When Death Comes Too Late: Radical Life Extension and the Makropulos Case

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Abstract
Famously, Bernard Williams has argued that although death is an evil if it occurs when we still have something to live for, we have no good reason to desire that our lives be radically extended because any such life would at some point reach a stage when we become indifferent to the world and ourselves. This is supposed to be so bad for us that it would be better if we died before that happens. Most critics have rejected Williams' arguments on the grounds that it is far from certain that we will run out of things to live for, and I don't contest these objections. Instead, I am trying to show that they do not affect the persuasiveness of Williams' argument, which in my reading does not rely on the claim that we will inevitably run out of things to live for, but on the far less contentious claim that it is *not unthinkable* we will do so and the largely ignored claim that *if* that happens, we will have *died too late*.

In this paper I will provide a new interpretation of Bernard Williams' well-known argument for the undesirability of immortality (Williams, 1973). I will do this by focusing on Williams' claim that if we extended our life span indefinitely and, in consequence, would in due course reach a stage of terminal 'boredom' in which we would be left with nothing to live for, *we would have 'died too late'*. My guiding question will be why and in what sense we can be said to have died too late if and when that happens.

1. Dying Too Early

It is commonly thought that people can, and often do, die too early. Death is rarely welcome, but we tend to think that if it has to come someday, it should not come before a person's life has run its normal, natural course. The death of a child or a young adult is generally felt to be worse than the death of an old person. We mourn the death of the old we know and love, but we have also resigned ourselves to it and accept it as a necessity, while the death of the young is considered a tragedy because there was still so much life to be lived, so

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many good experiences to be had, so much potential to be realised. There is a certain fittingness to the death of the old that is absent from the death of the young, which is why if we die young, people will say that we died *too* young.

However, what is considered too young can change over time. In modern wealthy societies the average life expectancy today is roughly twice as high as it was a hundred years ago, which means that if we die in our sixties today, our death will still be thought to have occurred too early by many because a majority of people live longer than that. Consequently, even though with sixty we may no longer be exactly young, we are still considered to be too young to die, largely because at that age there is *still* quite a lot of life to be lived. In this way, the average life expectancy in our social environment clearly has a certain normative significance for us.

Yet there are also other, less conventional ways to determine whether a life has been long enough that do not rely on what is normal or natural. Geoffrey Scarre for instance has argued that no matter whether we die early or late, our lives will in any case have been too short because even if we lived to a ripe old age, we would still not have had the time to explore all the opportunities that life offers us (Scarre, 1997). There is just so much to do and so little time to do it, so that as long as we are confined to the current human life span, we will always be frustrated in our most basic life project, which is that of 'living a valuable and fulfilling human life' (Scarre, 1997, p. 279). According to this view, not only are those with shorter lives worse off than those with longer lives, because their 'lives are like narratives without a proper middle or ending' (Scarre, 1997, p. 274), but we in fact *all* die too early because presently there is simply not time enough to pursue all the interesting and worthwhile projects that we may want to pursue: 'Should we become a philosopher or a footballer, a concert pianist or a world-traveller? If we had an extra century, we could be them all' (Scarre, 1997, p. 278).

That certainly sounds appealing, although living a lot longer than we currently do would not by itself be sufficient to make the dream of being able to pursue, consecutively, multiple careers come true. A lot else would have to change too. For starters, we would have to stay fully adaptable and at the height of our powers for much longer. It is, after all, for most of us *already* far too late to become a concert pianist or a (professional) footballer, and another century added to our current life span would not change that. So, if we really want to do all those things, it seems that what prevents us from doing them is not so much that we die too early, but that we *age* too early. That

being said, I am happy to concede the point. Although I personally think that the average human life span is long enough to allow the vast majority of people to do all the things they really want to do[1] and to live a 'valuable and fulfilling human life', there are clearly more things we could do and might want to do if we had more time, and in that sense we can be said to have died too early if we died before we were able to do them.

In any case, it is widely accepted that one can indeed die too early, and for the purpose of this paper I shall assume that this is correct. Now, when we say about someone that they have died too early, we are implying that it would have been better, in some way, if they had lived longer. Very often we mean that it would have been better *for them*, though this is not always the case. Sometimes we say that somebody died too early when we think that their continued existence would have been good for *others* – for instance when it is claimed that, say, the American president John F. Kennedy or the rock musician Jimi Hendrix died too early, not only because they were still comparatively young (Hendrix in his late twenties and Kennedy in his mid forties) when they died, but also, and perhaps primarily, because it was expected that they would have done more good, world-enriching things if they had lived longer: 'Sadly', one commentator writes, 'Hendrix died … far too early to see his musical vision fully realized' (Fricke, 1992).

