

## Immortality and Regret

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**H**umans are inherently limited; we are limited by our embodiment, capabilities, life circumstances, and lifespans. However, we appear to be content with most of our limitations. Few would seriously bemoan the fact that we cannot walk through walls or fly. We accept most limitations of a healthy human body because we did not place them on ourselves. It is when we are presented with the opportunity to choose that the possibility of discontent arises. If we feel responsible for an outcome and could have chosen differently, we are susceptible to regret. Hence, the one aspect of our limitedness that many cannot accept is our temporality. We suppress and fear death because it entails a limited amount of time to make choices. We will inevitably experience dissatisfaction because time does not allow us to pursue all courses of action. There emerges a natural obsession with immortality from our limitedness and regret. We long for the possibility of infinite time to make choices. In hoping for immortality as a solution to regret, we assume that immortality is an extension of our current existence—that its only distinguishing feature from our current state is infinitely more time to make choices. But what is the nature of immortality and is it recognizably human? Will life become boring and our choices become meaningless if our existence is infinite? Bernard

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Williams and John Fischer address these questions, the former arguing that immortality would be unbearably boring, and the latter arguing that immortality can be interesting and recognizably human. Although I agree with Fischer that an immortal life would not be radically different from a finite one merely because it has no end, I will argue that there is a case in which immortality would be unrecognizably human—a case in which time is not sequential. Furthermore, if we accept that immortality is temporally sequential, regret will still be possible. I will demonstrate this by transferring Connie Rosati's concept of temporal scarcity—the idea that we have conflicting desires and a limited amount of time to fulfill them—to an immortal existence. After explaining how a sequential immortality makes regret possible, I will explore how sociality, i.e., whether or not we are the only immortal being, also affects regret in immortality.

### **Bernard Williams—Intolerable Immortality**

Williams avers that we should prefer death to immortality because living for too long would lead to boredom. He explores the tedium of immortality through a character named Elina Makropulos who drinks an elixir that makes her immortal. She is perpetually 42 years old, and she is the only human living in an immortal condition (Williams 74). Inevitably, Elina reaches a point where everything that could happen has happened. She becomes so bored and apathetic that she destroys the elixir. Elina Makropulos is a tragic demonstration that life is meaningless without the stimulants of an impending death, an unknown future, and risk. When all our aspirations come to fruition, as they would with infinite time according to Williams, existence is aimless and dull. Williams then addresses the possibility of an “indefinite series of lives” (Williams 92). Perhaps the problem of boredom can be solved if we are continually reborn into new and different lives. But this formulation of immortality is equally hopeless for Williams. Our personal identity must remain contiguous for immortality to be desirable because such a drastic change in identity is essentially no different from death. Finding no satisfactory mode of immortal existence, Williams concludes that “Elina Makropulos reminds us that [death can come] too late” (Williams 100).

### **John Fischer—Recognizably Human Immortality**

In contrast with Williams, Fischer defends immortality on the grounds that it will remain recognizably human. If immortal life is comparable to our current state of existence, it will be meaningful and interesting.

One major concern regarding the appeal of immortality is whether or not life must be conceivable as a whole for it to be recognizably human. In other words, if infinity is inherently inconceivable, is it commensurable with human existence which has a distinct beginning and end? Although Fischer agrees that infinity is inconceivable, he argues that completeness is not a necessary condition for existence to be recognizably human. We can “freeze in our imagination” a specific moment within the infinite spectrum and evaluate life up to that point (Fischer 349). For example, though I am in my early twenties and my life is not yet complete, I can evaluate the period of time in which I have already existed as a whole. There will always be more life to live at any given moment on the infinite timeline of immortality, but according to Fischer, this is irrelevant because at each moment, existence up to that point is recognizably like our own. Similarly, he addresses the view that our lives are narratives, and as such they cannot be infinitely long. Narratives have a distinct end that allows us to grasp their totality. According to Fischer, immortal life can still have a narrative structure because meaning in our “life stories” depends on relationships between events rather than an ending to the story. Moments in immortality are still meaningful in context of each other. Fischer uses TV and book series as cases in point. Events build on each other and characters exhibit growth even when there is a next novel or episode (Fischer 347). Immortal life would always have “another episode,” but events up to that point can still be characterized as a narrative.

### **Temporally Sequential Immortality**

I agree with Fischer that existence does not need an end to be recognizably human. However, a necessary precondition for Fischer’s point is that we would continue to experience time sequentially as immortal beings. He fails to broadly address the nature of time when discussing the recognizability of immortality. The necessity of death as addressed by Williams and countered by Fischer is a mute point if how we experience time as immortal beings is drastically different from our finite experience. Therefore, prior to Fischer’s point is the necessity of temporal sequence in immortality. We currently experience time sequentially, meaning we live only in the present moment. The past cannot be returned to and the future is always ahead. In order for immortality to be deemed recognizably human, immortal existence must be limited by this sequential nature of time. Not only is it difficult to imagine a life unbound by sequential time, it is also absurd. How could the past and the future be lived simultaneously? Whether or not an existence without constraints of time is provably

absurd, it would be unrecognizably human because human existence is structured by sequence. Part of human experience is living only in the present moment. Immortality must be conceived as a succession of present moments for it to be comparable with our current experience. We must conceive of immortal existence as always having a past, present and future where traveling backward or forward in time is impossible.

