

Immortality and Significance

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Abstract

Although I reject his argument, I defend Bernard Williams' claim that we would lose reason to go on if we were to live forever. Like Williams, I develop my argument through a brief discussion of a work of fiction—in this instance, Borges' story "The Immortal." I expand on Borges' example, arguing that immortality would be motivationally devastating, since our decisions would carry little weight, our achievements would be hollow victories of mere diligence, and the prospect of eternal frustration would haunt our every effort. An immortal life for those of limited ability will inevitably result in endless frustration, since the number of significant projects that one is capable of completing is finite, but the span of time is infinite.

1 Introduction

Unamuno speaks for all of us when he says: "I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever and ever."¹ In our hurry to cast off thoughts of death we latch onto beatific visions of immortality without asking whether an eternal existence would be desirable. Although it seems obvious that no gift could be as great as eternal life, Bernard Williams offers a compelling argument against the value of immortality, suggesting that over the course of eternity we would either cease to be the same person or find ourselves trapped in perpetual meaninglessness.²

Although I reject Williams' argument, I defend his conclusion that over the course of an infinite amount of time our lives would ultimately become undesirable. I argue that the principal problem with immortality is that it would sap our decisions of significance, which, combined with a few related factors, would result in a general motivational collapse. I begin by examining Williams' argument, first explaining the parameters by which he thinks we should evaluate the desirability of any form of immortal existence. Provisionally, against Williams' charges, I defend what he calls the Tiresias model of immortality.

Then, through an examination of Borges' story "The Immortal" I develop an argument against immortality that has some similarities to Martha Nussbaum's position. In response to John Martin Fischer's objections, I attempt

¹ Miguel De Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (Cosimo, 2005), p.45.

² Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge UP, 1993).

to reveal the principal problems with immortality by systematically examining the various forms of immortal life. My principal claim is that an immortal life for those of fixed ability will inevitably result in endless frustration, since the number of significant projects that one is capable of completing is finite, but the span of time is infinite.

2 Desire, Meaning, and Immortality

In "The Makropulos Case," Williams argues that "an endless life would be a meaningless one, and that we could have no reason for living an eternally human life." He does not claim that the life of a god would be undesirable; rather, he argues that immortality would fail to support a meaningful "human life." Of course, the notion of a "human life" is vague, and unfortunately Williams is not altogether clear about just what he intends. The problem is that the more details we add to the notion of a "human life" the closer Williams' conclusion comes to a tautology. For instance, if the notion of a human life includes the average human life span, of roughly 70 years, then of course an immortal life could not be a human life. So, clearly he does not intend this particular detail. But just what does he have in mind?

Most plausibly, what Williams' intends by "human life" is a life in some way recognizably human in that it supports human concerns, significance, and can give us what we want when we want to go on. It is not clear how one could evaluate the life of an omnipotent deity, and it is even less clear if any adequate theory of personal identity would allow for such a metamorphosis. How could I become a god? Could such a creature plausibly be said to be me?

But questions concerning metamorphoses are beside the point. What we want to know is if there is a form of immortality that would support a meaningful eternal existence for us—whether our desire to live forever could be happily satisfied. Further, Williams thinks that a human life would need to support the development of a character—a set of preferences, intolerances, goals, and the like.

Williams' bases his argument against the prospect of a desirable form of immortality on a distinction between what he calls "categorical" and "contingent" desires. Desires for food, sex, and shelter do not give us *reason* to live. Although we desire good food if we continue living, we do not live to eat. Such desires are contingent on our existence. In contrast, categorical desires provide reason to live—they give meaning to our lives. One may desire to see their child become a self-sufficient adult, or to finish a long-running research project. These are categorical desires. The desire to finish a novel is distinctly unlike the desire for great southern Indian food. Categorical desires give us reason to live; contingent desires merely make our lives better.

