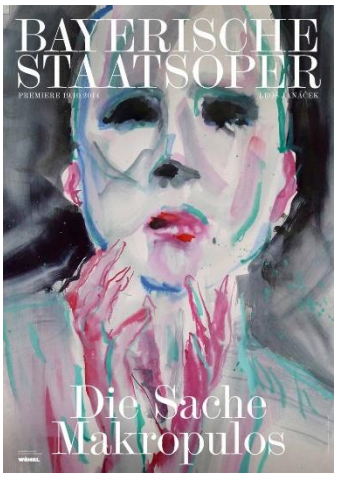
WHO WOULD WANT TO LIVE FOREVER, ANYWAY?



If **Bernard Williams** is right, then most of us should be able to relate to Elina Makropolus (a character in a play by Karl Capek, which has since been made into an opera), when she chooses to die after 342 years rather than take a potion that would allow her to stay alive for another lifetime. She does so because her extremely long life has left her *bored*, and she no longer has any reason to live. While Elina's case is fictional, Williams uses it two explore two closely related issues:

(1) What makes our lives meaningful and worthwhile (at least for most of us, most of the time)? Is it really rational for us to think of death as a "bad" thing?
(2) Supposing we *do* think our lives our meaningful and worthwhile, is it rational for us0 to want live forever, whether this be in the form of heaven, reincarnation, or a scientific miracle.

Williams notes that many (and probably most) of the philosophers who have written on these issues have taken one of two views, both of which treat death as a "good" (or, at least, not bad) thing. On the one hand, some people have thought that death marks the end of the self, but this isn't really bad, since we won't be around to experience death anyways. On the other hand, some people have thought that death is merely the "beginning" of a new life. Williams rejects BOTH of these views. Against the first group, he argues that death (especially premature death) is genuinely a bad thing for most people. Against the second group, he argues that people who desire immortality are deeply mistaken, since the sorts of things that make our (mortal) lives worthwhile could NOT make immortal life worthwhile.

LUCRETIUS: DEATH REALLY ISN'T ALL THAT BAD…

One of the most famous and influential discussions of death is from Lucretius (99 BCE-55 BCE), a Roman philosopher whose work helped spark the Renaissance (thousands of years after his death). Lucretius held that the world was composed entirely of "atoms and the void," and that the only good thing to be pursued was *pleasure,* which could be best done by living moderately. He was an early critic of organized religions, and he held that the gods (if there were any) were simply super-powerful (but ultimately physical and mortal) beings. He also argued against the existence of an afterlife, but nevertheless argued that (1) it is irrational to fear death and (2) a short life is as good as a long one.

Lucretius Argument 1: There is nothing to fear about death.

1. It is only rational to fear things (such as pain, suffering, or loss) that we could possibly experience.
    a. For example, it might be rational to fear getting your hand cut off (it would hurt) or losing your job (which would deprive you of money, as well as something to do during the day). It might even be rational to fear the deaths of other people, since this means you would never get to talk to them again.
2. We will never experience being dead, since this is simply the absence of experience.
    a. While the process of dying may be painful, being dead isn't painful, pleasurable, terrifying, or anything else. These are emotions felt by the living, not the dead.
3. CONLCUSION 1: So, it is irrational for us to fear death.

Lucretius Argument 2: A short life is as good as a long one.

1. It would only be rational to prefer dying later if this made some sort of difference to the sort of death we would experience.
2. The "experience" (or nonexperience ...) of death will be the same regardless of when we die—we will be dead for an infinite amount of time, either way.
3. CONCLUSION 2: So, it is not rational to prefer dying later over dying earlier.

Williams' Objections: Williams argues the argument 1 fails because it fails to identify the *reason* that many people fear death—i.e., that they might miss out on experiencing the good things (the "praemia") that life has to offer. These praemia might be everything from professional success to seeing one's children growing up to just going for a walk or reading a good book. (After all, you can't do any of these when you dead!) This is very different from thinking that death will be unpleasant. The same sort of objection can be leveled against Lucretius's second argument, as well: a longer life *can* be better than a shorter one, if the longer life enabled us to have more of the experiences that we wanted to have in life.

CATEGORICAL DESIRES = THE THINGS THAT MAKE LIFE WORTHWHILE

According to Bernard Williams, I **categorically desire** X if my desire for X is NOT conditional on my being alive. That is, it's not simply that I would rather have experience X rather than Y, if I'm forced to choose between them (by virtue of being alive). Instead, my desire for X is *unconditional*---I want X, and this actually provides me with a *reason* for staying alive. While the idea is a bit tricky, an example can help clarify it. Consider an old woman, Marie, who is currently undergoing (highly unpleasant) treatment for advanced cancer. She wonders: "Is it really worth putting up with this, just to extend my life a few more months?" The answer to this question, according to Williams, will depend on the nature of her desires:

- Marie almost certainly has a variety of non-categorical desires that are conditional on her being alive. So, for example, she might like to go see the fireworks next Fourth of July, supposing she hasn't died by then. More mundanely, supposing she doesn't pass away, she can confidently predict that she will continue desire to do things like eat, stay warm, watch TV shows, and so on. However, these things can't provide her with a reason for living, since she only wants these things "on the condition that she is alive." They are simply *irrelevant* to the question of whether she should continue treatment.
- Marie may (or may not) have categorical desires. So, for example, she may deeply desire to finish writing her memoirs, to see the birth of a grandchild, or to make sure her small business is set for the future. She wants these things categorically, and not simply "so long as I live that long." Because of this, they can provide her with a *reason* for living. Of course, depending on how much pain she is in, they may (or may not) be "enough," but in general, the stronger categorical desires one has, the stronger one's reasons for wanting to be alive, and the stronger the reasons for fearing death.

