

University of Nevada, Reno

Death and Value Reignition: Lucky in the Chance to Die

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Philosophy

by

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May, 2014

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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prepared under our supervision by

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Entitled

Death And Value Reignition: Lucky In The Chance To Die

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May, 2014

Abstract

In this thesis I examine life-extension and embodied immortality and ask whether these are intrinsically problematic. I examine the history of the concept of immortality and find that the usage of the term has nearly always referred to extended but mortal lifespans. I observe that modern commentators have conflated the concepts “mortal” and “immortal” and with deleterious effect on the field of inquiry as a whole. I examine Bernard Williams’ claim that extended lifespans are destined to crash into permanent boredom and find that while the “crash” is probably inevitable, recovery is always possible in finite lifespans. I do, however, think that a eudaimonic existence necessarily attaches to a mortal one. An immortal lifespan, that is, one in which death is impossible, would irreversibly crash and burn in just the way Williams thinks merely super-centenarian lifespans must. Death gives us a sense that time is running out, and this sense is one a mortal creature can capitalize on to reignite his categorical desires when they burn out. An immortal being does not have this resource. Furthermore, embodied immortality necessarily entails invincibility, and this cuts off a significant range of ethical interests that are deeply woven into the human being. A genuinely immortal life eventually reduces to an interactive video game that will become predictable, boring and valueless. My conclusions are supplemented by an extensive analysis of the Karel Čapek play *The Makropulos Case*.

Dedicated to the finest teacher I've ever known, Professor Christopher Williams

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Section 1

Immortality: Conceptions and Frameworks

1.1: An Overview of the Important Concepts

The thought of immortality is deeply fused into human culture, trailing on the footsteps of every civilization. It is tempting to say that death is married to deathlessness in human consciousness itself—it must be, for otherwise we are at a loss to explain the ubiquity and recurrence of the theme of immortality over the ages. But we cannot really make a claim this strong: the Pirahã—a contemporary Brazilian hunter-gatherer tribe famous for their radical empiricism—does not conceptualize an afterlife, gods, eternities, remote pasts or futures. When told that other societies have such beliefs, the Pirahã demand to know where these incredible places/beings are and how they can be reached (Everett, 77). And it seems unlikely the Pirahã are the only culture in history to have had a way of life so decidedly anti-transcendental. However, the mutual attraction of the death-immortality pair is evidenced by the extensive historical record of religious systems involving gods, souls, heavens/hells, reincarnation and mysticism-based cyclical cosmologies, one purpose of which—among many others—is clearly to ease the fear of dying. The thought of eternal existence, however vague or abstractly formulated, seems to comfort many a troubled mind in which death has settled into a rocking chair on the front porch.

On the literary front, what is generally acknowledged as the world's oldest story, the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, at least suggests that the wish for immortality had already

been long on the conceptual scene by the time a proto-literacy developed among Indus River Valley cultures circa 3500 BC. The wish is therefore clearly an ancient one. *Gilgamesh*, whose source tales might trace as far back as 3000 BC, depicts its eponymous hero as a rampaging demigod who develops a panicked fear of death after his dear companion Enkidu dies. Determined to find a way to live forever, Gilgamesh journeys to the land of the gods in search of eternal life, only to find that mankind was never destined for such an existence. On the return home, Gilgamesh enjoys renewed vitality through the acceptance that man is necessarily mortal, and that there are plenty of satisfactions and pleasures available sufficient to compensate for (or at least distract from) the unpleasant fact that death will come. The lesson of *Gilgamesh* is twofold: a life spent worrying about death is a wasted one, because it is possible to live well in spite of the fact that death is unavoidable.

These sentiments will have a familiar ring to those versed in ancient Western philosophy, for they were a significant message of both the Greek thinker Epicurus (~300 BC) and a Roman poet named Lucretius (~40 AD), both of whom argued that death is nothing to fear. They reasoned that since at the moment of death we cease experiencing anything, we cannot experience death; and since it makes no sense to fear what we can't experience, the fear of death is based on an incoherent notion.¹ On this point, and the subject in general, Lucretius more or less duplicated Epicurus, with perhaps extra emphasis on the idea that death cannot be a bad thing for anyone, at any time. It cannot, in other words, entail a "loss of goods"; for one cannot mourn what one has lost—loved

¹ This argument has been heavily analyzed by modern commentators, and nowadays the metaphysics of death is still debated along the lines of whether death really is a harm. Some philosophers, for example, have taken great pains to show that we can be harmed by things we don't experience, such as rumors. But we needn't concern ourselves with such fine points.

ones, reputation, riches, and so on—given that when dead one no longer experiences anything at all. Now, I mention these thinkers not just to establish a trans-millennial extension of the thought (more or less) expressed in *Gilgamesh*, nor simply for the reason that Epicurus and Lucretius are renowned for their formulations of it, but because they use it to argue (among other things) that yearning for immortality is a consequence of the fear of death; a *symptom* of that fear. On their view, only those who fear death crave immortality. For if there is nothing to fear because death cannot harm us, then we have no reason to wish to permanently avoid it. But this seems to force an absurdity from the beginning: if death does not harm us, then we should never care from moment to moment whether we live or die.

This dubious entailment (which neither Epicurus nor Lucretius ever promoted) has been soundly refuted, I think, and not just by noticing the actual way we live—which demonstrates the active concern we take in avoiding death—but by argument. A plethora of good rejoinders are on record; I shall follow the one made by Bernard Williams in his 1973 paper “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”. But that is leaping ahead. In this thesis I shall more or less take up the issue where Epicurus and Lucretius stop their meditations, that is, at the juncture where immortality itself conceptually begins. Now, since the nature of their opinions preempted the need for such an inquiry, neither of these ancient thinkers pondered what immortality would be like if it were otherwise to consist in a life such as we now have (that is, in having a physical body, and living in a world more or less like we now inhabit);² if asked about the matter,

² We must also add here that in those ancient days immortality was linked solely to divinity; that is, endless life was a property of the gods. To be immortal was to *be* a god, and so my question to the ears of an ancient Greek/Roman would perhaps sound like an inquiry into what being a god would be like. But the answer to this was readymade: the Olympian gods were said to live in carefree luxury.

they would undoubtedly interpret the question as one borne of a fear of death. But the issue is worth considering “from the other side”; that is, if we accept that a mortal life can be eudaimonic, to ask what immortality would be like is still a worthy question. If it were *necessarily* bad, for some reason, then an immortal Epicurean would be forced to concede—albeit metaphorically— “where life is, we are not; where we are not, life is.”³

My question, then, concerns what an immortal life would be like, and the worth of this question is shown immediately upon the recognition that a eudaimonic symmetry needn’t hold between mortal and immortal lives. In other words, the fact that a mortal lifespan can be lived well doesn’t force us to conclude that an immortal one could be as well. This proposition might strike as very unintuitive; all things considered, if death is a harm, then a deathless life should be so much the better. If we simply *could not die*, we wouldn’t need the wisdom of an Epicurus, a Lucretius, a *Gilgamesh* story to dissuade us from shuddering at the prospect of death—for there would be no such prospect. By this logic, in whatever way an endless life could be bad, it would only be so through a contingency, a bad *situation* or set of circumstances, just as a mortal life seems to be. But is that really the case? Might some special problem arise if death were to become *impossible*? In other words, might immortality be intrinsically bad for beings like us?

I am confident that the answer to this question is *yes*. However, before we can even begin to understand how a truly committed answer (whether yes or no) is defensible—for it isn’t immediately obvious how it could be—we need a firm conception of immortality. So what does “immortality” mean? A perusal of current philosophical literature on the subject reveals an alarming tendency of philosophers to

³ Epicurus, to demonstrate the incoherence of the fear of death, famously wrote, “when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.”

use the term very loosely; rather than signifying a well-defined notion, neatly marked off from nearby concepts, “immortality” instead seems to mean “any sort of life-extension”, with the extended time beginning where our normal (approximately 100-year) lifespan is expected to end. Thereby any person who can live much longer than the centenarian bracket tends to be called “immortal” in the literature. Only one commentator that I know of, Steven Horrobin, has pointed out that this term comes loaded with supernatural baggage (Horrobin, 286) and should be avoided for that reason. Horrobin’s battle, however, concerns the ethics of life-extension, with the point of contention being whether it is right for a human being to radically extend his life. Certain fundamentalists (religious and otherwise), after all, believe it is deeply wrong to tinker with the natural human lifespan. I think Horrobin’s advice to drop the term altogether is spot-on, at least when the conversation concerns mere life-extension. But I am not concerned here just with life-extension, *per se*, but also *truly unending* life—that is, worlds where death is *impossible*. So having said this, I should show at least this much of my hand: I do not consider any sort of life-extension intrinsically bad for a person, so long as that extended time is finite. And I truly mean *any* finite amount of extended time: whether we are talking about 100 or 100 million years makes no difference. Any finite span of time can be lived well, contingencies aside. But things change for the worse when a person cannot ever die; I hope to explain why in the final section of this thesis.

But getting back to the concept, a bit of research reveals an interesting fact about the linkage of immortality to the supernatural. It turns out that, actually, the word has almost never been used to indicate genuine deathlessness, in the sense where death is impossible for the entity/entities under consideration. As far back as the Sumerian myths

(whose gods play important roles in *Gilgamesh*), there have been deities who, though described as immortal, are nevertheless depicted as dying. In the Babylonian traditions (which connect to the Sumerian), Ishtar is depicted as something of a temptress and trouble-maker; jealous of his sister's status as ruler of the underworld, Ishtar tries to seize the throne, only to have "sixty diseases" unleashed upon her, causing her to die. Osiris in Egyptian mythology, Adonis in Greek, Quetzalcoatl in Aztec, and multiple deities from Scandinavian legends (via *Ragnarok*, the apocalypse of Norse mythology) are further examples of gods who perish. What we can take from this is that the term "immortal" has historically nearly always been used in a limited sense, something akin to "biologically immortal", in the sense of "ageless" rather than "truly invincible". The closest we get to the latter, I think, is the god of monotheistic religions such as Islam and Christianity—although "invincible" is perhaps ill-suited even for those cases, as it isn't clear how such beings as Allah can even be "attacked" or subject to circumstances where physical contact is possible. For those reasons, "eternal" is probably the better word to describe them.

This historical pattern of usage is interesting, to say the least. It means, actually, that the conceptual linkage of immortality to the supernatural is a bit more complicated than we might have initially thought. So, while I endorse Horrobin's advice, I do so for different reasons and with a different application in mind. For I want not to avoid the term "immortal" (and its various conjugate forms) altogether, as he does, but to insist that everyone who writes on this subject maintain an awareness of the difference between worlds in which death is possible and those in which it is not. I think it would profit the scholarship if the term "immortal" were reserved exclusively for worlds of the latter type,

and “mortal” for the former. If the person/entity under consideration can die, no matter how low the fatal event odds are, then he/it is mortal, period. Only a being which cannot die under any circumstances should be called immortal. And I say this not as a piece of pedantry, as an opportunity to act as a conceptual border patrol agent, but because I think it is profitable to separate the concepts. I will slowly work my way into showing how it is profitable, starting with section 2.1.

Now, over the centuries, the concept has migrated from its uniform application to divine beings. Religions of all sorts have also proposed the essence of the *human* being to consist in a soul which, by whatever means, is said to exist eternally. The means by which *personal survival* takes place by means of a soul is a complicated, and perhaps—depending on your ontological commitments—incoherent topic altogether. Exactly how a soul survives, what its existence entails after death, and how a person’s identity follows with it are, to put it mildly, unclear notions. But what is clear is that souls are always destined for worlds in which the qualitative aspects have already been asserted in the text or system of thought which talks of the soul. In other words, heavens are blissful, hells entail suffering, purgatories something in between, reincarnation as a lower/higher state of suffering/bliss, etc. We aren’t prompted, by the religious texts, to ponder what these worlds are like, since we are *told* what they are like from the outset. The quality is therefore analytically built into the terms; that is to say, they are qualitative terms to begin with. And for this reason, I will not entertain conceptions of such worlds: there is nothing to analyze in them. What I am concerned with, instead, is any world in which human beings survive in bodily form, either in finite or infinite temporal extension, whenever it is unclear what such worlds would be like. That is, I will analyze life-

extension scenarios (what I shall call mortal frameworks), but these must always be understood as categorically opposed to genuinely endless lives (what I shall term immortal frameworks). Since it is not immediately clear whether these worlds have something inherently problematic about them, they are worth analyzing, and in terms by which they are clearly conceptually distinct.

Just to finish the conceptual topic, there are, as we all know, conceptions of immortality which do not involve souls. The ancient Greek conception of *nous*, more or less translatable as “mind”, was thought to pick out some sort of immortal substance that every human being had. Similarly, Christian theologians near and after the fall of Rome tended to identify mind with soul, in the sense of a divine faculty of rationality. This view held stably for over a thousand years in the West among intellectual Christians. When Newtonian science got underway, various mechanical models of life and consciousness slowly arose. The human being itself, in fact, was (and had been for a while by certain adventurous thinkers) speculated as mechanical, though this was rarely publicly stated due to the long arm of religious law. The connection to the immortality is simply that what is mechanical is repairable; so if conditions allowed it, and our scientific/medical understanding were sufficiently advanced, we might be able to indefinitely repair ourselves—to slow aging, engineer immunity to and repair damage from diseases, and so on. Most recently (most conspicuously from the 1980s), *transhumanism* has taken this “man as machine” concept to the utmost degree, ultimately hypothesizing the human being as an uploadable piece of software. Often in these imagined scenarios, the uploaded person is free to float about in an unlimited virtual world, able to move and think in fantastic ways, and this picture of existence is proposed as a sort of endless heaven.

All these versions and half-measures now make the concept of immortality look a little messy, but to cut through it all I simply divide the worlds in which death is possible from worlds in which it is impossible.⁴ A transhumanist scenario, for example, is a mortal world: the machine that runs the “personal” software, as it were, is itself physical (if it is a virtual machine, it is x implementations removed from a physical host), and therefore subject to destruction. And any living being which is subject to destruction is mortal. This leads to an idea very important to my thesis which I call the *Ecclesiastes intuition*. Briefly stated, this refers to a general sense—I take it to be shared by nearly everyone—that the universe, and all the things in it, are subject to cycles of generation of decay, or, said another way, oscillations in states. Let us have a look at the famous Biblical passage (3:1-8, New International Version), for which I name this intuition, though, before getting into further details:

There is a time for everything,
 and a season for every activity under the heavens:
 a time to be born and a time to die,
 a time to plant and a time to uproot,
 a time to kill and a time to heal,
 a time to tear down and a time to build,
 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
 a time to mourn and a time to dance,
 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
 a time to search and a time to give up,
 a time to keep and a time to throw away,
 a time to tear and a time to mend,
 a time to be silent and a time to speak,
 a time to love and a time to hate,
 a time for war and a time for peace.

⁴ Because the question “what is death?” is inevitable, my fast and dirty definition is “irreversible cessation of experience.” In my conception of death, I want to avoid equivocations by building finality into the picture.

Now, the logic here is quite recognizable, for it appears in a great many substantial works of literature and philosophy across human cultures. One sees this kind of thinking in Plato, for example (Republic, Book VII); it also appears in *Gilgamesh*: ““There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time?” (Sandars, 107). There is a distinctive yin-yang picture of things in these passages, delivering the notion everything that is conceivable must obey a basic law of transitoriness. But to put it *that* way, which is rather the way Heraclitus (~500 BC) did with his idea of “flux”, is perhaps not specific enough—left at that, flux can imply chaos, unconnected chains of phenomena from moment to moment. A universe perpetually in flux could be a random one. I therefore prefer the way Ecclesiastes presents the notion, as it puts the universe in terms of oscillations between recognizable states. Importantly, the writer of these passages—Solomon, according to legend—is pointing out two kinds of oscillations, what might be called “natural” and “agent-based”, respectively. The first three lines are sweepingly broad, as the idea is applied to “everything” and “every activity under the heavens.” The mentioning of seasons, in particular, draws a picture of *mechanistic* natural oscillations, that is, (more or less) clock-measurable transitions between bookended states. But if it were left at that—if the writer had simply given examples of sunrises/sunsets, winters/summers, tides in/tides out, and so on—then the passages would be far less noteworthy than they are. But the rest of the lines depict agent-based transitions, and construes them rather in terms of *appropriateness*, a significant complication, considering that—just to take one example—if we love some person, it does not follow that there *must* be a time to hate that person. On the other hand, relationships do have their oscillations, so perhaps the problem in this example is just the

terms themselves. We might thereby change the love/hate pair to “There is a time to get along and a time to not get along.” That, at least, does seem to describe every relationship, passionate or otherwise. What we must avoid is the mechanistic construal of agent-based oscillations. The time to “not get along” does not come reliably say, every two hours or whatever. Nonetheless, in the world in *general*, there seems to be “a time for peace” and “a time for war”. So it seems the intuition places the human being—the “agent”—into the natural cyclic motion of natural objects, just not in a simple mechanistic way.

My point in bringing up this notion is to give a knock-down argument against the proposition that life-extension must degenerate inevitably into some dour state, such as boredom. For it has been argued—most potently by Bernard Williams in the 1973 paper—that an extended life must spiral into just that state, and once it does, there is no getting out of it. At a certain point—say, after a few hundred years—something like boredom or perhaps nihilism is supposed to set in, and there is nothing a person can do to relieve himself of this bad state of mind. One will have experienced everything valuable that one can experience, and from there on only experience repetition of those episodes, eventually to permanent boredom (just what term applies is itself a worthy subject, and one I take it up in section 1.3). Now, I find it not only plausible, but *likely* that over greatly extended periods of time a person will fall into terrible states, and probably a multitude of times. However, to argue that eventually a person can do nothing to relieve such a state is a claim that can be rejected on the basis of the Ecclesiastes intuition alone. For if the intuition points to something deeply true in the universe—as it seems to—then there is no such thing as a fixed, unchangeable state of *anything*, including a human

mind. Therefore, no one's mood, disposition, or outlook—however you prefer to put this—is objectively unimprovable (or for that matter, objectively “unwreckable”—things can always turn south).

At various times throughout this thesis, the “Ecclesiastes intuition” will appear to indicate a principle or axiom, at others an ontological reality. It certainly easily converts to a principle, and given my employment of it, one can argue it would be better so named. However, with the term *intuition* I wish to convey the folk origins of the proposition. The idea that the universe is transitory was certainly not gleaned in a modern laboratory—it's at least as old as *Gilgamesh*, after all—and I am not sure which scientific principles would capture it anyway (some laws of thermodynamics—entropy, perhaps?). I hesitate to call it an axiom or principle since this rather diverts from the folk origin, as though some modern piece of intellectual wizardry discovered it. So I will stick with the term *intuition*, and with the commitment that it really does point to something true about the universe as a whole, since—I don't think, anyway—we have yet found anything in violation of it. Flux, it seems, in a way is what there *is*.

Crucially, however, I think this only holds in worlds which conform to the Ecclesiastes intuition. That is, worlds in which transitoriness is in everything allow for an outlook to always change. For any person who has become “burnt out”, so to speak, by extended periods of living, the mechanism to reignite eudaimonia is the fact of death itself. In other words, the fact that time is running out is, I shall argue, one a person can capitalize on to get himself out of a nihilistic rut. But in worlds where death isn't possible, the fact of death cannot be so used, since it doesn't exist. If a person spirals into affective nihilism from having experienced everything he can valuably experience in

such a world, he will not be able to capitalize on the sense that time is running out to reignite his “categorical desires”, as Bernard Williams calls the desires which come into play when we live well. Importantly, my claim about deathless worlds is at least plausible, for in such worlds the Ecclesiastes intuition does not apply, since the ontological facts are radically different. A deathless world is an endlessly forward one, and so the persons in it can in principle have fixed, unchangeable outlooks. But I do not base my claims on just that principle alone, for it certainly does not follow from the bare fact of deathlessness that a person will come into an unchangeable outlook. But what deathlessness *entails* is a series of facts that, I think, would, in time, permanently prevent eudaimonia for creatures like us. We are indeed not meant to live eternally.

The thesis shall be organized as follows. First, I shall have a look at the topic of imagined worlds, for in assessing whether extended/eternal life would be attractive, we are forced to consider imaginary worlds. I distinguish between two kinds of imagined world, *thought experiment* and *framework*, and argue that frameworks are the ones we are dealing with when we contemplate immortality. In 1.3, I shall analyze what is surely the most cited piece of fiction in the field, Karel Čapek’s play *The Makropulos Case*. Since Bernard Williams names his important essay after this play, and takes its central character as a paradigm of the dismal state we would necessarily, and irreversibly, come to were we to live “forever”, it is important to get this play right. I find many subtleties in the work relevant to any understanding of the relation between time and eudaimonia, and hence an understanding of genuine immortality. It does not appear Williams himself read the work, but only saw the opera that was based on it, and this has very important consequences for his position. Furthermore, Williams consistently employs an equivocal

usage of the term “immortal”, sometimes describing the *Makropulos* character’s life as “endless” or “eternal”, which it clearly isn’t. As a result of this and some other minor confusions, Williams thinks eudaimonia is capped at a temporal upper limit. I find, on the other hand, that the protagonist of Čapek’s play suffers from nihilism, and try to point out its precise cause. Most importantly, I argue that her dismal state is improvable, and not only this, but that it *does* improve, on a certain very reasonable interpretation of the last line of the play. None of this has been mentioned by any other commentator that I am aware of, and it appears most take Williams’ breezy, nearly abstract summary of the play at face value.

Following this analysis, I extensively analyze Williams’ essay in section 2.1. I find that his construal of the interrelation between character, categorical desires and repetition to be brilliantly accurate and misunderstood by many commentators. I disagree, however, that in super-centenarian spans of time, categorical desires must burn out irreversibly. But I do believe that Williams’ analysis maps very well onto immortal frameworks, or worlds in which a person is unable to die. In section 2.2, I look at some important replies to the Williams essay. The best in my opinion are from Hunter Steele (1976) and Mikel Burley (2009). Steele might be the earliest commentator, and many of those writing after him seem unaware of his excellent reply, a miniature essay only 3.5 pages in length. His paper isn’t rigorously argued, but foreshadows every important point about the Williams essay that has come up in the decades since its publication. Most importantly, Steele points out that Williams doesn’t distinguish between lives that can end and lives that cannot. In 2009 Mikel Burley expounds upon a point made by Steele.

Arguing that our mortal lives are inextricably woven with the fact of death, Burley suggests that we may not be able to successfully imagine immortality at all.

In the final section, I try to imagine what life would be like as a genuine immortal, as a person who couldn't die. I argue that body-bound immortality necessarily entails invincibility, and that this would cut off a huge range of our interests as ethically-concerned beings. This, combined with the finitude of character and categorical desires, would lead to a dismal state, rather like the one EM comes to in the Čapek play, but truly irreversible. And it would be irreversible because there could be no urgency from a sense that time is running out available for the reignition of categorical desires.

1.2: Frameworks

All philosophers are well-acquainted with the practice of conducting *thought experiments*, by which attempts are made to shed light on matters which cannot, as it were, be settled in a laboratory. These often involve fantastic or bizarre scenarios, such as persons being duplicated by teleportation devices, or worlds containing weird facts. Almost every philosopher makes use of thought experiments from time to time, at least, and—as is the case with philosophy in general—everyone has certain tastes concerning which of them are worthwhile and which are pure folly. What strikes one thinker as absurd or artificial may utterly grip another, and on such moments of fascination whole revolutions of personal thought may turn. Friedrich Nietzsche had one such moment when he conceived the “eternal recurrence” in Sils-Maria, Switzerland, in 1881. Nietzsche wondered, what if this entire existence as we know it were fated to happen over and over without end—what would the psychological effect be on someone who came to know this? Sometimes a thought experiment makes it into popular consciousness, rising to the level of meme, as happened with Schrödinger's cat from quantum physics.

As I see it, there are two fundamental kinds of thought experiment in philosophy. The first aims for the question “What would you do?” given some set of circumstances. It typically games for a response that exposes, clarifies, or underscores one's moral commitments and beliefs. The venerable *trolley problem* is a paradigm of this sort. For the uninitiated: you stand at a lever which controls the switching of rails on a set of train tracks. The tracks split into two, and on one set there are five people tied down. On the

other, there is but one. Currently the train is heading down the set of tracks with five people on it. You control the lever, so, the question is: should you pull the lever, causing the train to switch tracks and run over one person, or do nothing and let it kill the five it is headed for?

There are some who find this sort of hypothetical entertaining, but no more than that. Others find in it a doorway to exploring philosophical themes such as consequentialism and utilitarianism in a spirited, concretized way. Generally speaking, those who *do* find value in trolley-like problems enjoy the process of amending or modifying the terms in order to settle upon a scenario that genuinely fascinates. Suppose your response to the original problem was to take no action, to let the train stay on the track bound for five people. But now suppose instead that the train is bound for the single person; in this case your wife. The other five are still strangers. Do you pull lever in *this* version? No? Very well. But now suppose there are 10,000 people instead of five on the one side, and again your wife on the other. Does *this* alter your decision? And so on. But of far greater interest here are those who are nonplussed by such experiments, for the manner in which they attempt to disarm trolley-like problems typically takes the form of, “*Why* have I been put in this position?”, directly pressing for more circumstantial details. Now, the presenter of the thought experiment may or may not play along. In response to such questions, he might reply with something like, “Just assume you’ve been forced into this position, and that the world is otherwise the same.” Other variations cut more directly to the chase: “That’s not relevant to the experiment. Why you’re in this position doesn’t matter. You’re there at the lever; what do you do?”—and such cases are like dance partners who have irreconcilable tastes in music.

