Always Choose to Live or Choose to Always Live?

Daniel Coren
University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract: Bernard Williams (1973) famously argued that if given the choice to relinquish our mortality we should refuse. We should not choose to always live. His piece provoked an entire literature on the desirability of immortality. Intending to contradict Williams, Thomas Nagel claimed that if given the choice between living for a week and dying in five minutes he would always choose to live. I argue that (1) Nagel’s iterating scenario is closer to the original Makropulos case (Čapek’s) that inspired Williams’s piece; (2) iterating versions of the choice given in the Makropulos case might well be less desirable than a one-time choice; and (3) Nagel’s mathematical induction premise is implausible. I discuss some useful implications of (1)-(3) for the broader discussion of Williams’s arguments and, more generally, for our understanding of the value of mortality and the possibility of mutually consistent but necessarily incompatible wants in ordinary human psychology.

1 – Introduction

Bernard Williams (1973) argued that immortality is necessarily not desirable for rational human beings. In particular, he argued that an immortal human existence would necessarily either become intolerably dull or else no longer your own. So you should not choose to relinquish your mortality. Death, Williams argued, might come too soon. When it does, that’s an evil. Death often comes too soon. So death is often an evil. But death at some point is necessary for a human life to have meaning. Williams’s piece has proved seminal: it’s provided the impetus for an entire philosophical literature. Some such as Altshuler (2015), Andric and Tanyi (2015), Beglin (2016), Cholbi (2015), Kagan (2012), May (2009), Moore (2006), Nussbaum (1994), and Scheffler (2013) side with Williams or a view close to but weaker than Williams’s view, though often for different reasons. Other such as Belshaw (2015), Bartolotti and Nagasawa (2009), Bruckner (2012), Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014), and Greene (2017) disagree with Williams’s view and some weaker variants of his view. Thomas Nagel seems to be in the latter group:

Given the simple choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes I would always choose to live for another week; and by a version of mathematical induction I conclude that I would be glad to live forever. (Nagel, 1986, p. 224)
Nagel confidently claims that he would always choose to live if given the following—presumably mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive—options: live for another week or die in five minutes. By a version of mathematical induction, Nagel claims that his always choosing a week of life over death in five minutes entails that he would be glad to live forever. Adrian Moore (2006) argues that Nagel’s inference is fallacious. Moore levels two main charges against Nagel’s argument: (1) it conflates (a) what a rational agent, S, would be glad to do and (b) the choices S would make; and (2) it conflates (a) S choosing to live forever and (b) S always choosing to live. Nagel’s premise is concerned with (1a) whereas Nagel’s conclusion, Moore argues, is concerned with the very different matter of (1b). And Moore argues that from Nagel’s premise it follows, at best, that (2b) whereas Nagel claims that the much stronger (2a) follows. S might wake up every Sunday morning and choose to live for another week rather than die five minutes later without ever choosing to live forever. Or so goes Moore’s worry.

But in my view at least one stage of the dialectic has moved too quickly. Nagel’s main premise (I would always choose to live for a week rather than die in five minutes if given the choice) deserves a good deal of scrutiny on its own terms. Such scrutiny can shed a good deal of light on the broader dialectic that is ongoing in the body of literature that has developed in response to Williams’s Makropulos piece. More generally and more importantly, it can shed some light on the prospect of immortality and, as I’ll argue, the possibility of mutually consistent but necessarily incompatible wants in ordinary human psychology. To that end, I use Nagel’s premise to develop an iterating version of the immortality vs. mortality choice, one that is arguably closer to the original scenario (Čapek’s) that inspired Williams’s piece. In the iterating version you get weekly choices between dying in five minutes and living for another week, as opposed to the scenario often assumed in the literature, one in which you get one and only one chance to choose between mortality and immortality (Section 2). Further, I argue that iterating versions of the choice given in the Makropulos case (such as Nagel’s) might well be less desirable than the one-time choice that’s given in Williams’s seminal piece and assumed in most of the literature (Section 3).