We may even say that someone died too early when living longer would not have been good for them at all, for instance when their death has allowed them to escape what we consider a just punishment for their actions. In this way, Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge responsible for the death of almost two million Cambodians in the 1970s, who died from heart failure before he could face trial, 'died too early for justice to be served' (Bartrop, 2015, p. 533). We don't like war criminals to die of natural causes before they have paid for their crimes.

2. Dying Too Late

Yet dying too early is not what this paper is about. The question that interests me and that I want to focus on in the remainder of this

[1] Clearly, we often do *not* get around to doing all the things we would like to do or fancy ourselves doing, but this is not usually because our lives are too short, but because we lack the opportunity or the necessary resources to do them.

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discussion is this one: if we can die too early, *can we also die too late*, in the sense that it would have been *good for us* if we had died earlier than we in fact did? Let us first gather some preliminary evidence. There are certainly situations in which the claim that someone has died too late would appear not entirely implausible. For instance, if somebody has lived a happy, fulfilled life until, one day, disaster strikes and something terrible happens that makes their life from then on utterly miserable (say, their family is killed in a car crash) or if they descend into dementia and forget who they were and what used to be important for them (as it happened to Iris Murdoch, who towards the end of her life became increasingly childlike and had all but forgotten that she was actually a famous novelist) (Conradi, 2001, p. 591), then we may well feel that it would have been better for them if they had died before that happened. Even John F. Kennedy, whom I mentioned above as someone who was widely thought to have died too *early* (not counting, obviously, those who disliked his politics and what he stood for and for whom his death couldn't come soon enough) may have died just in time to avoid being revealed as just another politician unable to live up to the hopes invested in him by his admirers. From that perspective, as an editorial in *The Independent* has it, JFK 'died too early to disappoint, leaving only a legend',[2] implying that he would have died *too late* if he had lived longer and thus been given the chance to spoil his legacy. So, what is being suggested here is that it was actually *good* for him that he died when he did. Compare the case of Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, who in the aftermath of 9/11 was hailed as a hero for his leadership, lauded as 'America's Mayor' by Oprah Winfrey, and named 'person of the year' by *Time Magazine*, and who might now always be remembered for (or perhaps not remembered at all because of) his crazy antics as one of Trump's worst stooges, dabbling in conspiracy theories and generally making a fool of himself. Would it be wrong to say that he has lived too long for his own good and that it would have been better for him if he had died shortly after 9/11?

It may seem, though, that these are all exceptional cases and that most of us do not die too late. If anything, we die too early. But perhaps we are wrong about that. One who strongly suggested we

[2] 'The real John F. Kennedy has been obscured by legend, while America's respect for politicians has dwindled away', *The Independent*, 20 November 2013. Accesssed 27 June 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/real-john-f-kennedy-has-been-obscured-legend-while-america-s-respect-politicians-has-dwindled-away-8952603.html

might be is Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he rather enigmatically proclaimed that 'many die too late, and some die too early. Strange is still the doctrine "Die when the time is right"'[3]. The doctrine is still strange today, perhaps stranger than ever. The speed of technological progress in the past three decades or so has fuelled hopes that we will soon be able to extend the average human life span by potentially hundreds of years,[4] and with that prospect constantly dangled before our collective imagination, we have become more reluctant to accept that our life must end and will end within the time frame alloted to us by nature and more inclined to believe, like Geoffrey Scarre, that almost *everyone* currently dies too early. Nietzsche, however, suggested that it is not only quite *possible* for us to die too late, but that far from being the exception, dying too late is actually the rule: *some* die too early, he wrote, but *many* die too late. Unfortunately, Nietzsche was not entirely clear about why he thought that. Following his proclamation, he talks about those who are 'not needed', about the glory of dying as a victor or, even better, in battle, 'throwing away a great soul'. He talks about the ageing of the heart and the ageing of the spirit and suggests that we might become too old 'even for our truths and victories'. Lasting fame, he says, requires that one 'leave at the right time' (Nietzsche, 1966, p. 334). Make your death a feast, he recommends, welcome it, seize it, own it; don't cling to life. According to him, it is best to die when life is at its very peak and we are still in full possession of our powers.

