Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate

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Abstract
This article reflects upon the debate, initiated by Bernard Williams in 1973, concerning the desirability of immortality, where the latter expression is taken to mean endless bodily life as a human or humanoid being. Williams contends that it cannot be desirable; others have disputed this contention. I discuss a recent response from Timothy Chappell and attempt to pinpoint the central disagreement between Chappell and Williams. I propose that neither side in the debate has firm grounds for its claims, and then proceed to consider four reasons for suspecting that the whole debate has yet to be placed on a conceptually coherent footing.

> [W]ho can endure the effort to conceive an endless temporal existence?
>
> (Schleiermacher)[1]

Bernard Williams' essay, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' (first published in 1973),[2] initiated a debate that still rumbles on. Williams' central argument can be summarized as follows. What makes a human life worth living is the activity of pursuing one's deep, or 'categorical', desires; but it is a non-contingent fact about human beings that our desires of this kind are finite; therefore there would necessarily come a time when an endlessly extended life becomes unbearably tedious and no longer worth living; and hence immortality is, necessarily, undesirable.

Opponents of Williams' thesis have tended to deny the claim that human desires are necessarily finite. A characteristic strategy has been to cite certain typically enjoyable features of a human life of normal duration and then to propose that these features need not be diminished or exhausted over time – even over infinite

[1] F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* [1799], trans. J. Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 100.

[2] My references will be to the version reprinted in J. M. Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 73–92. The reason for Williams' essay being entitled 'The Makropulos Case' will become clear in due course.

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time. John Martin Fischer, for example, distinguishes between 'self-exhausting' and 'repeatable' pleasures, and maintains that there would be a sufficient number of repeatable ones available to an immortal person to make that person's life endlessly pleasurable and hence desirable.[3] More recently, Timothy Chappell has adopted a similar strategy, but with a few differences here and there.[4]

My aim in this article is not to try to resolve the debate, but rather to highlight and critically examine some of the principal assumptions and argumentative strategies that drive it forward, and to ask whether any of these assumptions or strategies run into problems of ambiguity or unintelligibility. I will begin, in Section I, by focusing on the main points of disagreement between Chappell and Williams, and will endeavour to diagnose the crux of this disagreement. I will then move on to a consideration of the major assumption that must be made in order for the whole debate about the desirability of immortality to even get off the ground, namely the assumption that it is at least intelligible to speak of immortality as an unending embodied human (or human-like) existence. I will present, in Sections II–V, four distinct though interrelated lines of thought that place this assumption in question. I will conclude that, in the light of the considerations that I have brought forward, it appears that the Makropulos debate has yet to be placed on a coherent footing.

I

Chappell, following Williams, proposes that what gives meaning to a human life is the pursuit of 'projects and commitments' that we value.[5] Chappell is broad-minded and non-stipulative about which projects might count as worthwhile, giving as examples the writing of philosophy essays, the building of friendships, and the raising of children, but leaving it as a matter of personal preference whether these or other projects are in fact to

[3] See J. M. Fischer, 'Why Immortality is Not So Bad', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* **2** (1994), 257–70. Comparable points have been made by, for example, C. Lamont, 'Mistaken Attitudes toward Death', *Journal of Philosophy* **52** (1965), 29–36, at 33, and R. W. Momeyer, *Confronting Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 19.

[4] T. Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial: Must Immortality be Meaningless?', *European Journal of Philosophy* **17** (2009), 30–44.

[5] Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial', 32.

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be pursued.[6] The point that Chappell emphasizes is that the meaningfulness of a person's life is in some way proportionate to the projects that the person fulfils; and in making this point he takes himself to be merely voicing a generally-held assumption. As he puts it: 'We think (and surely rightly) that our lives will be less meaningful, the fewer worthwhile projects we bring to completion or fruition.'[7]

An immediate worry that we might have about this way of characterizing what furnishes a human life with meaning or value is that it appears to formulate the relation between meaningfulness and project-completion in purely quantitative terms: the fewer worthwhile projects we complete, the less meaningful our lives will be; and thus, we may presume, the *more* we complete, the greater meaning our lives will have. If we had a better idea of what was meant by 'project' in this context, it might be possible to assess the plausibility of this claim, but as it stands it is too vague to be either endorsed or denied. In discussion with Chappell, it has become clear that he does not in fact conceive of the meaningfulness of a life in terms of the sheer number of projects that are completed therein; qualitative factors are also important. Indeed, he maintains that a life could remain endlessly meaningful if it featured only one project, provided that project was something maximally worthwhile and inexhaustible, such as 'the mystical experience of God's love'.[8] Since Chappell regards this sort of experience as one whose value can never be exhausted, he might need to revise his earlier proposal that it is the bringing of our projects 'to completion or fruition' that imbues our lives with meaning.

