

9. Williams on the tedium of immortality

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Williams is concerned with death. He thinks that death is sometimes bad for the person who dies, but he also thinks it would be undesirable to live forever. In this sense, his view may seem close to the popular opinion that “death makes our lives meaningful”. We’ll consider two of his observations: the first is a reason to think that death is bad for a person to die. The second supports his claim that we shouldn’t want to be immortal.

1 Reasons why we should want not to die

Williams begins his paper with a brief examination of Lucretius’ arguments that we shouldn’t fear death. We have already discussed those arguments at length, so we won’t concern ourselves with Williams’ views on the matter. It is left as an exercise for the reader to decide whether the criticisms are on point.

The main point of Williams’s discussion is this. Our intuition that death is bad is partly supported by the observation that, if we die, then many of our desires won’t be satisfied. Yet, all things being equal, whenever we desire something, we have reason to pursue it and plan so that that desire is satisfied. Moreover, all things being equal, we have reason to resist or oppose obstacles to the fulfillment of our desire. Intuition has it, then, that we have reason ~~not~~ ^{not} to want to die because dying would impede the fulfillment of our desires.

Here’s how Williams puts it:

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. But one future, for sure, in which I would not get it would be one in which I was dead. To want something, we may also say, is to that extent to have reason for resisting what excludes having that thing: and death certainly does that, for a very large range of things that one wants.

One way of resisting this conclusion would be to say that all of our desires are conditional on our being alive: if I want to eat chocolate, really what I want is to eat chocolate *on the assumption that I remain alive*, or something like that.
~~Think of having retirement money.~~ ^{It may help to think about how the desire to have retirement money.} Most of us want to have money for our retirement, but we only care about having retirement money on the assumption that we live to enjoy it. If we knew that we wouldn’t live long enough to enjoy that money or that there is no further thing we could do with it, we wouldn’t care about having that money at all. Call desires that are dependent on the satisfaction of some further condition *conditional desires*.

An objector to Williams' line of reasoning may claim that all of our desires are conditional on our being alive, and so, we wouldn't care about their satisfaction unless we knew that we would be alive. Williams offers a simple counterexample: consider someone who wishes to die. Surely that person's desire can't be conditional on her being alive, since the very content of the desire is not to be alive. Thus, at least some desires are not conditional on being alive. **Question:** When Williams talks about conditional desires, is he talking about desires that are conditional on being alive, or about desires that have no condition whatsoever? What makes you think that?

Williams thinks that the particular desire above is *categorical*. If we have other categorical desires (and Williams thinks we do), then our having those desires gives us reason not to want to die, or to regard death as an evil. For death would preclude the satisfaction of some such desires:

the reasons which a man would have for avoiding death are, on the present account, grounded in desires—categorical desires—which he has; he, on the basis of these, has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided, and we, looking at things from his point of view, would have reason to regard his actual death as his misfortune.
(pp. 87-8)

Williams thinks that this gets us in trouble: if, all things being equal, death is a misfortune, and it is better to live longer than shorter lives, then it seems that, all things being equal, death is always an evil, and at any given point it's better to live than to die. If this is so, it seems, it would be better to live always, and so that's what we should want. However, Williams rejects this further conclusion.

2 The tedium of immortality

Williams thinks that an endless life would be meaningless and undesirable, under the assumption that such meaningless life was a human life. In a nutshell, he thinks that it would be boring to be immortal: after some period of time, we would have already experienced everything that humanity has to offer, and then we would stop having any further categorical desires that grounded our reasons to remain alive.

Moreover, if what ^{grounds} ~~ground~~ our reasons to remain alive is the satisfaction of our categorical desires, we should want some guarantee that our immortal selves would satisfy those desires and come to have new ones. Yet even if our future selves had new desires, it wouldn't be enough that they had *any desires* whatsoever. We would hope that their desires are ones that we could care about and whose satisfaction we could want.

We could reconstruct Williams' point as a sort of dilemma. On one hand, our future selves may stop having new categorical desires, partly as a result of having experienced it all. Following Williams, we may call this horn the problem of *boredom*:

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. (p. 95)

On the other hand, we may imagine that our future selves come to have new desires, but this would only be reassuring if it could be guaranteed that those desires are ones whose satisfaction we would want.

On this note, Williams imagine someone who is completely absorbed in some sort of intellectual endeavor. Could our present selves want something like that? He thinks not:

More interesting is the content and value of the promise for a person who is, in this life, disposed to those [intellectual] activities. For looking at such a person as he now is, it seems quite unreasonable to suppose that those activities would have the fulfilling or liberating character that they do have for him, if they were in fact all he could do or conceive of doing. (p. 96)