This is indeed a strange doctrine because it flies in the face of our conventional understanding of when we should die, and it flatly contradicts what we said earlier about when one's death can reasonably be said to have occurred too early. What Nietzsche sees as the best time to die is precisely what almost everyone else would see as too early: the common view is that we should definitely not die when life is still good; it would be best if we didn't have to die at all, but if we must die sometime, then we should die only when life is good no longer, when we are way past our peak, when there is not much left to look forward to and to keep us going. For Nietzsche, this would be too late.

In a similar vein, the British novelist Julian Barnes, reflecting on his own fear of death in his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, cites Somerset Maugham who once remarked that the 'great tragedy of life is not that men perish, but that they cease to love',

[3] Nietzsche (1966, p. 333), my translation.
[4] See for instance Kurzweil and Grossman (2005).

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which, regrettably and rather ironically, seems to be exactly what happened towards the end of his life to Maugham himself. 'For all his practical wisdom and knowledge of the world,' writes Barnes, '– and for all his fame and his money – Maugham failed to hold on to the spirit of humorous resignation. His old age contained little serenity: all was vindictiveness, monkey glands[5], and hostile will-making. His body was kept going in vigour and lust while his heart grew harder and his mind began to slip, he declined into an empty rich man. Had he wished to write a codicil to his own (wintry, unwarming) advice, it might have been: the additional tragedy of life is that we do not perish at the right time' (Barnes, 2009, p. 84).

Barnes goes on to recall the way he reacted to Maugham's apercu when, as a young man, he first came across it. Not much to it, he thought. When love ends, you can, after all, always love again. Lose your old lover, find a new one, no harm done. But that is of course not what Maugham meant at all. He was not talking about the love that comes and goes, that you feel for one object or person and then for another. Rather, as the older Barnes realised (who was then, at the age of 63, approaching old age himself), Maugham's words should be understood as 'a lament for the loss of the ability to feel, first about your friends, then about yourself, and finally about even your own extinction. … As your ears get bigger, and your fingernails split, your heart shrinks. So here's another would-you-rather. Would you rather die in the pain of being wrenched away from those you have long loved, or would you rather die when your emotional life has run its course, when you gaze at the world with indifference, both towards others and towards yourself?' (Barnes, 2009, p. 174).

This is not an easy choice to make. It is hard to die when life is good and we are still able to love and lucky enough to be loved. But might this not still be better than waiting until it is all gone and all that is left is indifference so that not even death and the spectre of annihilation is feared anymore?

3. Bernard Williams' Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality

This question takes us to Bernard Williams and the argument he presents in 'The Makropulos Case'. A lot has been written about it since

[5] The grafting of monkey testicle tissue ('monkey glands') on to the testicles of ageing men to maintain and restore youthfulness was all the rage in the 1920s and 30s. See Rémy (2014).

the paper was published almost fifty years ago. However, much of it has failed to address what strikes me as the essential crux of his argument, which is that the title-giving Elina Makropulos, whose fictional case Williams uses to question the desirability of radical life extension, has reached a stage in her life when her death would inevitably *come too late*. It is this particular claim that I will focus on.

Let us briefly revisit the case, which Williams borrows from a play by Karel Čapek about a woman who as a young girl took an elixir of life that has allowed her to live for more than 300 years without getting any older physically. After all this time, Elina has become tired of living and is now stuck in a 'state of boredom, indifference and coldness' (Williams, 1973, p. 82), because she has done everything she ever wanted to do and there is now nothing left for her to do and want. After analysing the case, Williams concludes that even though death, or more precisely premature death, is indeed an evil, 'it can be a good thing not to live too long' (Williams, 1973, p. 83).