Perhaps Chappell could say that, in experiencing God's love, one enjoys a project that is, in a sense, complete at every moment. Yet putting it this way might be problematic, given that Chappell wants to maintain that it is precisely the desire for the completion of our projects that gives us a reason to desire immortality. If the project of experiencing God's love is complete at every moment, then it is not clear what sense it makes to suggest that, having experienced it, we could continue to desire its completion. There is undoubtedly a lot more to be said about this, but since the notion

[6] I would not myself refer to friendships or bringing up children as 'projects', but I will not press this terminological point here.

[7] Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial', 32.

[8] Chappell uses this expression in 'Immortality and Identity', the written version of a paper presented at the *Death: What It Is and Why It Matters* conference (University of York, 18th July 2008), 5. See also Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial', 40.

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of experiencing God's love is mentioned only in passing in Chappell's published article, I do not wish to get too embroiled here in further speculations about what Chappell means by it.

On Chappell's view, insofar as we desire to have a meaningful life we thus have a reason to desire to fulfil our projects (or what he sometimes calls our 'ground-projects'); and since death at any particular time would inevitably foreclose the possibility of one's fulfilling the projects that one is pursuing at that time, one thus has a reason to wish not to die then. Chappell adds to this point the observation that our projects typically do not begin all at once or get fulfilled all at once, but arise at different times and come to fruition at different, later times. He characterizes this state of affairs by reference to the metaphor of a rope comprising multiple interwoven threads of varying lengths, each thread representing the duration of a project and the rope itself representing one's life as a whole. With this metaphor in place, Chappell then depicts death as the cutting of the rope, highlighting the fact that, at whatever point the rope is cut, its severance will inevitably entail the breaking of certain threads – that is, the frustration of some of our desires due to the collapse of certain projects. Chappell uses this image to illustrate his main point, which is that immortality is desirable for those of us who desire to fulfil our projects. 'Mortality', he writes, 'dooms us, if not to the frustration of every valued project we have, then at least to the frustration of some of our most valued projects. Insofar as we value those projects, we have reason to value the prospect of immortality as a way of continuing to pursue them indefinitely.'[9] In this context, it is obvious that 'frustration' cannot be meant in the sense of someone's *feeling* frustrated at having been unable to fulfil some particular project, since it makes no sense to speak of a dead person's feeling anything at all. Rather, it is, we must assume, the projects themselves that are frustrated, in the sense that the agent's death leaves those projects incomplete.

Much of what Chappell says about projects and a meaningful life is consistent with Williams' account. Williams, in arguing against the Epicurean view that death is not a disvalue for the person who dies, maintains that one's wanting to achieve some goal gives one a reason to resist those things that might prevent the goal's being achieved, and since such things include one's own death, one has a reason 'to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil.'[10] Where Chappell's account diverges from Williams' is in Chappell's contention that the desires which generate

[9] Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial', 34.
[10] Williams, 'The Makropulos Case', 77.

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our worthwhile projects could continue being replenished without diminution or cessation forever. But how, we might wonder, does this contention of Chappell's amount to anything more than a flat denial of Williams' claim that our categorical desires are non-contingently finite? If Williams is right, then Chappell's rope analogy unravels. No longer will it be the case that, whenever death occurs, it inevitably severs some of the threads that represent our worthwhile projects; instead, we can safely predict that for any individual, given a sufficiently long life-span, there would come a time when the threads of the rope run out and there is no more rope to be cut. As Williams sees it, the optimally preferable outcome would be to die at the very moment when the threads of one's worthwhile projects run out; if life continues beyond that point, it can only decline into intolerable boredom.

So how is Chappell doing anything more than begging the question against Williams on this point? Chappell maintains that 'logical pressure' is afforded to his view by appealing to a 'familiar feature of lived experience'. But the familiar feature that Chappell has in mind is simply the 'overlapping-thread structure' to which he has already referred, wherein there is an ongoing succession of temporally overlapping projects that sustains our interest in life.[11] So it looks as though the 'logical pressure' which, according to Chappell, supports his view that our worthwhile projects need never be exhausted, comes from the fact that our ordinary *mortal* lives exhibit a structure wherein our projects overlap one another without a time's ever coming when a permanent cessation of projects occurs. Again, it is difficult to see how this constitutes an argument against Williams. Instead, it just looks like a blunt refusal to accept Williams' proposal that our categorical desires are finite.

