change. That may be true for the most part, but it is sometimes not. Changes in circumstances, for example, can bring out important character changes, at the very least by emphasizing previously latent aspects of character.⁷ So it seems reasonable to think that an immortal could undergo quite significant character changes over the course of an endless life.

Williams argues that if we are to give up on constancy of character we must accept that under the condition of immortality, perhaps in the span of mere millennia, we should have entirely different characters, ones no longer adequately related to our present aims and desires. And this change would then violate the second condition on the desirability of immortality. This argument has been met with a great deal of skepticism and puzzlement. Our ordinary lives are permeated by significant changes in desires and aims, yet ones that do not (normally) make continuing to exist into old age undesirable. Why should immortality be different? Perhaps if we underwent extreme and sudden changes in character, such as changes that involve being transformed into a psychological clone of Napoleon, or if we knew we would over time become highly immoral creatures, we might wish to pull the plug before that happens or, at least, might have no desire to remain plugged in.⁸

⁶ [Williams 1973]

⁷ Consider the character features brought out in German citizens circa 1933, or in Millgram's experiments on authority.

⁸ Assuming, of course, that there is a sense of personal identity that can persist through such changes in order to satisfy the first condition.

But what if the changes in character undergone by immortals are just the kind we expect in our normal lives? What if those changes are gradual, retain continuity between old and new projects and desires, and take place as a result of rational (or at least normally rational) reflection on our circumstances? Such changes are ones we accept and frequently welcome in everyday life; why not in an immortal life?⁹

An interesting feature of this response to Williams is that it makes his position not simply untenable, but incomprehensible. A man who knows perfectly well that we normally undergo a fair bit of change in our lives and that knowing this does not make continuing to live undesirable, should not think that simply adding an indefinite number of such changes to our future must cancel out that desirability. The standard response to Williams, in other words, either displays a bizarre blind spot in Williams's view or fails in its application of the principle of charity. We are forced to choose between wondering how Williams could commit an obvious oversight that vitiates the core of his argument or, as I prefer, to look for a more charitable reading. I think there are two ways to read the argument charitably: by focusing on the attitude toward identity involved, and by examining the kind of desirability in question.

First, consider the scenario Williams evokes. Should my character go on changing—for millennia and beyond—it seems reasonable to suppose that the resulting person's desires, after some arbitrarily long period of time, will not

⁹ [Bruckner 2012; Fischer 2009b; Chappell 2009; Smuts 2011]

appear to me now to have *anything* in common with my present aims and purposes. This future being will presumably have gone through countless relationships of many kinds and developed interests I cannot even conceive of;¹⁰ and such a person is likely to have attitudes such that while some of them I might find sympathetic, others I will not understand at all, and some may seem, from my standpoint, rather horrific. To deny this, it seems to me, is simply to deny either variability in character or the possibilities open within an infinitely long life. That is, the person I would become after a sufficiently long period of time will not—from my current perspective—be *me*, but a complete stranger, far more different from my current aims and interests than my present-day next-door neighbor.

Such a person might, of course, maintain the same personal identity as I in some broad metaphysical sense of identity. But if we compare me now with this far-removed future person in question, it should seem clear enough that identity in the Parfitian sense of survival is undermined; this person may psychologically be further removed from me than Napoleon. Why, then, should I find the continued survival of this person desirable? To do so merely on the grounds that this person shares biological and psychological origins with me, however distant from them he may now be, has less to do with rational desirability than with rather thoughtless sentimentality.

¹⁰ What count as acceptable relationships can be expected to change over time; similarly the possible interests my future immortal counterpart can take up have, likely in many cases, not yet been invented.

But here I have not taken the *entire* response to Williams into account; I have considered only the comparison between current and far-distant future me, leaving out any discussion of the gradual continuity of change from one to the other. After millennia, the resulting person may be different enough from me that a transition from me to him would not count as survival-preserving if we consider the two persons in question side by side; but it is survival preserving granted that the change is continuous in the way that everyday change in character is. If this objection is right, then I now have just as much reason to desire the continued survival of my far-distant future self as I do of my far-less-distant future self ten or twenty years from now. This focus on continuity of change, however, conceals an important distinction between two ways of seeing the sense of identity involved in survival: the forward-looking and backward-looking perspective. Developing this distinction, in my view, is central to reading Williams charitably.

