A Critique of the Philosophical Discourse on Immortality

Abstract

In this paper, I analyze two prominent objections against the desirability of immortality - the boredom problem and the personality problem. I argue against both objections, as well as the desirability debate as a whole. These are my claims 1) Both problems hold fixed certain a priori, speculative assumptions in order to make claims about the desirability of immortality 2) Empirics may speak to the desirability of immortality like the boredom problem and personality problem. I use the hedonic treadmill and the future self-continuity observations as my empirical data. 3) However, even empirics are highly limited in answering the many concerns we have about immortality. 4) Therefore, our epistemic position with the respect to immortality is so impoverished, we are, ultimately, unable to make definite claims about the desirability of immortality.

1 Special thanks to Dr. Gasdaglis, Dr. Cholbi, Marmar Tavasol, and Bernard Granados for helping me on this thesis.
1.0 Intro

“Would you want to live forever?” According to one survey, at least 1 in 5 people in the UK do (New Scientist, 2018 poll). Questions involving the desirability of immortality are asked frequently but are rarely analyzed in-depth. In particular, I remember being asked a similar question when I took my first class at Cal Poly, Pomona. I remember initially thinking “Sure, I don’t want to die. I enjoy life and want it to last forever.” Little did I know, part of being an undergraduate in philosophy is the all too important act of justifying your responses. After contemplating the question, I realized that I had a difficult time substantiating my answer. This lead me to inquire about the philosophical discussions of immortality. I heard reasons for and against the desirability of immortality. What I didn’t realize then, as I do now, is that philosophical methodology being used in the debate about immortality is often speculatory. As a result, I focus my attention in this paper on two prominent objections to the desirability of immortality - the boredom problem and personality problem. In my critique of both objections, I illustrate that when answering if immortality would be desirable, we are in no position to make definite claims if it would or wouldn't be.

1.1 Roadmap

This paper will be an examination of two common objections to the desirability of immortality – the boredom problem and personality problem. First, the boredom problem, as presented by Bernard Williams, argues that if you have an infinite amount of time, life will get boring. I will also be using Shelly Kagan’s examples on boredom to expand Williams’s claim. Second, the personality problem, states that an immortal life would be undesirable because a person’s personality, in the form of interests and desires, would radically change over time. This would result in the individual insufficiently resembling themselves in the future and, therefore, make immortality undesirable because of the personality changes. I will give an exposition of both objections and then write expositions in response to both claims. This will be followed by
my own analysis: 1) Both problems hold fixed certain a priori, speculative assumptions in order to make claims about the desirability of immortality 2) Empirics may speak to the desirability of immortality like the boredom problem and personality problem. 3) However, even empirics are limited in answering the many concerns we have about immortality. 4) Therefore, our epistemic position with the respect to immortality is so impoverished, we are, ultimately, unable to make definite claims about the desirability of immortality.

2.0 The Boredom and Personality Problems

This section of my essay will focus on the philosophical expositions of two arguments against the desirability of immortality. The first exposition will be the boredom problem and the second will be the personality problem. This will be followed by responses to both objections by Fischer, Mitchell-Yellin, and Greene.

2.1 Boredom

In 1973, Bernard Williams wrote The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality. Williams’s paper argues that an immortal life would be undesirable because of the inevitability of boredom. Using a play called “The Makropulos Affair,” the main character, Elina Makropulos, is given a life extending elixir (Williams, 1973 82). By the age of 342, she becomes disenchanted with her extended life and finds her existence joyless and boring (Ibid.). Eventually, she refuses to take the elixir to prolong her life and accepts her death (Ibid.). Williams concludes that Elina’s problem was ultimately boredom: “Her trouble was, it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her,” (Williams, 1973 90). Using what he calls “categorical desires” Williams makes a case for boredom as an inevitability. To