I then take a closer look at a plausible interpretation of Nagel’s mathematical induction premise. Using a formal technique borrowed from Boolos (1991), I show that the infinitely many universal instantiations of that induction premise give infinitely many implausible conditionals (Section 4). I conclude with a discussion of implications for the broader discussion of Williams’s arguments. Getting clearer on the strength of
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the claim, “I would always choose to live” helps us get clearer on what is at stake in deciding whether or not to relinquish one’s mortality. It also helps us get a bit clearer on how ordinary human psychology sometimes facilitates mutually consistent but necessarily incompatible desires.

2 – Three Versions of Immortality vs. Mortality: Nagel vs. Williams vs. Čapek

The large body of literature following Williams (1973), much of which is mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, focuses on whether an immortal life would have value. When choice is discussed, it is in the context of whether immortal beings could be said to make genuine choices. It’s generally assumed that what is at stake in the hypothetical scenario is a one-time chance to attain immortality: either you choose to relinquish your mortality or you choose not to; and if you choose to relinquish your mortality then you will of course never die. If you choose not to relinquish your mortality then you don’t get another chance to choose it. So the literature focuses on finding the best reasons for and against choosing to give up one’s mortality, choosing to always live. The scenario that is the subject of Nagel’s claim seems to be markedly different: you get weekly chances to die in five minutes or live on for another week. You can, theoretically, live on forever. But that would require choosing for infinitely many weeks that you would rather live another week. One might think that Nagel’s scenario is much further from the original scenario on which Williams and the other literature focuses. But as I explain below, if anything Nagel’s scenario is slightly closer to the original scenario than the one-time shot at immortality vs. mortality is.

As Williams acknowledged, Karel Čapek’s “Věc Makropulos” (“The Makropulos Affair”) provided the central impetus for Williams’s piece. In Čapek’s play there is a potion that if ingested seems to give that person 300 years of good health. But the play also certainly implies that if the potion were not taken again in 300 years, then that person’s health would decline and that person would die as any other mortal human being normally would. The play is set in 1913. Emilia (originally Elina Makropulos and has over the years had aliases such as Emilia Marty and Ellian Macgregor), born in 1585, ingested a potion that guaranteed her 300 years of good health. Earlier on, Emilia had been keen to get her hands on more of that potion so as to give her another 300 years of good health. She was afraid of death. But in the final Act it comes to light that Emilia has grown tired of living. She is still afraid of death but doesn’t want immortality. Evidently her loathing of the prospect of immortality
outmatches her fear of death. For she decides that she would rather not take the potion again. And she doesn’t. It’s not clear that Emilia ever had the chance to relinquish her mortality altogether. Rather, she was able to merely postpone death and extend her health for 300 years, with the option of postponing it another 300 years. The audience is left unsure of whether or not Emilia might have postponed it for infinitely many 300-year periods – it seems unlikely.

There are differences not just in degree but also in kind between (a) postponing death with 300 (or 600 or 900) years’ extended health and (b) choosing immortality with eternal health. There is an important difference in conceivability. There has – as far as I know – never been a human being who has lived for a single millennium, much less infinitely many millennia. I can hardly begin to realistically imagine what that would be like. Nor can I predict the fate of humanity, the spatial and temporal extent of the universe, and other factors relevant to the desirability of my would-be immortal life. On the other hand, it is difficult though certainly possible for me to imagine what it might be like to live 300 years longer than I otherwise would. It would be much longer than my own life, but I have some sense as to what that life might be like. I can use my mortal life as a rough but somewhat accurate guide.

There might well also be a vital difference stemming from the potential for learning and achievement. In 300 (or even 600 or 900) years I am not at all certain that I could learn everything I want to learn in a single field of interest. Achieving such a goal would be especially difficult if I were also trying to gain expertise in every other area I might be interested in. And since I would be aware of the limit of my existence, for the duration of my life I would be aware that the potential for my learning is limited in an important sense. But given infinite time, I am more confident that I would have time to come a good deal closer to my desired goals.