Now why exactly is that? The usual interpretation of Williams' argument goes like this: if we extend our lives indefinitely, we will most likely – no matter what kind of person we are and what kind of environment we find ourselves in – reach a point in time when we will have run out of 'categorical desires' – which is what supposedly happened to Elina Makropulos. Categorical desires are desires that provide us with reasons to go on living (for instance when we do not want to die because we wish to see our children grow up or finish the book that is meant to be our crowning achievement). The only way to prevent this from happening is by changing so drastically that we are no longer the person we used to be. Yet if we will not be the same person that we are today, so that the person that will exist will, for all intents and purposes, not be *us*, then we have no good reason to bring about that person's existence. Therefore, since we need categorical desires for life to be worth continuing and, if our life span were radically extended, we would (most likely or perhaps even inevitably) run out of such desires unless we changed beyond recognition, immortality is not desirable, and we should not pursue it. Doing so would only make sense for us if we could be certain that we would never reach that stage of terminal boredom, and we can never be certain of that. So long as we remain the particular person that we are, Williams claims, even radical changes in our environment won't be sufficient to prevent us from ending up with no reasons left to live, which puts us in a difficult position because even though we may not want to reach that stage, we don't want to die too early either: 'I will eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that

happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late'. According to Williams, the only way to avoid this fate is by 'dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident' (Williams, 1973, p. 109).

4. Williams' Critics

Williams' argument has been much criticized in the literature. Wholehearted support is rare.[6] The alleged dilemma – that radical life extension will either lead to terminal boredom, which makes it undesirable, or requires us to change who we are to avoid it, which also makes it undesirable – is deemed unconvincing by most critics. Some attack the first leg of the dilemma, arguing that either categorical desires are not needed for life to be worth living or that it is far from certain that we will run out of them, some attack the second leg, arguing that even radical changes of our personality don't have to undermine personal identity, and some attack both.

Let us briefly look at a few examples. Fischer (2013) insists that not all pleasures are self-exhausting. Some are repeatable and can be enjoyed over and over again, indefinitely, for instance simple pleasures such as sex or eating, or more refined ones such as our enjoyment of art and music, or of philosophising, suggesting that those who fear that an immortal life might quickly become boring (like Williams), should just 'chill out a bit and allow themselves to be receptive to the magic and beauty of life as it unfolds' (Fischer, 2013, p. 352). In a similar vein, Rosati claims that categorical desires are neither necessary nor sufficient to make life meaningful and worth living (Rosati, 2013). We don't need them, and we need in any case more than them. Boredom is an unlikely outcome because being what we are, we are likely to continue 'creating and securing value in our lives' (Rosati, 2013, p. 378), which is all that is needed. Buben suggests that we could sustain categorical desires indefinitely through a commitment to a project of perpetual self-cultivation (Buben, 2016), and Wisnewski concludes that while it is quite *possible* that we might eventually get bored of life, it is by no means *necessary* because new possibilities are likely to continue to arise, providing new material to previous categorical desires (Wisnewski, 2005).

[6] For some exceptions, see Althuser (2016); Scheffler (2013, pp. 88–95); Shiffrin (2013, pp. 146–47).

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Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009) use research findings from psychology to tie the likelihood of reaching a state of habitual or chronic boredom – which seems to be caused not by the repetition of experiences and the satisfaction of categorical desires, but by their absence – to the presence of certain character traits, such as a lack of imagination. They argue that people who have those traits are likely to experience chronic boredom no matter how long or short their life is, while those who do not will probably continue to be fine even if their life goes on indefinitely (Bortolotti and Nagasawa, 2009, p. 269). Similarly, John Harris is confident that ongoing scientific and technological progress will ensure that there will always be plenty of new things to excite and engage us, so that 'only the terminally boring are in danger of being terminally bored', adding, rather scornfully, 'and perhaps they do not deserve indefinite life' (Harris, 2007, p. 64).

Smuts (2016, p. 183) attacks the second leg of Williams' dilemma, insisting that even a radical change of categorical desires would not necessarily undermine personal identity, and Chappell (2007, 30–44) attacks both legs, arguing that radical change is compatible with the preservation of personal identity so long as there is some continuity, and that there is also no good reason to think that we will ever run out of worthwhile projects. Overlapping projects might see some categorical desires expiring and new ones arising, but that change is unproblematic if there is, as there is likely to be, an unbroken narrative thread that connects them. Like Fischer, Chappell thinks that there may well be inexhaustible goods and that we need in any case more time to do all the (indefinitely many) things we want to do.

