

Immortality: Would it be worth it?

Would immortality that maintained a healthy 30-year-old body and brain as long as we wished make our lives better?

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I argue that immortality (suitably understood) will make our lives better. The argument proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I show that immortality is good because it removes *ageing*. Secondly, I argue that immortality is *prima facie* good because it is, in general, better to live longer. Thirdly, I consider the worry that life will inevitably be too boring, and conclude that this won't count against immortality. Lastly, I consider some worries concerning the type of life that immortality gives.

2. THE CONCEPT OF IMMORTALITY

The question that concern us here is the "Immortality Question":

"Would immortality that maintained a healthy 30-year-old body and brain as long as we wished make our lives better?"

As used there, the concept of “immortality” has a specific meaning. “Immortality” can be taken to mean different things. For some it involves merely the continued existence in an *afterlife* after death. This will not concern us here. On another, extreme, conception it refers to the literal impossibility of dying. Nothing could kill someone immortal in this sense; neither time, disease, injury, gun shots, and so on. This is also not the concept of immortality that will concern us here. It seems, if nothing else, extremely unrealistic. Surely, for instance, being at the centre of a supernova would kill anything remotely resembling a human life.

The concept of “immortality” used in the Immortality Question is more modest, but also much more scientifically realistic. As is clear from “as long as we wished” it allows for the possibility of dying from certain causes, e.g. killing oneself with a gun or throwing oneself down a mountain. Given this we should also allow that one can die of accidents such as falling down a mountain. It would be a mysterious sort of immortality if an *intentional* throwing of oneself down a hill could kill one but not an *accidental* falling down the same hill. The question also mentions “healthy”. Presumably, then, this form of immortality precludes the possibility of disease, at least dying from disease. Not much will turn on this, however. The central thing about this form of immortality is the ability of the body and mind to remain “young” after 30.

Lastly, I treat the Immortality Question as a question about whether immortality would, in itself, be better for the immortal herself. As such, I ignore worries about immortality connected to topics such as equality, overpopulation, resources, and so on (see Davies 2015 for relevant discussions).

3. THE ABSENCE OF OLD AGE

As defined here, immortality doesn't *necessarily entail* the absence of death. We'll return to death in the next section. But first, notice that it does entail that halting of *ageing* (process) and absence of *old age* (state). That is a substantial aspect of immortality which deserves attention.

Ageing is a long physical process of *decline* that ends up in, first, old age, and then death. Immortality allows us to halt this process at 30 and hence avoid "old age" – given the modest assumption that "old age", understood as a later stage in a process of decline, doesn't occur before the age of 30 (which seems plausible at least in all modern countries). This should be counted as a benefit because ageing is a negative process as "physical decline brings *loss*: loss of physical and mental capacities" (Galloway 2012, 1087; emphasis added) Compared to young adults, those in old age struggle much more with mental and physical impairments such as certain diseases and syndromes, memory loss, and so on.

Take Tom who lives *for* 80 years. Compare two state of:

- (1) Tom, at 80, has the mental and physical capacities and conditions of his *30-year-old-self*; and
- (2) Tom, at 80, has the mental and physical capacities and conditions of his *80-year-old-self*.

Immortality allows Tom to opt for (1) over (2). He is able to live just as long in both cases and but in (1) he is free from the negative aspects that ageing and old age bring. If t_1 is a time between, say, 70 and 80, then Tom will be better off at t_1 in case (1) than he would in case (2). Hence, *all else being equal*, immortality makes life better for Tom.

The argument assumes not only that there are some negative sides to old age but that having young bodies and mind is *better*. Of course, it is

possible to experience enormous joys with an old body and mind, and to experience despair with a young body and mind. People might find true love in old age, and people with young bodies and minds might hurt themselves horribly. But we must overlook such contingencies. We are here evaluating the essence of “old age” and “old age” is defined as a later stage in the process of physical and mental *decline*, and is associated with more pains and complications than young adulthood. Tom in (2) might find love at 80 but, I hold, it would be better for him if he found love at 80 in case (1). That is what we meant by “all else being equal” above. If the only difference is the state of one’s mind and body, then we should prefer (1).

An objector may say that only measuring comparative goodness in terms of physical and mental health stacks the cards against “old age” because ageing is defined as a *decline* in those features. There are, perhaps, certain other benefits that *require* “old age” (not only living long) which outweigh the material benefits of a young body and mind. One candidate might be *wisdom*, for wisdom is thought to be good and to require both large a amount of experience and a large *variety* of experiences. Consequently, wisdom requires *time*. Even though immortals, of course, have *more time* than mortals, one worry might be that immortals cannot have those experiences intimately connected to “*old age*”, e.g. being the subject of severe illnesses or feeling the threat of death approaching. Hence, immortals cannot develop the same degree of wisdom as old people can. Old age, not merely time, is essential to *wisdom*.