It would be careless to assume that given eternity I could have certainty in my ability to finish a project, such as reading every good book. Consider the fact that books can disappear (for example, burnt in fires or permanently deleted from servers). Some of these books may be good ones that I want to read. The possibility of my doing so is contingent, not just on my longevity, but also theirs. And the two matters are separate. The same goes for any goals I might have in physics, biology, chemistry, and so on – the rest of humanity might disappear a mere one hundred years into my life. Still, without any upper limit on my time available to learn – and a presumably distant upper limit on my time to accrue and maintain in a maximally reliable way my tools and resources for learning – there seems to be a second strikingly important difference between (a)
postponing death with 300 (or 600 or 900) years’ extended health and (b) choosing immortality with eternal health.

There are, of course, many other candidates for importance differences between (a) and (b). But I’ve merely tried to illustrate that this is far from a distinction without a difference. Rather, the original Makropulos scenario (Čapek’s) is markedly different from the Makropulos case that the large body of literature following Williams (1973) examines. Moreover, Nagel’s scenario, with its many iterations of a choice between death and a postponement of life, shares some obvious similarities with Čapek’s scenario. Unlike Williams’s case, neither Nagel nor Čapek give a case where one has the chance to choose to always live. At best, their cases offer the chance to always choose to live, with an apparently convenient opt-out clause attached. Next I’ll explain why there are good reasons to think that the opt-out clause is not nearly as appealing as it seems.

3 – Why It’s Not at All Clear that an Iterating Choice (Such as in the Nagel Scenario) Would be Preferable to a One-time Shot at Immortality

Important decisions (picking a college major, choosing to have children, etc.) are often highly anxiety inducing for human beings. Consider Emilia’s admittedly fictional but nonetheless not implausible decision-making process in Čapek’s play. Earlier in her life, she is convinced that she wants another 300 years of good health guaranteed. Her fear of death and the pleasure and sense of satisfaction she gains from acquiring unparalleled expertise in her areas of interest (such as singing) spur her on. As she continues to live, her fear of death remains but her life’s activities and accomplishments become less and less exciting, novel, and motivational. Eventually, she finds the courage to make an incredibly difficult decision: she chooses to give up her chance to live another 300 years. She had to endure the slow and painful disappearance of her enjoyment of her life. After many years the pain and bitterness accrued to an amount that allowed her to make her decision with a relatively high level of confidence. Perhaps Emilia experiences an effusion of regret later on in her life, towards the end.

You might think that Nagel’s scenario gives you the best of either outcome of a one-time shot at the immortality vs. mortality choice. You can live for as long as you like, simply saying “yes” for as many weeks as you find your life enjoyable. So you can have an extremely long life, and even immortality. You aren’t stuck with immortality, or even with a long life. For you can decide that it’s time to die at any given week. Then you
say “no” and the pain disappears five minutes later. You might well have an opportunity to get everything you want out of life: read every book you’ve ever wanted to read, visit every great museum in the world, learn everything you’ve wanted to learn, and so on. Then you decide which week will be your last. If, like Nagel, you always go on saying “yes, one more week” each week, apparently without any cause for hesitation, then immortality is yours. If, instead, you become intolerably bored, you can choose to end your suffering at your next weekly choice.

In my view, the reality of having weekly choices to live for another week or die in five minutes might well be thoroughly awful. Consider, first of all, that we generally find it difficult and anxiety-provoking to make extremely important decisions especially when we justifiably believe that (a) there might be long-lasting, painful consequences for making what turns out to be the wrong decision, (b) it’s not entirely clear which decision is least likely (if any) to produce long-lasting, painful consequences, and (c) there is plenty of time to consider what would be the right decision to make. Usually the level of our anxiety seems to at least roughly track our understanding of the importance of the decision, how long-lasting and painful the consequences might well be for making one or more of the decisions available, the lack of clarity as to what is the optimal choice, and the amount of time available to make the decision. It seems to me that this makes sense of why I experienced so much anxiety when deciding whether or not to have surgery now or wait several more years. I know that there would have been dire consequences for having the surgery now, including the huge cost and the extensive recovery time resulting in losing productive, working months during a crucial period in my career. I knew that my health might well be in jeopardy without the surgery. I had plenty of time to deliberate about what would be the optimal decision. And I was not at all clear as to what was in fact the optimal decision. There was a stark asymmetry between the complexity of my decision-making processes and the simple reality of the limited options available.