Williams argues that over the course of an eternity we would satisfy all of our categorical desires and be left with mere contingent desires—that is, left in a state of meaningless, frivolous existence. Of course, some of these desires might be directed at what John Martin Fischer calls "repeatable pleasures"—desires for the taste of newly discovered South American fruits or novel sexual

experiences—but regression into a being concerned primarily with keeping its stomach full and genitals stimulated is not one we should look forward to. In order for an immortal life to be desirable, it must be able to sustain one's categorical desires; it must be able to support our desire for significance. But it is surprisingly difficult to imagine an immortal life that could meet this demand.

Williams introduces two plausible restrictions that any viable account must not violate. First, he says that “it should clearly be *me* who lives forever.” Second, “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.” The second criterion is that a desirable immortal life needs to be able to give us what we want when we want to go on. Further, it restricts the content of our future categorical desires to those that are related to the desires that we currently possess. On some theories of personal identity, the first criterion is redundant, since our identity is at least partly constituted by the categorical desires required by the second criterion. But Williams keeps the criteria distinct because the second criterion is far stricter than most plausible conditions of personal identity, and the less strict standard is all that is needed to reject a few problematic models of immortality. With these two criteria in hand, Williams proceeds to evaluate a few alternative forms of immortal existence.

Williams considers several conceptions of eternal life, the most important of which are continued, serial, and varied existence. He argues that throughout the course of an eternal, continued existence anyone would satisfy all of their categorical desires, thereby depleting their motivational store of reasons to go on. As for serial existences, such as those envisioned by systems of reincarnation, they fail to meet the first criterion, since there is no reason to think that a person reincarnated as a mouse (or even in another human body) should be considered the same person. Reincarnated beings do not meet any plausible standard of personal identity, since the continuity between the old self and the “reborn” self is mysterious at best. And even if the soul theory of personal identity is the correct account, reincarnation does not give us what we want when we want to go on. How could it possibly provide solace to someone on their death bed to suggest that she might be “reborn” as a lion, giraffe, eagle, or chimp? Even the prospect of reincarnation as a famous hero is a questionable fate if “you” were to receive a completely different personality with no recollection of your previous existence.

Putting aside the problems of reincarnation, if we imagine a form of existence where our current set of categorical desires is completely replaced by another, varied set, we have little reason to think that the result would be the same person. Our categorical desires are not only what provide meaning to our lives, they also make us who we are. If they were replaced, our identity as a person would be replaced as well. Williams calls a form of immortal existence where we come to adopt various sets of categorical desires the Tiresias model, after the blind prophet of Thebes who lived as a man and a woman over the course of several lives. Williams argues that someone who lives as Tiresias “is

not, eventually, a person but a phenomena.”³

The first objection that we might raise against Williams' argument is that he fails to take seriously the possibility of a life composed of an evolving set of overlapping categorical desires.⁴ Couldn't one gradually come to have new categorical desires along with one's existing desires, which might eventually be fulfilled? There is no reason to envision a rupture as radical as described in the serial model; sufficient continuity might endure for this vision to serve “as an object of hope to one who did not want to die.”⁵ The fundamental problem is with Williams' second criteria. He supposes that we would need to be able to relate all of our future categorical desires to our current aims, but he never gives an adequate explanation of why this should be the case. For an immortal existence to be desirable, it merely needs to be the case that our categorical desires at any given point in time are able to propel us forward.⁶ In a thousand years we need not have the same categorical desires that we have right now to fulfill this condition. Williams' criterion is far too demanding. The prospect of our future existence need not propel us forward a thousand years at a time; a day or two will suffice.

Williams could concede this point but still argue that such an existence would suffer from the central problem of the Tiresias model, namely, it precludes the development of a coherent sense of self. We could not have *a* life in this model. We certainly could not construct a well-formed narrative of our life, and insofar as such narratives are important for our sense of self, our identity as persons would be at risk.⁷ Although over the course of infinite time we might have a gradually changing notion of who we are, we would become someone completely different from when we began. We might have a sense that our past experiences were linked, yet not feel as if they were all experiences of the same self.

However, this does not imply that an immortal existence would be meaningless or undesirable, only that it would be radically different from the kinds of lives mere mortals presently hope to lead. Further, it might still be a recognizably “human life,” in the broad understanding of the concept. In fact, one might suggest that the Tiresias model is not that radically different from the normal human progression from childhood to adolescence to adulthood to old age. Although one recognizes their childhood experiences as their own, many of

³ Williams, p. 94.

