

# Desirability without Desire: Life Extension, Boredom and Spiritual Experience

DREW CHASTAIN

## Abstract

In response to Bernard Williams' suspicion that we would inevitably become bored with immortal life, John Martin Fischer has argued that we could continue to enjoy repeatable pleasures such as fine wine, beautiful music, and spiritual experiences. In more recent work on near-death experiences, Fischer has also explored the non-religious meaning of spiritual experiences in more depth. I join this deeper exploration of spiritual experience, and I also join Williams' critics who question his view that character and desire are needed to explain the desirability of life, while providing additional reason for concern that Williams' way of valuing life may itself actually be a cause of boredom with life. With an eye to spiritual experience, I indicate how we can distance ourselves even further from Williams' view, and I suggest how the attitude that *life is good but death is not bad* emerges from spiritual experience, as expressed in numerous religious and secular spiritual traditions. This lends support to the conclusion that radically extended life is desirable even if not actively desired.

'Be little self-regarding and make your desires few'.  
~ *Daodejing* 19

'He who studies is daily enlarged; he who follows the Dao is daily diminished. Diminished and then diminished yet more, at last attaining non-action (*wu-wei*)'.

~ *Daodejing* 48<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1970s, a debate on the desirability of unending life has circled relentlessly around Bernard Williams' concept of categorical desire, the kind of desire that gives one reason to live, propelling oneself forward in life. Williams' pessimistic stance is that our categorical desires are likely to be depleted in a life that continues longer than the normal human lifespan, and then we will end up terminally bored. Therefore, radically extended life is not desirable.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Robert Eno (2010). I'll make some observations about Daoism and other spiritual traditions in the concluding section of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Williams (1993).

John Martin Fischer has responded by accepting Williams' talk of categorical desires, at least for the sake of argument, but denying Williams' conclusion. Sure, categorical desires might be needed to keep us going, but it shouldn't be expected that we will run out of activities that give us a reason to live. Among the endless activities Fischer says an immortal being could repeatably find pleasurable are fine dining, good music, sexual enjoyments and spiritual experiences.

Williams' basic stance on the supposed tedium of immortality has attracted much support and also much skepticism over the years, with Fischer standing out as a primary foil.<sup>3</sup> Here I'd like to explore how special attention to the spiritual experiences mentioned by Fischer affects the overall inquiry into immortality. After I have set up a non-religious account of spiritual experience, I want to develop and deepen a challenge to the idea that our interest in life, or our motivation to live, is fundamentally propelled by categorical desires. Criticism of Williams' appeal to categorical desire has been launched already, and in different ways, but I think attention to spiritual experience can provide additional compelling reason for doubting Williams' view. This will more decisively distance us from any philosophical orientation that insists so fervently on the idea that the value of life crucially depends on some sort of goal orientation. Additionally, the way of understanding spiritual experiences presented here provides a diagnosis of the sort of chronic boredom Williams thinks is inevitable if we live too long, so it will be important to understand the varieties of boredom and their causes as well as we can.

It will be interesting to first explore Fischer's own more recent investigation of near-death experiences (NDEs), since they are a kind of spiritual experience. I think that what Fischer says about NDEs is insightful, but I also think that a fuller account of spiritual experiences can say a bit more. Regardless of the details, a main takeaway is that spiritual experiences reaffirm the value of life while taking the focus off of self. As for the relevance of spiritual experience to the question of immortality, I believe that spiritual experience leads to a kind of ambivalence. While a radically extended life involving spiritual experiences can be quite livable, the *demand* that I myself live is at the same time lessened. This helps to explain how a deeply insightful spiritual tradition such as Buddhism can affirm both compassion

<sup>3</sup> Later in the paper I'll be referencing critics of Williams, but those who support Williams' position against immortality, though not always for the same reasons, include Beglin (2017), Cholbi (2016), Hauskeller (2013, Ch. 6), Kagan (2012, Ch. 11) and Scheffler (2013, Lecture 3).

and self-negation. An appreciation of vitality and connection in life is maintained, but that the life be mine is not as important, a kind of ambivalence that will be explored further at the end of this discussion. We will see that, against Williams' view, spiritual experience supports a sort of passive desirability of immortality, a desirability without desire.

### 1. Near-Death Experiences and Spiritual Experiences

Fischer calls himself an 'NDE realist' (Fischer, 2020, pp. 148, 181), meaning only that he believes that, in brushes with death, people do indeed subjectively or psychologically experience themselves to be outside of their bodies, traveling toward a light, crossing over a river, or passing over into another realm (Fischer, 2020, p. 144), not that he believes anything supernatural actually happens. Still, Fischer argues at length that NDEs can be profoundly meaningful even if we live in a physicalistic reality that bars the possibility of our souls leaving our bodies to join our friends, relatives, and divinities to live out our everlasting lives in a wondrous transcendent dimension. NDEs are meaningful primarily because of their narrative nature, and Fischer identifies the common story that unfolds as 'a voyage from a known (or familiar) place to a relatively unknown (or unfamiliar) situation or status, guided by a benevolent parental (or authority) figure (or figures)' (Fischer, 2020, p. 174).

Fischer explains that this narrative journey counts as a spiritual experience because 'the self is not the focus of the experience' and 'the content [of the experience] is present as objectively true – ultra-real'.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, NDEs inspire awe and wonder, even if we deny that they serve as evidence of divinity or supernatural survival. Fischer developed this line of argument with co-author Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, noting that we can experience awe with natural grandeur (such as the night sky) or with human grandeur (such as great achievements in art or science) or with the birth of one's children (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 159), yet the presence of the supernatural is not needed to elicit awe in these cases. Also, one can find wondrous narrative spiritual meaning in an LSD experience without thinking there to be anything but natural causes for such an experience (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, pp. 161–63). So, physicalist explanations don't undermine the meaning of NDEs.

<sup>4</sup> Fischer (2020, p. 169). Also see Fischer (2020, pp. 134, 177). Fischer draws this analysis from Pollan (2018, p. 390).