Second, consider that an immortal human life might well contain some prolonged periods of pain and suffering. Most human lives seem to contain at least some non-trivial periods of pain and suffering of one kind or another. We might see a parent struggle with illness for years before passing away. Seeing him or her in pain for years would of course be extremely difficult, not to mention mourning their passing and absence. In an immortal life with continuously youthful health, you would live through the death of every mortal human being you ever cared about and ever in the future might care about (with the exception of how much you care about yourself). You will probably also eventually live through the end of
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humility—minus-you altogether. Perhaps you would also live through the end of life—minus-you altogether. In fact, you might live through the end of the universe—minus-you. But human beings also seem to often experience psychological pain and suffering because of disappointments and events perceived as failures. When we attempt to achieve something of which we take ourselves to be capable and nonetheless fail the first time, the second, the third, we feel disappointment in ourselves. A human being who has been learning and acquiring knowledge and understanding of all kinds for four million years would presumably experience disappointment and a fairly pronounced frustration when trying to develop relationships with a human being with comparatively stunted intellectual and emotional development. Probably she would also experience great disappointment if it turns out that the universe is finite in lifetime or extent, if it turns out that human understanding and intellectual capacities have a disappointingly low upper limit in areas such as music, art, philosophy, chess, math, science, invention, and so on, and/or if it turns out that humanity is apparently the most intelligent life form around in space-time.

Third, we generally find it easier to endure pain and suffering if we think that there is a clearly discernible purpose and reason for our suffering, and one that is either connected with a future reprieve from our own suffering or with the benefit of someone we deeply care about. A parent (in human beings and in most non-human animal species) is often willing to endure large amounts of suffering, for instance, if that parent takes it to be the case that his or her offspring will greatly benefit as a result. And, while this claim does not follow from the previous one, I think it is also generally the case that we find it more difficult to endure pain and suffering if we do not think that there is a discernible and satisfactory purpose or reason for our suffering. I would find it much more difficult to endure the pain that fills a long recovery process if I did not justifiably believe that the pain was a normal and necessary result of the surgery I had, and if I did not expect that the pain will soon be followed by better health.

Now, consider the weekly choices available to you in the scenario I’ve constructed using Nagel’s immortality premise. Each time you can choose to live for a week more (10,080 minutes, or, equivalently, 2,016 sections of 5 minutes each) or die five minutes later. It might turn out, by a miraculously happy coincidence, that you experience an infinite number of weeks each filled with pleasure, fulfillment, and enjoyment. But it is much more likely that you will have some difficult weeks. You might, for example, experience the pinnacle of humanity’s determination to engage in war between its factions over limited resources on a single planet in a single galaxy, resulting in the end of humanity (minus yourself), at least
in that galaxy. The next week you might find out that you seem to have run out of interesting things to do. For any one of those difficult weeks, you will come to a new choice: endure the future pain and suffering that might come about in the single week to come, or definitively end any and all prospects for future learning, exploration, relationships, understanding, and enjoyment of kinds you haven’t yet imagined over potentially an infinite period of time.

