CrossMark

INTRODUCTION: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE DESIRABILITY OF IMMORTALITY

As we get older, our thoughts often turn more regularly towards death. Many of us would like more life than we are likely to get. A *lot* more life.

But what if you were offered the opportunity to live *forever*? Would you take it? I guess that would at least partly depend on the sort of life it was. Being in the presence of God would be ineffably great, no doubt. But, after a few billion years, wouldn't even that start to pall somewhat? The Bible tells us that a heavenly existence involves a great deal of singing God's praises. Author Mark Twain didn't find that a particularly attractive prospect:

> Singing hymns and waving palm branches through all eternity is pretty when you hear about it in the pulpit, but it's as poor a way to put in valuable time as a body could contrive.

It seems we humans are so put together that, while something positive like winning the lottery, or awful like losing a limb, can make us happier or sadder for a bit, we fairly rapidly return to much the same level of happiness as before. Before they win, lottery winners believe that winning will make them much, much happier. But it turns out that, a year after they've won, most are scarcely more content than they were before. We quickly emotionally adjust to whatever our situation is and regress to the mean, emotionally speaking. But then, in order to enjoy endless bliss in the presence of God, it seems something significant must change not only in our circumstances but also *in us* if we're not eventually to find even our Creator tedious.

doi:10.1017/S1477175620000305 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2021
Think 57, Vol. 20 (Spring 2021)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175620000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Is an eternal worldly existence desirable? Wouldn't that too become boring? In the opera *The Makropulos Case* by Janáček, opera singer Emilia Marty's (formerly Elina Makropulos) father provides her with an elixir. The concoction will extend Emilia's life indefinitely if she continues to take it. But now she finds life unbearably tedious. Emilia complains that 'In the end it's the same, singing and silence' and refuses to take the elixir again, preferring death.

The philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) agrees that while dying too early is a bad thing, dying too late may a bad thing, and – he argues in his famous paper 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' – being unable to die would be a curse. Even if some form of worldly immortality is achievable, whether through an elixir of life, or by our being uploaded in electronic form into virtual or robot bodies, it's not desirable. But is tedium an inevitable consequence of immortality? Suppose we could be uploaded into a *virtual* environment that is perfectly suited to us. It can provide endless *novel* stimulation. Become bored with one pursuit, and there are endless others to enjoy. Elina Makropulos became tired of singing and sex, but she could have taken up other careers. Elina might have become a surgeon, an explorer, or a scientist.

Our horizons would be still less limited if we had virtual bodies. We could create virtual bodies capable of visiting the bottom of the sea or distant planets unaided. If we desire social interaction, we could enjoy meeting an ever-expanding circle of dazzling people. And, given the opportunity to explore virtual realms, our options would not be limited to the actual universe. We could even explore other, physically impossible worlds.

However, perhaps the concern remains. Some will say: 'No doubt all this variety would keep us content for a long time, but inevitably, in the long run, we'd still start to get bored. Even endless novelty becomes tedious. New experience after new experience becomes a yawn. We would

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175620000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

eventually feel trapped and bored even by an endless merry-go-round of delights.'

I am not convinced that's true. I don't see why tedium is inevitable. In fact, most of us seem to enjoy a good deal of *more of the same*. We enjoy *some* variation in, for example, our diet. But then we want that variety repeated: 'Hoorah, it's Thursday. Pork *again*!' But if we're put together in such a way that we enjoy routine, why should immortality become a bore?

Even supposing some of us require constant new delights to remain content, we could reconfigure ourselves so that that's no longer the case. One solution would be to restrict what we can remember. Even if you have enjoyed an exceptionally exciting culinary creation a billion times before, you won't think 'Oh, not *this* again' if you don't *remember* enjoying it previously. Your one-billionth taste of it will be as scintillating as your first.

So, I'm not convinced immortality would inevitably be a curse.

I am grateful to Katerina Zacharias for her excellent editorial assistance.

Stephen Law
Editor, THINK

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175620000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press