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The Case for Immortality: Can a Human Life be too Long?

An examination of the works of Lucretius and Nagel leads Bernard Williams to conclude in “The Markopulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality” that death is an evil, living as long as one can is a good, and as a result, the infinitely long life would be the most desirable life. However, Williams does not accept that living forever is a good and desirable thing, claiming immortality leads to a meaningless existence consisting of unavoidable ennui. In the beginning of the article, Williams states “it can be a good thing not to live too long” (83). However, he does not specify how long is too long other than infinity, which is neither a humanly measurable or comprehensible quantity.

In this paper, I will attempt to determine at what length a life is too long by considering three different lengths of human life. I will describe a significantly longer human life, an indefinitely long human life, and an infinitely long human life and provide a case as to why each human life is good and rationally desirable. Then, I will examine whether each length of life could potentially be undesirable, ultimately endorsing a significantly longer human life and rejecting an indefinitely long life and immortal life. I conclude from my study of these three lengths of human life that it is difficult to pinpoint how many years before infinity it would be good and rationally desirable for a human life to last.

The first length of human life I will examine is a human lifespan significantly longer than it is now, for example 250 years long. For the human lifespan to have risen so dramatically, let us assume that the world life expectancy has increased so that everyone is living longer than before. Advances in medicine and health care would contribute greatly to the rise in life expectancy. People, in general, would be healthier so that dying from diseases common today, like heart disease and obesity, would be less prevalent. Furthermore, there might be fewer conflicts and wars in the world. Poverty and starvation would be greatly diminished, and we could handle any food shortages and environmental concerns that might get in the way of our food supply. Since people would live longer, multigenerational families would be the norm, and people would be more connected than they are today.

The stages of a significantly longer human life would likely be the same stages of life we experience now; however, they may last longer than our stages. For example, childhood might last fifty years rather than the eighteen years. I do not mean to say that puberty will last fifty years but that people younger than fifty will be regarded as children and still live with their parents even though they may physically be adults. Today many people we call adults still rely on their parents as if they were still children and do not go out into the world to make lives for themselves. So, this trend would likely continue if lives were significantly longer than they are today, and this is not necessarily a good or bad thing.

Despite stages of life being longer, I believe people will still be anxious to get on the right track in their lives so that they can meet their goals before their time on earth ends. However, people can take more time to identify what they would like to achieve in life and have a greater chance of reaching their aspirations because they have more time. Additionally, people will have more time to explore their world, do the things they enjoy, and hopefully find meaning in their lives or live meaningfully. Since there is still a limit to how long people can live, concerns about death will continue. Due to the fact that death will still occur though likely at a later date, the only difference between this significantly longer life and the life expectancy we have today is that there is more of life and the opportunities it presents to us. If we accept that our lives today are good, we should also rationally agree that a significantly longer life would be good as well and possibly even better.

Before delving into what living an indefinitely long human life would be like, some clarification as to what an indefinitely long human life means is needed. The difference between the current human lifespan and the indefinite human lifespan is that one will continue to live and can potentially live forever if he or she does not choose a point at which to die. So, a person living an indefinite life is capable of living as long as he or she wants. It is unclear how one’s life ends if one has the potential for immortality; however, I will not dwell on this issue.

Assuming everyone is able to live indefinitely, the most important aspect of the indefinite life is the ability of every individual to choose how long he or she lives. The power to make this choice enables us to customize our lives. Every day, we are faced with choices like what to wear, who to talk to, what to eat, and where to go during the day. We consider choice the ultimate freedom. So, one could argue, the ability to customize one’s lifespan is the epitome of freedom. Some might go as far to say that we are completely free now that we can select whether and when or not our time of death will be.

With our limited lifespans, one is free to do as he or she pleases while he or she can, but he or she is not completely free because his or her life can end at any time, interrupting plans and ambitions. If someone wanted to complete a long project or study something in depth, he or she may not be able to do so if his or her life is limited. If we have the ability to extend our lives, we have the freedom and opportunity to accomplish all of our goals and find meaning in our lives. People are often remorseful saying “I wish I did this or that” or “I could have done this if I had more time,” but with indefinite lives they have as much time as they need and would like to do anything they desire. So, there would be a decrease in remorse for lost opportunities and wasted time. People would not fear failing to do the things they want to do because they have all the time they need.

