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Sex, Death and Cabbages: A Defence of Mortality

Having argued that there is no duty to enhance others, it might still be something that it is a good idea to do; and it might be a good idea for us to enhance ourselves in various ways, too. Over the course of this and the next three chapters, I'll examine this idea, and defend the claim that, while most potential enhancements are permissible, they are also much less likely to improve our lives than we might hope. A small category of enhancements *does* stand a reasonable chance of promoting flourishing; counterintuitively, these are enhancements that look to be at first glance the most trivial. And there is one kind of enhancement that probably ought to be more positively resisted, as I'll argue in Chapter 7.

In this chapter, I'll take as my test case the possibility of significant life extension – which is something that I take to be the *excelsior* of enhancements that we might want to make to the body. John Harris claims that 'life-extending therapies are, and must always be, lifesaving therapies and must share whatever priority lifesaving has in our morality and in our social values'.¹ For him, there is no difference between saving someone's life, and extending that life, because saving a life just is a matter of extending it, and – '[s]ince lifesaving is just death-postponing with a positive spin'² – *vice versa*. If we think that saving lives by curing illness is a good thing, that's all we need to be committed to the idea that significant life extension is a good thing. Aubrey de Grey agrees: for him, to show that there is no meaningful difference between saving and extending a life is easily done,

because it derives directly from the definitions of those concepts. In each circumstance we are giving the beneficiary a greater remaining healthy potential lifespan than they would have if we held back, which is the beginning and end of what we mean when we say we have saved their lives, and also of what we mean when we say we have extended their lives. This is not a matter of the absence of a contrary argument; it is a matter of definition, plain and simple.³

And – to be fair – there does seem to be something commonsensical about the position. When we save the child's life by pulling her out of the pool, we are extending it; and the desire that she not die – that dying is bad, and that it should be averted – is presumably an important factor in our having decided to save her life. Ask many people what they think the first virtue of medicine

and medical research is, and they'll likely as not tell you that it's to save lives – which is, it would appear, as much as to say that it's to avoid deaths. Indeed, the NHS distributes resources in a manner that pays attention to the number of life-years, suitably adjusted for quality, that they'll generate. Harris, as we've seen, thinks that we accept dying of old age only because we see it as inevitable;⁴ de Grey, in only a slightly more radical claim accuses many of us of being in a 'pro-aging trance':

[A]ll the major current reasons given for not curing ageing are mere crutches to help us cope with the immutability of ageing that we have been brought up to accept. Once we realise this, our determination to consign human ageing to history will be second only to our shame that we took so long to break out of our collective trance.⁵

Nevertheless, the point of this chapter is to argue that, while protection against ageing is probably a desirable thing, significant life extension as an end in itself probably isn't. It might even be positively undesirable. Moreover – and this is, I admit, a slightly more hesitant claim – once we have got rid of the error of desiring to eliminate death, the problems presented by old age can be dealt with in ways that do not rest on the idea that it is incompatible with a good life.

Defending against death

It's fairly obvious that, if we're concerned with promoting human flourishing, that the humans in question should be alive is an important consideration. So it makes sense that significant life extension should figure highly on our list of potentially important enhancements. Being dead may not be bad for the dead – and I'm going to accept that Stoic idea as a given for this chapter (death, says Seneca, 'would have been worth fearing [only] if it could coexist with you'⁶) – but the point of death is also fairly clearly the point at which any kind of flourishing is terminated. Moreover, as Harris points out, '[g]iven that people want life and fear death it is difficult not to see longevity, and perhaps immortality, as a palpable good'.⁷ Woody Allen, for his part, isn't scared of dying; he just doesn't want to be there when it happens.

And we are (at least if people like de Grey are to be believed) tantalizingly close to living in a world in which natural deaths could be eliminated. Though there are some diseases that we cannot cure at present, we can be fairly confident that they are not incurable or ineliminable in principle. HIV presents us with a major source of morbidity, but it is, in the end, only a virus. We have already made great progress in turning HIV from something that kills with reasonable certainty and in a reasonably unpleasant way, into a chronic-but-manageable condition that need not make all that much difference to a

person's quality of life or death; and the more research is done, the better our chances of finding a cure or vaccine.⁸ The same applies to other diseases that, though currently incurable or unpreventable, are neither incurable nor unpreventable in principle. In all these cases, a great deal of suffering can be avoided; but not only that: a lot of deaths can be avoided, too.

The natural ageing process may strike us as being a little different; ageing is a part of what bodies do, and is therefore not so easily presented as being a result of an invasive organism or a cell gone haywire. Nevertheless, the process of becoming elderly is, when it comes down to it, just another biological process; and, as such, it ought to be possible to interfere with it. To some extent, we do that already: something like HRT is designed to interrupt an aspect of natural ageing; other drugs are designed to maintain heart function, and so on. The next step along this path is the use of bioscientific insight to repair some of the damage caused to the body by the ageing process 'from within' – for example, we might imagine the use of stem-cell therapies to rejuvenate flagging heart tissues. Granted the fact that nature manages to create tissues and organs anew from a basic genetic recipe, the general idea is that there is no reason in principle why we shouldn't be able to do something similar for ourselves, and either provide ourselves with endless spare parts, or – better yet – work out how to make ourselves less likely to wear out in the first place.

While there is a whiff of the science-fictional about many of these procedures, they are all things that have been suggested seriously as potential areas of research and as procedures that we could see beginning to be realized within the tolerably near future. It is at least conceivable that we could make use of the biosciences to make ourselves, to all intents and purposes, immortal. 'Immortals' in this sense would not be immune to dying – people whose bodies had been primed against the ageing process would not, of course, be immune to road accidents – but they would be resistant to dying of old age, and perhaps more resistant to dying of some 'non-natural' deaths, too: a road accident that causes a 20-year-old little more than a few bruises might be a causal factor in the death of a 90-year-old today; but if her body could be made less vulnerable generally, she would be in much less danger from it.