2 Although empirics are limited, the purpose of this essay is to suggest that the desirability of immortality may be answered through empirical reasons. I am not suggesting that empirics will definitively answer the desirability question nor am I arguing that empirics will be unable too answer either. My essay is arguing if, and I stress if, empirics were to answer the desirability question this is how it might go about it.
briefly explain, a categorical desire is a type of desire or goal that motivates individuals to look forward to the future (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2014 355). Such desires or goals are motivations that drive us to continue living e.g. having a family, graduating from college, learning new subjects, etc. According to Williams, there are a finite number of categorical desires in immortality that can be explored before we inevitably succumb to boredom (Williams, 1973 90). Moreover, this boredom occurs as a result of living through repeated cycles of the same or similar experiences over and over again (Williams, 1973 90-91). Although Williams isn’t specific about said experiences, I interpret his repeated cycles argument to mean that there are a limited number of new or fresh categorical experiences one can have. If life was analogous to watching our favorite film, there is only a finite number of times we can replay our favorite movie before we lose the desire to keep replaying. Eventually, we become bored and don’t want to re-watch it anymore. In Elina’s case, she is left with a sense of detachment from her lack of categorical desires. Williams describes her circumstances as a type of “frozen” life (Williams, 1973 91). He ultimately concludes “EM's case, her boredom and distance from life both kill desire and consist in the death of it;” (Ibid.).

Expanding on the boredom problem, Shelly Kagan advocates for Williams’s position by appealing to examples of interests that would lose their meaning over time. Kagan thinks that the desirability of living forever isn’t so much about being immortal; but rather the option of living as long as one wants to (Kagan, 2012 246). Regardless of what a person’s interests are, there will come a time where interests are so similar and repetitive that one will lose their desire to continue living. Kagan, like Williams, assumes there is only a finite number of interesting desires one would have in an immortal life. Kagan imagines an immortal existence in which you’re allowed to explore any interests you may have. Using the example of having an interest in math, Kagan imagines dedicating himself to solving math problems for a very long time. After x number of years, he is likely to become proficient and able to solve complex problems in math
and physics. However, after a certain number of years, Kagan imagines himself growing jaded with learning and solving math problems; even in instances where he may come across some math problem that nobody has solved. Kagan imagines himself unwilling to continue learning because he has exhausted that categorical desire (Kagan, 2012 243). Once you’ve seen a million years’ worth of math problems; slight deviations of math problems aren’t sufficient for maintaining interests. Inevitably people become bored with doing math or any x interest after y number of yrs. Contrasting from Williams, Kagan notes that he is only speaking for himself and that perhaps he is not imaginative enough to think of interests or activities that would keep him entertained ad infinitum (Kagan, 2012 240-241). Yet, he thinks it is impossible for individuals to think of any activities that would keep said individuals interested in living ad infinitum (Kagan, 2012 239). Ultimately, Kagan’s argument is that people’s true desire is to want to live as long as they want rather than living indefinitely.

2.2 Personality

The second objection against the desirability of immortality is the personality problem. Building on Bernard William’s boredom argument, Kagan argues that an immortal existence wouldn’t be desirable because an individual’s personality will drastically change over time. Assuming that there is gradual memory loss from an immortal individual, a person’s interest will change over time and new interests will develop. Kagan imagines himself having interest in math for the first 10,000 yrs. but will move on to molecular biology for the next thousand years; followed by a new interest or hobby after that. This new development of interests continues for infinity. However, while he is pursuing his new interests, his personality and biography are incrementally changing from year to year. An example of this change is the personality of an individual at 10 years old maturing into an adult at age 24. The same individual now possesses

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3 It’s possible that memory loss won’t occur in an immortal existence. Assuming technology advances to a point where we are able to recollect all lived experiences, our personalities may be radically different if we remember everything in our past.
different interests and personality traits. Furthermore, Kagan imagines these incremental changes to be drastic changes when compounding the timeline of immortality. These personality changes are so drastic that Kagan is left contemplating whether or not he cares for a future version of himself. His conclusion is that immortality is undesirable because he wouldn’t care about a future version of himself that isn’t sufficiently like him. He writes,

You tell me: ‘There’s going to be somebody alive. He’ll be you, but he will be completely unlike you. He will have different tastes, no memories of having taught philosophy-no interest in philosophy, or politics, or folk music, no concern for your family, and so forth and so on.’ I say: ‘That’s all rather interesting from a metaphysical point of view, but speaking personally, I don’t really care…What I want isn’t merely for somebody to be me. I want them to be sufficiently like me’ (Kagan, 2012 245).

