

Would Immortality Be Worth It?

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Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying,
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

Upon realizing the fact of their mortality, people typically respond in one of two completely opposite ways. One common response, exhibited by Robert Herrick, the 17th-century poet of “Gather ye rosebuds” fame, is, *I’m going to die sometime, so I’d better get a move on!* But equally often the response is, *If I’m going to die, what’s the use of doing anything?*

These are two very different attitudes toward the very same fact: mortality. And when the very same fact can give rise to such widely divergent reactions, philosophers become interested.

On the former view, the *Gather ye rosebuds* view, life has value despite the fact of death; the realization of impending death is simply a spur to get going on the things that make life worthwhile. We each have a deadline, a limited amount of time to squeeze in as much of the good life as we can—so gather ye rosebuds *now*. Don’t wait around, for neither you nor the rosebuds will be here forever. This is also the view paraphrased in the words of a bumper sticker on the car of a woman I know: “So many men, so little time.” Or in the academic’s version: “So many books, so little time!”

The point can be taken universally: we can each change the words to suit our preferences.

The idea here is that mortality means you have to get things done. Your awareness of death is seen, in part, as a negative motivation not to waste time, to get going on the good stuff. You don't want to reach 70 years of age and say "What if I had ... "—and realize that you hadn't because you were too worried or lazy or had just gotten into a groove and let things drift. This is not to say that you suddenly embrace life because you suddenly find death something to fear; it is not a horror at the nothingness of death that, contrary to what some like Unamuno have argued, gives life meaning. The claim is that what the awareness of death does is heighten your appreciation of the value of the limited time you have available. Life is too valuable to sit around and just watch it slip by.

But for the other view, the *What's the use?* view, the same fact of impending death is taken to wipe out any sense that a meaningful life is possible. On this view, the implicit premise is that only immortality could make life worthwhile. Mortality simply makes life meaningless. We are all going to die, so what's the value of anything? Consider the seven-year cicadas. They start their lives as eggs laid underground, where they stay buried and unhatched for seven years. During the spring of the seventh year they come out of the ground and go up into the trees for a brief but frenzied bout of reproduction, lay the next generation of eggs, and then die. The next generation of laid eggs stays unhatched and buried underground for seven years, and the cycle is repeated. Is this what we call meaningful life? If you were a philosopher for cicadas, you'd say, "What's the use?" And we humans are no different, on this view, except that our mortal lives are extended for a few more decades. Even those of us who do accomplish a lot die, and all our creations, however magnificent, eventually crumble. So, the argument runs, everything is meaningless.

To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow
Creeps this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot; full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth* 5.5)

Those are Shakespeare's words, if not necessarily his sentiments. Others echo those sentiments: "All we are is dust in the wind," the musical group Kansas pointed out in the late 1970s. Life is transient, so life has no meaning. But then, if life has no meaning, we're just a step away from affirming with Camus that the question of suicide is the only important philosophical question. What difference should it make if you die now or twenty or forty years from now? Either way you end up dead forever. If only the transience of life were eliminated! If only the possibility of death were eliminated!

The *Gather ye rosebuds* advocates hear all this, and ask in a puzzled tone of voice, What on earth are you folks talking about? The world is a beautiful place, life is intrinsically wonderful—so don't just throw it away. Make as much of it as you can, you only go around once, life is too precious to miss a single minute of. The fact that we're mortal is not as important as the fact that we're alive now. Of course, immortality could be great—not because it would make life worth living, but rather because it would give us more time to do more or get more or enjoy more of those things that do make life worth living.

So we have here a fundamental opposition expressed in completely opposite reactions to a single fact. And this raises our question: *Would* immortality change anything, as say those who say mortality makes life meaningless? And would

it be worth it? Is the amount of time one has to live one's life the fundamental question to ask when asking what makes (or would make) life worth living?

My plan is to set up a thought experiment. The scenario is quite simple. Suppose you were immortal, but limited to continued existence as a human being, on earth. Would it be worth it?

How do we answer this question? In preparing this essay I started, as is normal in philosophy, by doing some field research. I posed this scenario to people and asked them what they thought. As it happened, most of those I asked were young men and women of college age, and invariably instead of an answer I got a worried question in return: At what age would I have to live this immortal life? Would I have to have the body of a 110 year old, or could I have that of a 25 year old athlete? Could I keep my present body and age? Or—horror of horrors—would I start off young and then slowly, ever so slowly, wither away as the centuries ticked by without ever quite withering away into nothingness?