Though we can't reasonably hope for an eternal afterlife if soul/body dualism is false, the stories of solidarity and guidance that unfold in NDEs do offer us a different kind of hope because they 'resonate with us, comfort us, and transform us' (Fischer, 2020, p. 180).

I think that Fischer has gotten a lot right, and that the significance of spiritual experience does not depend on our settling the debate between physicalists and dualists or between naturalists and supernaturalists, because the significance has centrally to do with how the experience transforms us. But I also think that, if we are pursuing a general account of spiritual experience (which is not Fischer's main goal), a focus on NDEs could lead us to overstate the role that narrative plays. Some spiritual experiences are journeys, but not all. Still, Fischer's discussion of spiritual experience in the context of NDEs is a welcome advancement over his appeal to spiritual experiences in the context of his response to Bernard Williams. In objecting to Williams, Fischer is focused mainly on examples such as prayer, meditation, and yoga, which are more like activities intentionally performed.<sup>5</sup> Alternately referring to them as 'experiences' and 'activities', Fischer includes spiritual experiences on a list of repeatable pleasures that 'seem capable of providing the basis for positive categorical desires, even in an immortal life'.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, in his exploration of NDEs, which presumably aren't the sort of experience one would typically seek out on purpose, Fischer is instead analyzing what are clearly unintentional spiritual experiences and getting to the heart of their significance. It is important to clarify the ways in which spiritual experiences 'help to propel one forward' in life (Fischer, 2020, p. 126), but not in the form of a desire or an activity that one desires to perform, keeping in mind that spiritual experiences aren't always intentional or easily repeatable activities. On the emotional end of things, Fischer places much emphasis on awe and wonder, which is a fairly common move in the analysis of spiritual or religious experience,<sup>7</sup> but Fischer also discusses love and social solidarity in his account of NDEs (Fischer, 2020,

<sup>5</sup> See Fischer (2011, p. 89) and Fischer (2015, p. 351), where he calls the 'repeatable pleasures' of 'prayer and meditation' 'activities'; Fischer (2020, pp. 125–26).

<sup>6</sup> See Fischer (2011, p. 89).

<sup>7</sup> Religious theorists, such as Rudolf Otto a century ago (Otto, 1923), or John Cottingham today (Cottingham, 2019, p. 25), relate this awe to an encounter with the numinous or with God. Non-religious theorists, such as Ronald Dworkin, can find wondrous beauty in the natural order of the cosmos (Dworkin, 2013, Ch. 2).

p. 177, p. 180). I think that this element of love – which I am inclined to call the element of connection – should be made more central to an analysis of spiritual experience, though it shouldn't be focused exclusively on the human social, or even the social.<sup>8</sup>

We can feel connected to other people, but also to other animals, and also to the world, and also to oneself. This metaphor of connection is one we commonly use, though it doesn't show that we are literally connected to anything. I think it just means that we are returning to an experience of our spirit or vitality – our *joie de vivre* – after having felt disconnected from self, world and others. Although it may at first seem paradoxical, I think that the self is a main reason why we come to feel disconnected, or at least there are aspects of oneself that become excessive and stifle and strangle spirit, a set of dispositions relating to identity that can be marked out as 'ego'.<sup>9</sup> Iris Murdoch has identified the 'fat, relentless ego' as a problem common to both religion and morality.<sup>10</sup> Bypassing the term 'religion', I take the primary spiritual concern to be that the ego disconnects us from a more spontaneous, lived self, while also disconnecting us from others and the world, making us feel separate, alienated, empty, fake, and also bored; in which case, it is no surprise that spiritual experiences are notably absent of ego. I am not appealing here to any particular psychoanalytic idea of ego or any theory of personal identity over time. I am just pursuing the common sense observation that human beings are very self-absorbed, for social reasons and for existential reasons, and also for the reason that we're highly self-aware and, well, no matter where you go, there you are.

I think that spiritual experience can come to us at different times in different ways in varying degrees of wonder, vitality, and connection, and not just in rare, special experiences set far apart from everyday life. Rather, spiritual experiences sit on a spectrum with ordinary experiences, not found only in NDEs, meditation and prayer, but in times with family and friends, or walks alone in nature or in the

<sup>8</sup> Affirming the importance of connection/love, another theorist of spirituality without religion, Robert Solomon, says that the three main spiritual emotions are 'love (predictably), reverence, and trust' (Solomon, 2002, p. 29).

<sup>9</sup> To provide a more specific idea, our egoic tendencies can lead us to be excessively concerned with matters such as self-image, recognition, status, winning, self-interest, activity, goals, outcomes, agency, control, responsibility, autonomy, uniqueness, security, etc., none of which is inherently wrong, but which in excess can serve to cage us in a state of disconnection.

<sup>10</sup> Murdoch (1971, p. 52). I thank Michael Hauskeller for bringing my attention to Murdoch's focus on this theme.

neighborhood, or in religious services or at festivals, or at art galleries or while making art or making dinner, or when you are just listening to music on your headphones on the subway. Many associate spiritual experience with transcendent or supernatural realities, and I am not here to argue that such ontologies are untrue, only that the metaphysics doesn't determine the core experiential and normative significance of spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Varieties of Immortality**

When it comes to the question of how spiritual experience affects the desirability of immortality, a physicalist naturalist could only be talking about some enduring embodied form of extended life, while someone open to transcendent metaphysics could be thinking of a soul leaving the body for a better place, perhaps finding a more perfect body, or perhaps returning to life in another body, and so on. Now, if we are talking about some far out transhumanist possibilities, like cryopreservation, digital mind-uploading, and body switching, then it may turn out that we can achieve a kind of resurrection or reincarnation without souls, so it behooves us to keep in mind that extended life for the individual could, in theory, be achieved in numerous ways, and it is also worth noting that which options are available affects how desirable each of the other options are. In particular, I think that the perceived availability of a more perfect eternal life in communion with one's soul mates in the oceanic loving light of the divine tends to cast any pursuit of earthbound physical immortal into shadow, since clinging to this life could be perceived as just foolishly, greedily putting off the big reward.<sup>12</sup>

However, Bernard Williams believes that visions of supernatural immortality fail to explain how we wouldn't get bored with bliss, that is, if we took with us to the afterlife the intellectual faculties that he believes give our present life worth. He thinks that those imagining forever in heaven have to assume that we'd lose our reflective

<sup>11</sup> I haven't provided a full analysis of spiritual experience here, which receives fuller treatment in Chastain ([forthcoming](#)). There I emphasize that the form of spirituality I believe to be most important is normatively oriented (normative spirituality), which can be distinguished from metaphysical spirituality, or belief in the paranormal or supernatural, even if the two can helpfully combine.