There are no *a priori* generalizations available to us regarding the value of thought experiments, no consistent measure of usefulness or even realism. Our tastes in them are apt to be inconsistent, with enjoyment and/or value perception contingent on a variety of factors, including rhetorical and aesthetic features of a given presentation. But if something could be said to characterize the nonplussed reaction, it would be that it demands *more information*. One kind of detail I have already mentioned addresses rationale: “*Why* am I in circumstance *x*?” This question, filled with skepticism from the outset, is the sort which attempts to undermine the proceedings altogether. It is likely to contain the seeds of preemptive rejection; i.e., the person who demands adequate explanation as to how the hypothetical circumstance came into being will likely never accept any new terms. But there is a variation on this which asks for purely structural details, e.g., “Where are these train tracks? Because that’s not the way track-switching works!” and so on. This can follow the same spirit as the rationale-objectors, with no end in sight. But some technical-objectors have legitimate concerns; that is, they object not to the spirit of the thought experiment but have spotted a fly in the ointment which in fact interferes with the dilemma the presenter has attempted to show. These are usually the sort whose premises are adjustable to the objector’s satisfaction.

Now, there is another fundamental kind of thought experiment in philosophy, one quite different from a trolley problem. It aims not for the moral dilemma, but instead a “phenomenal intuition” concerning some imagined world. Instead of asking “What would you do?” it asks “What would this world be like?” A fine example is Thomas Nagel’s “What is it like to be a bat?”, a famous hypothetical in philosophy of mind/consciousness. For if you *were* a bat, you would—presumably—experience the world much differently

than you do now. In response to this question, some will say that there is nothing to imagine, either because bats aren't conscious in the way we are (perhaps because they don't have intricate mental lives), or because the difference between bat and human consciousness exceeds the capacity for language to describe it. Alternately, one might imagine there being a describable difference, or at least one smaller than we are apt to believe. Pet owners and professionals in various zoological sciences sometimes have intuitions like this. Whatever the response, it clearly isn't prompted by a dilemma—there is no “bat crisis” built into the hypothetical.

As with thought experiments of the first kind, this fundamentally different sort has endless variations and manifestations. The world in question might differ from the one we know in terms of physics, history, psychological facts, or any number of things. Suppose that we were all full-blown telepaths, able to read the mind of any person, and any other able to read ours. What would this world be like? What effect would this ability have on morality, religion, literature, etc.? What would it take to tell a conversational lie in such a world—or would it even be possible? Many stimulating questions arise from such thought experiments. Their point, of course—as with trolley-like experiments—is to shed light on *this* world. The trolley problem presses for your moral outlook: to what extent are you a utilitarian, if at all? Nagel's question asks about the general nature of phenomenal consciousness, or what it feels like to *be* something: what is it like to be *you*? Can you describe it? And do all phenomenally conscious beings have something in common, a base “what it is like” denominator?

Now, some imagined worlds are very obscure, and their very point is to prompt a clarification of just what it is we are to imagine. These are normally linked to issues of

epistemology and ontology, with relevance to the world we actually live in somewhere in the endgame. In his celebrated treatise *Naming and Necessity*, for example, philosopher Saul Kripke ponders what the names of objects actually refer to. Do the labels “water” and “H₂O” *necessarily* refer to the same thing, in every possible world? Opinions differ, and one way to reach an opinion is to imagine a world in which “H₂O” does *not* refer to water. What does this entail, exactly, for the imaginer? Opinions differ. Some will say, “I *can* imagine that H₂O doesn’t chemically reference water, but some other substance instead”, while others deny that this can take place even in the imagination. *If* you are imagining H₂O, they say, *then* you are necessarily imagining water: there is no possible world in which dihydrogen monoxide doesn’t reference water.

However weird such experiments strike you as, rest assured there are always weirder ones. Try this one on for size. Suppose the number 17 were stricken from the sequence of integers, and that neither any mathematics nor any physical object could reference or correspond to that quantity. The positive integers necessarily skip from 16 to 18. What would this world be like? A variation: suppose that this weren’t always the case, but that it became so at a snap of the fingers. What changes in the world would suddenly manifest? And so on. Now, the same objections levied against waterless H₂O substances are liable to be marshaled in these “weirder” cases as well: the premises of the experiment are incoherent, a doubter will say, and so there is nothing to imagine. This feedback is somewhat analogous to those nonplussed reactions to the trolley problem, but the dismissal here is sharp and a matter of logic, rather than stemming from demands about circumstantial rationales or the correctness of any mechanics or procedures. Recall the two objections to the trolley problem: “How did I arrive into this bizarre

circumstance?” and “Rail switching doesn’t work that way”, respectively. Some think that the trolley problem is circumstantially implausible or that more accurate facts are needed in order to arrive at a genuine (though still imaginary) dilemma. By contrast, waterless H₂O worlds invoke one’s stance on *necessity* (whether a denial or affirmation of it).⁵ To declare that imagining a “seventeenless world” is impossible is to reveal one’s commitments about the logical nature of mathematics and numbers. Now, most will think that such hypothetical worlds quickly outstretch the limits of usefulness. I think otherwise,⁶ although context is important. But I want here to label the second sort of thought experiment—which up to now I have described using the familiar phrase “imagined world”—a *framework*. As this section proceeds, it will become apparent why I choose this different term. The two fundamental kinds of hypothetical exercises in philosophy, then, are *thought experiment* and *framework*. One asks you what you will do (or what will happen), the other what things are like.

What is the relevance for our topic? Let us first understand that immortality is not a thought experiment, but a framework. When a philosopher ponders the concept of immortality, he is imagining a whole world, not an acute circumstance which presses for a decision. Immortality is no trolley problem. This is fairly obvious, given that I’ve characterized thought experiments as chiefly ethical dilemmas. If a philosopher said, “Imagine that you were immortal. What would you do?” we would, as Wittgenstein might put it, “not understand him.” But actually, this question is quite useful! It leads to a further insight, namely that thought experiments assume a world in the background (i.e.,

⁵ Necessity is a thorny subject, and there are multiple ways of construing it, e.g., “metaphysical” as opposed to “logical” necessity. But these distinctions aren’t important here.

⁶ I am of the opinion that all thought experiments have value, including the patently absurd ones. The weirder, the better: they put the mind in unfamiliar territory, and force one to fight out of a chaotic taffy of words and concepts. The thicker the taffy, the better your workout.

beside the features we are focusing on) which is more or less the one we know and live in. On the scene at the trolley lever, we assume nothing else is out of the ordinary, for we have no reason to. The dire circumstance featuring you at the lever is itself all that is unusual: there are no telepaths wandering about, no minds split into multiple bodies, no weird physics or metaphysical conundrums, such as the lack of the number seventeen. The thought experiment *is* you at the lever, and this hypothetical circumstance could not be coherent to anyone (regardless of taste in such matters) unless we assumed the imagined world were otherwise as we know this one. Most facts will be irrelevant, of course: is there an Oprah Winfrey in this imagined world? Who cares—you're at the lever; what are you going to do?

Now, because thought experiments assume the present world in the background, they needn't supply many of its details, because the dilemma posed isn't really contingent on them. For this reason, thought experiments are inherently lean on details. Where is this set of tracks, exactly, in the trolley problem? Is it in a specialized environment, one perhaps built just for the nefarious purpose of putting poor souls like you in ethical dilemmas? And, while we're at it—how *did* you get there? Is it your *fault*? Well, we aren't told such things, and if we insist on knowing them, we're likely fundamentally objecting to trolley problems, and covertly using such questions to show how absurd we think they are. And if we don't ask for this information, then by default we're playing along, conceding that the experiment needs few if any further details to operate as intended, i.e., a dilemma. And so *this* is another calling card of thought experiments—they get by on minimal details. They need only as many details as it takes to set up a

situation whereby some problematic action is forthcoming, either with you at the helm, as in trolley problem, or as an observer, as in Zeno's Dichotomy Paradox.⁷

A framework diverges from this considerably. In a framework, the thing being questioned *is* the world. The problem, the crisis, the quagmire, is *built into the scaffolding*, as it were. You are a bat: what is your life like? What does it feel like to perch upside down in forgotten creaky buildings, dreaming about blood? Are you comfortable in that furry little body? Do you panic when your sonar doesn't return an echo? Does your heart belong to the night? So many questions! And hereby is the soul of the framework. Whereas the thought experiment narrows in with a magnifying glass, a framework pans ever outward, attempting, in some manner, to embrace an entire world. Thought experiments, energized by dilemmas or conundrums, prompt us for direct answers about what will happen next. They are the still frame captured just before a crucial moment. Frameworks have an opposing emphasis: afloat in some vast intellectual space, we must find our bearings and simply *wait* for the right questions to ask, the intuitions to arrive.

That, at any rate, is the idealized distinction. In practice, the lines can blur. Which type, for example, would Zeno's paradox (the one mentioned above) be? I have already cast it as a thought experiment, but was that right? Perhaps something like the following is more accurate. It's quite possible that Zeno had already drawn up a framework—e.g., “Imagine a world in which space is infinitely divisible”—and only then concretized the problem as one of motion. What happens, Zeno thought, if we shoot an arrow into this

⁷ Zeno (490–430 BCE) was a Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher famous for posing a number of thought experimental conundrums, one of which is the Dichotomy Paradox, also known as the Arrow Paradox: any moving object, before it reaches some distant point, must travel half that distance first. But whatever distance this is, it must travel half of this as well: and so on for every halfway point. Therefore, in order to move at all an object must move an infinite distance. But this is impossible. Therefore, motion is impossible.

infinitely divisible space? ⁸ Now, if this is correct, then what happened was a kind of focal reduction: a framework was reduced to a thought experiment. The outermost consideration “What is this world like?” was resolved into a specific issue of motion. While I don’t insist that this was the actual genesis of Zeno’s arrow paradox (various partial-thought permutations, so to speak, are equally possible in the evolution of the hypothetical), I think it is plausible; more importantly, I propose that the movement from framework to experiment is one that happens frequently in philosophy. In one sense, it can hardly be otherwise. Restless creatures that we are, philosophers are liable to fiddle with the zoom lens and shift from metaphysical to existential to circumstantial distances and back again, all within a few minutes. There is no doubt, however, that the narrowing transition absolutely characterizes modern treatments on immortality, and its impact on scholarship in the field is not to be underestimated.

To see this impact, it should first be noted that when philosophers are in need of some imagined worlds featuring immortal beings, they normally borrow from literature. Literature is a natural—not to mention wonderful—resource for immortal frameworks. For that matter, a good case can be made that literature—and by this I mean not only the canonical and highbrow sort, but fiction in general—already covers what is discussed by the major philosophical treatises. Scattered across the world’s great stories are expressions of empiricism, moral realism, existentialism, and all the rest. The academic philosopher, of course, isn’t terminally satisfied with these intellectual morsels, tasty as they are. In a sense, no one else is, either: after the last page is turned, the book goes into

⁸ A nonplussed reaction could go like this: “If motion is impossible, then drawing a bow isn’t possible. Ergo, the thought experiment is absurd.” And for some, this does in fact end all further considerations. The more adventurous will allow the proceedings, even in the face of immediate contradictions. It all depends whether one wants to go for the amusement ride in which the paradox is solved.

the lap, and reflection begins. But the philosopher will doggedly after it. When Hamlet says, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” the philosopher wants, ideally, to convert this into a clear proposition. What is Hamlet *really saying* here? Well, every reader wants to know this. But to repeat, the philosopher will get doggedly after it. He wants to know, with as much assurance as possible, what Hamlet means or *could* mean. Of course, that is never made explicit in the text—but then, the great moments, phrases and passages in literature rarely are.⁹

One reason they aren’t, to go along with my claims here, is that their impulse and inspiration isn’t fueled by a thought experiment. Their propositional scaffolding doesn’t immediately suggest any loaded hypothetical. It is, in other words, difficult to distill an entire framework into a single thought experiment, out of which the truth of various propositions might be tested as a measure of the greater message of the framework. Consider the Hamlet quotation again. There are various possibilities as to its meaning, and some of them depend on an inferential construction of Horatio’s beliefs. It’s also plausible that, instead of addressing Horatio’s beliefs, Hamlet is speaking of the mind-world relation in general. The proposition in that case is something like: “Our minds can never fully grasp the world”—on one interpretation, a rather Kantian-sounding assertion regarding the limitations of human intellect. But whatever the case, it’s up to the reader to perform the clarification, to distill the imagined world into a moment *against which a thought experiment might be run*. Suppose our snapshot of Hamlet reduces exactly into the Kantian proposition above. We now have the means by which to construct a thought experiment: what happens when Hamlet tries to *know himself*? While not exactly rising to

⁹ All texts are necessarily gapped, incomplete. Narratives manipulate these gaps so as to produce desired effects, like suspense and surprise.

the ethical emergency of the trolley problem, there is nonetheless a problem, and its presence is widely agreed upon by readers of that Shakespearean drama, even if its precise nature isn't.

A story, then—whatever its genre, and putting all considerations of value aside—is in the framework business. Let me reiterate that when it comes to the subject of immortality, modern philosophers are in the habit of borrowing imagined worlds from literature. As I have said, this is the natural, and for that matter, probably most fruitful approach. The streets of literature are paved with golden imaginations. But in practice, these densely packed fictional worlds tend to become distilled into thought experiments when their texts are cited by philosophers for analytical purposes. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this *per se*. However, if one is going to do so, one should take pains to justify whatever propositions one has converted the framework into. Let us return briefly to Hamlet for an illustration. If your interpretation of Hamlet's plight (based on what he says to Horatio and/or anything else) converts, in your mind, into the following skeptical argument chain ¹⁰ :

- (1) A mind cannot fully know the world.
- (2) If a mind cannot fully know the world, it cannot be certain of having complete knowledge of any part.
- (3) What exists is part of the world.
- (4) Minds exist.
- (5) Therefore, a mind cannot fully know itself.

then the onus is on you to justify it. And the only way to do this is to read the text closely, citing the evidence as you go. Of course, if you aren't actually trying to interpret the text,

¹⁰ Those keen on Wittgenstein will be apt to protest this usage of the concept "know" in the example argument I give here. But the soundness of this argument isn't as important as its resemblance to the kind of distillation a philosopher is apt to arrive at upon reading a work of literature.

but are merely using it to springboard into some epistemological issues, then you needn't perform a textually deep-rooted analysis. Even in that case, however—provided you have good scholarly habits—you will have taken some pains to justify your reading. At the very least you believe the text exemplifies an idea you have, and so, to the extent that you rely on it for your claims, you should refer to it. Even if the passage cited is a one-off illustration, it would be advisable to reference a respected scholar's interpretation before getting on with your business; another route would be to qualify your judgment, e.g., "I take Hamlet's statement to mean x, y, z." At the end of the day, one cannot pass an interpretation off as a matter of fact while skipping over the evidentiary steps.

I cannot imagine there being controversy over such matters. Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate, scholarship in the philosophy of immortality has fallen well short of this obvious standard, and to ill effect. But why the big fuss over this? A perusal of papers in the field written since the 1970's reveals the popularity of Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Case*, and when leaning on this text for ideas or positions, commentators almost uniformly extract a singular message from it. This interpretation is then backed up by the breeziest of plot summaries. Very little of the text is cited, and it is always the same one or two quotations. I suspect the reason for this is that few philosophers have actually read the play and have simply duplicated Bernard Williams' interpretation of it, trusting that to be solid. But if that is the case, then so much the worse for everyone, as it is quite possible that Williams himself didn't read the work, but only saw the opera (I shall give evidence for this when the time is right), itself adapted from the original Čapek play by Czech composer Leoš Janáček. My point in mentioning this is not so much that the Janáček adaptation is a distortion of the original work and is therefore, in effect, a

different story about immortality—and that, consequently, Williams’ take essentially references *this*, and not the Čapek version—but rather that the act of mental recall is magnitudes of quality removed from having a text at the ready. In the absence of a text (or archived film), it is doubtful whether one’s interpretation can do justice to what one has read/seen. One recalls a few key moments and runs with them. But as any cultured purveyor of the world’s great stories can attest, multiple readings are not only beneficial but necessary for deep interpretation of quality literature. If you read Hamlet or see a stage production only once and then proceed to tell me, whether one day or one year later, what it’s all about—much less your appraisal of it—you’re going to get it wrong. At best, you won’t go far enough with what you’ve got right.

Now, having said this, I don’t think *The Makropulos Case* is among the world’s literary treasures. My reasons for this judgment should become clear in 1.3, but at any rate, the ranking of Čapek’s play, as it were, is quite unimportant. We need only pay the work its proper respects, and to that end I can confidently say—having read this play three times—that there is more to it than meets the eye. But we would never suspect this taking the word of those who distill the entirety of it into this single proposition: “An immortal life would necessarily be crushingly and irreversibly boring.” True, the protagonist, Emilia Marty (also known by various aliases all initialed “EM”) repeatedly laments her condition, claiming at every turn to be terminally uninterested in the things normally associated with a healthy, vibrant life. Projects, children, careers, art, sex, love—none of it matters to her, she says. She’s seen it all before and cannot be jazzed up by it any longer. By this token it is fair to associate EM with any proposition linking immortality with boredom. However, her testimony about the quality of her life isn’t

perfectly straightforward, because, first of all, (1) *The Makropulos Case* was written in the heyday of the modernist movement in arts and literature, a period notorious (amongst other chicanery) for portraying schizoid characters in fiction (in particular, unreliable narrators)—and EM’s testimony leaves more than a few unanswered questions. To go with this, (2) some possibly key events in the play (some of which are EM’s recalling past events in her long life) are highly ambiguous and require sensitive reading and/or imagination to fill in the resulting gaps. How we fill in these gaps will influence our construction of EM’s psychological profile. And the profile arrived at, in turn, will influence how we receive her testimony—and her testimony our distillation of the play. The upshot? A good case can be made that EM’s miserable state is partly her own fault and therefore improvable. This is a considerably more potent way of expressing the generalized counter-possibility, “An immortal life doesn’t necessarily have to be crushingly boring.” But we can’t arrive at it by examining a tiny sample of EM’s total speech content on a petri dish, extracted from the context in which it occurs in the play.

Now, the inestimable Bernard Williams may be right about the forced and inseparable intersection between boredom and immortality. I think he *is* right, but only about genuine immortality (but he doesn’t distinguish between this and equivocations: for Williams, a few hundred years is psychologically equivalent to all eternity). But Williams’ snap summary of *The Makropulos Case* and face-value treatment of the protagonist hasn’t done the field any favors. Consequently, the concept of immortality still circulates predominately in its equivocal version, and one reason for this is that Williams’ summary reduces a framework to a thought experiment. This is what broad summaries are good for, after all. Unlike cases in which we have the text before us, and

are absorbed in it—in which our thoughts become attuned to a framework’s essential mode, “What is this world like?”—our minds become very differently attuned in the face of a summary. Rather than being invited into an imagined world, a summary simply tells us “this text boils down to x” and, being good philosophers, we will want to test the truth of this statement. When faced with a summary of such brevity as “EM’s life nosedived into irreversible, profound boredom” we begin to wonder if an immortal life would always do this, no matter who the person was. But the pressure is already on: the problem has been cast in this distillation as one of boredom; that is, boredom is now supposed to constitute the preeminent issue of an immortal life. In the face of strong claims like this we always wonder. And in this case, the boredom issue advances itself toward a thought experiment—not one, as I have said, of panicked emergency, as in a trolley problem, nor really that of an Arrow Paradox, in which we’re to predict what happens when the arrow is let fly—but a rather queer one, a sort of sudden, clashing mixture between imagined world and thought experiment in which the pitch becomes: “You’re immortal. What are you going to *do*?” This question contains in it the presumption that boredom is the preeminent roadblock to eudaimonia in extended/immortal lifespans, since boredom is typically escaped by *doing* something, unless it passes on its own first. But this entire line of thinking, as I see it, hails from taking merely one of many possible distillations of *The Makropulos Case* as *the* distillation.

What I have sketched above is a reasoned speculation about why the general approach to immortality has been skewed in the direction of boredom, and why the topic in general remains fundamentally confused almost forty years after Williams’ paper. Both problems as I see it are the result of making short shrift of *The Makropulos Case*. The

first is far from disastrous; let's call it a trigger-happiness, an overemphasis that needs balancing and redirection. The second problem is by far the more important; the first, really, is just one of several by-products of it. The "fundamental confusion" stems from the fact that no one thus far has considered whether there might be a categorical qualitative difference between lives that truly cannot end and lives that are merely massively extended. As a result, it hasn't been considered whether the boredom objection might apply differently to the two categorically different frameworks, i.e., mortal and immortal.

I leave these as assertions for now; they cannot be seriously defended until the preparatory material has passed. However, let me reiterate here that *The Makropulos Case* itself employs a loose usage of the term "immortal", as most fiction does. This practice, as we have seen, has attended the concept since its (written) inception in *Gilgamesh*, the world's oldest known literature and whose driving theme just happens to be immortality. But the various possible meanings of this word should absolutely concern a philosopher, and those studying the subject should be alive to the categorical difference between a life that is merely very long and one that simply cannot end *by any means*. A few moments' reflection should reveal that this distinction simply cannot be meaningless or superficial.

As it stands, because Williams' summary of the Čapek play is so brief, not only are none of the play's important ambiguities or complications brought into view (in either Williams' discussion or the papers which came after his which mention the play), but the concept of immortality is duplicated wholesale from its usage there. Correspondingly, Williams analyzes only what we might call a "biological immortal", which is to say, a

person who can die. Since EM can die, but bemoans an ongoing disinterest in living, Williams concludes (after much supplementary analysis, of course) that all extended lifespans are doomed to the same fate. Presumably, he felt that a truly endless life would simply carry on this same miserable state infinitely forward, and that therefore there is no fundamentally different subject matter at hand when talking about the genuine version as compared to the equivocal. But this is precisely what I contest, and I must begin my case with a plot overview and detailed analysis of the key moments from *The Makropulos Case*.

1.3: *The Makropulos Case: A Mortal Reduction Exemplar*

Karel Čapek was a Czech author who wrote numerous short stories, novels and plays throughout the 1920s and 30s, a time of explosive revolution in the arts. Writers like James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner rose to prominence during this period, trailblazing unconventional techniques and subject matters in literature. Streams of consciousness, minimally descriptive prose, meandering and unresolved plots, “unreliable” narrators, taboo subjects and marginalized cultural voices all went into circulation as part of an expanding repertoire of literary possibilities, and in no small part due to these four authors. There were, of course—considering that this explosive time period spanning the years 1900-1945 was not confined to America—hundreds of other writers around the world delivering much the same unbridled, experimental energy in their novels and poetry. Čapek fits rather well into this misfit bunch. His adventurousness was more about content than form, and sometimes his work entailed sharp political criticism (especially of fascism and communism). But his work is hard to categorize; perhaps “eclectic social critique with a tendency toward futuristic speculation” is apt. One of his plays, *RUR* (1920)—short for *Rostrum’s Universal Robots*—laid the groundwork for what was to become a booming subgenre of science fiction in the decades following his death. It was in *RUR* that the word *robot* was coined, and this is Čapek’s primary claim to fame.¹¹ Though automata had been conceived centuries prior, Čapek’s label had the effect of a viral meme, and soon films and fiction

¹¹ Čapek’s brother, Josef, actually invented the term, playing off the Czech word for labor, “robota”. Josef and Karel collaborated frequently and coauthored many books, including children’s stories and a gardening manual.

were filled with clunky, cylindrical metal beings, riveted at the seams and running amok.¹²

The Makropulos Case was written in 1922. I would classify it as something like comedy-suspense,¹³ and in fact a good portion of the story serves as a setup for the big surprise moment in which Emilia Marty (EM) confesses her secret past. Given the surplus of clues laid out in the first half of the play, *that* she is immortal, actually, isn't such a surprise; but how she managed to become so *is*. That, it seems to me, is the story's primary interest-driver, the "hook", if you will. It actually sets up a further—what appears to be genuine—enigma; for, after learning the particulars of her achieving life-extension, we then want to know the reason for EM's wretched state of mind. Is it related to, perhaps even caused by, her extended life? This issue injects the play with substantial intellectual value, as the answer to this puzzle can't be perfectly given by the piecing together of any facts from the storyworld. It is therefore an open issue as to why EM is drained of passion and eudaimonic drive. On the downside, the characters are mostly cardboard, offering little depth. They serve as idealized social markers, stock representations of attitudes toward life (materialist, idealist, and so on). As such, we are apt to care little about them. Overall, the play is light-hearted and whimsical, but the characters will pipe up with cynical, sometimes penetrating remarks from time to time to keep the narrative from floating away into total farce. The lone tragic event, the suicide of a man's son, is passed over without much ado in order to keep on with the business of unraveling the mystery of Miss Marty.

¹² The robots in *RUR* are actually closer to what we would call androids, automatons with a human-like appearance.

¹³ The versatile Čapek wrote detective fiction as well.

Despite its trivial veneer, there is, as I have already stated, more than meets the eye in *The Makropulos Case*. And although its story falls well short of compelling, it is useful as a springboard into the psychological dimensions of life extension, and most intellectually curious readers will benefit from a second reading. As I see it, two central questions arise from the text: (1) to what extent can we attribute the cause of EM's emptiness to her long life, as opposed to other factors, and (2) given that EM doesn't die at the end of the play, what could we expect her life to be like following the destruction of the alchemical life-extension formula? In other words, what would happen in a *fifth* act, were such written? Given what we know about EM, what could we expect her life to be like in this hypothetical further chapter? The first question inquires about the relation of character, personality, and psychological health to time; the second has in mind a transformation from one kind of mortal framework (the world in which EM is biologically immortal), to another (a world in which EM begins aging in an ordinary centenarian bracket). Let us now dive into this story, divided into four acts, with an eye toward a few key moments, followed by an attempt to answer the two central questions. I want, also, for the reader to keep in mind that this text follows literary tradition in its usage of the term "immortal": it refers to biological immortality, and not invincibility. I call this tendency in literature (and many other domains, including philosophy!) the *mortal reduction*. That is, beings implied or actually described as "immortal" actually turn out to be vulnerable and, in various ways, subject to death.