The weakness in Williams' own position is that it relies heavily upon what he considers to be the readers' natural response to the fictional predicament of Elina Makropulos ('EM').[12] The predicament in question is that, having lived through three centuries at the

[11] Chappell, 'Infinity Goes Up on Trial', 36.

[12] The case of Elina Makropulos is adapted from Karel Čapek's 1922 play *Věc Makropulos* ('The Makropulos Case' or 'The Makropulos Affair'), or perhaps more immediately from Leoš Janáček's 1926 opera which was based on that play. Williams is not very careful to distinguish between these two works of art, as has been pointed out by Stephen Mulhall in 'The Mortality of the Soul: Bernard Williams's Character(s)', in A. Crary (ed.), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 355–79, at 359.

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biological age of 42, EM's life has been sapped of colour and enjoyment, and so she chooses to refrain from drinking any more of the elixir that would give her a further three-hundred-year span. 'The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM's unending life,' contends Williams, 'the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did.'[13] The implication here is that a 'realistic degree' of reflection upon the case reveals it to be at least highly likely that, among the necessary facts of human nature, must be counted the finitude of our categorical desires. The likes of Chappell demur: their reflections lead them to conclude, not that Elina's fate provides an exemplary illustration of what would surely happen to any potentially immortal person, but that hers was an odd case which cannot be generalized.

Thus we can see that at the heart of the Makropulos debate is a sharp disagreement about the contingency or non-contingency of certain features of human beings. Both sides concur that it is a merely contingent fact about human beings that we are mortal; if they did not agree on this point, the debate about the desirability of an immortal human (or at least human-like) life could not even get off the ground. Yet they disagree over whether our categorical desires, and hence our capacity for devising new and worthwhile projects to pursue, are finite. It is, to say the least, far from clear how a disagreement such as this can be resolved, and this, I take it, is why at least one recent commentator has proposed that the debate may come down to a 'temperamental divide' between its participants.[14] So, is the debate destined to remain at this impasse? My own view is that the situation may be even worse than this, and that there are good reasons for suspecting that the whole debate has yet to be placed on a coherent footing. This is because the participants' common assumption, that it is a merely contingent fact about

[13] Williams, 'The Makropulos Case', 82.

[14] See A. W. Moore, 'Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaninglessness of Immortality', *Mind* **115** (2006), 311–30, at 314. Moore was writing before the publication of Chappell's paper, and hence was making a general comment on the state of the debate, not specifically upon the disagreement between Chappell and Williams. Wittgenstein has noted the role that temperament plays in philosophical disputes more widely: 'If it is said on occasion that (someone's) philosophy is a matter of temperament, there is some truth in this. A preference for certain comparisons is something we call a matter of temperament & far more disagreements rest on this than appears at first sight' (L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, revised edn of text by A. Pichler, trans. P. Winch (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 17e–18e).

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human beings that we are mortal, has not been properly scrutinized. If it turns out that our common understanding of what human beings are is linked in some non-contingent way to our understanding of what it is to be mortal, then the sense in speculating about the desirability of an immortal life, where this expression is taken to be explicable in terms of a temporally unending bodily existence, will be placed in serious doubt. In the remainder of this article I intend to bring forward some reasons for doubting that it makes sense to speculate about the desirability of immortality in the putative sense just mentioned.

II

An initial worry that we might have regarding the feasibility of speculating about the desirability of immortality is connected with a more general concern about the usefulness of fantastical thought-experiments in philosophy. The problem in this vicinity is well expressed in a passage from Kathleen Wilkes. Here Wilkes is primarily concerned with thought-experiments in the philosophy of personal identity (teleportation, amoeba-style fission of human beings, personality transplants, and suchlike), but the dilemma that she sets up carries over into the Makropulos context:

> ... [W]e cannot extract philosophically interesting conclusions from fantastical thought experiments. We cannot do this because we have the following choice: either (*a*) we picture them against the world as we know it, or (*b*) we picture them against some quite different background. If we choose the first, then we picture them against a background that deems them impossible... If we choose (*b*), then we have a realm of fantasy, and fantasy is fine to read; but it does not allow for philosophical conclusions to be drawn, because in a world indeterminately different we do not know what we would want to say about anything.[15]

