# Possibility for A Fulfilling Immortal Life

## Doga Ayar

Reed College

dogaayar@reed.edu

Possibility for A Fulfilling Immortal Life

Given the chance to become immortal, Bernard Williams argues that it would be impossible to fall into intolerable boredom. However, an individual can seek a single goal in perpetuity if it provides her with infinitely interestingly divergent worthy qualities to consume by engaging with infinitely many objects. If infinity is considered as an experience that includes a set of information to be consumed, chasing an  overarching desire, in perpetuity can entail that there is a hypothetical inexhaustible capacity for engaging with engrossing pursuits without losing personal identity.

Williams distinguishes desires with the example of a disillusioned man's "rational forward-looking calculation of suicide" : although he doubts  remaining alive, he chooses to undertake "what lay[s] before him," because the desire "itself resolves the question of whether he is going to be alive."[1] A striving conditioned on living cannot reason the ideation, so Williams antagonistically defines "categorical" desires as those only frustrated by death and satisfied irrespective of mortality. For example, the desire to sleep does not rationalize living, as it depends on being alive to actualize it: I desire only on the assumption of my subsistence, so it cannot determine the value of my continuance. Although Williams concedes that people "need no reminding"[2] of death's evil nature, because it interferes with the ability to fulfill categorical desires, he distinguishes it from a mortality that deserves celebration. We are "lucky in having the chance to die"[3] because mortality is the precondition for a meaningful life, which is terminated by death.

Life is endurable if one can maintain a consistent identity. The possibility of infinite multiplication in interests with immortality lets personality fall prey to changes that are drastic enough to demotivate prudence for a personality that isn't sufficiently self-similar. It is also worthy when the motivation to pursue interests is accommodating to having unsolvable encounters: life is desirable if it isn't monotonous. However, for Williams, the two criteria are paradoxical: one can either be forever

---

[1] Williams, The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality, 4
[2] Ibid, 17.
[3] Ibid, 17

engrossed by original activities that would constantly erode his identity, or – "other things being equal"[4] – constantly engage with previous interests that reaffirm his identity, but to his boredom.

The slow deposit of successive encounters domesticates the unknown for its entry into our personal world, and the shortage of consumable qualities means that repetition is a temporary disengagement from other abilities to immerse oneself in what is already accommodating. Therefore, although labile, to be bored is to be in a state of suspension between more distinct dispositions between unease or peace, action or apathy, elation or sadness etc. Boredom means that, although one can be interested in an activity, given enough time she can suddenly grow disinterested. So, boredom is not an independent quality, but a response to the wearing off of initial capacities: a song listened on repeat still retains its attractive features, but the listener exhausts her ways of engaging with it. Boredom is a lack of originality in perceiving objects, which previously were experienced as unforeseen, in becoming involved in a network of fixed symbols that obscure their potential to still be interesting. It can only be fended off if a categorical desire is conveniently diverse in what it takes to accomplish it with contentment. Say the immortal person desires to know every language; she must find a worthwhile element in speaking each one. The languages need not be infinitely many, they just need to be infinitely distinct in their desirability.

Say the point of the immortal person's life was to change the trajectory of a person's life each day. The opportunity to do this would be everchanging, new ways to accomplish the same goal could spring up. She would repeat the action of "changing a life" daily, but since the permutation for the kinds of categorically desirable activities would be different every day, this would not fit the definition of being boring. Since boredom is the lack of new data with which one can come to be interested in, the possibility of infinite permutations for a set of data implies that one can find a goal that is infinitely engaging. So a categorical desire can include goals, which is an aggregation of infinite possible actions: it can be infinitely pursuable if it depends on a goal that involves changing other actors' conditions in any way.

It needs to be proved that the possibility for the immortal person to encounter infinite people, who can also be immortal, would have an infinite set of actions, and infinite things to be engaged with by the

---

[4] Ibid, 1

immortal person.Permuting, as the arrangement of elements in order in a given set, is applicable to finite

sets and can be proven by induction. However, an infinite set complicates this because , mathematically,

infinity is a concept that represents unbounded growth in a distinct direction. A "limit" is defined by the

behavior of a function as the values supplied to it become arbitrarily large. For example: $\lim\limits_{n \to \infty} \frac{1}{n} = 0$

because when n is arbitrarily large, 1/n becomes arbitrarily small, but is always nonnegative, therefore, $0$.

This is why additions like $\infty = \infty + 1$ do not make sense: algebraically, it cannot be that $0 = 1$.

Infinity is not a number, and using relations based on numbers isn't meaningful.

Therefore, permutations of infinities are explained with a set of possibilities, and specifically with

the idea of a "sure convergence (approaching to a limit)" in statistics.[5] One cannot get convergence for

every possible outcome, so non converging outcomes are considered fringe cases that combine to a

probability of zero, so they are treated as negligible. For example, if you flipped a coin infinitely, you

would ordinarily expect that the ratio of number of heads to the number of overall flips to average out to

1/2. But this is not the case for every outcome in the sample space: i.e, the outcome would be 1 if the

result consisted of all heads. Therefore, even if you had the chance of flipping coins for infinity, there is

no *sure* convergence.

