

Wings of Desire: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality

Introduction

In the opening scene of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) the camera follows two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, as they wander through East Berlin. Unable to affect the lives of its mortal inhabitants, the angels pass through as spectators—eternally disembodied ghosts. As immortals, the angels are invulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. Although they have witnessed the creation of the Earth and the rise and fall of its great civilizations, the angels suffer from an unbearable listlessness, an oppressive *tedium vitae*. Unable to endure his immortality, Damiel falls in love with a beautiful trapeze artist, Marion, and chooses to become mortal, renouncing his eternal spiritual life for a fleeting but sensate existence. The question *Wings of Desire* forces us to answer is whether we too would be willing to renounce immortality. Or, to put it another way, would it be wise to exchange our current mortal existence for immortality?

We can further extend the question: If immortality can be rationally renounced, then does death have something positive to offer? This certainly would not imply that death is always desirable, but it would give us reason to think that the fact that we will die has positive value. The question of the value of immortality is directly relevant to the main issues examined in the philosophy of death, particularly to the question of whether death is bad for the one who dies.¹ However, my aim in this article is to explore the value of immortality independent of the question of whether death is always harmful in and of itself. By contemplating the existence of the angels in *Wings of Desire*, we can see that they do not simply exemplify eternal existence, but embody negative aspects of immortal life that are essential features of that eternal state.

My analysis begins by exploring Bernard Williams' argument for the undesirability of immortality, since it has taken center stage in the debate. After presenting a few objections to Williams, I contend that *Wings of Desire* suggests a novel argument against the value of immortality. I consider several forms of immortality and conclude that they would all result in a state of anomie similar to the one that plagues Wenders' angels.

Desire, Meaning, and Immortality

Visions of the afterlife vary from a lofty, pure spiritual existence in communion with God, to the charmingly mundane land where grapes don't burn your stomach, to a doting harem of sexless houris. Despite the variation, all these products of wishful thinking promise devotees an escape from annihilation, from the fear of becoming nothing at all. The desire to escape death is so great that people will suspend all reasonable doubt that might disrupt the warm beliefs that assuage their fears of nothingness. Unamuno speaks for the lot 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."² In our hurry to expel thoughts of death we grab onto beatific visions of immortality without

questioning whether an eternal existence would in fact be desirable.

Although it seems obvious that anything is preferable to annihilation, Bernard Williams offers a compelling argument against the value of immortality, suggesting that over the course of eternity we would either lose our identity or find ourselves trapped in perpetual meaninglessness.³ Williams 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.” Crucially, Williams contends that “an endless life would be a meaningless one, and that we could have no reason for living an eternally human life.”⁴ What Williams’ intends by “human life” is a life that is in some way recognizably human, in that it supports human concerns, such as the desire for significance. 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 could account for it. 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 for ever could be happily satisfied. Further, he thinks that a human life would need to support the development of a character, which he considers to be a set of preferences, intolerances, goals, and the like.

Williams’ argument is based on a distinction between categorical and contingent desires. While our existence is contingent on fulfilling our desires for food and shelter, they do not give us *reason* to live. Although we are likely to desire good food if we continue living, we do not live to eat. Such desires are contingent on our existence, whereas, categorical desires provide reason to live—they give meaning to our lives. One may desire to see one’s 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. The former gives us reason to live; the latter merely makes our lives better.

Williams argues that over the course of an eternity we would satisfy all of our categorical desires and be left with merely contingent ones—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 conquests—but regression into a life where we would be primarily concerned with keeping our stomach full and genitals stimulated is not one we should look forward to.⁵ In order to see immortality as a desirable prospect, we need to be able to envision an eternal existence where one could sustain one’s categorical desires. But it is surprisingly hard to imagine an immortal existence that could meet this demand.

Williams introduces two restrictions that any viable account must observe. 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 states that a desirable immortal life needs to be able to give us what we want when we want to go on; it requires that the content of our future categorical desires must be intelligibly related to the desires that we currently possess. With these two criteria in hand, Williams proceeds to evaluate three alternative

conceptions of eternal existence that he calls continued, serial, and varied.