It seems to me that a rational agent given any such cost-benefit analysis probably ought to at least give a considerable amount of careful thought to the possibility that one more week of pain and suffering is worth enduring for the sake of a potential eternity of pleasure and enjoyment. There seems to be much more that you stand to lose (such as infinitely many opportunities, infinite enjoyment and pleasure), and much less than you stand to gain (such as not having to suffer for seven days more) by choosing to die in five minutes for any given week. Learning more and more over the millennia concerning the prospects for other things to understand and enjoy given enough time, the amount you stand to lose if you were ever to choose to die might become progressively larger and clearer to you. Each week would be filled not just with any pain and suffering you would endure without the weekly choices but also with the anxiety produced by your knowing that another difficult choice is coming a few days later. You will consider that dying in five minutes will not just give up the potential for infinite enjoyment, pleasure, and new opportunities, but also the potential for infinitely prolonged pain and suffering. You might, like Emilia, spend a significant portion of your existence slowly losing interest in every source of enjoyment and pleasure that life and the universe might have to offer. Unlike Emilia, though, your fear of death might grow to match and perhaps exceed your desire to end your pain and suffering.

You might at some point develop an especially acute case of what Baumann (2017) identifies as desires that are consistent with each other though necessarily incompatible. Baumann did not apply his results to the Makropulos case. But they might well be relevant. For each of the following might be true. First, you want to die at some point. Second, for each weekly choice remaining, it is true that during that weekly choice, you do not want to die. As Baumann (2017, p. 489) notes, “there is no inconsistency between the contents of [your] different wants.” For one thing, your wants have different contents. Your want this week not to die clearly has a different content from your want during another week not to die that week. Each of your week-specific wants concerning living on or dying is different from your general want to die at some point. Yet these mutually consistent wants cannot possibly all be realized. They
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are necessarily incompatible. Either you die at some point, but then one of your week-specific wants is not realized; or all of your week-specific wants are realized, but then you will never die.

None of that entails, of course, that choosing to always live (choosing immortality given a one-time choice) is necessarily more desirable than always choosing to live (as in my reconstruction of Nagel’s scenario). Nor does it follow that choosing to die, rather than choosing to always live given a one-time choice is necessarily more desirable than always choosing not to die. But I do think it follows that always choosing to live might well be less desirable than choosing to always live or choosing to die. So it’s not at all clear that Nagel’s scenario is preferable to the standard scenario. A chance to choose to always live might well be preferable to a chance to always choose to live.5

4 – Why I Think that Nagel’s Mathematical Induction Premise is Implausible

If it does turn out that living for trillions of weeks isn’t nearly as good as you thought it would be, which week do you call your last? Given Nagel’s reference to mathematical induction, we can frame the problem as follows. We’ll define mathematical induction as a principle that asserts that a predicate applies to every natural number if it applies to 1 and to the successor of every natural number to which it applies. We’ll use ‘′’ to denote the successor function. And ‘x’ is a variable ranging over the natural numbers. Like Boolos (1991), we’ll call the statement expressed by the result of inserting a predicate into the induction schema:

\[
\ldots 1 \ldots \ \land \ \ldots \forall x(\ldots x \ldots \rightarrow \ldots x' \ldots) \rightarrow \forall x \ldots x \ldots
\]

*induction with respect to* that predicate. We’ll call the first conjunct in the antecedent of the conditional above the *base case*. The second conjunct in the antecedent is the *induction premise*. The consequent is the statement being proved.

Take ‘E’ as our predicate for ‘is a week (week number n, denoted by the variable ‘x’ ranging over the natural numbers) of pain and suffering worth Enduring for the sake of avoiding death and having a shot at infinite pleasure and enjoyment.’ Week 1, even if filled with pain and suffering, is worth enduring for the sake of avoiding death and having a shot at infinite enjoyment and pleasure. I would certainly rather live for a week than die in five minutes even though my week has seen some rather worrisome national news headlines. It’s not been ideal but I still want more life. That seems reasonable. So we have our base case. As for our induction premise: for any week counted by a natural number n during your existence, if
week-n is worth enduring for the sake of potentially infinite enjoyment and pleasure then so is the week counted by n’s successor, namely, week-n+1. That is, \( \forall x \ (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \). So every one of the countably infinite weeks is a week whose pain and suffering is worth enduring for the sake of avoiding death and having a shot at infinite enjoyment and pleasure.