⁴ In “Death” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), Luper provides a brief summary of this central criticism of Williams. Thomas Nagel asks of Williams: “Can it be that he is more easily bored than I?” See Thomas Nagel, “Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life” in *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986), p. 224. See also John Martin Fischer, “Why Immortality is Not So Bad” in *Life, Death, and Meaning* ed. David Benatar (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

⁵ Williams, p. 92.

⁶ Fischer raises a similar objection in his introduction to the collection *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford, 1993), p. 12.

⁷ Jeff Malpas makes a similar argument in “Death and the Unity of a life” in *Death and Philosophy*, eds. Jeff Malpas and Robert Solomon (Routledge, 1998).

us do not consider ourselves to be even remotely the same person as we were in childhood (or even adolescence); so while the child may indeed be the father of the man, the man may nevertheless be a complete stranger to the child. We develop a self, a character, partly by renouncing aspects of who we once were and affirming others. This certainly does not make our lives meaningless and there is no reason to suppose that this process of self-development could not be continued indefinitely. We would not have “a life,” since (like a soap opera) our story would continue indefinitely, but this would not necessarily sap all meaningfulness from our existence.

Williams argues that Tiresias “cannot have a character, either continuously through these proceedings or cumulatively at the end (if there were to be an end) of them.” But it is not clear why not. Of course, if we take the entire span of Tiresias’ life, we will not be able to locate a single character. Nor will not find a cumulative character, but we rarely find these in normal human lives. Indeed, aspects of his/her personality from early periods would certainly conflict with those from later in his/her life. But this does not show that Tiresias could not have a continuously evolving character. Given sufficient overlap, which we would likely need for personal identity, at any particular point in time there is no reason to think that Tiresias would not have a character—albeit, a continuously evolving character.

Hence, Williams does not present any compelling reasons to think that an immortal existence of the kind that would support a “human life” is necessarily undesirable. It is plausible that Tiresias would never run out of categorical desires. Hence, at this point, we have no reason to think that an immortal life would necessarily fail to give one reason to go on or fail to support satisfactory levels of meaningfulness. It seems plausible that a life of overlapping categorical desires could, at any point in time, give us what we want in survival—that is, it could fund our motivation to go on. However, lacking the roughest sketch of a desirable immortal existence, we have cause to be suspicious. Through an examination of Borges’ story “The Immortal,” I intend to show that suspicion is justified.

3 Borges’ Apathetic Immortals

In a short story called “The Immortal,” Borges envisions a society of hopelessly apathetic immortals who crave nothing more than death. We learn of the society of immortals from a note scribbled into the back pages of copy of Pope’s *Iliad*. The note tells the story of an immortal that lived a life much like that of Tiresias—a life spanning ages, continents, and cultures. After a tireless search for a legendary river of eternal life, the author drinks from the magical river that lies just outside a labyrinth surrounding the city of immortals. But finding immortality as unbearable as Tithonus, the author embarks on a quest to find an antithetical river, one that will grant the opposite of the first—the gift of mortality. Borges does not intend to merely note one possible form that immortality could take; he has a more general significance in mind.

Section 3. Borges' Apathetic Immortals

Borges offers a pessimistic diagnosis of immortality, but it is not immediately obvious why he thinks that the immortals would lose the desire to keep living. He provides a few clues worth noting. Borges imagines that the ultimate insignificance of an immortal's suffering, perhaps since it could never lead to death and because time becomes somewhat collapsed for immortals, would lead them to become inhumanly callous. The narrator recounts that immortality makes them invulnerable to pity.

I have mentioned the ancient quarries which broke the fields on the other bank; a man once fell headlong into the deepest of them; he could not hurt himself or die but he was burning with thirst; before they threw him a rope, seventy years went by.⁸

Immortality, as Borges imagines it, is a curse. He thinks that immortality would not only preclude the development of a unified self as Williams argues, but also reduce the significance of pains and pleasures, both one's own and those of others.