If this is a concern, I responded, for the purposes of this thought experiment suppose that you would retain your faculties and potencies, that you wouldn't deteriorate appreciably either physically or mentally, that you could live forever in your prime, at whatever age you considered your prime to be.

That sounded pretty good to them, but then another question came up: Would you have to eat? I answered this question, Yes. It would be a *conditional* immortality, conditional upon you continuing to fulfill all the normal requirements for human life, including eating, sleeping, keeping warm, and so on.

Another question followed that one: Would the cows and the chickens and the other animal and plant species be immortal too, and thus not be able to die? Because if so, you wouldn't be able to eat anything and our supposed immortality would end rather quickly. To nip this one in the bud, I

replied: For the purposes of this thought experiment, suppose that only humans would be immortal.

But—the questions continued—what if we immortal human beings continued to reproduce and produced still more immortal beings and the world became overpopulated? Response: Suppose we found some way to solve this potential problem, by settling other planets, by birth control, or whatever. Our focus, I explained, is on what makes life worth living and whether immortality has anything to do with it, so let us set aside these sorts of considerations.

However, there is one consideration I wish to raise regarding some sort of unconditional immortality. I have this worry: If humans were unconditionally immortal, i.e., if humans were beings who could not die no matter what, would they even be the same sort of being? I ask this with the following in mind. If the alternative of life or death does not face a being in any way whatsoever, can that creature have *values*—can it judge things as good or bad, positive or negative? Think of it this way: Would such an unconditionally immortal being be any different than an indestructible robot? If it literally cannot die, then nothing can harm it, so nothing could be bad to it; and conversely, if it exists unconditionally there is nothing that it has to do, nothing it has to achieve, so nothing could be good to it. So for such an unconditionally immortal creature, there would be no limits, no framework for a value system to get started¹. And with no value system the question of whether life is good or bad, worth it or not worth it, valuable or not, becomes meaningless. The creature just exists, period. I think values are possible only if one faces, in some form, a life and death alternative; so if one is unconditionally immortal, then no values would be possible.

So all I wish to do in this thought-experiment is lift the limits of our biological clocks. Suppose that we can be immortal, provided we choose to continue to live and to do

the things that continued human existence requires, like getting enough food and rest. But if we choose at any point not to live any longer, we can put an end to ourselves. Everything about human life is exactly the same, except that there is no set amount of time one has available to live. Let's call this *conditional immortality*.

Imagine one is now immortal. Isn't it great? This has not always been thought to be obvious.

Let us consider Potential Problem Number One. I will indicate it to you by means of a quotation from John Steinbeck, a man who has thought a lot about things and come to some definite conclusions. What follows is an excerpt from a commencement address, written to be delivered to young people just graduating from college and about to go out into the real world. Steinbeck is accordingly trying to impart to those young people the most valuable advice he can muster. Here is what he wrote:

You are going out into the world and it is a frightened, neurotic, gibbering mess. Yes, my young friends, you are going to take your bright and shining faces into a jungle, but a jungle where all the animals are insane.

You haven't the strength for vice. That takes energy and all the energy of this time is needed for fear. That takes energy, too. And what energy is left over is needed for running down the rabbit holes of hatred to avoid thought. The rich hate the poor and taxes. The young hate the draft. The Democrats hate the Republicans, and everybody hates the Russians. Children are shooting their parents and parents are drowning their children when they think they can get away with it. No one can plan one day ahead because all certainties are gone.

If you work very hard and are lucky and have a good tax man, then when you are 50, if your heart permits, you and your sagging wife can make a tired and bored but first-class trip to Europe to stare at the works of dead people who were not afraid. But you won't see it. You'll be too anxious to get home to your worrying.

This, I think, is a good example of what philosophy can do to you if you don't get it right.

Berthold Brecht wrote, "The man who laughs is the one who has not heard the terrible news." What is the terrible news? The same news Steinbeck wanted to tell the college students. Fundamentally, the world is hell. We live in a nasty universe. Human beings are incompetents, misfits, neurotics. And we are all, quite rightly, damned scared. So you might as well face up to it, accept your lot, insulate yourself as best you can from life's messes, and hope you die a relatively painless death.

