

CHAPTER 16

THE MAKROPULOS CASE REVISITED

REFLECTIONS ON IMMORTALITY AND AGENCY

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We die like beasts. God, what comes after life, what is the immortality of the soul but a desperate cry against the shortness of our lives? Man has never accepted this animal span of life. We can't endure it, it's too unjust. Man is more than a tortoise or a raven. Man needs more time to live.¹

IN Karel Čapek's play *The Makropulos Case*, Emilia Marty, an opera singer renowned for her talent and beauty, appears at an attorney's office to inquire about one of his cases. The litigation concerns an estate valued at 150 million, and it has dragged on over four generations of disputants and their sons, and lawyers and their sons. It seems Emilia knows of facts favorable to the attorney's client, Albert Gregor. In particular, she knows of the existence of a will supporting Gregor's claim to the estate, which is likely in an old chest in the possession of Jaroslav Prus, Gregor's adversary. All of the parties to the dispute initially express disbelief, then bewilderment as to how Emilia could know what she does, given that the testator of the newly recovered will had died nearly 100 years earlier. We discover

in the fourth act that the apparently 30-odd year-old Emilia Marty—a.k.a. Elina Makropulos, a.k.a. Ellian MacGregor, a.k.a. Eugenia Montez—has lived to the ripe old age of 337.² As she recounts it, her father, personal physician to the Emperor Rudolph II, was ordered to test on her the elixir of life he had invented for the Emperor.³ The serum extends life, allowing one to “stay young” for 300 years, and as we encounter the seeming effects of this extension on Emilia, we find a life of boredom, apathy, and emptiness.⁴

Why, then, has Emilia appeared? Gregor, it turns out, is her great great grandson, and he is about to lose the case. Emilia has not come, however, to aid him in his cause. In fact, she has only just learned of the dispute, and she arrives apparently unaware that the document supporting Gregor’s claim remains hidden.⁵ In any event, she is as indifferent to Gregor’s lineage as she is to nearly everything else. What moves Emilia is not familial affection but apprehension of her own impending death: she seeks to recover the formula for the elixir, which she also believes to be in the old chest that is still, as she learns, in Prus’s possession.⁶ Once her story is revealed, a heated discussion ensues about what to do with the formula, and Čapek’s characters debate the merits of immortal existence, teasing us with questions about meaning and value and the nature of a life worth living. In the end, all, including Emilia, decline to take the formula, and amidst some protest, the aging parchment on which it is written is destroyed.

It is uncertain what lessons, if any, Čapek intended us to draw from his tale. Bernard Williams, in a striking essay, takes Čapek’s play to illustrate that immortality would be intolerable: an endless existence would be a dreary, meaningless existence, simply because of what it is to have a human character and to live a human life.⁷ Perhaps Čapek meant to convey just this, but the play is more suggestive than conclusive. As will become clear, Williams’s reasons for insisting that an endless life would be endlessly boring, that “in a sense, death gives the meaning to life,” are ultimately unpersuasive.⁸ His claims are, in any case, somewhat puzzling.

As Williams would surely acknowledge, his claims conflict with common intuitions about value, as well as with widespread fantasies, long reflected in art, religion, and literature, about magical potions extending our existence in this life or divine dispensation extending it in an “afterlife.” The conflict runs yet deeper, however, for his claims collide not only with common beliefs and imaginings but with a most basic and irresistible force: the felt imperative *to live*.⁹ We cling to life, ferociously at times, even the nihilists among us, and it seems, to most of us at least, that we are rational to do so. How, then, could too much life be a bad thing, and what would “too much” of it be? Our finite lives can, it seems, be both richly rewarding and profoundly meaningful. Why think, then, that a life without death would become deadeningly dull? Why think that a life without end would become a life without point?¹⁰

Whether or not Čapek intended any particular message, we are free to draw our own morals, and so we might as well draw ones that leave us well instructed. I am inclined to think that Williams misses the significance of the Makropulos case. His negative answer to the question of whether immortality would be desirable is, as I shall explain, an answer to no determinate question at all, and to the extent

that his arguments bear on any clear question about the desirability of extending our lives, they fail to support his assessment. For pretty obvious reasons, then, we ought to view with skepticism any effort to appraise the desirability of an endless or substantially extended existence. I here revisit Williams's essay, then, not to defend an alternative assessment, but the better to reflect on our mortal lives. In my view, Williams's position rests on questionable ideas about desire, character, meaning, and human life. As a consequence, he leaves unexplained what seems critically in need of explanation, namely, *the widespread and seemingly rational longing for extended existence*.¹¹

In what follows, I suggest that the rational appeal of extended existence rests on the fact that, although we are each humans with something like an individual human character, we are also autonomous agents with a distinctively agential character. The widespread longing for an extended existence is an expression of our agency, and contra Williams, satisfying that longing need not be practically at odds with satisfying the perhaps equally widespread longing for a meaningful existence. Whatever message it may impart about a limitless life, the deeper lessons of *The Makropulos Case* concern how to live the limited life each of us has. Absorbing those lessons may, in one sense, do more to burnish than to diminish the appeal of an "eternal life." For the lives we each do best to seek may be ones in which we find at least "intimations of immortality."¹²

