

The Nearly Unconditional Goodness of Immortal Life

DRAFT

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According to Marilyn McCord Adams, *death itself is a horror!*¹ Death puts an end to all our projects and, given the mortality of the cosmos itself, death puts an end even to those projects we know will come to fruition, if at all, only after our deaths. To defeat the horror of death, God must restore our lives and make us immune to death forever.²

Bernard Williams argues that immortality is undesirable in a famous essay called “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (=MC).³ The title of the essay comes from a play by Karel Čapek which features a woman, ‘E.M.’, who has lived for a few hundred years as though she were forty-two years old. She has grown tired of her life, and decides not to take her next dose of the elixir that, if taken regularly, would extend her life indefinitely. The Case illustrates the view Williams goes on to develop, which is that immortality is not worth having because, necessarily, an immortal life would eventually become intolerably boring.

If Williams is right, then the gift of immortality would be a gift of snakes and stones, not fish and bread. It would be a gift which would increase our participation in horrors rather than finally defeat them.

¹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.207.

² Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p.212.

³ Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p.82-100.

In this essay I will offer a limited defense of Adams' claim that immortality is a necessary condition on God's final defeat of horrors. I will do this by criticizing Williams' argument against the desirability of immortality, showing that it gives us no good reason to doubt that immortality would be a great good for us. The criticism of Williams which I offer here is deeply informed by St. Augustine's reflections on the unconditional goodness of human life in Book III of *On Free Choice of the Will* (=FCW).⁴

In addition to my own Augustinian criticism of Williams' argument, I will also discuss some valuable contemporary criticisms of it. These critics agree with Williams about the condition under which an immortal life would be desirable, namely, that we have desires of a certain sort which make life worth living, but hold against Williams that this condition can be met—pretty easily, in fact. I think these criticisms are successful. I want to supplement these critical efforts by arguing for a stronger conclusion. I want to argue that immortal life is nearly unconditionally good—good even if Williams' condition is not met. Immortal life is only *nearly* unconditionally good, on my view, because I think we need some reason to *hope* that, if our lives are extremely unhappy, they can be made happy. The view draws on some familiar Augustinian ideas, such as that simply to be is to be good to some degree; not to be is to be no good at all; so, for any individual, it is always better for that individual to be than not to be.

FCW rebuts the charge that God is to blame for evil by positing that human beings have a special power, the will, which directs the mind to pursue the goods it pursues. Some evil we do, some evil we suffer. The evil we suffer we suffer justly on account of the evil we do. The evil we do is our own fault. Therefore God is not the cause of any evil which makes him blameworthy (*FCW* I.15, p.24-27). But God created us with a will. Had we not received a will, we would not have been able to sin (*FCW* II.1, p.30); so isn't God to blame after all? The response is that without

⁴ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993).

the will, we wouldn't be able to sin but we wouldn't be able to live rightly, either (*FCW* II.1&18, p.30, 65-66). So having a will is necessary for some of the goods which make a human life distinctively valuable. Of course, God knows how we will use our wills, but this does not make God the cause of our bad willing. This is because, if what God foreknows really is an act of will, then what he foreknows is something that comes about freely, by the will of the person whose action God foreknows—this follows from what it is to be an act of will (*FCW* III.3, p.75-77). Moreover, in general, knowing something in advance does not entail causing it to happen; so, too, with God's advanced knowledge of what we will do (*FCW* III.4, p.77-78).

But can't we still blame God? After all, while his foreknowledge of our bad willing did not cause our bad willing, he brought this world into being, and he need not have. Might he have made a better world, or no world at all, and so avoided all the evil we've brought on ourselves?

Augustine's approach to this line of objection is startling in its optimism. He argues that no matter how unhappy we are, we are still good. The very fact that we can be *unhappy*, rather than merely *damaged*, is enough to show us that, however wretched we are, we are not just good but *better than* anything which lacks mind. We are not merely existent things but creatures endowed with reason and self-awareness, and this gives us a high ranking on the great chain of being. Augustine says,

For even though our souls are decayed with sin, they are better and more sublime than they would be if they were transformed into visible light (*FCW* III.5, p.82).

The mere fact of our existence should inspire us to thank God for his goodness, so our high rank should inspire all the more gratitude. Any complaint that God should

have made us better betrays a lack of gratitude for making us as good as we are (*FCW* III.5, p.82).