As discussed above, Williams believes that, in the course of an eternal, continued existence, one would satisfy *all* of their categorical desires, thereby depleting their motivational store of reasons to go on. As for serial forms of eternal existence, such as those envisioned by systems of re-incarnation, they fail to meet the first criterion, since there is no reason to think that a person re-incarnated as a mouse (or even in another human body) should be considered the same person. Re-incarnates do not seem to meet any plausible standard of personal identity, since the continuity between the old self and the “reborn” self is mysterious at best. How could it possibly be of solace to suggest to someone on their death bed that they 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.⁶

Putting aside then the insoluble problems of reincarnation, a form of existence where our current set of categorical desires is completely replaced by another, varied set would result in an entirely different person. Our categorical desires are not only what provides meaning to our lives; they also provide a sense of self. If they were replaced, our identity as a person would, in some important sense, 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 the equivalent of multiple lifetimes. Williams argues that someone who lives as Tiresias “is not, eventually, a person but a phenomena.”⁷

The central problem with Williams' argument is that he fails to take seriously the possibility of a life composed of an evolving set of overlapping categorical desires.⁸ Couldn't one gradually come to have new categorical desires along with their existing desires, which might eventually be fulfilled? There is no reason to envision a rupture as radical as described in the serial model, and sufficient continuity might endure for this vision to serve “as an object of hope to one who did not want to die.”⁹ The basic 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 to forward into the future. In a thousand years, it is not necessary that we possess *the same* categorical desires that we have right now in order to fulfill this condition. We are not required to presently desire to be the person we will become a thousand years from now in order to sustain the will to live.

Williams could concede this point but still argue that such an existence would suffer from the central problem of the Tiresias model, namely that it precludes the development of a sense of self. We couldn't 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 diminished.¹⁰ Martin Heidegger has expressed similar sentiments, arguing that our sense of self is dependent on the choices that we make. Our choice of goals imparts significance precisely because they cannot (for the most part) be undone. We do not get

much room for experimentation in this one life of ours.¹¹ 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 kind of life mere mortals presently hope to lead. It might still be a recognizably “human life,” in the broad sense of the term. 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. Although one recognizes one’s childhood experiences as one’s own, many of us do not consider ourselves to be even remotely the same person we were in childhood (or even adolescence); so while the child may indeed be 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. Indeed, 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.

Hence, Williams does not present any compelling reasons to think that an immortal existence of a kind that would support a “human life” is necessarily undesirable. 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 indefinitely fund our motivation to go on. However, lacking the roughest sketch of desirable immortal existence, we have cause to be suspicious. I intend to show that suspicion is justified.

Angels and Mammals

At first glance it may seem that *Wings of Desire* is relevant only to visions of purely spiritual immortal existence. However, a few moments of reflection expose its general import. Rather than a mere heresy, the movie gives us reason to suspect that the Tiresias model of eternal existence may be unattainable, even if it were able to give us reason to go on. To see why, it will be instructive to provide an overview of the film and the state of its angels.

Wenders' *Wings of Desire* explores the paucity of the experience of angels who are deprived of the ability to fully interact with their physical environment. Though *Wings* centers on the disembodied experiences of angels, it is not a film about religion; it is a quiet, even meditative, exploration of the horrors of an existence confined to spectatorship and denied the richness of physical sensation. The angels of *Wings* can neither act nor be acted upon. As John Dewey might describe it, they suffer from an excess of humdrum activity and

uncontrolled receptivity, since both the generally stable and precarious characteristics of life experience are absent. Further, the angels are incapable of having an experience, in the sense of the term that John Dewey proposed. Dewey explains:

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it — either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies. If its activity is not enhanced by the temporary alienation, it merely subsists. Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives.¹²

The competence of Dewey's analysis is suggested in the portrayal of the living death of the angels of *Wings*, who seem to be permanently (and eternally) out of step with their environment. They have always found themselves completely alienated by their total powerlessness.