The body, for them, was a submissive domestic animal and it sufficed to give it, every month, the pittance of a few hours of sleep, a bit of water, and a scrap of meat. Let no one reduce us to the status of ascetics. There is no pleasure more complex than that of thought and we surrendered ourselves to it. At times, an extraordinary stimulus would restore us to the physical world. For example, that morning the old elemental joy of the rain. Those lapses were quite rare; all the Immortals were capable of perfect quietude; I remember one whom I never saw stand up; a bird had nested on his breast.⁹

Although capable of sensate experience, Borges imagines that his immortals would be uninterested in physical pleasures, withdrawn into thought, close to the state of the angels in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987).

But why does Borges portray the immortals as uninterested in sustaining the pleasures of the flesh, and should we suppose that *all* immortals would share similar preferences? We can imagine that over the course of an endless existence anyone might become bored with the limited array of bodily pleasures available.¹⁰ We might agree that through familiarity nearly any source of pleasure can lose its interest; however, this is not Borges' contention. Instead, Borges says that the immortals were no longer concerned with their own fate and judged all undertakings as in vain. In Williams' terms, we might say that lacking categorical desires, the immortals saw no point in pursuing contingent desires. There is no reason to improve a life that one does not desire.

Immortality might mute our pleasures, but more importantly, Borges argues, it would threaten to deplete our actions of much of their significance. Contrary to popular sentiment, the singularity of our mere mortal existence does not add lightness to our decisions. We need not be forced to suffer the

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths* (New Directions, 1964), p. 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Fischer argues that at least some pleasures are repeatable and, with some variation, we would enjoy them forever.

Section 3. Borges' Apathetic Immortals

consequences of our actions in an endlessly recurring cycle, as Nietzsche might have us imagine.¹¹ Rather, the forward direction of time's arrow, with each decision closing off endless possibilities that cannot be recovered, is sufficient to weigh down our existence. We find ourselves in a position where many possibilities have already been foreclosed; one where, more importantly, we must choose between countless possibilities, right now. The significance of the situation is not simply that time moves forward and we lack the means to re-do the past, but that our existence is irrevocably finite and we lack time to pursue all the tempting alternate paths. We cannot, for instance, live our early adult lives both with and without children. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues that our finitude gives impetus and weight to our decisions:

The intensity and dedication with which very many human activities are pursued cannot be explained without reference to the awareness that our opportunities are finite, that we cannot choose those activities indefinitely many times. In raising a child, in cherishing a lover, in performing a demanding task of work or thought or artistic creation, we are aware, at some level, of the thought that each of these efforts is structured and constrained by finite time. And the removal of that awareness would surely change the pursuits and their meaning for us in ways that we can scarcely imagine—making them, perhaps, more easy, more optional, with less striving and effort in them, less of a particular way of a particular sort of gallantry and courage.¹²

Given an infinite amount of time to accomplish a goal, there is no reason to worry about a few failures along the way. With an eternity ahead of us, there will always be time to pursue other projects. Certainly this would make one's choice of projects more optional, but why exactly would immortality lead to apathy, as Borges' portrayal suggests? The option to try again, risk free, seems as if it would be a blessing, not a curse.

Although the forward march of time would impose some significance on the decisions of immortals and mortals alike, Borges suggests that an unlimited duration would threaten to impart any immortal life with an unbearable lightness. Borges explains of his immortals:

They knew that in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men. [...] There are no moral or intellectual merits. Homer composed the *Odyssey*; if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once.¹³

Borges' position is that a certain kind of significance would be impossible for immortals—the significance of personal achievement. For immortals, achievements are not something to be proud of. The products of the creative efforts of immortals are not necessarily the result of talent or skill, or “moral or intellectual merits,” or anything else we, rightfully or not, feel pride in. No,

¹¹ Very roughly, Nietzsche asks us to consider if we could stomach the thought of an eternal return in *The Gay Science* (section 341). My argument does not hinge on this high level gloss of Nietzsche.

¹² Nussbaum, p. 229.

¹³ Borges, p. 114.

immortals can achieve by mere diligence.