There might be some good reasons to think that the induction premise is false. That is, you might well think that it’s the case that \( \neg \forall x \ (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \). But it also seems exceedingly difficult to show that \( \exists x \ \neg (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \), that there exists a week-n such that any pain and suffering that week-n’s successor might bring is suddenly not worth enduring for the sake of avoiding death and having a shot at infinite enjoyment and pleasure. Rather, week-n is the last week’s pain and suffering worth enduring.

Perhaps one useful way of showing the dubiousness of the induction premise is to show that among its many universal instantiations are infinitely many ‘spanning’ conditionals, infinitely many (though nowhere near all) of which are astonishingly strong. As Boolos points out in a discussion of mathematical induction related to vagueness rather than immortality: if an induction premise such as \( \forall x \ (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \) is true, then so are all the members of the set \( \{(E1[i] \rightarrow E1[i+1]): i > 1; i \rightarrow \infty\} \), which contains infinitely many universal instantiations instances of \( \forall x \ (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \). Therefore, all spanning conditionals including \( (E1 \rightarrow E1[10^{100}]) \) are true.6 But it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which the antecedent of that conditional is true and its consequent false. By way of a useful comparison, there are 4,160 weeks in an 80-year life span. And \( 10^{10} \) (miniscule in comparison with \( 10^{100} \)), or equivalently, \( 10,000,000,000 \), contains over 2,403,846 iterations of a 4,160-week (80-year) span. Suppose, for example, that \( 10^{100} \) weeks after the week that Nagel wrote, “I would rather live for a week than die in five minutes,” the universe no longer contains anything remotely interesting except Nagel. Presumably Nagel would not want to live for another week. And of course it needn’t be that particular conditional: there are infinitely many other candidates for more expansive spanning conditionals.

For Emilia, another 300 years of good health was not desirable. For Bernard Williams and many following him, immortality would not be desirable. By my lights all but the least expansive spanning conditionals given by the universal instantiations of \( \forall x \ (Ex \rightarrow Ex') \) are either extraordinarily difficult to evaluate if not simply false. I do not have a good sense of what the world (or I) will be like in \( 10^{100} \) weeks. But I need a good sense in order to be at all confident in the truth of most of the conditionals given by the infinitely many universal instantiations of
∀x (Ex → Ex'). Thus I do not have a good sense as to whether or not I want to live for another week after 10^{100} weeks of life, let alone for the infinitely many weekly choices afterwards. So, Nagel’s mathematical induction premise seems implausible.7

5 – Concluding Remarks: Broader Implications
In Section 2 I distinguished between iterating versions of the immortality vs. mortality choice and the non-iterating, standard version of the choice. In one iterating version inspired by Nagel’s strong claims about the desirability of immortality, you get weekly choices to die in five minutes or live for a week. As long as you keep saying “yes, another week” you continue to get weekly chances to live. In the now standard version, you get a one-time shot at immortality: either you relinquish your mortality without the possibility of ever getting it back, or you give up your shot at immortality without the possibility of ever getting it back. The iterating version is, as I explained, closer to the original scenario that inspired Williams’s piece. At the very least, it is much too strong to claim that one would always choose to live. In Section 3 I argued that it’s not at all clear that an iterating version of the mortality vs. immortality choice is preferable over a one-shot choice. In Section 4 I argued that on at least one plausible interpretation, Nagel’s induction premise is implausible.

But why have I bothered to discuss Nagel’s premise and a Nagel-inspired version of the immortality vs. mortality decision? First, in connection with the large body of literature on Williams’s arguments, one area in which I think that my discussion might help to elucidate matters is the importance of getting clear on exactly which specific scenario is the one under discussion. Is it strictly a one-time shot at immortality? Or is it possible that there are further choices later on, something much closer to the original Makropulos case? Or is that just left somewhat ambiguous? There is plenty of discussion of the best reasons for and against thinking that immortality for a human being would allow for a life of value. But there isn’t much discussion of, for example, how impactful the anxiety associated with the choice itself might be, especially in iterative-choice scenarios much closer to the original scenario that inspired Williams’s piece.