To clarify the distinction, I want to consider a recent debate between Marya Schechtman and the late Peter Goldie. Schechtman¹¹ argues that the standard Lockean accounts of identity overlook a feature crucial to our survival: empathy. She develops the argument by reference to Parfit's famous Russian nobleman thought experiment. The Russian nobleman, young and filled with a philanthropic sense of social justice, worries that in his later years he will become conservative and wish to keep his vast resources to himself rather than sharing them with peasants. Schechtman argues that the Russian nobleman sees his likely change of character as genuinely survival-

¹¹ [2001]

threatening, and that this threat to survival is of a fairly ordinary kind. To prevent this sort of alienation from different stages in our lives, Schechtman argues that we need empathy with our past states. Having empathy with our past states does not, on her view, require that we continue living our lives in accordance with them. It requires only that we give them, so to speak, a seat at the table; that we still be able to see ourselves in those past traits, to recognize them as ours, and to consult them—though not necessarily to give them overriding weight—in our current deliberations. If, by contrast, we reject those states entirely, denying them any rational force in our present considerations, this is tantamount to permanently silencing our past selves, much as if they had ceased to live.

What I want to stress here is the first move in Schechtman's argument: that the sort of threat to survival the Russian nobleman fears does speak to a kind of concern we normally have, and even if such a normal and continuous change in character does not threaten survival in a basic sense, there is a more "subtle" sense of survival (as she puts it) that is threatened here. Schechtman's view is a forward-looking one: it assesses survival from a perspective that looks at my future self and finds the prospect of myself becoming such a person disquieting. What's significant about this perspective for our present purposes is that continuity of change does not remove the threat to survival, if there is one here. On the contrary, the fact that the change is a gradual one may serve to make the threat appear worse. The young Russian nobleman might prefer to be abruptly

transformed into an altogether different person, as an abrupt transformation would spare him from what he anticipates will be a gradual and continuous erosion of his most deeply held values. If this account does identify a genuine threat to survival in some subtle sense, then, it offers support to Williams's worry about immortality, since presumably the Russian nobleman's self in two millennia is likely to care even less about peasants than his self in a mere twenty years and is likely to embody far less of what the Russian nobleman currently values in himself. Moreover, in the case of immortality, this threat is likely far more universal; while not everyone has reason to think they will face a destruction of their cherished practical identities in the course of their mortal lives, as in the Russian nobleman's case, we all will likely undergo such drastic changes given infinite time. If the threat to survival persists despite—and to some extent because of—the continuity between my present and my far-distant future self, the forward-looking perspective that makes this threat manifest seemingly allows for a vindication of Williams's argument.

Goldie, on the other hand, worries that the empathy requirement on survival unacceptably constrains our possibilities.¹² Since many of our desires, projects, and character traits may be misguided, the ability to leave them behind is crucial to growth. Given normal human maturation, it is likely that all of us will need to leave youthful aims for more informed and more practical ones. Nor, argues Goldie, is giving up empathy with one's misguided past self threatening to survival; surely I can reconstruct my past self in

¹² See [Goldie 2012, Ch. 7]

narrative despite a lack of empathy with some, perhaps even many, of my past projects and aims. In fact, Goldie argues, “the subtle sense of survival adds nothing of any importance”,¹³ because survival is clearly preserved in any number of cases where, far from empathizing with our former selves, we feel ashamed of or deeply alienated from them. “Alienation and mortification and so on are perfectly possible in our engagement with our past and our future, and they in no way bring into question our basic survival; on the contrary, they imply it—we remain riveted to our past as, precisely, ours.”¹⁴ If Schechtman's concern is that my survival is threatened in a subtle sense by the prospect of a future self who cannot empathize with my current aims, Goldie's response is that, far from threatening survival, many empathy-negating reactive attitudes toward one's former self imply survival. The mature, conservative Russian nobleman can be ashamed of his youthful self's quixotic ambitions only because those ambitions were *his*.

