Chapter 5
Death and Immortality

Learning Objectives
■ Contrast being a living thing and having a life, and discuss which matters for the possibility of an afterlife.
■ Summarize Plato’s argument for the immortality of the soul, and describe at least one problem with the argument.
■ Explain the fallacy of equivocation and the fallacy of false dilemma.
■ Describe the relevance of the problem of personal identity to doctrines of reincarnation.
■ Summarize the Argument from Indivisibility, and identify at least one weakness in the argument.
■ Compare and contrast Epicurus and Lucretius on why we should not fear death.
■ Identify at least two challenges to the idea that an immortal life would be preferable to a finite life.

In this chapter we explore two questions: Do persons continue to exist after their deaths? And Is a person’s death always a bad thing for the person who dies? Although the first is a question about survival or persistence through change, the second is about values—about whether it is better to be immortal than to have a finite existence. As such it may seem to be outside the usual borders of metaphysics or epistemology, but a good way to explore the natures of death and immortality is to ask whether they are inevitably bad.

Most people who give any thought to these questions assume that it would be better to be immortal than to exist for only a finite time. The assumption seems a natural consequence of the idea that death is a bad thing for the person who dies. But that further idea—that our deaths are always or usually misfortunes for us—depends on views about the nature of death. We will explore those views more carefully in this chapter.

TALKING ABOUT THE DEAD
Our concern is with the life, death, and possible immortality of persons. To coherently discuss these topics we will need to settle how we will use some important vocabulary.

A person’s death refers to the permanent cessation of her existence—when she dies, she ceases to exist, and she will never exist again. How can we possibly say this with confidence? The objection to such confidence is as follows: A great many people believe that there is a life—an
afterlife—that awaits after death; some even believe that the afterlife is eternal. Furthermore, what happens after death is unresolved for a good reason: We cannot know what happens until we are dead. So for all we know, it is possible that we will continue to exist in some form.

The objection is a misunderstanding. We have only attempted to define the word “death.” Think of it as a decision about how we intend to use the word. In doing this, we have not taken a side on the issue of whether there is an afterlife. Those who believe that an afterlife awaits believe that we continue to exist, and so they believe that we do not die (as “death” has been defined). They may think something else dies—our bodies, perhaps—but they do not believe that persons die. By defining the word “death” (and, correspondingly, “die” and “dead”) as the cessation of existence, we leave open the question of whether we actually die. But as a result of our definition we do know what happens after death: nothing does, since when we are dead we do not exist.

Even under this definition, “death” can still refer to two different things. First, a person’s death as refers to an event that marks the end of her life, or the end of the process of dying. My dying is an event in my life, and it can be brief or protracted, but my death refers to the event of my ceasing to exist. But “death” sometimes also refers to the state or condition that follows the event of our death—the state or condition of being dead. The “condition” of being dead is not like any other; it is not pleasant or unpleasant, it is not terrifying or boring. We can best see this by comparing it to the condition of being extinct. Dinosaurs are now extinct, but that is not the condition in which they currently exist. It is the condition of no longer existing. To speak paradoxically: There are no extinct species or dead people. There are species and persons who no longer exist, and that explains why they are not suffering, or happy, or bored.

Like the term “death,” “life” is also ambiguous. Persons are living organisms for at least part of the time we exist. In this respect we are not different than carrots—they are also alive. Being alive is a biological or a medical status requiring, in our case, breath, heartbeat, and brain activity. But in addition to being alive, persons also have, or lead, a life. The lives we lead—our biographical lives—are the series of events, activities, feelings, and thoughts in which we play a part. A carrot is just as alive as we are, but it does not lead any kind of life. Because “life” is ambiguous between being a living thing and having a biographical life, our understanding of when life ends is also ambiguous. A person’s biological death—sometimes referred to as the death of her body—refers to when she ceases to be a living organism, as marked by the cessation of vital functions. But a person’s death refers to the end of her biographical life. We can leave open for now whether a person’s death must coincide with the end of her biological life, but even if they coincide they are still distinct ideas or concepts—which is why we can understand the idea of vampires: the undead, who continue to lead lives even though they are no longer alive.

Those who believe in an afterlife believe that a person’s biographical life continues after her biological death. Some people put this point by saying the body dies but the person (whom they might even conceive as an immaterial soul, or spirit) continues to exist. Finally, although the two are often treated together, belief in an afterlife is not the same as belief in immortal, or eternal, life. To have an afterlife is to have an autobiographical life that extends beyond biological life. But that extension might be finite. Those who believe in a finite afterlife eventually need to face their own deaths. Belief in personal immortality, on the other hand, is the belief that we never cease to exist, so immortality is the only genuine alternative to eventual death.

**afterlife**: Any continuation of a person’s life, whether finite or eternal, after her biological death.

**immortal**: Something is said to be immortal, or to have immortality, when it will always exist—there is never any end to its existence.
TWO ARGUMENTS FOR IMMORTALITY

In this section, we examine two metaphysical arguments that conclude that persons are immortal. The first, formulated by Plato, uses conceptual tools for describing change that were developed by the ancient idealists. The second argument makes an early appearance in Plato, but it was circulated widely in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries and it employs the ideas about change that were developed by ancient atomists.

Plato and Reincarnation

Although Plato presents a number of arguments designed to justify his belief in the immortality of the soul, many of those arguments presuppose other important Platonic doctrines, for which he offers independent defenses. However, at least one of his arguments for immortality can be kept apart from his other doctrines.

Plato believes that immortality takes the form of reincarnation—persons are born, live a human life, die, and then are reborn to live another human life. Some of those who believe in reincarnation think the sequence from birth to death repeats only a limited number of times. On their view, reincarnation means a longer existence for the individual, but it does not amount to immortality. But if the cycle of birth and death is repeated without end, as Plato appears to believe, then it qualifies as a form of immortality. On Plato’s view of reincarnation, the individual soul endures as far into the future as we can conceive, and it has also existed as far into the past as we can imagine. Not only do souls not die, but, strictly speaking, souls never come into being—they have always existed. Whether reincarnation is a form of immortality or only extends our finite existence, it is important for any version of the doctrine to maintain that the person who is later reborn is the same person who existed earlier. So a view about personal identity that will make this possible is an essential component of doctrines of reincarnation.

The following discussion about the nature of the soul is an excerpt from a dialogue set in the hours leading up to Socrates’s execution. Socrates tries to console his disciples, among them a young man named Cebes, by proving that he will not perish.

Proof of Reincarnation (Plato)¹

Cebes answered: I agree, Socrates, in the greater part of what you say. But in what concerns the soul, men are apt to be incredulous; they fear that when she has left the body her place may be nowhere, and that on the very day of death she may perish and come to an end—immediately on her release from the body, issuing forth dispersed like smoke or air and in her flight vanishing away into nothingness. If she could only be collected into herself after she has obtained release from the evils of which you are speaking, there would be good reason to hope, Socrates, that what you say is true. But surely it requires a great deal of argument and many proofs to show that when the man is dead his soul yet exists, and has any force or intelligence.