But my concern here is not whether the goodness of our lives—however unhappy they are—successfully deflects blame from God for making the world as he made it. Instead, my concern is with how Augustine responds to an imagined interlocutor who objects that human misery makes suicide a reasonable choice.

Augustine's response to this interlocutor is structured around what I will call Augustine's Quintet of Happy Theses, which I will list together here and then discuss each in turn:

[A1] Every human is really good!

[A2] Every unhappy human is such that that human's unhappiness is separable from its existence.

[A3] Every human is such that that human's degree of happiness can always increase.

[A4] For every human, existing is better for that human than not existing.

[A5] There is no human such that that human can be in any way improved by ceasing to exist.

[A1] is a short version of what Augustine really says, which is that each human being is better than the best thing that is not a person—even better than visible light (*FCW* III.5, p.79)! On what grounds can we hold such a view? Augustine's own grounds have to do with the greater reality of persons compared with non-persons. A human person has existence, life, sentience, plus awareness of itself (*FCW* I.7, p.12-14). So it has more reality than things that aren't persons. But *more* is wriggly.

Does self-awareness imply more existence than being very large? Intuitions don't seem to be much help here. But the weaker, [A1] version of his claim is all we need.

So each human is really good. But some of us are unhappy. I might be so unhappy, in fact, that my non-existence begins to look attractive. I want either to cease to exist or never to have existed at all. In response, Augustine holds [A2] and [A3]. It's not my *existence* that's getting me down, but my *unhappiness*. If I could have my existence together with happiness, I'd be fine to go on existing (*FCW* III.6, p.83). This point does not require for its truth that, for any unhappy human, we *know how* to separate it from its unhappiness. We might not, in some cases. The point instead is that existence is not the problem; a bad *mode* of existence, unhappiness, is the problem.

Augustine conceives of unhappiness not as a positive quality, the *opposite* of happiness, but as a very low *degree* of happiness (*FCW* III.7, p.84-85). This entails the weird but not absurd view that the most unhappy person is still a teensy bit happy—the extremely unhappy person has a very low degree of happiness. This helps us see an important qualification to [A2]. Augustine's view is not that I could exist without any happiness whatsoever—to lack all happiness whatsoever would require ceasing to exist. Instead, the view is that existence is never the problem, unhappiness is; I can go on existing without being unhappy; therefore, I should aim at the eradication of my unhappiness, not myself.

So given that I cannot exist without some degree of happiness, and given that if I have a very low degree of happiness I am very unhappy and wish not to go on existing, or wish that I had never existed, it is important for Augustine to supplement [A2] with [A3].

[A3] tells us that things can always get better. Augustine's own prescription for increasing happiness is *to change our loves*, turning away from temporal goods which cannot satisfy to the eternal goods which can (*FCW* III.7, p.84-85). Examples

of eternal goods are God, mathematics, wisdom, and the four cardinal virtues (*FCW* II.7-19, p.41-68).

One worry with [A3] is that this turning toward eternal goods might seem to require too much willpower, more than I can muster in my unhappy state. But I shouldn't therefore reject [A3]. Augustine himself later in his career would come to downplay willpower and play up God's grace (*Reconsiderations* I.9).⁵ Might we fashion a notion of grace—big enough to include heaven and earth, *sacred and secular grace*—which applies *grace* to any aid outside ourselves which manages to rescue us from unhappiness?⁶ Doing so would furnish me with a wealth of potential resources, without if not within, for increasing my degree of happiness. So furnished, I could have a strong *hope* that, even if I can't improve myself, grace might rescue me.

But I may find that I cannot even muster this hope for grace. Suicides seem to illustrate as clearly as possible that some people desire their own nonexistence. Augustine avers however that suicides and those who think suicide could be a rationally permissible option are gravely in error. He holds [A4] on the grounds that not existing at all solves no problems. Not existing at all cannot bring about a decrease of unhappiness, an increase of happiness, or even an equal degree of unhappiness. A non-existing thing is not good, and a non-existing thing cannot be happy or unhappy. So I should not will not to exist—not existing wouldn't be good for me (*FCW* III.8, p.86)!

Augustine is not wholly without sympathy for those tempted to suicide. He thinks that even suicides pursue a good—peace—but they are mistaken because their chosen means cannot possibly bring about the goal of peace. Suicide cannot bring about peace because if suicide brings about my nonexistence, it thereby ensures that I do not have peace (*FCW* III.8, p.86-87). In fact, if suicide brings

⁵ Included in Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, p.124-129.