Kagan concludes that immortality wouldn’t be desirable because of a double bind. Either we succumb to boredom after years of exhausting our interests i.e. categorical desires; or our memory fades and we continue pursuing interests at the expense of personality changes. Yet this solution isn’t any better because a future version of ourselves isn’t sufficiently like us to be considered desirable. Ultimately, Kagan resolves that he personally agrees with Williams and that it’s in a human being’s interest to live as long as they desire than to desire immortality.

2.3 Objections against Boredom and Personality Problems

2.3.1 Repeatable Pleasures & Fixed Categories

According to John Fischer, Bernard Williams’s boredom objection doesn’t account for desires for pleasures that are repeatable (Fischer, 2008 263). Acts like sex, enjoying music, having great food, art, etc. are all pleasurable experiences that are consistent and cannot be exhausted to the point where life is boring (Ibid.). Fischer notes that this claim is assuming repeated pleasures are not “distributed too closely” e.g. having cake every day at every moment.
would not be a repeated pleasurable. Yet, enjoying repeatable pleasures are not necessarily boring (Fischer, 2008 264). Continuing the rebuttal against Williams, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin use a metaphor of a library to illustrate their criticism (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2014 358). If an immortal person was to be locked in a library, proponents of the boredom objection would think there are only a finite number of books one could read. After the immortal individual was done reading all the books, their life would result in boredom as in the case of an immortal that has experienced all their categorical desires. Yet, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argue that books, like immortality, are constantly evolving. Sure, some books will be finished and categorical desires will end but there will be authors who write responses to old books and authors who write new books. The analogy is that categorical desires will continue to evolve into new and exciting deviations. Also, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin challenge Kagan’s math example by questioning Kagan’s assumption that math would lose its appeal. They compare the interest of losing math to being disinterested in sex, love, or friendship:

But why exactly suppose that math would lose its appeal? Of course, as Kagan recognizes, one would need to spread out one’s activities in an immortal life (just as it is sensible to do in a finite life). Under these circumstances, why think that the joy of doing math would disappear, any more than (say) the pleasures of eating fine food, listening to beautiful music, or having sex? For example, it would be very odd to say, “I’ve tried all of the positions in the Kama Sutra, and even more, and I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?” This is jarring for many reasons, not least of which is that sex is not all about different positions or partners: there is something compelling and rich and deeply engaging about the experience itself (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2014 359).

Both Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin claim that Kagan and Williams are assuming that categorical desires are fixed. However, using the metaphor of the library, neither books nor sex, love nor
friendship are fixed states of enjoyment. Categories evolve and bring about repeatable pleasure. Therefore, Williams’s boredom objection is using fixed a priori assumptions about how an immortal life would be like.

2.3.2 Imagination

Continuing the rebuttal against Williams and Kagan, Preston Greene argues that the boredom problem and personality problems are predicated on the imagination of future events. Greene notes that “If very long life is unimaginable, then we should not expect appeals to imagination to result in accurate affective forecasting,” (Greene, 2017 5). Moreover, Williams’ and Kagan’s theories are open to criticism based on their fixed assumptions of what a future life might be. Greene cites Thomas Nagel’s response to Williams’s boredom argument: “Can it be that [Williams] is more easily bored than I?” (Ibid.). According to Greene, Nagel’s response highlights some serious flaws with imagination. Instead of relying on experience to justify what an immortal life would be like, Williams and Kagan are using imagination of an infinite future to make fixed assumptions about the future. This poses a serious problem for philosophers because claims about the desirability of immortal are difficult to justify and are speculative at best.