Schechtman addresses this scenario, but her response to it is precisely what characterizes her view as forward-looking: the point, for her, is not that in looking back at my (very different) past self I may see my survival threatened, but that looking ahead to my future self, I see that self's lack of empathy with my current self as threatening to my survival. Her focus, in other words, is on what might appear threats to survival from my perspective now, looking forward. Goldie's focus, on the other hand, is on such threats from the perspective of my future self

¹³ [Goldie 2012, 140]

¹⁴ [Goldie 2012, 141]

looking back, and this focus suggests that worries about those threats are misplaced. Goldie's response, then, seems to offer support to Williams's critics in much the same way that Schechtman's argument undermines their view.

As I noted at the outset, the difference here may be one of temperament. Moore, following Williams, suggests that "it is surely just ... a matter of temperament, as much as the forces of reason, that leads philosophers to disagree so trenchantly about the issues raised in Williams's essay".¹⁵ Here, I am attempting to provide some content to that difference in temperament by suggesting that it may result partially from differences in the perspective one takes on one's survival. And once one takes a particular perspective, reasons to desire or reject immortality come with it, which is why the debates over Williams's argument aren't *just* a matter of temperament. Some of us are more inclined to think of survival in a forward-looking way. That is, we worry about what sorts of possible future changes would, or would not, undermine our survival, and we try (or hope) to avoid ones that would do so. A backward-looking take on survival, on the other hand, brushes these worries aside: we naturally mature and undergo significant character changes, and while we *may* find some such changes regrettable when we look back on our lives, for many we do not. Even though we may once have considered such changes threatening to our very survival, by taking a backward-looking perspective we can avoid the worries, since we have reason to suspect that, having lived through the character changes in question, we will (in the usual kind of case) still be ourselves, puzzled about why we worried so in the first place. The Russian nobleman may hate the prospect of becoming the sort of

¹⁵ [Moore 2006, 458]

conservative landowner he despises. But as the conservative landowner—perhaps wiser but perhaps more resigned to the ways of the world—he thinks his former ambitions foolish, the product of an immature mind, and while he may miss the fire that came with those sentiments, the sentiments themselves seem distasteful and certainly a good riddance. Those who entertain a forward-looking perspective thereby have a reason to be weary of immortality, seeing it (perhaps somewhat paradoxically) as the ultimate threat to survival, in the form of a distant future self who repudiates and buries the commitments they take to be central to their selves. Those with a backward-looking perspective can remain unperturbed by the prospect of living forever: for them, change over time typically leaves their selves intact.¹⁶

There is, then, a perspective on survival—a forward-looking one—that supports Williams’s contention. Those who prefer to take a backward-looking view of survival will no doubt be more likely to think that passing judgment on the desirability of immortality now is premature: we should wait and see. Having lived through countless character changes, we will be in a better position to determine whether or not we have survived them, and most likely the answer will be that we have. If there is a problem with this view, it seems, it is only this: how long should one wait? For one problem that confronts Williams’s critics is that if passing judgment on the desirability of immortality *now* is premature, then it will *always* be premature. The question he poses about desirability is, from the backward-

¹⁶ I say “typically” and (above) “in the usual kind of case”, because there may be some experiences—especially traumatic ones—in which the subject of the experience may genuinely doubt, looking backwards, whether they really survived as the same person. For discussion, see Brison [2003].

looking perspective, unanswerable, despite the number of positive responses offered in the literature; and in this sense at least the forward-looking perspective is superior. Of course this may not bother Williams's critics, who might reply that this is their point: we have no grounds for saying, at the outset, that immortality is undesirable. But if this is a feature of the backward-looking perspective, then we cannot say that immortality is *desirable*, either. The best we can say is that, at any point in a life (however long), we may find some reason to see continued survival past that point desirable. But this Williams grants. None of this is to say that the forward-looking perspective is more desirable all things considered. I doubt we could say that about either perspective, and I suspect most of us have both perspectives on our lives, especially as we age, and find important uses for them. But while both perspectives have their advantages, the forward-looking one seems better suited for addressing the question of whether immortality is desirable, if only because the backward-looking perspective cannot get a grip on the problem at all.