Even those who share some of Williams's concerns about the alleged desirability of immortality don't find his argument particularly compelling. Temkin (2008), while conceding that it is quite possible that we will all eventually get tired of living, agrees with Smuts and Chappell that radical changes of one's values and priorities are compatible with identity and do not make the pursuit of life extension irrational. Some, like Burley (2009) and partially Gorman (2017), support the idea that boredom *might* be unavoidable, but point out, quite sensibly, that we cannot be sure either way. Gorman, defending Williams against Smuts and Fischer, argues that while we can indeed conceive of inexhaustible categorical desires, we cannot know whether or not we will actually have such desires.

To sum up, while Williams' critics focus on different aspects of his argument and while some are more sympathetic to his concerns than others, they all agree that while some might indeed experience the kind of boredom that Williams describes if their life were indefinitely

extended, such an outcome is by no means *necessary*, certainly not for everyone. Immortality, therefore, need not be bad, and no good reason has been identified (at least not by Williams) why we should not desire and pursue it.

5. The Unthinkability Condition

The objections we just looked at are all based on the assumption that the persuasiveness of Williams' argument depends on the claim that terminal boredom would be *unavoidable* in any radically extended life. Fischer calls this the 'Necessary Boredom Thesis' (Fischer, 2014). If we make that assumption, refutation is quite easy and straightforward. We simply have to show that, for all we know, terminal boredom is *not* necessary and that it is in fact entirely *conceivable* that we could go on living indefinitely without ever reaching a stage of complete indifference. And if it turns out that we have no good reason to think that terminal boredom is inevitable, then Williams' argument has failed. But what if that assumption were wrong? What if for Williams' argument to work it were sufficient that terminal boredom was simply *possible*? Williams himself indicates as much when he asserts that boredom must be 'unthinkable' for eternity to be worth pursuing (Williams, 1973, p. 95). Unthinkable means impossible, something that we are very sure *cannot* happen, which is very different from merely 'not necessary'. And yet, to my knowledge, no critic has claimed that the state of utter indifference to life that Williams imagines will sooner or later engulf us could *not possibly* occur. It is generally deemed far from certain, perhaps even unlikely, but its possibility has not been seriously questioned by anyone. No argument has been put forward to show that it would be *unthinkable* that we would ever reach a state of terminal boredom if our life were radically extended. Might that not be enough to make it unwise to pursue it?

That it doesn't really matter whether terminal boredom is a necessary feature of an immortal life because the mere possibility of it is enough to make it undesirable has recently been argued by David Beglin. If it turns out that one does indeed get terminally bored, then by relinquishing mortality, he claims, 'one has damned oneself to a very bleak existence. Immortal boredom would mean forever living in a world in which nothing seems meaningful – an endless existence of alienation from one's life and environment' (Beglin, 2017). This interpretation of Williams' argument has the advantage of allowing us to make sense of Williams' unthinkability

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claim because if that is what *could* happen, then the risk would be considerable and each of us would have to think very carefully about whether we are really willing to take our chances in the hope that it won't happen to us. If one of the possible outcomes of our decision to become immortal is truly horrifying, we certainly do have a good (though not necessarily compelling) reason to reject that option.

However, the problem with Beglin's argument is that immortality in a strict sense is not really on the table and never was. Whatever happens, we are not going to be like Douglas Adams's Wowbagger, the Infinitely Prolonged, who simply cannot die and therefore cannot escape what Adams calls 'the Long Dark Teatime of the Soul' (Adams, 1982, p. 9). The best (or worst) we can hope for is radical life extension, which, if it is indefinite, leads to what I call *postmortality*,[7] which is a state where we still *can* die, but no longer *need* to die because of our biological constitution. If it is postmortality rather than immortality we are talking about, then by achieving it we have not at all condemned ourselves to an endless existence of alienation, simply because we can always decide to end our existence once it has become so alienated and if we find this intolerable. There is, in other words, an escape route from that grim fate Beglin envisions, should it indeed materialise. And we all have an interest in keeping that escape route open, which is why it is rather obvious why strict immortality (meaning you *cannot* die) is not something worth having: there are clearly situations in life when ceasing to exist seems to be far more attractive than continuing to exist. If your life is hell, you certainly don't want it to last forever. That is precisely why the Christian hell is envisaged as eternal: it makes it a lot worse than any finite punishment could ever by. Accordingly, nobody seriously wishes to be no longer *able* to die. The ability to die is an important freedom that few of us would be willing to give up in exchange for an eternal life.