[15] K. V. Wilkes, *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 46. This sceptical view of fantastical thought-experiments is foreshadowed in a speech by Philo in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [1779], Pt 2, ed. R. H. Popkin, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 17: 'Were a man to abstract from everything which he knows or has seen, he would be altogether incapable, merely from his own ideas, to determine what kind of scene the

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Clearly, if one is to inquire whether immortality is, or could be, desirable, then one must try to imagine what immortality might be like. Yet as soon as one tries to imagine a scenario in which oneself or some other being is immortal, one embarks upon an imaginary voyage into a world indeterminately different from the actual world in which we live. While it would, perhaps, be unduly pessimistic to suggest that *nothing* of any philosophical interest can be gained from engaging in such flights of fancy, it does not seem unreasonable to be highly sceptical about the usefulness of these exercises. Yet the literature associated with the Makropulos debate is littered with bold claims based on exercises of precisely this fantastical sort, where the radical indeterminacy of the purported situation is typically masked by the paucity of descriptive detail.

The problem with this speculative fantasizing is (unwittingly) encapsulated in a remark made by Christine Overall, that 'what we are imagining here [that is, in the debate over the desirability of immortality] are individuals who are human in every respect except longevity.'[16] This implies that it is possible to construct an imaginary scenario in which the only variable to be adjusted is the longevity of the imagined human beings, while everything else about them remains unaltered, or is at least not significantly altered. But this, I would suggest, is itself a fantasy. To imagine a human being with a life-span dramatically longer than any normal human, let alone to imagine an immortal life, is to imagine, or to *try* to imagine, a world in which such a life-span is possible. Of course, if the life-span to be imagined is merely a few years or a few decades longer than normal, then the network of facts that surrounds our ordinary human lives need not undergo much alteration in the imaginary scenario; but as the extent of the imagined longevity increases, so does the strain upon that network of facts. While it would be naïve to suppose that there is some specifiable range of longevity beyond which our imaginings break down into indeterminate ramblings, it would be equally naïve to merely assume that we can have any clear idea of what it means to imagine a life of millions or billions of years in duration, not to mention a putatively unending life. It is easy enough to *say* that one can imagine an enjoyable immortal life; but it is quite another thing to spell out one's imaginings in sufficient

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universe must be, or to give the preference to one state or situation of things above another.'

[16] C. Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 145.

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detail to convince anyone that what one purports to be imagining is recognizably oneself existing in a world that is recognizably ours.

To illustrate this problem of grounding assertions about the desirability of immortality upon sketchily articulated imaginary scenarios, let us consider a case in point. In a relatively early response to Williams' Makropulos essay, Jonathan Glover writes that he is

> . . . not convinced that someone with a fairly constant character *need* eventually become intolerably bored, so long as they can watch the world continue to unfold and go on asking new questions and thinking, and so long as there are other people to share their feelings and thoughts with. Given the company of the right people, I would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went.[17]

Firstly, we need to note that it is by no means obvious what span of time Glover is claiming to have in mind here. In expressing his willingness to 'sample a few million years', he implies that he has something like an extended version of Elina Makropulos' predicament in mind, perhaps where he, Glover, has a potion that can prolong his life by some finite period each time he takes a sip. Although this is perfectly in-keeping with the particular style of Williams' argument, it fails to get us anywhere near the conclusion that a life without any end whatsoever could be desirable or even conceivable. After all, Glover's remark that he would like to 'see how it went' implies that, were those few million years to go very badly, he would like the option of discontinuing the life in something like the way that EM did.

Secondly, we see well exemplified in the passage from Glover the strategy of citing characteristically enjoyable features of ordinary mortal lives, and then presuming that these features can be unproblematically transposed from this ordinary context to one in which the life in question is very much longer, and perhaps infinitely long. But in arguments of this sort, the devil really is in the detail, and severely underdescribed imaginary scenarios give us very little upon which to base our judgements. For a start it would be interesting to know whether Glover takes himself to be envisaging a world where only he has the chance to sample a few million years or whether this opportunity is afforded to others as well. Whichever way we go with this consideration, problems are liable to arise. If, for example, it is only Glover himself who has extreme longevity,

[17] J. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin, 1977), 57.

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then we are obliged to imagine him outliving generation after generation of people. In this case any individuals with whom he might wish 'to share [his] feelings and thoughts' would, it seems fair to presume, have a vastly different outlook upon life from himself; yet since it is very difficult (perhaps hopelessly difficult) to imagine how being thousands or millions of years older than one's fellows might alter one's perspective, one cannot even begin to get any realistic grip on what sharing one's feelings and thoughts with them might be like.