True, Cebes, said Socrates; and shall I suggest that we converse a little of the probabilities of these things?

I am sure, said Cebes, that I should greatly like to know your opinion about them.

I reckon, said Socrates, that no one who heard me now, not even if he were one of my old enemies, the Comic poets, could accuse me of idle talking about matters in which I have no concern:—If you please, then, we will proceed with the inquiry.

Suppose we consider the question whether the souls of men after death are or are not in the world below. There comes into my mind an ancient doctrine which affirms that they go from hence into the other world, and returning hither, are born again from the dead. Now if it be true that the living come from the dead, then our souls must exist in the other world, for if not, how could they have been born again? And this would be conclusive, if there were any real evidence that the living are only born from the dead; but if this is not so, then other arguments will have to be adduced.

Very true, replied Cebes.

Then let us consider the whole question, not in relation to man only, but in relation to animals generally, and to plants, and to everything of which there is generation, and the proof will be easier. Are not all things which have opposites generated out of their opposites? I mean such things as good and evil, just and unjust—and there are innumerable other opposites which are generated out of opposites. And I want to show that in all opposites there is of necessity a similar alternation; I mean to say, for example, that anything which becomes greater must become greater after being less.

True.

And that which becomes less must have been once greater and then have become less.

Yes.

And the weaker is generated from the stronger, and the swifter from the slower.

Very true.

And the worse is from the better, and the more just is from the more unjust.

Of course.

And is this true of all opposites? and are we convinced that all of them are generated out of opposites?

Yes.

And in this universal opposition of all things, are there not also two intermediate processes which are ever going on, from one to the other opposite, and back again; where there is a greater and a less there is also an intermediate process of increase and diminution, and that which grows is said to wax, and that which decays to wane?

Yes, he said.

And there are many other processes, such as division and composition, cooling and heating, which equally involve a passage into and out of one another. And this necessarily holds of all opposites, even though not always expressed in words—they are really generated out of one another, and there is a passing or process from one to the other of them?

Very true, he replied.

Well, and is there not an opposite of life, as sleep is the opposite of waking?

True, he said.

And what is it?

Death, he answered.

And these, if they are opposites, are generated the one from the other, and have there their two intermediate processes also?

Of course.

Now, said Socrates, I will analyze one of the two pairs of opposites which I have mentioned to you, and also its intermediate processes, and you shall analyze the other
to me. One of them I term sleep, the other waking. The state of sleep is opposed to the state of waking, and out of sleeping waking is generated, and out of waking, sleeping; and the process of generation is in the one case falling asleep, and in the other waking up. Do you agree?

I entirely agree.

Then, suppose that you analyze life and death to me in the same manner. Is not death opposed to life?

Yes.

And are they generated one from the other?

Yes.

What is generated from the living?

The dead.

And what from the dead?

I can only say in answer—the living.

Then the living, whether things or persons, Cebes, are generated from the dead?

That is clear, he replied.

Then the inference is that our souls exist in the world below?

That is true.

And one of the two processes or generations is visible—for surely the act of dying is visible?

Surely, he said.

What then is to be the result? Shall we exclude the opposite process? And shall we suppose nature to walk on one leg only? Must we not rather assign to death some corresponding process of generation?

Certainly, he replied.

And what is that process?

Return to life.

And return to life, if there be such a thing, is the birth of the dead into the world of the living?

Quite true.

Then here is a new way by which we arrive at the conclusion that the living come from the dead, just as the dead come from the living; and this, if true, affords a most certain proof that the souls of the dead exist in some place out of which they come again.

Yes, Socrates, he said; the conclusion seems to flow necessarily out of our previous admissions.

**The Argument from Opposites**

We can reconstruct the central argument for immortality and reincarnation in Plato’s discussion as follows:

1. Everything that comes to be comes to be from its opposite.
2. The Dead and the Living are opposites.
3. So, the Dead come to be from the Living, and the Living come to be from the Dead.

This, Plato thinks, supports the idea that just as those who are dead must previously have been living, so we who are alive must previously have been dead. This gives rise to a potentially endless cycle of life and death. How good is this argument?
The first premise of this Argument from Opposites states a view about change that goes back to Parmenides. If a man becomes an insect, then something that is an insect comes to be from something that is not an insect—in that way, whatever “comes to be” comes from its opposite. Plato’s argument depends crucially on the idea of “opposites,” which makes an appearance in both premises. To say that two things are opposites means that nothing can be both of the two at the same time. In effect, they exclude one another. But even within the constraints of this definition, we see that there are two different kinds of opposites:

**Contradictories:** Opposites such that (i) nothing can be both of them (at the same time) and, furthermore, (ii) whatever is not one of the two contradictories must be the other.

Between them, two contradictories must cover all the options. For example, spherical and non-spherical (or not spherical) are contradictories, since (i) nothing can be both spherical and non-spherical (at the same time), and (ii) whatever is not spherical is non-spherical.

**Contraries:** Opposites such that (i) nothing can be both of them (at the same time), but (ii) some things can be neither of the two contraries.

For example, black and white are contraries since (i) nothing can be black and white (all over, at the same time), but (ii) some things can be neither black nor white—they might be red or blue. Contradictories and contraries are both species of opposites because of what they share in (i), but they are different kinds of opposites because they differ in (ii).

Which of these two kinds of opposites—contradictories or contraries—is employed in Plato’s argument for reincarnation? The first premise of his argument seems plausible when we understand it as saying that whatever comes to be must come to be from its contradictory. Thus, nothing can come to be spherical unless it was first not spherical; nothing can come to be green unless earlier it was not green, and so on. But the first premise does not seem true, or even plausible, if Plato is referring to contraries. Using black and white as our example, it is clear that something can become white without having been black: Before it became white it might have been red. So if the first premise of the argument is to remain plausible, we need to understand “opposites” in that premise as referring to contradictories and not to contraries.

Let us turn to the second premise of Plato’s argument: the claim that the living and the dead are opposites. What sort of opposites are the living and the dead—contradictories or contraries? It is not plausible that the dead are the contradictories of the living, since the living and the dead do not cover all the options. Some things are neither living nor dead, but are simply inanimate. If that is right, then the living and the dead are contraries. But in that case we cannot conclude from the fact that something comes to be living that it must have been dead; it may have been inanimate. Contradictories must come from their contradictories, but contraries do not need to come from their contraries. So one reply to Plato’s argument would be that most living things come to be from other living things (for example, parents), but living things in general come to be from inanimate things. In that case, life comes from nonlife, and not from the dead (the deceased).
Plato's argument then commits the **fallacy of equivocation**: It equivocates by using the single term "opposites" with two different meanings. The first premise is only plausible if "opposites" means "contradictories," but the second premise is only plausible if "opposites" means "contraries." If "opposites" had the same meaning (whether contradictories or contraries) in both premises, then at least one of the premises would be implausible. But if "opposites" means different things in different premises—for example, if it means "contradictory" in the first premise but means "contrary" in the second—then the premises will both be plausible but the argument will be invalid.