For most of us (most of the time), the question of "Why do I want to stay alive?" doesn't arise, and so we may not reflect on what exactly our categorical desires actually are. This doesn't mean that we don't have such desires, however. In fact, it's just the opposite—our categorical desires are so strong and obvious to us that it doesn't occur to us that we might lack such things. In many cases, it's precisely when people lose hope in fulfilling their categorical desires—relationships fail, jobs are lost, children die—that they are most likely to ask themselves questions like "Is my life really worth living, if I don't have anything worth living for?" In such cases, many people discover that do have at least one categorical desire: the categorical desire to have categorical desires in the *future*. That is, they stay alive with the hope that they will discover *new* causes and people that matter to them, and that these will provide meaning and purpose to their lives.

Life Without Categorical Desire? On Williams' account, the real problem arises if one discovers that one lacks even this weakest possible categorical desire, as EM apparently does after 342 years. Not only does she lack categorical desires for specific things, she has lost all hope of developing *new* ones, since she has come to feel that there is nothing "new" left to try. While she presumably still has a variety of non-categorical desires—to eat, sleep, avoid pain, and so on—these cannot provide her with a reason to continue on. For her, unlike for most of us, Lucretius' claim seems to ring true: there is nothing to fear about death.

BAD THINGS: (1) IMMORTALITY POTIONS, (2) REINCARNATION, (3) HEAVEN

"Suppose, then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall want not to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unliveable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go 3way from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us that it can be too late, and many, as against Lucretius, need no reminding that it can be too early. If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident. Technical progress may, in more than one direction, make that piece of luck rarer. But as things are, it is possible to be, in contrast to EM, felix opportunitate mortis - as it can be appro. priately mistranslated, lucky in having the chance to die." (B. Williams)

It is tempting to think that EM's case is simply an artifact of her particular situation and personality. Perhaps she was just a grumpy person, or maybe a different sort of immortality would have suited her (or us) better. Williams argues that this is mistaken, however. Instead, he argues that there is NO possible type of immortality that would avoid the sorts of problems EM encounters, and that people who desire heaven, reincarnation, or other sorts of immortal life are deeply mistaken. In order to show this, Williams considers the conditions that a truly satisfactory sort of immortality must meet, and then arguments that it is not possible to meet them both.

Requirement 1: "It should clearly be me who lives forever." A satisfactory sort of immortality should preserve enough of my memories and character traits, that it is actually *me* who lives forever. After all, if my reason for living involves taking care of my family, it hardly does me any good to be reborn as a squirrel with no memory of this family, and which cares mostly about finding nuts.

Requirement 2: "The state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims that I have now in wanting to survive at all." If my reason for wanting to live at all necessarily involves the fulfilling of certain categorical desires, then it had better be the case the version of immortality I sign up for actually allows me to fulfill these desires. So, for example, it doesn't do *me* much good to be taken up to a heaven where people spend all of their time singing, if I don't especially care about singing.

Williams thinks these two conditions rule out all possible versions of immortality:

- **Continuing your ordinary existence** might meet both of the above conditions for a little while, but will eventually become boring. Eventually, you will have fulfilled all of your "reasons for living" (categorical desires)—you will have raised 100,000 children; seduced 1,000,000 attractive people; written 5000 books; gotten 500 PhDs, solved world poverty, witnessed the heat death of the universe a few times, etc.
- **Reincarnation,** which involves "surviving" as an entirely new being with no memories of your old life, solves the boredom problem, but violates requirement 1: there's no real sense in which it is recognizably "you" that survives. Williams does not think this is something worth wanting, at least for *you* (as you currently are). After all, what does it even mean to "survive" without any of your memories, desires, etc.? These things are, to a large extent, what makes us the people that we are.
- **Heaven/Nirvana/etc.** which involves some sort intense and ever-lasting pleasure or intellectual engagement must (necessarily) involve something very different from the satisfaction of our current categorical desires, since these sorts of desires are not the sort of thing that can be stretched out for eternity. So, William thinks that either (a) we would find heaven kind of boring/not worthwhile or (b) we would cease to "ourselves" in any recognizable sense (we would violate requirement 2). The basic idea here is pretty simple: as you are right now (with your current desires), you wouldn't really enjoy heaven. And if you were to become the sort of a person (e.g., the perfect "philosopher" or "pure soul") who would enjoy heaven, that wouldn't really be "you" anymore.

REVIEW QUESTION

1. Give examples of ONE categorical desire and ONE non-categorical desire.
2. Suppose that a super-powerful being approaches you and asks which of the following you would prefer. Once made, your choice cannot be taken back. Explain and defend your choice using class material. Make sure to consider potential objections or drawbacks to your choice.
    a. You will get to live out your life, die, and then cease to exist.
    b. You will be granted immortality in (more-or-less) your current form—you won't age, can't be killed, etc. If you'd like, the being will grant this same sort of immortality to your friends and loved ones (provided they agree to it).
    c. You will live out of your lives as normal, and then be reincarnated/reborn as a new human or animal of your choice, with no memories of your previous life.
    d. You will live out your lives as normal, and then go to a heaven in which there is no hunger, pain, thirst, and so on. You will spend your time contemplating God, thinking about mathematics, doing philosophy, or something else of the sort. Your psychology will be altered so that becoming bored with such things will be *unthinkable.*

FOR FURTHER READING

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