Due to the customizability an indefinite life affords, people can plan out their respective lives and decide whether or not they should end. Since individuals are the only ones who can gauge how much time they want or need, the indefinite life allows people to realize their potentials and find meaning in their lives. People could pick a date and have the opportunity to revise it later if they have not yet reached all their goals. Setting a date could be a good motivational tool for people to achieve their goals. As for those who desire to live forever, there is nothing wrong with that; it is their choice.

If immortality were not a choice but the norm, the benefits of having more time from the significantly longer life would continue: having more time to do the things one enjoys, achieve one’s goals, and find one’s meaning in life. We would have the option to do anything we would like because we would have all the time in the world. Families would be extremely large, and one could meet people constantly. People would have to work a lot to support themselves forever, but there would also be a lot of downtime as well. The stages of life may be even more greatly extended.

To describe why the immortal life is good and rationally desirable, it is necessary to address Williams’ boredom objection. His objection focuses on EM, a character from a play who drinks an elixir that causes her to live for three hundred years in her 42-year-old body. In the case of EM, she was the only person in her situation. Also, it seems she is stuck in her ways has no desire to branch out or try something new. Williams claims she is a static character because he has a particular disposition that makes her who she is and does not wander far from it (90). He says EM did everything as a 42 year-old woman for three hundred years and tired of it on account of her character.

While on the exterior she was the same, it seems impossible that on the inside she was the same. It is unlikely that she never became interested in anything else from her multitude of experiences. The protagonist from the movie *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors serves as a counterexample to EM’s unavoidable boredom. In the movie, Phil Connors is doomed to repeat Groundhog Day every day, forever it seems, yet his character changes dramatically. The movie chronicles his change from selfishness to selflessness. At first, Connors is frustrated with his situation and is extremely cynical and tries to take advantage of those around him. He later realizes his fate and tries but fails to free himself from it through suicide. Eventually, he takes an interest in those around him, helps others, makes friends, changes his outlook on the world, and becomes a better person. Like EM, Connors is the only person in his situation, which is much more limited than hers, yet he undergoes a change. So, the question remains why she does not exhibit any kind of change. Immortality provides the opportunity for one to continuously reinvent the self. Therefore, one can develop new tastes and interests over his or her lifetime leading to an inexhaustible number of things to do, which is the opposite of boredom.

Of the three types of human lives I presented, I solely endorse living a significantly longer human life. Over time human life expectancy has increased allowing us more opportunities in life, and a significantly longer human life would do the same. A longer life means people have more time to understand themselves and achieve their goals. Whenever there is more time available than may be needed to complete a task, procrastination becomes a major problem, impeding people from achieving their goals. If people have significantly longer lifespans, they may succumb to the illusion that they have all the time in the world to do what they want. Even people today fall for the illusion, especially young people. The illusion may last longer if people lived significantly longer, but the illusion will always occur no matter how much longer people live than today. Eventually, people will see past the illusion and recognize their life is limited; however, this may occur at a significantly later time that it does for people today. For example, midlife crises will still occur; they will just happen at a later point in time. While procrastination is an impediment to meeting life goals and a significantly longer life can lead to greater procrastination, the fact that procrastination is still a problem even in a significantly longer life doesn’t make a significantly longer human life much different than human life today.

While procrastinators can waste a lot of time, they may have more time to make up for their time lost because they are likely to live longer. There also would be many people who do make the most of all of their time. Since people will have significantly longer to live they can achieve more in their time. If people spend a good amount of time exploring their interests and seeking their purpose, something many are not able to accomplish in our current lifespan, then living significantly longer is a good thing. For example, if Gustav Aschenbach from Thomas Mann’s “Death in Venice” was able to live longer he could have produced literary works that espouse beauty and meaning. He could have been able to create art that would enlighten the public and is meaningful to him. Artists such as Aschenbach and others could have enhanced their lives and the lives of others if they had the ability to live longer.

Even though it seems that how long people have until they die is the main issue of concern when discussing a significantly longer human lifespan, the real issue is how they make use of the time that they have. Since people have more time to be productive and make up for procrastination than our current lifespan allows, a significantly longer life expectancy would enable people to get more out of their lives.