This conclusion is too hasty. We can only say that immortals cannot develop the *same* kind of wisdom as old people. We might, moreover, question whether wisdom partly built on experiences related to death and severe illness is of any value for immortals; after all, they do not have to worry about these things. The sort of wisdom useful for immortals will plausibly be constituted only by experiences they can have, not those that are necessarily connected to old age. Moreover, as said, it isn’t clear that

immortals cannot experience disease. And it is also possible for them to die accidentally; hence they will probably have some experience of, and appreciation for, the reality of death. We should, moreover, always be careful about concluding that “different” means “worse”. In this case, for instance, the different kind of wisdom is simultaneously a wisdom *for different* people, i.e. immortals.

Hence, I conclude that, as it compares to old age and ageing, immortality is favourable. There is nothing in old age and ageing that outweighs the benefits of immortality.

4. THE ABSENCE OF DEATH

While it is good that immortality allows us the ability to live into “old age” without actually becoming *old*, the central aspect of immortality is, of course, the ability to live *beyond* that. And it is an open question whether we can make the same type of argument as above in favour of the goodness of living *longer* than normal. Hence, it isn’t immediately clear whether immortality in this latter respect is valuable.

Above, we drew an intimate connection between the *goodness* of immortality and the *badness* of old age. Immortality is good because it enables us to avoid the pains of old age and instead choose the much less painful condition of young adulthood. However, it is not immediately clear whether *death* is similarly bad, and so unclear whether avoiding it (i.e. immortality) is valuable.

Those inspired by Epicurus (1994, 29) are pessimistic about the prospects of making such an argument. Death cannot be bad for the dead because, once it occurs there exists *no person* for it to be bad for. There’s no sense to be made of pleasure or pain for the non-existent. Hence, death cannot be bad for the person who dies. We should agree with these premises. But it is too hasty to draw the conclusion.

The common response is to characterize the badness of death not in terms of intrinsic (or instrumental) badness but rather *comparative* badness and deprivation (see e.g. Nagel 1979; Feldman 1991; Bradley 2009; Kagan 2012). Death is bad in the sense that, *if* it didn't occur, the person would continue living and experiencing pleasures¹. Its badness is related to the pleasures it *deprives* us of. Death isn't like a painful punch in the face; it is more like a robber who steals your new video game. However, it is unclear how to precisely measure the deprivations inflicted by death.

Compare two outcomes – one actual and one possible, respectively:

(1') John dies at t_1 .

(2') John dies at t_3 .

The naïve would simply conclude that (1') is worse since John is being deprived of certain pleasures at t_2 , for instance, that he would enjoy in case (2'). Suits (2001, 72), however, argues that it is absurd to conclude that since John *would* be enjoying some pleasure at t_2 had he not died, then John who actually dies at t_1 is being deprived of that pleasure. As he says, being deprived usually means "being in a comparatively worse position". But, the objection goes, John isn't *actually* in a worse position at t_2 ; he isn't in *any* position at all, for there exists no John at t_2 . There *is* no actual person, John, that could enjoy pleasures at t_2 . And so no actual person for whom (2') is better. We say that circumstance *C* deprived Smith if *C* caused Smith to now be in, say, *pain* instead of enjoying a pleasure. We cannot say the same of death and John, however, for it is a comparison between sensation and *non-existence*; not different sensations. So, death cannot be bad in the depriving or comparative sense either.

¹ We are assuming that this continued life will be *more* pleasurable than painful. Dropping the assumption allows for cases where death is better. See next section.

Whatever we think of the objection, Feldman (1991, 220) offers a way out. The relevant comparisons aren't between particular possible pleasures but rather between the *sum* of pleasures that are possible. Suppose John in (1') lives in possible world W_1 , and John in (2') lives in W_2 . John-at- W_1 's life has some overall value x , and John-at- W_2 's life has some overall value $x + n$ (where $n > 0$) since John-at- W_2 lives *longer* (see assumption in footnote 1). To say that death is bad for John we needn't make dubious comparisons between continued life and non-existence. Rather, we make life-life comparisons: a comparison of the values, for John, of *two possible (whole) lives* that could be his. Death is bad for John in the sense that it realizes a possible life-path for him that has less overall value than the alternative possible path.

There are various issues, not directly connected to immortality, with these sort of proposals (see McMahan 2003, §2) which we cannot consider here. Let me merely emphasize that they do seem to forget one relevant aspect of why we think death is bad: some degree of *desire* or *interest* (Belshaw 2013; Williams 1973, 85). It seems that interest, not *only* overall value-loss, is important to determine the degree of badness of particular deaths. One must also take into consideration how invested, or interested, the person would be in the continued life, and whether he has unfulfilled (categorical) desires. Not much in the following discussion will turn on these points, however.

