# KIERKEGAARD

Compêndio

Volume 3

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Volume 3

Clóvis Gedrat
Victor Manoel Fernandes
Natália Mendes Teixeira
Gabriel Ferreira da Silva
(organizadores)

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# ÍNDICE



USO EXCLUSIVO - PROFA. Marilyn Gaye Piety

# KIERKEGAARD ON THE DESIRABILITY OF IMMORTALITY

MARYLIN G. PIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that the chief attraction of religion in general and Christianity in particular is the promise of eternal life. Death is usually interpreted as the annihilation of the individual. Death, it is thought, is the end, the cessation of all sentience for the subject whose death it is, and this prospect is something most people find profoundly disturbing. Religion holds out the prospect that death, at least for the faithful, is not the end. On the contrary, it is actually the beginning of an eternal life that is completely devoid of the pains and sorrows that generally accompany temporal phenomenal existence.

The prospect of life everlasting has certainly sounded appealing to most people throughout human history. It has come under attack, however, by philosophers. Bernard Williams argues, for example that immortality, if one really reflects on its implications, far from being something one can look forward to, would actually amount to a kind of curse.[33] The problem, according to Williams is twofold. First, anyone who actually lived more than a few hundred years, would inevitably become *bored* with existence. The only way to avoid such boredom, he asserts, would be if the person changed so significantly over time that they were no longer recognizably the same person. So, what religion actually does, on Williams' view, is present us with the horns of a dilemma. The immortality it promises must either inevitably devolve into a torturous kind of boredom or elude us entirely in that it is not something the selves we are *now* could possibly ever experience. That is, Williams argues that immortality is inherently undesirable.

There may be a way through this Scylla and Charybdis. Williams' argument assumes that novel experiences are essential to avoiding boredom. It's far from clear, however, that Williams in correct on that point. That is, it's possible, at least in principle, to derive pleasure even from repeated experiences and there are, in

[33.] "The Makropulos Case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972,* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 82-100.

fact, examples of individuals, as we will shortly see, who argue that the pleasure they derive from their experiences does not diminish with repetition.

The problem of repetition is arguably central to Kierkegaard's thought. His eponymous work suggests that human beings are defeated by it. My argument here is that Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, solves the problem of repetition, or what would appear to be the inevitability of boredom when experiences are repeated too often, and that hence Williams' argument that immortality is inherently undesirable is both questions begging and, from Kierkegaard's perspective, wrong. It's question begging in that it assumes human capacities for the positive appreciation of their experiences would remain unchanged in eternity, and it is wrong, at least from Kierkegaard's perspective, in that the immortality Christianity promises involves a transformation of the individual's capacity for appreciation.

In what follows I will first examine Williams' argument for the undesirability of immortality. I will next mount a secular challenge to it. Finally, I will weigh in with Kierkegaard's specifically Christian solution to the problem Williams poses.

## I. WILLIAMS' POSITION

"Immortality, or a state without death," asserts Williams, "would be meaningless, … so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life" (p. 82). Williams bases this position on what he refers to as "facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is." He takes as his point of departure, a play entitled "The Makropulos Case" about a woman, Elina Makropulos, or EM, who imbibed a potion that extends the life of the person who consumes it to something like three hundred years, at which point, it becomes necessary to consume the potion again. The assumption is that the potion could be consumed every three hundred years into the indeterminate future and hence effectively confer immortality on the person who repeatedly consumes it.

The reason Williams takes this play as the point of departure for his argument is that by the time EM has reached the age of 342 "[h]er unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless; 'in the end it is the same', she says, 'singing and silence'. She refuses to take the elixir again; [and] she dies" (p. 82).

