

# The Makropulos Case Reconsidered: Desirability of Immortal Life

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## 1. Introduction

Since the publication of Bernard Williams's classical article 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' (1973), many philosophers have discussed immortality. Most have argued that an immortal life is not a human life at all, because a human life should be finite in nature. The main points can be summarised as follows: (1) the inconceivability and the undesirability of immortal human life and (2) the difficulties concerning the evaluation of life. In this article, I criticise these points and conclude that immortal life can be desirable.

*The Makropulos Case (Věc Makropulos)* is a drama written by Karel Čapek<sup>2</sup>. Emilia Marty is a beautiful and excellent opera singer. A young singer, Kristina, was impressed by Emilia's performance and said: 'You don't know. It's her technique, it's stunning.'

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<sup>2</sup> Williams's argument is based on the opera by Leoš Janáček.

Last night, I couldn't sleep a wink, [...] Everyone's in love with Miss Marty' (Čapek 1922, pp. 194-196). Nevertheless, she looks to be an indifferent person:

Gregor: [...] Your singing is so perfect, it almost hurts. And you...

Emilia: Yes?

Gregor: Well, you seemed bored. Your voice is extraordinary, but not quite human. It's as if you're bored. You're cold, frozen, numb.

(Čapek 1922, p. 199)

At the final scene of the drama, she explained the reason for her coldness. It is because she has lived for 337 years<sup>3</sup>, despite her biological age having stopped at 37 years old.

Emilia was born in Greece as Elina Makropulos. Her father was a personal physician to Emperor Rudolf II. The emperor had requested that he invent an elixir of life. However, because he was afraid that doing so might poison him, the emperor ordered Emilia's

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<sup>3</sup> In Williams's version, it is 342 years old. I think that the precise age is not so important. May assumed the mid-thirties (May 2014, p.55). Fischer assumed that 'the individual in question is biologically "frozen" at some age understood as the biological "prime of life"' (Fischer 2013, p.338). Of course, too young an age would be undesirable because such a person is immature and her character is instable.

father to try it out on his daughter. As a result, Emilia lived another three hundred years.

During these years, she had changed her address and her name, which appeared as

Ellian MacGregor in Prague, Eugenia Montez in Spain, Ekaterina Myshkina in Russia,

and Elsa Müller (probably in Germany)<sup>4</sup>. Now, she calls herself as Emilia Marty.

Although she has had a number of partners and twenty children, she has lived in

solitude, as her family all died during the natural process of time. Not only her physical

conditions, but also her extraordinary long life engendered unbearable feelings of

emptiness and boredom.

Gregor: How are you feeling?

Emilia: Empty. Horrible. My head is aching.

Hauk-Šendorf: There, there, it'll pass.

Emilia: No, it won't. It'll never pass. I've had it for two hundred years.

Kolenatý: What exactly?

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, she perfectly kept her memory: '[Anna Maria] Strada squeaked like a mouse, Corona [Schröter] had dumplings in her throat, [Lucrezia] Agujari honked like a goose, Faustina [Badoni] wheezed like a walrus'. She vividly remembers also that Jean-Paul Marat had sweaty hands, and George Jacques Danton's teeth were rotten (Čapek 1922, pp. 201-202).

Emilia: Boredom. Melancholy, Emptiness. It's...oh you humans...you have no word for it. No language has a word for it. Bombita talked about it. It's horrible. [...]. We weren't meant to. A hundred, a hundred thirty years maybe. Then...then you realise, and your soul dies inside you.

(Čapek 1922, pp. 254-255)

Finally, she refused an elixir that would give her another 300 years of life, and she instead chose to die, saying 'Haha, the end of immortality!'

## **2. Classification of Immortality**

Williams argued that Emilia's life of 300 years is not desirable, because 'Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless' (Williams 1973, p.82) and her situation is not a contingent, but a necessary conclusion of an immortal life.

Fischer classified immortality into two kinds: first, actually living forever (with the possibility of dying) or necessarily living forever (Fischer 2013, pp. 337-338). I think that his distinction is inappropriate because immortality differs from 'indestructibility'.