Act One takes place entirely in the law office of a Dr. Kolténatý, attorney for a certain Mr. Gregor who disputes a Mr. Prus for the rights to an estate. The case has been ongoing for nearly a hundred years (having been passed from lawyer to lawyer over the

generations) due to some ambiguity in the original will. The stakes are high: whoever manages to win it stands to gain a vast fortune, since the estate sits on a massive coal deposit which is ripe for the mining. Koltenatý, his assistant Vitek, and Mr. Gregor are all anxiously awaiting news on the verdict as the scene opens. The dialogue is a bit of misdirection, rather taking on the character of a procedural law drama. Names, dates, details of the case and materialist cynicisms are thrown about with an air of sophistication, rather as we might today witness in a snappy prime time television drama, the sort in which cagey veterans trade quips about the nature of the game. Vitek's daughter enters the room. An aspiring opera singer, she has just returned from a rehearsal in which a renowned performer, Emilia Marty, practiced on stage with her. Kristina exclaims that Miss Marty is "the greatest singer in the world" (Čapek, 170) and raves about her beauty. In awe of the diva, Kristina wants to be like her in every way.

After some banter on this subject, as luck would have it, in walks Miss Marty. Her celebrity and charisma have immediate effect as the adults fall over themselves bowing, telling Miss Marty ("EM" from here on) what an honor the moment is. Nonplussed, she gets straight to business, asking about the current status of the Gregor vs. Prus case. Young Kristina is ushered out the door; EM's absent-mindedness is evident as she glances at Kristina—whom she has just practiced singing with—and wonders why the young girl looks strangely familiar (173). The story proceeds with a mass of fine-grained details in conversations concerning the evolution of the case over the last century. One thing is for certain: EM is up to something, and she seems to know a great deal about persons long deceased but connected to the case.

A great deal of banter ensues as names and dates are thrown around in a prolonged question-and-answer session. EM wants to know what it would take to win the case outright, to which Koltenatý replies “a valid written will” (183). Claiming to know just where such a document is, EM gets the room in an excited uproar. Gregor takes her at her word while Koltenatý waves his hand in disbelief. EM asks Koltenatý to pay the Prus estate a visit and, once there, to ask for the document, which (she claims) is kept in an old drawer. The lawyer refuses, convinced this is all a charade. But Gregor, smitten with EM, compels Koltenatý to try. With little choice, Koltenatý leaves to do so.

The narrative takes a rather artificial turn at this point. Alone with EM, Gregor begins confessing his undying love for her, despite having met her mere minutes ago. His fawning reaches a kind of hyperbole that could only be described as bizarrely inappropriate, e.g., “Have you ever seen the blood of battle? It drives a man wild....there’s something terrible and wild about you...” and “The moment you walked in I could feel it...Hot and wild, like a furnace...A man smells it and stiffens like an animal” (187). These passages are meant to drive home a picture of Gregor as an unstable fellow; indeed, moments before uncorking this bad poetry, he tells EM that he had been planning to commit suicide later that night, and only now changed his mind because of meeting her. All of this might have been more believable (and hence effective) were it not compressed into such a small span of narrated time,¹⁴ but it seems Čapek was intent on demonstrating EM’s powerful charm at all costs. Importantly, as Gregor proceeds with his love-struck melodrama, EM insults him, though without genuine malice. In some respects, her reaction is one any mature, but direct, woman would employ to rebuff an

¹⁴ *Narrated* time, or the time it takes to read a given span of text, is opposed to *narrative* time, or the span of time represented in the storyworld itself.

outclassed younger suitor; e.g., “I’m not laughing at you...but you’re being an idiot” (186). But there is an added dimension of psychological coldness here which Čapek skillfully renders; EM’s curt, utterly factual and graceless replies speak to an existence of pure utility in her motivations. Her mysterious agenda, whatever it is, seems wrapped up in her personality—or, perhaps better, lack of one.

As Act One winds down, word comes that Gregor has lost his case, and the estate will remain in the hands of Prus. Koltenatý returns with—surprisingly—Prus himself, who is there to shake hands with his legal adversary Gregor. It turns out that some documents were found in the drawer of the Prus estate just as EM asserted, but, Koltenatý says, they don’t prove that Gregor is the rightful estate heir. Undaunted, EM claims that she has the relevant document herself and will “send something round in the morning” (191), much to the disbelief of Prus, but not Koltenatý, who is no longer surprised by anything EM says or does.

Act Two takes place on the rehearsal stage of the opera in which EM has been performing. Kristina, the hopeful opera diva, and her boyfriend, Janek, are there. Kristina, who is obsessed with her heroine EM, emulates EM’s coldness by insulting Janek, who is trying everything under the sun to show his girlfriend affection. Having none of it, Kristina says she will never earn the adulation of the world until she dedicates herself to singing and only singing, with no distractions, including romance. Janek, a token pandering sap, pleads with her, but to no avail.

Prus, who is Janek’s father, enters the scene and begins insulting his son, whom (evidently) he has a great deal of contempt for. Gregor, Vitek, and EM arrive next. EM complains of the onslaught of flowers from admirers that, apparently, plagues her at

every rehearsal. Nonetheless, she is quite interested in knowing whether those who saw her performance the previous night liked it. Gregor, unexpectedly, gives his candid opinion: “Your singing is so perfect it almost hurt”; “You seemed bored. Your voice is extraordinary, but not quite human. It’s as if you’re bored. You’re cold, frozen, numb” (199). Though irritated, EM doesn’t bother denying the charge: “You felt it? Well maybe there’s something in what you say. I sent that stupid document to your stupid lawyer” (ibid).

An interesting exchange now occurs between EM and Vitek. Asked whether he enjoyed her performance, Vitek replies, “Goodness, I’ll say I did! You were like Strada!” (200). Strada, apparently, was an opera legend from a century ago. EM despises the comparison: “Listen, Strada had no voice. She squeaked like a mouse” (ibid). When Vitek expresses incredulousness at EM’s personalized opinion (a mouse—really? How could she know?) EM responds “You should have heard her. Strada, Strada, Strada! All this fuss about Strada!” (201). Feathers ruffled, she then berates several generations of opera greats in the same manner: “Listen Mr. Vitek, Strada squeaked, Corona had dumplings in her throat, Agujari honked like a goose, Faustina wheezed like a walrus. That’s history!” (ibid). On a roll, she moves on to some famous personalities from the French Revolution, citing pock-marked faces and bad teeth as among the facts that history books have failed to tell.

Act Two winds down with a bit of a faceoff between Prus and EM as the other characters drift off or are called away to other business. Prus is now highly intrigued and suspicious. Among the papers found in the desk at the estate was a sealed envelope, and Prus demands to know its contents. Suddenly breathless, EM won’t tell him, but insists

that he give it to her. Though he can't quite fit all the pieces together, Prus realizes that EM's true interest in the case lies with the contents of the envelope (which he will not risk opening himself due to legal jeopardy); and her interest is quite remarkable considering her bored contempt for nearly everything else. EM and Prus reach a stalemate; she won't tell him what's in the envelope, and he refuses to give it to her. Prus exits. Gregor then returns backstage with yet more gushing free verse Cupidity for EM, alternating between starry pleas and growling adolescent threats. EM, bored as ever with people throwing themselves at her feet, isn't impressed by the threats either, as she has (she claims) been assaulted by men before and has the scars to prove it. As Gregor yammers on with his serenade, EM begins to snore in her chair. Aghast, Gregor departs. While EM slumbers, Janek happens to walk by on the steps near the stage wings, causing her to rouse. EM asks him to come to her. Janek is like a repressed version of Gregor, smitten with EM but keeping his feelings to himself. More importantly, he is naïve and impressionable; accordingly, EM straight away begins fashioning a plan for him to steal the sealed envelope. As she works her spidery manipulation, Prus (who is Janek's father, recall) barges back in, immediately dismissing his son. When Janek leaves, Prus has a proposal for EM: the envelope in exchange for one night with her. EM readily accepts and Act Two comes to an end.

Act Three dials up the humor a few notches. It takes place in the bed chambers of EM's hotel suite, where EM and Prus have fulfilled the terms of their mutual agreement. Prus is quite displeased, as his expectation of a night of boudoir fire with EM has been terribly crushed. "You cheated me", he says. "You were cold as ice. I felt I was holding a corpse. (*Shivers.*) To think I stole someone's papers for that! Thank you very much!"

(219). All sour grapes, Prus curses his own behavior as “disgusting” (ibid); EM calmly asks if he wants breakfast. Much hilarity ensues from the contrast between EM’s completely unaffected demeanor and Prus’ wailing self-horror. A knock comes at the door and word comes that Prus’ son, Janek, has killed himself. Prus is handed Janek’s suicide note. In it, his son writes that he was in love with EM, and had resolved to tell her until he spied his father on the way to her hotel room. Despondent that his father would betray him (by stealing what he considered his true beloved, apparently), Janek wrote his farewell to the world, after which, evidently, he shot himself. Speechless and in shock, Prus expects EM to console him or at least express horror and sadness herself. Instead, she sits at a vanity struggling with a brush. The ensuing exchange typifies Act Three:

Prus: Perhaps you don’t understand. Janek was in love with you. He killed himself for you!

Emilia: Ah well, so many of them killed themselves.

Prus: And you go on playing with your hair?

Emilia: Am I supposed to run around with my hair a mess because of him? Do you want me to tear it out? My maid pulls it enough as it is.

Soon after this, word arrives that there are some men downstairs who want to speak with EM, but they won’t say what about. It becomes evident that EM is in a bit of trouble, and two men—not officially with the party downstairs—offer to whisk her away, one, an old man named Hauk-Šendorf who thinks EM is his lover Eugenia Montez from fifty years ago; the other, EM’s ever-devoted Gregor. EM refuses both of them, at which point all hell breaks loose as Koltenatý and Vitek enter the room, demanding answers. It seems the document EM sent to Prus’ attorney showing that Gregor was the rightful heir to the estate was forged, and EM is the suspected forger. Additionally, her constant

matter-of-fact quips about the distant past and knowledge of case-relevant history (not to mention the location of the secret papers at the Prus estate) has become too much for everyone. Soon the entire cast of characters is gathered in the room. EM tries her best to duck the hard questions. Gregor (who now stands with the accusers since EM has rebuffed his offer to elope) starts rifling through her desk for clues; panicked, EM reaches into a drawer and lunges out with a gun, only to be stopped by Kolténatý. Gregor begins reading some of the papers stashed in EM's desk, a series of legal documents and personal papers belonging to various people with the initials "EM", some going back centuries. Wishing to avoid police intervention, but with nowhere to hide, EM offers to confess everything if the group promises to give her "a fair trial" (234). Act Three concludes in whimsical, albeit bizarre, fashion, as the assembled begin decorating the room—in EM's words, "...like a real court of law. With a crucifix and all the rest of it" (234).

Act Four is the real meat of the play, and the section at which divergent interpretations of EM, and the play altogether, become possible. The hotel room is now a mock courtroom, with Bible, witness stand and all the fixings. During her "preparations" EM managed to get hold of a bottle of whiskey, and arrives at the witness stand a few sheets to the wind. Gregor and Kolténatý begin interrogating her, starting with what her real name is and when/where she was born. EM replies that she was born Elina Makropulos, daughter to a court physician named Hieronymus Makropulos, in the year 1585, in Crete. According to EM, this makes her 337 years old.¹⁵ The expected incredulous reactions ensue, but the questions continue. Kolténatý, convinced EM is

¹⁵ This squares with the meta-data: the play was published in 1922.

some sort of scam-artist, attempts to trip her up by asking rapid fire questions about the past, but EM has answers for everything. Even drunk (and snorting cocaine) at the witness stand, she has her math straight and names correct. Though fuzzy over a couple of items—which would be expected, given the sheer amount of candidate information in her memory—her account checks out. As for how she has managed to live for 337 years, she tells this story. When she was sixteen her father, Hieronymus, concocted a potion of longevity for the aging Emperor Rudolph II; but the emperor, paranoid it might kill him, forced Hieronymus to try it out on his daughter first. EM fell into near-death illness for a week, but recovered; the king refused to take the elixir—how could he be sure it had worked on EM?—and locked her father in a tower. EM then escaped to Hungary or Turkey (she can't recall), after which it became apparent that the formula was indeed genuine. Over the centuries she married and had children many times, sharing the formula with a select few husbands and lovers. Some of them might still be living; EM knows that one “got killed” (243)—presumably in war, as he was an officer—while another died from the elixir itself (no further details are given about this; evidently the elixir is dangerous and one must survive a high fever from the uptake).

Angry that he's been unable to catch EM in an obvious lie, Kolténatý forces her to drink a sedative which knocks her unconscious. While EM lies in bed, the group convenes regarding her testimony. Everyone, including Kolténatý, now believes she is telling the truth. Consequently, a dilemma has arisen: tucked in the cleavage of EM's dress (inside the envelope Prus gave to her) is the longevity formula; what to do with it? An amusing conversation now takes place—generic in some respects, as it conveniently injects the proceedings with neatly opposed extremist voices, but a thought-provoking

one nevertheless. Koltenatý ponders what effects unleashing this formula would have on the world. Gregor, who (it turns out) is a descendant of EM's, claims that the formula belongs to him, as he is an heir; therefore, what happens to it is his decision. Koltenatý replies that so long as EM lives, she has no heir: she might live another 300 years if she feels like it. The consequences of stealing it are then weighed against EM's keeping it for herself. Vitek then rises and gives a very affected speech (248) about the tragedy of the average lifespan:

...a man's brain, his work, his love and creativity—all this, my God, and what does he achieve in his sixty years of life? What does he learn? What can he enjoy? He never picks the fruit from the tree he planted. He never even knows what men knew before him. We leave our work unfinished without being able to set an example. We die without having lived!

God, what might we achieve in three hundred years! A child and a pupil for fifty years! Discover the world and everything in it for fifty. A hundred years of useful labor. Then when we've learnt everything, another hundred years of wisdom—to

rule, teach, set an example. Just think how valuable a human life could be if it lasted three hundred years. There'd be no wars. No rush, no fear, no selfishness. Each person would have knowledge and dignity. (Clasps his hands.) Sovereign, perfect, all-knowing, the son of God, not a freak of nature. Let's give people life! A full and human life!

Vitek's romantic speech has little effect on the others. Gregor is the first to argue that class inequality predetermines the qualitative content for the majority of human lives, that this content is fairly dismal, and that an extended lifespan would only magnify the misery: "Three hundred years filing invoices. Three hundred years darning socks. Thanks a lot!" (249). Koltenatý fine-tunes this observation, remarking that "Our social economic system is based on short lives. Contracts, pension schemes, securities, inheritance laws and so forth. And what about marriage? Who in their right mind would enter into an agreement with someone for three hundred years!" (ibid). Hilarity ensues as the

suggestion is made to divvy up the formula into packages with smaller doses, selling ten-year segments with huge profits in the offing. Prus then gives his two pennies, which are dark indeed. According to Prus, only the strongest should survive: “For the masses even the life of a mayfly is too long” (250). “Only greatness dies. Only strength and talent die, because they’re irreplaceable” (251). His rhetoric goes to the furthest extreme as a ruling race is proposed, one comprised only of truly great men who deserve to live indefinitely long lives: “The masters of life. A dynasty independent of the uncivilized herd” (ibid). Clearly Čapek is engaging in political criticism here, but the polar opposition between the Nazi-like Prus and Kumbaya-singing Vitek actually raises fascinating practical issues which would inevitably arise in a world of long-lived persons.¹⁶

The debate over the socioeconomic dimensions of extended life and who deserves the formula continues for a bit. Finally the group settles on a legal premise that the formula is simply EM’s property, and it is up to her to decide what to do with it. At this point EM is still sleeping; and because the prominent figures have all expressed their points of view, the group resorts to probing the minor characters their opinions. Asked how long she would like to live, the maid replies, “Thirty years, maybe!” to the surprise of Koltenatý, who shoots back, “No more?” “No,” the maid replies; “what would I do with it?” (250). Kristina, girlfriend of Janek (now dead from suicide, recall) doesn’t know what to make of super-longevity or what relation eudaimonia has to time (253).

¹⁶ Without getting too deeply into this issue, as it isn’t directly my subject, let me point out that any objections made against extreme longevity on the basis of social-political structure in the actual world are purely contingent and easily countered by proposing a more reasonable structure. Obviously a world of massive economic inequality cannot accommodate ever-increasing populations of long-lived persons. But in a way, we are already in such a world: our planet’s population is deeply resource-stratified and one could object to bringing a mortal life (with ordinary life expectancy) into it on that basis alone. Of course, our planet has a real carrying capacity, a limit on the number of lives supportable assuming reasonable living standards. No one knows what the carrying capacity of the Earth is, but it might be in the high tens of billions, assuming a reasonable distribution of resources. Thought experiment: you can bring a life into the world, but you don’t know in what country the child will be born or who the parents will be. Should you do it?

EM awakens and returns to the main room, holding a towel to her head. Gregor asks how she feels, and in her reply we get what could be taken as a crucial interpretive point for the character of EM, and perhaps distillation vector for the entire play as regards a statement on the value of life extension. EM says some remarkable things, and her exchanges with the others are worthy of careful analysis. There is, as I have remarked about the play overall, more than meets the eye in them. I will simply quote the relevant text here. Afterwards, I shall try to shed some light on the events and dialogue which have passed by, with particular attention to alternative interpretations and distillations of *The Makropulos Case*.

Emilia: Boredom. Melancholy. Emptiness. It's...oh you humans...you have no word for it. No language has a word for it. Bombita talked about it. It's horrible.

Gregor: What is?

Emilia: I don't know. Everything's so stupid. Empty, pointless. Do you really exist? Perhaps you're not real, perhaps you're objects, or shadows. What am I supposed to do with you?

Koltenatý: Would you like us to leave you?

Emilia: It makes no difference. To die or disappear behind doors, it's all the same. It's all the same if something exists or not—and you're getting all worked up about this stupid death of yours! You're strange—bah!

Vitek: What's wrong with you?

Emilia: It's not right to live so long!

Vitek: Why not?

Emilia: We weren't meant to. A hundred, a hundred and thirty years maybe. Then...then you realise, and your soul dies inside you.

Vitek: What do you realise?

Emilia: God, there are no words for it. You find you don't believe in anything. Nothing. Just this emptiness. Remember, Bertie, you said when I sang I was frozen. See, art still keeps its meaning long after life has lost it. It's just that once you've got the hang of it you realize it's useless. As useless, Kristy, as snoring. Singing's the same as silence. Everything's the same. There's no difference.

Vitek: That's not true! When you sing...it changes people, they become greater, better.

Emilia: People never get better. Nothing changes, nothing. Nothing matters, nothing happens. Shootings, earthquakes, the end of the world—nothing! You're here, and I'm somewhere far, far away, three hundred years away. If you only knew how easy your lives are!

Koltenatý: Why do you say that?

Emilia: You're close to things. Everything means something! Everything has value in your few short years of life, so of course you live it to the full. Oh my God, if only I could get...(Wrings her hands.) Fools, you're so happy! It's disgusting to see you so happy! And all because of the stupid accident that

you'll soon be dead! You're interested in everything, like monkeys. You believe in everything. Love, yourselves, honour, progress, humanity, everything! Maxie, you believe in pleasure. Kristina, you believe in love and faithfulness. Prus, you believe in power. Vitek believes in all his rubbish. Everyone, everyone believes in something. What a life, you fools! What a wonderful life!

Vitek (*agitated*): With respect madame, there are higher things, values, ideals...aspirations...

Emilia: There are, but only for you. How can I put it? Perhaps there's love, but it's only in your minds. Grasp it and it's gone, nowhere, nowhere in the universe. No one can love for three hundred years. Or hope, or write, or sing. You can't keep your eyes open for three hundred years. It's unbearable. Everything grows cold, numb. Numb to good, numb to evil. Numb to heaven, numb to earth. Then you see nothing exists. Nothing. No sin, no pain, not even the earth, nothing. The only thing that exists is something which has meaning. And for you everything has meaning. Oh God, I was once like you! I was a girl, I was a woman, I was happy, I...I was a human being! God in heaven!

Hauk-Šendorf: So what happened, for God's sake? What happened?

Emilia: If you only knew what Bombita told me. He said we—we old ones know too much. But you know much more, you fools. Much, much more! You know love, greatness, purpose. You have everything. You couldn't ask for more. You still have your lives! While we go on and on, numb, frozen. Jesus Christ, I can't go on. God, the solitude!

Prus: Why did you come for the formula, then? Why did you want to live all over again?

Emilia: Because I dread death.

Prus: God, so not even the immortals are spared that?

Emilia: No.

The remainder of the story, about three pages, consists of EM offering the formula to those gathered. Everyone but Kristy refuses. The tension is high as she takes the paper in her hand; what will she do with it? After a moment she turns to a burning candle and suspends it over the flame, letting it curl up until it is totally destroyed. The following dialogue closes out the play:

Koltenatý: And we might have lived for ever. Thanks a lot!

Prus: For ever? You have children?

Koltenatý: I have.

Prus: See, eternal life! If we thought of birth instead of death, life wouldn't be short! We can be creators of life...

Gregor: It's burning down. What a wild idea to live for ever. God, I can't help longing for it, yet I feel better for knowing it's impossible now.

Koltenatý: We're no longer young. Only Kristina could burn our fear of death so beautifully. Thank you Kristy, you did it well.

Hauk-Šendorf: Forgive me...may I...there's a strange smell in here of...

Vitek (opens the window): ...burnt ashes.

Emilia: Haha, the end of immortality!

And there you have it: the end of “immortality”. Let me begin my analysis by giving Bernard Williams’ synopsis which, I have mentioned, is probably not of the Čapek play, but the Leoš Janáček opera. Williams writes that *The Makropulos Case* “...tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, alias Emilia Marty, alias Ellian MacGregor, alias a number of other things with the initials “EM”, on whom her father, the Court physician to a sixteenth-century emperor, tried out an elixir of life. At the time of the action she is aged 342. Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. ‘In the end it is the same,’ she says, ‘singing and silence.’ She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies, and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman among the protests of some older men” (Fisher, 74). And now for Williams’ distillation: “EM’s state...suggests that it can be a good thing not to live too long” and that “it was not a peculiarity of EM’s that an endless life was meaningless” (ibid). I shall reserve a high-resolution commentary of Williams’ thoughts for the next section (2.1), but some of the analysis belongs here. Let us first note the brevity of his synopsis, and the fact that it allows, realistically, only one distillation. Naturally, without the luxurious space accommodations of, say, a thesis, a journal-published paper must get right to the point, and so a detailed summary such as I have given isn’t possible in that sort of venue. To be fair, it isn’t necessary, either. But it is necessary to give as much evidence as possible for one’s distillation, and this includes giving the counter-evidence a fair trial. And although it cannot be seriously disputed that Čapek’s play does indeed suggest that one can live too long and that meaninglessness and super-longevity are not accidentally related, it is quite reasonable to ask whether the play—either incidentally or on purpose—makes other suggestions. One cannot, of course, create such interpretations out of thin air; the text

must permit them one way or another. But *if* the text permits alternative readings (and decent works of literature always do), one will never notice it from a synopsis that borders on the abstract. So, although Williams' distillation follows well from his synopsis, the discovery of any serious alternative to it depends on a better synopsis. It goes without saying that no summary of any kind can replace a first-hand reading/viewing, but neither can one's memory from a one-off reading/viewing. When it comes to *The Makropulos Case*, I believe the evidence indicates that (1) Williams only saw the opera and (2) most philosophers who have analyzed Williams' paper and have undertaken their own interpretations of the EM character have neither read the play nor seen the Janáček opera.¹⁷ They are thus trusting Williams' synopsis to be accurate, just as Williams trusts his memory of the opera.

As for the evidence that Williams only saw the opera, three items stand out: (1) In his synopsis, he states that EM is "aged 342" which, if you recall, does not match the text: EM claimed to be 337. Now, one might ask what the difference is between 337 and 342. My answer: contingencies aside, absolutely nothing. But again, the point is not so much any paranoia that Janáček's opera is delivering a radically different story than the play, but only that memory isn't nearly as reliable as having a text at the ready. And if Williams only saw the opera, the kinds of details I am about to go over here would have slipped by him, especially since they would be, in effect, competing at great disadvantage against the thunderous booms and explosions of colors that tend to dominate in one's memory of an opera. As a result, relying solely on memory, Williams couldn't have arrived at any other distillation of the play than the one he did. As for evidence item (2),

¹⁷ At least one writer, Roy Perrett, in *Death and Immortality* (1987) points out the same discrepancies I do (p. 93), but he doesn't think they matter. No doubt others have made the observation, but the trend is clear.

Williams says that “If one pictures living forever as living as an embodied person in the world rather as it is, it will be a question, and not so trivial as it may seem, of what age one eternally is. EM was 342; because for 300 years she had been 42” (81). He then reckons that “if one had to spend an eternity at any age, that seems an admirable age to spend it at” (ibid). The text of the play, however, does not say that the elixir freezes the imbiber at his or her present age, but that the person will “stay young for three hundred years” (Čapek, 242). This is all we get on the matter; it’s left to the reader to figure out what “staying young” is supposed to mean. It seems unlikely that it means “freezing the person’s physical appearance at his/her present age” since, according to EM’s testimony, she took the elixir at age sixteen, and it is doubtful she would have passed for very long in any society (failed to arouse suspicion) at that tender age. One may look to be, say, 35 years old until one is 55; clean living, exercise and good genetics can make such a thing happen. But no one looks *sixteen* for very long. At any rate, EM could not have stayed 42 years of age for “300 years” because that would mean she took the elixir at age 42, which she did not—unless Janáček changed some facts in his version. And for the last item of evidence, (3), note that Williams says that EM dies at the end. From what I understand, in some versions of the Janáček opera, she does; but in Čapek’s play she doesn’t.