Damiel and Cassiel appear as two ordinary people dressed in everyday clothes, but only their fellow angels (and a few children here and there) can see or hear them. Though they move around effortlessly and have complete access to people's thoughts, they cannot touch, taste, or see color. This latter fact contributes to one of the film's most striking stylistic elements—the contrast between the handsome (though severe) burnished black-and-white of the undead and the brilliant color of the living.

Echoing Dewey, Bernard Williams' 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."¹³ The angels in *Wings* are eternal spectators cut off from the world, suffering from a profound anomie. They are un-living creatures, unable to fulfill the truncated set of desires they barely feel. The angels exist, but they can feel no personal danger and have never been satisfied by the environment. They exist to the world of human experience, but with a detachment that we often adopt when watching TV. This is suggested in an early sequence, where we pass in and out of the lives of several Berliners. We see the front of a man sitting in a chair, thinking about his son. The film cuts to a reverse-shot (which reveals where the initial shot was taken) showing a television; the angels stand to this man as he does to the television. They often feel strongly towards the situation of other humans, but they live a marginal existence which can neither be enriched by such feelings nor satisfied by the gratification of their (feeble) desires. The concern they feel for those in danger may put them on the edge of their seats, but after centuries of powerlessness, many of the angels (especially those we see in the public library) have become abject spectators.

Damiel (Bruno Ganz) discovers a trapeze artist, Marion (Solweig Dommartin), for whom he develops a profound passion, and through whom he can witness the extremes of human sensuousness. At a crucial episode late in the film, Damiel grows tired of being "outside of the world" and decides to "return to the river" of life—to renounce his immortality and become an embodied human being, capable of having true experiences. He finds himself in a world of rich color (as the film changes from black and white) on the west side of a Berlin Wall

which is covered in graffiti. His first moments are spent in intense wonder, as he learns to identify the colors on the wall and the blood on his hand. This differentiation of colors from a confused beginning, leading to a desire to know them, to testing and asking which are which, and finally to the consummating moments of realization, mark this as an experience, thus making manifest the metaphorical contrast between the gray existence of the angels and the colored existence of the living. As Daniel discovers the full spectrum of colors via the wall, he also experiences much of the “spectrum” of human existence in this moment—the pain, the wonder, the perplexity. Dewey mentions a story called “The Unlearner”, where an afterlife is portrayed as continuously re-experiencing all that came before, and discovering relations between previous experiences. *Wings* is the inverse: Daniel, a witness to the impact on existence made by others, is finally allowed to interact with a world from which he had been eternally severed.

The film's most memorable portrayal of having a vital aesthetic experience is the short scene when Daniel drinks his first cup of coffee. He revels in the intense sensation of his embodiment on his first cold morning, when he stumbles upon a coffee stand. Remembering Peter Falk's earlier discussion of the joys of coffee drinking, Daniel, shivering, buys a cup. He picks it up and, feeling its warmth, brings it to his lips, only to discover that, if you consume a hot drink too quickly, it burns. He continues, sipping it slowly now as he is gradually warmed. That's coffee-on-a-cold-morning. The experience is unified and tied together as an event from the desire for warmth to the fulfillment of this desire, complete with all of the complexity such a seemingly simple experience contains—the slow savor and adjustments required to enjoy without being burned, the deep inhale that enhances the richness of a hot cup of coffee in such a climate. The relations between the doings and suffering of coffee drinking are discovered, noted, and celebrated. The quality of this experience of multifaceted embodiment is set off from Daniel's previous disembodied existence, which had been eternally bland and lifeless.

This contrast is similar to that between an experience (in Dewey's sense of the term) and the general stream of the majority of our needlessly anesthetic lives.¹⁴ *Wings of Desire* is not so much about the poverty of angelic experience, as of ours: we become trapped in the mechanical and are unaware of what we are doing or what is occurring. For Dewey, the aesthetic is present in all complete experiences that have meaning, purpose, unity, and are rich with recognized relations. *Wings* celebrates this element of ordinary experience, when (early on) one of the angels says that he would just like to “come home like Philip Marlow and feed the cat.”