If, on the other hand, Glover is taking himself to be one among a number of extraordinarily long-lived individuals, but within a world where the rest of the population have far shorter life-spans, we must then contemplate what sort of world this might be. How could it come about that one group within a species acquires superlative longevity while the species as a whole does not, and what would be the implications of such a vast discrepancy of age-ranges for the relationships obtaining between members of these different humanoid types? Perhaps imaginative answers to these questions could be devised. Authors of science fiction novels are very adept at constructing believable futuristic scenarios. But in merely noticing how much imaginative work would be required before anything more than a glib judgement could be made about the desirability of some particular kind of life, we notice how inadequate a response such as Glover's is. Similarly superficial is the sort of aspiration expressed by Corliss Lamont when he says: 'I ... *do* want to live forever, provided I maintain fairly good health and a satisfactory economic standard of existence.'[18] Does the highlighting of these two conditions even begin to show an appreciation of the momentous transformation that would need to occur in order for the world to accommodate the possibility of Lamont's, or anyone's, living forever? It does not seem to me that it does.

Getting back to Glover: a third possibility of his underdescribed proposal is that he is envisaging a world in which *everyone* has the chance of living for millions of years, or perhaps longer. But then we would have to wonder about such things as the implications for population expansion. If, in this fantastical scenario, humans remain sexually active and fertile for periods proportionate to their counterparts in our ordinary world, it is unclear how a Malthusian nightmare could be avoided. Yet if sexual activity or fertility were restricted in some fundamental way, then the kind of world we are being invited to imagine shifts in another direction. All of this is so indeterminate that, to adapt Wilkes' expression, we do not know

[18] Lamont, 'Mistaken Attitudes toward Death', 32.

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what we would want to say about it. Indeed, the proper response to a question about whether one finds it desirable would seem to be: 'I don't know: I have no idea what such a world would be like.'

III

A second worry regarding the feasibility of speculating about the desirability of immortality concerns the problem of conceiving an immortal life *as a whole*. It seems reasonable to suppose that a proper judgement about the desirability of a life requires, as a minimal condition, the possibility of conceiving of that life in its entirety, rather than just some portions of it. With the possible exception of some mathematical contexts, it seems to make no sense to speak of completed infinite series. As many philosophers, from Aristotle to Kant to Wittgenstein, have pointed out, while we can make sense of the notion of a *potentially* infinite series – and hence of a process that could, in principle, be continued without end – there is nothing that could count as an infinite series that has reached its completion, for an infinite series is, precisely, a series that never reaches a point of completion: it just goes on and on forever.[19] So if one agrees that a necessary condition of being able to assess the desirability of a life is that the life be conceivable as a whole, then it looks as though such an assessment cannot be made in the case of a putative immortal life.

One way of trying to resist the above argument would be to deny that the assessment of a life's desirability requires its conceivability as a whole. One might, for example, cite the life of some historical figure about whom we have only fragmentary knowledge, and propose that we can nevertheless make some assessment of the desirability of that person's life. Or one might claim that there are certain features, or certain kinds of achievements, that make a life desirable irrespective of how the life as a whole transpires. It is not immediately

[19] See, for example, Aristotle: 'Nothing is complete unless it has an end, and an end is a limit' (*Physics*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), III.6[a]14); Kant: '... an infinite aggregate of actual things cannot be regarded as a given whole ...' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A429/B457); and Wittgenstein: 'isn't that which we can imagine multiplied to infinity never the things themselves, but combinations of the things in accordance with their infinite possibilities?' (*Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. R. Hargreaves and R. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), §147).

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obvious what we should say about these cases, partly because it seems plausible to suppose that the criteria for assessing the desirability of a life have a substantial subjective component. However, there is a crucial difference between a claim made about the desirability of any temporally finite life and a claim made about the desirability of a temporally infinite one. This difference derives from the fact that, in the case of a finite life, even if we have only limited information available to us, we could in principle acquire a fully rounded picture of the life in question, and could thus reach a well-informed judgement about the desirability of that life. In the case of a purportedly infinite life, by contrast, we could not acquire such a picture even in principle, since there is nothing that could count as a 'fully rounded picture' of an endless life; however much information we acquired, there would always remain an infinite amount of the life that was unaccounted for. Thus, while in the case of a finite life it makes sense to speak of revising one's judgement about its desirability in the light of new evidence, and of progressing towards a more comprehensive evaluation of the life, such notions make no sense in the infinite case: one can go on acquiring more information forever, and still the life infinitely outstrips one's picture of it. I take it that these epistemological points carry over into the context of conceivability: no matter how much of the infinite life one endeavours to conceive, one's conception must always remain open-ended, there being no end to the possible revisions that would need to be made to one's estimation of the content of the life in question.