There is, in addition, a problem common to most views involving reincarnation, including Plato's. On Plato's account, the souls of the dead drink from the waters of the river Lethe (meaning "forgetfulness") before they can be reincarnated, and this erases all memory of the life that has just ended. Plato must say something like this if he wants us to believe that we have had many previous lives when we have no recollection of them. This confronts the doctrine of reincarnation with a **dilemma**.

On the one hand, the fact that we have no knowledge or memory of any previous life suggests that there might be no psychological continuity between the person in one life and the person in her next life. According to John Locke, a later self must remember the thoughts and deeds of any earlier self if they are to be different stages of the same person. But even those who think Locke's requirement is too stringent often hold that there must be some form of psychological continuity between two selves if they are to qualify as different stages of the same person. Such philosophers will surely look at Plato’s doctrine of...
reincarnation and say that even if the same soul is reborn again, it is not enough for the same person to be reborn. According to this criticism, in Plato's account my soul continues to exist after my death (or the death of my body), but I do not continue to exist. He owes us an account of why we should believe our reincarnated souls are reincarnations of us. Unless it is accompanied by an account of personal identity that can ease this worry, it is unlikely that reincarnation can be the basis for a theory of personal immortality.

On the other hand, suppose Plato does somehow satisfy us that we are our reincarnated souls—that their survival is also our survival. Plato will then have an account of personal immortality. But, unless his account includes significant psychological ties to my future reincarnations, it is utterly unclear why I (now) should care whether I survive. Immortal life loses its attraction if there are no significant psychological connections between our earlier and later selves. David Hume expressed this worry best: “The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth: And if the former state of existence no wise concerned us, neither will the latter.” 2 In other words, we have no interest in our past selves if we have no psychological connections to them, and the same will be true of any future selves with whom we have no psychological connection—their continued survival will not matter to us.

So the dilemma Plato's doctrine of reincarnation poses is that if we have no significant psychological connections to any future incarnations of our souls, then either those future incarnations of our soul are no longer us, in which case we do not survive the deaths of our bodies, or they are us, but we have no reason to care whether we survive.

**Body Parts**

The second argument for immortality we will consider also has ancient origins, but it was revived many times in later millennia. In the same dialogue as the Argument from Opposites, Socrates confronts the worry that on the death of the body the soul might be “dispersed like smoke or air”:

> Now the compound or composite may be supposed to be naturally capable, as of being compounded, so also of being dissolved; but that which is uncompounded, and that only, must be, if anything is, indissoluble. . . .
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> And the uncompounded may be assumed to be the same and unchanging, whereas the compound is always changing and never the same. 3

Socrates's reply points out that only things consisting of many parts (“compounded”) can be decomposed into parts and dispersed in the wind. Things that are not compounded of parts (“uncompounded”) are immune to dissolution and dispersal—they are, in effect, indestructible. This was the idea behind ancient atomism: Change, and destruction, consists in the re-arrangement and dispersal of parts, so what has no parts cannot change or be destroyed. We know the body is compounded of parts, and so will be dispersed, but how can we determine if the soul is also divisible into parts? Plato attempts to answer by

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appealing to the ways in which he thinks souls resemble divine beings, and so we might expect them to also partake of the immortality of divine beings. None of this is which a reason to think the soul is not divisible into parts, but it is easy to discern a simple argument for immortality in Socrates’s suggestion:

1. The human body is divisible into parts.
2. The person (or, mind, soul, self, etc.) is not divisible into parts.
3. Whatever is divisible is destructible; whatever is indivisible is indestructible.
4. Therefore, the human body is destructible, but persons (minds, souls, selves, etc.) are not destructible.

This argument, which we will call the Argument from Indivisibility, seems a good start toward the conclusion that persons are immortal. Variations on the argument were widely promoted in the cause of immortality. It is easy to agree with the first premise, so the challenge is to make the second premise seem plausible. We will look briefly at two attempts to justify the second premise—one from the seventeenth century and one from the eighteenth century.

Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1640) offers a variant of the Argument from Indivisibility to show that minds and bodies are distinct things, and he sees clearly that it suggests that minds could be immortal. But he also offers a justification for the premise that the mind is not divisible into parts. In his Sixth Meditation, Descartes writes:

> [W]hen I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet if a foot, or an arm, or some other part, is separated from my body, I am aware that nothing has been taken away from my mind. And the faculties of willing, feeling, conceiving, etc. cannot be properly speaking said to be its parts, for it is one and the same mind which employs itself in willing and in feeling and understanding.

We are not likely to find Descartes’s central claim persuasive. He may be correct that the loss of my foot does not “take away from” my mind, but that is not, by itself, a good reason to think my mind does not have parts. It can only be a reason for saying that my foot is not a part of my mind. Furthermore, we have ample reason to think that the loss of parts of the brain can “take away from” a person’s mind. By Descartes’s reasoning, that should suggest that the mind has parts—even physical parts.

We might answer Descartes by saying that the loss of parts of the brain can result in the loss of mental faculties, and the loss of a mental faculty is the loss of part of the mind. But Descartes immediately tries to block this objection: The division of the mind into various mental faculties is not, he thinks, a division of the mind into parts, and so the loss of a mental faculty is not the loss of a part of the mind. The various faculties of the mind—perception, willing, feeling, and so on—are only different tasks that one and the same mind performs. In other words, Descartes claims that the will is not one part of

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Argument from Indivisibility: Argument for the immortality of the soul that depends on the idea that the soul, unlike the body, cannot be divided into parts. Versions appeared as early as Plato, but variations of the argument are widespread in the modern era and can be found in philosophers as diverse as René Descartes and Thomas Reid.

René Descartes: French philosopher and mathematician who made major contributions to seventeenth-century science and philosophy. He is best known for his development and defense of a foundationalist theory of knowledge, his dualist theory of mind, and lasting contributions to geometry.

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the mind and the imagination another part; rather, willing and imagining are different tasks that the same entity performs.

It is not clear how we should evaluate Descartes's claim that mental faculties are different activities of the mind and not different parts, but even if he were right, it would not be a good reason to think that minds lack parts. After all, running and swimming are not different parts, but only different activities. They are performed by the same parts—by my arms, legs, muscles, lungs, and so on. We can even say that these various activities are all performed by one and the same physical body. But that does not imply that the body that performs those different tasks has no parts. Similarly, if the different mental activities of willing, feeling, and thinking are different tasks performed by the same mind, this would not imply that the mind has no parts.

Descartes’s considerations do not appear to show that the mind is indivisible, and so do not successfully support the second premise of the Argument from Indivisibility. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Thomas Reid promoted a closely related attempt to defend the idea that persons are not divisible into parts:

[All mankind place their personality in something that cannot be divided, or consist of parts. A part of a person is a manifest absurdity.