"[I]t was not a *peculiarity* of EM" (emphasis added) writes Williams, "that an endless life was meaningless" (p. 82). EM's problem, according to Williams, was "boredom; a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her" (p. 89). EM had satisfied all her life goals, which is to say that she had finished with life before it had finished with her. The only way, according to Williams, that EM's life could become meaningful again would be if her character changed over time to the extent that she came to have new and different life goals, which, in turn, led her to desire new and different things, things her earlier self had not desired. If her character continued to change in this way, then at least

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arguably, she could continue to have meaningful experiences. The problem, however, with this scenario, according to Williams, is that such changes would result in a "series of psychologically disjoint lives" (p. 91), lives that would no longer recognizably be those of the same person.

This leads Williams to propose what he asserts are two important conditions that must be satisfied in order for personal immortality to be desirable:

> 1. "[I]t should clearly be me who lives for ever.
>
> *and*
>
> 2. "[T]he state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all" (p. 91).

Unfortunately, it appears impossible, according to Williams, to envision a scenario where both conditions could be satisfied. If we remain recognizably the same self in our indefinitely extended lives, it appears we will inevitably reach EM's state where we have achieved all the aims our concern to achieve makes us the selves we are. That is, it appears we will inevitably become bored, indifferent, and cold to what from that point on, can only be a repetition of things we have already experienced. And if we do not remain recognizably the same self throughout eternity, then it isn't really *personal* immortality that we have achieved. The first scenario is unequivocally undesirable. The second scenario is equivocally desirable because it would amount to desiring the indefinite extension of the lives of others rather than of our own life and such a desire is certainly psychologically possible. According to Williams, however, it would not amount to a desire for our *own* immortality.

Williams' view that immortality is undesirable is consistent with a pervasive, if not pervasively acknowledged, intuition concerning immortality. That is, while human beings appear to have longed for immortality almost as far back as recorded history, there is longstanding evidence of a certain ambivalence in relation to the idea of living forever. The goal of Hinduism, for example, as well as for at least some forms of Buddhism, is liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Vampire legends, as well as the medieval legend of Ahasuerus, or the "Wandering Jew," depict their subjects as condemned to, rather than blessed with, immortality.

## II. MEMORY DECAY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Most responses to Williams, as I noted in the introduction, focus on the second of William's conditions for the desirability of immortality. That is, most responses focus on Williams' claim that "the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it

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presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all" (p. 91).

One of my reasons for wanting immortality appears to be that I find my experiences interesting, which is to say that my aim in wanting immortality is the infinite repetition of my interesting experiences. The problem appears to be that any experience, when repeated infinitely, inevitably becomes boring. Donald Bruckner argues, however, that the fact that memories decay means that the unending repetition of what are arguably essentially the same experiences will not necessarily mean they will inevitably become boring.[34]

The difficulty with this position is that it is nearly universally agreed that memories are constitutive, in some sense, of personal identity. A certain amount of memory decay is a natural consequence of aging. This amount of memory decay is not normally considered to threaten personal identity. Extreme forms of memory decay, however, such as those associated with advanced cases of dementia or traumatic brain injuries are widely acknowledged to threaten our notions of personal identity. "He wasn't the same person," friends and relatives will say of someone in advanced stages of dementia. Personality traits change as dementia advances. In fact, research suggests that attention to such changes may be helpful in diagnosing dementia.[35]

The question, of course, is how much memory decay is required to threaten personal identity. Ryan Marshal Felder argues that the "partial forgetting" of "non-essential memories" would not threaten personal identity. He argues that such "partial forgetting" would enable us to remain recognizably the same selves through eternity, while also enabling us to enjoy experiences that would otherwise "have grown tiresome with age."[36] "The model for *partial forgetting* I imagine," explains Felder

> is one where certain important memories stay available to the immortal person throughout the entirety of their lives; for example though they lose a great deal of their memories, they retain key memories of their early childhood, as well as memories associated with important life projects or skills. An immortal person, on *partial forgetting*, avoids the worst sort of forgetting that would raise worries about *survival* not being preserved, since there are certain core memories retained throughout the person's whole life which make it possible to conceptualize oneself as a persisting person. The memories that are lost, we might say, are non-essential to their self-conception; thus, their loss is unproblematic on *survival.*