<sup>12</sup> As Diogenes Allen (2004, p. 394) explains: 'This life is not sufficient to satisfy our aspirations, at least once we are aware of perfect love'.

consciousness, becoming something like lobotomized lotus eaters (Williams, 1993, pp. 86–87). I don't think this is right, and I think that people get chronically or existentially bored for reasons other than just continued life, one danger actually being too much egoic emphasis on our supposedly higher intellectual functions, to be explored more in what follows. But I do want to say something here about how belief in this transcendent option influences spirituality. For instance, if there is a God, then it would be rather odd for God to create us and then just let us die while God lives on, which appears to be part of the historical reason that the Judaic tradition gradually developed a belief in an eternal afterlife, though there is negligible Biblical support for this view (Gillman, 2004, 94–108). Such anti-abandonment logic likely influences a theist's interest in immortality, so that the desirability question is not entirely about the goodness of prolonged life in itself. Someone who is spiritual but not supernaturalist presumably must reject the heaven idea, but can still have desirability concerns extrinsic to extended life's basic goodness, such as overpopulation, intergenerational fairness, equality of access to life extension technology, etc. In this case, extrinsic concerns may tend to count against the option of radical life extension, since the pursuit of life extension would likely create so many extrinsic problems in earthly society, no matter how desirable longer life is in itself.

As I unpack the desirability question here, I will be focused on the intrinsic question of the desirability of radically extended lifespans, and to my mind, the intrinsic question is clarified if we bracket the possibility of a more perfect transcendent immortality. I believe this supernatural option guarantees a bit too much on faith while producing a comparative bias against physical life, which has influenced religious and secular minds alike to neglect a deeper, more sacred appreciation of our immanent earthbound existence. I'd also like to keep it as real as possible, though I'll push at the bounds a bit to keep the thought experiment interesting. Current conservative medical science cautions us not to get our hopes up too high if we have them, pointing to a biological law of mortality governing human lifespans. Age 85 seems to be the average for humans on one estimate, with 115 being the upper limit that only a tiny minority will ever breach, barring genetic modification (Olshansky and Carnes, 2019, S7–S12). Of course, for transhumanists, genetic modification is just par for the course, and Aubrey de Grey and others continue to pursue numerous other strategies for considerably prolonged life.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> de Grey (2004, pp. 249–67). As for genetic modification, Chinese researchers made a breakthrough in early 2021, extending the lifespan of mice

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I suspect that humans lifespans will increase, but even then, the question of desirability I want to ask is not whether it is sensible to *actively* desire to increase the human lifespan.

If I were to imagine being offered a fantastical immortality potion or a free spot in a cryopreservation clinic, personally, I am not sure I would choose more life if it weren't already in the genetic cards, so to speak, unless I had some strong reason for the extra time, like if it is the only way to save the planet, or something like that. When I opt for health, it is more for the purpose of experiencing life as healthy, not so that I will experience more life. To put some personal cards on the table, I feel like I have experienced plenty of life, and I feel like I 'get the idea', which is a somewhat bored thing to say, I'll admit. I will also confess my own view (though I am not trying to convince anyone of it) that there is no God or cosmic purpose or immaterial soul or eternal afterlife or deep metaphysical free will. Though many think such conditions are needed for there to be meaning to life, I don't think so, and so I tend not to angle my emotions toward transcendent hope. But if I – even with a personality and character that might come off as bored and pessimistic in a way – were born in a future generation that lived longer in healthy bodies because of developments in medical science, and a radically extended life of 200 or 300 years or more were in the genetic cards for me, could that be desirable? Sure, I think so, and I feel that my overall attitude is informed by, or is at least consistent with, spiritual experience or spiritual wisdom, as I will explain. I will also say more about the distinction between an active and passive sense of desirability as we get closer to the end, but first we've got to do the work of discharging Williams' boredom thesis, with an eye to what boredom really is.

### 3. Boredom and Ego

Is it possible to get bored with life itself? I mean, would that really be boredom per se, rather than some more complex disaffection? Peter Toohey disagrees with Lars Svendsen on the matter, both of whom have recently written books on the subject of boredom.<sup>14</sup> Toohey

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by 25%: 'Chinese scientists develop gene therapy which could delay ageing', <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-genes-ageing/chinese-scientists-develop-gene-therapy-which-could-delay-ageing-idUSKBN29P02V> (accessed June 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Toohey (2011); Svendsen (2005). Svendsen also provides further reflections, partly in response to Toohey, in Svendsen (2017). Wendell

distinguishes between simple boredom (also called situational boredom), chronic boredom (also called habitual boredom), and existential boredom. Simple or situational boredom is being bored by something or someone or by a circumstance because of some features of whatever it is that is boring – and also, it should be conceded, because of one’s inability to be engaged by the boring thing. Perhaps one person would be bored in a given situation but not another, but regardless, once one has been relieved of the boring thing, one can return to one’s capacity for engagement. Chronic boredom is more persistent and doesn’t go away when the typically boring things do, correlating with chemical imbalance, risk-taking and sensation seeking. Existential boredom is supposed to be something more profound than a psychological or behavioral disorder, but Toohey suspects that the term more likely designates a hybrid of simple boredom, chronic boredom and depression that’s just been overintellectualized, especially by moderns hung up on their self-importance (Toohey, 2011, Ch 2. for chronic boredom, pp. 141–42 for a key statement about existential boredom).