I take it that Borges' suggestion is that it would be motivationally devastating to know that one could achieve almost anything by sheer perseverance. Couple this with the fact that it would not matter if one started any particular project now or in a hundred years, and the apathetic portrayal of Borges' immortals begins to look apt. With no risk and possibly nothing to be proud of, Borges suggests that our immortal lives would lack significance. We would have no reason to go on, or at least no desire to continue to live.

The question we need to ask is whether Borges is right. Would immortality preclude satisfying levels of significance? Would immortality be motivationally devastating?

4 Immortality and Significance

As an initial objection, one might argue that Borges' choice of the *Odyssey* is misleading and perhaps atypical of the kinds of achievements available to mortals and immortals alike. Although any literary work could eventually be produced by random typing, there are other kinds of achievements that could not result from the mere happenstance arrangement of characters on a page. For instance, in a million years, a million monkeys could not come up with calculus. It is not the kind of thing one could invent by sheer dumb luck or persistent, mindless tinkering. Hence, one might argue that enough talent and skill is required that the invention of calculus is an achievement worthy of admiration, regardless of the mortality of the inventor. Such prospects for significant achievement should be enough to prevent abject apathy among immortals; perhaps similar prospects might even inspire vigorous engagement. Therefore, the objection concludes, it is simply not the case, as Borges' suggests, that "there are no moral or intellectual merits" among immortals.

Indeed, the invention of calculus by an immortal might be something an outsider could admire, but would it be something an immortal should feel proud of? Or, more to the point, since pride is not our central concern: Is it something an immortal would even care to develop? Ultimately, the question we need to ask is this: Would the prospect of the invention of the next calculus, or a similar project, be enough to make an immortal life worth living? Although it might at first appear that the above objection shows that Borges is wrong, if we consider the situation in more detail, it will become clear that the problems with immortality are far worse than we initially thought.

Suppose that an immortal, ignorant of calculus or prior to the advent of calculus, wants to know how to measure the area under a curve. To see if such a goal could serve as the basis of a categorical desire that could propel one forward, we must consider a few alternatives. If one's abilities were limited, then over an infinite amount of time, they would reach their peak. Hence, for immortals, limited abilities can be considered fixed abilities. If an immortal's abilities were fixed, then either she would eventually achieve her result, or she would forever fail. Creating calculus is something that one would either be

capable of doing or not. Let's begin by considering the case where an immortal of fixed abilities succeeds, successfully inventing integral calculus, thereby allowing her to accurately estimate the area under a curve.

I. *Success with Fixed Abilities*

An immortal's success at any significant project, such as the creation of calculus, would either be quick or prolonged. A quick success might be satisfying, but would likely indicate that the task was too easy to offer much satisfaction. Although a few quick successes may be satisfying, a series of easy wins would quickly become boring. Playing a simple computer chess program on the novice setting is unchallenging for skilled players. If a computer is incapable of presenting a significant challenge, there would be no point in playing. Simply put, there is little satisfaction in proving that one can repeatedly beat a weak opponent; the same holds for projects that are too easily accomplished.

Quick successes might be boring, but those taking more time would not necessarily offer any more satisfying rewards for immortals. Success after a prolonged struggle would largely be attributable to mere diligence, which is not something one should feel good about, especially when one has nothing to lose—no other projects that one cannot return to at a later date. So, the worry is that success would likely either be only mildly satisfying and quickly boring or the hollow victory of diligence. Either way, such prospects are not likely to make life worth living for very long.

At this point, one might object that I have downplayed the significance of a certain kind of accomplishment, namely that of precedents, of coming up with something first. Although one might eventually be able to develop calculus, the decision when to try could still be significant. If one waits too long, others might develop it before you get started. Since there is only one chance for historically unique innovation, if one waits too long, one might miss the chance to create something new. Hence, the risks of delay and the joys of the competition for discovery are available to mortals and immortals alike.