In opposition to the point I have just made, one might want to say that conceiving the content, or possible content, of a life is not necessary in order for an evaluation of the life's desirability to be made, perhaps because one holds life itself to be of positive value independently of what occurs within it. Thomas Nagel makes this latter suggestion when he writes that 'There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive.'[20] Even if one can make sense of this suggestion, however, it does not seem to undermine the view that a life can be so lacking in good elements, and so over-burdened by bad ones, that any emphatic

[20] T. Nagel, 'Death' [1970], in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1–10 at 2. I was reminded of this remark of Nagel's by Havi Carel's paper 'More Is Not Better Than Less: Epicurean Responses to Deprivation Theory', given at the conference *Death: What It Is and Why It Matters*, University of York, 18 July 2008.

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positivity that inheres in one's merely being alive is vastly outweighed by the life's negative content. If this is deemed true, then one must accept that content is relevant, indeed essential, to the assessment of a life as desirable or undesirable; and since any attempt to conceive the content of an infinite life will necessarily encompass only a relatively infinitesimal fragment, we cannot even begin to assess the desirability of such a life.

IV

A third worry about the debate over the desirability of immortality is that participants in this debate tend to ignore the issue of whether the sort of immortality that is being discussed is to be regarded as contingent or necessary. Since I suspect that insuperable conceptual difficulties attach to each of these options, I am doubtful that deciding whether it is contingent or necessary immortality that is at stake will result in the debate's being placed on a firm footing; but a decision on this matter certainly needs to be made if we are at least to be able to discern *which* conceptual difficulties are liable to arise.

The distinction between 'necessary body-bound immortality' on the one hand and 'contingent body-bound immortality' on the other was introduced by Hunter Steele in his article 'Could Body-Bound Immortality Be Liveable?', but it has been largely neglected since then.[21] In the case of necessary immortality, any being who existed in this state would be absolutely incapable of dying, whatever happened. This contrasts with the state of a contingently immortal being, to whom death could occur in certain circumstances; and if those circumstances were to include ones that could be brought about voluntarily, then the being would have a degree of choice over whether to go on living. The sort of scenario that we saw sketched by Glover earlier appears to involve some implicit notion of contingent immortality, although Glover may have been thinking merely of extreme, but nevertheless finite, longevity. And the predicament of EM, which figures so prominently in Williams' contemplations, is another case in point. Since Williams and Glover, among others, appear to be making claims about the desirability of a literally endless life while actually describing cases in which an individual has a choice about whether to continue living or not, the question

[21] H. Steele, 'Could Body-Bound Immortality Be Liveable?', *Mind* **85** (1976), 424–27. Among the few philosophers who have discussed Steele's paper is Overall, in her *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity*, 130, 146, 163.

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at the heart of the debate becomes rather murky. At the very least we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, the question whether the living of an absolutely endless life could be desirable, and on the other hand, the question whether it would be desirable to be able to go on living as long as one wanted and to choose when to die. While Chappell, for example, clearly takes himself to be responding to the first of these questions, and answering it in the affirmative, and Williams takes himself to be answering it in the negative, Glover seems to be fudging the issue and suggesting that it would at least be desirable to live a lot longer than we do at present. On this latter point, there is no reason to suppose that anyone involved in the debate would disagree.

The chief importance of distinguishing between necessary and contingent versions of immortality can be explained as follows. If one opts to talk about contingent immortality, then one enters into the sort of imaginative game that constituted the second horn of the dilemma posed in the passage quoted earlier from Wilkes; while supposing that human beings might not be mortal, and hence that the facts of the world could be radically different from what they are, one pretends that we remain capable of making inferences about what that radically different world would be like for us. In other words, while removing the factual foundations upon which our valid inferences stand, the speculative philosopher hopes to make some valid inference nevertheless. The difficulty here consists in finding a principled reason for holding some features of a human being, or of the world, constant while permitting others to be modified or dispensed with. As we have seen, Williams and Chappell both want to hold constant what they consider to be facts about human psychology while openly disregarding facts about human mortality. The danger then arises that, once having entered into a world of fantasy, the argument is liable to deteriorate into a battle between competing intuitive suppositions, and nothing of any substance emerges.