Second, it seems to me that the application of Boolos’s spanning conditionals point helps to show (a) how difficult it is to conceive of an immortal human existence, and (b) how much is at stake in your decision. If you are given a one-time shot at immortality and you choose immortality then you count on the truth of infinitely many enormous
spanning conditionals, such as:

[C-1000000] If more life is desirable to me now, in 2017, then more life will be desirable or at least not an intolerable prospect to me after I’ve lived a million years more and in whatever state my world will be a million years later.

[C-1000000000000] If more life is desirable to me now, in 2017, then more life will be desirable or at least not an intolerable prospect to me after I’ve lived a trillion years more and in whatever state my world will be a trillion years later.

[C-10^100000] If life is desirable to me now, in 2017, then more life will be desirable or at least not an intolerable prospect to me after I’ve lived $10^{100000}$ years more and in whatever state my world will be $10^{100000}$ years later.

And so on *ad infinitum*.

I am not at all confident in C-1000000. I am not sure what to make of C-10^{100000}. I know such a conditional has a consequent that denotes a finite span of time but I can hardly begin to imagine what my life would be like after – or even anywhere close to the middle of – such a span. In my view I would need such confidence, and confidence in infinitely many spanning conditionals with ever more (temporally) distant consequents in order to responsibly relinquish my mortality.

Third, and more generally, it is interesting that if given (infinitely many) iterative choices to live on or die, you might develop mutually consistent but necessarily incompatible wants. You might deeply desire to die at some point; yet for each weekly choice remaining, it is true that during that week you do not want to die. This is a fairly common situation in ordinary human psychology. I want to have important surgery at some point. But for each day remaining, it is true that on that day I do not want to have
that important surgery. Or: I want to go on a strict diet at some point. But for each day remaining, it is true that on that day I do not want to go on a strict diet. In each ordinary case I cannot realize both desires and yet there is no inconsistency between them. This helps to explain, I think, why we have conflicting intuitions about the desirability of immortality. It might also help to explain why some of us often fail to make good use of the time available to us during our finite lives, despite our also often knowing what we ought to do and desiring to do it. We desire to do the more beneficial activity at some point. But for each opportunity to do that beneficial activity, it is true that, at the moment of that opportunity, we do not want to do that beneficial activity. There is no logical inconsistency between these desires. And we might be well aware of that logical consistency. But it is impossible for our general desire and our more specific desires to

Notes

1 For further discussion see Scheffler (2013, pp. 83-112) and Wollheim (1984, pp. 265-6).

2 The set whose members are each of the distinct, consecutive millennia in such a life would be a countably infinite set. Partition an immortal person’s existence into consecutive millennia. Let $M$ be the set – that is, a well-defined collection of distinct objects – whose members are each only one of those partitions, arranged in chronological order (such that $m_1$ is the first millennium, $m_2$ the second, and so on): $M = \{m_1, m_2, m_3, \ldots\}$. There is a one-to-one mapping from $M$ to the set of natural numbers, $N$. More precisely, there’s a surjection and an injection – and therefore a bijective function also known as one-to-one mapping or correspondence – from $M$ to $N$. So $M$ has the same cardinality as that of $N$. But $N$ is a countably infinite set. $M$ is, therefore, a countably infinite set.

3 I am assuming that you know that you can (if you forever carry on saying “yes, one more week”) have infinitely many further weekly choices available to you, and that a “yes” prolongs your life for a week and a “no” gives you death in five minutes. You know that there will be no end to these choices until you say “no” (if ever).