Now Williams certainly uses the term 'immortality', yet what he is actually talking about is postmortality. As Connie Rosati has pointed out, correctly, Elina Makropulos, whose case Williams uses to develop his argument, is *not* immortal (Rosati, 2013, p. 359). She can die, and indeed she eventually does die when she feels that her radically extended life is no longer worth living because it has run its course many times over and no longer offers anything worth having, or more precisely nothing that *she* cares to have. Her life had been extended for 300 years, and she now decides that this is enough and declines to take another dose of the elixir that would

[7] See Hauskeller (2015).

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grant her a further extension. This, then, is the situation Williams is talking about, not one in which we are condemned to eternal misery. And yet he still insists that terminal boredom must be unthinkable to make a radically extended life worth pursuing. If we want to fully understand Williams' argument, we need to figure out why he makes that rather astonishing claim.

6. Opting Out

According to Williams, when Elina Makropulos dies, she dies too late. Too late in what sense, though? Too late for what? Since we are dealing with radical life extension and postmortality rather than immortality, it is obviously not too late for her to die, and that makes it hard to understand what the problem is. Say we decide to have our life indefinitely extended once that becomes possible (if it ever does), we then keep on living until we get tired of it. We enjoy our extended life as best we can and as long as we can, and should it turn out one day that we are really running out of categorical desires and other reasons to carry on, we can, as John Harris put it, still decide to 'opt out' (Harris, 2007), which we can do anytime. It seems that in that case we haven't lost anything. We have not lived too long but just long enough. So why not try it out and see what happens? The worst that can happen is that one day we will no longer want to live, but we don't know for sure that will ever happen, and even if it does, suicide will always be possible, so there is plenty to gain and nothing to lose when we extend our lives to the greatest possible extent. We simply live for as long as we find it worth our while and quit when it ceases to be so. As long as we have the freedom to quit, this looks like a win-win situation, and that is so even if eventually entering a stage of terminal boredom is in fact unavoidable so that at some point in our radically extended life we definitely *will* fall prey to it. Whether it is necessary or merely possible, makes no difference at all.

This seems like a rather obvious objection, so why has Williams not thought of it? It is hard to believe that it simply didn't occur to him. It is more likely that he didn't think it was relevant. But how could it not be? Why would killing myself or 'opting to die' not solve the problem of my having lived past the point up to which life still appeared worth living to me? Before I try to answer that question (which I believe is crucial for our understanding of Williams' argument), let us have another look at the possible cases of 'dying too late' I introduced and briefly discussed earlier on. The examples I gave were 1) someone who has lived a happy and fulfilled life until something terrible

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happens to them and they suddenly lose everything they ever cared about or cared about the most, 2) the gifted writer and thinker who develops dementia, becomes dependent and fearful, and all but forgets who she is and what she has achieved (Murdoch), and 3) the once revered statesman who lives long enough to disappoint, become irrelevant, and perhaps even a figure of widespread contempt and ridicule (Giuliani). I suppose we can make sense of the claim that all three died or will have died too late by using some sort of hedonic calculus where we try to measure the overall quality or 'actual value' of a life by adding up all the goods someone has had in their life and subtracting from it all the bad,[8] in which case the net sum of happiness or utility would be higher for anyone who died before their life would have taken a turn for the worse. But is that really the reason why we think that it might have been better for them to have died earlier? When a story ends badly, it is not just the ending that is bad, because the bad ending affects the way we understand the story as a whole. A tragedy is not any less a tragedy just because things looked so good for much of the time before it all went downhill. A sad ending always makes for a sad story, and a happy ending for a happy story. As Josuah Seachris once put it, 'the ending relevantly frames the entire story' (Seachris, 2011).

Life may not be a story, but it still seems as if in the cases we have looked at the bad things that happened in those people's lives cast a shadow back on their *whole* life, making the *good* parts less good than they would otherwise have been. And it seems to me that once the damage is done, it would be woefully inadequate to suggest that if they don't like the situation they suddenly find themselves in, they can just 'opt out' anytime by taking their own life. They can, of course, but it wouldn't make things any better. It would be too late to do anything about the harm that has been inflicted on them (or, in some cases, that they have inflicted on themselves) because the real harm does not consist in what is happening in those people's lives *after* their situation has taken a turn for the worse, but in what *did* happen. The real harm has already been done and that harm is not only considerable, but also irreparable.