Added to this is the fact that the longer someone lives, the greater the chance that they'll survive to see some medical innovation that can help them live longer still. Aubrey de Grey has claimed that the world's first 1000-year-old could well be not only alive, but an adult, today; part of the reason for this is that, though we do not have the ability to make someone live that long right now, we do have the ability to keep anyone who is less than about 60 or 70 years old alive, and in reasonably good health, for another 20 years – and there is nothing difficult about that. With the right kind of research input, by the end of that 20-year period, we could easily have the wherewithal to maintain their life and health for a much longer period again. The process would be something like the reverse of Zeno's arrow: whereas the gap between the arrow's head

and its target narrows forever without closing despite the arrow's constant movement, so the gap between the currently-60-year-old Immortal *in embryo* and his death widens forever despite his. Ray Kurzweil and Terry Grossman, after having claimed (somewhat perplexingly) that we are built according to 'an outdated genetic program that wants us to die young'⁹ describe affairs thus:

[W]e still don't possess the full technology and skills to enable us to [overcome our genetic limitations], but it is very likely that we will have them in the near future. Therefore, our goal is to *live long enough* (and remain healthy long enough) to take full advantage of the biotech and nanotech advances that have already begun and will be occurring at an accelerating pace during the next few decades. If you stay on the cutting edge of our rapidly expanding knowledge, you can indeed *live long enough to live forever*.¹⁰

Assuming that Immortals would have survived the killers of infancy, and would not have to face the killers of old age, we can do a little actuarial work to determine the death rate for average adults, and use that information to make predictions about the attrition rate among Immortals. Hence John Harris quotes Steven Austad as having suggested that the average life-expectancy for Immortals could well be just a little short of 5000 years¹¹; that is, some would be struck by lightning on their 30th birthday, and others would live much longer – but it would not be unreasonable to expect to go around 5000 years before experiencing a fatal misfortune.

Is it really better that we defer death, or do not die at all, though? That's the question that I'll address in this chapter. I'll defend the position that Immortality would not be something that a reasonable person would list as a characteristic of the good life.

Avoiding deaths and saving lives

One point needs to be got out of the way before engaging with the question in earnest, though, and it speaks to the therapy/enhancement distinction. As I conceded above, medical science has become very good at saving our lives; as such, it has done its bit to make us live longer. An Immortal is, by definition, someone who lives a great deal longer.¹² But beyond this, there is nothing all that special about an Immortal; and it might well be assumed that a great deal of fairly workaday medical treatment nudges us some way in the direction of becoming Immortal. In turn, this might be taken as an indication that anyone who supports the progress made by the biosciences in increasing lifespan (and health span) ought, on pain of inconsistency, to support living longer (with a correspondingly high quality of life) outright – and, by the same token, that to express doubts about the Immortalist programme is to express doubts about medicine more generally. But this is not quite correct.

A great deal hinges on providing an account of what is accepted as a reasonably long life. As Thomas Nagel has observed, we do tend to think that Keats' death at 24 years of age was somehow a greater loss than Tolstoy's at 82.¹³ Having said this, as he goes on to point out, though dying at 82 is seen as less bad than dying at 24, it might still be terrible to die at 82, or 806. Nevertheless, the idea that the badness of dying diminishes the longer the life in question is the kind of sentiment that is traded on by the so-called 'fair innings' argument, which suggests that – at least when it comes to the allocation of scarce health resources – the young trump the old. This only makes sense if we think that there is a point beyond which people can be said to have had at least a minimally acceptable lifespan. But thinking about minimally acceptable lifespans brings us back to what makes the difference between 'therapeutic' life-extension and Immortality: the reasonable expectation criterion outlined in Chapter 1. If one accepts that there is a reasonable expectation concerning survival times, then this is all one needs to be able to draw a line between interventions that aim to ensure that people live to a minimally acceptable age, and the kind that aims to ensure that they live a great while longer. Suspicion of radical life extension does not imply suspicion of medicine, even if we think that the point of medicine is to extend life.

Does this mean, then, that it would be acceptable to leave a centenarian to drown in the pond on the grounds that he has had a reasonably long life and then some? Actually, it doesn't; and this is because there is a difference between saving someone's life by rescuing them, and postponing death in the sense that we are considering here. In the normal run of things, the idea that one might save a life by means of rescue is reserved for those situations in which a person is faced with some imminent threat. This is the situation in which the drowning centenarian finds himself. By contrast, one does not rescue anyone by providing swimming lessons, or by vetoing the construction of the pool to begin with. (This is a point that will have a role to play in Chapter 9, too.)

Now, I understand terms like 'significant life extension' to indicate procedures that aim to defer the point of death for as long as possible by minimizing certain threats – if possible, by making sure that they never arise. This is not the same as rescue. One might plan to make use of a certain life-extending intervention next Saturday and book an appointment to see the relevant expert; it's strange to talk about a person planning and making an appointment to be rescued then. It *might* be that the apparent difference between the two ways of describing the appointments is purely illusory; but this is not something that we can take for granted – and the two descriptions do not appear to be mutually substitutable. On these grounds, and notwithstanding that both life-saving by rescue and by significant life extension refer to reducing death tolls, it remains possible coherently to stick to a claim that there is an obligation to attempt the rescue of centenarians in danger – which does, of course, amount to an attempt to avoid their dying – without having to admit that whatever we say about cheating death in this situation applies *pari passu* to cheating death in all others.

Moreover, questions about the morality of rescue are, in a certain sense, differently focused than are questions about extending lives. The ethics of significant life extension revolve largely around the person whose life is potentially going to be lengthened – around what *he* wants, what is reasonable *for him*, and so on. By contrast, asking these questions in respect of someone whom we can rescue is an indication that we have had, to borrow Williams' phrase, several thoughts too many. Rescuing someone has less to do with the details of their life and assessments of what they want and what is reasonable for them, as with the details of ours – our relationship with the person rescued, perhaps, or the preservation of our own sense of basic decency and moral character.

It might be interjected that there are all kinds of reasons to prefer never to be in a situation in which someone requires rescue. If we had the means to rejuvenate the muscles in the heart, for example, we might thereby save people from having to be rescued from heart attacks. It might be that this is, in the long run, more desirable. But that doesn't alter the point that there is a coherent distinction to be drawn between rescue in the everyday sense of the term, and the indefinite avoidance of mortality. One cannot leap directly from the former to the latter. Avoiding death will lead to longer lives; but taking pains to prevent a death is not the same as promoting Immortality because there is a class of deaths that one might try to prevent without being engaged in the project of indefinitely avoiding death.