Although Svendsen is more interested than Toohey in earnestly exploring the phenomenon of existential boredom and does seem to think that existential boredom is in some sense warranted, there is a way in which the two writers’ diagnoses of existential boredom align. Svendsen’s diagnosis for existential boredom is basically Romanticism: ‘The problem for the Romantic is precisely that he does not recognize his own size; he has to be bigger than everything else, transgress all boundaries and devour the whole world’ (Svendsen, 2005, p. 142). Also from this modern European tradition, Svendsen says we get the idea of needing a personal meaning in the form of a ‘unique meaning for me, as something that alone can give my life meaning’ (Svendsen, 2005, p. 153). In his 2005 book, Svendsen gains much inspiration and guidance from Heidegger’s account of boredom, adding that ‘according to Heidegger, the emptiness that crops up in this more profound form of boredom is the emptiness left by “our proper self”’ (Svendsen, 2005, p. 120).<sup>15</sup>

I say that Toohey and Svendsen have a similar diagnosis for existential boredom, because they both think it results from a sense of self-

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O’Brien provides a very helpful overview of the history of ideas on boredom and related psychological states here: <https://iep.utm.edu/boredom/> (accessed June 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger’s discussion of boredom can be found in William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (1995, Part One).

importance, an explanation that isn't necessary to explain simple boredom. One sees oneself on a grand scale, and then on that grand scale, one sees something fundamentally lacking with the world as a whole. This kind of boredom seems to be driven more by an egoically inspired evaluation than by mere loss of stimulation. I think that the question whether existential boredom is a legitimate category, emotion, or attitude isn't really about whether humans can be said to get worn out with life psychologically, as if we were only wired to handle a certain quantity of life or repetition. I think it comes down to the question whether the judgment that life itself is boring is valid (and this is a judgment, not just an emotion), and by 'life itself' I don't mean life under such and such circumstances, but life understood with respect to its most general features – life in general, or life as such. There is an anthropocentric attitude, which I will be critiquing further in what follows, that tends to produce a negative assessment of life itself, life apart from human activity, that looks down upon animal life and nature, and this, I suggest, plants the toxic seeds of existential boredom. Svendsen, for instance, reinforces the problem by glorifying humans over other animals for having the exalted ability to experience meaning and its lack, declaring that, for this reason, animals can't really feel boredom, at least not what he takes to be the more important kind.<sup>16</sup> This is a source of irritation for Toohey, who thinks the more important kinds of boredom are situational or chronic, which other animals certainly do experience, for instance, when they are locked in cages as pets, or in zoos or in animal experimentation labs.<sup>17</sup>

In his 2005 book, Svendsen seems to have no solution for overcoming boredom, rejecting Heidegger's own optimistic stance as just more problematic Romantic overreach (Svendsen, 2005, p. 132). But in a 2017 article, he responds to Toohey, and accesses the theories of meaning in life provided by Harry Frankfurt and Susan Wolf to give more shape to his talk of meaning. Svendsen admits that existential boredom bears a resemblance to depression, but argues that this is no reason for dismissing it, since existential boredom can be set apart from depression as a kind of lack of meaning, rather than just psychological dysfunction. But what is it to regain meaning? Following

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 32, where Svendsen says, 'Animals can be understimulated, but hardly bored'.

<sup>17</sup> Toohey expounds: 'Existential boredom, for so many thinkers, has come to be seen as one of the costs, or even the badges, of modernity or civilization, both conditions to which non-human animals do not have access' (2011, p. 88).

Wolf, Svendsen agrees that there is a subjective side and an objective side to meaning, in that having meaning in life involves combining subjective attraction and objective attractiveness, or as Wolf also puts it, meaning in life comes from active engagement in projects of worth.<sup>18</sup> Svendsen observes that the problem of existential boredom puts a lot of weight on the subjective condition, but still follows Wolf in affirming the idea that ‘in order to have a meaningful life, a person must care about what he fills his life with. You must be committed to something, because commitment gives life substantial meaning’ (Svendsen, 2017, p. 211).

What I would like to note about this kind of suggestion is that it solves what looks like a problem caused by ego in some way or other by building up that ego, making it more ‘substantial’, by giving yourself goals that are as important as you can make them, and then taking strenuous control over your life so that you are continually committed to them. I wonder if this kind of life strain is really a good long-term remedy, or can it become the problem by caging the spirit? One could put the point in terms of freedom, as Brian O’Connor has in his interrogation of an array of modern and contemporary European criticisms of idleness. O’Connor identifies a ‘worthiness myth’ which he finds in philosophers as diverse as Kant, Sartre, Frankfurt, and Christine Korsgaard: ‘It is essentially a thesis of the Enlightenment, and it continues to sustain the remarkable idea that we must build and perfect the self as an autonomous moral entity if we are to become properly human’.<sup>19</sup> It is a myth, because it hasn’t been proven that humans naturally desire a higher or more substantial self or that we should meet this normative demand or that substantial commitments are required for meaning in life. For instance, in Kant’s well-known illustration of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant does not explain what would motivate a wanton idler to consider whether it is his moral duty to cultivate his talents to make himself useful: ‘This would seem like too much effort for someone who had already lived well and in his own way’ (O’Connor, 2018, p. 46).

<sup>18</sup> Svendsen (2017, pp. 209–210). Wolf’s view is laid out in Wolf (2010). I present critiques of Wolf’s view in Chastain, (2019, section 3); and Chastain (2021, sections 3, 4.1).

<sup>19</sup> O’Connor, (2018, p. 28). In a similar manner, Elijah Millgram critiques Frankfurt’s explanation of boredom as a failure to be properly oriented to final ends, tracing this way of thinking back to Aristotle, and implicates Williams and Korsgaard in this way of thinking as well (Millgram, 2004, pp. 178–80 inc. fn. 23).