Memories that are essential to personal identity do indeed seem to be those "associated with important life projects, or skills." But if essential memories, such as these survive, then in what sense does "partial forgetting" avoid the boredom and

[34] Donald Brukner, "Against the Tedium of Immortality," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies,* 20(5), 2012, 623-644.
[35] Gabriele Cipriani, Gemma Borin, Alessandro Del Debbio, and Mario Di Fiorino, "Personality and Dementia," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease,* March 2015, Vol. 203, Issue 3, pp 210-214.
[36] Ryan Marshal Felder, "Forgetting in Immortality," *Journal of Applied Philosophy,* Vol. 35, No. 4, November 2018, pp. 844-853.

indifference that, according to Williams, is the result of having "those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all" eventually satisfied? That is, if "partial forgetting" allows us to remember our important life projects and skills, then it also allows for our eventual appreciation that we have *realized* all those important life projects, that we have developed those skills to their utmost potential. That is, "partial forgetting" would *not* appear to preclude the "boredom, indifference, and coldness" that drove EM to view immortality as ultimately undesirable.

Felder's response to Williams is essentially question begging. That is, he assumes without proof that there is a degree of memory loss that is sufficient to preclude boredom but that does not threaten personal identity. The description he provides of this sort of memory loss, however, while it would indeed preserve personal identity, does not clearly avoid the boredom that Williams believes would ultimately make immortality undesirable.

## III. THE NOVELTY FALLACY

I believe that many of the responses to Williams mistakenly interpret the boredom he argues would be an inevitable consequence of an indefinitely extended life and hence ultimately make immortality undesirable to be a product of a loss of novelty, of the fact that one would reach a point where they could no longer have "new" experiences. This is the position, for example, of John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin in their article "Immortality and Boredom."[37] Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argue that

> Williams and other proponents of the view the we would lose all our categorical desires and associated projects in an immortal life are in the grip of a problematic metaphor. They sometimes seem to think of the relevant projects as though they were books in a library that contains a large but finite number of books. The idea is that given an infinite amount of time, a human being could read all the books in the library. (p. 358).

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin point out, however, that new books, to stick with the metaphor, would continue to be written and hence the view that immortality would mean that one would eventually run out of new books to read is simply mistaken. So long as there are new books to read, they argue, there would be novel experiences to be had and hence boredom would not be an inevitable result of immortality.

A careful reading of William's original article makes clear, however, that the problem about which Williams is concerned is not really one of a loss of novelty, but of a loss of meaning. EM's problem, according to Williams, "lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom; a boredom connected

[37] John Martin Fischer, Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom," *The Journal of Ethics,* Vol. 18, No. 4, December 2014, pp. 353-372.



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with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 already had happened to her" (p. 89). By this, Williams clearly does not mean that EM reaches a point where she can no longer have novel experiences. What he means is that no new experience could add to the satisfaction of her particular life goals. That is, EM had reached a point where she understood everything that was connected to the life goals that made her the particular self she was. No new sense could be made of those goals through new experiences.

Novelty cannot rescue someone from the boredom that stems from a loss of meaning. The wealthy person who pursues new experiences to exhaustion only to find that they finally tire of novelty is a standard literary, or narrative, trope exemplified wonderfully in the movie "A New Leaf" starring Walter Matthau and Elaine May where playboy Matthau has run through his entire inherited fortune in a vain attempt to give meaning to his life, a meaning he finally finds in the role of husband to the wealthy yet inept May and manager of her hitherto mismanaged estate.