When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person, and has lost nothing of his personality. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before. The amputated member is no part of his person, otherwise it would have a right to a part of his estate, and be liable for a part of his engagements. It would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit, which is manifestly absurd. A person is something indivisible . . .

Reid offers two arguments in favour of the idea that persons do not have parts, and so are not divisible and destructible. He first reasons that since we remain the same persons before and after a body part is amputated, the body part is not a part of the person. However, although it seems plausible, as Reid says, that my amputated foot is not a part of me, it does not follow that it was not a part of me before it was detached from my body. We are not entitled to say anything more than that it is no longer a part of me. Notice also that my severed foot is no longer a part of my body either, although that doesn’t show that it wasn’t once a part of my body or that my body lacks parts. Thus, Reid’s first consideration does not show that the still-attached and still-functional body parts of persons are not parts of persons.

His second argument is that if a person’s foot were a part of a person, then it would be entitled to a share of her property. It is not entitled to any share of her property, so, he concludes, it is not a part of her. This argument seems to have nothing to do with whether the foot is amputated or still attached—my still-attached foot has no more claim to a part of my property than my severed foot has. Reid is right that our various body parts are not each entitled to a share of our property. My left foot, which currently rests under my desk, does not own any part of my home, and it is not a partial owner of the whole home, even while it is a fully functional part of me. But this doesn’t show that I—the person who does own the property—have no parts. To explain why our parts have no claim to our property we need only two observations. First, only persons can own property. Secondly,

not all parts of persons are persons. This is unsurprising—parts of vacuum cleaners are not vacuum cleaners, and parts of watches are not watches. It follows, then, that parts of persons—whether attached or detached—cannot own property. It does not follow from the fact that a body part cannot own property that the part is not part of a person; it only follows that a part of a person is not a person. Similarly, my watch keeps time, but none of its parts can keep time. That doesn’t show that those parts are not parts of my watch; it only shows that the parts of my watch are not also watches.

Many early philosophers suspected that a defense of personal immortality might be found in the Argument from Indivisibility, but to make that argument persuasive we would need a reason to believe the second premise—a reason to think persons are not divisible. The arguments we have seen in support of the second premise fail, so unless a better defense of it can be found, it should not persuade us that persons are immortal.

Fearing Death

People who reflect seriously on the prospect of their own death—on the possibility that they will cease to exist—usually ask about the values we should assign to death and immortality. A natural position to take combines two thoughts: First, that each person’s death is a bad thing for her, something to be feared, something to be delayed, and if at all possible something to be avoided entirely. Second, a longer life is better than a shorter life, and so an immortal life would be best of all. Since these thoughts concern the kinds of attitudes we ought to have toward our own deaths, they may seem to lie outside the scope of theories of reality and knowledge. But they do not if, as many philosophers have maintained, our two apparently natural thoughts about death and immortality rest on a failure to appreciate the nature of death and immortality. We will accordingly use questions about how we ought to feel about death and immortality to deepen our understanding of their natures.

We will examine two closely related defenses of the view that it is not rational to fear our own deaths, and discuss two related attempts to persuade us that an immortal life would be undesirable. We begin with reflection on the fear of death by ancient Greek atomist Epicurus (341–270 BC).

Death is Nothing to Us (Epicurus)6

[T]rain yourself to hold that death is nothing to us, because good and evil consist in sensation, and death is the removal of sensation. A correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable—not because it gives you an unbounded span of time, but because it removes the desire for immortality. There is nothing terrifying in life to someone who truly understands that there is nothing terrifying in the absence of life.

Only a fool says that he fears death because it causes pain ahead of time, not because it will cause pain when it comes. For something that causes no trouble when present causes only a groundless pain when merely expected. So death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, because as long as we exist death is not present, whereas

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Epicurus: Ancient Greek philosopher who defended a version of atomism; he founded the school known as Epicureanism, which derives guidelines for a better life from the idea that pleasure is the only good thing and pain is the only bad thing.

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when death is present we do not exist. It is nothing to those who live (since to them it does not exist) and it is nothing to those who have died (since they no longer exist).

Most people shrink from death as the greatest of evils, or else extol it as a release from the evils of life. Yet the wise man does not dishonor life (since he is not set against it) and he is not afraid to stop living (since he does not consider that to be a bad thing). Just as he does not choose the greatest amount of food but the most pleasing food, so he savors not the longest time but the span of time that brings the greatest joy. It is simpleminded to advise a young person to live well and an old person to die well, not only because life is so welcome but also because it is through the very same practices that one both lives well and dies well. It is even worse to say that it is good to never have been born, or:

Having been born, to pass through the gates of Hades as soon as possible.

If he believes what he says, why doesn’t he depart from life? It is easily done, if he has truly decided. But if he is joking, it is a worthless remark to those who don’t accept it.

Epicurus has two objections to those who fear the prospect of their own deaths. First, death cannot be a bad thing for the person who dies, since nothing is bad unless it can be experienced as painful, and the dead person suffers from no pain. Of course, this does not mean that the death of a person is not a bad thing for their loved ones, who will suffer the pain of losing them. But on the view that nothing is bad for someone unless it causes them pain, nothing can be said to be bad for the dead.

We might object that even though we no longer exist after death, and do not have experiences of any kind, it is perfectly rational to fear death now while we are alive and face the terrifying prospect of not existing. Epicurus addresses precisely this objection: “Only a fool,” he says, would fear death “ahead of time”—that is, only a fool would fear the prospect of her own death. Why?

First, Epicurus tells us, if something will not be a bad thing when it happens, then it makes no sense to fear it in advance of its happening. It is not rational for me to fear the sunrise unless, for some reason, the sunrise will be bad thing for me. Epicurus’s central objection, however, is that we will never have to face our own deaths; we will never have any encounter with death. My friends and loved ones will face my death by confronting my absence from their lives, but their doing so requires their continued existence. I do not continue to exist beyond my own death, so when I am alive, I will not be dead, and when I am dead, I will not be. There is, then, no circumstance in which I will encounter my own death. That is why, as Epicurus says, our own deaths are nothing to us.

Epicurus’s reasoning may be a remedy for one misunderstanding of death—as a confrontation with nothingness. The Epicurean point is that there will never be any such confrontation. Our deaths will not bring us face-to-face with nothingness (because we will fail to show up for the meeting). However, there are aspects of his argument that need further thought. Is Epicurus right that nothing can be a bad thing for us if we never experience it, or its consequences, ourselves? If something can be a bad thing for us even though we do not experience it, then it might be reasonable to fear our deaths even though we will never experience them. Is Epicurus right to assume that those who fear their own
deaths fear them because they erroneously think they will be there to experience death? It may be that our fear of death has another source altogether. For example, we might legitimately be concerned about our loved ones and worry about how they will cope when we are gone, or we might fear leaving our projects unfinished. I suspect Epicurus would reply that, in that case, it is not really death that we fear.