O'Connor suggests that freedom can mean being who you already are rather than working yourself up to be something more, and I'm suggesting a corollary about freedom from boredom – that existential boredom becomes more of a threat for those who are in pursuit of the self-inflation enterprise.<sup>20</sup> In summary, to stay connected with self, others, and the world – while preventing existential boredom – it is wise (i) not to pursue the project of self so fervently, and (ii) to also remain sensitive to what makes life itself worthwhile and meaningful, apart from one's own desires, activities, and projects. I'll be bringing this perspective into a discussion of Williams and his critics.

#### **4. Categorical Desire and Desirability without Desire**

Williams' case for our eventual justified boredom with a very long life appears to access the mood of existential boredom. His point is that death is made bad by our having categorical desires that get thwarted by death, but if we live life too long, we'll run out of the desires that make death bad. To exemplify his point, Williams uses Elina Makropulos, or EM, from Karel Čapek's play *The Makropulos Case*.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the play, EM confesses that she is 337, though she appears only 37, because it was at that age that she was forced by her father to test out an elixir of immortality, and she wound up being the only one to consume it, therefore enduring her uniquely prolonged life alone. After her confession, EM explains to the men in the room the feelings she has had for the last two hundred years:

Boredom. Melancholy. Emptiness. [...] Everything's so stupid. Empty, pointless. [...] It makes no difference. To die or disappear behind doors, it's all the same. [...] It's not right to live

<sup>20</sup> Millgram likewise suggests that 'the life of rational agency ... is a life you won't be able to stand' and 'that the lives that boredom doesn't veto are somewhat *disintegrated*, and maybe a bit frayed around the edges to boot' (Millgram, 2004, p. 183, emphasis in original). Though disagreeing somewhat with Millgram's understanding of boredom, Cheshire Calhoun agrees with Millgram's basic diagnosis that 'the effort to live meaningfully may itself be the source of boredom' (Calhoun, 2018, p. 118).

<sup>21</sup> As Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016, p. 354, fn. 1) note, Williams mistakenly describes EM's age to be 342 rather than 337. She gets the nickname EM because she has also had other names fitting those initials over her very long life, such as Elsa Miller and Ekaterina Myshkina (Čapek, 1999, Act 3).

so long! [...] We weren't meant to. A hundred, a hundred and thirty years, maybe. Then ... then you realise, and your soul dies inside you.<sup>22</sup>

Williams believes that EM's feelings would be our own after a similar stretch of existence, though it should be acknowledged that, in this scene, EM was also 'very' drunk on whisky, sniffed what was said to be cocaine 'or something', and was also poisoned by one of the men. Still, *in vino veritas*, and I take it as plausible that someone could develop such negative attitudes toward life in EM's position, but should we expect that every long-lived person would be so distraught?

Entertaining the idea that this question gets settled by categorical desires, let us more closely define that concept. Williams specifically defines it as a desire that decides whether you continue living, which he clarifies with the case of someone rationally contemplating suicide, that is, someone who is not under undue influence of emotions or a psychiatric condition, but simply trying to sort out whether there is sufficient reason for believing it is worth it to keep going. In this context, the sort of desire that would serve as a genuine reason to keep living would be a categorical desire, though you don't have to be contemplating suicide to have them.<sup>23</sup> Now, will any desire do? Not according to Williams' intuition, because he excludes '*just* the desire to remain alive',<sup>24</sup> though he doesn't here explain why it must be something more than that. But let's hold that thought and next think about how these desires relate to getting bored.

According to Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa, who are keen on the distinction between situational (or simple) boredom and habitual (or chronic) boredom, EM strikes them as someone affected with the condition of chronic boredom (which gets characterized here as boredom with life), afflicting those having normal lifespans as well: 'the subject is not bored with something specific, but with life in general. Among the phenomena correlated with habitual boredom or directly stemming from it, we find inactivity, withdrawal, anxiety, alienation, anti-social behavior, alcohol and drug abuse,

<sup>22</sup> Čapek, (1999, Transformation).

<sup>23</sup> Williams, (1993, p. 77).

<sup>24</sup> Williams, (1993, p. 78, emphasis in original). He says the desire to live must 'be sustained or filled out by something else', but without clear explanation as to why. Indicating a sort of deprecatory view of the desirability of life in itself that I will push back on below, Williams describes the desire to live as a 'sheer reactive drive to self-preservation', as if valuing life itself could have no reflective foundation.

and even depression and suicide' (Bortolotti and Nagasawa, 2009, pp. 268–69). As these critics of Williams observe, even those living normal lifespans can lose their categorical desires because of their complex and unfortunate disaffection, and one begins to suspect that Čapek and Williams are unjustifiably projecting this disorder onto immortals by simply selecting an imagined case who would be especially prone to an extremely aggravated death wish.

Connie Rosati also emphasizes this point, concluding that 'it is hard to separate Emilia's fate from the peculiarities of her situation', forced by her father as she was into her immortal journey alone, 'leaving her to drift through time,' adding: 'Without the capacity to love – to connect – nothing our lives might hold out will seem to us to matter' (Rosati, 2012, pp. 377–38). Rosati also critiques Williams' appeal to categorical desires. She believes that, even if EM could not, we could imagine many other individuals who could 'derive happiness just from the things that she desires given that she is alive', what Williams calls 'conditional desires'.<sup>25</sup> The idea is that not all desires are of the caliber of categorical desires to propel one forward into hard nothingness. Quite a lot of our desires seem to merely fill in the blank for the statement, 'well, since I'm here, I guess I might as well \_\_\_\_\_'. But why shouldn't that be enough reason to live, or to be happy with life? Why should boredom follow just because all of one's desires are of the conditional rather than the categorical sort?<sup>26</sup> Is boredom really the result of having no answer for the question of the larger direction I am taking my life because I have no sizable projects or commitments? Or is that just a fantasy of the intellect?