What's wrong with mortality(?)

If there is a coherent difference between having one's life extended by means of rescue, and having it extended by means of coming never to require rescue, it means that a person may endorse being saved from imminent danger, and may endorse Immortality, but that endorsing one does not imply endorsing the other (although someone who endorses immortality for himself is presumably going to be *de facto* the sort of person who would want rescuing as long as there was a reasonably high quality of life assured for him afterwards). Would a failure to endorse indefinite life extension be wildly eccentric, though?

One way to begin to answer this question is to look at why dying is taken to be bad. We can account for the badness of dying by saying that it deprives us of the goods of life. This is a position that has been occupied by several people. Death represents, for Nagel, the 'abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods'¹⁴; Williams articulates the position by saying that

to want something is to that extent to have reason for resisting what excludes having that thing: an death certainly does that, for a very large range of things that one wants. If that is right, then for any of those things, wanting something

itself gives one a reason for avoiding death. From the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of affairs in which his want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided.¹⁵

Death deprives us of things we like and want; therefore it makes sense to consider death to be bad and undesirable; therefore it would seem to make sense to consider the opposite of death – extended life – to be good and desirable. Of course, a great deal hangs on the goodness of the thing lost: if, for some reason, we no longer regard our lives as good, then death may not be as unwelcome as it could be. But the basic message is intuitively powerful: it is better for us not to die, or at least to defer our deaths for as long as possible, because life is a necessary condition for us doing things that are important to us, and its termination means losing the opportunity to do them. Let's call this the 'Lost Opportunity Thesis', or 'LOT' for short.

As it happens, I think that the LOT is about as good an argument for Immortality as one is likely to find. Its power is significantly related to the idea that, for a life to be desirable, it must be *for* something, and that something has to be more than yet more life. If we imagine a person whose only project is continued living, and ask him why he wants to stay alive, and he tells us that it is because that way he will be alive longer, there would be some justice in our supposing that he had not quite understood the question: a project cannot easily be accepted as its own justification. A longer life will not provide a reason to live longer; it is hard to see how the phrase 'At least you're alive' would be of much compensation to someone who was deprived of all *but* his life. I am, for this reason, satisfied that life for life's sake is – certainly from the point of view of the working hypothesis that flourishing is important – a non-starter.

This point is, I think, almost a platitude. It can be deepened a little by pointing out that what we *do* value about being alive may not always be compatible with the strategies that we may have to adopt in order to achieve more of it. Hence it might not only be the case that a life lived for the sake of extending life is at best dubiously worth living: it might easily turn out that that life would be less desirable than a life not so directed. For example, one of the strategies that have been suggested as contributing to an extended life is caloric restriction. And, more generally, it may well be possible to adopt all manner of modified behaviours that will help us to live longer. For example, in a *New Scientist* article in 2010, Ray Kurzweil claimed to have all-but-cured his own diabetes by coming up with his own, strict, nutritional regime – a regime that includes consuming only 1,500 calories per day, based on under 80 grams of carbohydrates, and 150 supplements daily – all topped up with weekly intravenous infusions.¹⁶ Kurzweil and Grossman, in *Transcend*, recommend avoiding many kinds of food for the sake of a longer life.¹⁷

Let's allow that these strategies for staying alive actually are effective. The problem with this is that eating is one of life's pleasures (and it is not for nothing

that deriving all our nutritional needs from pills is an idea that never caught on); a rich, varied and plentiful diet is *fun*. Hence it is no small question to wonder whether sacrificing that pleasure upon the altar of extra life-years is worth it. In considering this question, we shouldn't forget that the sacrifice would not be a one-off event followed by many extra years of cakes and ale, either: we would be talking about extra years of abstemiousness. The strictness of the Kurzweil regime is no small matter. Kurzweil and Grossman even suggest that

tap and bottled water often contain environmental toxins, so we believe it is important that you filter tap water and know the quality and source of bottled water. [. . .]It is important that you filter the water from your tap before you drink it.¹⁸

Alternatively, you could drink when you're thirsty, and not worry about it. Even if tap water is not as pure as it *could* be, it is not unsafe – at least, not in the parts of the world where books like *Transcend* are likely to sell well – and so that notion that it is *important* to filter tap water does seem to be a little excitable.

Assuming that the science behind this kind of suggestion is sound, adopting the kind of lifestyle required to reap the rewards is rather burdensome – and though these burdens may be adopted into a daily routine that would become just as natural as does anyone else's if all else were equal, all else is not equal, because the world is (generally) not geared to that kind of regime. Moreover, too close an adherence to this kind of lifestyle also risks becoming antagonistic to flourishing because of other aspects of the psychological burden that it implies. One characteristic that we might reasonably expect to be found in a flourishing life, for example, is some capacity for spontaneous action – action with which rigid adherence to any kind of regimen is obviously incompatible. It is not at all evident that life for its own sake is worth making this kind of sacrifice, or that an extended period of this kind of self-discipline is all that attractive an option. And adapting the regimen to be compatible with an enjoyable life means that rules become guidelines, and guidelines become good intentions, and good intentions get measured against other good things, and we find ourselves living the life we had before.

So: I am satisfied that, if Immortality is desirable, it is so because of some version of the LOT. This is not enough to show that it actually is desirable, though. There's a number of arguments that might purport to show that it isn't.

Why not be immortal?

The first kind of reason that might be produced to resist significant life extension has to do with worries about what kind of world it would be that had Immortals in it; the second has to do with the kind of life that would be lived.

The overpopulation objection

One of the arguments against the pursuit of immortality is that it would lead to a massively overpopulated world; a world in which people do not die is one in which more people are forced to live side-by-side, simply because nature has not managed to eliminate the bulk of them. This means that there will be many more people competing over the same resources, and polluting the world in the process, and a corresponding diminution of the quality of life for each. This is not in itself sufficient to show that there is anything wrong with pursuing significant life extension, for as long as the life of Immortals is just about worth living.¹⁹ All the same, a life that is just about worth living is not really a *good* life, and it's the possibility of postponing death indefinitely for the sake of a good life that concerns me here – so some version of the argument does seem to stand.