So, I modify this condition. Even supposing that I were immortal, my life would be restricted by laws of nature or biological nature as a normal human being: for example, if someone injected me with a lethal dose of painkiller or chopped off my head, I would die. As per its strict definition, the term ‘immortal life’ means that, in the absence of such situations mentioned above, I can live eternally.

Fischer’s second classification is the person’s cognition; whether someone knows that she is immortal or not. In this article, I use the word ‘immortality’ to indicate necessarily living and knowing that the person really recognizes her immortal life.

Burley doubted the possibility of imagining immortal life and suggested that it is just a speculative fantasy (Burley 2009, p. 536), but I believe that we can well imagine such a life. Although I admit that it is possible only at a purely theoretical level, even so, it would be useful in understanding what is valuable in our mortal human life.

### **3. Narrative View**

Recently, the ‘narrative view of a human life’ has seemed the most plausible and attractive view for understanding our lives (MacIntyre 1981; Malpas 1998; Fischer

2009; Fischer 2013; Behrendt 2016). The view is derived from MacIntyre<sup>5</sup>, who posits that a person is ‘essentially a story-telling animal’ (MacIntyre 1981, p. 216). All my actions become intelligible within my narrative structure and I am accountable for them as mine. My narrative gives me a basis for unity in my life. MacIntyre claimed:

To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one’s birth to one’s death is, I remarked earlier, to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life. (MacIntyre 1981, p. 218)

Narrative, intelligibility and accountability are mutual presuppositions for explaining unity of a life. MacIntyre summed up:

The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life

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<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre, Fischer and May equate fiction with real life. However, Williams criticised MacIntyre and argued the difference between fiction and nonfiction. See Williams 2007, p. 311.

as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. (MacIntyre 1981, p. 219)

Williams also argued that ‘the story of which I am part will offer, among other things, the story of my life. So, finally, narrative provides not merely an account of the process of living: it also provides the basis of *unity of a life* (Williams 2007, p. 305)’. However, he criticised MacIntyre’s concept of narrative that it remains ambiguous. If a narrative plays an explanatory role well, it needs narrator prior to narration. On the one hand, when we talk about causal events, for example, why male calico cats are sterile, we provide some explanations. The best explanation, because of an abnormal chromosome, is decided in the sense of a truth, independent from the narrator. On the other hand:

It is a banality to say, with regard to any complex subject matter, that there are no definitive narratives; that each is perspectival and perhaps incommensurable with others; that narratives are constructed, not discovered (Williams 2007, pp. 307-308).

Here, I add a new feature to narrative. A narrative not only makes my past actions intelligible and me being accountable for them, but also gives me an action-guiding force. As Williams suggested, if I am faced with the question, ‘what am I to do?’, then my past narrative could provide an answer. Moreover, I can create my narrative, as Williams suggested above. Williams denied that this narrative has the action-guiding force that it is supposed to have and suggested ‘the idea of a complete, unified, or coherent narration is of no help in leading life’ (Williams 2007, p. 312). However, I refute this claim, because a narrative is not only retrospective and used to explain my past choices and actions, but also futuristic. I suppose that my narrative has more flexible features, and it is open to re-interpretation throughout my life. It is possible that I mistakenly interpret my character, my projects and values in my life. In such a case, when I find inconsistency in my interpretation, I can re-interpret my narrative. Consider the case of Simone Weil, who wrote that, in 1937 in Assisi, ‘[...] something stronger than I compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees’ (Weil 1942, p. 15). At this moment her religious belief had radically changed, but she remained one and the same person. Rather, she would discovered this inner change and settled it as a new part of her narrative life.



Velleman also argued that the value of life is not only the sum of momentary well-being but also the narrative structure that it has. He explained a case in which a person can re-interpret a past misfortune.

[What can we learn from a misfortune?] The answer, I believe, is that conferring instrumental value on a misfortune alters its meaning, its significance in the story of one's life. The misfortune still detracted from one's well-being at the time, but it no longer mars one's life story as it formerly did. [...] An edifying misfortune is not just offset but redeemed by being given a meaningful place in one's progress through life (Velleman 1991, p. 337) .