However, the question remains how long does a significantly longer human life need to be for people to get the most out of life, meet all of their goals, and find meaning in life. The indefinitely long human life thought experiment provides one answer to the question: it varies from one person to the next. The crux of the benefits of indefinite life is the element of choice; however, making choices can be problematic and complicated. Choices concerning life and death lead to debates about morality. Today there are a number of ongoing debates about life and death such as whether suicide, abortion, and euthanasia are permissible or forbidden. Assuming an indefinite life were possible, there may be a rift between those who believe in the ability to choose when to die and those who think everyone should live forever.

If everyone is allowed the option to decide when his or her life should end, there would not be any limit to how early one can end his or her life and at what age he or she can make the decision. For there to be complete freedom and choice, there cannot be any restrictions. So, there would be nothing saying that an eight-year-old cannot decide if he or she would like his or her life to end. If the child made the choice to stop living, then everyone would have to honor the choice. The child’s parents would likely be devastated by the loss of their child, but there is nothing they could have done to prevent it from happening. If people lived indefinitely, I can imagine many cases where people die before they and the others around them are ready for it. While people die before they and those around them are ready today, there is additional pain associated with the death that comes from the choice making death even more of an evil than today. It may even seem that all deaths are misfortunes because people can live forever. The world would be a much sadder and depressing place if people had the ability to choose if and when they die.

Aside from the problems associated with a minor making such a decision, one could question whether anyone is truly capable of making the decision on their own. Some people may not be rationally fit to decide that they want to die. I wonder how reflective people truly are and how conscious they are of the fact that death is the end and they cannot take it back. There may be people who make the choice impulsively and arbitrarily. I would hope those making a decision as serious as this would think it through, but there are no guarantees they will. While the idea of choice seems appealing, it can result in conflict and sadness in the world as well as rash decisions. Furthermore, one can question whether one truly finds meaning in their life if they can choose if and when to die. Meaning could come from death itself, not dying, or any accomplishments one has in one’s lifetime. If meaning arises out of death, then a world in which people live an indefinitely long might not be depressing to those who live in it. However, such a world where death is celebrated rather than lamented seems twisted and perverse. Therefore, I cannot endorse an indefinitely longer human life.

In an infinitely long human life, people have more time to do what they want, but there is also time for greater boredom. As mortals, we do not fully grasp what it means to be immortal. We understand that it is an onerous task for someone to spend forever in a meaningful way. The examples of EM and Connors from *Groundhog Day* provide an insight into a timeframe that seems like it will last forever but eventually both their supposed immortalities comes to an end. EM became bored after three-hundred years or so, and while it is unclear how many days Connors re-lived, he became tired of his situation at a point as well. These characters succumbed to ennui much before they came anywhere close to infinity. While Connors gives an example of escaping boredom, he could have just as easily become bored again at some later point and living without meaning, ending up like EM.

Yet, EM and Connors are both seemingly immortal individuals surrounded by people with normal lifespans. So, maybe if everyone were immortal, things might not get as boring. Williams posits the contrary saying to “suppose more generally that boredom and inner death would be eliminated if everyone were similarly becalmed, is an empty hope” (90). Even though people can do the things they enjoy for as long as they want, reinvent themselves, try new things, and meet new people all the time, eventually people will get tired of it. People may become bored from exhausting all of their options, but they can also become bored doing the same things, even if they are ones they enjoy, if they do them long enough. No matter what people do, the things that happen in their infinitely long lives will likely repeat over and over again leading to ennui. Thus, I cannot endorse an infinitely long human life.

With every increase in life span presented by the three options, there is the benefit of a longer life but also the drawback of increased potential boredom. The indefinite life poses the additional challenge of choice. While I endorse a significantly longer human life, I cannot determine how long a human life should be, between what we currently have and infinity, for a person to get the most out of it and for it to be labeled as meaningful. Maybe some could figure it out for themselves and pull the plug when they are ready or found meaning like with the indefinite lifespan, but it doesn’t seem like this is a responsibility that can be given to just anyone. So, unfortunately, the question of how long a human life is too long and how long a human life needs to be for meaning to be ascribed to it remains unanswered.