⁶ Consider the verse from Samuel Ervin Beam's "He lays in the Reigns": "One more kiss tonight from some tall stable girl / She's like grace from the earth / When you're all tuckered out and tame."

about nonexistence then it cannot bring about any improvement whatsoever. Thus, if [A4] implies that nonexistence is never *net better* for someone than existence, [A5] holds that nonexistence is never *in any way better* for someone than existence.

[A1]-[A5] make up a Quintet of Happy Theses. Can we believe them? Here is not the place to defend them outright, though they are all plausible. More importantly for present purposes, it matters *dialectically* that Bernard Williams is more or less committed to [A1], [A4], and [A5], and [A2] and [A3] are independently plausible.

Williams seems somewhat grudgingly to concede [A1] when he says, “I do not want to deny the existence, the value, or the basic necessity of a sheer reactive drive to self-preservation (MC, p.86).” It must be added, however, that he does not think that this baseline goodness of our lives is enough to make them worth living.

Also, he seems to concede [A4] and [A5]. Considering a possible world in which I do not exist at all, Williams says, “Thoughts about [my] total absence from the world would have to be [...] impersonal reflections on the value *for the world* of [my] presence or absence [...] cannot think egoistically of what it would be for [me] never to have existed at all (MC, p.87).” The reason we cannot think egoistically what it would be for me never to have existed is, presumably, that whatever goodness obtains in such a world, it is not good *for me*. I think we could say the same thing about ceasing to exist. We cannot think egoistically of what it would be for me to cease to exist, because whatever goodness this world has once I’m gone, it is not good *for me*. So my nonexistence, conceived either as my not appearing in an alternative possible world or as some future state of this world, cannot be better for me, neither net better nor better in some respect. And this is to grant [A4] and [A5].

[A2] and [A3], however, are nowhere to be found in Williams' reflections. But they are hard to dispute! Given the goodness of my life, implied by [A1], [A2] seems to follow: my life is good, so what's bad about my life neither constitutes nor follows from my life. [A3] requires only the barest logical possibility that I could always become happier. I don't see any reason to deny this possibility. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern here about the circumstances under which hope is possible. It may be that the possibility that grace might come to me outstrips my capacity to hope for grace. I'll return to this at the end.

For now I would like to consider Williams' argument against the desirability of immortality. Williams thinks that an immortal life that *we could really call our own* would become boring and therefore undesirable. Williams' view hangs on the idea that what makes a human life worth living is the having of certain desires. Williams distinguishes between *conditional* and *categorical* desires; having categorical desires is what makes a life worth living. A conditional desire is a desire I have to do what is necessary to sustain my life. A categorical desire is a desire which makes it worthwhile to sustain my life. For example, my desire for food is a conditional desire. I eat to live, not live to eat. But my desire to raise my children into flourishing adulthood or to write a book on medieval metaphysics, is the sort of desire which makes my life worth living. They're among the desires that make death an evil to me. Death thwarts these worthwhile projects, so as long as I have desire to complete these projects, death is an evil rationally feared (MC, p.83-86).

But Williams asserts that it is a *non-contingent fact* of human life that categorical desires are finite. He means that they are finite in two senses, an obvious and a less obvious. The obvious sense is that we don't at any one time have an actually infinite number of categorical desires. The less obvious and more relevant sense is that we can't have a potentially infinite number of categorical desires, some finite number after some finite number and so on. In an immortal life, eventually we would *run out* of categorical desires. We would become intolerably bored. Life

would not be worth living. If we had a way out of immortality we'd take it, as Williams illustrates in E.M.'s choosing to end her indefinite life by refusing to take her next dose of the elixir of life. That our lives are in fact mortal is therefore preferable to any imagined scenario in which we have immortal lives that we could call our own (MC, p.82).

The qualification, *that we could call our own*, is crucial here because Williams considers some immortality scenarios which try to show that there could be an infinite supply of categorical desires in a single life: for example, suppose we live out, as immortal organisms, psychologically disjoint lives such that each successive life feels like a typical mortal life, or suppose we have immortal lives which include extremely vivid fantasies in which any number of mortal lives are lived out (MC, p.90-93). The problem with both scenarios is that, while they solve the problem of boredom, because each allows for inexhaustible categorical desires, neither can in any meaningful sense be called a life of the sort that is ours. We would not recognize ourselves in such a life (MC, p.94).