If, meanwhile, one opts to talk about necessary immortality, then one hits the more obvious and immediate problem of intelligibly construing any necessarily immortal being as recognizably human or even humanoid. Could, for example, a necessarily immortal being be made of flesh and blood? If it could, then, since a necessarily immortal being cannot die whatever happens, one must consider how a being made of flesh and blood could survive, say, a direct nuclear strike, or the earth's collapsing into the sun. If, on the other hand, a necessarily immortal being could be made of something other than flesh and blood, then one must consider how a being not

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made of flesh and blood could possibly be understood to be at all human-like. Again, perhaps the science fiction fraternity could go some way towards depicting super-heroic mutants or androids whose 'bodies' are invulnerable to every kind of assault. But if our question is whether immortality could be desirable *for us*, then there will be no point in speculating about the lives of possible beings with whom we could not identify ourselves.

V

The fourth worry that I wish to discuss here relates very closely to some of the points that have just been mentioned. It concerns the whole issue of what it is to conceive of a life as one that I or any other human being might have; and hence one might say that it concerns the conceptual connections that surround our understanding of what a human being is, and of what it is to live a human life. One starting point for these considerations is the following remark from Peter Winch:

> . . . I will say that it does not seem to me a merely conventional matter that T. S. Eliot's trinity of 'birth, copulation and death' happen to be such deep objects of human concern. I do not mean just that they are made such by fundamental psychological and sociological forces, though that is no doubt true. But I want to say further that the very notion of human life is limited by these conceptions.[22]

I take Winch's point here to be that, over and above the practical concerns that we characteristically have with such things as the births, deaths, and sexual relations of ourselves and others, there is a deep conceptual connection between these aspects of a human life and our very understanding of what a human life is. This conceptual connection would not be well captured by talk of necessary conditions for something's being human or having a human life, since such talk typically implies that we can grasp the concept of the condition independently of grasping the concept of that for which it *is* the condition. But grasping the concept of a human birth, or sexual relation, or death is not like that; these concepts are internally related to the concept of a human being in the sense that they form

[22] P. Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', in his *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 8–49, at 44. The Eliot reference is to a line from his play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926).

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part of the complex system of interrelated concepts of which 'human being' is a member. To understand what a human being is, and hence to be able to operate competently with that concept, one must also have some understanding of, among many other things, what it means for a human being to be born, to form sexual relationships, and to die.

Those who maintain that it makes perfectly good sense to speak about a human being, or a being *like us* that will never die, are liable to want to draw a distinction between the meanings of words or concepts on the one hand, and 'facts about the world' on the other. In a paper responding to an earlier version of this article, Chappell argues that even if it could be shown 'that "human" and "mortal" were analytically or conceptually connected',

> [t]hat would do nothing at all to prove that you, me, or Burley, could not be immortal. All it would show is that *if* you, me or Burley turned out immortal, then we would have turned out not to be human in Burley's sense. At which point I think we can reasonably lose interest in that sense of 'human'.[23]

This claim that we can set aside the ordinary meanings of our words and focus instead upon the facts alone is radically at odds with the sort of understanding of the connection between facts and language that is espoused by the likes of Winch, and to which I am highly sympathetic. Chappell's talk of beings such as ourselves possibly turning out to be immortal implies that we can hold onto our understanding of who and what we are while at the same time abandoning our understanding of ourselves as mortal. Chappell further suggests that the attempt to show that there is a deep conceptual connection between 'human' and 'mortal' can, at most, show that such a connection obtains only with regard to some more or less arbitrary sense of 'human'.

The problem here is that, for each of us, our understanding of ourselves is not detachable from our understanding of ourselves as human. So basic is this understanding of ourselves to our conceptual system that it is hard to think of any context in which it would make sense for someone to suppose that he or she might not be human after all. Outside of cases of mental illness, it is probably only in science fiction or fantasy contexts that it might make sense for a character to speculate in this way. Similarly, with regard to the concept of our mortality, when we look carefully at the pattern and structure of our lives, we can see that our understanding of ourselves

[23] T. Chappell, 'Immortality and Identity', 1.

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as human is saturated with the implicit awareness that being human involves – we might say *essentially* involves – being mortal. This is a bedrock assumption, a feature of our conceptual system that, as Wittgenstein might put it, 'stands fast for us' and is constantly reinforced by the complex swirl of life that surrounds us from one day to the next.[24] It informs our sense of who we are. We do not question it, because in view of who we are it would make no sense to question it.