We may now continue this thought into the second concern I suggested at the outset: just what does it mean to say that immortality—as opposed, simply, to living longer, perhaps long enough to be able to satisfy all our categorical desires as they arise—is desirable?

On some views, there is no difference between wanting to be immortal and wanting to continue to live to satisfy our projects: if one thinks that we will always have projects, then the two are the same. Many responses to Williams,

in fact, do seem to assume that to prove the desirability of immortality, all we need to do is show that it is possible to never run out of projects, and thus that we can always have a reason to go on living.¹⁷ Williams, of course, denies that we can never run out of projects; coming to an agreement on whether we would *necessarily* run out, however, is the hard part, and takes us into speculative territory.¹⁸ I want instead to focus on the assumption that desiring to live forever is just like always desiring to live. As Rosenberg nicely sums up this view, a desire for immortality is nothing more than a desire for an open future.¹⁹ In our mortal lives, that is, we see our futures as constrained by death; the desire for immortality is merely the desire for a removal of those constraints, that is, for the freedom to continue pursuing our projects indefinitely. I want to propose, in opposition to this move, that there is a significant difference between the desire to be immortal and the more commonplace desire to live to satisfy one's projects, one that suggests that Williams's opponents are talking past him.

Our everyday desiring has contours: sometimes we have a very sharp image of what we desire; other times, its edges are fuzzy. Sometimes I want a crème brûlée, while other times I want to do something entertaining. Still, even in the

¹⁷ [Fischer 2009b; Fischer 2009a; Chappell 2009]

¹⁸ Though Aaron Smuts has raised some strong arguments to back up Williams's side, arguing that immortality would lead to a collapse of our motivational structures, despite rejecting Williams's own formulation (2011)

¹⁹ Rosenberg's view here presupposes his argument that immortality must be reversible—in this case, of course, being able to live forever loses much of the negative appearance brought out by the possibility of endless boredom. See Rosenberg [2006].

latter sort of case, I have at least some idea of what I'm looking for. This is true even in so-called “transformative experiences”, where as a result of the experience one is epistemically or personally transformed. In the most widely discussed account, put forward by L. A. Paul, one cannot make a rational decision about whether to have children on the basis of what it will be like to have them, because the experience of having children is transformative: one cannot, prior to the experience, know what one will be like (and what things will be like for one) post experience.²⁰ Even in these cases, however, we have a rough outline of both the object of our desire and of what we will be like after obtaining it. We have a good sense both of what is possible and what is likely in the domain of human experience, and so while we do not—in a sufficiently limited sense of “know”—know what we will be like post experience, we can have some pretty good ideas. The same is true of the desire for an open future. While of course I may not know what my future holds, and thus what projects I will pursue and care about completing in the future, I do know what to expect in the realm of human experience. Desiring an open future is not, in other words, so different from desiring, in my thirties, to live into my eighties. Is desiring to be immortal like this?

Consider my earlier discussion of the idea that immortality will lead to massive changes in character, sufficient to render me unrecognizable. Here we might still insist that we have *some* idea of what we are desiring in desiring to live forever, since this seems very much like desiring an open future. I think we can already spot some differences, however: I now have a

²⁰ See Paul [2015].

sense of what I desire in desiring to live into my eighties, but in a few millennia the world might be so radically different from what it is like now, that the person I would be in it, and the possibilities open to that person to take up as projects, would be entirely unrecognizable to me. But now consider what other changes immortality would require. Malpas, following Williams, argues that a human life, to have projects, must have a sense of closure, a possibility of death, for the individual projects in that life draw their meaning from one's sense of life as a whole.²¹ Echoing this sentiment, Samuel Scheffler has recently argued that in imagining immortals, "we are trying to imagine creatures who have little in their existence that matches our experience of tragic or even difficult choices, and nothing at all that matches our experience of decisions made against the background of the limits imposed by the ultimate scarce resource, time."²² Such creatures would be fundamentally different from us, because "the aspects of life that we cherish most dearly—love and labor, intimacy and achievement, creativity and humor and solidarity and all the rest—all have the status of *values* for us because of their role in our finite and bounded lives."²³ Like Malpas, Scheffler concludes that our valuing itself depends on our mortality; without death, the domain of values would either be nonexistent or highly constrained (since, as