Now suppose we asked Steinbeck and Brecht whether immortality would be worth it. Their response would no doubt be: Are you kidding us? We don't see why *any* amount of life is worth living, let alone an infinite amount of it. Life is pain, depression, and horror.

This certainly poses a problem for the immortal life. How could one tolerate a neurotic mess forever? Wouldn't 70 years or so be quite enough?

What are we to think of this? If we do not agree, then how should we respond to such extreme pessimism? This is a question I raise now only as a teaser, for I would like to set it aside temporarily in order to pursue our main objective, which is to find out exactly what value immortality would add to life, *supposing that it is possible to value life*. So let us suppose we are not in this pessimistic tradition, for such pessimism negates the very question that is the focus of this essay. Suppose (if you don't already believe it) that such Steinbeckian pessimism is some sort of philosophical illness and that you do find or can at least conceive of some positive value to life on earth. The question is, Could this positive value in life, whatever it is, be extended over eternity?

Potential Problem Number Two: What would you do with all that time? Mark Twain's "Extracts from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" satirically characterizes Heaven

as a place of eternal boredom: folks just hang around and play harps. Is this what immortality means? Is it all standing on clouds, wearing a halo and playing a harp? Captain Stormfield gave it his best shot for a while—after all, that’s what you’re supposed to do in Heaven. After about sixteen increasingly boring hours he questioned a neighbor who had been doing the same thing: “Now tell me—is this to go on forever? Ain’t there anything else for a change?” Immortality is here conceived of as a static state: you don’t do anything, or if you do, it’s within a very limited range of activities. So after a while there are no new experiences and you start to get bored. An eternity of boredom, I think it is safe to say, would not be worth it.

Now, whether one is immortal in Heaven or on earth, the same potential problem of boredom arises and thus the same question: How does one prevent boredom from making immortality worthless?

But this is an important clue. Two facts—the fact that boredom lessens or negates the value of life and the fact that boredom can result from doing nothing or from doing some limited number of things over and over again—together imply that life is worth living only if there are new things to do. Only if there is a possibility for growth, a potential for discovering new experiences or for enriching current experiences, does life remain valuable. The moment one stops growing, a wise man once said, is the moment one starts dying. Stagnation for an organism means, at best, boredom; at worst, death. *Life is essentially growth*. Another way of putting this point is to say that life is essentially value achievement: setting goals, planning a course of action, executing the plan, overcoming obstacles—hopefully enjoying the process all the while—and then achieving the goal and savoring the beauty or usefulness or pleasurable nature of the result. The values to be achieved certainly needn’t be limited to any one range of items: they can include increasing your knowledge, enriching

your friendships, experiencing art, developing your career, and so on.

Supposing this is so, the question then for our immortal life is: Is there in principle a finite limit to this, a cap on how much you can grow, a limit to the number of new experiences it is possible to have? Yes. The universe is huge, but, say physics and philosophy, it is finite. There's only so much of it, and this is the problem. If there's only so much of it, then there's only so much you can do, and then what do you do when you've done it all—after you've taught physiology for 16,000 years, and after you've won Wimbledon for the 750th time, and after you've gained and lost 1200 fortunes on Wall Street, and after you've composed every possible piece of music for a piano with 88 keys, and then done the same for the harpsichord? We're talking about billions of years here—a big leap from the usual 75-year life-span we think in terms of—but after you've done absolutely everything, and had a great time doing it, there are no more goals. And if there are no more goals, what motivates you to do anything? Nothing. And if you do nothing, what's left except to be bored?

This problem of the limits to growth and the ensuing boredom can be tailored a bit. If there is a limit to growth and new experiences, then there is certainly a limit to *positive* growth and experiences. For after you have done everything fine and good (you've been a deep-sea diver, a poet, a professor of 19th century Romantic literature, an Austrian pastry chef, a space explorer), then to avoid boredom you would be driven to start working on the bad and evil. Perhaps you would set out to be a peeping-Tom; and then when that began to become boring, maybe you could try your hand as a confidence trickster in Rio de Janeiro; and when that began to pale, you could give the police and citizens a hard time as a serial killer in Montreal; and then when that lost its edge, just for kicks you might

move on to a stint as a bullwhip specialist in a New Orleans brothel. We are left with the specter of the immortal life leading us to exhaust the positive possibilities that make life worth living and then forcing us to seek out the evil, the nasty, and the unpleasant in order to avoid boredom. This is an unsavory outcome: life remains worth living only at the cost of embracing evil and destruction.