Those are the three chief pieces of evidence. At any rate, let us leave that subject now and try to extract something of importance from the extensive synopsis I have provided. The outstanding feature of EM’s personality is undoubtedly her self-centeredness which, at times, borders on narcissism. Recall that she constantly asks whether people liked her performances and seems puzzled, near the end of the play, when Kristina doesn’t envy her (257). She seems jealous of past opera greats, obsesses over her

hair while Prus mourns his dead son, and says she will need “at least an hour” (234) to prepare for the impromptu trial. Now, *why* Čapek gives us so many looks, as it were, at EM’s egoistic persona is something we should ponder. Without a doubt, it fosters a great deal of comedy, especially given EM’s blunt demeanor (shameless and self-centered: a readymade formula for a comedic character if there ever was one). But that is a meta-reason, an appeal to the writer’s toolbox. Within the storyworld itself, so to speak, there are two very different possible explanations for EM’s narcissism: (1) she was self-absorbed to begin with, and her character at age 337 is the one she’s always had, or (2) she only became this way over time; at a certain point, for some reason she became especially rotten and selfish.

In support of (2), there is the idea that, if in fact one became so bored as to permanently lose all interest in life’s various attractions, a last-ditch effort to recover value in living might—though pathological—consist in a severe turn inward, a desperate backward traveling into the corridors of selfhood, to the point of obsessive self-focus/monitoring, and perhaps culminating in pubescent worrying and ultra-sensitivity to the opinions of others. In other words, this project of value-recovery consisting of a *retreat into the self* could well take the form of genuine narcissism, which, by most accounts, actually entails a kind of self-loathing, manifest in an ongoing pattern of approval-seeking. I do not, of course, insist on this interpretation: I do consider it one possible outcome of prolonged, profound boredom (and boredom is linked with a multitude of pathological disorders, as we shall see in 2.3.). But something like this could explain EM’s weirdly adolescent state of mind. It could be, in fact, the remnants of a failed strategy against boredom, like a drug which failed to cure a disease in a patient

who now suffers the side effects of the drug in addition to the symptoms of the disease. Out of touch with her once meaningful self—missing it, grieving its loss—she tries to incur applause and approval at every turn, hoping to recover a valued sense of self, but to no avail. And the pathology here would have entailed that, in fact, a healthy self is one which is turned *fairly outward*; in other words, concerned with *other* people and their welfare, with projects larger and more significant than oneself. And the upshot here is that one's *self* cannot be a sole source of value, as there is no meaningful self totally severed from the world, or the "other", as Hegel or Sartre might put it. But neither can one engage others purely for the sake of their utility in building one's personal identity, either. In other words, the *outward turn* isn't utilitarian or pleasure-seeking, but a kind of relief from the cramped apartment space of one's self, a release into a much vaster space of concerns about other people, causes, and projects, about which the intellect and ethical drive of a person can find full expression. And if an (at least moderate) outward turn is necessary for eudaimonia, then an extreme inward turn is doomed.¹⁸

On the other hand, we needn't take EM's narcissism as the consequence of a failed strategy against boredom, but the very cause of that boredom. She seems in some respects like a spoiled child celebrity who, having red carpets rolled out everywhere she walks, can neither fathom a world where this doesn't happen for her, nor tolerate the one in which it actually does. The imperial dissatisfaction and bratty outbursts of a Miley Cyrus are, actually, but a stone's throw away from EM, who has nothing but insults for admirers while demanding to be admired. So, in this explanatory model, (1) EM's self-

¹⁸ And by the same token, an extreme outward turn—concern *only* for others, making oneself strictly a utilitarian servant of causes—seems doomed as well. But in such cases, I think we have a sort of disguised pathology. For to neglect one's own desires and needs must at some point incur consequences harmful to the very causes one has ostensibly devoted oneself to; and if a person proceeds in such a self-neglected state which in fact interferes with one's use to the project or cause at hand, then something else is going on, perhaps a fleeing from some undesired aspect of the self which devotion to a cause helps to hide.

absorption is part of her character; she was always this way. One consequence of this character is a readymade path to boredom in one's life experience, as a narcissistic personality tends to be a pleasure-seeker, and pleasure-seeking is a limited form of self-fulfillment, a temporary measure. As Epicurus realized, many forms of pleasure come at too high a cost—and certainly the same cost results if one devotes a preponderance of time chasing pleasures, no matter how moderate or reasonable (low cost) each of them may be in isolation. Ultimately, pleasures burn out; they cease to *be* pleasures at all when pursued relentlessly, and if one has tried to build the scaffolding of eudaimonia with them, the day is foreordained when this foundation will reveal itself as illusory. I will return to this subject in Section 2.2, when I discuss important responses to Williams' essay, in particular John Martin Fisher's analysis of exhaustible versus inexhaustible pleasures. I think the term pleasure is misapplied in his analysis, and prefer to think of pleasures as *amusements*, as gratifications which live and die in the moment, having little long-term effect on a person. But more of this when the time comes. Williams (among other) commentators takes it for granted that EM's long life *forcibly caused* her to lose interest in everything: "Her problem lay in having been at it too long" (Fischer, 82). Because that is his position, Williams doesn't think EM's state is pathological, but inevitable, i.e., natural. In other words, it would be a mistake, on Williams' view, to think that EM's state of mind is improvable. In one sense, this view *is* a manifestation of the Ecclesiastes intuition: "there is a time for everything and every season..." By this logic, our interests and concerns in the course of living must also come to an end at some point. Importantly—and this cannot be stressed enough—Williams thinks that there is *nothing to be done* for EM; she isn't mentally ill, and so cannot be treated for a disorder, as it

were. No friend, no well-meaning person, no fellow immortal, no mental health expert, no guru can assist EM in altering her dismal condition for the better, no matter how much longer she lives, and neither can EM herself do anything about it. It's simply out of everyone's hands.

I do not think that many commentators, even in the contra-Williams camp, have realized what an extreme claim this is. One reason for this may be that the Ecclesiastes intuition exerts a powerful pressure on our conceptions (of anything) to conform to finitude, and so when we make claims contradicting that intuition, it feels as if something is askew. When we start talking about infinities, eternities, endlessness, and so on, the further away the conversation seems to drift from the world as we know it. To propose an endlessly forward unchanging state is the stuff of Platonic Forms, religious heavens and hells, mathematics, and the like—in short, transcendentals; empirically, the closest we get to infinity might be cosmological physics involving black holes (where infinite densities are predicted at the centers), singularities, and so forth. These are all fantastic conceptions and to hold them in the mind takes some effort. In conversations or extended episodes of thinking about such things, it becomes evident that we're at the fringes of what is discussable/thinkable.¹⁹ Perhaps the hallmark of these discussions is their poverty of empirical detail: what is heaven like? “Bliss”—whatever that means. What is spiritual existence like? “Well, it's ineffable. But it's very blissful.” What's in the bottom of a black hole? “Infinite density.” And what are we to imagine this as being like? “The gravitational force you feel on the Earth's surface, but infinitely greater.” Indeed.

¹⁹ (c.f. Kant's *antinomies*).

Therefore, to propose that the human being can maintain indefinite healthy, active interest in life's "banquet", even if this banquet goes on forever, is to make a claim that seemingly violates the Ecclesiastes intuition (or at least is in strong tension with it). But something isn't right here: remember, Williams believes that EM's state isn't just inevitable but *irreversible*. And what is *that* state, if not itself an infinitely forward, unchangeable one? Against it I ask this: in what other scenarios or conditions do we ascribe psychological misery like EM's purely from psychological causes? The answer is *none*. No set of experiences are known to be sufficient to cause an irreversible pathological state of mind, a disorder for which there is absolutely no treatment (and depression, emptiness, etc. as EM describes would meet every definition of a personality disorder). But of course, Williams posits that the very nature of EM's outlook is that it is *not* pathological. It resembles those pathological states, he would argue, which we know come into the minds of centenarian-bracketed mortals like ourselves, but isn't actually pathological because very long spans of time *force* it and guarantee its irreversibility. But this is a slippery claim. I reiterate that there are no such states on record from which to extrapolate the one Williams claims EM's to be. No matter what a person has been through, no matter what tragedy, heartache, or mental holocaust, we regard his or her resultant psychological suffering as treatable, *period*—where "treatable" means not curable or wholesale removable, but simply *subject to improvement*. The emphasis here is on psychological causes. Only traumatic brain injury, genetic diseases, and neural damage from substance abuse are known to forcibly alter mental well-being, but even the worst cases aren't so straightforward: depression caused by, say, repeated concussions (as is widespread in violent contact sports like American football and boxing) is still treated

with both medication *and* therapy, and—patient willing—with some success. And the truly *worst* cases—say, severe brain injuries from blunt force trauma (as in helmetless motorcycle crashes) resulting in semi-vegetative states with clear psychological suffering—are such that we can at least *envision* medical intervention given sufficient technology in the future.

Therefore, any claim that some state of mind—mood or outlook, if you like—is permanently fixed due to cause *x* is faced with a very high burden of proof, given that such cases are totally unknown to empirical evidence. And remember that EM’s detached, empty coldness is supposed to have been *purely psychologically caused*: we’re not even talking about brain injury or degenerative diseases here. She’s just “lived too long” and we’re supposed to take that as evidence that her dire state is forevermore unimprovable. EM’s own testimony has a very Lucretian ring to it; recall that in her estimation the upper temporal bound for eudaimonia is “A hundred, a hundred and thirty years maybe. Then...then you realise, and your soul dies inside you”, but it requires more support than an intuitive assertion that eudaimonia just happens to fit only within a centenarian bracket of time, the bracket comprising modern human life expectancy.²⁰

Of course, neither EM in her storyworld nor Bernard Williams leaves the claim about the inevitability of boredom purely as an intuitive assertion, an Ecclesiastical soothsaying. Williams’ explanation for EM’s state of mind is that “everything that could happen and make sense to one particular being of 42 had already happened to her” (82), a claim that *experiential novelty* is vital for eudaimonia. I will deal with this very

²⁰ In developed nations with adequate healthcare provisions and standard of living, anyway. There are, of course, places like Liberia in which the life expectancy is much lower, either because of extreme poverty/lack of medical resources, or unstable politics leading to warlike conditions.

interesting claim in 2.1; but at this point let me close out the analysis of EM's personality by giving evidence that favors explanation (1), the idea that she was always a bit of a narcissist. In her testimony, Gregor asks EM why she didn't share the formula with a certain child of hers; her reply is "I never cared much for my offspring" (240). Vitek inquires how many children she has had over the years; she answers "Twenty or so. One can't keep track of everything" (ibid). Keeping in mind, obviously, that because this is a storyworld we can't conduct an empirical investigation (we can't interview people who witnessed EM playing with her children in 1633, for example), we must judge whether a statement like this is consistent with the overall picture of EM that Čapek provides. This is the best we can do in an effort to see whether EM's boredom is plausibly related to her character. As I see it, what she says on the subject of her "offspring" is quite unsurprising and therefore very much in sync with the other glimpses we get of her character. Everything about EM indicates that she has always been a self-absorbed pleasure-seeker. She strikes as someone who since the beginning appealed to entertainment and pleasures for life's value, and children—to put it mildly—are not always entertaining and pleasurable. And for someone with this outlook, boredom is sure to come—and once it did, why wouldn't it return frequently, so long as one stuck with that outlook? EM seems to have no outward turn in her approach to life, perhaps because she never had it.

Now, it is possible that her testimony isn't reliable. Suppose for the sake of argument that it isn't — in other words, that she did in fact love her children but says otherwise now. What could cause or motivate her to tell a lie or misrepresent the facts—especially *those* facts? One possibility is that her dismal mood—which she implies has been ongoing for a good 200 years or so—simply injects her characterization of

everything with sourness. To illustrate, try this thought experiment: you've been fired from your job on the same day you find out your spouse has been cheating on you. Your children, you've also discovered, have helped their mother pull the wool over your eyes. For a cherry on top, your car breaks down on the drive home. A whistling and happy-go-lucky tow truck driver tells you about his children, all the funny things they do. He asks you whether you have children. You say yes. He then asks—somewhat rhetorically—“Aren't children the greatest gift on earth?” Now, what will your response be, supposing you do love your children, in spite of their being complicit in your wife's infidelity, and the atrocious day you've been having? It might be “Yes”—but under the circumstances, the way you say this might itself come across as distant and not very genuine. You might even growl, “I hate my children!” or “Who cares!” Of course, you wouldn't mean it—but such things can come out of our mouths on a bad day. EM has had a bad *life*, or at least one she hasn't enjoyed in a long, long time. Is it so far-fetched to imagine that she is practically unable to speak well about anything anymore, no matter how contrary the truth of the past might be to her present mood? I think by itself this is quite plausible. Perhaps she loved her children but just doesn't have the necessary energy to speak well about them. One thing speaks against it, however, and that is her fond remembrance of her husbands. In the mock trial in Act Four, Hauk-Sendorf, the old man who was married to EM 50 years ago when her name was Eugenia Montez, gets angry when EM says “I loved Peppy” (240)—a different, prior husband, and one whom she shared the formula with. In response to his anger, EM says, “Be quiet Maxie [EM's pet name for Hauk-Sendorf]. Life was sweet with you too, old soldier! But Peppy was...(*Bursts into tears.*) I loved him more than any of the others!” (ibid).

I believe this not only kills the “can’t speak fondly of the past” objection, but actually lends credence to EM having had a superficial, pleasure-based approach to life all along. A spouse provides certain—well—delights that children, obviously, do not. Children are needy and require a great deal of patience and understanding from their parents. So naturally, EM doesn’t miss hers. But Peppy—oh, those were some good times. And good times of *that* sort, we are told, EM was quite fond of writing about; at one point, she mentions that she enjoys reading her own erotic letters from the distant past (240).

Important to realize about the case I am making here is that none of the individual items stand on their own as “proof” (read: strong evidence) of EM having had a narcissistic or strongly self-absorbed character from the beginning. Love letters, missing Peppy, luxuriating in the fame of her opera career, fishing for compliments, and so on—on their own each of these can be explained in ways that don’t require her to have had a self-obsessed character all her life. But taken together, they speak in favor of just that picture of her; and if we can accept character as a plausible rival explanation for her self-centered, jealous behavior, it can open the doorway to a completely different understanding of the reason for her boredom (recall that a self-centered outlook is boredom-prone anyway; it stands to reason that the longer one pursues this bad strategy for achieving/maintaining eudaimonia, the more its bad effects will compound).

The issue of character, actually, is of high importance in Williams’ essay. On that topic, he has, initially, this to say: “The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM’s unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did. That it is not a contingency is suggested also by the fact that the reflections can

sustain themselves independently of any question of the particular character EM had; it is enough, almost, that she has a human character at all. Perhaps not quite” (Fischer, 83). Williams then reckons that a person who began in the state that EM ended up in—frozen and withdrawn—will be the sort for whom an unending life shall be less problematic. But, as Williams points out, if the quality of an endless life is what we are inquiring after, that sort of case isn’t one we can take comfort in, as most of us consider a severely stoic disposition to be undesirable, and rather a misfortune for those that have it. That very state is the one we lament about EM. At any rate, for Williams, having a character “at all” is what ultimately leads to irreversible boredom in any significantly long-lived person, because that character sets a limit on the kinds of experiences one can value and take interest in. A person’s character entails having preferences and “impatiences” (87) the result of which is that a person finds only certain things attractive and worth engaging. And this finite set of experiences worth engaging has a shelf-life: since finite, they must repeat for the person over significant stretches of time, and enough repetition of anything, it seems, always leads to boredom. Inevitably, according to Williams, every activity collapses into humdrum in an immortal life.

This is as much as I will give of that argument here, as Williams connects it to further, distinct notions whose intricacies I will take up in 2.1 Let us return to the statement quoted above, in particular the first sentence which reads “The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM’s unending life...”—for it contains two conspicuous points. The first, this business about reflecting “to any realistic degree”, is a piece of irony, given that “the conditions of EM’s unending life” are exactly what are skipped over in Williams’, and nearly everyone else’s, summary of *The*

Makropulos Case. Her character—or outlook, personality, disposition, if you like—is part of those “conditions”, and her testimony regarding what her life has been like is open to interpretation. I shall, in a bit, analyze that very important stretch of dialogue, already given above, in which EM actually explains what *she* takes to be the reason for her boredom, and what that boredom feels like to her—and not a bit of which is ever quoted by any commentators who use EM as their point of departure or paradigm. Now, in contrast to what I am saying here, by “realistic reflection” Williams might mean “reflection on what is necessarily involved in any immortal life, and not what is unique to EM’s case” and thereby skirt the objection I’m making. But that begs the question; one at least owes it to an author to survey his work for all the suggestions it makes, as—hard as it may be for philosophers to admit—non-philosophers have things to teach. Could it be that there is more to Karel Čapek’s play than a simple, unambiguous proposition attached to a cheap-thrill veneer? Well, one way to find out the answer to that question is to not take it rhetorically, and that entails reading the play.

The second point is a specific and serious error, and the source of nearly all the confusion and irreconcilable disagreements in the scholarship of immortality; I speak of the mischaracterization of EM’s life as “endless”, a logical faux pas committed not just by Williams, but many commentators after him. For “endless” is exactly what it is *not*; even if she had chosen to take the elixir at the play’s end, in her further 300 years of biologically guaranteed life there lay every normal susceptibility to physical harm, whether by violence or accident. And for every re-up of the elixir, the same susceptibility. Over one of these cycles, sheer statistics dictate that EM’s life will converge on a fatal moment. It is not worth entertaining smoking magic worlds in which

EM, though susceptible to harm, somehow manages to perpetually avoid it over future elixir re-ups. Floods, tornados, earthquakes, terrorist attacks, banana peel slips, earth-bound asteroids—for that matter, the collapse and explosion of our sun—are all lurking behind anyone’s mortal curtain; and, to take it to the endgame, so does the end of the universe itself, at least in the sense that, even should the universe never *end* per se, the specific region of it any person happens to live in will certainly fall prey to changes, the likes of which make life unsustainable.²¹ This, actually, is just another instance of something marked by the Ecclesiastes intuition: the universe cycles through generation and decay, order and disorder. Flux is what there *is*.

Now, *that* EM managed to avoid incidental death in 337 years is perhaps a bit fortunate (in the statistical sense), but not wildly implausible; no doubt a rigorously dedicated death-avoidance strategy could keep an EM alive even longer. But the point here is not about probabilities in mortal frameworks, but the relationship possibility has to certainty in them as regards mortality. What I propose is that, for any given framework in which death is possible, death is *inevitable* for every living being in it. In other words, if death is possible at all, the framework in question is necessarily *mortal* and *only* mortal (no hybrid frameworks!) because the possibility of death always converges upon 100% probability over the long run. Consequently, I further claim there are no mortal frameworks worthy of serious consideration in which one can perpetually elude death by some fancy footwork, whatever that happens to entail. At some point in the future in these worlds either you will trip on your own feet, or the dance floor will collapse—one or the other. The means exactly that you will die someday, no matter how deft a mover

²¹ I will consider the consequences of having absolute control over the universe in my analysis of Immortal Framework in the last section.

you are. Neither are any worlds in which death is “unproven but suspected as possible” worth seriously pondering, given the ease and variety of methods by which suicide/murder can be attempted in any framework we can imagine which even remotely resembles the one we live in. To propose otherwise entails what I call *Dungeons and Dragons philosophy*, essentially pondering magical universes that have no clear connection to our own except by sheer fact of being imaginable. The foundational features of these worlds (imagined as so different from the ones in ours) operate by assertion. An example of this phantasm-philosophy pertinent to our subject would be a *kryptonited world*, in which only rare substance x can cause death, but which is, however, permanently avoidable. There are some green rocks in a remote part of the universe, and they are the only thing that can kill you, but they are all accounted for and exist in an easily and perpetually avoidable region—and all this in a universe which itself never ends, nor one’s local region of it alters to the detriment of life. A variation on this theme is the *suspected kryptonite world*: it seems the beings in this world can’t die, but subtle evidence suggests that somewhere there exist green rocks fatal to the species, yet, like superstrings, they can’t be located. The search goes on, and on...

Now, both the suspected and proper kryptonite worlds are inverse EM-worlds: one needn’t renew the apple of life, but *avoid* the serpent of death. They fall under the banner “contingently immortal”—a phrase used by philosopher Mikel Burley to describe EM’s existence—but I think that the entire concept is unhelpful and the particular labeling of it unwise, since it makes conspicuous an equivocal usage of the term *immortal*. Again, if death is possible it *will* occur except in the weirdest of imagined worlds, and these are the sort which operate by fiat, by declaration, nearly to the degree

that heavens and hells and spiritual realms do in theological discussions. Consider that there is nothing to figure out about heavens or hells because they operate precisely by (nearly) content-free assertion. There are no questions to ask about them which can be meaningfully answered to even a reasonable standard of rigor, unless one considers abstract replies meaningful.

Now, a “contingently immortal” world of body-bound beings isn’t quite *that* conceptually alien; we can certainly imagine the fantastic facts at hand in them (though perhaps not their explanation—e.g., why green rocks?). But the imagined facts that go into the making of any contingent immortality make these worlds red herrings. They are complications that don’t help. What, exactly, can we gather about such worlds that is useful to an estimation of what super-centenarian life would be like? We are better off going all the way, I think, into genuinely immortal frameworks—that is, worlds in which the life at hand isn’t “contingently endless” but *unavoidably* endless. In such worlds, death is *impossible*, and in them this fact will be *known* unless we insert a strange modifier stipulating ignorance of the impossibility. And although these worlds, no doubt, also operate by assertion (many of the whys and wherefores are fudged), we can learn something from them that we can’t from the halfway versions, popularly called “contingently immortal” worlds. Genuine immortal frameworks are the concentrated subject of the last section, so I withhold what it is we can learn from them until that time. For now, let me reiterate that EM’s life certainly isn’t genuinely endless, but neither is it even contingently endless, because, as I have said, if death is possible, it is inevitable unless we want to play Dungeons and Dragons with our frameworks. EM can renew the elixir as many times as she likes; she’s still physically vulnerable, and this means that, in

a world that conforms to the Ecclesiastes intuition—which is the world that we seem to live in, and *ours* being largely the one EM’s is based on—death will come knocking.

The consequences of keeping mortal and immortal frameworks distinctly separated are far-ranging and deep, and their chief benefit is a clarification of the subject at large. One consequence immediately impacts Williams’ thesis at the foundational level, given that Williams himself at the outset of his essay has this to say: “Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life” (73). For now it is quite puzzling that he denies EM the very possibility for achieving that meaning because—as I have shown—she not only *can* die, but *will*. She will precisely *because* she can, since this is the essential nature of mortal frameworks, Dungeons and Dragons versions excepted. Therefore, if death gives the meaning to life, and EM clearly can (and therefore will) die, then why is she doomed to an experience of cold meaninglessness? Her state is not deathless!

It is plainly evident that Williams has not characterized his own position accurately—a direct consequence, as I see it, of the failure to correctly label EM’s framework; that failure itself the consequence of failing to keep the terms “mortal” and “immortal” logically distinguished. With that in mind, we should try to reformulate his thesis, perhaps along these lines: “Death gives the meaning to life, but only in a (more or less) centenarian bracket.” That must be closer to his true position, since EM can die, though she has exceeded—by a longshot—the normal human lifespan. But why this clause referencing a “centenarian bracket”? It is, admittedly, an inference I make in surveying Williams’ essay, since nowhere does he specify a period of time, universally stamped on every person, after which meaning can no longer be achieved. But EM

herself remarks that we are meant to live “a hundred and thirty years maybe” and, though I doubt that statement of hers is a detail Williams remembered (assuming it even made it into the Janáček opera), he expresses no objection, intuitive or otherwise, to her irreversible boredom at age 337 (or 342, as the opera must have had it) on grounds of implausibility. And at any rate, if one *does* subscribe to the notion of inevitable boredom, it would require some magnificent insight to declare that it lies not at the several-hundred year mark, but instead, say, the 2,500 or thereabouts. It stands to reason that a pro-Williams stance on this issue will posit that a couple of centenarian cycles of thriving, at best, are possible, after which eudaimonia is unachievable. And so, as I use it here, a “centenarian bracket” isn’t strictly limited to 100 years, but includes up to a couple of centuries or thereabouts.

To reiterate, I have reformulated Williams’ thesis as: “Death gives the meaning to life, but only in a (more or less) centenarian bracket.” But even with this adjusted version, something looks wrong: death doesn’t “give” the meaning to life, does it? Is it really that easy? I would say, rather, that it only makes that meaning *available*. In the classic philosophical jargon, mortality is *necessary* but not *sufficient* for a meaningful life.²² A person must make an effort to discover and build the value that death merely makes possible. If that is correct, and assuming Williams would agree with my tweak (I don’t think he would say that meaning falls into one’s lap by the mere fact of mortality), then we need to reformulate again. Hence: “The *opportunity* for meaning that death makes possible lasts only for the duration of approximately a centenarian bracket.”

²² I will defend why I think mortality is necessary for eudaimonia in the last section.

That is his true position as far as I can tell, but we have to wonder what Williams would have said if, say, EM were living in a genuinely immortal framework. There is no evidence that he would change his opinion, given that he doesn't distinguish the two frameworks. I think it is possible to reformulate it, nonetheless, to reflect the existence of these frameworks, and without distorting his position. I also believe the term *eudaimonia* is equivalent to the phrase "meaningful life", and is the concept Williams is describing with that phrase. Assuming a person takes the "offer" that death makes, so to speak, by actively engaging in projects and activities that allow the discovery, creation, and expression of values, then we can use "eudaimonia" to describe his meaningful existence through time. With that, and the reference to frameworks in mind, the *final* formulation of Williams' thesis would then run like this: "Eudaimonia has a finite temporal upper limit for all persons, approximately the span of a centenarian stretch of time, regardless of framework." I am confident this is accurate because, as his essay proceeds, it becomes all the more clear that the issue for Williams isn't as much about death as it is about time.

The essay, then, has actually a different subject matter (or at least different focus) than he himself believed: it isn't really about death's relation to meaning, but the expiration date that comes with eudaimonia. By his logic, even for a person who does the necessary "work" to discover and build the value that death only makes possible, there comes a point in time after which this work and discovery process can no longer function in the service of living a meaningful life. The work at that point has exhausted its purpose, and, I infer, Williams thinks this exhaustion occurs whether you will actually die someday or not. It simply happens after a certain length of time has passed corresponding to about one centenarian bracket. Turning EM's framework into a legitimately immortal

one, then, would have been of no significance to Williams; he certainly would have said of it, “So much the worse for her.” As it turns out, on Williams’ view, our centenarian mortal brackets are well-suited to the “expiration date” fact: if our lives were extended much longer, we would all end up like EM. As he says, “EM’s case suggests at least that...it can be a good thing not to live too long” (74).