Suppose we recognize Epicurus’s point that our own deaths will not be dreadful for us, since there is nothing at all that they will be like for us, and also accept that it is not reasonable for us to fear the prospect of being dead. Still, there might be any number of reasons to fear losing our lives and all that they contain. To dread the loss of one’s life is not the same as dreading an encounter with nothingness. In the following lines from one of his poems, Philip Larkin responds to Epicurus, whose argument he finds to be only a “trick” consisting of “specious stuff.”

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round. 7

Larkin’s disagreement with Epicurus must be developed in more detail than we can attempt here, but perhaps some observations can point us in useful directions for further exploration. Larkin is careful not to discuss death positively, in terms of what we will experience when dead, but only negatively, in terms of what we will have lost. His point seems to be this: Epicurus may be right that death is not at all like an encounter with nothingness, so it is unreasonable to fear any such encounter. But death does amount to not having any more encounters with anything, and that is something that it is perfectly reasonable to dread.

To explore the apparent disagreement between Larkin and Epicurus further, we might begin by asking whether this is a real disagreement at all. Is there is any genuine difference between experiencing nothing and not experiencing anything? Suppose you are threatened with the future loss of your eyesight. Does it make sense to say that it would not be reasonable to be frightened at the prospect of seeing nothing, since when you lose your eyesight you won’t be seeing at all, but it is perfectly reasonable to be frightened at the prospect of not seeing anything again? If there is a real difference between these, we would also need to explore how, if at all, the difference will matter to Epicurus’s argument. In particular, is it reasonable now, when we are alive, to fear the loss of things that will not matter to us when we are dead?

The following section examines an interesting extrapolation from Epicurus’s ideas as presented by one of his Roman followers, Lucretius (c. 99–55 BC). The lines come

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from his long poem *On the Nature of Things*, which Lucretius wrote in part to introduce Romans to the philosophical accomplishments of the ancient Greeks, and especially to the atomists.

"Folly of the Fear of Death" (Lucretius)\(^8\)

Therefore death to us
Is nothing, nor concerns us in the least, . . .
Yet nothing 'tis to us who in the bonds
And wedlock of the soul and body live,
Through which we're fashioned to a single state. . . .

. . . For when in life one pictures to oneself
His body dead by beasts and vultures torn,
He pities his state, dividing not himself
Therefrom, removing not the self enough
From the body flung away, imagining
Himself that body, and projecting there
His own sense, as he stands beside it: hence
He grieves that he is mortal born, nor marks
That in true death there is no second self
Alive and able to sorrow for self destroyed,
Or stand lamenting that the self lies there
Mangled or burning. . . .

. . . But ask the mourner what's the bitterness
That man should waste in an eternal grief,
If, after all, the thing's but sleep and rest?
For when the soul and frame together are sunk
In slumber, no one then demands his self
Or being. Well, this sleep may be forever,
Without desire of any selfhood more,
For all it matters unto us asleep. . . .
Death is, then, to us
Much less—if there can be a less than that
Which is itself a nothing: for there comes
Hard upon death a scattering more great
Of the throng of matter, and no man wakes up
On whom once falls the icy pause of life. . . .

Look back:
Nothing to us was all fore-passed eld
Of time the eternal, ere we had a birth.
And Nature holds this like a mirror up
Of time-to-be when we are dead and gone.

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And what is there so horrible appears?
Now what is there so sad about it all?
Is’t not serener far than any sleep? . . .

. . . Nor by prolonging life
Take we the least away from death’s own time,
Nor can we pluck one moment off, whereby
To minish the aeons of our state of death.
Therefore, O man, by living on, fulfil
As many generations as thou may:
Eternal death shall there be waiting still;
And he who died with light of yesterday
Shall be no briefer time in death’s No-more
Than he who perished months or years before.

This selection begins with the Epicurean idea that death is nothing to us, but Lucretius embellishes it in several ways. First, when we suppose that being dead is terrible, we commonly imagine ourselves being torn apart by beasts and vultures, or ourselves left mangled and burning. (Apparently these were more common ways of dying in ancient Rome than they are today.)

When we imagine such things we are guilty of a double error. The person who fears death makes a mistake by “imagining / Himself [to be] that body.” Since we cease to exist at death, the corpses that are torn and mangled are not us. Although our bodies sometimes outlast us, any indignities done to them are not done to us since we no longer exist. Second, if we find the contemplation of such scenes disturbing, then we have also forgotten that we will not be there to contemplate them: “[I]n true death there is no second self / Alive and able to sorrow for self.” So we first suppose it is us who must suffer the indignities done to our bodies, and then we imagine that we must helplessly contemplate those indignities. Both errors forget Epicurus’s lesson: Since we will not be there, our death will be nothing to us.

Lucretius then compares death to dreamless sleep, in which we are conscious of nothing. If we do not find the prospect of sleep terrifying then we should not find the prospect of being dead terrifying. The analogy between death and dreamless sleep seems appropriate in this respect: In both cases, we are not conscious of anything. The analogy between being asleep and being dead is of less help, however, if (like Larkin) it is not the prospect of facing nothing that frightens us, but the prospect of not facing anything. I can even fear falling asleep if it means I will miss out on something that is important.

There is, in addition, one obvious difference between the unconsciousness of sleep and the unconsciousness of death: We go to sleep with the full anticipation of seeing the next day, but we do not go to our deaths with any such expectation. Unconsciousness is much easier to face when we believe it to be temporary.

The Symmetry Argument then follows, when Lucretius says, “Look back: Nothing to us was all fore-passed eld / Of time the eternal, ere we had a birth.” To paraphrase, Lucretius says when we look back at the time that elapsed before our births—effectively, an eternity in which we did not exist—we find nothing horrifying to contemplate. But, he continues, “Nature holds this like a mirror up / Of time-to-be when we are dead and gone.” That is, the time before our births is a mirror image of what awaits us when we are dead. The time before we came into existence (a period of prenatal nonexistence) is

Symmetry Argument: An argument given by Lucretius that we should not fear death since it is only a mirror image of the period of nonexistence preceding birth. Since contemplation of the latter does not occasion fear, neither should contemplation of death.
a mirror image of the time after which we cease to exist (a period of posthumous nonexistence), and if the one is not frightening, then the other should not be frightening. Nonexistence is something we have already been through. It was not horrible before, so it will not be horrible the next time. Because they are perfectly symmetrical, we should have the same attitude to our own deaths that we have to the eternity of nonexistence that preceded our births.

Again, we will let Philip Larkin object to the Symmetry Argument. There is, he suggests, an important asymmetry between our posthumous nonexistence and our prenatal nonexistence that Lucretius overlooks. In one brief section of a poem about the very elderly, Larkin writes,

At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. It’s only oblivion, true:
We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. Next time you can’t pretend
There’ll be anything else . . .