Perhaps, but when we are working in infinite amounts of time, it is plausible to think that all qualitatively identical situations might reoccur. If so, calculus will eventually be forgotten and you will have the chance to develop it the next time around, or the time after. The fact that it had been previously discovered would not make your discovery any less significant. If we discover that Leibniz invented calculus years before Newton, this would not lessen the significance of Newton's work. It would still be a remarkable achievement to develop calculus in the span of a normal human life. In terms of satisfaction and admiration, psychological uniqueness is at least as important as historical uniqueness.

Unfortunately, this does not make immortality any more attractive. Rather than redeem the life of immortals, the possibility of rediscovery would lessen the significance of their choices by eliminating risk. If, given an infinite amount of time, all events would reoccur, immortals would risk nothing in delaying any given pursuit. The rediscovery of calculus by an immortal 100,000 or 1,000,000

years from now might be a significant achievement, but the decision for any given immortal to pursue its development would carry no weight—it would be without risk.

Of course any such decisions would appear to carry risk for immortals that were somehow unaware that they were immune to death. But how could this be possible without recurrent episodes of amnesia or periodic radical deteriorations of memory? The result would be an immortal endlessly repeating himself. Yes, such a confused immortal may be propelled forward by categorical desires, but there are significant problems with this suggestion. For one, it is not clear that personal identity holds after total amnesia. And even if our best theory of personal identity admits amnesiacs, such a state certainly does not give us what we want when we want to go on. Faced with a choice between death or irreparable amnesia, I could not be bothered to flip a coin. Further, it is hard to see how the prospect of a life as serial amnesiac could be in any way desirable. Although a serial-amnesiac might be propelled forward by categorical desires unwittingly dredged from the past, such an existence does not meet the external condition: it is not desirable. It would be pointless. Inane. Sad. How could anyone wish such a fate on a loved one?

Since it is not clear if we should accept the thesis of historical reoccurrence—the thesis that all events will reoccur in qualitatively identical (or at least highly similar) form in an infinite amount of time—we need to consider the possibility that many events are qualitatively singular. For instance, if calculus will never be forgotten, then the decision of when to begin development and the decision of how hard to work carry potentially irrevocable consequences. If you do not get started now, or if you decide to work on something else first, someone else might beat you to the discovery. Hence, immortality does not eliminate all risk. Insofar as satisfaction is dependent on historical precedent, the choice of projects would be significant for immortals.

The principal problem is that although precedent setting could be a source of significance for immortals, it is not clear that the prospect of precedent-setting discoveries could motivate one indefinitely. Here's why: For a discovery to be worth finding first, it would need to be of some value—that is, it would have to be worth finding at all. However, over the course of an infinite expanse, as one approaches the Peircean end of inquiry, there would be little left worth discovering. Although this initially might sound implausible—surely there are an infinite amount of truths—it is hard to imagine that there are an infinite number of big discoveries to be had or an infinite amount of revolutionary inventions to be created by those with fixed abilities. If our abilities are fixed, then what we are capable of understanding and what we are capable of achieving is limited. Over an infinite expanse of time, the limits would be reached, leaving us with nothing worth doing. If we could grow no smarter, no more powerful, then we would run out of projects that we would be capable of completing.

The same goes for artistic creations, as well as scientific pursuits. Of course one can produce infinite variations on *Hamlet*, but why bother? One may object that I am suffering from a dearth of imagination; certainly art admits of an

infinite number of significant works. Indeed we may never reach a point where all the love songs have been sung, but we can reach a point where there are no significant new kinds of love songs to sing. To see why, imagine an infinite library or an infinite gallery after an infinite amount of time. Even if you could find space on the shelves for a new volume, even if you could find readers for your millionth novel, why would you care to write it? As in science, in art one would run out of worthwhile innovations that an immortal of fixed abilities could accomplish.

One might object that my argument assumes that the universe is composed of atoms, or that there are some base-level patterns and properties. But if the universe were not composed of atoms, or if worlds were created as fast as one could come to understand them, then one could conceivably make an infinite number of meaningful discoveries. Surely, the objection concludes, inquiry into the nature of such a universe could motivate immortals indefinitely. However, it is not so clear that such a universe could support indefinite meaningful inquiry. Either there are nonrandom patterns ultimately behind the expansion and complexity, or there are none. Investigation into a universe lacking such patterns would necessarily fail to reveal any ultimate order besides sheer random progression. One cannot indefinitely sit in awe of the kaleidoscopic unfolding of an ungraspable complexity. It is hard to imagine that such inquiry could remain motivating, especially if its conclusion were successfully reached, since it would amount to nothing more than correctly concluding that the universe just gives us “one damn thing after another.” Alternatively, failure to realize the chaotic nature of such a universe would land us in the same state as any other ultimate failure—a situation that we will consider in the next section.