I have made efforts to reformulate Williams’ thesis because his own statement of it (“death gives the meaning to life”) contains a contradiction, in light of the fact that his focal example, EM, is mortal. I have taken pains to remove any attempt to view her as a “contingent immortal” since subscribing to that would mean that we think it plausible for her to somehow avoid all the incidental forms of death lurking in the world for all eternity, including political mayhem, weather disasters, and cataclysms at the level of solar system and universe. I have interpreted EM as a self-absorbed person whose character has always been rooted in pleasure-seeking. What I have not said is whether I think this character *really is* the cause of her (supposedly) irreversible boredom. So let me put these chips on the table, with the forewarning that I cannot defend my wager rigorously until the final section.

First, let us recall the Ecclesiastes intuition as it applies to the human mind: there are no states, outlooks, moods, person-to-world qualitative relations, etc, which we understand to have been caused by something purely psychological, that are proven to be unchangeable. Even dismal states/moods linked to physical brain traumas aren’t considered absolutely fixed, but are met with treatment, both pharmaceutical and therapeutic. No doubt these and dementia-class disorders are very tough cases, e.g., Alzheimer’s. But when it comes to even these clearly *physically* caused disorders we

don't give up and declare eudaimonia a hopeless cause; we think it is possible to improve these suffering patients and act accordingly (and there are partial recoveries on record for dementias). But EM's condition is, in principle, easier than these; it is clearly *psychologically* caused: over time, something nonphysical happened *in* her which influenced her—as Williams puts it—“relation to the environment”. And though one can quibble with the term *psychological*, there doesn't appear to be a good alternative, since the cause of her boredom isn't (that we can tell) physical trauma. She's a drinker and a drug-user, but appears not to have been the victim of brain damage from these substances, at least in any sense that has a direct bearing on the play. If she were, Čapek would probably have inserted this information somewhere. So her problem is psychological; but a psychological state (however we posit it—outlook, disposition) is the paradigm of what we consider changeable in a human being. It is *the* changeable feature, if anything is. *How* changeable is another question: but suffice to say we wouldn't bother with the tough cases (like dementia) unless we believed treatment could at some point noticeably pay dividends.

But this puts us at an impasse, and I am hesitant to place EM's dire state purely under the governance of her character, however self-centered it is. So I will offer this. Her character isn't the most eudaimonia-friendly to begin with, and so we should factor that into her bored state. The pleasure-driven are boredom-prone, and the boredom-prone are liable to come to periods of darkness (when pleasures aren't available or fizzle out) that resemble EM's final state, in some of whom boredom reaches pathological thresholds. However, the extremely prolonged nature of her boredom is something that needs explaining. It seems to violate the Ecclesiastes intuition, or at least matches the

profile of a fixed state, given that it hasn't changed (according to her testimony) for the last 200 years or so. But it seems a bit facile to propose that a good mood lies in store for EM if only she can hold out, say, another 700 years. As I have remarked in the opening section, the Ecclesiastes intuition doesn't apply to agents as it does to sunsets and weather patterns. EM clearly cannot sit on a tuffet and wait for eudaimonia. Nor can she keep doing what she's been doing, living the life of a famous opera singer who then waits for the compliments to roll in; for if anything about pathological states can be generally said with confidence, it is that they tend not to fix themselves. Usually, intervention is needed: a therapist (or friend!) tries to bring certain facts to light about the patient's outlook, life-strategy or behavior that the patient isn't aware of. Sometimes a person can "self-diagnose", discover what steps are necessary for getting better, and then take them. But the person must meet the initial stages with willingness, "effort", whatever that exactly entails. I rather doubt a *therapist*, as such, could help EM; but I am proposing that EM can help herself, if she is so willing.

But this is going in circles: why *hasn't* she helped herself? What in her outlook, as such, has blocked her from the reception of meaning again, or rejected its possibility? Here is my attempted answer: I believe that her ability to continuously stretch her mortal bracket, so to speak, constitutes a shift in responsibility toward herself as the primary steward of her mortality, and this entails a responsibility that, given her character, is too much for her to bear. Here is how this works. Although I have pointed out that EM *can* and therefore *will* die, this doesn't mean that death is at the same psychological distance to her that it is to persons in a normal centenarian bracket, beings like ourselves. Now, I want to introduce a further notion of the Ecclesiastes intuition, via the recognition that we

are better able to cope with the unfortunate things in life if they are established as inevitable. If death must come, then we can deal with it all the better if we recognize that it is unavoidable. In fact because of this utility I think the Ecclesiastes intuition is one of our time-honored nihilism-management tools. I think it is even plausible that the very thing which even led to the employment of this intuition as a coping mechanism at all was *death itself*. And knowing *both* that mortality is simply out of our hands, and that death will come at the latest around the century mark, we are so much the easier able to come to terms with it—so effectively, in fact, that we can discount it for the majority of our lives: death simply isn't a factor in most of our day to day living. What we can do nothing about won't be helped by tears, and the sooner we make peace with this, the sooner we're free to go about our business.

But imagine that you could alter your centenarian bracket, periodically widen it, so to speak, as EM can. Although death will come one way or another, you have a far more slippery grasp as to when. If only external trauma can kill you, then death is substantially more avoidable than it is if internal causes are included. What this comes down to is that your choice of lifestyle will, in all probability, substantially affect the length of your life. A deliberately safe strategy in living will probably allow you to live thousands of years (early banana peel slips and random violence aside). Unlike Williams, however, I don't think the length of such a timespan will be the problem. Instead, the problem arrives through the fact that your physical actions throughout this span now have a relation to death that they didn't before, when you lived in a standard centenarian bracket. Whereas in that bracket an internal, biological clock was ticking regardless of whether you lived as a daredevil or a hermit, in *this* bracket there is no such clock.

Consequently, a biological immortal, rather in the mode of the gods in the ancient myths, lives in a substantially less determinate temporal bracket as a result of his mortality being solely tied to external physical trauma. Whereas a lifestyle dedicated to longevity in a normal centenarian bracket will at the *very most* result in around 120 years of life,²³ the same lifestyle has an unknown finite upper limit for a biological immortal. Technically speaking, all we know is that this limit must be finite in years; and we do *know* that it must be, unless we want to play the deft-dancer version of Dungeons and Dragons with our imagined world. So some external trauma will kill an EM someday, though we can hardly predict in advance, say, what the odds of her dying in an earthquake will be over the centuries. And though the probability for any specific manner of death will be low (assuming she isn't reckless), eventually *one* such low-probability fatal event will happen to her, no matter how carefully she lives. But when, approximately, such an event happens will likely depend on her lifestyle. If EM were a motorcycle daredevil instead of an opera singer, death by external trauma would certainly come much sooner—probably within the bracket of the first elixir dose, 300 years; whereas singing on theater stages and mingling with high society are not apt to result in trips to the hospital, much less the mortuary.

This constitutes a special problem of *mortal responsibility* that is very reduced in the lives of beings like us. Because we live at most 120 years, we can more easily enter into a comfortable relationship with death. Knowing approximately how far away our death is at the farthest, the issue of our mortality is settled not only in general terms of

²³ We cannot, of course, pinpoint the true biological limit of human life, e.g., “148 years, and not a second longer.” Wikipedia lists the “longest unambiguously documented human lifespan” as that of “Jeanne Calment of France (1875–1997), who died at age 122 years, 164 days.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oldest_people. But no doubt as we approach the century mark our probability of dying asymptotes toward 100%.

finitude, but specified into a range of decades called the centenarian bracket. This specificity joins with the general fact of finitude to enable a sort of mental comfort in the fact that things are basically settled, out of our hands. The very best we can manage is around 120 years, and that's all there is to it. The clock is ticking. But EM has no such comfort: *when* she dies will be the result of choices she makes, essentially where she chooses to be and what physical actions she takes. If she chooses to travel to Milan and a bolt of lightning strikes her dead there, it will hardly be her *fault*, as such an event was low-probability and beyond her prediction; but nonetheless, the lightning bolt could not have struck her unless she were at that particular place and time, essentially the result of where she chose to put her body and at what time. She has been handed the keys to a substantial part of her mortality; not her *entire* mortality, since she isn't a Deft Dancer, dodging bullets and outrunning earthquakes through all eternity. But her future is open-ended in a way ours is not, even though it is necessarily finite. And this causes death to seep into everything for her: it lurks around every corner because it does not stand waiting for her at the end of 120 years, 1,200 or 120,000. If it *does* stand waiting for her, it is uncertain where, precisely (for even assuming a strictly determined world, our predictive abilities are quite limited). Since this issue isn't settled for her, she cannot use the Ecclesiastes intuition as effectively as a person living in a more or less determinate bracket of time. In such a bracket, the ticking clock is out of our hands. Our actions serve at best to shorten our existence from the approximately 100 year limit to life; EM's serve to shorten hers from an unknown upper limit. This is why, for her, death seeps into everything.

Consider the very important things which come into our responsibility: children, for example. If you have them, you are responsible for their safety and, as a result, *all* your actions have a dimension to them that was absent when you didn't have children. Consequently, your children will be on your mind fairly often. Largely responsible for her own death, EM has death on *her* mind fairly often. But since death is without content—sensory deprivation, as it were—then what is preeminently on her mind is, in a sense, a thing without content. Hence “nothingness is seeped into everything”. And we should expect prolonged perception of this nothingness to be rather horrifying: things will acquire a relativity that they didn't have before (given that an acute preoccupation with nothingness interferes with the perception of differential), that they didn't have in the comfortable confines of a centenarian bracket. Death, roaming out there invisibly, could be anywhere for EM; and one of her actions will connect with it. But which one? This is a responsibility she never wanted; EM, a pleasure-seeker who never cared much for her offspring, isn't someone who ever wanted much responsibility to begin with. Yet she has come into perhaps the greatest and most mysterious responsibility a person could have. Consequently, she's a mess of a human being. Death is at the wrong psychological distance to her because she has never adjusted to her heavily increased responsibility for it.

What I propose, in very general terms, is that it is in her power to adjust to this responsibility. I mean this only in the sense of what is *possible* for her to do. It would take a great deal of work on her part, perhaps the sort of work that persons with deep psychological disorders undertake. I wouldn't confidently bet on a person like her pulling this off. I would expect better odds from someone of a different character, actually:

someone less self-absorbed, able to turn his concerns toward other things and projects which aim beyond personal pleasure. All the same, I treat the onset of mortal responsibility, such as the kind which falls into EM's lap, as a terrible burden for anyone, regardless of character. But I insist on the mind's flexibility, as the thing which can change with enough effort. This is the very thing Bernard Williams denies EM; as he sees it, she's finished. There's nothing she can do, because she's not mentally ill. She's simply past the temporal bracket in which eudaimonia is possible. Contrary to that view, I think she's just in a lot of psychological trouble and—until the final moment of the play—hasn't thus far found a way out. However: I believe that Williams is right if we apply his considerations toward genuinely immortal frameworks. Our eudaimonia does indeed have a finite forced upper limit, but only in worlds in which we *cannot* die. In the end, the issue isn't about length of time, but what facts necessarily come into play in a world in which there is no death. I take these facts to be permanently fatal to eudaimonia. What they are and why I consider them so fatal is the subject of the final section.

What should not get lost in all this is that at the end of *The Makropulos Case*, EM refuses to re-up her longevity dose, offering it instead to anyone who wants it. The lone character who takes her up on this offer, Kristy, then destroys the formula. The result: EM has been placed back into a centenarian bracket (!). Recall her reaction to this: "Haha! The end of immortality!", which concludes the play. Now, this sort of ending is what might be called unresolved, or *open*. A hallmark of modernist writers, the open ending concludes without resolving the central problem of the text. Variations are possible: sometimes the central problem *is* resolved, but the ending comes just as a new and important one comes into focus. The effect of open-endedness can be both frustrating

and liberating: although we lose certainty of the plot's outcome, we are free to interpret what happens, or what we take *should* happen, to the best of our ability. In some respects this mirrors the random cutoffs that happen in real life; e.g., a friend signs up for the army and ships out to Iraq—and what ever happened to him? Open endings entail what narratologist Meir Sternberg calls a *permanent gap*: an item of curiosity or suspense to which there is no definitive *text-given* answer. This would be opposed to a *temporary gap*, in which a question that opens up somewhere in the text is definitively answered somewhere later in it (or earlier, depending on the setup). Now, one can argue that *The Makropulos Case* does not actually have an open ending. On this interpretation, the mystery of how EM became immortal is resolved, and furthermore, since the formula is destroyed, this takes care of any problems unleashing it into the world might have caused. The philosophical considerations on that point become moot as a result.

I don't see it this way. In the ending we *are* given, EM remains alive, and this fact opens up by far the most important question we can ask in response to the Čapek play: what is EM's life like after she returns to the centenarian bracket? If Williams is right, it's back to the same old rut: EM will suffer for the remainder of her life exactly as she has for the last 200 years. But if what I have said above is correct, then a great relief will come to her as a result of having death back at its proper psychological distance. What is this distance, exactly? I call it the *North Star Distance*: knowing approximately where death is at the *farthest*, at all times. The actual North Star—the star Polaris—is very far away indeed. But we know it is there. One can in fact navigate by it. And so it is with death: it's always far away, but *there* nonetheless. Just as one needn't look up into the sky to realize that the North Star is there, one isn't prompted to look for death in a

centenarian bracket. From the day we are born, our fatal moment is at most 120 years away: this issue is *settled*, out of our hands. Nothing we can do can alter the ticking clock, except to a subtraction of years in the centenarian bracket.

Now, supposing we could significantly alter the ticking clock—that is, our senescence and our susceptibility to diseases—then, depending on the degree of influence we had, we would draw closer to EM’s state of maximum mortal responsibility, in which death’s farthest distance transfers from a ticking clock entirely into one’s actions. Perfect biological immortality, consisting in immunity from diseases and age-related bodily dysfunction, is precisely the state of maximum mortal responsibility, and I propose that this would be quite uncomfortable for anyone (except perhaps those born into it, and in a culture where this state is the norm). I do not, however, think it is forcibly and permanently fatal to eudaimonia. If one has sufficiently balanced inward and outer turns, one can achieve the kind of life we call flourishing, living well, for the full duration of *any finite span of time*.

Now, care must be taken to describe what this flourishing *doesn’t* consist in. Simply put, eudaimonia is not a constant happy feeling, a lopsided life of smiles and prancing through Elysian fields. Eudaimonia obeys the Ecclesiastes intuition: there will be heartache and sadness, grief and misery threaded throughout the tapestry of a finite life. But there will also be the opposite of these things, and redemptive features, the main of which consist in the expression of values—at bottom, what one stands for; which is to say, one’s identity, through all the myriad shifting sands of fortune in the world at large. I therefore propose that all finite spans of time, whether centenarian brackets or brackets of a million years, come with the same essential difficulties. No stretch of time *per se*

outruns the possibility for eudaimonia, and boredom isn't a worse problem for creatures like us over vast stretches of time than it already is in our single century of living.

As EM eases into her centenarian bracket, a new perspective should settle into her mind. At 37 years of (biological) age, she's near her physical prime, and with a whole new world open to her. Why is it "a whole new world"? Because she's mortal in the way "creatures like us" are for the first time in her adult life. Death is, finally, at the North Star Distance for EM, which effectively makes *novel* all her undertakings for the remainder of her centenarian bracket. Whatever she chooses to do, be it singing in the opera or anything else, it will be under the new, but comforting, pressure of a ticking clock. What had been tiresome and meaningless to her—which is to say, *everything*—should have eudaimonic transformative possibility as her values begin to prioritize against the mortal "due date". Against any protest that what I'm describing here sounds like an automated process by which EM need only wait on her tuffet for her values to announce and then prioritize themselves, I reiterate that death doesn't "give" the meaning to life, but only makes it possible. A person must still work on finding out what those values are, a process which is part discovery and part creation. And although her experiences in this newly centenarian bracket will, to some extent, entail repetition of those she has already experienced in her 337 years of life, for EM the ticking clock will affect the purely repetitive nature of any of these experiences, since they aren't infected with "nothingness" any longer. The dreaded question of *when* she will die, at the latest, is answered by her centenarian bracket. She may indeed die before reaching the outermost part of this bracket; but her maximum number of years is effectively settled, and this, as I see it, should come as a relief. And although the ticking clock constitutes a *pressure* of

sorts, it's a good one, as responsibility for death is substantially out of her hands now that aging is back in the picture. Consequently, knowledge that "these are my final years as an opera singer" may well help her to enjoy them, and perhaps even prompt her to make the all-important "outward turn" in the general project of eudaimonia.

Now, the question of whether EM *will* do this is somewhat absurd, since we're not only talking about a fictional world, but an imaginary add-on to it. But my entire point here is that EM isn't "finished" as a person. She wasn't as a biological immortal, and she isn't at the end of the play when she switches into a bracketed mortality. But the open-endedness of her biological immortality would have surely been a hostile element in her achieving eudaimonia, as was her naturally selfish character and outlook to begin with. So the issue isn't about time and what to fill this with, but what allows time to be meaningfully filled in the first place, death. And a bracketed mortality—one in which the outermost temporal longevity is fairly well defined—makes it easier to fill one's time with meaningful things, because the final deadline is approximately known. A bracket makes the value discovery/creation process a bit easier because one's actions do not bear the sole weight of mortal responsibility. Shared responsibility between ticking clock and one's physical doings in the world constitutes the easiest way to enter into the North Star Distance, the ideal psychological distance to death. Now, as one ages, responsibility shifts more and more onto the clock, since death asymptotes toward 100% at around the 100 year mark. At the outermost part of the bracket, one will inevitably die in bed even if one lies there for the exclusive purpose of being as safe as possible from external traumas, like traffic accidents. Since all that's a done deal, one can relax and get on with the project of finding out what matters the most in the time allotted by the bracket.

The notion that boredom is both inevitable and irreversible beyond the confines of a centenarian bracket is simply unfounded. I will add more to this claim in the discussion about Bernard Williams' essay, since Williams has a particular conception of eudaimonia aimed at showing that it has a temporal upper limit, after which permanent boredom ensues. But to conclude this section, I ask whether "bored" is even the right choice of words to describe EM's state. I believe that she is indeed partly bored, but also *disaffected* and *fearful* at the same time; bored because her outlook is, and likely always has been, substantially inwardly turned (and amusements do not extend much beyond the moment of their enjoyment and therefore cannot scaffold eudaimonia); she is disaffected (disinterested in life's proceedings in general) because "nothingness" has seeped into everything as a result of death not being at the North Star distance; and she is fearful of death for the same reason, because its presence is magnified. So her life is a disconnected yet jittery, fearful affair in which there are no interesting diversions for her, rather in the state that Gilgamesh was—tired, desperate and confused—when he reached the realm of Utnapishtim, searching for immortality. I believe her testimony significantly conforms to this interpretation, instead of one that asserts that life becomes permanently uninteresting after a certain length of time, and that EM just "bears witness" to this.

Recall these statements from EM: "Everything's so stupid. Empty, pointless"; "To die or disappear behind doors, it's all the same. It's all the same if something exists or not"; "Singing's the same as silence. Everything's the same. There's no difference"; "People never get better. Nothing changes, nothing. Nothing matters, nothing happens." This isn't really a picture of *boredom*, as it were; if anything, it resembles what Nietzsche, writing in the late 1800's, diagnosed as the preeminent problem of modern

culture, *nihilism*. Since Nietzsche's day, the concept has speciated into several strains, but the main idea is that there is no "true" world, and that consequently mankind's hitherto highest ideals are illusory and therefore unattainable. There is no objective (or "correct") way to orient one's existence, since there isn't any objective purpose to it, no unshakeable schematic to follow. Approaches to life based on religious beliefs, moral codes, genuine knowledge, progress, or grand cosmic orders are based on pure fiction. Any person who realized this, Nietzsche thought, would be in a bit of trouble, since it put the responsibility for life's meaning squarely on the shoulders of the individual. This would be a heavy burden, to put it mildly. Even so, Nietzsche—contrary to what is often believed about him—did not endorse this problem from the point of view that all is lost. In fact, he believed it would become a litmus test for modern strength, because though frightfully difficult, it was still in mankind's capability to shoulder this responsibility.

There is more to it, but those are the main strokes. One can easily identify EM's outlook with nihilism as Nietzsche understood it, and this is where things get interesting, as far as my proposal that the eudaimonic dependency relation is one of death, and not time per se. I draw your attention now to this part:

Emilia: ...If you only knew how easy your lives are!

Koltenatý: Why do you say that?

Emilia: You're close to things. Everything means something! Everything has value in your few short years of life, so of course you live it to the full. Oh my God, if only I could get... (*Wrings her hands.*) Fools, you're so happy! It's disgusting to see you so happy! And all because of the stupid accident that you'll soon be dead!

Two things about this passage: (1) EM clearly believes that shortness of life is necessary for eudaimonia—in her language, "living it to the full." However, she may not

understand why she fell into her dire state. One explanation for that state is, of course, that eudaimonia is in fact limited to the centenarian bracket, as Williams thinks it is. Another explanation is the one I have given, which posits that EM's biological immortality has altered her psychological distance to death, the distance personality types like hers (pleasure-driven, uncomfortable with responsibilities which aren't related to pleasure) require to live well. (2) The last sentence, in which EM attributes the happiness of ordinary mortals to the accident of death's proximity, isn't as clear cut as it seems to be. As I have already said, if the issue really is about time, then EM can only suffer from here on out, as she's "lived too long." But not so fast—hasn't EM herself become the beneficiary of a "stupid accident" (Kristy's destroying the formula) by which she herself will now "soon be dead"? She's in a centenarian bracket again, remember. Fatal accidents aside, based on her biological age of 37, EM will live only another 50 years or so. As I see it, the North Star is now in her sky, and therefore by her *own reasoning* she should be able to reacquire interest in life, since the ticking clock will bring her "close to things" once again.

Of course, that will only be true if the North Star Distance postulate is true. If eudaimonia is limited to a single-shot stretch of time, because after a certain time everything becomes monotonous, then all is hopeless for EM. But EM seems to be making two distinct, opposing arguments throughout her statements, at times one, and at others a different one. One claim is that the eudaimonic dependency is one of total time lived, the other of closeness to death. It seems to me she believes she's arguing solely for the former, while expressing certain intuitions that actually land in favor of the notion of death's temporal proximity. Consider that in response to Vitek, who says that "With

respect madame, there are higher things, values, ideals...aspirations..." EM has this to say:

Emilia: Perhaps there's love, but it's only in your minds. Grasp it and it's gone, nowhere, nowhere in the universe. No one can love for three hundred years. Or hope, or write, or sing. You can't keep your eyes open for three hundred years. It's unbearable. Everything grows cold, numb. Numb to good, numb to evil. Numb to heaven, numb to earth. Then you see nothing exists.

So this seems to express the "total time" thesis, with 300 years exceeding the maximum eudaimonic span. But EM has already tied "closeness to things"—i.e., value—to proximity of death ("the stupid accident that you'll soon be dead!"), which is a different claim. Now, as for the idea that one cannot love, hope, sing, etc. "for three hundred years", it is not only plausible, but (at least in one sense) forcedly true if we accept the Ecclesiastes intuition regarding fixed, eternally forward states; namely that there are *no* such states, because everything is in flux. Flux is what there *is*. But that is based on a wooden, literal reading of EM's statement. Obviously, one cannot dance through the daisies uninterrupted for three centuries; so that isn't what EM is saying. What she is saying is that it's impossible to keep caring about anything after—given her prior testimony—100, maybe 130 years of living. Thus, to paraphrase, "nobody can care for 300 years." But in response this claim, I say that the eudaimonic drive through time itself consists in periods of dire distress, hopelessness, and even the occasional total disassociation from values (as we shall see, Bernard Williams says much the same thing). In other words, nihilism is to be expected from time to time. And although EM clearly is arguing that one cannot regain interest in anything after it becomes apparent that nothing is objectively valuable ("it's only in your minds"), it does not follow that this disinterest,

this shutting of the eyes, this nihilism, itself must remain an unchangeable forward state. It might fail to change for *her*—but that is not a foregone conclusion, either, because in *every* case there is the agency of the person at the bottom of it all, the power to overcome this nihilism right alongside the choice to submit to it. Just as Nietzsche saw nihilism as a great challenge to, but not the end of, meaning, EM isn't objectively condemned to her rut.

And if boredom, better understood as *nihilism* in context, were the preeminent problem in extended mortal brackets, open-ended or otherwise, it would be because it's a significant problem in a centenarian bracket. But it isn't—it's just one of many potential problems which can drive people to pathological states, none of which are proven to be unchangeable in a person. Why would boredom forcibly ensue only at the 130 year mark, as EM claims, but not, say, the 80? Many people who live conservative lifestyles essentially encounter no significant experiential novelty after reaching middle age. Some are driven to madness as a result; but not many. Why isn't boredom or nihilism both inevitable and irreversible in middle-aged, conservative people?

Last, but not least, recall, once again, EM's reaction to the destruction of the formula: "Haha! The end of immortality!" In other words, not "What a relief, my misery of repeated experiences will soon be over!" but rather, "At last my burden of mortal responsibility is again shared with a ticking clock, and so doesn't feel so heavy on my fragile shoulders. I feel light and can breathe again. Time is now running out for me, so I'd better live my life to the full!"