Thankfully, Rosati goes even deeper in her analysis, bringing to our attention that we live in 'a world that we do not experience simply in terms of desire – bare, conditional, or categorical' (Rosati, 2012, p. 368). And when she speaks of desirability, she doesn't mean only an active desire for something, as in a 'genuine longing'

<sup>25</sup> Rosati (2012, p. 361). See Williams (1993, p. 77). Rosati is not alone in sensing the power of conditional desires to sustain life. See, for instance, Rosenbaum (1989, pp. 88–89).

<sup>26</sup> If one thinks too hard about this, it might turn out that the two kinds of desires might just be distinguished by their strength. Ben Bradley and Kris McDaniel provide a thorough examination of Williams' concept of categorical desire that seems to leave it no functional footing whatsoever, psychological, normative or axiological. Interestingly, on one of Bradley and McDaniel's readings of categorical desires, even other animals can have them: 'As long as an animal lacks a desire to die and has just one other desire, that desire will be categorical' (Bradley and McDaniel, 2013, p. 131).

but also allows for a 'mere standing readiness to continue living, other things equal, for as long as one can'.<sup>27</sup> Rosati goes on to distinguish between the desirability of living and the desirability of being.<sup>28</sup> The felt desirability of living pertains to the aesthetic, pleasurable experiential qualities of life, such as feeling a blanket against one's skin, or hiking in the woods, or simply breathing in air and letting it fill your lungs (ibid.). The desirability of being pertains more specifically to the being of our distinctive human agency: 'capacities to reason and assess, to explore and discover, to create and appreciate beauty of form and sound, to will and to love' (Rosati, 2012, p. 371). Rosati indicates that the desirability of our agential capacities is really what explains the desirability of immortality, rather than the desirability of living, since living contains not only pleasures but also pains. Rosati also claims, 'The object of seeming worth cannot be life or being alive, but *your* (or *my*) being alive, *your* (or *my*) existing as [an] individual agent with a distinctive vantage point' (Rosati, 2012, p. 370, emphasis in the original). But I think this is untrue, even if a rational being with a vantage point is needed to make the judgment of worth. While Rosati denies Williams' view that categorical desires are needed to make it meaningful enough to go forward in life, she still maintains what I take to be a neighboring view that human agential capacity explains the desirability of life, expressing a common intuition that you have to add something to life, probably in the form of a rational human characteristic, in order for life to gain some sort of meaning.

Against this view, I think that in spiritual experience, the meaningfulness of life itself becomes manifest, a view that I think should be taken more seriously. And by meaningfulness, I mean *objective* meaningfulness, a qualification I use in the way that Susan Wolf emphasizes, following David Wiggins, indicating that it is not just some one person's idiosyncratic, dim-witted or perverted point of view.<sup>29</sup> When these philosophers speak of meaning, they are on the

<sup>27</sup> Rosati (2012, p. 379, fn. 11). Michael Cholbi (2016, p. 225) makes a point about the undesirability of pain in a way that could be flipped to explain the desirability of pleasure or other positive subjective states without reference to desire. 'But its undesirability may not be best explained by the fact that we do not desire it. Pain feels bad. That is what renders it undesirable and why we do not desire it'.

<sup>28</sup> Rosati (2012, p. 369). Rosati applies this analysis to a quote from Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* (originally published in 1912), also used by Williams.

<sup>29</sup> David Wiggins (1976); Wolf indicates Wiggins' influence in Wolf (1997, p. 209).

hunt for something that gives an individual human life meaningful direction, but what I am pointing to is something that gives all direction (or even lack of direction) meaningful grounding. When one experiences wonder, vitality and connection in spiritual experience, one comes to see that life isn't meaningful just because of me, or because I just happen to experience it or value it. In spiritual experience, we come to appreciate the deep value that life itself has – not just my life, but the vastly wondrous, spontaneous, creative, vivacious, interconnected, awe-inspiring phenomenon of life and reality itself.<sup>30</sup> One is also readily inclined toward gratitude because life wouldn't be meaningful if it weren't for something beyond my agency that enables me to experience this life and my agency.<sup>31</sup> Further contributing to a sense of objective meaningfulness, one readily concludes that life was meaningful before I and other rational creatures and our kin got here, and life will be meaningful even when I and all of humanity are gone. Life's basic meaningfulness has nothing to do with me and my aims. Life is the basic creative potentiality that is able to breathe the play of spirit into my agency and its preoccupations, without which all of my endless aimfulness would become empty vanity.<sup>32</sup>

This inadequacy of human vanity emerges in what has come to be known as the 'midlife crisis', which has been helpfully explored by Kieran Setiya. Also harboring a critique of Bernard Williams, Setiya identifies a problematic sort of goal orientation in life as a central explanation for the emptiness of a midlife crisis. Interestingly, he does not believe that immortality in itself would alleviate the underlying problem that supposedly occurs at 'midlife' (Setiya, 2014, p. 3), even though awareness of mortality seems to be among the triggers, because mortality inspires you to quantify the number of completed projects you will achieve in life, leading to the question of what it all adds up to (Setiya, 2014, p. 10). Yet, Setiya suggests that we could find a radically extended life worth living if we can overcome the key problem that generates the crisis, which is precisely the idea of completing projects, or what he more concisely terms 'telic activities'. Setiya observes that many recent philosophers have difficulty seeing

<sup>30</sup> This is my way of putting it in 'Faith, Meaning, and Spirituality without Religion'.

<sup>31</sup> For clarification of how gratitude as a spiritual attitude makes sense in secular context, see Chastain (2017); Lacewing (2016); Solomon (2002, pp. 103–106).

<sup>32</sup> Stan Godlovitch makes this point: 'we shouldn't perhaps forget that the world "out there" came up with us' (1999, p. 23).

the value of life as anything but telic, and he calls out Williams in particular for defining persons in terms of desires and projects. ‘Williams is wrong. You are not what you plan to get done. And the activities you love need not be projects. Atelic activities, ones that do not aim at terminal states, have value, too. There is pleasure in going for a walk, just wandering or hiking, not to get anywhere, but for the sake of walking itself’ (Setiya, 2017, p. 140).