Yet the argument can be countered. Importantly, 'overpopulation' is a term that really only makes sense within a context: there is no fixed quota of humans that the planet can support. If the planet's carrying capacity can be increased, there ought to be little reason to worry too much about overpopulation. And it is far from a given that the planet's carrying capacity cannot be increased. The problems of guaranteeing a sufficient supply of food, for example, are not insurmountable; even now, there is a great deal of food that goes to waste already that could be used to feed the hungry, and many of the problems of feeding an increasing and increased population can be solved by means of wise economic management. A much more powerful point could be made alongside this one, which is that a population that has the means and the will to carry out the kind of cellular and genetic tinkering necessary to make people Immortals presumably also has the wherewithal to tinker with the means of agricultural production. Problems of undersupply could, at least in principle, be solved by a new agricultural revolution that puts effort into the development of, and commits to the use of, crops capable of producing food from what is now marginal or unusable land. It might be necessary, alongside this trend, for people to become vegetarian, or to adapt to a diet based on, say, mealworms – getting protein from meat in the familiar way is highly inefficient – but the point stands that, with the application of the kind of scientific know-how necessary to create Immortals in the first place, it would be possible to create the food resources necessary to feed them. And much the same could be said in respect of other resources: a world with a higher population might quickly become intolerable if we rely on the same energy economy; but this is a long way from meaning that a radically different energy profile, that develops and makes much more use of renewables, and novel fuel sources such as biodiesel from GM algae, or even nuclear fusion, would not be possible.

Moreover, a world with more Immortals might turn out to be better in important respects than the world in which we live now, because Immortals

would have an incentive to take care of the planet that we do not. Though it might be unjust for me to act in a way that will make life harder for my great-grandchildren – say, by refusing to minimize my CO₂ emissions – there is little reason apart for the call of my conscience to do anything about it, since I will be dead by the time the consequences of my behaviour manifest themselves. Mortality gives me an escape route by which I can avoid behaviour that we might think is required. Immortals, though, would have a much greater incentive not to pollute or overburden the planet in other ways, since someone who can reasonably expect still to be here in 800 years' time can, by the same token, reasonably expect to have to carry the burden of his actions.

Another guard against overpopulation could be that we impose a *quid pro quo* – that those who would undergo whatever the procedures are for Immortality should be required to reduce their fertility. If we assume that Immortals would simply be people whose ageing process had been halted, they might well be expected to be fertile not just for decades, but for centuries. This would mean that they could be expected to have many more children over the course of their lives. (Many may prefer to have the same number as they would have had in a normal lifespan; but there would be at least some who would continue to procreate, if only because the chance of becoming accidentally pregnant during your life is much higher if the fertile part of your life lasts the best part of a millennium, and some of those accidental pregnancies would doubtless be carried to term.) Moreover, a rise in the average number of children born to each woman would be compounded by the fact that previous generations would not have died off – so the population would still be rising. Even if we can increase the world's carrying capacity, there may still be an unsustainably high number of people on the planet for as long as the fertility rate of Immortals was more than zero.

It might be the case, then, that Immortals could reasonably be expected to be sterilized. This would be a curtailment of reproductive freedom; but while many bioethicists hold to the idea that respect for autonomy is not just a principle that we should follow, but is inviolable, it is not obvious that they are correct. And, anyway: if a person is told that sterilization is a condition of Immortality and chooses to go ahead with Immortality anyway, then that is hardly a curb on her autonomy – any more than is being told by the man in the showroom that paying for the Lamborghini is a condition of driving off in it.

From the point of view of achieving the good life and maximal flourishing, it might be the case that not being able to have children would be undesirable; on some accounts, we might want to hold that reproduction is an aspect of the good life. However, this point is fairly easily dealt with. First, though having children may be a part of the conception of the good life entertained by *some* people, it is not part of the conception entertained by *all*: plenty of people believe that they are flourishing, or can flourish, without children. Moreover, there're ways to have children or a family that don't involve close biological

relationships: what benefits there are from family life do not seem to be reducible to any consideration about the lines of genetic descent. But even allowing that an argument was generated that established the contribution to flourishing made by having children of which one is genetically a parent – well, even then, it might simply be that there's a decision to be made about how to achieve the good life; genetic parenthood and Immortality may simply be antagonistic. Some may choose the former, and others the latter.

So it would seem to be, at the very least, less than obvious that the overpopulation argument will undermine the idea that Immortality could feature as a part of the good life.

Exclusive immortality

But supposing, for the sake of the argument, that overpopulation would be a problem: one retort to this is that opting for Immortality does not imply that there would be any other Immortals. Wanting immortality for yourself doesn't mean that you want it for everyone else, too. Hence, if we are disposed to think that it is better to live for as long a life as possible, we need not be worried by the undesired consequences of everyone else living just as long. My flourishing might not be maximized in a world of generalized Immortality – but that tells us nothing about whether I would find it desirable for myself.

One interjection that might be made at this point would run along the lines that the quality of the life of a solo Immortal would be diminished simply by virtue of his solitude. It might be pointed out, for example, that a flourishing life is a social life, and that – perhaps more importantly – humans as a species tend to form deep and long-lasting emotional bonds with a few people. For these bonds to be broken – for a spouse to die, or a friendship to founder acrimoniously – can often be traumatic. An Immortal would therefore have to choose between sacrificing meaningful relations with others, or enduring a succession of bereavements. (Mortals have a reasonable chance of not having to experience the death of their loved ones because they also have a reasonable chance of dying first: a good way not to be widowed is to be the one who leaves a widow behind.) The alternative would be that all those about whom he cares should be Immortal, too – but those other Immortals would presumably have a circle of attachment that was non-congruent with the first's – and so we would very rapidly see ourselves having to accept a very large number of Immortals.