The most important question that *Wings* prompts us to consider is whether an immortal existence *in any form* would be better than that of mere mortals—fleshly mammals subject to hunger, thirst, and lust. The principal difference between the angels in *Wings of Desire* and us is one of embodiment. The angels live a pure intellectual existence, eternally cut off from the rich sensory experiences of human life. Although our desires for food, sex, drink, etc. might not give us *sufficient reason* to live, it is extremely important to note that their deprivation can provide reason not to. It is not simply that the angels lack categorical desires; they suffer

tremendously from a lack of contingent desires as well. If a state of senseless, inefficacious existence is undesirable, the question of the value of immortality becomes one of the conceivability of an alternative to the angels' form of existence.

Immortal Alternatives

Perhaps there are other, purely spiritual forms of existence that might offer us sufficient reason to go on, but they are difficult to fathom. Early Christians seem to have understood some of the problems of disembodiment. They postulate that we will be re-united with our bodies at the time of the Last Judgment, after which we will live in eternal bliss. And, yes, the most viable alternative to a pure spiritual existence is one where we exist in an embodied state. If we are embodied, then either we exist in a body that is vulnerable or one that is invulnerable to harm. One may say that we could exist in a third kind of body—one that is vulnerable but regenerative. Like a lizard's tail, we might be able to regenerate any body part, perhaps after a significant period of time. However, even if the period of time were a millennium, when we are considering immortality, we are considering the infinite. One year or a thousand years to re-grow an arm would be inconsequential. Considered in the scope of the infinite, we either change or remain the same. If our bodies were subject to harm in the course of infinite time, we would eventually completely degrade physically through accident or aging, however slowly. Vulnerable immortals would suffer from the curse of Tithonus, whom Zeus granted immortality but not eternal youth. If subject to deterioration, eventually one would end up disembodied, as are the angels in *Wings of Desire*.

On the other hand, if one's body were invulnerable to harm, then it quickly becomes difficult to imagine what kind of existence we could lead. Can we conceive of a physical pain that becomes unbearable, although we suffer no ultimate dysfunction? Perhaps we can, but we should step back. Couldn't we imagine an immortal being much like us, capable of experiencing the pleasures of the body—enjoying sex, relishing a savory dish, or feeling a rush from physical exertion? If so, it is plausible to assume that the immortal could be much as we are now, not suffering from the defects of disembodiment.

One conceivable form of embodied existence would be where we could feel certain forms of pleasure, but experience no pain in response to what would otherwise be unpleasant stimuli. Perhaps we might feel a tingling numbness when we put our hand in a flame, or feel nothing at all when we drive a knife through our inner thigh. We would exist in a state akin to the main character in James Tiptree Jr.'s story “Painwise,” where a human unable to feel pain is used as a biological sensor, testing some unknown qualities of the countless worlds on which he is deposited by his ship.¹⁵ Craving tangible consequences, the painless flesh-probe engages in a series of ultimately ineffectual efforts to kill himself. But (unlike the character in “Painwise”) can't we imagine a painless immortal existence complete with rich sensations of sensory-based pleasures?

The problem with the conception of a painless, but pleasurable model is that it does not robustly support the

having of desires. As Schopenhauer accurately noted, many desires are experienced as lacks, and lacks are painful. Although not all pleasures are the result of lacks (take the pleasures of exercise for instance), many are.¹⁶ On one popular account (the representational theory), pain is an undesirable experience representing the threat of tissue damage.¹⁷ Although standard accounts of pain have difficulty accounting for purely psychological pain, many desires cause forms of mental anguish which are often indistinguishable from other, paradigmatic pain states. If you have not felt a longing so great that you feared for your life, then you have not lived a full life. Many desires are experienced as painful, to various degrees. Immortality does not, in itself, entail that we would possess any of the other powers of a god. We would still be able to experience frustration and long for what we cannot have. Hence, a painless existence is not one that can support desire.

If one doubts the desirability of desire, Ivan Soll asks us to consider whether we would be willing to eat a meal that would be permanently satiating, have intercourse that would kill off our libido, or drink a libation that would forever quench our thirst.¹⁸ No one (unless he was pathologically depressed) would agree to inflict such mythical curses on himself. We welcome our often painfully felt desires and the satisfactions they offer. However, stripping our desires of their frequent negative affect would bleach them of their color, leaving them with little or no motivational force. A desire that fails to motivate is a desire unworthy of the name, and the undesirability of a life without desire is vividly portrayed in *Wings*.