7. Retroactive Harm

That it is possible for an event that occurs while we are still alive to affect the value of our life as a whole is certainly not less plausible

[8] See for instance Gardner and Weinberg (2013).

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than that the value of our lives can be affected by what happens to us (or our plans and interests) after our death, which has frequently been argued.[9] If for instance we think that how well our life is going depends among other things on the extent to which we manage to achieve our goals and ambitions – some of which may only come to fruition or be thwarted after we have died – it seems reasonable to conclude that it must be possible for our life to be made worse by events that occur after our death. 'If someone destroys your life's work, that is bad for you, even if it happens far from you. Whether it happens just before or just after your death would not seem to make the difference' (Keller, 2014, p. 187). It has also been argued that, more specifically, the *meaningfulness* of our life can be affected by what happens after our death. 'Since the narrative significance of an event can change even after one's death', writes Antti Kauppinen, 'the meaningfulness of a life may be influenced posthumously. What if Martin Luther King's campaigns eventually turn out to have led to catastrophic consequences for African-Americans? Shall we think of his life as having been as meaningful, or to have been as good for him as we do now?' (Kauppinen, 2021, p. 374, fn.). If retroactive harms exist and my life can even be rendered meaningless by an event that occurs *after* my death, then surely it can also be rendered thus by an event that occurs *before* my death.

Consider the following case that I borrow from Simon Keller: 'Suppose that you think of yourself as living a wonderful life, featuring professional success, good friends, and a healthy marriage. Suppose also that your colleagues do not really respect you, your apparent friends do not really like you, and your spouse does not really love you. Suppose that they all make fun of you behind your back, suppose that your own beliefs about your life are utterly misguided. But suppose also that the pretense carried out by your colleagues, friends, and spouse is immaculate, never making any difference to your subjective experience. Your life so imagined does not look like a life that goes well for you. It does not look like a life high in welfare – not because you have bad subjective experiences, but because your life, though you do not know it, is based on a lie' (Keller, 2014, p. 186).

Obviously, this little tale is not an example of posthumous harm, but of circumstances in a person's life that they are completely unaware of and that do not in any way impact on their subjective

[9] See for instance Pitcher (1984); Nagel (2012, pp. 1–10); Nussbaum (2013, pp. 33–34); Luper (2013). For an opposing view, see Taylor (2005).

well-being, but which we tend to feel are still *bad* for them (Feinberg, 2013). We would probably pity such a person if we knew what was going on, and why would we pity them if it did not do them any harm? Personally, however, I am not convinced that, in the rather unlikely event that all the deception that is going on here remains completely unnoticed by the one who is thus deceived and that their life is in no way different from what it would be if they were not deceived, that person actually suffers a *harm*. They are certainly being *wronged* because they are being lied to, but you can be wronged without being harmed (as well as harmed without being wronged). But there is no need to argue the point here. Instead, let us imagine that the person to whom all this is happening *discovers* at some point that they have been lied to practically all their life. They now do know that their whole life was based on a lie. They must face the fact that what they thought was real was not and that what they valued was actually entirely worthless. Can we doubt that this would be a world-shattering and utterly devastating discovery?

We may of course wonder whether it would also have been *better* for them if they had never learned the truth (and, more importantly for our purposes, better if they had *died* before learning the truth). That depends on what we think is more important, that our beliefs align with reality or that they make us feel good. We may, after all, prefer a devastating truth to a reassuring lie. But now imagine another twist to the story. Suppose that what that person believes they have discovered is not actually the truth about their life. They have had this wonderful life with a loving spouse, good friends, and a successful career, and then, at some point, they become convinced that none of this has been real, that it has all been a lie (even though in fact it has not). Clearly, the effect on them would be just as devastating and their life, if they remained convinced that it was all a lie, would be just as ruined as it would be if they were right, and it would not make things any better if they now ended their life. It would be too late.

This is what I am suggesting would happen if we ever entered the state of terminal boredom that Williams was so worried about.