Section 2

Bernard Williams' Essay on "Immortality"

2.1: Overview and Analysis

Having looked at Čapek's play in considerable depth, let us turn our attention to the essay which called so much philosophical attention to it, Bernard Williams' "The Makropulos Case: *Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*", published in 1972 as part of a larger collection of essays (all by Williams) entitled *Problems of the Self*. Now, some of what Williams has to say in this essay has already been covered in the analysis of the play in 1.3. There will be a bit of retread here, but the main focus will be on those claims about the relation of eudaimonia to time which Williams takes to be non-contingent; that is, as universally true. For if they are universally true, then they necessarily cover EM's case, about which I have already quoted Williams as saying, "The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM's unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did." Relevant to the proceedings here, if EM's nihilistic plight isn't contingent on factors peculiar to her, but simply what would happen to everyone who lived that long, then my analysis of EM is completely off the mark, since my understanding of immortality altogether is wrong. So the main objective here will be the establishment of whether Williams' claims are universally true.

So, what are his claims? We've had, thus far, at least a broad picture of them; recall this earlier quotation, which I cast as representative of his thesis statement: "Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a

sense, death gives the meaning to life”; and, additionally, my attempts to reformulate that thesis statement, the last of which was this: “Eudaimonia has a finite temporal upper limit for all persons, approximately the span of a centenarian stretch of time, regardless of framework.” Recall, also, the rationale for those reformulations, namely my assertion that “It is plainly evident that Williams has not characterized his own position accurately.” So let us take a close look at his claims to see whether in fact he misrepresents them, and from there check for their contingency.

There is, first of all, a statement he makes which perhaps better summarizes his position than the one I saw operating in that capacity (and chose to amend). In the end I don’t think it does summarize it any better, but it is certainly worth a look. It runs as thus: “I shall rather pursue the idea that from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil” (Fischer, 73). I find something quite interesting in this statement, namely, the clause “immortality...where conceivable at all”. Now, on a certain reading, it might open the door to a kinder consideration of what I have thus far called “equivocations” of the concept of immortality. In case it hasn’t been clear, I consider these equivocations a sort of ongoing wrecking ball to the subject in general, in fact, the source of nearly all the confusion and irreconcilable disagreements in the scholarship. Now, putting aside for the moment that it won’t make sense to divulge the outstanding use for the unequivocal versions until the last section, let us keep in mind at least the plausibility that there is something really beneficial to be gained from the insistence that the terms *mortal* and *immortal* are logically contrary; i.e., that *mortal* means “unable to live forever” and

immortal means “unable to not live forever”, where the term “forever” refers to infinite forward time. What might preempt the value of this logical separation is just the implication made in the clause pointed out above, *if* we entertain the idea that genuine immortality—in the sense of “unable to not live forever”—might not really be conceivable. In fact, the reason that Williams never talks about immortal frameworks in his essay may be that he doesn’t think they are conceivable except in bare outline. This raises issues discussed back in 1.2 regarding the conceivability of worlds containing weird facts, such as “waterless H₂O” and “the lack of the quantity of seventeen.” Hence the phrase “conceivable at all” might refer to what Williams takes as an upper limit to the powers of imagination, one which effectively forces all our considerations about immortality to draw upon the equivocal versions, namely super-centenarian lifespans—presumably because worlds comprised of genuinely endless living have some intangible weirdness, red herring- or Dungeons and Dragons assertions running through their frameworks which effectively reduce the value of contemplating them to zero. On this view, such contemplation cannot really get off the ground, so we’re stuck with imagining merely extended lives, the sort of “immortality” that is “conceivable at all.”

As it stands, I empathize with that objection,²⁴ but I don’t think Williams is making it. For although it appears he thinks there is a conceptual difficulty involved, the rest of his essay—at the very least—shows he doesn’t believe this difficulty is one worth mulling over, since nowhere in it does he emphasize that the subject matter has been forced into the equivocal versions. But moreover, if one believes that every personal life extending much beyond our centenarian bracket is doomed to unchangeable frozen

²⁴ In 2008, a powerful correspondence occurred on this very issue between philosophers Mikel Burley and Timothy Chappell. I’ll discuss it 2.2, where I take up responses to the Williams essay.

boredom, one needn't analyze an immortal framework at all, as this imaginary world does nothing more than compound the total amount of frozen boredom irreversibly incurred at the 200 year mark or whatever.

That said, it doesn't look as if the statement referencing conceivability is a better summary of Williams' thesis than the one I have taken pains to amend ("Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless...so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life"). It is at worst equivalent to that one, and therefore doesn't threaten my final reformulation, which was, to reiterate: "Eudaimonia has a finite temporal upper limit for all persons, approximately the span of a centenarian stretch of time, regardless of framework." Since what guides that reformulation is my conviction that Williams misunderstands the thrust of his own essay, I shall try to point out the evidence of that misunderstanding throughout the analysis of his argument.

Now, some of the essay is devoted to the subject of whether death is an "evil", that is, whether death is bad for the person who dies. Recall that the basic thrust of the Epicurean argument is that it is irrational to fear something which we cannot experience, since we cease to exist the moment death takes us, and therefore do not experience a sense of loss after this event. Williams cites the Roman poet Lucretius, the most famous proponent of Epicureanism, whose arguments, according to Williams, "have the consequence—that for oneself at least, it is all the same whenever one dies, that a long life is no better than a short one" (Fischer, 75). In other words, death is never an evil. As it turns out, Williams rejects this conclusion, because, at the very least, "If I desire something, then, other things being equal, I prefer a state of affairs in which I get it from one in which I do not get it, and (again, other things being equal) plan for a future in

which I get it rather than not” (76). And death, of course, thwarts all such plans when it arrives (unless death was the planned-for event); consequently, death is unquestionably an evil in such cases.

Here is where things get tricky. For if Lucretius is wrong, Williams notes, “we seem committed to wanting to be immortal” (81), unless suicide is in our plans—but of course, a suicidal state isn’t one we hope for. The problem, as Williams sees it, is that at some point our future-oriented desires necessarily fizzle out, and for good. This has been discussed to some extent in the preceding section; for there we saw in EM’s testimony a rampant nihilism in her worldview and her claim about having felt that way for a very long time, with the implication that this state was unimprovable (a point which I contested). Also recall that my reformulation of Williams’ thesis statement included the word “eudaimonia”, and I have described “living well” as the activity of expressing those values which have been created and discovered, as opposed to merely feeling happy over and above the bad feelings and difficulties in life. I believe this characterization of eudaimonia is a more general form of the one Williams gives us, which he calls *categorical desire*. But this concept is what drives Williams’ essay, so it is important to understand what he means by it and how it works.

First, Williams distinguishes categorical desires from *conditional desires*. A conditional desire is one that a person seeks to fulfill in the event he happens to be alive. Eating a bowl of cereal, tying loose shoelaces, and sleeping would (for most people) exemplify. They are not what a person lives *for*, as it were. In the event a person happens to be alive, he will undertake these kinds of things. One desires to eat, to have tied shoelaces, to sleep. They are the sorts of desires that even the (latent or directly) suicidal

have, but undertaking them is conditional on merely being alive. Such desires do not *prevent* anyone from suicide. The sort that can prevent it are the categorical desires, those that “resolve the question of whether he is going to be alive” (Fischer, 77). Now, the suicide theme is just a way of getting at the power and significance of categorical desires; Williams isn’t proposing that the baseline emotional state of a human being is essentially suicidal, and that the precise function of categorical desires is to stop a person from taking his own life. There is no doubt, however, that such desires function in the service of eudaimonia—a term which Williams never uses, perhaps because “looking at the happy state of things” (78) tells us less about the nature of categorical desires than circumstances in which the value of life becomes the central question. And as for that question, Williams says “it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all” (78), which is surely true: being occupied with our categorical desires takes the opportunity, not to mention the necessity, of asking the question out of the equation (although, since eudaimonia isn’t a “constant happy feeling”, one is liable to wonder about the value of life when the really bad times roll around). At any rate, let us not be preoccupied with the notion of suicide; for Williams, the issue is how *long* categorical desires themselves last. The ultimate question is whether they sustain themselves indefinitely. If they don’t—if they necessarily fizzle out after a certain length of time, and can’t come back—then we could expect something like EM’s state for every person who lived long enough. And though I have argued at length that EM’s condition isn’t permanently fixed, we can easily imagine that it is. The question then becomes under what conditions such fixity could take place; and if we say “the end of categorical desires”, then the same question applies: what could cause categorical desires to permanently end?

Williams' response is one I have already discussed, albeit briefly. I'll begin by repeating what I said there: for Williams, "having a character 'at all' is what ultimately leads to irreversible boredom in any significantly long-lived person, because that character sets a limit on the kinds of experiences one can value and take interest in. A person's character entails having preferences and 'impatiences' (Fischer, 87) the result of which is that a person finds only certain things attractive and worth engaging. And this finite set of experiences worth engaging has a shelf-life: since finite, they must repeat for the person over significant stretches of time, and enough repetition of anything, it seems, always leads to boredom. Inevitably, according to Williams, every activity collapses into humdrum in an immortal life."

So that is his argument as to why categorical desires fizzle out. What is worth emphasizing, however, is that Williams tells us that this boredom isn't just about the activities themselves:

The point is not that...boredom would be a tiresome consequence of the supposed state or activities, and that they would be objectionable just on the utilitarian or hedonistic ground that they had this disagreeable feature. If that were all there was to it, we could imagine the feature away, along no doubt with other disagreeable features of human life in its present imperfection. The point is rather that boredom, as sometimes in more ordinary circumstances, would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment (87).

This is a point Williams might have profitably expounded on, as it is very important for his position. The fact that he didn't is probably what has led a number of commentators to overlook it, as it is buried in a sea of statements (among the waters of a long essay) which give exactly the opposite impression, namely that boredom *would* be "a tiresome consequence of the supposed state or activities". A fair number of anti-

Williams responds in fact simply “imagine the disagreeable feature [of boredom] away”, which is a bit of a strawman tactic. Doing this does not address Williams’ point. They have done so, again, I think because the qualifier is so briefly stated, and surrounded by many statements which make it sound like the “tiresome effect” is just in the events themselves, without the relational element. I believe, furthermore—especially after having carefully examined the Čapek play—that the term “boredom” does more harm than good for Williams’ case, and should either have been used sparingly or not at all in the essay. Precisely because it tends to conjure a picture of adolescent dejection, it should have been avoided. A bored child is one who isn’t having fun, and although EM is inarguably self-centered and demanding of attention—childlike, in a way—it would be hugely inaccurate to summarize her fixed state as merely “lacking fun.” For a child (unless he lives very unfortunately) at least can look *forward* to a period of fun in the near future which only his impatience construes as “an eternity away from now”. The chores will end, the class bell will ring, etc., after which such things as video games and roughhousing on the playground await. EM’s state is certainly not like this at all; she looks forward to nothing (except perhaps at the very end of the play!), and we should not think her condition as merely one that has resulted from the “tiresome consequence of activities.” But Williams should have emphasized this.

EM’s state, if anything, resembles deep depression, the sort universally recognized as clinical; and I have taken pains to characterize her worldview as nihilistic, the experience of which can entail exactly the desolate emptiness which sufferers of intense depression undergo. Perhaps the worst component of depression is the inexorable belief that what one feels is *the truth*. For the deeply depressed person feels not just a

misery connected to the moment, but a one connected with the “certainty” that nothing in the future will ever change so as to make the dismal feeling go away.²⁵ EM feels exactly that way about the world: what she “knows” is that value is entirely in the mind, fictional. Accordingly she believes her reaction to the world is simply how anyone would react to that truth. This is precisely how many suicidal people feel. Of course, the cause of EM’s depression (supposing we stick to that term) is precisely the issue; but I have already given my take on that. Now, *if* we modify the term “boredom” in certain ways, e.g., “profound boredom”, we can arrive at something closer to the true picture. But this leads us back to depression (for profound boredom is linked with that) and the depression in question—EM’s—is most accurately rendered by the term “nihilism”²⁶ (in fact, “affective nihilism” is perhaps more accurate). In the end, “boredom” is a less than optimal way to label the experience of the loss of categorical desire, whether EM’s or anyone else’s. The concept of boredom is preloaded with that of “stimulation” and this is too close to the adolescent picture of “the lack of fun”. As Williams himself says, “categorical desire can drive through both the existence and the prospect of unpleasant times” (92), so it is quite possible that a categorical desire can entail boring activities (though it matters, as I see it, entirely whether this takes place in a mortal framework).

Now I don’t think, actually, that for *Williams* using a different term would have made a difference; his opinion on the nature of categorical desires would probably have stayed the same. But the point here is that for many others trying to understand his essay,

²⁵ Note here a further validation of the *usefulness* of the Ecclesiastes intuition: any person who says that “things will never change” and really means this is someone we tend to think mentally unsound. Imagine someone in a tremendously happy state, overflowing with energy and smiles, as though he had just hit a jackpot. If he were to say, “I just know I’m always going to be this happy! I’ll never not be this happy!!” Would you believe him, or think that he doesn’t have a handle on things?

²⁶ Since Nietzsche’s day, nihilism has taken a turn for the happy-go-lucky, at least in some versions. In the postmodern way of thinking about it, one simply shrugs at the meaninglessness of the universe and says, “Oh well!” I doubt Nietzsche would be impressed, but that is another matter.

the word “boredom” interferes with the point he is trying to make. In light of all this, the term “tedium” in the title of the essay seems equally dubious; in this choice of word I see yet another of the negative consequences of believing that the preeminent issue in immortality/life extension is *time* and not *death*—to which I have found relation in treating immortality as a thought experiment instead of a framework. What is “tedious”, after all, but a description of certain things we *do*, activities by which time presses an awful weight upon us? Recall: instead of thinking about immortality in thought-experimental terms which almost force a confrontation with the question of *action* (“What are you going to *do*?”), begin instead with, “What is this world like?”

But let us return to the anti-utilitarian qualifying remark Williams attaches to his concept of “boredom”. Again, as Williams intends it, we are to understand boredom as “a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment.” What we must investigate, then, is what a person’s “relation to the environment” is. Unfortunately, Williams doesn’t give us much on this beyond what I have already sketched above, essentially that the number of ways a person can meaningfully encounter his world is finite, because his character causes him to prefer some experiences over others, and allows him to experience value—let us say, enter a value-relationship—only in certain ways with the sorts of undertakings he does find valuable. We might say that precisely what a person values, in fact, *is* the way his projects, activities or experiences connect to his character. In that sense, then, it is neither the activity per se nor the character in isolation which is valuable, but their conjoined state, and this state is the one expressed by categorical desire. So if I say, for example, that I am passionate about chess, and that I virtually *live* for it, my categorical desire isn’t

just about playing the game, per se, in the sense of being stimulated by those features in it which are universally celebrated (the feeling of suspense, for instance), nor is it just about having specified an activity that my character is generally suited for, e.g., something intellectual—but the *interactive relation* of these two things which amounts to the experience I value when I play precisely chess. So it's not just about “some interesting activity” or just “me”, but the value that the combination of “me” and “the interesting activity” causes me to experience. On this view, no two people are doing the same thing when they play chess, unless they have exactly the same character. And ditto for any other activity.

That, at any rate, is one way to interpret Williams' concept of the “relation to one's environment.” I cannot really find fault with it as such; in other words, it seems quite plausible that the character-activity relation entails finitude. However, accepting this portrayal of the relation does not entail the eudaimonic terminus that Williams thinks it must. It is on this point that just about all the anti-Williams papers agree on, whatever their differences may be (and the important responses will be looked at shortly). Plainly put, there is no compelling reason to believe that our categorical desires must permanently come to an end simply because the finitude of our character-activity relations forces, after a time, repetition in experience.

This relation that repetition bears to experiential value is admittedly not so simple; so let's start with the least controversial scenarios and work our way from there. I think everyone would agree that a single song repeatedly played begins—at least at some point—to tire the ears; and after some period of continuous play, the effect will become outright maddening. Perhaps the total effect would, at best, cycle between boring and

maddening over prolonged periods of time. Surely if the song in question was the only one we could ever hear, everywhere we went, its value would diminish or disappear, if not become entirely negative. Now, how far we can extend this sort of example is the question. The best we can do to sort the issue might be the following: when the components of any experience begin to conform too tightly to expectations, and do so unavoidably over time, the experience is likely to succumb to value drain. Like the single song repeating over and over, anything which begins to mechanize in step with expectations, without the threat of variance, will surely strike as monotonous.

What needs figuring out is whether short experiences, like a three minute song, are truly analogous with longer ones, like marriages. On that particular score I can offer no insight, although one frequently hears about the loss of passion from long-wedded couples; and whether or not this becomes the death knell in any particular case, the prevalence of the problem is noteworthy. Yet even those for whom the annulment bell tolls are liable to try their hand at marriage again; it is, after all, quite common for (at least older) married people to have one or two divorces under their belts. Similarly, those who compete in sports at a high level almost always experience at least temporary burnout, in which more than injuries and low winning percentages figure into the experience of value drain; one sometimes hears from the athletes “I just had to take a break”, the implication of monotony always in the air. Some of these athletes walk away permanently, others return. My surmised is that monotony factors into most “burnout” experiences in sports, but the complications brought on by a mixture with bad results (failure to win, problems with managers/promoters, etc.) make these cases difficult to analyze. What can be said with certainty is that any sport (or undertaking driven by

competition) loses value for the participants in proportion to weakness in competition. A chess player who outclasses his opponent will frequently take huge risks simply to make the game interesting, digging himself into a hole to put the outcome in doubt for a minute. Certainty of the outcome *from the first move* makes the game not worth playing, unless some other agenda is at hand (one could play to impress people; to flirt, and on).

Whether all the proceedings in life can reduce to the mechanization of, say, a game of tic-tac-toe, is another question. I rather doubt that large-scale projects, such as marriages and ambassadorships, could ever reduce to the quantized resolution of a turn-based board game, one that had been perfectly solved. We are surely departing the subject of the human being as we know it if certainty about what happens next enters into his consciousness to that level of specificity. But the question then arises as to what level of predictive resolution *is* sufficient to force monotony, such that what lay before us might as well be a case of tic tac toe. Now, it is trivially true that we have predictive powers at *some* level; a salesman tends to know quickly whether his prospective customer is one who is serious about purchasing, for instance, although a sale in the early going is normally far from certain.²⁷ In this sense, our lives have a significant dimension of predictability, one we could hardly live well without. We must be reasonably confident about the outcomes of our undertakings, or at least which outcomes are possible. But the assumption here is that the *outcomes* of events are the sole interest we take in them; and surely that is wrong. “It’s not the kill,” as the saying goes, “but the thrill of the chase.”

So, while there must be something *to* chase, what I propose is that too much predictability along the way could very well drain all the value from the proceedings, in

²⁷ In retail sales, a good closing percentage—the percentage of customers the salesman winds up selling to—is around 35%.

effect kill the entire sense of “the chase”. And I will stick with the general formula “there must be something to chase” as opposed to “there must be something to enjoy” as regards categorical desires. For it seems to me there are two basic types of engagement when it comes to categorical desires: active and passive; and of the two, the former are the longer lasting, in effect inexhaustible in mortal frameworks. One cannot, thereby, have a categorical desire consisting of largely passive enjoyments, such as listening to music or watching sunsets. Although a person can engage these actively in some respects (through reflection), the interactions are too stable, too predictable to sustain interest indefinitely over time. On the grand scale of a centenarian bracket and beyond, one needs resistance in one’s affairs, dynamic, active engagements which unfold in time and whose outcomes, or at least steps along the way, are significantly less than guaranteed. These engagements are exactly what I have termed “large scale projects” and, to reiterate, either (1) their moments of predictability are balanced by uncertainty in the aimed-for end, or (2) their moments of unpredictability by certainty in the end. Either the chase or the outcome must be significantly intriguing. An example: imagine an ambassador sent on a mission to settle a minor international disagreement, with solution essentially in hand. The happy conclusion is just about foregone. But what leads up to the crucial moment—the people to be met, the atmosphere of the location, unexpected side issues—will keep the proceedings charged with interest. On the flip side, the particulars of the trip might well be laid out with near-algorithmic fixity, the day planned out to the minute, but with the final outcome greatly in doubt. Each of these kinds of uncertainty suffices to sustain the categorical desire indefinitely, as long as we allow for periods of temporary burnout. If, on the other hand, the ambassadorial missions are nearly always algorithmic step-like,

rarely veering off course, with mission outcomes similarly guaranteed as well, then this entire affair would fail to satisfy a categorical desire. One could not “live” for such a thing.

The important question, though, is about “resolution” of the predictive insight. At a certain level of description, everything really is a repeat of what has already happened, and a perfect foreshadowing of what is to come. Consider the following species-tiered, Aristotelian categorical arrangement:

1. Being
2. Eventhood (flux)
3. Physical Motion
4. Motion of my body
5. Voluntary motion of my body
6. Exercise
7. Cardiovascular exercise
8. Jogging
9. Jogging around Virginia Lake
10. Jogging around Virginia Lake as the sun sets
11. That time I jogged a full revolution in 6 minutes as the sun was setting

Now suppose you are a jogger, and someone asks you about what your interests in life are. I doubt you can meaningfully respond from the level of (5) or higher. If you say, “I enjoy voluntary bodily motion” then, humorous possibilities aside, you haven’t answered the question. All the same, what you’ve said is true; for jogging is a kind of voluntary motion. But you won’t respond this way; instead, you’ll probably start at the level of (6) or lower, and speciate downward as the conversation requires. And this can only be because it is the level where categorical desire lives; it is here where activities and projects begin to take meaningful shape and where one’s projects, goals and otherwise sought-after futures can adequately connect with character. At the level of (5)

or higher, there is nothing for character to attach to, because there is little to no uncertainty in any outcome of events to which these levels of description can refer insofar as a *telos* is concerned.

To see why there is nothing for character to attach to at those levels, imagine that your categorical desire really was met by, say, level (3). If what you desire is to simply witness or experience physical motion, whether of your body or some external object, it follows that, first, your desire cannot avoid fulfillment unless the world suddenly freezes in place and all motion stops. We therefore always have a guaranteed outcome for this categorical desire. And similarly, everything “along the way” in any such time-series involving that desire will be a repeat of what has just happened in that series, as well as a perfect predictor of what is to come, since everything in the series is met by the description “physical motion”, barring sudden world-frozenness (staring at a wall in an isolated room could not threaten this guaranteed outcome, since one’s body would be in motion at least by the involuntary act of breathing and the heartbeat, shifting of weight, blinking, etc). This categorical desire would be like the ambassadorial example above in which all the steps proceed like clockwork toward a guaranteed outcome; which is to say, it could not be a categorical desire for very long. At the very high levels of description, only the vaguest character could find enjoyment. If mere “bodily motion” was a satisfactory categorical desire, then many people would have it, because it would mean that character could match it. But it stands to reason that character is more specific than what mere motion could satisfy; an engagement must meet the complexity of a person’s character for it to count as a categorical desire.

The case that categorical desires require uncertainty to function needs more arguing. For now, it is worth remarking that EM's outlook is stuck around the upper third portion of the speciated category list.²⁸ Since "everything's the same" to her, downward speciation is irrelevant; it signifies nothing for her that the higher categories haven't already indicated. Singing, silence, loving, hoping, etc. are simply cases of "eventhood" (silence is an event) if one so chooses to describe them that way, and EM more or less *perceives* the world this way. Recall the earlier remarks about death being "seeped into everything" due to her altered North Star; here we can add to the account of why this "seepage" has such a disastrous effect. Since death is without content (afterlives not counting as "dead" if they constitute personal survival), a preoccupation with it is tantamount to being perceptually stuck at the higher levels of the category list. The more death is on the mind, the more events become, in the mind, "one damn thing after another"; in other words, undifferentiated. It is important to emphasize the level of preoccupation necessary to have this effect, however. Over the centuries, EM's rose to the level of obsession: very nearly her sole concern, at the time of the story, is the avoidance of death. At that level of preoccupation, or anywhere near it, I think it is safe to say that a kind of ascension takes place in the mind's engagement with the world, such that one's overall participation settles near the level of mere "being"—a bare outline of existence, in which hollow memories roam.

What I have added to Williams' account, then, amounts to a specification of what categorical desires can plausibly consist in, namely, dynamic projects and activities

²⁸ The one I've provided is just an example. Doubtless a better, more accurately descending list could cover the full range of possible human interests and activities, and in proper order. In my list, neither the number of speciations nor the activity of jogging *per se* are important. The important point is the upper half or so, where the categories become more and more vague in proportion to their comprehensiveness, and therefore "boredom friendly".

which unfold in time, and the conditions by which they come to an end, to wit, high predictability in both the proceedings and outcomes, of which the effect on a person is tantamount to a categorical ascension in perception, the experience of which is like a detached gliding over a series of undifferentiated events. The question that remains is whether any specific categorical desire can remain indefinitely immune to such high predictability, and my answer to this would be *no*, but with the following qualifications: (1) in mortal frameworks, “no” always means *temporarily* no, whereas (2) in immortal frameworks, it means, at some point, *permanently* no. For these qualifications I give the following reasons. In a super-centenarian bracket, I rather doubt any person can always resist “categorical ascension” in his perception of those proceedings and outcomes pertinent to his categorical desires. That is, the projects he is involved with will always look predictable at some point, their proceedings and outcomes undifferentiated, such that “one damn thing after another” ensues. But since a mortal framework consists in persons that will die, death will put pressure on any person to “get in touch” with his values, given that time is limited. It is by that token that a categorical desire can “revive” when burnt out by predictability: one begins to re-appreciate what one took for granted. After a period, one can pick up the categorical desires burnt out by predictability. Importantly, this entails a “re-descension”, a traveling back down through the categories and into the land of details—the level where genuine interest thrives in a human being. For a detail *is* that which is unpredictable. At the level of mere “being” or “motion”, for example, there can be no genuine interest in the sense that describes a categorical desire, because there are no meaningful details at hand, and nothing for a person’s specific character to attach to.