More importantly, novelty is completely ineffectual as a means of rescuing people whose lives have become meaningless as a result of acute and or chronic depression, because the problem with such depression is precisely that those who suffer from it have ceased to care about what happens to them in what would appear to be the same sense that EM ceases to care about what happens to her. But unlike the situation of EM, it's not because "everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being ha[s] already happened to [them]." Serious depression can even strike the very young, or people who have had relatively few experiences and for whom important life goals have yet to be satisfied. This suggests, again, that it's not the novelty of a person's experiences that makes their life meaningful.

## IV. WHAT BOREDOM? WHOSE IMMORTALITY?

The key, I would argue to an effective response to Williams' argument is alluded to in Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's article. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin cite Connie Rosati's observation that "[w]e all know people … who seem to find just about everything interesting, whose inquisitiveness and capacity for enjoyment seem nearly boundless."[38] "So at best," they continue, "Williams might be right about *some* individuals. But his claim is about *all* persons" (p. 356). That is, they argue that while some people, perhaps even the majority of people, might become bored were they to live forever, it is far from clear that this would be everyone's fate.

Fischer argues in an earlier article that while some pleasures are "self-exhausting," others are "repeatable" and that such repeatable pleasures could make immortality desirable despite Williams' argument.[39] Fischer's focus, however, would appear to

[38] C.S. Rosati, "The Makropulos case revisted: Reflections on immortality and agency," *The Oxford Handbook for the Philosophy of Death,* ed. B. Bradley, F. Feldman, and J. Johansson, pp, 365-366.
[39] J.M. Fischer, "Why immortality is not so bad," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2: pp. 257-270.

be on preserving the novelty of these pleasures despite their repeatability because he observes that "even repeatable pleasures may become boring or unappealing if distributed too closely." That is, these repeatable pleasures need to be spaced in such a way that the subject can effectively forget what it was like to have them, so that when they are experienced again, they have a quality of novelty about them.

It would appear, however, that the issue is not actually the nature of the *pleasures* in question, but the nature of the *individual* experiencing them. That is, there are those individuals, as Connie Rosati observes, for whom "the capacity for enjoyment seem[s] nearly boundless."[40] Corliss Lamont would appear to be such an individual. "I deny," writes Lamont,

> that repetition as such leads necessarily to 'monotony and boredom.' Consider, for instance, the basic biological drives of thirst, hunger, and sex. Pure cool water is the best drink in the world, and I have been drinking it for sixty-two years. If we follow through with [the Necessary Boredom Thesis], I ought to be so tired of water by this time that I seek to quench my thirst solely by wine, beer, and coca-cola! Yet I still love water.[41]

Novelty is not an intrinsic quality of an experience. It is a product of a relation between an experience and an individual's past. Experiences are initially novel, but lose this novelty with repetition. Individuals such as Lamont appreciate experiences for their intrinsic, or essential, qualities, not for their temporal contingency, or novelty.

The question of what makes life meaningful appears to be an empirical question. Some people may feel that the novelty of their experiences gives their lives meaning. Others may see the meaning of their lives in the satisfaction of particular, finite life goals. At least some people, such as Lamont, seem to be able to appreciate what appear to be the intrinsically positive qualities of certain experiences in a way that makes their novelty, or lack thereof, irrelevant. Hence it is possible to take such appreciation as a life goal.

That I should strive to appreciate my experiences for what I take to be their intrinsically positive qualities is one of my own life goals. This is a finite goal to the extent that my life is itself finite. Life goals do not necessarily have to be finite, however, if the life of the individual in question is not itself finite. My goal to appreciate my experiences for what I take to be their intrinsically positive qualities could easily be made an infinite goal if immortality were suddenly conferred upon me.