3.0 – The problems with certain fixed a priori, speculative assumptions

Although Williams’ and Kagan’s boredom and personality arguments are potential problems for an immortal life, both of their methodologies are using a certain kind of fixed a priori reasoning to make speculative assumptions about the future. In imagining a world so vast and unpredictable, as in the case of anything infinite, one is limited to how they can critique a future world composed of infinite possibilities. Since there is infinite time in an immortal life, there is as much possibility of being bored as there is of being entertained. Perhaps Williams and Kagan are correct in that an infinite life would run its course and we are left with an Elina Makropulos situation. Yet, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin can be equally correct in their prediction
that an immortal life is similar to a library that never stops developing. Perhaps sex, love, and friendship are enough to motivate us to keep on living, perhaps not. So far, the only conclusions we can make about immortality is that there are many unknown variables to an immortal life. Holding fixed certain a priori assumptions about the desirability of immortality e.g. boredom and personality problems, relies on imaginative speculation. As argued by Greene, this is problematic because imagination alone makes it difficult to justify our claims about immortality. Without the proper justification of our imagination, we are left with different hypothetical accounts of what an infinite life would be like. This dilemma applies to both proponents and opponents of immortality and perhaps we are stuck without any justifiable claims. Larry Temkin summarizes this point best: “Unfortunately, like everyone else, my views on this topic are based not on experience, but on mere speculation and imagination. Clearly, then, anything I, or anyone else, writes on this topic should be taken with a large grain of salt,” (Temkin, 2008 193).

3.1 – Empirics

In spite of what Greene calls Temkin’s “disarmingly honest reflections,” I suggest that the concerns Williams has about immortality are questions that empirics may help answer (Greene, 2017 5). Admittedly, it is important to note that empirics are still highly limited in answering questions about infinity and perhaps, in many cases, if not all, they may not help whatsoever. Yet, if empirics can provide answers to the desirability of immortality, these are the methods that may be adopted. Moreover, empirics is still a better alternative than engaging in certain fixed a priori speculative assumptions. The following will be arguments against Williams’s and Kagan’s objections.

3.1.1. Boredom

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4 This quote was originally referenced by Preston Greene. I decided to use it here because it illustrates the difficulty of talking about immortality without proper justification.
First, Williams’ boredom objection stipulates that all individuals will inevitably succumb to boredom due to a lack of categorical desires. However, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin note that this universal claim shouldn’t apply to all individuals (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014 356). Certainly, some people would be able to imagine an immortal life where they would be entertained for eternity. Nagel’s question to Williams’s boredom argument hints at the difference in imagination between himself and Williams. To extrapolate, Williams and proponents of the boredom objection may be accepting that all categorical desires are fixed and see no justifiable reason as to why categorical desires bring repeatable pleasure. To be charitable, this may not be the case for Kagan and other proponents who are speaking for themselves and not for others’ imaginations. In the case of Williams, there is a universal claim that people will no longer be happy because of boredom in an immortal life. (Williams, 1973 94-95)

Empirically, we can look to psychology and the observed tendency, called the hedonic treadmill, in response to the boredom objection. The hedonic treadmill, also called hedonic adaptation, “refers to the process by which individuals return to baseline levels of happiness following a change in life circumstances,” (Lucas, 2007 75). The changes in life circumstances can be drastic changes in either positive or negative ways. Negatively, changes can involve the death of a spouse, unemployment, paralysis, and divorce. Positively, change can come in the form of a windfall or winning the lottery. A study conducted on 22 lottery winners indicated that there were no significant changes in long-term pleasure after the initial peak of winning the lottery (Brickman Et al. 1978). However, set baselines of happiness vary from individual to individual i.e. some people may have lower baselines than others. Empirical data on hedonic adaptation and baseline happiness are still in development. Yet, psychologists conclude that genetics, situational circumstances, and environment all play an important role in determining baseline happiness (Diener Et. al 2009 103-118). Moreover, long-term negative events, in the case of disability, death, etc. have long-lasting negative changes in baseline happiness. Yet,
hedonistic adaptation restores the baseline happiness in individuals who are more receptive to positive outcomes (Lucas, 2007 76-77). Applied this concept to Williams’ boredom objection, assuming the range of the infinite number of activities we endure throughout infinity, the observed effects in hedonic adaptation tell us that there is a baseline for happiness. If Williams is correct that our categorical desires are finite, we still may have a baseline of happiness that keeps us motivated to keep living. There might be periods where we are bored with the activities of an immortal future but hedonistic adaptation might restore our levels of happiness after a certain time. This is not to universalize that everyone will avoid boredom. There are individuals who have lower levels of baseline happiness and may be likely to succumb to the boredom problem. Perhaps this was the case for poor Elina Makropulos. However, this doesn’t mean everyone is like Elina Makropulos. This leaves open the possibility, that perhaps, some people are genetically or environmentally better suited for an immortal life than others.