The ascent-descent movement is, I believe, partly out of a person's control. One simply detaches from willful, focused or intense concerns and "free-floats" into a kind of neutral zone, above which there lies genuine nihilism. Over time, purpose-driven efforts may well contribute to this upward-bound free floating, given that in most cases the outcome of any pursuit is construed in binary terms, i.e., successful or not. In that sense one may begin to discard the details of the proceedings, the "chase" as it were, in favor of the outcome. And in this sense there can be a "falling out of love": a lopsided concern with "functionality", the *telos* of categorical desires. When life becomes mechanical, it may be because one's efforts have driven too hard at the outcomes of affairs, most of which conform to a binary logic. The energy required for this kind of drive, I think, in fact *requires* a detachment from time to time, a letting off the pedal, as it were. But the detached state is dangerous, as in it one can free float into nihilism. And recall, here, EM's state, in which her preoccupation with death led to nihilism; in place of that preoccupation, we can substitute any single-minded obsession, or any very long term, lopsided concern with outcomes, to which details don't matter. Categorical desires simply lend themselves to this utilitarian-driven concern, and this concern with desire burnout, with the extreme sort entailing a temporary large scale loss of all desires, one which the person construes as permanent but actually isn't (provided the framework is mortal).

This process is underwritten by the Ecclesiastes intuition, by which the generation-decay cycle/recycle is guaranteed in all temporal phenomena. It is by this grand logic that all desires shall come to an end, regardless of framework. In a mortal framework, however, they can come back, because in them there are no irreversible states

of mind, including bored, depressed, or nihilistic (and their opposites). This means that, for all intents and purposes, the worst that can psychologically happen to a person—relevant to his categorical desires—is a temporary perception that everything is predictable and therefore not worth differentiating, with a miserable emotion attending the thought that nothing in the future can change this perception. This was EM's state prior to the very end of the Čapek play, and it was pathological. The events at its conclusion show that EM was able to change this dismal state of mind by restoring her North Star Distance, by having the burden of mortal responsibility shared once again with a ticking biological clock. Now, altered North Star Distance is just one of many ways in which categorical ascension can occur; generally speaking, any longstanding preoccupation with some singular thought (generally a negative one) is enough to cause this ascension. If one thinks, for example, that the world is nothing but tragic misery, and really begins to see this feature throughout the engagements of his categorical desires, then ascension occurs, because this element has overridden the value felt at the level of downward speciation. And this *is* where value lives: at the lower levels, the levels of differentiating detail. This is level where love lives. As a convenient illustration, consider the things you know about a present or past romantic partner. Your passion surely makes (made) you aware of things others do not and perhaps cannot notice. The number of eyelashes, the way a breath is drawn. This easily extends to categorical desires, which can be aptly described as “the things I love to do.” Categorical ascension, then, is like the loss of love. One doesn't care for the particulars of the ambassadorial mission if one thinks that all its proceedings, really, fall under the general category of suffering and misery. Who cares who one meets, what the weather shall be like, the gaudiness of the

plastic plants in the hotel room, the outcome of the mission if it's all just part of the unalterable clockwork misery of the universe? Similarly, who can care about the details if one perceives them as, in fact, "a series of events", and no more than this? Similarly, who can remain in love while being concerned only with outcomes?

So let us tie this with a bow: prolonged, fixated outlooks lead to high predictability in perceptions, and high predictability in perceptions to prolonged, fixated outlooks, ones proximal to nihilism (departure of the experience of value). But all outlooks are changeable because the universe is in flux. A solution to categorical desire burnout is therefore always possible in a mortal framework; what is in question is how long a person can tolerate the suffering required to reach the turnaround point. It will therefore always be a relevant question, for those suffering nihilistic outlooks, as to how close to death one biologically is, because this will, in the mind, foreshadow how much suffering there is to come before death arrives. A healthy, external point of view will not see it this way; hence, the friend or therapist argues by default that the suicidal/hopelessly depressed state of mind will change if the sick person can understand that "time heals all things" and that eudaimonia is possible again with effort. As a general fact, though, the more extended a temporal bracket is, the more times a person will cycle into categorical desire burnout. In this specific sense, eudaimonia *does* have a relation to time. However, this relation to time is not one of a temporal upper limit. One can live well again after a period of burnout, no matter how long one has lived.

Included in all this is the "burnout of categorical desire altogether", that is, becoming tired of desire itself. Weariness of engaging projects, chasing dreams, pursuing goals, and taking a stand on things (expressing values) is part of the pathological cycle of

human existence. We can attach various labels to this inevitable low point; I think it is aptly described by the phrase *affective nihilism*; and I mean this in opposition to “carefree nihilism”, the sort which does not entail suffering, as perhaps characterizes the postmodern strain. Whether one has burnt out a particular categorical desire or burnt out what feels like the very capability of such a desire makes no difference insofar as both such cases cannot be shown to be inalterable. To any arguments against this, I simply ask, when is a person objectively *ruined*? Outside of the severest cases of brain trauma, what case has there ever been in which a person has been said to be inarguably psychologically fixed?

Now, things are different in immortal frameworks. Very briefly stated, the reason is that, in any world where a person is unable to die, it necessarily means the person is invincible (no deft dancers!), and invincibility entails, essentially, a kind of virtual reality video game. In such a world, ethics cannot attach to death; consequently, they become part of an arbitrary system. And a world that is essentially an arbitrary game can only become valuable through the amusements and aesthetic attractions it provides, both of which begin to spiral into relativity, that is, non-differentiation—and ultimately, affective nihilism for the persons in it. This nihilism will have no remedy, since death cannot press the question of one’s values in such a world. What *can* press that question isn’t sufficient to revive categorical desire once it burns out. I leave this very complicated matter at that for now; but to close out this section, let us look at two remaining issues in Williams’ essay, after which I’ll have a brief discussion of some of the important responses of leading philosophers to it. One response in particular, by Mikel Burley in 2009, is very

important, and I shall use it to springboard into the discussion of immortal frameworks, the last section of this thesis.

For Williams, there are two conditions that must be met by an unending life “grounded in categorical desire” if that life is to be an adequate refutation of the Lucretian thesis. The first is that “it should clearly be me who lives forever” (83) ; the second is that “the state in which I survive should be one that, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims I now have in wanting to survive at all” (ibid). The first condition pertains to personal identity, and the second to the appeal of the life in which the identity will exist. So, according to Williams, in order for immortality to look attractive to someone, the person must be sure in advance that it shall be he who survives throughout the forward time, and, furthermore, the kinds of activities that await him must be related to the categorical desires he has now.

The problem, as Williams sees it, is that if a person survives with his identity intact, his categorical desires will burn out due to the repetition problem resultant from the finitude of possible relations between character and activities. I have, of course, just discussed this issue; I believe the Ecclesiastes intuition, combined with the empirical data, combine to show that we needn’t ever fear a fixed state of mind, and that, accordingly, categorical desires will reignite after a period of time (how, precisely, they reignite, cannot be given by formula; time, patience, a bare willingness to attune oneself to details, getting back in touch with the fact that time is limited because of death, and trust in the judgments of others all collaborate toward this end). All the same, we might wonder just what the condition “it must be me who survives” is all about—what is the fear here, exactly? Clearly it *will* be me who survives, if immortality’s the game; who

else could we be talking about? But tricky issues arise here. There are ways, in other words, by which we could undergo significant changes in identity, if not lose identity altogether, in endless timespans; and these, Williams says, are not changes we can attach our present categorical desires to. Williams gives two examples, both of which are intended to escape the problem of boredom. So, to consider these relevant, one must first think the irreversible boredom hypothesis plausible. If one does, one might think that endless survival could avoid boredom through a model of continuous deaths and rebirths, in which, somehow, the same person survives. But if it *is* the same person, then the boredom objection comes back into play, so long as psychological continuity is strong enough throughout the incarnations; and if the psychological continuity is weak, then it isn't the same person, and that person could not be "an object of hope" for the person considering immortality. That is, we consider persons who are psychologically distinct from us to be in fact different persons; if reincarnation of the person entails such distinct psychologies, it is tantamount to dying.

Variations on the theme fail on similar grounds. We might imagine, for example, reincarnation preserving the memories of all the previous lives, while varying in character over each new birth of the self, thus averting boredom. Williams calls this the *Teiresias model*, and judges that it is no more attractive than any birth-death models which don't entail continuous memory. For the multiplicity of characters that Teiresias instantiates over his serial lives means that he has, essentially, no character at all: thus, we cannot want to be such a person, nor can we relate our present desires to his undertakings, as this merry go round of different characters will become a confusing blur of attitudes, outlooks, and concerns. As Williams puts it, "...he is not, eventually, a

person, but a phenomenon” (86); we would, accordingly, reject such a model of immortality. As an alternative, Williams says we might, in trying to avert boredom, look for some endlessly fascinating activity, one by which boredom would be “unthinkable” (87). A candidate for this kind of activity could be “intense intellectual inquiry” (88), perhaps something rather along transhumanist lines (see p. 24) in which existence is driven entirely by mental pursuits like mathematics and philosophy. Against this proposal, Williams declares that utter immersion of this sort would entail a *loss of self*; for being so utterly free would entail the loss of a need for a character. And, as usual, if one proposes that these endless transcendent states do not entail such a loss, then the retaining of that character makes the person subject to the boredom objection. Hence Williams’ ultimate stance on the proposal—such intellectual inquiries would become boring because they are necessarily informed and driven by a character in the first place.

That takes care of the first condition, the identity condition. As for the second, the “recognition condition”, as we might call it, this leads us to an equally dark conclusion. As Williams has it, if what one sees in the immortal future is a project or pursuit that does not connect with one’s character, one cannot find any attraction in it. A farmer, for example, would probably balk at any proposal of immortality involving transhumanist scenarios. But if Williams is right, scenarios that so contradict our character would be inevitable, because, in trying to escape the boredom problem, we would be forced to go outside the bounds of that character looking for interesting engagements in an immortal life. But these engagements could not look attractive to us, given that we presently have a character that doesn’t connect well with them.

For Williams, character and categorical desires are inextricably linked, and any immortal life that we could be concerned with will show the finitude of this linkage in a bad way. The mere desire to stay alive is not, as he sees it, a categorical desire. A genuine life, as opposed to a mere existence, must consist in desires which aim beyond the mere clinging to life. It is hard to argue with this part of his argument, and it syncs well with the Nietzschean idea that living beings aren't dedicated to survival, but driven by "the will to power". And the idea that character and activities have a finite relation is, as far as I can see, well founded. What Williams does not make clear is the relation that repetition has to categorical desires, beyond the mere claim that repetition leads to boredom. I have attempted to fill out this account by proposing that boredom is related to predictability, predictability to mechanization, and mechanization to the lopsided attention to outcomes in our endeavors, the result of which is "categorical ascension", and a perception of the world which entirely takes leave of one's character because so general. I have said, also, that mechanization can occur by being preoccupied with one thing for a very long time, and that the worst such preoccupation would be death itself, as this is by definition a notion without content, a kind of nothingness that is "nihilism friendly" from the start.

I am unsure whether Williams would agree with my picture of how boredom works in relation to categorical desires. One consequence of my take is that it leads to a different conception of boredom, or at least a phrase which better indicates the heaviness of the problem, namely, "affective nihilism". And this is, as I see it, a profitable way of construing the problem, since nihilism indicates the termination of value altogether, just what the end of categorical desires seems to indicate. But at the end of all these suggestions is a fork in the road. One either believes that categorical desires can reignite,

or that they cannot. In one sense, my account of why they can is unsatisfactory, because in effect it relies substantially on a counter-challenge, namely, "Prove that they can't." But this counter-challenge is based on two things, the first one of the longest standing bits of wisdom in human history, the Ecclesiastes intuition, which denies that permanent fixity in *anything* is possible, and the second, the empirical data, both from an everyday and a clinical point of view, which shows that, if there are any fixed outlooks or moods, we are unaware of them, and as such we regard even the deepest psychological disorders as treatable, as subject to improvement. This squares with another intuition, namely that, if anything is changeable in a human being, it is the mind.

Therefore, while I cannot prove that burnt-out categorical desires are always revivable, I can certainly ask why anyone would be so sure that they are not, and, in step with that assurance, demand equal measures of evidence. The evidence that Williams provides is based on a flighty interpretation of a character in a play he did not read, and on a construal of the character-activity relationship whose sensitivity to repetition he asserts is quite high, and ultimately subject to a mysterious threshold after which the repetition can never be tolerated again. I think that, in the end, Williams is making a naturalistic kind of claim, the sort which tends to posit the human condition as ideal for the kinds of happiness it can strive for, and that any alteration to it involves tinkering with perfection. On this basis, arguments have been made against various scientific enterprises for centuries; for instance, that wanting to fly is absurd, for if man were meant for that, he should have wings already. And so, wanting to extend the centenarian bracket must be foolish; we are already in the bracket we were "meant for", and so on. Now, I do

think there is more than a little something to this reasoning, but only if we start talking about genuine immortality, that is, immortal frameworks.

The whole domain of inquiry, as I see it, is mired in confusion, and precisely because almost nobody insists on the importance of logically separating the two frameworks. Bernard Williams didn't, and as a result, he misrepresented the thesis of his own essay, thinking that he was emphasizing the importance of death instead of time. But his essay is only secondarily about death, because, if eudaimonia is stuck at a temporal threshold, whether we can die or not doesn't matter. What matters is how long we live. In contrast, I claim that we can live well for the entirety of a mortal bracket, no matter how much time is involved, because categorical desires are revivable. But when I say "live well", I just mean that, in the end, this timespan will have been worth it. I don't mean that the whole of the span will be spent spinning on the green hills of the sound of music. As a reality check to my revivability claim, I find it likely, in fact, that most people will find themselves in multiple spots of bad psychological trouble over the course of very long lifespans, and that one of these bad times will result in a drastic action, perhaps suicide or something reckless and fatal (drunk driving, crimes of passion, and so on). Susceptibility to *this* comes with the territory of the ever-flexible mind. But in every case of that happening, we cannot insist that the suicidal (or otherwise dismal, profoundly bored, if you like) state of mind is fixed, somehow in contrast to everything else in the universe, which one way or another obeys the Ecclesiastes intuition.

Now, a number of very good replies to Williams' essay are on record, and, before I launch into an analysis of immortal frameworks, I will briefly survey them. I am, first of all, far from the first person to deny Williams' boredom claim, and the logic by which

these other denials operate is worth looking at. More importantly, at least one other philosopher, Mikel Burley, has realized the importance of the distinction between mortal and immortal frameworks. He does not, however, think that we can learn anything from the latter, because in his opinion the entire conception is—to put it in my terms—Dungeons and Dragons philosophy. I agree that an immortal framework is a fantastic conception and that it operates at crucial points by mere assertion. However, Burley does not make the connection between death and ethics that I do—perhaps because he failed to realize that every immortal framework entails invincibility—and it is through this necessary fact that I think immortal frameworks have something to teach us.

2.2: Responses to the Williams Essay

The earliest significant reply to Williams' essay (that I have been able to locate, anyway) came three years after its publication, in 1976, courtesy of Hunter Steele. In this short but sweet little paper (3.5 pages, earning my eternal envy) a great number of interesting ideas and suggestions are compressed; in fact, by reading it alone one can get a very good grip on the problems in the Makropulos essay. In many ways it foreshadowed all the scholarship to come. For these reasons one would expect frequent citation of it, but that has not been the case. This puzzles me, especially as many authors simply repeat the claims Mr. Steele makes, both good and bad. One reason it failed to get attention might be its early publication date, and the general delay in digitizing printed journals. So it is possible that for those writing, say, in the 90's and early 2000's, it simply wasn't easily available yet.

Mr. Steele's paper is called "Could Body-bound Immortality be Liveable?" and it is very easy to read and follow. Steele begins the paper with a summary of Williams' thesis, followed by a quotation of his distillation of the Čapek play, which, you'll recall, I criticized rather heavily. Steele then goes on to make six points. The first four, he says, are of secondary concern; I think one is very important, actually, but at any rate, here they are: (1) Williams' judgment about immortality is "extremely suspect" (425), since the concept of happiness and immortality are not logically contrary; (2) Williams "leans quite heavily on the proposition that a person who lived for ever would learn nothing and forget nothing" yet doesn't argue for this proposition; (3) Williams fails to present a

credible form of “BBI” (body-bound immortality); and (4) rather as a corollary to (3), “The case for the tolerable management of boredom in BBI may be enhanced by” imagining that the immortal person ages between, say, 16 and 60 over the stretch of time (425).

Now, as for these points, I will say that (1) is more than interesting, as it puts a logical pressure on Williams’ thesis that few (including myself) have considered. The force of this pressure is that, since happiness and immortality are not contrary concepts, the claim that BBI cannot be eudaimonic requires a great deal of ancillary justification. A clean and neat way to immediately challenge Williams’ thesis. About (2), I did not think this claim of Williams’ worth combatting, since it is an entailment of the character-activity finitude-boredom conjunction. It certainly follows that, if a person’s categorical desires have resulted in an endless repeat of what he has already experienced, he cannot learn or forget anything relevant to the restoration of his eudaimonia. Point (3) is not very well thought out; a “credible” form of immortality is almost tantamount to a demand that Williams present an attractive form of it, which of course Williams could not do since he thought it unattractive. Besides, Williams does analyze what he takes as the best contenders for attractive immortality scenarios, like the Tiresias model, so he does give his own thesis a run for its money on just the grounds Steele thinks are lacking. As for (4), this is clearly an absurdity if we are talking about an immortal framework, since the incremental increase in aging would proceed infinitely slowly if it encompassed the entirety of the eternal timespan. If it didn’t encompass that entire span, then at some point one would become 60 years old and remain that age for the rest of eternal time. That obviously does not help the problem of boredom as Williams understands it. Now, if

we're talking about a *mortal* framework, then this is quite a good suggestion. After all, we do track *our* progression through centenarian brackets by aging, and aging brings many eudaimonic features into play, such as the clear demarcation between generations, and the social roles that ensue from age categories. There is, in other words, a kind of beautiful order set into play through the fact of aging, one by which reverence and great traditions follow. Aging, I think, also helps a person keep his death at its North Star distance.

Steele has two further points, in fact distinctions, which he considers the real force of his paper. The first is that between “(a) being bored at some points during eternity and (b) eternal boredom” (425). He points out that we do not demand of our lives that they never be boring, and so making this demand of eternity does not follow. But when Williams says that “nothing less than something that makes boredom unthinkable will do”, he is making that claim on special grounds. Williams isn't claiming that a prospective immortal would reject an eternal life on the basis that he might become bored here and there, but that permanent loss of categorical desire is horrifying enough to demand that there be something in the immortal world that would guarantee against such a loss. And that “something”, you'll recall, led to the proposal about intense intellectual inquiry being a candidate as the eternally interesting project. So Steele's point is somewhat misguided here.

Connected with this point, however, Steele makes an intuitively very appealing suggestion which has been repeated, in one way or another, by nearly all the anti-Williams commentators, starting with John Martin Fischer in 1993. What Steele says is this: “Rather than spend all eternity in intense intellectual inquiry, we might spend some

of it thus engaged, some of it playing table tennis, some of it seducing film stars, and some of it being bored” (426). He doesn’t supplement this with any real argumentation, but leaves the suggestion at that. The problem with it—potentially, anyway—is that Williams has already foreseen this kind of objection through his construal of the character-finitude relation. The relation as I see it operates in two ways: (1) it limits what we can be interested in at all, e.g., farmers will not want to be astronauts, and (2) what we are interested in can only repeat so many times before it becomes monotonous. If we accept Williams’ construal, then having a “lively mix” of interests, as Fischer calls it, will at best forestall the boredom that Williams sees as inevitable and irreversible. Of course, the weak point in Williams’ thesis is that he doesn’t defend the irreversibility claim very well. My take on the matter should be clear; as for Steele’s (and Fischer’s, et. al) claim, it simply follows that a good life is healthily spread over a range of interests and undertakings. Some periods may be more dedicated than others to singular pursuits, but generally speaking, a natural eudaimonic strategy consists in dividing up one’s time between interests. In fact, one can hardly avoid doing so, unless chained to a rock or something. It all comes down to whether one thinks categorical desires have a finite temporal upper limit. If they do have this limit, then no strategy will prevent their ultimate burnout. If they don’t, then strategy matters at least insofar as one can avert boredom more often. And averting boredom more often means, as I see it, limiting the chances for boredom to ascend into genuine affective nihilism.

Steele’s second distinction foreshadows my own thesis, insofar as it implies that there is an important difference between mortal and immortal frameworks, although what Steel actually distinguishes is the difference between biological immortality and the

impossibility of death, which he calls *contingent BBI* and *necessary BBI*, respectively. I have already given my opinion on the practice of mixing up frameworks (which is characterized by inserting the qualifier “contingent” in front of the word “immortal”) in my discussion of EM; to briefly reconjure, “contingent immortality” entails either a Deft Dancer or a Kryptonited / Suspected Kryptonite world model, all red herring proposals that lead us far astray. If death is possible, it will get you one way or the other, so nobody is “potentially” or “contingently” immortal. You’re either immortal or you’re not, and if you are, you will *never* die because you *can’t*. And if you are immortal, you’ll know it, because it’s easy to find out whether you can die. Steele does make an interesting observation here, however, in saying that “the likelihood of the concept of necessary BBI ever being instantiated seems infinitesimal” (426). I couldn’t agree more, but that won’t stop me from analyzing such a world for purposes of illuminating some important facts about *this* one—the point, after all, of imagining worlds with weird facts in them.

To conclude his paper, Steele observes that “the pessimistic tone of Williams’ exposition constantly appears to imply that BBI would necessarily be necessary” (426). This is right on the money, as it refers to the conspicuous presence of the equivocal usage of terms like “immortal”, “endless”, “eternal”, and so on, which roam throughout Williams’ essay. As I have pointed out, EM is mortal, period, and so describing her in these terms lends a rather convenient rhetorical force to Williams’ thesis. These terms actually cultivate boredom in the mind as one reads the essay; one tires of EM’s life, though it is quite sparsely described! At any rate, the “pessimistic tone”, Steele says, doesn’t do justice to many imaginable contingent BBI models, and, should the going get that rough anyway, one can just pull the plug in them. I think this is rather easier to say

than to do; recall, for example, that EM herself did *not* commit suicide, but only changed her mortal bracket from open-ended to centenarian, and only did that by sheer luck—for she gave the formula to someone else, a girl who might well have taken it for herself and hidden the manuscript away. This highlights the difficulty in the problem of having one’s life substantially in one’s hands; for EM, the solution to her dismal state wasn’t suicide, but getting death back into its North Star distance. And giving someone else the formula transferred that responsibility to *them*; in essence, saying, “My life is in your hands.” And so for any super-centenarian, the prospect of suicide may well force him into that uncomfortable rock and a hard place, resulting in a failure to do anything, just as EM did for hundreds of years. But EM never committed suicide because she *feared death*, and this fear was very powerful.

The very last point in Steele’s paper may be the most important one. He writes, “but can we really imagine that BBI might be liveable? I do not profess to know the answer; I think the question takes us so far from our ordinary existence, experience, beliefs, hopes, imaginings, etc., that we do not know how to react to it. Nor can we predict with any confidence how we would respond to life in a state of contingent BBI. But I do seriously suggest that if any healthy and reasonably happy person were offered the opportunity of life in such a state he would not turn it down. It would, after all, always be open to him to end his life if it became unbearable” (427). My take on this last thought should be clear: suicide is easier to talk about than do; consequently, super-centenarian life that spiraled into pure misery wouldn’t be as easy to leave as Steele (and other commentators) think it would be. Yes, a gun (or whatever) will be available—but can you use it? I think that, over enough cycles of nihilistic ascension, not to mention

circumstantially-driven depressions, a person *would* likely do something reckless if not outright kill him/herself. A common way to facilitate this—to remove one’s fear—is to become intoxicated; and this is clearly shown in the toxicological report data of suicides. But this only shows the difficulty in the whole process; the road to this decision isn’t a neat calculus, but a turbulent path full of agony and half-retreats, walking on building ledges and staring at the pistol in one’s lap.

What Steele says about immortal frameworks in general is highly prescient, however. The question indeed does take us “far from our ordinary experience”, and so what a philosopher must confront in this question is just what he thinks thought experiments and imaginary worlds can tell us. A debate between Mikel Burley and Timothy Chappell is very instructive on this matter, and I think I can add something to it. I will look at this debate momentarily. Before I get to that, I should mention a few remarks some other philosophers have made about Williams’ essay.

The topic in general didn’t really heat up until the mid-2000’s. I could find no relevant material in the 1970’s, aside from Steele’s excellent paper; the 80’s appear barren. It really isn’t until 1993 that another significant reply comes, this one by John Martin Fischer. Fischer, as I have mentioned, duplicates the argument Steele makes when distinguishing between temporary and permanent boredom. Fischer outlines his suggestion in terms of “a certain mix of activities, possibly including friendship, love, family, intellectual, artistic and athletic activity, sensual delights, and so forth” (Fischer [B], 261). This, as Steele’s argument did, just begs the question; if no single activity is any longer interesting, no mix of them will be. On the other hand, Williams’ own argument begs the question, as it just assumes that the loss of categorical desires will be

permanent at some point. Also, like Steele, Fischer wonders why there should be a different standard for an immortal life than there is for a mortal life. We get bored in our centenarian brackets; why should we demand that we must avoid this by insisting we find some activity that would make boredom “unthinkable”? The same reply I gave above to Steele’s version of the objection applies here: the objection is misplaced.

Fischer does make one suggestion that attempts to cut through the seemingly irresolvable divide between the opposing “brute intuitions”, as Mikel Burley calls them, regarding the sustainability of categorical desires. “Some pleasurable experiences, it seems, are in some sense ‘self-exhausting’” (262), Fischer writes, an example of which would be climbing mountain just to prove that one isn’t afraid of heights (263). Once one had done that, one wouldn’t need to climb the mountain again. Fischer thinks that many of our pleasures would be like this, but not all. There are, he says, “repeatable pleasures” (ibid), citing “the pleasures of sex, eating fine meals and drinking fine wines, of listening to beautiful music, or seeing great art” (ibid). This distinction looks legitimate: in the right frequency of exposure, some pleasures are indeed inexhaustible. But the concept of a pleasure seems to miss the target. Remember, Williams’ distinction was between conditional and categorical desires; activities we will undertake just on the chance that we happen to be alive, and those that preemptively answer the question as to what we are living *for*. Fischer’s examples look like they belong on a list of conditional desires, as though a therapist had asked EM what she once enjoyed about living. *Pleasures* as such are inwardly turned, and cannot scaffold eudaimonia for very long.

