"A *logos* that increases itself": response to Burley

TIMOTHY CHAPPELL

Mikel Burley says that he thinks that the Makropoulos debate can make no sense unless talk about eternal life makes sense. Here is his most striking argument that it doesn't – that immortality is inconceivable:

> . . .the concepts [of birth, death, and sexual relations] are internally related to the concept of a human being in the sense that they form 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. (Burley, 'Immortality and meaning: reflections on the Makropoulos debate', *Philosophy* **84**, 543–544)

Here, at first sight, Burley appears to be making no more than some unsurprising true generic claims about humans – that they get born, that they have sex, that they die. Yet from these unsurprising generic claims, Burley apparently infers a very surprising semantic claim: that it would be a grammatical mistake, a piece of nonsense, to speak of particular humans who didn't die, or who in some way or other lived after their deaths. This inference is simply a *non sequitur*, just as it would be a *non sequitur* to infer from the generic premiss that sex is part of human life to the semantic conclusion that it is nonsensical to suggest that a particular human might be celibate.

Humans have 32 teeth, yet I have 31. Whatever the fans of Winch-style argument by semantic decree may think, generic claims can be true without that implying very much about which particular claims are true, false, or meaningful. And in any case the books are not as closed as Burley seems to think on *which* generic claims are true about human beings. Perhaps our ancestors thought that 'Humans with lots of black bile tend to melancholy' was a generic truth. If so, they were wrong. We get our generics from our conception of humanity, and any conception of humanity, our own

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included, is almost certain to be both fallible and incomplete. The suggestion that eternal life might be possible for humans may go beyond the generic claims that we are sure of (or may not, depending on who "we" are). That does not prove that it is either nonsensical or false. Perhaps the whole point of the claims of religion is to extend our understanding of what it is to be human; perhaps Heracleitus was right to say that 'the *psyche* has a *logos* that increases itself' (Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 22 B 115).

I do rather wonder, anyway, whether Burley really means it when he argues that discourse about immortal life is necessarily nonsensical. By the end of his article, he himself has slipped back into that discourse. The last phase of his paper develops the thought that immortality can't be desirable because a conception of eternal life cannot mean much to me unless it is, as Burley (following Williams and Nussbaum) thinks it can't be, a conception of eternal life *for me*.

In Williams' original presentation of the Makropoulos argument, this thought was part of an alleged dilemma: given the chance to live for ever, *either* I would necessarily run out of projects, *or* "my" future projects would take me so far from where I am now that the future "me" would no longer be *me*, and so would no longer be someone that I have first-personal reason to care about. In my *European Journal of Philosophy* article, I said something – something that I think came to more than mere assertion – about both horns of this dilemma. About the first horn, I observed that Williams' odd focus on the strange case of EM's immortality – to the exclusion of other and more historically prominent conceptions of immortality, such as the Christian conception – meant that he did not do enough to exclude the possibility that a person might have either one infinitely inexhaustible project, or an infinite succession of exhaustible projects. About the second horn, I observed that it had a presupposition that seems very odd given Williams' other writings on personal identity: the presupposition that personal identity has to be a matter of fixity of character.

My main comment on Burley's final argument, apart from querying its coherence with what precedes it, is to take this last point a little further. We should distinguish two importantly different thoughts. One is the thought that I cannot care, in the special first-personal way in which we 'care about our own futures', about any future being that is not identical with me. The other is the thought that I cannot care, in the special first-personal way in which we 'care about our own futures', about any future being that is not uniquely psychologically continuous with me. The first thought is false; the second is true.

To see why, suppose, for example, that we adopt a robustly Aristotelian conception of personal identity, according to which I am

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essentially male and essentially human. And suppose that – as The Folk will most certainly express it – 'I get turned into a crocodile' (let's call him Snappy) or 'I get turned into a woman' (let's call her Sophie). Either by a miracle or by technology or by an astonishing cosmic fluke, my body and my first-personal stream of experience, which are currently the male human Tim's, both become at some point the crocodile Snappy's, or both become at some point the female human Sophie's. According to the Aristotelian, this modification of my body and transfer of my consciousness involves a breach of my personal identity. For I, Tim, am *essentially* male. So necessarily, nothing that is female, as Sophie is, can be identical with me. And I, Tim, am *essentially* human. So necessarily, nothing that is a crocodile, as Snappy is, can be identical with me. When Tim goes under the knife to become Sophie, or for that matter Snappy, he ceases to exist; as it sometimes – very misleadingly – put, he dies.

Even if we agree with the Aristotelian that *personal identity* has not been preserved across these transformations, we need not agree that *first-personal concern* cannot be preserved across them. If I, Tim, know that I am going to be transformed into Sophie, then it seems entirely reasonable for me to be concerned now about what will happen to Sophie after that transformation – even if my theory of personal identity (be it Aristotelian, or about fixity of character, or whatever) makes me deny on conceptual grounds that Sophie can be, or will be, the very same person as Tim.

For my first-personal concern for a future being, e.g. Sophie, to be reasonable, it will very often suffice that I should know that my first-personal consciousness now is going to be continuous with Sophie's first-personal consciousness once she appears on the scene some time in the future. As to whether Sophie is, *stricto dicto*, 'the same person' as me, I may well neither know nor care.

So when I am assessing a future state to decide whether it is a future that *I now* can care about or desire first-personally, personal identity does not have to be what matters. What *must* matter, I think, is continuity of consciousness. But whether that aligns with personal identity is an entirely open question. It all depends on your theory of personal identity.

Suppose then that Williams, or Burley in his non-Winchian mode, can show that some possible transformation of EM, which would allow her to carry on having a good life, would not be identity-preserving because it would not preserve (enough) fixity of character; and suppose also that this transformation *would* preserve continuity of consciousness. In that case, for anyone who cares about EM's well-being, a reasonable response to Williams or Burley is: '*So what* if

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'EM' won't be *stricto dicto* the same person after this transformation? Who cares about that, provided the new EM is a continuous consciousness with the present one, and is happy?'

Similarly, suppose someone can show that some future transformation of me as is imagined in the theology of Heaven, some increase of the *logos* of my soul into some exalted being experiencing enlightenment or *mystica unio* with the Divinity, would not be personally-identical with this Tim here – though that being *is* conscious-continuous with me. Here too, for those who care about me (such as myself), the same response is reasonable: '*So what* if, after this transformation, "I" won't be *stricto dicto* the same person as I am now? Who cares about *that*, provided the celestial me is a continuous consciousness with the present one, and is happy?'

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground, and dies, it comes to nothing (John 12.24). Perhaps philosophers who want think constructively about immortality, in particular about the Christian doctrine of immortality, should take more seriously an idea that is central to that doctrine: that the only place for the hope of immortal life to begin, is in the death of the self.

The Open University
t.chappell@open.ac.uk

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