If the well of motivation for immortals is innovation, it would likely be tapped dry sooner or later. Not only ignoble and soaked in amour propre, the motivation of the race—of the desire to be first—would be unsustainable. Without groundbreaking precedents to set, the trivial victories of sheer diligence remain hollow.

II. *Failure with Fixed Abilities*

So far we have been considering the case where an immortal of fixed ability will eventually be able to succeed at some endeavor. Let us now consider the case where an immortal of fixed ability fails, no matter how long she persists. It should be clear that eternal failure is not an attractive prospect. Think of Sisyphus’s miserable existence.¹⁴ Who would want to be frustrated indefinitely? Although this is obvious, the problem for immortality is that some failures are inevitable. Even if occasional successes could give great satisfaction, with fixed abilities, innumerable, endless failures would be just over the horizon.

¹⁴ Even if Sisyphus found tremendous satisfaction in the rolling of his stone, as Richard Taylor asks us to imagine, it is not clear that his life would be desirable. It is certainly not the kind of life that we would look forward to. See Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life” (Benatar: 2004).

Immortality for those with fixed abilities and just a little ambition would be a prison of eternal frustration.

In reply to the suggestion that immortality would sap our decisions of significance by, in part, diminishing our accomplishments and dampening urgency, Fischer asks us to “Imagine the humiliation of being asked, perhaps at an APA meeting ‘You’ve lived that long and you’ve only published *one* paper in the *Journal of Philosophy*?’”¹⁵ His suggestion is that rather than adding lightness to our decision to work on projects, such as writing philosophy papers, immortality would remove all excuses for low productivity. Surely some immortals would be capable of high-caliber work, but Fischer does not explain why he thinks it would matter to immortals if they published their ten-thousandth or ten-millionth paper in a leading journal. Regardless, supposing that one could be propelled by the prospect of yet another publication, there would be some problems that one could not solve and other kinds of projects that one would be incapable of accomplishing. Ambition involves desiring to accomplish more, to do something new—to grow. One cannot be propelled to engage in an endless race to fill the pages of the *Journal of Philosophy*, or to do anything else. Over the course of infinity, you either win or tie or flat out lose. But one cannot win every race worth running. Eventually, as one tackles bigger, faster, stronger obstacles, one is bound to fail. For immortals with fixed abilities, this creates a serious problem.

One may object that for some it is the prospect of future activity, not the result, that provides meaning to their lives and propels them forward. To put the objection as catchphrase: It’s about the journey, not the destination. There is no reason to dispute the general sentiment behind this claim, but it gives us no reason to think that a journey of eternal frustration would be desirable. Certainly the end bears some importance. No sane person would willingly row in place indefinitely. But rowing in place indefinitely is precisely what immortals of fixed abilities would eventually find themselves doing.

Throughout the course of an eternal life, one would achieve all that one could ever hope to achieve and then be frustrated by one’s limitations until the end of time. Indeed, it would be motivationally devastating to run out of new projects (especially if, sadly, all one cares about is establishing historical precedents) and even worse to face the prospect of eternal failure at every turn. When engaged in a new project, an immortal of fixed abilities would not know if endless frustration would ensue or if success was just a few tries away. After a few failures spanning millennia, only those of heroic perseverance or supernatural powers of self-deception would dare to pick up new challenges. The rest would undoubtedly sit down and let birds nest on their chests.