As he suggested, we can indeed understand even past misfortune or regrettable experiences as meaningful when adequate time has passed.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4. 1 Misunderstandings of immortal human life**

First, some have argued that immortal life is no longer human life; therefore we

cannot even conceive of such a life (Malpas 2005; Burley 2009; May 2009)<sup>6</sup>. For example, once Jorge Luis Borges wrote as follows:

There is nothing very remarkable about being immortal; with the exception of mankind, all creatures are immortal, for they know nothing of death. [...] Everything in the world of mortals has the value of irrecoverable and contingent. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful passage of others that will repeat it in the future, *ad vertiginem* (Borges 1949, p. 15).

I think that such a view of immortal life is completely mistaken, but I agree that only humans can be aware of their death; my cats can feel pain and pleasure, fear and delight, but they can not be aware of their own death, even at the moment of the death. Nevertheless, I do not think that immortal life comprises the repeated and exact circulation of experiences of the same and intolerable boredom.

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<sup>6</sup> Such a view is influenced by Heideggerian thought, but I do not discuss this point further here.

It seems that many have confused immortality with Nietzschean ‘*Ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen* (eternal recurrence)’. If immortal life were such a life, certainly it would be intolerable. However, even in real life, no matter how long, the same event never reoccurs. For example, Immanuel Kant is well known to have taken a walk in Königsberg everyday, same route, and at the same time. Even so, I believe that Kant’s experiences differed each day. On every walk, he would have felt different wind, noticed different flowers, considered different philosophical problems, met different people and talked about different things with them. Since human life is composed of these varying experiences, why should we suppose that an immortal life dramatically differs from a mortal life? There is no reason to suppose that at all. Therefore, even if I were immortal, my life would not be just a sum total of repeated experiences; every experience would remain singular<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally, I observe that human beings cannot achieve anything perfectly, no matter how long we live, even until eternity. Emilia said:

Emilia: [...] Remember Bertie, you said when I sang, I was frozen. See, art still keeps its

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<sup>7</sup> I have already discussed this aspect of human activity. See Tsuruta 2013.

meaning long after life has lost it. It's just that once you've got the hang of it, you realize it's useless. As useless, Kristy, as snoring. Singing's the same as silence. Everything's same. There's no difference.

(Čapek 1922, p. 255)

However, I believe that, in the first place, it is impossible for humans to accomplish something *perfectly*. This fact makes the pursuits of human life worthwhile. Moreover, this is why artists often repeat the same works. For example, Claude Monet repeatedly painted *Water Lilies*, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf repeatedly recorded *The Four Last Songs* and so on. At the same time, these types of activity will never be bored no matter how many times they are repeated<sup>8</sup>. The supposition that Emilia felt her life to be boring because she sang perfectly would be a mistake.

I also believe that our imagination well explains many people's beliefs in eternal life. Socrates believed in the immortality of the soul, and Christians believe in eternal life

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<sup>8</sup> Fischer highlighted similar point in terms of pleasure. Some kinds of pleasure—for example, the pleasure of sex, the pleasure of sense of palate, and the pleasure that derives from seeing and listening the great art works—are not self-exhaustive but repeatable. See Fischer 2009, p. 851; Fischer 2013, pp. 351-353.

after death. Only human beings conceive of eternal life, eternal activity. We can well conceive of eternal life, similarly to conceiving of our own death, our own nonexistence. Therefore, I conclude that eternal life would be just the same as my actual mortal life, although I know that I am immortal.

Second, I argue against the isolation and coldness into which Emilia falls because her partners, children and friends aged and died<sup>9</sup>. This is not necessarily a truth of immortal life. Certainly, if an immortal person were left alone, she would feel isolated. Nevertheless, although her partners and acquaintances will die, new generations will appear: she can meet new partners and friends.