3.1.2. Personality

Concerning the personality problem, empiricism offers two responses to Kagan’s concern of our future self not being sufficiently like us. The first is that our personality is changing all the time throughout life, and, typically, for the better (Roberts and Mroczek, 2008 31-35). To illustrate this point, consider my life. I am a ‘different’ person now, at age 26, then I was at age 21. I’m ‘different’ in terms of personality, interests, hobbies, goals, etc. At age 21, I was a business major who was interested in entrepreneurship and financial markets. 5 years later, I am interested in philosophy and ethics. My personality and interests have changed but I still feel sufficiently like myself, but perhaps Kagan is talking about a longer period than 5 years. Let’s imagine 5 yr-old me (21 yrs. ago): My interests at the time were Sesame Street, especially

5 It is important to note that because immortality involves infinity, a person’s environment could be drastically different than what it is today. It could be the case that a person’s happiness baseline is exceptionally low or high. The problem with empirical data is that it’s limited in determining where a person’s happiness point will be.
Big Bird, and my personality was that of a hyper kid who was very social. Although my personality has changed over those 21 yrs., I still love Sesame Street and Big Bird, in a different way, and I still like to socialize. Likewise, I assume my personality and interests will continue to change when I become 40, 60, and 80. Yet, that doesn’t cause me to say “who cares?” I have completely different interests from when I was 20 and don’t care to see a future version of myself.” Empirically, I have cared about myself throughout my life. Why would this change my outlook if my life extended to millions, billions, ad infinitum years? I personally find myself disagreeing with Kagan; I think the future version of myself is sufficiently me. At least in the 26 yrs. of my existence, I don’t feel a disconnect with my younger self.

I can imagine proponents of this claim arguing that my view is limited to incremental changes of personality rather than cumulative changes in personality. I may not care from year to year about incremental changes but I would care about an aggregation of incremental changes that would lead to culmulative changes in my personality. I think Kagan points to this claim when referring to his interest in philosophy switching to math and poetry (2.2). However, consider individuals who may welcome large cumulative changes in their life. They may see a future version of themselves and say “Wow! How did I get there?” I enjoyed philosophy, I enjoyed math, but what I truly enjoy is living life itself. Even if they experience cumulative changes in their lives, this isn’t necessarily a bad outcome; it’s just a part of life’s journey. This may or may not be justifiable for Kagan or Williams but the argument is that individuals have different motivations in imagining their own immortality.

Secondly, empirical research conducted at Stanford University concluded that some individuals are committed to their future-self continuity i.e. caring about a prospective version of themselves (Ersner-Hershfield Et al. 2009 280-286). Participating undergraduates were evaluated on three different measuring methods. In the first measure entitled: Future Self-Continuity Measure, students were given a questionnaire followed by a self-reported point-

6 Special thanks to Marmar Tavasol for finding this
ranking evaluation. The rankings involved “how similar and how connected they felt to a future self ten years from now. They also rated how much they cared about and liked their future self ten years from now on 7-point Likert scales” (ibid). The second study had the students evaluate themselves in the form of personality traits. Participants would select either a ‘me’ or ‘not me’ response to positive, negative, or neutral traits about themselves and a future, 10-year-old, version of themselves. Researchers concluded that individuals who cared more about a future version of themselves had a higher probability of delaying immediate rewards for greater future rewards. In the case of the students who had a higher future-self continuity, they were able to save more money than the students who didn’t care as much for their future selves. Likewise, a similar study used VR (virtual-reality software) to show students an older version of themselves and were asked how they felt about their future well-being. Students reported that they were more likely to save for retirement and were concerned about their future selves (Hershfield Et al. 2011 37-38).