One might be tempted to argue that experiences do not have intrinsically positive qualities but derive their status as positive from the contingent fact that we happen to view them that way. This, in any case, is the secular perspective. That is, in the absence of any dogmatic commitment to the view that the world of our experience

[40.] C.S. Rosati, "The Makropulos Case Revisited: Reflections on immortality and agency," *The Oxford Handbook for the Philosophy of Death,* eds. B. Bradley, F. Feldman, and J. Johansson, pp. 365-366.
[41.] Corliss Lamont, "Mistaken Attitudes Toward Death," *The Journal of Philosophy,* Jan. 21, Vol. 62, No. 2, p. 33.

is inherently positive, the question of the desirability of immortality is unavoidably an empirical one. *Some* people, perhaps even *mos*t people, seem eventually to tire of even what we are ordinarily inclined to think of as the most intrinsically pleasurable experiences. But, again, there is no a priori reason to suppose that *everyone* would.

Opponents of Williams' argument for the undesirability of immortality who object to his claim that boredom would be a *necessary,* or *inevitable*, result of immortality, are, I believe, correct. That is, while Williams' claims that immortality would lead to boredom would appear to be true with respect to what is perhaps the vast *majority* of humanity, it is not clear that it is necessarily true of *everyone*. If certain people are able to appreciate experiences for what appear to them to be their intrinsically positive qualities rather than for their novelty, then immortality would be desirable *for these people* because *they* would never become bored.

Whether there really *are* such individuals, or whether it only appears that there are is itself an empirical question. It is, after all, conceivable that the length of even the longest human life is insufficient to expose that the pleasure that even *these* paragons of appreciation derive from their experiences depends to some extent on their retaining some small hint of novelty. Unfortunately, what would be required in order to establish the truth of the hypothesis that such individuals exist would be an empirical study of infinite length, since no matter for how long an individual retained the ability to appreciate repeated experiences for their apparently intrinsically positive qualities rather than for their novelty, the possibility would always remain that they would cease to be able to do this at some point in the future, and in that way expose that, appearances to the contrary, they had *never* actually been able to do this.

So, absent any dogmatic commitment to the view that the world of our experience is inherently positive and hence an inexhaustible source of meaning, we are left with the conclusion that we are not actually in a position to establish the truth of Williams' hypothesis concerning the inherent undesirability of immortality.

## V. KIERKEGAARD ON THE DESIRABILITY OF IMMORTALITY

Christianity is not neutral, however, on the issue of whether the world of our experience is inherently positive. No matter how corrupted the world of human experience has become as a result of sin, creation itself remains positive. God is described not once but twice in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures as gazing upon creation and pronouncing it good.[42]

The Makropulos problem, from the Christian perspective, is a result of a flaw in human nature. It is not a feature of reality itself. People lust constantly after novelty, not because repetition cannot satisfy, but because they refused to be satisfied with it. Kierkegaard introduces the problem of repetition on the first page of his work of the same name in a manner that suggests far from being

[42.] Genesis 1:21 and 1:25.

boring, temporality itself makes repetition impossible. The work begins with a reference to the Eleatics, who were famous for their views that all motion, change, and by extension, time itself, were unreal.

"When the Eleatics* denied motion," writes Kierkegaard's pseudonym Constantine Constantius, "Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward in protest, actually came forward, because he did not say a word, but simply walked back and forth a few times, with which gesture he believed he had sufficiently refuted the Eleatic position."[43]

But of course, Kierkegaard rejects the view that time is unreal. Time for Kierkegaard is precisely the challenge of human existence. We are not what we are supposed to be, but are constantly engaged in a process of becoming. He is even more contemptuous, however, of the pursuit of the novel than he is of the Eleatic denial of the reality of time. An existence that is characterized by nothing but change is superficial in the extreme. "What would life be without repetition?" asks Constantius.

> Who would want to be a tablet on which life wrote something new every moment, or a memorial to something past? Who would want to be moved by the fleeting, the new, that is always effeminately diverting the soul? If God Himself had not willed repetition, there would never have been a world.[44]

The challenge for human beings is to preserve continuity through change. Constantius observes that he is preoccupied with the problem of repetition, with whether it is even possible, and if possible what it would mean. He decides to set out for Berlin as an experiment because he had been there before. He wants to see whether he could repeat the experience he had on his first trip. What he discovers, sadly, as every reader of the work knows, is that he is unable to repeat, at least in the positive sense, the sense the possibility of which he's concerned to establish, *any* of his earlier experiences. [45]

And yet, he asserts at the beginning of the work that the problem of repetition.