So it looks to Williams like any imaginable immortality scenario would either become intolerably boring or would involve a life that is unrecognizably ours. A.W. Moore has expressed Williams' point well. Moore says,

The kernel of his argument for this grim view [that immortal life must become intolerably boring and hence not worth having] is that the conditions that must be satisfied for my life to continue to count as mine [some sort of consistency with my character as it is now] militate against the conditions that must be satisfied for it to continue to be a life worth living [having inexhaustible categorical desires]. Conditions of the former kind demand a constancy and conditions of the latter kind a variety, that cannot be reconciled."⁷

⁷ A.W. Moore, "Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaningless of Immortality," *Mind* 115:458 (2006), p.311-330.

Here, as best as I can tell, is Williams's argument that immortal life is not worth having:

[W1] A life is worth living if and only if it has categorical desires.

[W2] It is a non-contingent fact of any life we can call our own that it has a finite number of categorical desires.

[W3] In any immortal life we could call our own we would eventually fulfill all of our categorical desires.

[W4] So in an immortal life we could call our own we would eventually have no categorical desires.

[W5] Therefore an immortal life is not worth living.

Objectors to Williams' argument have tended to deny [W2], and for some very good reasons. Attila Tanyi and Karl Karlander play up the virtue of curiosity. Curiosity is a disposition to be interested in the world, to situate ourselves somewhat passively in the world's flow. As the world flows around us, it's plausible to think that some very interesting thing will always be on the horizon. If we have the virtue of curiosity we're likely to become relevantly interested in some of them, and if we have this virtue in an immortal life, there's no reason to think we couldn't just go on getting new interests of the sort that make life worth living.⁸ Neil Levy emphasizes the joy of gaining knowledge and our inability to know what a completed system of knowledge would look like. Therefore, at least for those of a cerebral bent, making more discoveries might be an inexhaustible categorical desire, or perhaps an inexhaustible series of categorical desires⁹ John Martin

⁸ Attila Tanyi and Karl Karlander, "Immortal Curiosity," *The Philosophical Forum* 44:3 (2013), p.255-273.

⁹ Neil Levy, "Downshifting and the Meaning of Life," *Ratio* 18:2 (2005), p.176-189.

Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin have simply found it wildly implausible, given how interesting the world is, that we would ever run out of categorical desires.¹⁰ Christopher Belshaw has suggested that a partial handicap on memory and imagination could sustain our interest in life while preserving the requisite psychological continuity.¹¹ The handicap couldn't be too great, though. Christine Overall speculates that beings of limited cognitive and affective capacities, like dogs or cognitively impaired people, could enjoy immortality, but not human beings of ordinary intelligence.¹² Geoffrey Scarre agrees that very dull things, like sheep or rabbits, could enjoy immortality, but not ordinary human beings.¹³ And A.W. Moore supposes a goldfish would be happy forever circumnavigating its bowl.¹⁴ So the spirit of Belshaw's proposal that we could enjoy immortality with certain handicaps implies a check on just how handicapped we'd need to be for immortality to be both enjoyable and *our own*. Donald Bruckner has made the very sensible observations that memory decays, such that even if we lose all our interests in things we might eventually forget what we've done and get those interests back; and, in any case, even without loss of memory there's no reason to think that interests that we once had we can recover again after a fallow period. Finally, there's no reason to think we can't always go on developing new interests.¹⁵ None of these authors' suggestions, with the caveat that a handicapped memory couldn't be too handicapped, militates against the conditions that must be satisfied for my life to continue to count as mine. And together they show, at least, that we have no good reason to accept [W2], and, probably, that we have good reason to think [W2] is false.

¹⁰ John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom," *Journal of Ethics* 18:4 (2014), 353-372.

¹¹ Christopher Belshaw, "Immortality, Memory, and Imagination," *Journal of Ethics* 19:3-4(2015), p.323-348.

¹² Christine Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.147-148.

¹³ Geoffrey Scarre, *Death* (Chesham: Acumen, 2007), p.60.

¹⁴ A.W. Moore, "Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaningless of Immortality," p.318, n.14.

¹⁵ Donald W. Bruckner, "Against the Tedium of Immortality," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20:5 (2012), p.623-644.