In summary, based on the observed research, empirics provide a response to Kagan’s personality objection. Some individuals, in the present, have particular desires about prospective versions of themselves. However, a 10-year future projection is minuscule compared to infinity. Yet, current research indicates that on small timelines, individuals have an interest in future-self continuity.

### 3.2 Candidates for immortality

Considering that some individuals are more prone to future-self continuity than others and that people have different baselines for happiness (3.1.1), perhaps certain individuals are better suited for an immortal life than others. In my response to Kagan and Williams, I am able to speak about my childhood and how I am able to identify with my past-self. Furthermore, empirical research shows that certain individuals desire and care about future-self continuity.

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7 Results of the Stanford study indicated that age is a high factor in future-self continuity; this could be due to maturity or other variables.
Although there is no clear correlation, perhaps individuals who have higher baselines for happiness and have higher future-self continuity are the best candidates to avoid boredom and personality problems. Yet, this observation is too early in its infancy to make definitive claims about immortality. What can be said is that there seems to be no universal claim that immortality would or would not be desirable.

4.0 Our limited understanding

As mentioned earlier, the methodology used by Williams and Kagan is a fixed form of certain a priori assumption about the desirability of immortality. This form of reasoning is problematic because philosophers aren’t able to justify any of their fixed claims about an infinite future. Due to several variables, Williams and Kagan are, at best, relying on imagination to determine what wouldn’t be desirable. Likewise, empirical studies are severely limited in answering a lot of questions and concerns we have about an immortal life. This poses a problem to philosophers on both sides of the immortality debate, for desirability and against it, because the assumptions that we make about immortality could be completely inaccurate.

To illustrate this point, consider the 1989 film, Back to the Future Part II.8 The premise of the film involves Marty McFly traveling into the future with, friend and scientist, Dr. Brown in the year 2015. Since the timeline is set in the future, there are considerable advances in technology from 1989 to 2015. There are flying cars, hoverboards, holographic advertisements, automatic dog walkers, etc. After having lived in 2015, the movie was inaccurate about a lot of predictions about the future. In some instances, they were right in crude ways, flat-screen televisions, drones, e-payments. However, the futuristic world that was envisioned in 1989 was not an accurate prediction of 2015. Only a minority of people could have imagined a future where everyone had handheld computers in his or her pockets. Nor did any of the movies capture the birth of the internet. Using Back to the Future Part II as an analogy, philosophers have a difficult,

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8 Thanks to Dr. Gasdaglis for this movie reference
if not impossible, task of predicting how an ad infinitum life will be like via fixed a priori speculation.

There are infinite possibilities of events that can happen in an immortal life. Perhaps we learn to travel to new galaxies and discover aliens. What would humanity be like when the sun runs out of energy? What is the role of AI in the future? Do we upload ourselves into a virtual world where we can't distinguish virtual reality from actual reality? If we are to live ad infinitum, what does it mean to be human? Contemplating these questions can derive infinite webs of possibilities. Williams and Kagan could be correct in the way Back to the Future Part II was correct, albeit crudely, in predicting how 2015 would be like. However, the problem with having certain fixed a priori reasoning of immortality is that there is no way of knowing how the future will be like, not in 40 yrs., 1,000 yrs., or 1,000,000 yrs. In this regard, our understanding is very limited by our capacity to imagine how the future will be like.

To use a metaphor, as a child, I imagined myself one day becoming a police officer or a cowboy. I was infatuated with guns and action movies where the hero fought off bad guys and earned the respect of the community. I envisioned myself becoming a hero for my own community and fighting crime for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, police officers and cowboys aren't as glamorous as Hollywood made them out to be. Reflecting back on my adolescent self, I realize that I had an impoverished understanding of how life worked. My knowledge of the world was so limited that imagining a realistic future was out of my depth. In many ways, our understanding of immortality mirrors that of a child. Our understanding of infinity is so impoverished, we are in little, if no position, to make definite claims about the desirability of immortality in the same way a child can predict the outcome of their future.