However, the nod towards friendship indicates the reason why this challenge is weak; friendships do come and go over the course of a lifetime – as, indeed, do other close relationships. Though these events do leave a mark on people for a while, they are rarely so devastating as to inhibit flourishing for the rest of one's life. Indeed, it's possible that we'd think that someone whose quality of life is devastated utterly by losing a loved one may be in some sense pathological – and there's certainly no reason to think that a person *shouldn't* live a full life in

the wake of such events. At the same time, though there is a reasonable chance that one will be bereaved by the death of a loved one at some point during one's life, this is not much of a reason to eschew love. Much the same could be said in respect of Immortals; they may find that their lives are marked by more of these events than are the lives of their mortal counterparts; but there is little reason to suppose that this will tell us that Immortality is a silly thing to pursue after all. An Immortal will know that there is a reasonable chance that she will lose those she loves; but this is not a reason not to love to begin with.

Nor is it quite clear why Williams thinks that an Immortal's personal relationships would require 'peculiar kinds of concealment' and would be vulnerable to 'a form of isolation'.²⁰ It is not obvious that an Immortal would be able to – or would even want to – avoid personal relationships with a mortal; after all, in the familiar world, people do form close relationships with others whose life expectancy is, for one reason or another, much shorter. Correspondingly, there is no clear reason why an Immortal would have to hide her immortality in order to have any chance of a meaningful relationship with a mortal. All relationships – whether with other people, or even with pets – bring with them the risk of their ending; but this is not a black mark against relationships.

There is no obvious reason to suppose that Immortality would be uniquely antagonistic to any of the social aspects of a good life. But none of this really answers the question of whether significant life extension would reasonably be desirable to someone interested in the good life to begin with. I am not convinced that it would be.

The tedium of immortality

The beginnings of an argument against the desirability of Immortality are nevertheless suggested by Bernard Williams in 'The Makropoulos Case': that being an Immortal might well turn out to be intolerable. This being the case, there would be less of a reason to pursue Immortality, and it might well turn out that to insist on a *right* to it (and de Grey thinks that there is such a right²¹) would be irrational. In fact, mortals might have a significant advantage in respect of achieving the good life; and – though this is a touch more speculative – at least some Immortals might have a life that's noticeably worse, for reasons that I'll mention later.

Williams is happy enough to accept that dying is undesirable; but he is famously unhappy with the idea that not dying might be preferable. We need no reminding, he claims, that death can come too early; but the story of Elena Makropoulos reminds us that it can also come too late. Its tardiness is due to the fact that an unending life would become oppressively boring; and, as such, we would seem to be entitled to suppose that Immortality would be antagonistic to the good life.

Williams recognizes that life is good to the extent that it is required for the fulfilment of our desires, and I've already noted his claim that wanting something provides a reason for resisting things that exclude having that thing: things like dying.²² The desirability of the life of the Immortal would depend on having a succession of things to do, careers to pursue, and so on, for the sake of keeping him occupied. But the problem that Williams identifies here is that the train of diversions would itself become tedious. After some particular time, one would have done and experienced all the things that it would make sense for a person of stable character to do and experience.²³

It's possible that, if Williams is correct in this, things are even worse than he imagines. One reason for this is that, while many of us feel that it would be better to have more time in which to cram the things we want to do before we die, the Immortal would soon enough find herself looking for things to do with which the time could be filled. Life, that is, would become something that had to be endured. And yet the prospect that immortality would be something that has to be *endured* is, presumably, not what an Immortal would have wanted. And things get worse still, since not only would an Immortal have to find ever more ways to fill the time ahead of her, but this task would itself become an increasingly difficult chore.

One possible way of circumventing the problem would be to opt for a kind of 'elective amnesia', by which memories would fade over the course of, say, a century or two: this would mean that an Immortal would be able to rediscover some skill or pastime abandoned long ago as though for the first time.²⁴ There would on this account be a rolling disconnection between an Immortal and his distant past; but since what concerns an Immortal is his future (and the possible lack thereof) rather than his past, this ought not to be the sort of thing that worries him too much. This is a possibility that Williams does not seem to countenance: he spends time considering the question of whether a series of psychologically disjointed lives *heading into the future* could be an object of hope to an Immortal as a means of avoiding tedium, and concludes that there are difficulties with it²⁵; but he doesn't seem to pay much attention to the possibility that a series of psychologically disjointed lives *heading into the past* would mean that experiences might never be felt to be repetitious. An Immortal wouldn't even have to opt for his memories being positively erased: all he needs is to be willing to countenance the possibility that they will become less and less complete as the centuries roll on – something that seems intuitively plausible. Hence there need be no shortage of novelty and fascination in an Immortal's life.

The potential fly in the ointment here is that a reasonably clever Immortal would quickly reach the conclusion that, since he cannot remember what happened more than (say) a couple of centuries ago, he will not be able to remember today a couple of centuries hence; and we might worry that this would rob him of any incentive to commit to any projects in the meantime

because their absurdity will be manifest to him. This is related to, but different from, the dread that might arise out of absurdity – the knowledge that, in all likelihood, nothing you do will matter in a thousand years' time, and it certainly won't matter in a million. The difference is, though, that most of us can still cling to the expectation that our actions will matter to us for the duration of our lives. This is not a hope available to the Immortal, since his past actions losing their salience is a condition of his continuing life being tolerable.

Still, there is a way to avoid this problem, and it is to insist that it is possible to pursue projects for the sake of the virtues they offer now, without reference to the extended future. Let them be absurd! Their absurdity really doesn't matter: what counts is that we should live for the moment. This is an impressive response – but, as we'll see later in the chapter, it also spells the end for the desirability of Immortality.

The part of the problem that remains unaddressed is that the badness of boredom has less to do with what has gone before than with what is yet to come: one can put up with almost any amount of boredom so long as it is in the past. The Immortal, though, knowing that he has an indefinitely large number of years spanning ahead of him, is susceptible to a kind of dread stemming from the expectation that the attractions of whatever he does do, no matter how enriching it is, will almost certainly pall; there will, then, be a never-ending need to find something new; and the difficulty of finding new things would rise exponentially. Knowing that you've done it all before is bad; but so is knowing that eventually you will have done it all. In this respect, Williams' concerns about disjointed future selves are well founded; for if my chosen method of avoiding this dread is to sever the connection between me and the entity that I will become such that I am no longer troubled by an indefinitely long life ahead of me, the sense in which I would still be willing my indefinite survival becomes unclear. For as long as the Immortal knows he is immortal, and projects a recognizable version of himself into an indefinitely far future, the dread of a predictably barren future will be likely to be inescapable.