For the sake of argument let's assume that you could feel the pangs of desire, but no physical pain to speak of. Although not as severe, the problem is the same: If we were unable to experience physical pain, many of our most basic desires would be sapped of their motivational force and their satisfactions would be deprived of their sweetness. Could we be warmed by a cup of coffee if we could not feel cold? Can we imagine effort without exhaustion? With truncated desires and muted satisfactions, a painless existence would take us undesirably close to the meaningless lives of the angels in *Wings of Desire*.

The only conceivable form of immortal existence that supports the gratification of sensate desire is one where our body is invulnerable but we can still feel many forms of pain. It is difficult to imagine the specifics of such a state, but the general idea is that although we would be able to feel exhaustion, pricks, pangs, and trauma, our bodies would suffer no irreparable harms. To support such a conjecture, we could either be immutable or perhaps we might have completely regenerative bodies, where our total physical destruction would only be temporary—a time-out from sensate life. On such a model, we could live a full, sensate existence with no ultimately harmful physical consequences. This model, of course, takes us close to that of the gods of Olympus. Since the ineffectuality of the angels is at the heart of their discontent, perhaps a viable alternative would be immortality like 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 an impact on the world down below Olympus. Angels are unique, as they never were embodied and hence did not share our passions (except for Satan), whereas, the Greek gods seem to have to best of both worlds. However, there is a significant problem with holding the

existence of the Greek gods up as an ideal. To get at the central issue, we need only ask how they maintain 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 multi-player *Sim City*?

Although seemingly ideal, there is a problem with this model that makes it significantly less desirable than it might at first appear. The basic problem is that immortality would lessen the significance of our experiences and decisions.¹⁹ Consider a society of such inhabitants, like the one envisioned in Jorge Luis Borges' "The Immortal." Borges imagines that an immortal being's suffering would ultimately be insignificant, both because it could never lead to death and because time becomes somewhat collapsed for immortals (which would also lead them to become inhumanly callous). Borges' central character recounts that immortality "made 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."²⁰

Hence immortality, as Borges' imagines it, is a curse. He thinks that it not only precludes the development of a unified self (as Bernard Williams argues), but that it also reduces the significance of pains and pleasures, both of the self and 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.²¹

Although capable of sensate experience, Borges imagines his immortals as uninterested in physical pleasures and withdrawn into a world of thought, close to the state of the angels in *Wings*.

But why does Borges portray the immortals as uninterested in the pleasures of the flesh, and should we suppose that *all* immortals would be similarly uninterested? I imagine that, over the course of an endless existence, anyone might become bored with the limited array of bodily pleasures available. Through familiarity, nearly any source of pleasure can lose its interest; this, however, is not Borges' contention. Instead, as he envisions it, the immortals were no longer concerned with their own fate and judged all undertakings as in vain. In Bernard Williams' terms, we might say that, lacking categorical desires, the immortals saw no point in pursuing the contingent ones. Why seek to improve a life that one does not desire? We noted earlier that the desirableness of our lives is dependent on our contingent desires, but our contingent desires are also dependent on the desirableness of our lives.

So, immortality might mute our pleasures, but perhaps more significantly, it would threaten to deplete our actions of much of their significance. The singularity of our mere mortal existence does not add lightness to our decisions. We need not be forced to suffer the consequences of our actions in an endlessly recurring cycle, as Nietzsche would have us imagine.²² 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. As Heidegger would describe the situation, we are thrown into this world.²³ That is, we find ourselves in a position where many possibilities have already been foreclosed and where we must choose between countless others, 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.

Although the forward march of time would impose some significance on the decisions of immortals and mortals alike, 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.”²⁴ Borges’ claim 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 that we can feel pride in. No, immortals can achieve anything by mere diligence alone.

I take it that Borges’ suggestion (which we find confirmed in *Wings*) 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 wouldn’t matter if one started any particular project now or in a hundred years, and the apathetic portrayal of Borges’ and Wenders’ immortals begins to look apt. With no real risks to face, and nothing to be proud of, an immortal life would lack significance. An immortal would have no reason to go on, or at least no desire to continue to live.