In sum, then, I hold that death is *prima facie* bad and so that immortality is *prima facie* good. Given the assumption of pleasure (and interest), it is better to live to 100 rather than 80, and to 120 rather than 100. But how far can we take this reasoning? Does the assumption inevitably become implausible at some point?

5. THE TEDIUM OF IMMORTALITY

The reasoning-pattern just given assumes that continued life will be pleasurable and desired. This might be justified for a few hundred years, but is it reasonable to hold for thousands or years, or even millions? Will it always be good to continue living, or is there some point at which life necessarily becomes so undesirable or painful that we would prefer death? This is important, for above we connected the goodness of immortality to the badness of death which again is connected to the pleasure and the desirability of life. If the latter falls away after a sufficiently long time alive, then so does the badness of mortality and so, seemingly, the goodness of immortality.

In fact, Bernard Williams (1973) argues against immortality along similar lines. In essence: after a sufficiently long time alive, life will become, at best, utterly tedious and, at worst, painfully so. Living for that long will inevitably lose desirability, and everyone will welcome death. More specifically, Williams poses a dilemma. After a sufficiently long time alive, then either:

- 1) It'll be enjoyable, but the person alive will be so different from the initial person that they will be, effectively two different people; or
- 2) It'll be so tedious as to not be valuable.

Williams argues that after having lived for, say, a thousand years, one will not be able to do or experience anything that one finds interesting or enjoyable anymore. If one did find pleasure and enjoyment, however, this would require that one's interests, attitudes, and so on be so different from one's original one's such that one would count as a different person altogether.

Now, Williams' account of personal identity is controversial. Interests, attitudes, etc. change over time. Just compare your childhood self and you now. Most likely there'll be large differences without us wanting to say you are two different people. To keep it brief, I'll only mention that a more plausible account of personal identity is that of Parfit (1971) according to which persons can survive as themselves through large changes as long as the change is gradual and each "person-stage" can clearly see himself in the immediately preceding and proceeding stages, even though he cannot do so for the distant ones.

Still, even allowing this mutability of persons, it is an interesting question whether or not one can get bored of life. Will there inevitably be some point in time when none could want to go on living; a time after which none has the ability to enjoy life or the desires to propel them into continued existence? Will existence become utterly and/or painfully boring and undesirable?

It is virtually impossible to say anything certain about this, and discussion often refers to mere intuitions. Following Williams, Temkin (2008) and Kagan (2012, 239) and others seem sympathetic to the idea that we'll get bored of everything after a sufficiently long time. Temkin is already bored of classic rock music but has no interest in any new music. He worries the same will eventually hold for *everything* else that he could be interested in. On the other hand, Fisher (2013; Fisher & Mitchell-Yellin 2014), Lamont (1965) and others have the opposite intuitions. Lamont (1965, 33), for instance thinks biological desires like *hunger* and *sex* will never die out or stop giving pleasure. More radically, Fischer (2013, 352) expands the list of such "repeatable pleasures" from "mere animal pleasures" to also include meditating, enjoying art, doing philosophy, etc. Kagan, however, reports being unsure whether he'd want to do philosophy

forever, and Fisher admits that he cannot *prove* the opposite. I have little to add to these speculations about pleasures in the distant future².

However, we needn't reach a verdict on this in order for us to prefer immortality. Either life will become unbearably boring, or it won't. Suppose it won't: continued life is *always* more desirable and valuable than death (assuming no torture, etc.). The conclusion from the last section holds forever; and so immortality would be better than mortality. Suppose, instead, that life will inevitably lose desirability. This means that death isn't always worse than continued life. But contrary to the suggestion in the first paragraph in Section 5, this needn't diminish the value of immortality *as here defined*.

Immortality as defined in Section 1 guarantees a healthy young adult body and mind "as long as we [wish]". The necessary boredom hypothesis would only disvalue the more extreme sense of immortality which necessitates life *forever*. It is one thing to ask whether immortality *as defined here* is good, and another to ask whether *never* dying is good. The two notions aren't interchangeable. Even if boredom is inevitable, immortality as defined here make our lives better because it gives us *control* over death and the ability to choose when we've had enough. In fact, it allows us to reap all the benefits life *could* offer us. If the benefits never stop, then it allows us to enjoy them *forever*; if, however, the benefits do stop at some point, then it allows us to live life up until that point but not necessarily anymore.