Self-inflicted boredom?

As a slight aside, it's worth noting that Immortals might turn out to be temperamentally unsuited to an Immortal life anyway, precisely because they will positively – and paradoxically – *avoid* certain ways to fill it. This is an argument that's articulated by Nicholas Agar, who speculates that anyone who takes seriously the idea of becoming an Immortal would lead a life that is rather restricted in other ways. Agar suggests that we might find that would-be Immortals lose out on a good portion of a good life by virtue of being rather risk-averse.

The argument is essentially this: For someone who thinks that more life is worth having in its own terms, anything that increases the risk of dying, either naturally or ‘artificially’ – say, in a road accident – would be seen as something to be avoided. This much is true for all of us, of course; but the difference is that if someone is willing to take extraordinary measures not to die from natural causes, it’s hard to imagine anything but a correlative willingness to take extraordinary measures in respect of other causes of death.

It’s possible that negligibly senescent people will decide to treat the interior causes of death, such as the seven deadly things²⁶, differently from exterior causes of death such as driving, bush-walking, and skiing. The one-thousand-year estimate of the life expectancies provided by SENS is, after all, based exclusively on the elimination of the seven deadly things. It does not assume that we’ve done away with any of the mortal threats posed by cars and tsunamis. Is there anything wrong with pronouncing yourself content with the mere one-thousand-year expected increase?

Though there’s nothing wrong with saying this, I doubt that people susceptible to de Grey’s rhetoric will be inclined to agree. It sounds suspiciously like the “pro-aging trance” that encourages us to accept the risks of death that come from the seven deadly things. Those who take de Grey’s therapies have quite deliberately set themselves on a course of reducing the probability of death in succeeding units of time. . . . Negligible senescent people have shown themselves unsusceptible to the pro-aging trance in respect of the interior causes of death. They’ll be spending much of their time self-administering anti-aging therapies. It’s hard to imagine them cavalierly dismissing similar risks accompanying downhill skiing and helicopter flying.²⁷

Immortal life, Agar worries, will be somewhat etiolated. It is not a given that such a life would be all that desirable; and so the quest to live longer might precipitate a life whose liver feels there is less to live for. An Immortal, inasmuch as that he’s the sort of person who takes great care to avoid dying, may turn out to have to take great care not to do anything much at all – and that’s hardly living a good life. (One thinks here of George Burns’ joke that someone who gives up smoking and drinking doesn’t live longer – it just feels like it.)

There is a part of this analysis that misses something. In a possible future in which the damage from injury or Kurzweil and Grossman’s (rather ill-defined) toxins could be repaired or avoided easily, it might be possible for people to live rather *more* recklessly, in at least some respects, given that repairing the damage will become easier. But even taking this on board, Agar’s claim does have the air of something correct about it as well. Admittedly, it’s possible that Immortals will just learn to narrow their horizons. But, in that case – and this is a point that I don’t actually see Agar making, though it’s implicit – it’s hard to see why people who’re willing to narrow their horizons to accommodate the short life to which we’re currently used are in any more of a trance than anyone else.

Either way, though, we're still confronted by people who appear to want life for life's sake. Either way, they're still going to have to find things with which to fill the extra time; the only question is how wide or narrow the range of acceptable options is. Either way, there'll come a point when all acceptable options are exhausted.

Filling a life, and the LOT revisited

We can, though, put all these considerations about possible methods for avoiding boredom and angst to one side, because they miss the point. Attempting to find ways to fill a prolonged life is indicative of having misunderstood what it is that makes life worthwhile anyway. This becomes apparent when we revisit one more time Williams' claim that the badness of death is attributable to life being a necessary criterion for the realization of good things. What this means is that life *qua* life is valuable only in respect of other things. Put another way, death's badness is to do with it inevitably preventing the realization of projects. It's the projects, though – that is, the content of a life – that matter, rather than the fact that it's a life at all.

For the mortal, life is a necessary substrate for the pursuit and potential realization of a project (or the attainment of any other good thing that a life might contain); dying is bad because it hinders the things that really matter. This is basically the idea behind the LOT. But what is important is that the opposite is true for the Immortal: projects (and other good things) are not things that require life, but things that are required for his life to be bearable. They are simple props to occupy one's time. Instead of being the reason why one might feel that one wants more life, life becomes a reason to want more projects. That is at the centre of the Immortal dread of the future.

This might give us pause to wonder whether being an Immortal really is something to which it is sensible to aspire. However, if we reach the conclusion that being an Immortal would be bad after all, this still only leaves us in a position that was marked out by Williams: via the application of the LOT, dying is still bad; it's just that not dying is bad for different reasons. However, we can move things on a little from here, and ask whether we have to accept the truth of the claim that dying is really all that bad for the mortal after all. I am not sure that we do: I think that there is a good chance that a good life may be compatible with mortality after all. And if I'm right, it means that there's a way out of the problem with which Williams leaves us.

To get the argument going, it's worth recapping a little. I'm going to keep hold of the idea that flourishing for a human depends in some way on having and pursuing projects of one sort or another. One of the reasons for this is that a person's projects provide a shape to his life, and so provide us with a standard by which we – and he – can assess whether a life is a success or failure, which

might well shade our assessment of whether it is a good one. Another reason is that a person without projects would live a listless sort of life because he would have little or no stake in his own future; moreover, that even minimal projects are a necessary way of fending off boredom, and boredom is incompatible with a good life, means that someone interested in living the good life – *ex hypothesi*, this means everyone – will have an interest in pursuing one or more projects of one sort or another at almost all points in their life.²⁸

I made another claim in Chapter 1, though, and it is very important for the position I want to outline here. That was that the good that is contributed to the good life by a project is, at the very least, not closely dependent on its completion. What is required to stave off boredom and to give a life a shape is that there are projects, not that there were projects that have since been realized.