Given the problem with telic activities, Setiya concludes that ‘the best life, the ideal life, would be one in which we could, without evaluative error, treat telic activities purely as means’ (Setiya, 2014, p. 16). To put it another way: ‘The way out is to find sufficient value in atelic activities, activities that have no point of conclusion or limit, ones whose fulfillment lies in the moment of action itself. To draw meaning from such activities is to live in the present – at least in one sense of that loaded phrase – and so to free oneself from the tyranny of projects that plateau around midlife’ (Setiya, 2017, p. 144). I think Setiya provides a much needed balance to the problematic orientation we have been discussing, but I think we can take the analysis even further away from telic activity, because, as I have indicated, we don’t even have to understand the desirability of life in terms of human activities or ends at all, telic or atelic, which still traps meaning in the sphere of the human ego. Sure, everything we experience can be placed under the description of an activity, but that doesn’t mean that its value is entirely or most basically captured by that description.

What is really needed is the experience of connection that gives being in the moment or mindfulness its depth, a component which Brian Treanor includes in his description of ‘vital action’:

In vital action we experience a loss of self, which is the result of being completely engaged or absorbed in the activity. But the ‘self’ that is lost here is the conscious, egoistic, monadic self, the self that makes efforts in order to accomplish things and be productive. What remains when the conscious self, concerned with acting on the world and the achieving results, gives way? ... A self more engaged and participatory, one that acts in and with the world rather than on it, one that delights in the process, the activity itself. The self of vital activity reveals that we are, at some fundamental existential level, a part of this world. It is not merely that we have a home here, but that we belong here in the deepest ontological sense. (Treanor, 2021, pp. 70–71)<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> In the ellipsis, Treanor cites Laozi, Michel Serres, and Annie Dillard as writers he is appealing to for this insight.

In my analysis of spiritual experience, I gloss what Treanor describes here simply as an experience of vitality and connection that balances ego for the benefit of self. No boredom here. Treanor claims there is a loss of self, or at least an egoic kind of self, which can allow for reconnection with one's deeper lived self, which those favoring the ego would probably view as the animal. Now, for Williams this was the whole problem with visions of an eternal afterlife in heaven, or even with just losing oneself in intense intellectual inquiry, because Williams felt 'the desire for freedom can, and should, be seen as the desire to be free in the exercise and development of character, not as the desire to be free of it'.<sup>34</sup> What we need to resist, then, is the idea that there is some kind of either/or that we must choose between, when in reality there are times when we must develop character and discipline and other times when we must affirm connection with the world and with others and with a deeper, more amorphous self that does not align with some idea of character that we are overweeningly aiming for. To not allow ourselves freedom from a too demanding and limiting ego can produce alienation and boredom and a negative assessment of life itself.

## **5. Concluding Remarks on Spiritual Ambivalence about Life**

On the way toward affirming the desirability of radically extended life, I have really just been promoting a view of the desirability of life that doesn't depend on desires or even on any special qualities of human existence. Spiritual experiences of wonder, vitality, and connection bring out what is most deeply positive about living. I am not asking anyone to imagine a life that is free of activities, or a life dominated by spiritual experiences, but only to imagine an evaluation of the desirability of life focused by spiritual experience rather than by ego. It is important not to place too much emphasis on the value of human goals, because an imbalanced view about the value of life can impact the way we live and life's resulting desirability. Talk of appropriate commitments and such may carry an important moral or ethical message for wayward or lost humans, and the

<sup>34</sup> Williams (1993, p. 90). As some readers will have noticed, I have sidestepped Williams' argument that an immortal being's identity must be maintained by way of maintaining the same desires. It is not clear that this is, indeed, how one's character remains more or less the same, or how we are justified in counting a person the same over time, but in any case I think that Fischer has sufficiently responded to this aspect of Williams' argument. See, for instance, Fischer (2020, pp. 117–20).

moral and spiritual are also natural allies in many ways. However, the spiritual should be allowed to speak for itself sometimes, and the silencing of an often overly self-absorbed ego is a condition for hearing the spiritual wisdom.

I think this desirability of life achieved by way of balancing or diminishing ego also allows for the view that death is not bad, though death is often viewed as life's enemy. For this reason, I call this pairing of attitudes about life and death coming out of spiritual experience 'spiritual ambivalence'. To think more about this phenomenon, and to see how spiritual ambivalence can get expressed in different ways, I will close by considering a brief sampling of different spiritual traditions, including Daoism, Buddhism, and Epicureanism.

Daoism celebrates action without action, which is one way to translate *wu-wei*. In that ancient Chinese mystical tradition, there is a way of having everything you need, but not because you were trying hard to get it. Perhaps this isn't good advice for youngsters who need to learn from a more formative morality about how to become mature adults, but then spirituality is more like advice to disciplined adults who need to learn how to be more childlike and less controlling. Daoists do not recommend a life of inactivity, but instead encourage us to be more *ziran*, or self-so, like the other animals, who are what they are in what they are doing. The idea is to not reach so strenuously beyond oneself in what one does, distending oneself out of harmony with oneself and one's surroundings.

Judging from references to death in the *Zhuangzi*, a primary text in the Daoist canon, acceptance and affirmation of death is recommended, alongside the affirmation of life: 'Life and death are matters of fate. ... [The Sage] takes death in youth to be good; he takes old age to be good. He takes life's beginning to be good; he takes life's end to be good'.<sup>35</sup> I am not advocating for any particular spiritual tradition, and I find myself immediately wanting to reframe the startling assertion that death in youth is good.<sup>36</sup> But notice the cultivated ambivalence toward life on display here, a spiritual ambivalence explained by balancing of the ego and its fear of death and need for control. Life is good, yes, and lived better with ego tamed – and Daoist tradition certainly has its alchemical

<sup>35</sup> Eno (2019, 6.2).