III. *Non-Fixed Abilities*

On the other hand, if the abilities of immortals were not fixed, then they would

¹⁵ Fischer, “Contribution on Martha Nussbaum’s *The Therapy of Desire (Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LIX, no. 3, 1999), p. 792.

eventually become godlike, omnipotent beings, guaranteed of success in every endeavor. Supposing that our best theory of personal identity would allow us to consider ourselves numerically identical with such radically transformed creatures, it is not clear that immortals capable of indefinitely expanding their powers would fare any better than those of fixed abilities. For those capable of infinite growth, all obstacles could be overcome, except, of course, for those that were imposed by creatures of similar strength. If there were other equally powerful immortals with conflicting desires, then eternal frustration would again be the result. The godlike immortals would butt heads into infinity. Eternal frustration would result in motivational collapse, for gods and mortals alike.

However, if the wills of omnipotent immortals were in harmony, they could accomplish anything that is logically possible. As for the desirability of the life of such gods, I hesitate to speculate—they certainly could not lead anything recognizable as a human life. But it is clear that none of their decisions could carry any weight, as they are nearly all revocable and altogether unsatisfying. Where is the satisfaction in exercising boundless powers? Of course, an omnipotent entity could always do something new, but it could not develop its powers any further. Although feeling one's powers expand can be a source of great satisfaction, one can only move a mountain or destroy a galaxy so many times before it loses its novelty. An expanding range of abilities may be intoxicating to tyrants and gods alike, but unless one's powers are ever-increasing, it is hard not to sober up.

5 Conclusion

Williams fails to adequately consider the prospect of a life of overlapping categorical desires, a life where at any given moment in time we would want to go on. One might not be able to live an immortal life with a three-act plot structure, but an immortal existence would not necessarily be undesirable because of this fact. Although Williams' reasons were wrong, his overall assessment of immortality is accurate.

Williams' convincingly argues that insufferable boredom would plague an eternal intellectual existence: "boredom [. . .] would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment."¹⁶ One might think that a viable alternative to the hell of pure spiritual existence would be immortality much like that the Greek gods enjoyed, with all the passions and desires but with no vulnerability to death. They could take on human form, and often had impact on the world down below Olympus. Although it may sound attractive, there is a significant problem with the existence of the Greek gods that makes it far from ideal. To expose the central problem with this model, we need only ask how they maintain an interest in human affairs, if not simply through heroic pettiness. Could the meddling life of Zeus be any more desirable than playing an eternal game of

¹⁶ Williams, p. 95.

multi-player Sim City?¹⁷ The same fundamental problem extends to all forms of immortality: Eternal existence would sap our experiences and decisions of significance.

Nussbaum argues that invulnerability, which any desirable form of immortality must provide, would likely make any existence unrecognizable—far from anything close to a human life. For instance, how could those who are invulnerable develop close friendships, which are premised on the willingness of mutual self-sacrifice? Without risk, how could one develop virtues such as courage? Nussbaum gives us good reason to think that immortality would threaten much that we value both in relationships and in virtues, whereas, I have focused on the effects of immortality on our adoption of, what existentialists call, projects. She provides independent reasons to be skeptical of the promise of immortality, but I have not ventured far down this avenue.

Nor have I attempted to develop a substantive account of what makes a life meaningful. Although I am suspicious of the claim, there might indeed be several sources of meaning available to immortals, such as that had from the close communion with friends and the development of lasting relationships. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that the problems with immortality are grave.

Through an examination of Borges' "The Immortal" I argued that an immortal life would be unbearably light, as our actions would be without *a* crucial form of significance. In addition, the lack of risk and the shrinking range of significant new projects, combined with the threat of eternal frustration, would be motivationally devastating for those of limited powers. If our powers are limited, the number of significant projects that we are capable of completing is finite, but the time span of an immortal life is infinite. As for immortals of unlimited potential, it is equally difficult to fathom what would get the omnipotent out of bed in the morning. The same fundamental problem extends to all forms of immortality that could support anything even vaguely recognizable as a "human life": Eternal existence would sap our experiences and decisions of significance. An immortal life would be either frustrating or boring, and long. Very long.

¹⁷ Nussbaum argues that the existence of the Greek gods would be radically different from our own, in ways that might be highly undesirable. As I have argued, she thinks they would be comparably bereft of risk. See Nussbaum, p. 227.