²¹ See [Malpas 1998]. Similar arguments are suggested by Nussbaum [1989], who argues that mortality is built into our evaluative structures, and is thus a condition of our finding something desirable, and by Burley [2009], who holds that we cannot judge whether a life is desirable without having some idea of what the whole of that life might look like, a condition it is impossible to fulfill in the case of an immortal life.

²² Scheffler [2013, 99]

²³ Scheffler [2013, 100]

he notes, at last *some* kinds of temporal scarcity would still be present in even immortal lives).

I do not think we need to go so far to make the point I want to make, nor do I think we *should* go so far. It may be a mistake to say that projects as such *necessarily* require some sense of mortality to be meaningful or valuable. For it seems likely that our concern with *wholeness*, perhaps with meaning itself, is predicated on our mortality. Immortals would have no need to give a shape to their life as a whole, and thus no need to assign values to items depending on their place within that whole. That need not mean immortals could have no projects or values, however; only that the internal structure of their lives would be sufficiently different from ours to render it unimaginable for us.

We desire to go on living because we want to complete projects, projects that give sense to our lives as wholes. In wanting an open future, we want to retain that basic structure of projects. But to desire immortality is to desire a life in which wholeness is irrelevant and projects do not draw their significance from it. So if immortals *can* have projects—a possibility I do not want to rule out—we can have no idea of what those projects might be like or what sort of meaning they might have. In this sense, then, desiring to be immortal is nothing like desiring to have an open future, which is at bottom simply a desire for more of the kind of life we have, that is, a mortal one. One might think that the contrast here is too starkly drawn. True, immortals may have a sense of projects and values completely unfathomable to us, but if I were to consume a potion tomorrow that

would make me immortal, surely I would not magically forget what projects, desires, values, and meaning are like. So, the objection might go, immortality for me really *would* be just like more of the kind of life I now have. This objection seems short sighted. If I were to acquire the power of flight tomorrow, I might spend a few days walking around, out of habit, but would start zooming through the air soon enough (perhaps as soon as I realized how much I could save on footwear). Similarly, were I to suddenly become immortal, I might spend some time enjoying an open future—that is, continuing engaging in the same projects as ever, with the same meaning (subjectively, at least) as ever—but sooner or later I would drift toward an existence that, for me now, is unimaginable.

If a desire for immortality is just a desire for an open future, it is not in the sense that it is a future about which we have incomplete information, but in the sense that it is a future about which we *cannot* have information, because we cannot imagine what sort of beings we would be in it. One may want such a future; one may want to see what sort of being one would be under such conditions.²⁴ But one cannot desire it in the sense in which one simply desires to go on living, because the latter sort of desire rests on our projects while the former implies a life structured by projects unfathomable to us (if there are even projects in it). And so we cannot, from the claim that one might always want to go on living, conclude that one has reason to desire to always live. For, returning once more to Williams's formulation, if I were to become immortal, “the state in which I survive” cannot “be one which, to me looking

²⁴ [Rosenberg 2006]

forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all.” The desire for immortality is a desire without contours, and if it is a desire at all—and not simply a confused wish to have more of the same mortal life without the pesky mortality—then it is radically unlike any desire we might have for our future. If we want to read Williams charitably, then, we might ask not whether immortality can be desirable, but whether it is even possible to desire it.²⁵

²⁵ I would like to thank participants at the inaugural meeting of the International Association for the Philosophy of Death and Dying for helpful feedback on the early presented version of this paper and Christopher Belshaw for his detailed comments on the previous draft.

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