### **Connie Rosati—Temporal Scarcity and Immortality**

This form of immortality has significant implications for regret. If we are always limited to the present moment, immortality is not a panacea for regret. In “Mortality, Agency, and Regret,” Rosati outlines the effects of finitude on regret with the concept of temporal scarcity. Though her work is specific to regret in mortality, it is extendable to a sequential immortality. Temporal scarcity, understood broadly, means that our time in life is limited. We only have a short amount of time before death to make choices. Our finitude is further complicated by conflicting desires. At any given moment, we have multiple desires competing for the resource of our time. Choosing to fulfill one desire leads to the dismissal of another and consequently the possibility of regretting our decision. However, temporal scarcity also applies to limits we have within our already short span of existence. Drawing upon fertility as an example, she observes that the decision to have a child must be made during a specific frame of life. The upshot is that the timing of our choices is significant (Rosati 244). If immortality is sequential, temporal scarcity is still a relevant concern. Though we will have infinite time to make choices, we cannot go back in time to change decisions in the past. Returning to Rosati’s point that timing is significant, we might wish that we had made a choice earlier in our existence. For example, if I had met my best friend five years earlier than I did, I would have had more time to share with them, thus adding to the amount of pleasure I would experience in my existence. Similarly, immortality would not necessarily mitigate conflicting desires. Something as simple as choosing between a desire to go to a party or a desire to stay home and read could lead to regret. That exact party may not be thrown in the future—and again, perhaps I could have met a friend there earlier than I would have had I stayed home to read. Because we are eternally limited to the present moment and are unable to change the past, regret is still possible.

### **Everyone Being Immortal**

The level of sociality in immortality also impacts regret. I will explore three different possibilities of sociality and their effects on regret: everyone being immortal, only one person being immortal but living among mortals, and only one person being immortal without living among mortals. First, if everyone were immortal, we must consider the possibility that our regrets might not be justified in the context of eternity. For example, I might regret not having met my best friend ten years earlier. But infinity minus ten years still equals infinity. According to this logic, I would not be justified in feeling regret because the time I did not spend with them is infinitesimal in comparison to eternity. However, returning to Fischer's argument, we could still feel regret on a moment by moment basis. Though in an infinite number of years I might not regret my decision to work late instead of spending time with my family, if I froze time within a few years of my decision, I would still feel regret (given that I did want to spend time with my family). Regret is justified because the meaning of our decisions is derived from their relation to each other and not from a definite end.

### **One Immortal Among Mortals**

In the second case (only one person being immortal but living among mortals), we will return to Bernard Williams and Elina Makropulos. Recall that Elina is the only human being in an immortal condition. Her immortal solitude would amplify her regret in the context of her relationships. She has an infinite amount of time to live, but the people she cares about do not. Her relationships are temporally scarce, meaning the timing of her decisions in regards to her relationships is crucial. If she does not choose to spend time with a given individual, she will never get that time back. Given that more than one human being exists alongside Elina, she has multiple relationships competing for her attention, and a limited amount of time to build said relationships. The impending death of her friends limits her immortality relationally. If Elina is invested in making human connections, there will be no end to regret and grief. This existence, though painful, could hardly be considered boring. Considering that every individual is unique, Elina has infinite possibilities for genuine new relationships (which are interesting in and of themselves) accompanied by regret and grief.

### Solitary Immortality

Finally, the case in which only one immortal being exists and does not live among other beings, mortal or immortal. Regret regarding relationships would be null, though it still might be possible to regret not engaging in a certain activity earlier. For example, I might regret not having learned to ski ten years earlier because I could have enjoyed my new hobby for an extra ten years. However, it is hard to imagine this existence being meaningful or recognizably human. Our life is characterized by our relation to others. They shape our emotional wellness, identity, and purpose. What would our lives be without communication, competition, love, and hosts of other opportunities that relationships afford us? Having relationships is a distinct and necessary characteristic for a recognizably human existence. Just as we have been thrust into an existence bound by temporal sequence, we have been thrust into an existence of coexisting with other human beings. It is impossible to imagine a meaningful, recognizably human immortality without the defining characteristic of relationships.

### Conclusion

Thus far, I have outlined Bernard Williams's argument on the tedium of immortality, Fischer's defense of immortality as recognizably human, and the necessity of temporal sequence. Bernard Williams demonstrates through the Elina Makropulos case that death is necessary for a meaningful existence, while Fischer argues that life does not need to be conceived as a whole (i.e., have a distinct end) to be recognizably human. However, prior to Fischer's argument, immortality must be temporally sequential to be recognizably human. Because immortality must be temporally sequential, regret will still be possible. Connie Rosati's concept of temporal scarcity applied to immortality demonstrates the possibility of regret by highlighting the importance of timing in our choices. The extent to which we feel regret will also be impacted by our level of sociality in immortality. If everyone is immortal, regret will be minimal in contrast to the Elina Makropulos case, where relationships are temporally scarce. If immortality is solitary, there will be no relationships to warrant regret, but it also would not be a recognizably human existence.

Regret being possible apparently adds to the bleakness of an immortal existence. Can we argue favorably for an immortal life of regret? Although regret may not directly add to the pleasure of existence, it does have an important place in immortality because it prescribes value to our choices. If part of being human means that we view our choices as valuable, death

is not a necessary condition for a recognizably human existence. Death is significant in mortality because a prospective end to choices gives value to the present moment. What we choose is important when we may not have time to also make the other choice. But regret, rather than death, makes every choice valuable within a sequential immortality because the timing of the choice is still significant. If I do not make a certain choice in the present moment, I have the possibility of regretting it. For example, if I have to choose between devoting my present moment to becoming an artist or a basketball star, I may regret choosing art because I will eventually discover I love basketball more. I could have had more time as a basketball player had I chosen it sooner. In the moment of deciding between basketball and art, my decision is valuable because I know I might regret either choice. The choice is still weighty, even when death doesn't threaten to end our decision making period. Although experiencing regret throughout eternity seems less than idyllic, it is necessary to prescribe value to our choices. Rather than lamenting regret, we can recognize it as a necessary side effect of a sequential existence that secures the importance of our choices throughout immortality.

## Works Cited

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