But even then, once all the possibilities for new experiences of evil have been exhausted, after you've become the consummate criminal and immoralist in every possible way, the identical problem of boredom once again looms large.

Setting aside the problem of resorting to new experiences—any new experiences, including evil ones—what happens when you reach the limit, however many billions of years it takes? There are no new experiences, there are no new challenges, and no growth is possible. There is nothing to do that you haven't done a hundred or a thousand times before, and so boredom sets in. This, I think, would be a state worse than death: death at least is a neutral, a nothing, a zero—while boredom is a negative: boredom is *painful*. This is also a boredom you can't do anything about, as compared with the garden-variety boredoms we encounter nowadays, most of which are our own fault or under our control to change. This is Boredom with a capital 'B.' So at this point, the point of supreme, irreversible boredom, death would become preferable to life. Your immortality becomes a burden and one aspect of the Myth of Sisyphus becomes true: you would have absolutely no motivation to roll the boulder up the hill one more time.

Supposing you reached this point, I think you would want the capacity to opt out. At the moment of realization of impending, eternal boredom, at the moment you realize that you have done everything, literally everything, you would want the power to end your life.

Unless there is some way to avoid the boredom.

One possibility is this. On any theory of the nature of the mind, there is at the very least held to be an intimate connection between mind and brain. In some form or other, our memories, our knowledge, our characteristic emotions and thought patterns—in short, everything that makes each of us a unique individual personality—are dependent upon the physical brain. The brain, however, is a finite physical organ. However much it can retain, it can only retain so much. I have no idea how much that is, but I would venture a guess that it is much less than what it would take to know and retain absolutely everything that can be known and experienced. And that means that before you could reach the end of the new experiences and challenges you could try, you would reach the point at which, in order to store and retain the new experiences you would have to forget some of the old ones. Think for a moment of the brain as a huge hard disk drive. Once it is filled up, the only way to store new information on it is to write over the old information, which means that the old information is lost.

This could be our saving grace with regard to boredom, for it opens up the following possibility: after you've done everything and are looking for something interesting to do, there will be things that you have already done but forgotten having done them. And since you've forgotten having done them, you can therefore approach and do them again with all the zest and freshness of the first time. So even if you already spent, as a young pup back in your early millions, twenty-two thousand years learning everything there is to know about volcanoes, you've forgotten all about it; so now volcanoes can be incredibly interesting again.

Could the built-in limits to our brain capacity prevent an immortal life from becoming boring?

But another potential problem arises. What if at some point along the line you discovered that this forgetting was happening? Perhaps during your three million year stint as a

neurophysiologist you found out exactly what the limits of the human brain are, and you found out that you have lived longer and experienced more than your brain could possibly have retained. This would mean that you must have forgotten things, that some major portions of your life are no longer accessible to you. *This* opens up a potential worry: whatever it is you are doing right now and perhaps enjoying seemingly for the first time, maybe you've already done it a thousand times before but forgotten all about it. This, I think, would start to take the edge off the pleasure of whatever it is you are doing right now. There's a parallel here to how one reacts to the thought of Nietzsche's concept of the Eternal Recurrence². If the cycle of world history repeats itself over and over again in the exact same pattern, forever—if, for example, you have read this essay a jillion times before, only you don't remember the other times, and you will read it a jillion times again in the future, and then a jillion times again, and so on without end—coming to know that this is going on would, I think, detract from whatever enjoyment you are getting out of this particular portion of the cycle. The new experience isn't genuinely new, you come to realize; it only seems new because you've forgotten all the other times.

If you discovered that this necessary forgetting was happening, how much would it detract? I don't know. But it is a counter-problem for the solution to the boredom problem. And probably once you discovered that you were forgetting major portions of your past life, for fear of repeating yourself you would start devising other ways to store the information about your past life—other than in your brain, that is; in a computer or a diary, or whatever—and before embarking upon a new career in quasar physics at age 13 trillion you would check your computer or diary to see whether you had done it before. If you found that you had and that you had spent 211 thousand years at it, would you want to do it

again? What if you couldn't find a single thing to do other than the things that you had forgotten having done but had done nevertheless? Eventually you would reach this point, the same abyss of eternal boredom would confront you again, and you would have a choice: to do again things you know you've done already but forgotten, or to decide that the only new experience worth having is a genuinely new experience and not just one that you happen to have forgotten about—and that therefore you would rather stop right there.