Augustine's Quintet of Happy Theses give reasons for rejecting other parts of Williams' argument. Augustine may or may not have thought that it is a non-contingent fact about our lives that we have a finite number of categorical desires. The question would not have been very interesting to him, though. What matters for Augustine, so to speak anachronistically, is not the *number* of our categorical desires but *the nature of their objects*. Maybe there is just one categorical desire and it cannot ever be fully fulfilled, given the nature of its object. So Augustine wouldn't feel the need to dispute [W2]. But he'd deny that [W3] follows from [W2], and [W4] from [W3]. Granting we have a finite number of categorical desires, provided we had at least one which could never be fully satisfied, then, contra [W3], we wouldn't eventually fulfill all categorical desires. And then, contra [W4], we wouldn't face an indefinite remainder of our immortal lives having no categorical desires.

That Augustine thought there is at least one such categorical desire is no surprise: he thought it was God, who could always go on being enjoyed more because no one can have all of God at once and God is infinite. A lifetime of enjoyment of God is always, properly understood, a life we could call our own because God is infinitely and unqualifiedly good and all our desiring aims at the good in general. But we needn't buy God to buy Augustine's rejection of the inference from [W2] to [W3]. Neil Levy gives us a very good non-theistic alternative: the desire for a completed system of knowledge can qualify, for some subject, as a categorical desire. It's a desire which can always go on being fulfilled because, first, we can always gain more knowledge, and second, we can't gain all knowledge.

So one of Augustine's beefs with Williams' argument is that a finite number of categorical desires does not entail that all of them are exhaustible, so we can't infer [W3] and [W4] from [W2]. Augustine's other beef with Williams' argument is with premise [W1], which states that a life is worth living if and only if it has categorical desires. Here are some things Augustine might say against [W1].

Suppose you find yourself with no categorical desires. Life doesn't seem to be worth living. In reply, consider that, according to [A1], you are good just the way you are. If you cease to exist then, by [A5], you cannot be improved in any way, and by [A4] you cannot have a net increase in goodness. I understand that your life is very unhappy. But it's not your life that's the problem, it's just your unhappiness. By [A2] there is no necessary connection between your life and your unhappiness, so don't throw the baby out with the bath water. Similarly, by [A3] there is no necessary connection between your life and your current degree of happiness. You are very unhappy, yes. But consider that you don't have to be this way. I know you might not know how to improve your condition of life. But can't you concede that there may be something in heaven or earth of which you have not yet dreamt, which might come your way and lift you out of your doldrums? Conceivably there is something which could bring it about that you could increase in happiness, helping you gradually to shed your unhappiness and become happy. If you cease to exist, you forestall any future hero—a god, a friend, a lover, a politician, a pill—which might rescue you from your unhappiness. Thus, against [W1], Augustine might say that a life without categorical desires is worth living in case it includes hope for categorical desires.

Can one hope for the hero? Williams might say that it depends on one's character. Perhaps I am just so bored with life that I can't summon a hope that something might eventually come along and renew my interests. I would need a sort of *prevenient* grace, the grace to hope for grace. Might we hope for this?

I'm not sure we can hope for this if we place all the burden of hoping on the individual, a personal atom for whose flourishing no other persons hope, a person whose wellbeing is not the object of any others persons' categorical desires. Maybe all on my own I just do not have the resources to hope for hope. I think it is significant that, in E.M.'s case, she had to endure everyone around her growing old and dying while she endured. She was deeply alone.

But imagine an immortal life in which I have a community of fellow immortals. Some in the community might be able to have hope for me, to keep me from ceasing to exist, perhaps against my short-term will, because they hope for the rescuer on my behalf. A sort of coercion might be justified, if they have Augustinian sorts of reasons such that I am good, that my unhappiness is not who I am, that I can get better, and that ceasing to exist would not be good for me. They might compel me to exist, hoping on my behalf for the rescue. Of course, I might be so unhappy that a community's hope on my behalf might not be able to motivate any hope on my part. My community might not inspire any wish to hope for hope. All the more reason for my community to will things for me which I do not will for myself, for my own good. Of course, the whole community might be infected with the same extreme boredom, and then I'd be stuck. Augustine held out hope for an immortal rescuer not conceivably subject to boredom. Might we not hope for such a rescuer?

Augustine's Quintet of Happy Theses helps us see that Williams' argument is at least doubly flawed: first, it simply does not follow from the number of our categorical desires being finite that they will be exhausted; second, hope for a renewal of categorical desire, even in the circumstance in which we have no categorical desires, makes a life worth living. Therefore Williams gives us no good reason to reject the desirability of immortality. Therefore Williams gives us no good reason to reject Adams' claim that immortality is the sort of good which places a necessary condition on God's final defeat of horrors. Foes in the problem of evil literature, friends in immortal life: Augustine defends Adams against Williams!