There is a negative explanation for this, framed in terms of what the completion of a project does not do, and a positive one, framed in terms of what it does. The negative explanation is that while one might justly derive satisfaction from the completion of a project, that is not enough: and no matter how much satisfaction is generated, it will not itself be able to tide us through even an un-extended life. The positive explanation is that though it's the prospect of realizing a project that gives a shape to a life, it is the actual engagement with a project *right now* that eliminates boredom. Hence the contribution made to the goodness of a walker's life by hillwalking is attributable to a range of things: the anticipation of the walk, the actual walking of it, and so on. Having completed the walk is, of course, a source of satisfaction, and the project itself contains what we might call 'the idea of its completion': but its value does not come from its completion, and the goodness of having once completed a walk tarnishes reasonably quickly.

(By the claim that a project contains the idea of its completion, I mean to say that for a project not to be absurd, we must be able to imagine a world in which it is capable either of being completed, or in which progress towards its completion is possible. I find it hard to see how someone could truly be engaged in a project that she believes to be futile, and so think it to be worth the effort or the lifespan.²⁹ Note, though, that a person could be engaged in all manner of grand projects without absurdity. For example, it might be that a solution of the $P=NP?$ problem is, as a matter of fact, beyond human mathematicians; but even so, for as long as we do not know this, it would not be absurd for a person to adopt solving the problem as a project (and so as a reason to be alive). A person could derive satisfaction from the project of painting the Forth Bridge, too – a task that is famously unending – because it is possible to imagine the whole bridge painted³⁰; the job is not futile as a matter of principle, and so a person could be engaged in it. WG Sebald has an anecdote about a man engaged in the task of building a scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem in his barn – a demanding enough task in its own right, but one rendered

apparently interminable by the accretion of more archaeological discoveries and controversies, which require constant revision of the model³¹; but the Temple did look like *something*, and so we could imagine an accurate model emerging at some point.)

What is important here is that there can be projects that give our lives shape, but which we do not value for the sake of their completion so much as for the process by which they approach completion, and the completion of which is not required for their being valued. The fact that a project contains the idea of its completion generates the illusion that it's completion that matters; but, at least from the point of view of living a good life, it isn't. And, of course, if we *do* realize all the projects that we have at time *t*, it won't be long until we start to get bored again, and feel the need to find another project – so it might actually turn out that there could be situations in which a project's realization turns out to have been an undesirable thing. Immortals might find that they are condemned to finish what they start.

Mortality and the good life

The nub of the hypothesis is indicated by a citation of Ovid in Montaigne's essay 'To Philosophise is to Lean How to Die'. Montaigne writes that '[w]e are born for action: *Cum moriar, medium solvare inter opus*.' The Latin he cites here is cribbed from book II of Ovid's *Amores*³², and Montaigne takes it here fairly literally as 'When I die, may I be in the midst of my work'. For Montaigne,

I want us to be doing things, prolonging life's duties as much as we can; I want Death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening.³³

For the record, it has to be said that Montaigne misrepresents (and misquotes) the passage a touch (though in a way that leads more naturally to the point about planting cabbages): it's fairly clear from the context that Ovid is making a joke about the best kind of death being the death that one dies while having sex³⁴; and it's stretching things a little to suppose that Montaigne means 'planting my cabbages' to be read euphemistically. But the general point stands: Montaigne's view is that, in being born for action, it is better for us that our lives end while we are actively involved in something that gives our lives both pleasure and meaning. A man who is content planting cabbages is, at that moment, living a good life; and for him to be so absorbed in that activity that (if I can be excused the image) he barely notices his own death has ended his life well. It doesn't matter if there's another row of cabbages left untended. Montaigne barely seems bothered by death at all, and certainly less concerned about putting off death than about the characteristics of the life being lived at the point of death.³⁵

This sentiment is sent up wonderfully in Joshua Ferris' novel *Then We Came to the End*:

Hank Neary had a quote and we told him politely to shove the quote up his ass. "When death comes, let it find me at my work." He said he couldn't remember if it was Ovid or Horace who said that and we replied that we could give a good goddam what Ovid the Horse said. Ovid the Horse got it wrong about death and work. We wanted to die on a boat. We wanted to die on an island, or in a log cabin on a mountainside, or on a ten-acre farm with an open window and a gentle breeze.³⁶

But it turns out that Ovid the Horse, Montaigne and the narrators of the novel are more or less of one mind. For all, what counts is that when death finds them, it should find them content with whatever it is they are doing. For some, contentment is found in planting cabbages; for others, it is found in a log cabin. I have argued that a good life depends, for the most part, on doing something. I find it unlikely that a sustainedly good life can be had simply by virtue of being on a boat, since a good life demands engagement and simply being on a boat does not (as far as I can see) provide that. But that might just be because I've missed something about boating. All the same, what matters is engagement: with living life in a manner that promotes flourishing – whatever that manner may turn out to be. If a person finds satisfaction in work of a certain sort, then doing that work may be a way to live a good life. This is a fairly egoistic position – but the quest for the good life is, in a sense, irreducibly egoistic to begin with, and no worse for that. The point is that, if one's life at a given point is enriched by what one is doing, then it is – at least at that moment – being lived well; and a life that ends 'on a high', while it's being lived well, ends better than one that doesn't. It makes sense to hope that death finds us at our labour.

Williams seems to be nonplussed by the prospect of this kind of absorption in a project. In response to the notion that Immortality would be bearable if we could find something endlessly and totally absorbing, he claims that

if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the conditions that it should be me who lives forever, and that the eternal life should be in prospect of some interest.³⁷

To some extent, Williams appears correct. If I am willing to lose myself in a task, I am willing to lose myself – in which case, I lose contact with who- or whatever it is that goes on to live forever. Correspondingly, if I am concerned that *I* should live forever, this seems to be inseparable from a picture of my continued self; I ought to be able, to some extent, to adopt the pose of a spectator of my own activity. But what Williams does not account for is that, to the extent to that one is a spectator of one's activity, one is alienated from oneself. To be absorbed in one's projects is to be devoted to something

that – presumably – one thinks worthwhile; to stand as a spectator to that kind of absorption is to deprive oneself of whatever satisfaction it offers. Put another way, a good life is one in which we can lose ourselves in the things that we think desirable – whether they be sex or cabbage cultivation.