<sup>36</sup> We can of course acknowledge that premature death deprives the young of much potential, but perhaps also consider Schlick's view (1979, p. 123): 'The more youth is realized in life, the more valuable it is, and if a person dies young, however long he may have lived, his life has had meaning. In the concept of youth, so viewed, there is an infinite abundance'.

seekers of immortality<sup>37</sup> – but also, death is not bad, because it is all part of the Way of Nature, and it is not about you.

It is known that Buddhism's core doctrine of non-self resonates well with what is being confirmed by empirical cognitive science today.<sup>38</sup> Our experience of a unity of consciousness and personhood and of agential control is mostly an illusory, constructed experience emerging from the brain. When we are having an experience of loss of ego in spiritual experience, this really does seem to be getting us closer to the truth, though the focus of my point here has only been that we get the meaning of connection out of a spiritual experience, and that this diminishes the strength of our egoic impulses. Belief in a controlling agent and hope for an enduring self after the body dies are among the causes of dissatisfaction with life, and so the Buddha advises us to relinquish these dispositions in order to lessen our suffering. But the aim of *nibbāna*, or extinguishing the craving for existence as if blowing out the flame of a candle, is not the same as actively desiring to die (or *vibhavatanhā*), which is instead taken to be a perverse inversion of the craving for immortality. Also, not all desire is discouraged as craving, as some simplistic interpretations of Buddhism have it, so love and compassion can be encouraged, enabling a kind of love of life. Thus, we see that yet another spiritual tradition affirms the idea that life is good and that death is not bad.<sup>39</sup>

The Epicureans also have this basic view, which has been much maligned by analytic philosophers of death in recent years. Well known for the view that death is not bad (because when dead, there is no experiencing subject for whom death can be bad), Epicurus also affirms the desirability of life: 'The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offence to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest'.<sup>40</sup> Samuel Scheffler has less of an issue with the Epicurean view that

<sup>37</sup> See Olson (2003).

<sup>38</sup> See Robert Wright, (2017, chs. 5–9).

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Velez provides a helpful overview of the historical Buddha's philosophy based on the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pali Canon: <https://iep.utm.edu/buddha> (accessed June 2021). See esp. 3b–f for Buddhism's view of non-self.

<sup>40</sup> Diogenes Laertius, (1975, Chapter X, pp. 651–53). Also quoted in Rosenbaum (1989, p. 83).

death is not bad than with the similar but separable Epicurean assertion that we should not fear death. For Scheffler, this fear is not just a fear of the loss of future opportunities of which I will be deprived by death, but more basically a fear of the annihilation of me:

In some people at least, there is a distinctive kind of terror that is produced by the strange and *sui generis* character of the thought that I myself – the thinker of my thoughts, the perceiver of what I perceive – will simply stop being. ... The egocentric subject – which is what has provided the fixed background for all my previous endings – is itself to end. ... And this induces, or can induce, *panic*. (Scheffler, 2013, pp. 85–86)

Scheffler suggests that the Epicurean attempt to fight fear with philosophical arguments is inadequate (Scheffler, 2013, p. 87), and also finds arguments à la Buddhism that there is no self in the first place similarly inadequate (Scheffler, 2013, p. 103), choosing instead to address the appropriateness of the panic response. I mention Scheffler's point, not to engage or oppose Scheffler's argument for the appropriateness of death panic, but only to add that, even if a case can be made that fear of death is appropriate, I think it is also true that loss of fear of death is desirable, which would seem to be a better fit for Scheffler's overall view that eventual death is good. As for how to achieve that loss of fear, philosophical argument may help on some level, but I think spiritual experience and spiritual wisdom can play a bigger role, and there are certainly other methods.

Again, I am not advocating for any one particular way of housing spirituality, only noting an underlying pattern. The spiritual ambivalence I am highlighting does not produce the view that life is both good and bad, but rather the view that life is good and death is not bad, a kind of soft ambivalence that sides with life, yet does not side against what is often viewed as life's opposite. This ambivalence pivots on the diminution of the ego, tending to reduce the role that ego plays in evaluating life or death, and there can be many variations on that theme, given the metaphysical or philosophical principles housing the spirituality, though I don't think any elaborate structure is needed – the humblest hermit shack will do.

Many secular theorists today think it can't make sense to care about life but not be troubled by death, because they think caring about life must be entirely egoic<sup>41</sup>, based entirely in commitments to one's own life in some way, caring about projects or ideals or the people you are

<sup>41</sup> Not 'egoistic', so this is consistent with 'altruistic'.

attached to, or in concern for pleasures or opportunities that one is deprived of because of death. Williams asserted an egoic ambivalence, an ambivalence conditioned on ego's rise and fall, declaring life good when ego is buzzing along with categorical desires, and not so good when ego peters out, implying that this makes death good.<sup>42</sup> I think this is too dark a picture of life, and it is a more complex ambivalence, a harder ambivalence, one that flips its evaluation of both life and death when ego dries up, while the softer spiritual ambivalence doesn't flip – it always loves life. Spiritual ambivalence can even love life if euthanasia is chosen on the reasonable conclusion that my life is no longer livable, because this love of life is not based only on the conditions of one's own life. An enduring love of life without fear of death is a possibility with spiritual ambivalence, and spirituality is a possibility for secularists that I think is desirable, because it makes life overall more desirable, no matter how long one lives it.<sup>43</sup>

*Loyola University New Orleans*  
[chastain@loyno.edu](mailto:chastain@loyno.edu)

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<sup>42</sup> I thank Michael Hauskeller for bringing to my attention that Williams doesn't explicitly say that death is made good by too long a life, but Williams' closing statement in 'The Makropulos Case' does seem to imply it – that it is possible to be 'lucky in having the chance to die' (Williams, 1993, p. 92).

<sup>43</sup> For helpful feedback, I am grateful to Michael Hauskeller, Bryon K. Ehlmann, and Eric Wilson, and to those present at the Meaning in Life and the Knowledge of Death conference held at the University of Liverpool, July 2021.

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