5.0 Objection: Simulation of all possible outcomes

9 Special thanks to Dr. Gasdaglis for helping me with this metaphor
If having certain fixed a priori assumptions won’t help us figure out the future, perhaps we can double down on our empirics effort and create a simulation of all possible scenarios in an immortal life. In the event AI progresses enough, potentially, we can develop supercomputers that can run numerous variables in an immortal life. Alternatively, we could run a sophisticated simulation of the world and predict how we would fare in an immortal existence. We would then be able to conclusively know if we get bored, if hedonic adaptation works, future-self continuity, etc.

6.0 Reply

There are two problems with this theory. First, is that we are speculating that this is possible. Second, even if it is possible, a simulation or AI wouldn’t be able to accurately convey the experience of being immortal. Considering we don’t know what the future will be like, there isn’t certainty that an AI or supercomputer will have the capacity to predict the future. Using Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin’s library metaphor, if books represented variables in an immortal life, perhaps the computer could predict every book title and genre in the library. However, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the computer to predict books, or variables, that will develop in the future. Authors will continue to write new books, others will respond to original works, some will create entirely new genres, there will be some in English, some in Spanish, etc. Also, would an AI even be around past 1,000,000 years? or will we have discovered something more intelligent and more sophisticated for our simulation? will humanity even be around for that long? These are difficult questions for us to comprehend and relying on a supercomputer to convey this information might be impossible.

Finally, even if a supercomputer could provide us with a definite answer to the desirability of immortality, understanding the experience of being immortal is unequivocally incomprehensible. To use a metaphor by L.A. Paul, imagine if someone offered you the chance to become a vampire. You would be able to live forever, you could feast on animal blood, and
you’d be granted superpowers. Assuming your friends were vampires before you, you ask them about their experience and how they enjoy it. Your friends tell you they “love it” and it’s the best thing to ever happen to them (Paul 2014 1). However, there is a huge difference in having your friends tell you how great it is to be a vampire and actually being a vampire. Paul’s argument is that when confronted with major life choices we often can’t rationally compare our lived experiences with prospective desired experiences. Even if science, friends, and relatives can provide information on how a particular experience will be, we must acknowledge that we can’t fully understand the scope of our decision. She concludes that the best way to make life-changing decisions is to decide based on “whether we want to discover who we’ll become,” (Paul, 2014 4). So, in the event a computer can tell us all the variables of immortality, we can’t understand what immortality would be like without first experiencing it.

7.0 Conclusion

To briefly recap my argument, I examined two prominent objections against the desirability of immortality - the boredom problem and the personality problem. I critiqued both by arguing each problem has certain fixed a priori assumptions. I then used empirical data as a suggestion on how empirics could potentially address the boredom and personality problems. They included hedonic adaptation and future self-continuity. This was followed by own analysis on why having certain fixed a priori speculations are bad and that empirics may or may not have the necessary data to answer the desirability of immortality. Ultimately, I concluded that our understanding of immortality is incomprehensible in order for us to make a rational choice.

Lastly, some final thoughts, because our understanding of immortality is incomprehensible through certain fixed a priori assumptions and current empirical data, we must be cautious in our philosophical approach in discussing immortality. At times, I am sympathetic to Temkin’s claim (3.0) that all our discussions should be taken with a grain of salt. However, I still think a priori reasoning can serve an important purpose in the discussion immortality, as
long as the claims aren’t holding fixed certain a priori assumptions about whether or not immortality would or would not be desirable. Allowing such speculation oversimplifies the desirability of immortality. Instead, we must endorse a type of humility in acknowledging that we know close to nothing about an infinite life. Accordingly, the question if immortality would be desirable or not seems like an unanswerable question at this point. To quote Wittgenstein “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” (Wittgenstein, 1889). Well, not completely silent, just in matters of certain fixed a priori assumptions.
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