

Is immortality desirable?

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It is very natural to think that immortality is desirable; after all, we certainly act as though we want to avoid death, and, if we want to avoid death, it must be because we want to stay alive. In ‘The Makropulos Case’, Williams agrees that it is rational to avoid death, for at least a while, but argues that a life without end would be ‘unlivable.’

First, he considers some famous arguments by Lucretius for the conclusion that death is nothing to fear. Lucretius wrote:

“Death, then, is nothing to us, nor does it concern us one least bit, inasmuch as the nature of the mind is that of yet another mortal possession . . .

For, if by chance grief and pain are in store for a man, he must himself exist at the time ill is to befall him. Since death forestalls this and prevents his existence, into which such misfortunes might otherwise crowd, we may be sure that we have nothing to fear in death, and that he who is no more cannot be wretched, and that there is not a scrap of difference to him if he had never at any time been born, when once immortal death has stolen away mortal life.”
(‘On the nature of things’, §15)

What is Lucretius’ argument here?

Williams’ reply to the argument, based on the possibility of *categorical desires*, or desires which are not conditional on being alive. The example of the ‘rational forward-looking calculation of suicide’ (85-6).

So Williams thinks that Lucretius’ argument — that it is always irrational to fear dying at a particular time — can be resisted. But he doesn’t think that we can make sense of the idea of an eternal life which is worth living.

His reason is basically this: if I am to want to continue to live, it has to be that the future person I imagine being is similar enough to me in character as

to be recognizably a future version of me. But if I have more or less the same character for all of eternity, then there are only two ways things can go. Either my future experiences and relationships can be an eternally repetitive loop of the experiences and relationships I have already (by some point in my life) had, in which case

“it is strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations . . . The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable.”

But the other alternative seems just as bad:

“Or is the pattern of her experience not repetitious but varied? Then the problem shifts, to the relation between these varied experiences, and the fixed character: how can it remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences? The experiences must surely happen to her without really affecting her; she must be . . . detached and withdrawn.”

The result, in either case, is “boredom and distance from life.” As Williams puts it at the end, “in those versions [of eternal life] in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself” (100).