> is going to play an important role in modern philosophy because repetition is a decisive expression for what 'recollection' was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is recollection, thus will modern philosophy teach that life itself is a repetition. …. Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. Repetition, if it is possible, thus makes a person happy, while recollection makes him unhappy.[46]

Repetition makes a person happy. Constantius' problem throughout his

[43] *Repetition,* 1.
[44] *Repetition,* 4.
[45] Insert reference to negative repetition.
[46] *Repetition,* 3.



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visit to Berlin was that he constantly compared his present experiences with those of his first trip and found them wanting. That is, he was "recollecting" his earlier visit while trying to repeat it, hence his unhappiness. What he couldn't do, it seems, was experience Berlin, *again,* as if for the first time. *That* is genuine repetition. But that is precisely what eludes him, and what eludes all of us, sooner or later according to Kierkegaard, not because the experiences that enchanted us the first time around were only chimerical, but because we were enchanted by their novelty not by their inherently positive qualities. Repetition's love, writes Constantius,

> is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection, it is not disturbed by hope nor by the marvelous anxiety of discovery, neither, however, does it have the sorrow of recollection. It has instead the blissful security of the moment. Hope is new attire, stiff and starched and splendid. Still, since it has not yet been tried on, one does not know whether it will suit one, or whether it will fit. Recollection is discarded clothing which, however lovely it might be, no longer suits one because one has outgrown it. Repetition is clothing that never becomes worn, that fits snugly and comfortably, that neither pulls nor hangs too loosely. Hope is a pretty girl, who slips away from one's grasp. Recollection is a beautiful older woman who never quite suits the moment. Repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never tires because it is only the new of which one tires. One never tires of the old, and when one has it before oneself one is happy, and only a person who does not delude himself that repetition ought to be something *new*, for then he tires of it, is genuinely happy. It requires youthfulness to hope and youthfulness to recollect, but it requires courage to will repetition. He who will only hope is cowardly. He who wants only to recollect is a voluptuary. But he who wills repetition, he is a **man**, and the more emphatically he has endeavored to understand what this means, the deeper he is as a human being. But he who does not grasp that life is repetition and that this is the beauty of life, has condemned himself and deserves nothing better than what will happen to him—death.[47]

"Repetition," continues Constantius, "is the daily bread that satisfies through blessing." It is more than that, though. For Kierkegaard repetition is life ever-lasting. The person who, like Corliss Lamont, can have the same experiences over and over again without ever tiring of them because it was never their novelty that made them meaningful, is the person for whom eternity is not merely desirable but a blessing.

If we return to the two conditions Williams asserts must be satisfied in order for immortality to be desirable, we see that Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, satisfies both conditions. The conditions, again, are:

1. "[I]t should clearly be me who lives for ever.

*and*

[47] *Repetition,* 3-4, emphasis added.



USE EXCLUSIVELY WITH GOD PRAY

2. “[T]he state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all” (p. 91).

The Christian, from the moment they become a Christian, takes an appreciation of the inherently positive nature of creation to be a life goal. That means they continue to be recognizably the same person throughout eternity that they were in time. In addition, such a goal is inexhaustible. Neither in this life nor in the next could one reach a point where one could be said to be finished with it. Hence the state of the Christian in eternity will dovetail perfectly with the aims they now have in wanting to survive at all.

More is required, however, according to Kierkegaard, than simply the courage to will repetition. One must have *faith* that it is possible. From a purely secular perspective such faith appears ill-founded. How many individuals, after all, are like Corliss Lamont. Kierkegaard’s perspective is not a secular one, however, *with God*, he believes, *all* things are possible, even *eternal* blessedness.

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