

Cave, “Why you should not choose to live forever”

Notes and study questions, pp. 26 - 37

Section 3.3, pp. 26 – 32

Section 3.3 can be further divided this way:

- (1) Cave’s description of ‘The Immortal’: from the beginning of the section to the top of p. 28
- (2) Cave’s analysis of the short story: p. 28
- (3) What *meaningless* means in the context of living forever: bottom of p. 28 to the middle of p. 29
- (4) The argument that living forever would result in meaninglessness and Cave’s discussion of the argument: middle of p. 29 to middle of p. 30
- (5) Cave’s explanation of how meaningless would affect each of the four categories of living forever: middle of p. 29 to the end of 3.3

Cave’s description of ‘The Immortal’ is fine, but you may want to read [this synopsis](#) (or the short story [itself](#)). You might notice that the story doesn’t cover thousands or millions of years, and so the characters—or at least the main character—might not, in fact, have time to “do everything under the sun” (p. 29, top). Cave calculates that the main character, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, lives 1650 years (p. 30, bot.). But nonetheless, the story illustrates how an infinitely long (or just very, very long) life could devolve into meaningless.

A *troglodyte* is a person who lives in a cave (That is, it’s just a regular human, not a different kind of creature.)

Read the two full paragraphs on p. 28 carefully. How is meaningless (as it applies to living forever) different than boredom?

In the paragraph that begins at the bottom of p. 28 and then the next one (on p. 29), Cave mentions *identity* several times. How, according to Cave, would living forever affect one’s identity?

As he does in this previous arguments, Cave isn't precise about what is a premise and what is (or are) the conclusions in *the argument that living forever would result in meaninglessness*. Each of 1 – 4 contains “a person will do an immense variety of things” (or the same idea worded slightly differently). Call this *i*. The argument then is this:

- (1) If a person lives long enough, then *i*.
- (2) If *i*, then individual projects will lose their significance.
- (3) If *i*, then the person will cease to have a distinct identity.
- (4) If *i*, then categories of virtuous and vicious, good and bad, cease to have meaning.

So, then one way to interpret this is as three different arguments where the three conclusions are what follow the “then” in lines 2 – 4. This, for instance, would be one of the arguments:

P1. Living forever is long enough to do an immense variety of things (maybe even all possible things).

C. Therefore, for a person who lives forever, individual projects will lose their significance.

And two more arguments can be created with the same premise:

P1. Living forever is long enough to do an immense variety of things (maybe even all possible things).

C. Therefore, for a person who lives forever, this person will cease to have a distinct identity.

and

P1. Living forever is long enough to do an immense variety of things (maybe even all possible things).

C. Therefore, for a person who lives forever, categories of virtuous and vicious, good and bad, cease to have meaning

After presenting the argument (or arguments), Cave just considers whether the premise (i.e., the first premise in his version) is true. This begins with “the immortality optimist might respond

that a person is not required to do all things given indefinite time.” The immortality optimist is going to argue that this premise is false (which will mean that all three arguments will fail).

What is the immortality optimist’s full response?

Cave then offers two responses to the immortality optimist (both are on p. 30). What is the first? What is the second?

Toward the bottom of p. 30, Cave says, “However, as with the boredom problem, the problem of meaninglessness will not impact all categories of immortality equally.” The first three—moderate life extension, radical life extension, and contingent immortality—are not black and white. How meaninglessness might affect them can vary. What does he say about each one?

According to Cave, would meaninglessness be a problem for true immortality?

How does Christianity deal with the problem of meaninglessness (at least according to Cave)?

Does this solution violate the identity criterion? (And what is the *identity criterion*?)

Section 3.4, pp. 32 – 35

How procrastination might affect someone living forever is pretty self-explanatory, but notice the distinction that Cave makes in the last paragraph of section 3.3 between “partly backward-looking in time” and “partly forward-looking in time.” Procrastination—as Cave (sort of) states in the first paragraph of 3.3—is only forward looking.

What is the example about working versus taking a holiday (i.e., a vacation), and how does it illustrate the problem of procrastination?

In a couple of places in section 3.4, Cave combines the procrastination problem with the problem of planning if one was living forever—for example, near the bottom of p. 33 and near the bottom of p. 34. In these cases, what does he think would be difficult to plan if one was living forever?

Starting at the top of p. 34 and continuing to the end of this section, Cave discusses how procrastination would affect each category of living forever. What does he say about each? Which type of living forever would be most affected by the procrastination problem and which would be the least affected?

You know from reading section 2.1.2 (on pp. 5 – 6) what Cave means by *radical life extension*, but since you (hopefully) find it rather easy to avoid life-threatening disasters, accidents, or encounters with other people, you might not realize how significant these kinds of events are for thinking about this category of living forever.

Imagine that each year there is a 1 percent chance that you will die from a disaster, accident or deadly encounter with another person. Thus, for each particular year, it is very unlikely, but it will still be more likely than not that you will die this way before reaching 75. (If the probability is 1% per year, the chance of dying this way over a 100-year time span is not 100%. Adding up the probabilities doesn't work that way. But nonetheless the probability that it will happen before a person hits 75 is over 50 percent.)

So, even if the chance of dying from a disaster, accident, or encounter with another person is very low — say, 0.1 percent (instead of 1 percent) — the chance of it eventually happening to a person who is living for hundreds or thousands of years is significant. But it's still just a chance. (If the probability is 0.1% per year, there is about a 40 percent chance of dying over a 500 year time span.) Thus, thinking about procrastination (or any of the other three problems) for this category of living forever is trickier than it is for moderate life extension and true immortality.

Does Cave say anything at the end of this section about how the religions that postulate true immortality deal with the problem of procrastination (like he did for boredom and meaninglessness)?

Section 3.5, pp. 35 – 37

What is the prudential criterion? Recall that Cave explained this in section 2.3 (on pp. 11 – 12).

When we talk about the *prudential criterion*, we mean that if it is satisfied (or not being violated), then living forever is consistent with what a person wants for him- or herself. If this criterion is violated, then living forever is inconsistent with what a person wants for him- or herself. Thus, if the prudential criterion is violated, then a person would be better off dead. That's the basic idea. Read what Cave says in the first paragraph of this section to see exactly what he says.

What are the "two scenarios in which someone might conclude that they were better off dead"? These are stated in the second full paragraph in this section.

Cave discusses the first in a little more detail in the paragraph that is at the end of p. 35 and the top of p. 36. He discusses the second in the first full paragraph on p. 36.

Note that boredom, ennui, and meaningless are the main issues in this section. The problem of procrastination might be a reason why we shouldn't want to live forever (or for hundreds or thousands of years), but it doesn't figure into the two problems on which Cave is focusing in this section (although he does mention it briefly in this section).

Which category of living forever is Cave discussing in the second full paragraph on p. 36 (the one that begins "If someone is considering")? What has he "tried to argue" about this type of living forever?

What if you are not convinced by *all* of his arguments in section 3? What if you are "not completely convinced by any of his arguments ... that these problems are *inevitable*"?

How, according to Cave, do his arguments affect how we should think about moderate life extension?

In this section, Cave says that "perhaps the most interesting question" is "whether it would be rational to pursue" which type of living forever? One of the reasons why it is the most interesting is because, conceivably, this type of living forever is one that we (as a society) could try to achieve. The other reason has to do with what I explained earlier about the probability of dying if a person has this type of immortality.