8. The Horrors of Terminal Boredom

However, this follows only if, for one thing, it is indeed possible for an event in our life to change, as it were retroactively, what went on before and especially the *value* or *worth* of what went on before, and for another, if the transition to terminal boredom that Williams

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believes will very likely occur at some point in an indefinitely extended life is indeed such an event. But is it? It may seem that the situation Williams is talking about is very different from the situations we looked at before because nothing terrible will have happened in our life if one day we discover that we have run out of categorical desires and things don't really matter to us anymore. Boredom, even chronic or terminal boredom, is certainly an unpleasant state of mind, but it is hardly a catastrophic event that changes everything for us. Except that, for Williams, that is precisely what it is. The only way, he says, we can avoid dying either too early or too late is by 'dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident' (Williams, 1973, p. 100). Is boredom a 'horror' then? It seems to me that we can only make sense of this claim (and the corresponding claim that we would have died too late if we ever reached that stage) if we understand what is happening here as just such a catastrophic event that causes irreparable harm to whoever experiences it. That event is not the state of boredom itself, but the transition from a normal mortal life – which is often right to the very end rich with, and only rarely entirely devoid of, things to live for – to the state of complete indifference that Williams, perhaps for lack of a better word, calls 'boredom' – but which he also describes as 'distance from life', the 'death of desire', a 'cold' and 'stony' existence (Williams, 1973, p. 91). How so?

Williams starts his paper by declaring his intention to show that 'immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless', so that 'in a sense, death gives the meaning to life' (Williams, 1973, p. 82). In light of the discussion that follows this declaration, the state of boredom that Williams thinks we would eventually reach if we became immortal (which in practice means: if our life were indefinitely extended) must be understood as a state of utter meaninglessness: nothing would make sense anymore; nothing would mean anything, it would all be the same to us. If it is at that stage 'too late to die', this can only mean – since it is obviously still *possible* to die – that the loss of meaning that we will then experience will not only affect the life that we could still have if we chose to go on living, but also the life that we will then have lived already. All the meaning that our life may have had up to this point would be cancelled and irretrievably lost. Our *entire* life will suddenly have become meaningless because we do not merely stop caring, but also wonder why we ever did. If our life had value before, it has now lost it, or more precisely, it has *revealed* itself as being without value. We used to think that things mattered, but now we know (or think we know) that they don't. We were wrong about life. The

things we valued weren't really valuable. It was all a lie or an illusion. Or so it appears to us. Would entering such a state of mind not be horrible?

Such a complete loss of meaning may well be unavoidable because the ageing process does not merely affect the body, but also the mind. There is such a thing as mental ageing, caused by the sheer accumulation of past in a person's life, which goes along with a loss of (a subjective sense of) meaning (Hauskeller, 2011). It is not the environment that is the problem; it is the agent and the disappearance of all substantive commitments (Beglin, 2017, pp. 2015–16). Worthwhile things may be inexhaustible, as Fischer and others have argued, but that doesn't mean that we will still be able to relate to them in such a way that they make our life (both the life that might still lie ahead of us *and* the life that lies already behind us) appear worth living (Beglin, 2017, p. 2025). 'Consider,' writes Julian Barnes (without reference to Williams), 'how boring that "me" would become, to both me and others, if we went on and on and on' (Barnes, 2009, p. 87).

It is true, of course, that we don't know whether this is actually going to happen and if so when, since nobody has tried it out yet, but even if it is not unavoidable, unless we can be fairly certain that it won't happen to us (which I don't think we can), we may not want to risk retroactively making our whole life meaningless by living too long, not necessarily because it is very likely that this is going to happen, but because the stakes are simply too high. Terminal boredom is a state that can engulf us even in a mortal life and when that happens it is indeed terrible, and we have every reason to avoid it. We don't usually call that state boredom, but major depression, but that is what Williams is talking about. In major depression 'activities and projects that used to be pleasurable lose all significance, future events are stripped of their emotional resonance, and the motivation to move forward and engage with the world breaks down' (Aho, 2016, p. 59) which sounds very much like the state that Elina Makropulos is in. Major depression, can be understood as 'a nonterminal world-collapse, in which one experiences the possibility of the impossibility of every way of existing, and traumatically endures their own death' (Hughes, 2020, p. 207), thus leading to a 'radical transformation of the meaning and significance of one's life' and, because that state appears unlimited, an 'immortalization' of one's suffering and despair (Hughes, 2020, p. 208).

If radical life extension considerably increases the risk that something like this happens to us, which is certainly not *unthinkable* if

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we go 'on and on and on', we may well have good reason not to strive for it.

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