In sum, then, we can accept both that immortality (as here defined) is good and that death *at some point* is good (i.e. when we have no interest to go on anymore). Immortality as here defined allows us to enjoy life as

² Some might argue that life is *intrinsically* valuable so there's always value in continued life. This is controversial and I agree with Kagan (2012, 262) that it must be possible to outweigh any such value if there is sufficient lack in pleasure or desirability.

much *as possible*, so to speak, by allowing us to enjoy it as long as we *could* want. Immortality isn't valuable because it removes death entirely, but rather because it gives us *control* over it. The value of immortality isn't dependent on mortality always being bad; rather its value stems from that fact that it makes mortality *voluntary*, so to speak.

6. THE ESSENCE OF HUMANS

The last objection I'll consider is that involuntary mortality is somehow valuable. Given the above, we should be sceptical of this contention. One way to attempt to motivate is, however, is by starting from the premise that involuntary death is an *essential* part of human existence. This can be read in two ways:

- (1) "Natural lifespans" are essential to human life, or
- (2) Involuntary death at some point is essential to human life.

Now, anyone arguing from (1) seems to me to be committing the "bioconservative mistake" of equating "different from the natural" with "worse than the natural" (see Buchanan 2011, §4). But essentiality doesn't necessarily entail value. At best, (1) entails that a life without the "natural lifespan" (however defined) will not be a proper *human* but rather a *post-human*. Let us grant that. This isn't a value-judgement. It is far from saying that the *post-human* existence is worse for us. People with heavily enhanced mental or physical abilities might be best categorized as "post-humans", but this doesn't mean they are worse off. Moreover, the above arguments suggest that it is hard to argue why it is better to live shorter.

(2) is more sophisticated. The idea is that death's being outside our control and known to be inevitable is essential to human existence (though it doesn't mean that lifespans should be as they are now). Any existence without these facts will be *too* different from human (or indeed post-human) existence. Scheffler (2013), for instance, seems to think that our lives – our values, motivations, sense of self etc. – are so intimately shaped by our understanding of them as finite, that a life without this understanding wouldn't be a "life" at all. He says, "we need to die ... because an eternal life would, in a sense, be no life at all" (2013, 95-6). The reason is, Scheffler (2013, 97) argues, that concepts like "health", "benefit", "safety" will lose meaning unless we recognize "that we are subject to death at any moment and that we are certain to succumb to it in the end". But without these concepts, the very concept of "life" becomes meaningless as well. Hence, immortality wouldn't make our *lives* better after all. It wouldn't produce anything remotely similar to human *lives*.

Scheffler seems to focus mostly on the importance of our *thinking* of our lives as finite and *appreciating* that it can end at any time. However, recall that our notion of immortality does not guarantee infinite existence. Both killing oneself and dying accidentally are possible. So, we will continue to see death as real and a potential threat. We have only considerable, not *complete* control, over death. So, even if death must be a part of our mental lives for our lives to be even remotely human, this doesn't count against our notion of immortality. True, death might play a *smaller* role in our worries and this might translate into different lifestyles. But we have little reason to think it will be worse. Look at history: throughout humanity's time, death has become less and less a part of our daily worries without this being worse for us.

An immortality-pessimist might alter the objection. The worry isn't that we must have some appreciation of involuntary death as a potential threat. Rather, the worry is that actually living extremely long will seriously

alter human psychology with bad consequences. Simply living for thousands of years will have disastrous consequences for us. True, human minds have evolved for very finite existences so it is hard to predict how they'll behave once we start living extremely long. *Perhaps* human minds won't function as normal. This is mere speculation (just as with the boredom hypothesis), however. But even if we grant that extremely long existences will result in *different* psychologies and lifestyles, this doesn't show that it will be *worse*. Indeed, human psychologies and lifestyles have arguably changed continually with the advent of new technologies (e.g. medicine or communication technology) without this necessarily being for the worse. Hence, pessimists don't have any impressive inductive basis from which to conclude that different means worse.

Of course, immortality-optimists aren't able to *prove* that immortal existence will *not* result in any unforeseen catastrophe. All we are able to provide are the sorts of arguments given earlier. But we are in a better position than the pessimists. They are arguing in favour of potentially keeping large benefits from us by denying us immortality. Optimists, however, are merely advocating a reversible position with potential for large benefits. *If* immortality turned out to be undesirable because of how different a life and psychology it would result in, then there's always a way out: voluntary death.

I conclude this section, then, by claiming that we should not conclude that immortality is bad based on arguments about the essence of human life. Difference doesn't automatically translate into worseness; nor does immortality *force* us to live in a potential undesirable immortal lifestyle.

7. CONCLUSION

The short answer to the Immortality Question that is motivated by the discussion above, then, is “Yes”. Immortality, as here defined, enables us to avoid old age and live as long as we desire, however long that may be. Immortality allows us to enjoy all the joys that existence could offer us without also forcing us to live in any unbearable infinity or painful existence. In essence, immortality is better for us not because it completely removes death, but because it gives us considerably more control over it. Such a life, I have argued, is better than a life without that control.

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