The Symmetry Argument requires that there be no relevant difference between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence—no difference that is relevant to how we ought to feel about them. But Larkin claims there is a difference that should matter to us, so the symmetry between the two breaks down.

It is true, as Lucretius says, that both are cases of not existing for an eternity; both are “only oblivion.” In retrospect we know that the long stretch of prenatal nonexistence “was going to end” with the unique and mysteriously many-faceted life each of us lives. From the perspective we come to occupy at the centre of our biographical lives, the past is a history that converges (“merging”) on where we are now, and out of which we come into being. Parts of the past during which we did not exist eventually became parts of our past. But our posthumous nonexistence has no such culmination. Apart from a few very minor ripples we might make, which settle down soon after we sink into oblivion, in the future everything diverges (“speeding away from each other”) in directions that have nothing to do with us.

We can legitimately understand the time before our birth in terms of what is still to come for us, but we can only understand the time after our death in terms of what has been lost to us. This is a real difference, and it matters to how we ought to feel about our deaths. The poet still believes a bad end awaits us all.

**EROSION OF BODY AND SOUL**

Most of us believe that dying too soon would be bad, and that living longer would be better. Then it seems that living forever would be best of all—an immortal life would be good. Whether that is true is something we should explore. We will begin by examining the case for thinking that an immortal life would be bad for us.

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An immortal life, as we understand it, is a biographical life that never ends. We seldom take the trouble to think what it would mean to continue our lives after our sun has dimmed and cooled, after the earth is a cold and airless cinder drifting in the darkness of space, even after our galaxy has been stripped of its spiral arms and cannibalized for parts by larger neighbouring galaxies, and even after the probable heat death of the known universe. And yet, we are supposed to think we will continue through all that. Fortunately, the problems that are thought to be associated with immortality will arrive long before then—a few hundred years, or at most a couple of millennia, will suffice for the cracks to show.

The following lines are from an Alfred Lord Tennyson poem in which one immortal, Tithonus, describes his unfortunate plight. According to classical myth Tithonus was a beautiful young man who caught the eye of Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, as she arose each morning in the east. Tithonus became Aurora's lover, but, as goddesses are inclined to do, she soon tired of him. When Aurora departed, she granted him one wish, and Tithonus recklessly asked for immortality, but he forgot to ask for eternal youth. In Tennyson’s lines we hear from Tithonus after many centuries have passed, and he has become little more than a pile of human rubble on the horizon, where he watches the still youthful goddess reappear each morning and longs for his own death.

**Tithonus (Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1859)**

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
> The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,  
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
> And after many a summer dies the swan.  
> Me only cruel immortality  
> Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,  
> Here at the quiet limit of the world…

> . . . I ask’d thee, ‘Give me immortality.’  
> Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,  
> Like wealthy men who care not how they give,  
> But thy strong Hours indignant work’d their wills,  
> And beat me down and marr’d and wasted me,  
> And tho’ they could not end me, left me maim’d  
> To dwell in presence of immortal youth,  
> Immortal age beside immortal youth,  
> And all I was, in ashes…  
> Let me go: take back thy gift:  
> Why should a man desire in any way  
> To vary from the kindly race of men,  
> Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance  
> Where all should pause, as is most meet for all…

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Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
In days far-off, and with what other eyes
I used to watch—if I be he that watch’d—
The lucid outline forming round thee; . . .

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bath me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glistening thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

The famous opening lines of this poem describe death as an event that is both as natural and as inevitable as the cycle of seasons. But death is also something from which Tithonus has been excluded—he is an onlooker rather than a participant in natural events. For him, immortality is “only cruel.” How can ancient mythology tell us anything about immortality?

Our initial reaction may be that Tithonus represents a problem with eternal aging, not with immortality. He made a mistake in not asking for eternal youth. Let’s see if we can improve on Tithonus’s request to the goddess: Having learned from his mistake, what would we ask as a parting gift from her? We would perhaps ask her to grant an immortal life in which we do not age, where we stay forever at some preferred physiological age. We’ll need to select a fixed physiological age, with no aging whatsoever, since in a life that lasts forever even glacially slow aging will eventually put us in Tithonus’s situation. Of course, we won’t want to stay too young or too old, but somewhere between the extremes we should find an age at which to exist forever—perhaps 21 years, 30 years, or 40 years.

Next we’ll need to sort out what kind of body (of the relevant age) we’re going to have. We might, for sentimental reasons, wish to keep our own bodies, but this shouldn’t matter. Any new body will become “our own” once we become accustomed to it in a few years or decades. But we’ll need to do something about the fact that we are mere creatures of flesh and blood. We are frail, and over enough time we are sure to accumulate a great many nicks and cuts and to damage or even lose body parts. Even granite erodes from exposure to air and water given enough time, and granite is vastly more durable than we are. The physical world is full of dangers. As things now stand, odds are that most of us will not be struck by lightning, mauled by grizzly bears, or severely injured in a traffic accident. But the only reason the odds favour us is that our lifespan is relatively short. In a world anything like our current world, if we are around long enough it is extremely likely that there will be serious damage inflicted—over and over again—on our chosen bodies.

These considerations suggest that Tithonus’s problem was not merely that he neglected to ask for eternal youth. Even if we managed to stay youthful, the normal wear and tear of being an embodied human being in a sharp-edged world could only be endured for a finite time. If we seek genuine immortality, we should not want a body of flesh and
bone; we should not want to exist in any human body. We will not escape Tithonus’s problems in bodies anything like our current ones. Of course, we might ask the goddess to change the kind of world we exist in so that it cannot do us any damage. She might soften the hard edges and dull the sharp ones, remove the bears that might maul us and the seas that might drown us. Our present universe won’t serve for immortals with human bodies. Eventually, even Aurora will need to change her position in the hierarchy of gods since she cannot continue to be the goddess of the dawn after the sun expires in roughly 4 billion years. Our imaginative exercise so far points in one direction: For physical beings that are anything like us, a physical world anything like ours would not be a good place to live forever.

The story of Tithonus helps focus our attention on the many changes needed to make immortality bearable. This leads to a dilemma. Unless the changes we undergo are quite significant, immortal life will not be pleasant—we will encounter some variation of the problems that afflicted Tithonus. But if those problems are addressed by making significant changes, the resulting immortal person might no longer be us. The dilemma is that without enough change immortality is undesirable; but with the needed changes what survives might no longer be us. The aging, immortal Tithonus expresses understandable doubts about whether he is the same person who once lived as a mortal: “[W]ith what another heart/. . . and with what other eyes/I used to watch –/if I be he that watch’d.” That worry should be prominent for anyone who imagines a desirable but immortal life.

One response to our dilemma might be to follow Locke and Parfit in the view that what matters for our survival is only psychological continuity. However much physical change might be needed to make immortality attractive, if we can preserve enough psychological continuity with our past selves then the persons who survive those changes might still be us. Our next exercise in imagination will therefore consider the psychology of immortality.