As Martha Nussbaum has ably argued, the very values that characteristically pervade and give meaning and direction to our lives are not independent of factors such as our temporal finitude and mortality: these factors are not external to our values, but are *constitutive* of 'all valuable things' having for us the value that in fact they have.'[25] The suggestion here is that, irrespective of whether the inevitable prospect of our own death or the deaths of others is occurrently present to consciousness, this prospect constitutes part of the background against which all our important decisions in life are made. It is a structuring feature of our lives, and we cannot make sense of the thought of a life in which that feature is absent. Admittedly, on this latter point, Nussbaum is equivocal. While speculating that '[t]here would be other sources of value' that might obtain in the lives of immortal gods, she nevertheless maintains that the 'constitutive conditions' of such lives 'would be so entirely different from ours that we cannot really imagine what they would be.'[26] I take the main point here to be that, *for us*, the constitutive conditions of our values – the very conditions of the possibility of those values' obtaining in our lives – include the fact of our mortality and our pervasive awareness of that fact, and hence to imagine a life even remotely recognizable as ours is to imagine a life that is mortal.

If this line of argument is sound, then when the likes of Chappell suppose that we can abstract away from the given context of our mortality and yet retain a cogent conception of ourselves, this betrays a hopelessly attenuated conception of the sorts of beings

[24] For the idea of something's 'standing fast' for us, see for example Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), §144: 'What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.'

[25] M. C. Nussbaum, 'Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature', in her *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 192–238, at 226.

[26] Ibid. 229.

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that we actually are. Perhaps if it made sense to think of ourselves as something like pure Cartesian egos, mere empty vessels of consciousness that could be attached to any kind of body or thing, then it might also make sense to speak of ourselves turning out to be immortal. Perhaps. But since we are complex beings, replete with systems of values that inform not only our major commitments but also every decision and worthwhile project in which we engage, it makes no such sense. To speak of an 'endless temporal existence' or an 'embodied immortal life' as being something that *we* could enjoy or find desirable is to speak idly, to use putative expressions that have yet to be given a meaning.

VI

Finally, then, let me draw together the main reflections upon the Makropulos debate that this article has presented. By taking Chappell's disagreement with Williams as a case in point, we have seen that the debate hinges upon competing intuitions about the exhaustibility of our capacity for devising new projects which could sustain our categorical desires. While Williams considers this capacity to be non-contingently finite, Chappell thinks we could go on devising new projects forever. But, as we have also seen, these claims about putatively non-contingent features of human psychology are made on unsubstantial grounds. In Williams' case, it is his reflections upon the single fictional predicament of Elina Makropulos, from which he proceeds to make an inference pertaining to human beings in general. In Chappell's case, it is merely the 'familiar feature of lived experience', that our projects characteristically overlap with one another rather than arising and then burning out all at once.

Having suggested that there seems to be no clear way of resolving the clash of intuitions here, I then proposed that, in their rush to voice their opinions on the desirability or undesirability of immortality, neither side has adequately addressed the logically prior question of whether it even makes sense to talk about the possibility of our living immortal lives (where an immortal life is taken to be an endless embodied existence). I assayed four main considerations that I take to be pertinent to this question. First among these was a general doubt about the usefulness of fantastical thought-experiments in philosophy. Second was the suggestion that the desirability of a life can be reasonably assessed only in cases where the life can at least be conceived as a whole, and nothing could count as conceiving the whole of an endless life. Third was the concern that the

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distinction between contingent and necessary forms of immortality has tended to be ignored in the debate, and that different conceptual difficulties arise depending on which of these forms one tries to imagine. And fourth was the proposal that our very conception of what it is to be us is informed by our understanding of ourselves as human and mortal in such a way that, in the absence of these conceptual connections, we fail to intelligibly speak about ourselves at all. In the light of these reflections, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Makropulos debate has yet to be placed on a coherent footing.

Before ending, however, I should say that none of what I have argued here should be taken to imply that talk of immortality or eternal life has no place within human discourse. On the contrary, I think it has a perfectly respectable place within certain religious uses of language. What I have argued here is that, in the particular context of the philosophical debate about the desirability of an immortality that is supposed to be temporal and bodily, such talk has not been given a clear sense. In order to see what sense it might have within religious contexts, we would need to look at those contexts themselves. And that is a task for some other occasion.[27]

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