Near the end of *Wings of Desire*, in a scene called “Finally Serious,” the now mortal Daniel manages to locate the trapeze artist whose vitality served as the impetus for his fall. When they meet, she holds back his embrace and explains the significance of their love and of Daniel’s renunciation of immortality. Echoing Heidegger, she explains how she found herself thrown into her life: “as if by coincidence. They were my parents. [. . .] Why is this brown-eyed boy my brother?” But now, she and Daniel have become serious: “I must put an end to coincidence. The new moon of decisions. I don’t know if there is destiny, but there’s a decision. Decide!”

Looking at the camera, facing Daniel, she says, ‘Now it’s your turn. You hold the game in your hand.’ It’s not that Daniel’s immortal existence was meaningless merely because of its lack of sensate experience; as an angel, he was unable to decide—unable to make a choice that could carry any weight. But now, the former angel stands in the same position as you and me. That is, Daniel’s existence can finally become serious, because his decisions carry the irrevocable weight that bestows significance on the pursuit of our desires.

Conclusion

The attribution of the contingent nature of our underlying sensate pleasures marks a profound difference between the positions of Wenders, Borges, and Williams and that of Thomas Nagel. Nagel argues that merely being alive (i.e., in a sensate state) is a good, and that death always deprives us of this good.

Perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life. They are widely regarded as formidable benefits in themselves, despite the fact that they are conditions of misery as well as of happiness, and that a sufficient quantity of more particular evils can perhaps outweigh them. That is what is meant, I think, by the allegation that it is simply good to be alive, even if one is undergoing terrible experiences.²⁵

At first blush, it may seem that Wenders agrees with Nagel. The problem with the angels in *Wings* looks to be largely one of disembodiment, but this is an overly hasty conclusion. What *Wings* presents is a contrast between the dull life of angels and the rich, meaningful existence of humans in the world. It is not merely that the angels lack the richness of embodied experience, but that the existence of *any* immortal would be similarly drained of significance. Although they may illustrate the worst case scenario, the angels in *Wings* suffer from the insignificance likely to afflict any immortal being. It is not merely that they cannot take pleasure from the satisfaction of the contingent desires that add color to our lives, but that an immortal existence precludes levels of significance that motivate us to want to go on, and to live well in the process.

Not only does the film make philosophical claims, it provides reasons for us to believe its position. For instance, the vivid portrayal of the listless existence of the disembodied angels, and Damiel's awakening into rich sensate existence, shows us that a spiritual existence would lack much of what makes our lives worth living. *Wings* does not simply come out and tell us that immortality threatens to deprive our actions of significance; it leads us to this conclusion via the example of a disaffected spirit. Since Wenders provides support for his evident conclusion, I would not hesitate to say that *Wings of Desire* does philosophy, in the most flat-footed sense of what it means to “do philosophy.”²⁶

Of course, some of the philosophy in *Wings of Desire* has been “downloaded onto the soundtrack”, but the filmic devices do much of the work.²⁷ In one sequence, the editing compares the angel to a spectator watching TV. In another, and in closeup, we witness the joy of Damiel's first experience of sipping coffee on a cold morning. The switch from black and white to color, when Damiel becomes mortal, comments on the richness of his newly sensate existence. Through these cinematic devices, the film forces us to consider the role of desire and risk in what makes our lives worth living. Although not entirely explicit and in need of some supplementation, the philosophical contributions of the movie are rich and varied. *Wings of Desire* helps us to see the tedium of immortality.²⁸