4 All else equal, the choices would probably each become much more important and much more difficult if you did not have a guarantee that another weekly choice with the same options and the same results will come next week. I won’t discuss that variant of the scenario here, since it seems different in kind (and in an awfully important kind) from the original Makropulos case, from Williams’s variant and the variant discussed or taken for granted in the literature on Williams’s piece, and from Nagel’s variant. In the original version of the scenario and in Nagel and Williams’s respective variants of the scenario, it seems that the agent knows what her choices are and how many they are. Of course, this is not to say that the agent knows everything that will follow from her choice. It is largely because we do not know everything about what immortality would
be like, in fact we know very little, that we might well struggle and experience a great deal of anxiety in deciding whether or not to relinquish our mortality. In any case, that epistemic access to the choice and its number plays a central role in the variants I am discussing here. It might certainly be interesting to discuss scenarios without such epistemic access. But I must turn my focus away from some markedly different areas, and this is just one such area.

5 To be clear, I am *not* arguing that there are not any good reasons to think that an iterating version of the immortality vs. mortality decision might well be preferable to a one-time shot at the choice. There is of course room to argue that the one-time shot has its own psychological disadvantages. For instance, a person who has chosen to always live will likely experience far more dread about the possibility of a dismal future than an immortal who might, in any given week, choose not to renew her immortality.

6 To put the matter in a way that is more faithful to one of the points made early on in Boolos’s brilliant paper (to which I could not possibly hope to do justice here): 1 is definitely small. $10^{80}$ is definitely not small. But if the successor of every small number is itself a small number then $10^{80}$ is small. The induction premise says that the successor of every small number is itself a small number. So we have a good reason to think that the induction premise is false.

7 One might think that I’ve neglected an important difference between Nagel’s scenario and the one-time shot at the immortality vs. mortality choice: in Nagel’s scenario, if a person does not choose to live for another week, they will die in five minutes. The fact that five minutes is relatively immediate is significant here because it is possible that someone might not wish to live forever, while wanting also not to perish on his/her own terms (or seemingly for a decision that he/she has made). This element is lacking in the one-time choice. Presumably, if one does not choose to live forever (or chooses not to ingest the potion that gives that person 300 years of good health), then one will die as any other mortal human being normally would. It might seem that neglecting this difference (and feature of Nagel’s account) leads to an uncharitable reading of Nagel because it strengthens the desirability of repeatedly choosing to live (if only because one thereby does not become responsible for one’s own death). So, Nagel’s account might seem more like choosing when (and how) to die rather than choosing to continue to live. But given the context of Nagel’s claims, it seems to me that Nagel *is* specifically responding to Williams’s argument against choosing mortality over immortality. Nagel seems focused on the subjective relation a particular person has to the *fact and implications of* his or her death and his or her mortality, rather than the relation a person has to how he or she will die:

Some people believe in an afterlife. I do not; what I will say will be based on the assumption that death is nothing, and final. I believe there is little to be said for it: it is a great curse, and if we truly face it nothing can make it palatable except the knowledge that by dying we can prevent an even greater evil. Otherwise, given the simple choice between living for another week and
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...dying in five minutes... Perhaps I shall eventually tire of life, but at the moment I can’t imagine it, nor can I understand those many distinguished and otherwise reasonable persons who sincerely assert that they don’t regard their own mortality as a misfortune. (1986, p. 224)

Nagel cites mentions Williams’s Makropulos piece in a footnote to the latter claim. Nagel goes on to argue that “Life can be wonderful, but even if it isn’t, death is usually much worse” (1986, p. 224.). Still, in the more general context and spirit of Nagel’s wonderful book, we might read Nagel more charitably as hinting at a deeper point, and one not inconsistent with the central thesis of this paper: it is strikingly difficult for a particular person to reconcile (a) her or her more specific, subjective attitude wherein he or she wants not to die now or in the immediate future with (b) the more objective attitude or she perhaps ought to have to the possibility that he or she will find life intolerable at some distant point in the future.

8 I am assuming that you are guaranteed physical health and freedom from psychiatric disorder, but not freedom from psychological difficulties.

9 For helpful comments on previous drafts, I am grateful to Tess Bloom, several participants at the 2017 Mountain-Plains Philosophy Conference, and anonymous reviewers for the Southwest Philosophy Review.

Works Cited