If I'm right to suggest that it's engagement with an ongoing project that matters, and that completing it doesn't – or, at most, matters only a very small amount, since the satisfaction that one derives from having completed a project is transient, having a tendency to drift over the horizon – then we have another reason to suppose that extending our lives isn't all that important after all. The fact that we need to be alive to complete a project means that we need to be alive only if the completion of that project is important to our lives being tolerable – but that is not true. The goodness of a good life is related to the completion of projects in, at most, a glancing way. Nor is it obviously better to have time to complete a number of projects. If something, or some range of activities, is engaging now, then that is all that is needed for the life that we currently live to be rewarding. We may have a simmering hope that we will have engaging activities in the future – but this is a version of the hope that, if we are alive, our life will be rewarding, and it won't therefore tell us anything about the desirability of more life *per se*. Naturally, we would subscribe to the idea that, *if* we are alive, our lives should be good; but this is not the same as subscribing to the idea that we ought to remain alive *so that* that life can be good. All we need to live a good life is that that life should be engaging for its duration; duration doesn't add to the goodness.

The boon of mortality

What I hope to have done in this chapter is to deflate the case for immortality as being a serious contributor to the good life. Immortality brings with it the risk of boredom, and – more importantly – it makes the mistake of thinking that more life is desirable just by virtue of there being more of it, as though life is rewarding quite aside from anything that goes on during it. Once we get hold of the idea that it's the content of a life that matters, though, it's only a short step to being able to suggest that living longer adds nothing except time that needs to be filled.

Accepting this means that we can confront de Grey's claims about being caught in a pro-ageing trance, too. For it is possible for people to live a good life notwithstanding their being liable to ageing; and accepting and adapting to ageing is hardly the same as adopting a *pro-* attitude. It might yet turn out that all these apparently happy people are deeply mistaken, and not happy at all; I have no principled objection to this kind of bad faith being possible. But, absent more evidence, it is equally possible simply to accept that elderly people who claim to be basically happy really are basically happy. This happiness is

frequently to be found even in those who have chronic health conditions – people who have been disabled by stroke, or who have diabetes or whatever, but who manage their lives within constraints. (Maybe we'd want to say that they shouldn't have to adjust to the facts of ageing; but not *having* to is a long way from it being an indication of bad faith.) A lot of this has to do with a wide, varied and supportive social network. The goodness of these lives comes, that is, not from having got rid of senescence – but from having got rid of the *worry* about senescence. That, too, is something that seems to have been forgotten by the Immortalists – their picture of human life is not only a picture of an empty box into which things can and must be crammed, but also one that is individualistic and isolated. If one is socially integrated, though, growing older is just one characteristic of life; a part of facticity that has to be confronted, and nothing more. It's even possible that there's something slightly petulant about the Immortalist's view that his life is worth the effort of saving. Really, it isn't; and I have a hunch that there's something quite admirable about the cynic who recognizes that he should chisel what he can from his life, knowing that it counts for nothing much over all.

There's one final aspect to the defence of mortality, and it harks back both to Agar's concerns about the risk-averse Immortal, and to Montaigne's comment that he wants death to find him planting his cabbages, 'neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening'. The final thought is this: Immortalists worry too much. In thinking about ways not to die, they are inevitably thinking about their own death, and so about something they think to be bad. Their deaths cast shadows over their lives. Montaigne thinks about his garden, about the butterfly on the flower, about his wife and mistress, and about the sunshine. I'd rather be Montaigne.

Notes

- 1 Harris, 2007, p. 61.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 de Grey, 2005, p. 662.
- 4 Harris, 2007, p. 52.
- 5 de Grey, 2005, p. 659.
- 6 Seneca, 2010, 4.3.
- 7 Harris, 2007, p. 64.
- 8 Finding a vaccine for HIV has proved to be difficult; but there are several strategies being pursued – see, for example, work by Balasz et al. (2012), among many, many others.
- 9 Kurzweil and Grossman, 2011, p. xxiv.
- 10 Ibid., pp. xxiv–xxv; slightly modified.
- 11 Harris, 2007, p. 68.

- 12 I'll use the capitalized form 'Immortal' here to designate a person who, thanks to some scientific intervention, can have a reasonable expectation of a life several times longer than the current average.
- 13 Nagel, 1970, p. 80.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Williams, 1999, p. 85; slightly modified.
- 16 Adler, 2010, pp. 38–9.
- 17 Kurzweil and Grossman, 2011, pp. 207–312.
- 18 Ibid., p. 208.
- 19 This point is obviously borrowed from Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*.
- 20 Williams, 1999, p. 90.
- 21 de Grey, 2005, *passim*.
- 22 Williams, 1999, p. 85.
- 23 Ibid., p. 90.
- 24 In Chapter 6, I consider the possibility of mnemonic enhancement – an intervention designed to increase a person's capacity for memory. It occurs to me in passing that such enhancement may seem like the opposite to a bored Immortal.
- 25 Ibid., *passim*.
- 26 The 'seven deadly things' are the seven biological processes that de Grey holds to be the causes of senescence.
- 27 Agar, 2010, p. 120.
- 28 Almost all, but perhaps not all. A person might quite straightforwardly have space in his life for a degree of empty-headed sitting on a beach for a few days each year; this is compatible with avoiding self-stupefaction. Still: it is reasonable to think that this would have its limits.
- 29 Albert Camus suggests that we ought to imagine Sisyphus happy – but this is a struggle almost as great as Sisyphus' own; it seems likely that Sisyphus would have to put rather a lot of effort into believing in his happiness.
- 30 As I was drafting this chapter, the BBC reported that the painting of the bridge had, in fact, come to an end for the time being, which just goes to show, doesn't it?
- 31 Sebald, 2002, p. 242.
- 32 Ovid, 1982, p. 124.
- 33 In Montaigne, 1991, p. 99.
- 34 Indeed, Peter Green's translation of Ovid's poem translates 'inter opus' as 'on the job', which seems much better.
- 35 For more on Montaigne's thoughts about his own death, see Chapter 1 of Sarah Bakewell's *How to Live*.
- 36 Ferris, 2008, p. 327.
- 37 Williams, *op cit*, p. 96.