The distinction to be made is this: following Williams' definition of a categorical desire as

distinct engagements that are defined in-itself, without being bound to others or temporality, it is true that

they converge to a finite amount of space and time. This is the definition of a limit: mathematically, given

infinite time, it may reach an actual number. Zeno supports Williams to this end. According to his

paradox, a man moving from Athens to Sparta, if he traversed half the distance from his starting point to

the end point of each day, he would still only be arbitrarily close. The only way for him to reach his

destination would be if he had infinite time. So, in Williams' definition, categorical desires can be

exhaustible. However, there being no *sure* convergence in a set of possible outcomes and the possibility of

reaching a number in infinity are not the same. Williams' theory does not exclude categorical desires to be

---

[5] Chugh

dependent on satisfying the desires of infinitely many people: the pursuit of a goal dependent on infinitely

distinct variables can be infinite, and cannot be measured by a limit because it is not a number but a set.

According to the goal-oriented hypothetical, every time the helped person uses her abilities, the

probability of the other failing becomes less than before. According to convergence, the probability of

failure goes to zero as the number of actions goes to infinity. So, after the person employs her capabilities

for a long time, she can be confident in her abilities, but may still fail. But even if we assume a stronger

convergence, where the total number of failures is *finite* and a single person is capable of becoming

perfectable by exhausting her chances for improvement, the immortal person still has the prospect of

meeting infinitely many people. It does not matter whether the ultimate satiation in a person is reachable

or not: there will be infinitely many of them.

Immortality can therefore be life-affirming, since there is at least one positive categorical desire

present. But the content of the said goal should be justified too, as for Williams, "those who totally wish

to lose themselves in the movement can consistently only hope that the movement will go on...the

consistent Spinozist...can only hope that the intellectual activity goes on". So an immortal being who

centers her life on intellectual endeavors, can consume her to a point of anguish. However, it can be

argued that one can go through symbiotic endeavors while being able to self-attribute her experiences.

This depends on the distinction between a memory criteria and causation criteria between personal

identity.

Williams' would contend whether a goal, composed of infinitely extensive determining factors

dependent on an infinite influx of other people,  preserves the existence of "a person" or a

"phenomenon"[6]. For him, if immortality is a mere series of coterminous modes of living, the person

would not be able to retain her memory. However, Williams' takes the memory criteria for personal

identity as *a priori*, which doesn't rule out a causal criterion[7]: when a person exists from moment to

moment, and have memories of their previous moments experiences, the memories that they acquire are

---

[6] Williams, 12
[7] Perry, Dialogues

caused to exist by the experiences that they had in those previous moments. The link between different stages in the life of the same person are causal links: personal identity can be defined in terms of remembering. Memories do not make the person but allow her to know her past directly. A theory of personal identity should explain how a person stays identical: if it is defined as non-continuous, identity is removed with diversity. But, it can be argued that memory is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity metaphysically, even if it can have evidential relation. People have been agents in various events that they no longer remember: episodic memory confirms that one was present during an event, but it does not entail that her ability to remember defines her.

  The causal criterion is more convincing than a memory criterion because it accounts for the concept of forgetting. Say Williams was right and the immortal person exhausted all her categorical desires. There still is the possibility for her to take up an interest in a previous categorical desire she forgot about. Having an immortal life contradicts with having a finite memory: Williams' argument does not rule out the possibility of returning to the same engagements that were once interesting but got forgotten, with a restored sense of anticipation. After a ten thousand year break, it isn't justified why I wouldn't forget and be reinterested in learning how to paint again. Memory does prioritize categorical desires that are so meaningful and identity-affirming that the engaging aspects of these pursuits are not the kinds you are likely to forget, but they aren't limited to this criteria.

  Conditions that provide an ownership over life militate against the conditions that keep life forever engrossing. However, boredom is a response to the wearing off of running out of data to engage with instead, like a suspension in time, instead of the emptying of/running out of a desire. Things still retain their attractive values, but people run out of the capacity to engage with them. Therefore a goal can be defined as the permutation of the kinds of engagable data, that define a categorical desire that does not bore you irregardless of your immortality, would be different every day. This makes further sense with the fact that an infinite permutation of possibilities is bound to the infinite ways of changing a life because there are infinitely many people: an entire infinite can be attributed to a single desire. Infinity is not an endless series: It's a group. Circling back to Zeno's argument: the condition for the paradox is not

considering "each next step, infinitely" but rather "all infinite steps at once". The idea that it takes infinity steps to arrive means that one can take any specific number of steps without arriving: but if you take infinity steps you may arrive. It's not about taking one more step forever, but taking all infinite steps in one big clump. Infinity as a number is not meaningful because, to put it another way, going through infinitely many motions no matter how many steps you imagine you've taken, you've already taken the next next one. Therefore the first principle for a worthy life would not be violated: boredom is defined by running out of a set of data that is engaging, and if there are infinite people, who can also be immortal, there would have an infinite set of actions, and infinitely many things to be engaged with by the immortal person because infinity is to be regarded as a set of possibilities and not a distinct number. The Second principle for personality would not also be violated because the memory criterion contradicts with the idea of an immortal life: one can forget and be reinvested in a categorical desire.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

Chugh, Vidhi. "Convergence of Random Variables. Different modes of convergence… | by Vidhi Chugh."

    *Towards Data Science*, 8 July 2020,

    https://towardsdatascience.com/convergence-of-random-variables-c1830b3c95bc. Accessed 28

    October 2022.

Perry, John. *A dialogue on personal identity and immortality*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

Williams, Bernard. "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality." *Problems of the*

    *Self, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973*.