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Notes

- ¹ For an excellent overview of the main issues in the philosophy of death, see Steven Luper, "Death," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. For a more detailed discussion of whether or not death constitutes a harm, see Steven Luper, "Annihilation," *The Philosophical Quarterly* (volume 37, no. 148, 1987), pp. 233-52. See also, Ivan Soll, "On the Purported Insignificance of Death," in *Death and Philosophy*, eds Jeff Malpas and Robert Solomon (Routledge, 1998). Fred Feldman's excellent book *Confrontations with the Reaper* (Oxford, 1992) is a characteristically clear and comprehensive introduction to the major issues in the philosophy of death. John Martin Fischer's edited collection *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford UP, 1993) contains a rich set of essays on the major topics. Similar, David Benatar's edited collection *Life, Death, and Meaning* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) contains a wide range of essays in what Benatar calls "analytic existentialism."
- ² Miguel De Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (Cosimo, 2005), p.45. Williams discusses Unamuno on pages 98-99 of "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge UP, 1973), also reprinted in Fischer.
- ³ Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality."
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad" in *Life, Death, and Meaning* ed. David Benatar (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
- ⁶ The soul theory of personal identity is clearly wrong, for reasons that John Locke provided.
- ⁷ Williams, p. 94.
- ⁸ In "Death," Luper provides a brief summary of this style of 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."
- ⁹ Williams, p. 92.
- ¹⁰ 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).
- ¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
- ¹² John Dewey, "The Live Creature" (*The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1981), p. 535.
- ¹³ Williams, p. 95.
- ¹⁴ Aaron Smuts, "Anesthetic Experience," *Philosophy and Literature* (vol 25, no. 1, 2005), pp. 97-113.
- ¹⁵ I thank Heidi Bollich for this reference. See, James Tiptree, Jr., "Painwise" (1973). Available here: http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/classics/classics_archive/tiptree4/index.html
- ¹⁶ This is the central difficulty with Plato's homeostatic theory of pleasure. There are many kinds of pleasure that are not the result of lacks. We can take great pleasure from forms of physical exertion that neither satisfy needs nor take us closer to a homeostatic state.
- ¹⁷ I'm speaking extremely loosely here about what constitutes a representational theory of pain. I merely want to note that

the philosophical literature on pain largely ignores mental pain. It may be that when we speak of anguish as “pain” that we are using the term metaphorically. Murat Ayedya provides a clear overview of the various theories of pain in his article “Pain” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. His introduction to the collection *Pain* (MIT, 2005) is also useful.

- 18 Ivan Soll, “Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy,” in *Reading Nietzsche*, edited by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Oxford UP, 1998).
- 19 Martha 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 argue, she thinks they would be comparably bereft of risk. See Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton UP, 1994), p. 227.
- 20 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal,” trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths* (New Directions, 1964), p. 115.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Nietzsche asks us to consider if we could stomach the thought of an eternal return in *The Gay Science* (section 341).
- 23 Heidegger discusses the significance of the aspect of existence that calls “thrown” in *Being and Time*.
- 24 Borges, p. 114.
- 25 Thomas Nagel, “Death” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 2. Nagel expresses similar sentiments in “Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life” in *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986). Stuart Rachels offers a compatible criticism of Nagel. He argues that it is not experience itself, but “a background of good feeling [that] supplies the additional weight” (256). See Stuart Rachels, “Six Theses about Pleasure” (*Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, *Ethics*, 2004, pp. 247-267).
- 26 The question of whether film can do philosophy has recently received a good amount of deserved attention. For an introduction to the issue, readers are advised to look at the special issue on film of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The essays in this volume have been published as a book: Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2006). Volume 12 of *Film and Philosophy* features an exchange between Russell, Carroll, and Wartenberg on this issue. See: Bruce Russell, “Film’s Limits: The Sequel” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 1-16), and “Replies to Carroll and Wartenberg” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 35-40); Noël Carroll, “Philosophy in the Moving Image: Response to Bruce Russell” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 17-26); Thomas Wartenberg, “What Else Films Can Do: A Response to Bruce Russell” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 27-34).
- 27 Noël Carroll, “Introduction to Part VIII”, *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2006), p. 381.
- 28 I thank Heidi Bollich for her trenchant criticism and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and numerous conversations on the topic. And, again, I thank Daniel Shaw whose cogent suggestions on multiple drafts improved this paper immeasurably. I also thank Noël Carroll for an insightful conversation on the topic. In addition, the students in my class, “The Philosophy of Death,” at Temple University in the spring of 2008 helped me think through some of the key issues.