But perhaps this is uncharitable to Fischer. We can say, for example, that sex, meals, wine and art can be part of categorical desires, say, in the mode of professions,

institutions or relationships. If we attach sex to marriage or a meaningful intimate relationship, meals/wine/art to being a chef, winery operator and artist/art critic, then, I think, this line of suggestion makes sense. But then we're back to square one: what happens when one falls into serious trouble, and nihilism rears its ugly head? Against any cries along the lines of "this would never happen to me!" I beg to differ. Since the Ecclesiastes intuition guarantees flux, your circumstances, in a radically long life, will undergo the full turn of the wheel of fortune. The longer the life, the more turns the wheel will make. And by "circumstances" I mean both internal and external: your outlook and what happens around you simply will not stand still, unless the universe freezes. And the variations will not always be minor. Your mind will experience earthquakes, just as the political system will, just as the actual ground will. So the question is really about how well one is able to cope when the really bad times come around. And this should make us reflect on something Mr. Steele said, namely, "if any healthy and reasonably happy person were offered the opportunity of life in such a state he would not turn it down." Oh, indeed! If I've just won the lottery, ask me anything; surely my reply will be full of amazing optimism and charity. But please don't ask me the value of life while I'm looking for my lost wallet; life is an annoyance, can't you see that's what it is? So there is certainly a sense here by which our answer to the question, "Would you want to live forever?" is conditioned by our mood. My best try at circumventing this bias is to posit the Ecclesiastes intuition as our most reliable guide as to how things would go in an extended lifespan. No state of mind will be objectively fixed and unalterable, but the very worst times have the potential to shake us to the core, and it is in these times that a person walks a high ledge, stares at a gun, drives a mountain curve with abandon.

Now a very quick sampling of some ideas from papers written after Fischer's. Most of them dispute Williams' construal of character, which at times resembles a rigid essentialist account. One gets the idea that Williams believes we begin and end life with a perfectly fixed character. On this Jay Rosenberg writes in 2005 that "character isn't something one is simply born with like one's sex or eye color. Some actions, especially (but not exclusively), in one's youth, are necessarily formative of character, and the fact that character must be formed implies *inter alia* that it is the sort of thing that can also be reformed or transformed" (Rosenberg, 7). With this point, Rosenberg rescues Teiresias from the judgment Williams made of him—namely that "he is not, eventually, a person, but a phenomenon"—by construing character as "having a coherent relationship among one's preferences, desires, reactions, and dispositions and the experiences that shape them" (7). Rosenberg then says that if that is the case, "then there is surely another sense in which Tiresias would also, inevitably, have some determinate resultant particular character" through the cumulative effect of his memories. Furthermore, "an excitable and impulsive youth can by degrees become a calm and reflective adult and, later, an irascible and impatient old codger, or an impetuous tomboy mature into a staid matron, without even once acting 'out of character' " (7). It is through such changes that we can, in fact, connect with future versions of ourselves which look wildly different from what we are now.

Overall, I take Rosenberg's thoughts to constitute yet another instance of the Ecclesiastes intuition at work. Flux is what there *is*. And so, on this reasoning, we can dismiss Williams' fearful insistence on the terms of his identity condition, namely that "it must be *me* who survives". Rosenberg's point is found in several papers in the mid-to late

2000's. The general idea is that personal identity can be construed in terms of "overlapping chains of connectedness", as Derek Parfit might put it, rather than a continuous, unbroken thread, as Williams seems to think it must.

A paper from 2005, by Jeremy Wisnewski, takes up the issue of boredom. Wisnewski distinguishes between temporary, trivial boredom and "fatal boredom" (read: permanent boredom), saying, rightly, that Williams does himself a disservice by appearing at times to talk about the former in terms of the latter. Wisnewski, as Steele did almost twenty years earlier, points out that Williams does not prove his contention that categorical desires must permanently burn out: "even if I end up in a state in which I no longer have categorical desires, it does not follow from this that significantly related categorical desires will not arise in the future" (Wisnewski, 33). Wisnewski goes on to say that "Williams' view rests on the assumption that an infinite life takes place within a finite set of possible activities. Once we reject this setting for immortality, the immortal life can escape fatal boredom" (ibid). I agree with Wisnewski here that burnt-out categorical desires can reignite, although, as I've pointed out so many times, Williams isn't talking about an "infinite life" to begin with, but mortals living in super-centenarian brackets. More importantly, Wisnewski seems to posit the reignition in the events or things themselves, which ignores Williams' connection of character with categorical desires. Wisnewski's example consists in a bored musician who had already mastered every musical instrument in existence gleefully welcoming into his concerns a newly invented one, which he will then excitedly set out to master. I think it stands to reason that if one's categorical desires were burnt out by having mastered thousands of musical instruments, a new one would do little for reignition. As Williams says, "I would

eventually have had altogether too much of myself” (Fischer, 92). My response to *this* assertion is that re-ignition consists in falling in love again, by which one immerses in the details of one’s undertaking through categorical descension—a process requiring trust, patience, the detachment from utilitarian concerns with outcomes, and the realization that death will take all this away some day. This is a rather different picture than simply waiting around for novelties to be served up on a plate.

In 2006, Steven Horrobin, writing on the subject of medical life extension, observed that “Immortality, with all its echoes, resonances, and baggage, is a term nearly ubiquitous in modern discussions concerning the ethical and social implications of age retardation or life extension...I contend that its usage is entirely illegitimate and misleading” (Horrobin, 287). As when Steele wrote that necessary BBI isn’t something we need to be concerned about, Horrobin says that “Immortality is a supernatural state of being.” His point is that genuine immortality is a magical concept. I obviously agree with the sentiment here, although I rather prefer the way Steele put it. As my survey of the concept of immortality revealed, however, even the mythological contexts carrying this concept rarely confer it as utter invincibility, since gods die in almost all the ancient stories, and across nearly all the pantheons. Monotheistic religions are an exception, so in this sense, immortality is anchored in the supernatural, although I am not sure the god of the Old Testament, for example, is described as “immortal” in that text; rather I think “eternal” is what is being rendered there (and what is eternal must be invincible, although what is at issue is whether something eternal can even be “attacked”). At any rate, Horrobin’s observation is worth its weight in gold—keeping in mind that, as with almost

everything that has been said in the last twenty years on the subject, Hunter Steele already more or less said it.

That more or less covers the important responses. There other papers written in the mid-to late 2000's mostly analyze variations on the themes of character, boredom and categorical desires in the terms already undertaken by the authors I've looked at. The majority take an anti-Williams position on the basis of positing infinite novelty in the universe by which a person can always reignite his burnt-out categorical desires. There is one thinker from this time period, however, who rejects not only this conclusion, but the entire terms of the debate. His name is Mikel Burley, and in 2009 he opined that "the Makropulos debate has yet to be placed on a coherent footing" (Burley, 547). This judgment arrived at the end of a paper which was, principally, a response to one by Timothy Chappell written in 2007. In that paper, Chappell took the more or less standard view that categorical desires need never die. Burley wondered how Chappell's account amounted to "anything more than a flat denial of Williams' claim that our categorical desires are non-contingently finite" (Burley, 533). In Burley's opinion, "there seems to be no clear way of resolving the clash of intuitions here" (546) and that "in their rush to voice their opinions on the desirability or undesirability of immortality, neither side has adequately addressed the logically prior question of whether it even makes sense to talk about the possibility of our living immortal lives" (ibid). Burley's rationale is as follows: (1) the usefulness of fantastic thought experiments is questionable; (2) the desirability of a life can only be assessed by looking at the whole of it, which is impossible if the whole is infinite; (3) "the distinction between contingent and necessary forms of immortality has tended to be ignored in the debate" (546), and (4) we can only understand ourselves in

terms of mortality, and so any attempt to understand ourselves outside of that context will result in a failure to “intelligibly speak about ourselves at all” (547).

Chappell responded to Burley’s paper, and criticized Burley’s claims that there is some very close internal connection, almost a logical entailment, between being mortal and being human. For if we suppose that being human and being mortal “were analytically or conceptually connected” would “do nothing at all to prove that you, or me, or Burley, could not be immortal. All it would show is that if you or Burley turned out immortal, then we would have turned out not to be human in Burley’s sense. At this point I think we can reasonably lose interest in that sense of ‘human’” (Chappell, pp. 1-2).

Chappell’s retort is interesting, but I think it loses the spirit of the inquiry. It essentially posits that “what will be will be” and that whatever we end up becoming through necessary immortality will be just fine. I don’t think ditching the idea of humanity is the right way to go in this discussion, because if genuine immortality necessarily involves a transformation or state that looks entirely dismal *and irreversible*, then it is, in fact, a good thing that we are mortal. The problem then lies in *what it means* to understand ourselves in terms of mortality, beyond the rather circular formulation that mortality is the general term under which we understand ourselves. What would we lose by becoming immortal that we so value? What *could* we lose?

Burley’s concerns about thought experiments are well-founded. I have, of course, expressed the same concerns in my labeling of certain practices as “Dungeons and Dragons philosophy” and cautioned against inventing worlds that operate by “pure assertion.” Burley thinks that necessary immortality involves nothing but D&D philosophy, and so everything operates by assertion. Since we can’t step out of ourselves,

we can't evaluate the sort of immortality by which a person simply cannot ever die. I am sympathetic to the line of suspicion, but nonetheless I think I can "put the terms of the debate on coherent footing" because I believe that immortality necessarily entails invincibility, and invincibility is something we can profitably imagine. We can ask exactly what such a world would be like without begging any questions, or, to put it more accurately, without inserting *qualitative* assertions into our imagined world. This concept is the key to understanding what kinds of imaginary worlds are profitable to imagine, and which are not. For the entire rationale of an imagined world is to understand *what it is like*, and therefore what we must avoid at all costs is any assertion which simply stipulates what that world is like. That is why heavens and hells are not worth analyzing: we are already told what they are like, so all we can ask about them is what, technically, they consist in. But an imaginary world that is worth our time is one which contains only *technical* assertions, essentially, the hows and wherefores. Therefore, how certain facts arose in some imagined world, and how these facts operate, isn't something we need to worry about. We need only connect the imagined world with our own by imagining the world as we know it but with the facts changed as mandated by the entailments of the framework concept. In this case, our framework is immortal, and the entailment is invincibility, since, otherwise, we would be vulnerable and subject to death by external harm. So, the beings in an immortal framework are necessarily immortal, meaning they can never die under any circumstances, and this includes by the collapse of the universe and so on. These are the terms of the framework, and they beg no questions, because the assertions that built them do not involve qualitative assertions, but only technical.

Now, given what I have just said, one might question why I have called the Deft Dancer and Kryptonite worlds “Dungeons and Dragons philosophy” since these don’t seem to involve qualitative assertions. Well, actually, that is a sound objection. But let me put it this way: they are effectively useless because they are in fact mortal frameworks, and there is little to be gained by asserting that *one* framework somehow operates under the terms of the *other*. In “contingently immortal” worlds, we’re supposed to ponder what the significance of eternally evading death is under circumstances in which it is always possible. But why analyze this, when in fact a genuinely immortal framework offers a much clearer picture of the same result? Not to mention, the North Star feature is completely absent in the genuine immortal framework, whereas in the Deft Dancer and Kryptonite worlds, one has a relationship with death which emerges through a sense of responsibility for it in one’s actions. So, “hybrid frameworks” are red herrings; one might as well ask a question like, “What would it be like to live in a world containing the color red, but in which neither you nor anyone else happens to see it?” Now, there might be some benefit to analyzing this world, but before doing so, I strongly recommend that you analyze a world in which the color red simply doesn’t exist and see what comes of *that*. And if nothing does, then go ahead with the “undetected red” version and see what comes of it.

So, that is the one qualification I advise when it comes to making “technical assertions”—we need, whenever we imagine a world, to check whether we are mixing up our framework with some other one, because doing so can have unintended muddying consequences which can surely be avoided by going straight to the pure version of the

world under consideration. With that in mind, let us take an imaginary trip into the world of beings who can never die, but are otherwise just like us. What is this world like?

Section 3

Immortal Frameworks

Let us get our terms perfectly in order: what we are imagining is not just a world in which “some beings” can never die, but “creatures like us”, which is to say, human beings. Now, we have just had an encounter with this issue via Mikel Burley. Human beings are mortal, and to be mortal is to be human (more specifically, I think it means to be an animal, but humans are a kind of animal). And, as I said, we want a way out of this circular definition, and the first step to take toward this goal is to understand that human beings did not fall from the sky in readymade form. We have not just personal histories spanning backward through our centenarian brackets, but a *species* history. The question is how much of it we should take into account when we consider what a human being “is”. I think, actually, we should take all of it into account; and since this means drawing arbitrary lines at a certain point, we might as well take into account the history of life on this planet, back to the first proto-organisms.

How can we “take this into account”, exactly? Well, perhaps you’ve heard this little cynical morsel before: “You can take the kid out of the streets, but you can’t take the streets out of the kid.” A practical bit of caution for warm-hearted souls who open themselves up too much to persons who have lived harsh and nasty lives. Like a feral cat which can be fed but probably not picked up and cuddled, people who have grown up under severe and brutal conditions by which survival itself was often the order of the day

can be counted on to do certain things, keeping in mind that behavior is alterable and that amazing transformations are possible (not to mention that, sometimes, people come out of such conditions as if they were never in them—but this is quite rare). Generally speaking, a person who has grown up on the streets will be untrusting and will take the “better you than me” attitude. The utilitarian calculus will be sharply honed in such a person, and his instincts will instantly alert him the moment anyone tries to manipulate him. For he cannot simply shed his survival instincts; they lie in his nerves like a stroke of lightning awaiting the slightest opportunity to bolt.

Now consider that the history of life on this planet is like such a person who has, for all intents and purposes, been fighting for survival for *billions of years*. Our nervous systems, our brains and bodies, are the product of this desperate fight. The entire set of features which we understand as functional *abilities* and *faculties*, our entire toolkit in that regard, arose out of these primordial days. Our civilized history, as it were—say, from the time we began to domesticate plants and develop stable societies away from the hunter-gatherer paradigm—reaches back a scant 12,000 years of so, an infinitesimal fraction of the total time it took us to get to our present day. We have these *primordial mean streets* in us: twitchy nerves, sex drives, and a multitude of physiological responses that are largely on autopilot. And all the ethics and morals which have shaped our recent species history unfolded from a legacy of slim-chance survival in which the body was the vulnerable thing, the thing first protected.

Now, what I mean to propose here is not that we can trace, say, the precise origins of charity or pity into our protoplasm state in the primordial volcano days, or whatever. But I am quite simply asserting that, for all the Nietzschean construals of the will to

power, our toolkit has a relationship to physical harm that is nothing less than an inextricable entanglement, and this means that we are *from the streets*. Harm was, and still is in many respects (especially for those in unfortunate circumstances), right around the corner. And so our engagement with the world is built on high specialized faculties with deeply paranoid premises: harm is just around the corner. We think about this harm all the time; we conjecture it, predict it, avoid it, and try to inflict it on others for certain purposes. And it is through this fact that our moral codes travel. Of course, for those of us who live in highly developed, industrialized nations, a great deal of our moral refinement is essentially detached from the direct concerns of physical harm. Manners and honesty, for example, do not concern harm or death *per se*. Being polite to a neighbor and admitting to a mistake do not force mortality into the picture. But such customs could hardly have gotten off the ground unless there were something at stake which let their usefulness arise. Hence politeness indicated, perhaps, nobility amongst ones noble peers—but the nobility itself a result of physical power, of the means to coerce or resist coercion, to shape the world with the almighty threat of physical force. And what would lies be, but a means to combat the more powerful, with subterfuge and manipulation? And so on for every moral principle, every ethical concept. None of it ever gets off the ground unless death is there on the scene from the beginning, underwriting the entire saga.

So this is our key towards understanding what it means to be human. Although we can profitably describe the human being in such terms as Aristotle, Nietzsche, or Heidegger do (in order: man as rational animal; man as will to power; man as “the being which interprets being”), their accounts make no sense if death is taken out of the picture.

Or rather, taking death out of the picture would, essentially, involve putting a person shaped by a long history of fighting, one who is sharply attuned to this way of being, into a world of opulence and treasure, one in which the most dire problems are aesthetic in nature and morality has been reduced to a stewardship of *legacy ethics*, essentially manners.

If this picture of things isn't convincing, simply ask yourself what it would be like to live in a world of invincible beings—the world as it is, but without death. Could you enjoy it? Would it be “liveable”? Well, I think it would be—for a *while* anyway, and perhaps a long while. There are lots of places to go in this universe—planets, stars, nebulae, asteroid belts, and god knows what else. Perhaps there are intelligent creatures out there. And perhaps that would be exciting for a while. But since this is an immortal world, death is impossible. So the aliens are immortal too. Now, I have suggested some things we can do in this deathless state, like exploring the galaxy, but keeping in mind that our morality is now severed from its ultimate roots, how would *that* influence our activities? *Prima facie*, at least, things would be great. Israel and Palestine could not wage war upon one another, at least in the terms it has been waged thus far. The tanks, Molotov cocktails, suicide bombs, and other means to murder would become largely irrelevant. The most any of these things would do is impact a body, causing it, essentially, to move where it did not want or expect to. Some things might break; perhaps *that* could become the basis of war, the new foundation for coercion. “Do what we say, or we'll destroy your house...again!”

Perhaps I'm skipping over an important possibility; we need to ask whether *pain* is still in the picture. This, perhaps, is the most serious conceptual roadblock to an

immortal framework. Is it sensible to propose invincibility while retaining the capacity for pain in the imagined beings? Well, we can simply assert it and see what happens. The ultimate game here is to see whether pain can surrogate for death as a rooted concern by which all morality retains entangled relevance. So, to take the Israel-Palestine example again, the weapons which potentially cause death in a mortal framework would cause pain at the worst in an immortal one. Let us say that severe pain is possible: a direct hit from a tank projectile, say, right in the face, would cause a tremendous migraine. Would this be as potent a threat as death would be? I rather think not, and simply for the reason that the arms race would plunge immediately into anesthetic research, and that the means to stopping pain altogether would come sooner or later. This feature might well be grafted into our bodies, making analgesic pills and injections obsolete. So that would put us back to square one.

What effect, though, would “body impact” have, since projectile and blunt force weapons would still have that effect? It seems that warfare would devolve into a coercion of *inconvenience*: we moved your body to location x, which you did not desire, and now you shall have to walk back to where you were. And should you walk back...we’ll inconvenience you again! But perhaps it isn’t as trivial as *that*; say, for example, that you were captured and thrown into a dungeon. And once there, your analgesic state could be reverse engineered. You could then be tortured, but never killed. And that, actually, sounds like the worst outcome of all, and something all of us would be deeply concerned with.

But surely the world wouldn’t take on the paradigm of imprisonment and pain reverse-engineering wars. If it did, and the two sides were equal, I think hostages would

always be traded, since no one wants to see their loved ones suffer forever. One *might* be able to tolerate their deaths; some hostage scenarios have involved refusals to negotiate, whereupon the victims were executed. But if hostages were taken on both sides of a deathless, but pain-possible world, they would surely be traded, and terms of settlement agreed to. Now, if the sides were not equal, then perhaps the dominant side would keep their hostages in dungeons, torturing them forever while they enjoyed wine and good music in their civilian lives. In such a scenario I think the dominant side ultimately wins. So let us say, after a long war on the planet, the dominant side wins, and they get what they want, whatever that was. *Now* what?

In an immortal framework, the things we can be seriously concerned with begin to radically dwindle. Think of a mother and her newborn child. Her protective, cuddling instinct is now entirely a formality. Should her baby drop from the balcony, a concerned citizen would probably squat down and hurl it right back up at the mother. If the toss was errant—well, that's what second, third, and fourth tries are for. After all, what's the harm? Doing it that way would be far easier than taking the elevator to return the baby, unless the balcony was too high. And as this child grows up, there shall be no paranoid watch as to his every movement, as nothing he can do can have fatal consequences. Should your five year old squirt some insect poison into his mouth, well, he shall have bad breath. If he gets stuck under a speeding locomotive? A terrible inconvenience ensues. You shall likely have to rendezvous with your child at the next train station, as the folks who run the train system cannot go around stopping for every child who gets stuck underneath the grinding gears—they have a schedule to keep, after all. And as your child gets older, forget the karate lessons, as bullying simply isn't possible anymore,

unless bullying proceeds along the same lines as war is restricted to, essentially moving people where they don't want to be. Since pain will have been engineered away, in order to stop the rationale for such things as bullying, then the worst that can happen to your child, or anyone you love, is an inconvenient, nonconsensual relocation. The pain wars will not start up on the world scene again, since the results from the first one were pretty tiresome and predictable: hostage for hostage, or domination until the weaker side gives up, and back to square one.

What can these immortals do, then, to occupy themselves? There shall be no human rights causes; no endangered species, no funerals, no bittersweet memories of the dearly departed, no soldiers, no gangs, no drive-by shootings, no conspiracy theories about insidious manmade nanobot phages that prey on the brain cells after being delivered through vaccinations; no cancer, no terminal illnesses at all; no morgues, no murder investigations, no life insurance policies. Half the law code, or more, would become obsolete. Religion would become extinct; with no way to make it to the afterlife, no emissary of your god to confront your sins at the pearly gates, no materialization of the promised karmic reincarnation, what could religion matter? You'll never die, and religion is entirely senseless without death in the picture. So, with all that in mind, what can we value in such a world? What could energize our living; what would we "live toward"? Ethics would become largely a matter of honorific practices; we would, perhaps, behave as though death was still in the world, as part of the legacy of our mortal ancestors. But this charade wouldn't take us very far. At best, the old ethical codes would become a matter of aesthetic ceremony; the *way* in which one pretended that death was still possible would become celebrated. But it would be a thin celebration after a time;

and the honorific aspect of this pretension would, eventually, evaporate entirely. The affair of emulated morality would reek of sadness, of mourning, of *grief* for the loss of mortality.

Now, *some* morality would remain on genuine terms; respect for property, for instance, and not bumping into people. Theft and lying would still be crimes, or at least morally frowned upon; but thieves in this world could hardly be the desperate sort they are now. One would, I think, rather be an explorer than a thief, as over time, one would surely accumulate the kinds of possessions a thief in any mortal framework has limited time to obtain. And for that matter, without the pressure of death's deadline, before which we must have our eudaimonic bets placed well in advance, there could be no race against time, the race which drives a person's activities in general. As children, we try to get our fun in before responsibilities come into our lives; as young adults, we try to get our lives under control before middle age; and before old age, we try to have our way of life carved into a stone which tells the story of who we really are. We try to *be* something *before it's too late*. And a terrible tragedy is a person who does not hurl himself into the project of trying to be something, however ultimately illusory such a thing is. A man of knowledge, what is *that*, in the grand scheme of things? Well, it's something you can be *while the stage is yours*. How long do you have the stage? Fifty years, maybe. A bodybuilder, say, what is *this* trivial undertaking, but a grotesque monument to self-concern compared to the cosmic order? But there is no cosmic order that can guide your living unless there is death in the cosmos. If death is possible, then it gives you time to discover and create your identity, a window of time in which you can attempt to materialize a project on the mortal theater. How long do you have *that* stage, the prime of

your life during which you can flex your muscles for all their potential worth? Twenty years, maybe. Then you can train others, for another thirty, perhaps. You'd better know all you can know, if knowing is what you're game is; you'd better build your muscles to the utmost, and train others to do the same, while there's still time. And time is always running out. That's what it does in a mortal framework, *no matter how much time is involved*.

In an immortal framework, our undertakings can have only aesthetic significance, or the utilitarian aspect of pleasure or pain. Let us say pain is in the picture, in contrast to what was outlined above. Yes, we can, to an extent, substitute pain for death-rooted morality and ethics. But only to an extent. What shall be missing shall, in time, shall be missed as the crucial dramatic ingredient, the one that makes this game of masquerades worth acting out: a deadline, a time beyond which there is no redemption, no replays, no do-overs, no rewinds, no edits. What is aesthetically significant in a world in which there is no deadline shall spiral into relativity: value will operate by pure declaration, pleasure principle, or momentary judgment. A philosopher surely could not repeat his winetasting, art-viewing, music-listening, gourmet food-tasting pleasures eternally to potent effect in such a world. None of us could: the impact of such things would begin to exhaust as the variation on themes ground to a halt. For it is in this venue, the venue of a genuine immortal framework, where novelty would be truly a thing lusted for; it would be the *only* thing, in time. And so exactly the fate Bernard Williams decreed for any merely long-lived mortal does, actually, apply *perfectly* to beings like us who transitioned into an immortal framework. We would indeed become like “bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing.”

The pathological character of such an existence cannot be overstated. I think, actually, that the world would begin to *worship death*; cults would arise promising the return of mortality. One after another, prophets would declare the coming of death, like the messiah of Abrahamic religions. Scientists would, as in the Suspected Kryptonite world, go mad with their delirious conjectures of data supposedly pointing to the existence of green rocks somewhere. Art, music and theater would surge with a new vitality as death-driven themes rose to the level of hysterical obsession. But this, too, would subside, as the learned bourbons could no longer ignore their condition. Death will never come, and in this world, we will have had “entirely too much of ourselves”, as Williams put it. In fact, nearly everything Williams says in his essay can be mapped onto an immortal framework, and with marvelous truth. We would, indeed, look for some single, endlessly fascinating activity, one which made boredom—or, as I prefer, affective nihilism—unthinkable, but there could be no such thing. It would be a kind of suffering without end. The “street” in us would simply have nothing to aim for; our nervous systems, our harm-centered navigational system, our striving and will to power would come to total emptiness. And the Ecclesiastes intuition? There can be no such thing, as it is already violated by the terms of our existence. And in this awful, hollow world, how deeply we would mourn the fact that, once upon a time—to paraphrase Williams—we were a people so lucky that we had the chance to die.

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