**Death and Desire**

English philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) maintains, against Lucretius, that a person’s death is a bad thing for her. The reason is that we have desires to satisfy, and death prevents us from satisfying them. Williams’s response to Lucretius makes use of a classification of desires into two categories.

First, there are some things we desire to do but only if we live long enough. Those desires are conditional on our being alive. For example, I desire to travel to Paraguay when I retire—if I live that long. It’s one of the things I would like to do if I’m still around, but it is not my reason for wanting to be around. I would have the same degree of interest in existing even if travel to Paraguay was ruled out. With no prospect of ever visiting Paraguay, my interest in living would not decrease. Some of our desires, however, are categorical (unconditional) desires. These desires give us our reasons for wanting to live—we want to live in order to fulfill them. For example, I want to spend time with the people I love, to gaze at the stars, and to discuss philosophy with friends. These are not things I merely desire to do if I happen to be around; they are my reasons for wanting to still be around. Unlike conditional desires, our categorical desires are our reasons for wanting to live; they are the source of our interest in continuing to exist. If I learned that I could never do the things I categorically desire, then my interest in living would diminish.

It is because some of our desires are categorical that Williams thinks Lucretius is wrong about death. Death will prevent our doing what we categorically desire, and
this makes it perfectly rational to regard death as a bad thing and to struggle against its approach. So long as we have such desires, it is perfectly reasonable to hope we will continue to exist—to have what Williams calls the “anti-Lucretian hope.”

Despite believing that death is a bad thing for us, Williams does not believe it is always a bad thing, so he does not believe that immortality would be preferable to death. In the following selection, he reflects on the case of a woman—a fictional character known as EM—who, after over 300 years of life, passes up the chance of immortality. Unlike Tithonus she stays the same age and remains physically healthy. But, like the goddess Aurora, she has grown cold and indifferent to life. Williams defends the view that the problems that lead EM to give up on further life are not mere contingencies—that is, they are not problems that are peculiar to her own case or to her special circumstance. They are, he thinks, problems that are unavoidable in any human life that continues for too long. If that is right, then the problems that lead EM to refuse immortality are problems that would make immortality undesirable for any of us.

Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality (Bernard Williams, 1973)¹¹

Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives meaning to life. That does not mean we should not fear death (whatever force that injunction might be taken to have, anyway). Indeed, there are several very different ways in which it could be true at once that death gave the meaning to life and that death was, other things being equal, something to be feared. Some existentialists, for instance, seem to have said that death is what gave meaning to life, if anything did, just because it was the fear of death that gave meaning to life; I shall not follow them. I shall rather pursue the idea that from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil. Considering whether death can reasonably be regarded as an evil is in fact as near as I shall get to considering whether it should be feared: they are not quite the same question.

My title is that, as it is usually translated into English, of a play by Karel Čapek which was made into an opera by Janáček and which tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, alias Emilia Marty, alias Ellian Mcgregor, alias a number of other things with the initials ‘EM’, on whom her father, the Court physician to a sixteenth-century Emperor, tried out an elixir of life. At the time of the action she is aged 342. Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: ‘in the end it is the same’, she says, ‘singing and silence’. She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman among the protests of some older men.

EM's state suggests at least this, that death is not necessarily an evil, and not just in the sense in which almost everybody would agree to that, where death provides an end to great suffering, but in the more intimate sense that it can be a good thing not to live too long. It suggests more than that, for it suggests that it was not a peculiarity

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¹¹“Problems of the Self,” by Bernard Williams. Copyright (c) 1973 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.
of EM’s that an endless life was meaningless. That is something I shall follow out later. First, though, we should put together the suggestion of EM’s case, that death is not necessarily an evil, with the claim of some philosophies and religions that death is necessarily not an evil. Notoriously, there have been found two contrary bases on which that claim can be mounted: death is said by some not to be an evil because it is not the end, and by others, because it is. There is perhaps some profound temperamental difference between those who find consolation for the fact of death in the hope that it is only the start of another life, and those who equally find comfort in the conviction that it is the end of the only life there is. . . .

. . . No-one need deny that since, for instance, we grow old and our powers decline, much may happen to increase the reasons for thinking death a good thing. But these are contingencies. We might not age; perhaps, one day, it will be possible for some of us not to age. If that were so, would it not follow then that, more life being per se better than less life, we should have reasons so far as that went (but not necessarily in terms of other inhabitants) to live for ever? EM indeed bears strong, if fictional, witness against the desirability of that; but perhaps she still laboured under some contingent limitations, social or psychological, which might once more be eliminated to bring it about that really other things were equal. Against this, I am going to suggest that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies; that an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever. In some part, we can apply to life Aristotle’s marvellous remark about Plato’s Form of the Good: 12 ‘nor will it be any the more good for being eternal: that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day’. But only in part; for, rejecting Lucretius, we have already admitted that more days may give us more than one day can.

If one pictures living for ever as living as an embodied person in the world rather as it is, it will be a question, and not so trivial as may seem, of what age one eternally is. EM was 342; because for 300 years she had been 42. This choice (if it was a choice) I am personally, and at present, well disposed to salute—if one had to spend eternity at any age, that seems an admirable age to spend it at. Nor would it necessarily be a less good age for a woman: that at least was not EM’s problem, that she was too old at the age she continued to be at. Her problem lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

There are difficult questions, if one presses the issue, about this constancy of character. How is this accumulation of memories related to this character which she eternally has, and to the character of her existence? Are they much the same kind of events repeated? Then it is itself strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations—indeed, accepting is what it later becomes, when earlier it would not, or even could not, have been that. The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable. Or is the pattern of her experiences not repetitious in this way, but varied?

12 *Ethica Nicomachea* 1096 4.
Then the problem shifts, to the relation between these varied experiences, and the fixed character: how can it remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences? The experiences must surely happen to her without really affecting her; she must be, as EM is, detached and withdrawn.

EM, of course, is in a world of people who do not share her condition, and that determines certain features of the life she has to lead, as that any personal relationship requires peculiar kinds of concealment. That, at least, is a form of isolation which would disappear if her condition were generalised. But to suppose more generally that boredom and inner death would be eliminated if everyone were similarly becalmed, is an empty hope: it would be a world of Bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing, and it is unclear how much could even happen.

The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM's unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did. That it is not a contingency, is suggested also by the fact that the reflections can sustain themselves independently of any question of the particular character that EM had; it is enough, almost, that she has a human character at all. Perhaps not quite. One sort of character for which the difficulties of unending life would have less significance than they proved to have for EM might be one who at the beginning is more like she is at the end: cold, withdrawn, already frozen. For him, the prospect of unending cold is presumably less bleak in that he is used to it. But with him, the question can shift to a different place, as to why he wants the unending life at all; for, the more he is at the beginning like EM is at the end, the less place there is for categorical desire to keep him going, and to resist the desire for death. In EM's case, her boredom and distance from life both kill desire and consist in the death of it; one who is already enough like that to sustain life in those conditions may well be one who had nothing to make him want to do so. But even if he has, and we conceive of a person who is stonily resolved to sustain for ever an already stony existence, his possibility will be of no comfort to those, one hopes a larger party, who want to live longer because they want to live more.