I propose the ‘my cats and I’ model. I live with five cats, and since my childhood, I have lived with a dozen cats. We have maintained a strong, mutual affection. All my cats died, and my five cats will die prior to me: and I know this for a fact. I also clearly recognize that every cat has only one life in my life, each has its unique character, and I cannot meet the very same cat after her death. Even so, I do not feel this as a bad truth. I will care for my cats to the end of their lives, grieve at their death, cherish their

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<sup>9</sup> I do not suppose the case that everyone is immortal. This is simply absurd and meaningless. See also Burley 2009, pp. 538-539; May 2014, p. 64.

memories, and meet new cats. This is same with people. If I were immortal, and if my family members and friends died, leaving me alone, then I could find new partners and friends. This situation would not differ from many in real life. In real life, although a person may divorce or although a partner may die, she can meet another one. Consequentially, a different kind of human relationship or knowledge about the world might reveal itself. In this case, whether the immortal person feels isolation depends on her attitudes toward her personal relationships to others. Additionally, since an immortal person can experience abundant activities and the history of humankind, her life might be more fruitful than the lives of mortal people.

#### **4. 2 Evaluation of a life**

Next, some claim that we should evaluate the goodness of life as a whole (Burley 2009, p. 539; Behrendt 2016, pp.164-165). I disagree with it on the basis that if we evaluate life only as a whole, then no one would live a happy life. This, however, is clearly absurd. In fact, we can certainly evaluate the goodness of life. As Aristotle suggested:

Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see the end? Even if we are to lay down this doctrine, it is also the case that a man is happy when he is *dead*? Or is not this quite absurd, especially for us who say that happiness is an activity? (Aristotle, 1110a, p.1738)

Burley argued that ‘no matter how much of the infinite life one endeavours to conceive, one’s conception must have always open-ended’ (Burley 2009, p. 540). I agree with him on this point. However, in my view, this is not a serious defect of immortal life. Rather, it seems to me to be no problem at all. Given a life with no end, we can evaluate the life and we do evaluate the finite lives we are living, which are also open-ended.

Moreover, all philosophers seem to make the same kind of mistake in evaluating of immortal life. For example, May claims:

[Nussbaum] argues that the clearest example we have in literature of human immortality is that of the Greek gods. Looking at their lives, she concludes that many of the virtues we associate with human life would go missing if we were immortal. Courage, for instance, would be absent, since it would be impossible to

risk one's life for anything. Moderation would be less pressing, since our bodies would not be threatened by our activity. Even justice would be imperilled. The needs of others would not urge themselves on us in the same way, since their existence would not be threatened by our neglect (May 2014, p. 62).

Why did they make such absurd assumptions? They are absurd because they ignore the natural fact that, except for immortality, this person is an ordinary human being like us.

Immortality does not mean 'unrestrictedness'. Indeed, even if I were immortal, my choices would be restricted by my inheritance, my bodily constraints and my breeding.

For example, if I practised the piano ten hours a day and continued for a hundred years,

I could neither become left-handed, nor I develop longer fingers, I could not play just like Glenn Gould. In the same way, I cannot change my sex, the colors of my eyes or

hairs or other bodily traits. This would be true also in the traits of my native character.

However long I live, since I never would be in godlike viewpoint, so-called '*sub specie aeternitatis*', I would love decent people, hate injustice and violence. For, even if I were immortal, the person would be the same '*me*'.



Although I know these facts, I would never abandon to practice something, trying to write philosophical papers and discussing philosophical questions with my friends and I would feel happiness in living my life.

What is important in human life, I believe, is neither to achieve perfection, nor grasp a life's total shape, but experiences themselves. Indeed, when we evaluate a life, we should not focus on the life as a whole, but rather we should focus on activities and experiences themselves. Their quality is what is truly important. If my interpretation is correct, we can evaluate whether a life is happy or miserable while we are still alive. In this point, I think that immortal life would be a desirable life.

## **5. Conclusion**

I argued that immortal life is conceivable and more desirable than mortal life. I quoted MacIntyre's text that '[Narrative] quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions'. If I were immortal, my quest would continue forever. It might be a difficult quest, however, but it must have great value in its pursuit. We are future-oriented beings. So, immortality just adds a new feature; open-ended life. If given immortality, I could always reconsider my life's value. My life's interpretation

remains open, but I could unite it with one narrative at time.

I conclude that immortal life would be neither inconceivable nor undesirable, but rather an attractive life, in which we could endlessly pursue our possibilities. I believe that we have the potential for seeking goodness and flourishing in it.

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