That choice is a long way away in the future, and it is not obvious which choice is preferable, or even whether the same choice would be preferable to every conditionally immortal person. However, for our purposes the situation that gives rise to this choice serves to sharpen up our initial question about the value of the immortal life. What if, in the context of the boredom problem, we now asked those who feel that only immortality would make life worth living: What exactly would make the immortal life worth living? What exactly does the mortal life lack that you think makes it meaningless? The answer would have to be along the lines of pointing out that if you were immortal you could continue to grow and learn and enjoy the manifold activities life has to offer; that such growth is what makes life valuable is the lesson boredom teaches us. But this is not a satisfactory answer, for it is the same one given by those who think life has value even without immortality. Why then is the fact that humans are mortal a problem, if in any case it is growth that makes life worth living and growth is possible whether one is mortal or not? Because, the answer comes back, mortality means that at some point the growth has to stop. One eventually dies, so one cannot grow forever, and so why even start? Only, in other words, a capacity for infinite growth would make any growth worthwhile.

But this sort of response is also problematic. The trouble is that one cannot grow forever, even if one is immortal. That is also what considering the problem of boredom teaches us. We are finite, reality is finite, and that's a fact. So immortal or mortal, there is always going to be a finite limit to growth. Thus, what makes life valuable cannot be cashed out in terms of an infinite capacity for growth. And if this is the case, then it cannot be that having an infinite amount of time available, i.e., an immortal life, is what makes life worth living. An infinite amount of time would only give you more time to do more of those things that make life worth living in the first place. But that is to say that life *is* worth living in the first place, that life has value independently of the amount of time available to live.

For actually mortal creatures, then, the point has to be to recognize that the amount of time available to each of us is necessarily limited, to accept the fact that that's the way the life is, and not to let that fact interfere with our enjoyment of the positive values life has to offer. The moral has to be, in other words, not to be trapped and paralyzed in the attitude of the young boy in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* who explains to his bewildered parents the reasons for his crippled sense of life with these words, "I am very, very sorry, father and mother. But please don't mind!—I can't help it. I should like the flowers very very much, if I didn't keep on thinking they'd all be withered in a few days." Whether your life is to be 75 years long, or 200 years, or several millennia, the principle is still the same: time considerations are at the very least of secondary import if not irrelevant to the value of life.

This is where we must pick up once again the challenge of Steinbeckian pessimism. Why should we think life worth it at all, the pessimist retorts, if life is essentially futile suffering and defeat? Immortality and boredom are not the real problems of life; futility and pain are. This has been a dominating theme for

the past century in the works of the great pessimists—Hardy, Camus, Dostoevsky in some moods, Chekhov.

Is life useless suffering and defeat? This is, perhaps, the point at which, as with all fundamental philosophical starting points, one either agrees or not—and nothing more can be said. If you think life is better than death but your interlocutor can't see the point, what can you say to convince him? You can always point to x , y , and z (nature, friends, lovers, family, advances in technology, puzzle-solving, art, exploration), but if this leaves him fundamentally indifferent and unconvinced, what more can be said? There is no value outside of life that makes it good, and if the values you see within life are not also seen as worthwhile by your pessimist, then no argumentative recourse is left. The only thing possible is to affirm the fundamental values you find that living involves and go your separate ways when he claims, as all pessimists ultimately do, that he finds "value" to be an empty concept. You can then only forge your own values and seek them out.

I do think, with Herrick, that each of us mortals should get out there and gather as many rosebuds as we may, that any amount of life is preferable to none at all, that human life is the most precious thing in the world. But it is because what makes life precious is that it allows for growth, for development and change, for constantly having new worlds to seek—it is for this reason that I do not think immortality would be worth it. Barring some satisfactory solution to the problem of boredom, immortality would have to become a burden. And then, after having had enough time to do everything worthwhile and knowing that you've done it, having the capacity to bow out would be essential. But until you do bow out, under whatever circumstances that happens, gather ye rosebuds!

The next question is, of course, Which rosebuds? It is here that ethical philosophy gets down to business.

Let me close with the final lines from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," which I think speak directly to our theme.

Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasure with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life;
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

That, I think, is the ideal. So to give my answer to the question of the essay, *Would Immortality Be Worth It?*—I would say No, but a billion years would be great.

References

1. Rand, Ayn. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet), p. 16.
2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974 [1882]. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage), section 341.

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