To meet the basic anti-Lucretian hope for continuing life which is grounded in categorical desire, EM's unending life in this world is inadequate, and necessarily so relative to just those desires and conceptions of character which go into the hope. That is very important, since it is the most direct response, that which should have been adequate if the hope is both coherent and what it initially seemed to be. It also satisfied one of two important conditions which must be satisfied by anything which is to be adequate as a fulfillment of my anti-Lucretian hope, namely that it should clearly be me who lives for ever. The second important condition is that the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all. That is a vague formula, and necessarily so, for what exactly that relation will be must depend to some extent on what kinds of aims and (as one might say) prospects for myself I now have. What we can say is that since I am propelled forward into longer life by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires.

On William's view we are kept going by our categorical desires. But EM has already fulfilled her categorical desires again and again, to the point where even their satisfaction now bores her. Her 300 years has proven adequate for satisfying all her desires, but also for tiring of them. Since her reasons for wanting to live were to satisfy those categorical desires, any further continuation of her life is only tedious. When the strength of her categorical desires diminishes, or when she has lost those desires entirely, the strength
of her interest in life diminishes and she will have lost any reason to struggle against the approach of death or to think of its arrival as a bad thing.

Williams must persuade us that EM’s eventual boredom is not a reflection of her character—that any person would eventually experience the same loss of interest in life. His argument rests in part on a belief that any desire will diminish in strength, or eventually disappear, if we occupy ourselves long enough with its satisfaction. The argument requires that there is nothing we could possibly do forever. It’s unclear how one should decide whether this is true, but one route for exploring the claim might be to simply recall something you found endlessly fascinating when you were four years old, but in which you no longer have the slightest interest. Pick something you would now find tiresome. Of course, those where childish things, and you are no longer a child, so it is not surprising that the same things would bore you now. Now ask yourself whether the same thing could eventually happen to your present interests. Part of Williams’s claim is that in the span of a normal human life you will experience the same loss of interest in the things that engage you now, and the same can be said of the things that engage your interest at any stage in your life. We would all be horrified at the prospect of living with the same interests, knowledge, and capabilities we had at four years of age. That is not because there was anything wrong with those interests and capabilities, it is because a lifetime is too long to have only them. We change, and the desires we seek to fulfil are very different at different stages in our lives. That helps us sustain an ongoing interest in life, but, on Williams’s view, it only helps for a lifespan of relatively short duration.

It might be thought that EM need only change her categorical desires on a regular basis. Even if the pursuit of satisfaction for one set of desires grows tiresome in, say, 50 years, she can replace that set of desires with another, and so on, continually renewing her interest in living. There is no obvious reason that the kind of psychological changes we undergo could not be continued for the long run. To see how Williams might respond to this suggestion, note that there is an important connection between the set of desires that a person has at any given time and her personality or character at that time. The categorical desires that ground a person’s interest in living are even more central to her character—to who she is—than her conditional desires, for they are what give her life meaning. Williams mentions that the accumulation of memories and experiences also affects our characters. So to imagine an immortal life in which a person’s categorical desires—not to mention her memories and experiences—undergo regular change is to imagine a life in which her character and personality also undergo regular change. The objection to Williams that we are considering suggests that, in order to make immortality bearable, EM must undergo very important changes. She will need to change what she wants most, and what most matters to her, over and over again. She will need to change the kind of person she is on an ongoing basis. Once again, the attempt to make an immortal life attractive places great pressure on us to say what would make those immortal persons who persist into the remote future still us.

There are two ways to ensure that some person in the remote future is me. On the one hand, they might overlap with me psychologically, sharing many of my psychological traits. They might continue to have some of the beliefs and passions that are most important to me. This is the scenario Williams thinks will ensure tedium—the same categorical desires, over a long enough time, can only result in a life that grows tiresome. On the other hand, perhaps the person who exists in the remote future might share none of my current
psychological traits but will at least be psychologically continuous with me, in the same way that I am psychologically continuous with my four-year-old self even though we have little in common. For this, there must be a long, unbroken line of selves, leading from me to that future person, in which each self is psychologically very similar to the ones adjacent to it in time. The selves in the queue naturally view the selves directly ahead of them as their future editions—they notice common interests and concerns, and so they understandably see them as continuations of their present selves. But as we look further ahead in the queue, we will find persons with whom we have less and less in common, and whose personalities are increasing remote from our own. Nonetheless, if psychological continuity is enough for survival, those future persons with whom we will eventually have nothing in common will still be us. They will still be us even if they are the sorts of persons we would now despise and would rather not become. Naturally, when I do become those people, I won’t despise myself, but I now despise that sort of person, and so I now have no interest in becoming them. If psychological continuity is enough for personal identity, and if I live for long enough, then I and my future selves will be, at best, indifferent strangers. Whether there is some deep metaphysical sense in which that future person still qualifies as me, it is difficult to see how it can matter to me whether he ever exists.

Perhaps our earlier dilemma has grown an additional branch: If we don’t change enough from what we now are, (i) immortality will be unbearable. But if we do change enough to make immortality bearable, then either (ii) the persons who survive the change won’t be us anymore, or (iii) they will be future versions of ourselves that we are indifferent to becoming. If those are the options, then our own deaths, so long as they don’t come too soon, will either be preferable to more life or, at the very least, will be a matter of indifference to us. Whether we find such considerations compelling, they should at least give us pause and encourage us to consider that even if a long life is better than one that is too short, it may not be that an immortal life is better than a finite one.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at two metaphysical arguments for the immortality of persons: the ancient Argument from Opposites and the more modern Argument from Indivisibility. Both made use of a distinction between bodies and persons, with the latter conceived of as nonphysical minds, spirits, or souls. And both arguments were found lacking. We asked whether it is rational to fear our own deaths, and whether immortality—the only alternative to eventual death—might be good or bad. We emphasized two arguments, one focusing on the physical problems associated with immortality, and the other on the psychological problems. The two arguments we emphasized concluded that the idea of immortality faces a difficult dilemma. As human beings are, an immortal life looks to be unbearable, so we would need to undergo changes—both physical and psychological. But the needed changes would be so significant that they raise doubts about whether the immortal persons who survive us would still be “us,” and whether they would be anyone who would matter to us.

In our discussion of death and immortality, we took for granted that it makes sense to think of ourselves as beings that have both mental, or psychological, lives and bodily, or physical, lives. In the chapters ahead we will ask how these aspects of ourselves are related, whether both bodies and minds exist, and whether they are separable aspects of persons.
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afterlife p. 87
immortal p. 87
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Additional readings on death and immortality