1. IN SEARCH OF A QUESTION

Human lives, as we know them, have a characteristic cycle: an early stage of physiological and psychological development; a middle period of intense learning, social expansion, production, and reproduction; and a final phase of physical and mental decline and social contraction, ending in death. Of course, individual lives vary markedly, and development and decline of many sorts need not be limited to a single period. Psychological growth, thankfully, can occur throughout a life. Decline and decay, sadly, can occur far too early, due to injury or illness or owing to our own self-destructive choices. With social, economic, and technological advances, we have ever increasing flexibility in how we structure our lives, in our opportunities for charting a new course, and for correcting or overcoming defective or deficient conditions. Both the fact of something like a typical human life cycle and the fact of its malleability bear importantly on the possibilities for value and meaning in any life we could know.

A fundamental difficulty arises in efforts to assess the desirability of immortality, for our ordinary judgments about value and meaning are tied to our sense of a typical, if-variable, finite human existence. When we try to imagine an *eternal* human existence, our judgments lose their natural mooring. The difficulty is not that we must assess a very different sort of human life; rather, unless we can

carefully stipulate the terms of an endless existence, we must assess no particular sort of human life at all.¹³

Consider the difficulty of determining what we are to imagine. Would the person living an immortal life age as we do in our finite lives but very slowly? Would she repeatedly undergo cycles of development, decline, and renewal? Or would she live indefinitely at a particular age, and what age might that be?¹⁴ If at a particular age, how would her development—physical, intellectual, and emotional—be affected? Would she have a body? If so, would her physique and psyche be in or out of sync? And what of her relations with others? Would she be alone in her immortality? A member of some small group? Or would all humans be immortal? And, finally, what other features of our world, if any, would remain fixed as those immortals among us carried on endlessly?

The terms of a person's existence make all the difference to its desirability.¹⁵ No one, for instance, would rationally want to spend a life—mortal or immortal—trapped in early childhood or in decrepit old age. Too many goods become accessible to us only as our powers mature; too many escape us as those powers decline. No one would rationally want to live a life—mortal or immortal—in a state of physical and psychological mismatch.¹⁶ Recall what Tithonus endured because of Eos's error in requesting eternal life for her lover without also requesting eternal youth.¹⁷ Without a clear fix on the terms of immortal existence, we cannot reasonably guess what goods would enrich our lives or elude us, what ills we would escape or suffer; we cannot guess how our view of what is a good or ill or of what makes a life meaningful would change.¹⁸

One might be tempted to think we could avoid the foregoing complications simply by imagining eternal existence under "ideal conditions." Suppose, for example, that one were to carry on indefinitely in "one's prime."¹⁹ That seems to be just the condition in which we find Emilia—at the height of her operative powers and, as the swooning of the men who encounter her attests, at the height of her physical beauty and sexual allure. Perhaps, other things being equal, such a life would be highly desirable. But other things aren't equal, and in fact, once the familiar limits on a human life have been lifted, we no longer understand what it would be for other things to be "equal."

Whatever the attractions of living forever "at the top of one's game," no one would rationally want to do so if, like Emilia, they would be alone in this endlessness. I do not mean, of course, that Emilia has spent her 337 years alone. On the contrary, she has had many relationships—with parents, husbands, lovers, children—all of whom have predeceased her. The fact that she has outlived them all suggests a rather different problem for an extended life, at least of Emilia's sort, than the one Williams claims to find. For there may be a limit to how much loss any human being can bear before she loses the will or the ability to invest herself emotionally in ways required to create and secure value. Without such investment, a person is doomed to be cut off from the concerns that animate, and render desirable, human life as we know it.²⁰

Our need for connection finds recurrent and striking expression in literary depictions of endless existence, including Čapek's. Despite her countless lovers and children, despite the adulation of her fans and the attentions of her many male admirers, Emilia's complaints concern not only her boredom but her solitude.²¹ For all Čapek tells us, Emilia's shallowness and self-absorption—indeed, her callousness—may have been, at least to some degree, long-standing features of her character, but they may also reflect a narcissism induced by emotional isolation.²²

2. THE ALLEGED PROBLEMS FOR EXTENDED EXISTENCE

Williams well recognizes the problem of what to imagine when we contemplate immortality. Moreover, he himself observes that Emilia occupies a unique position in that she "is in a world of people who do not share her condition"; as a consequence, he remarks, her personal relationships require a certain concealment, resulting in "a form of isolation that would disappear if her condition were generalized."²³ Still, he thinks he can argue that an endless life would involve the tedium Emilia endures—and *inevitably* so.²⁴ Of course, Emilia is not immortal; she has just gone on living for a very long time. Williams's concern would thus seem to lie not with immortality *per se*—with our living forever—but simply with our living for too long.²⁵

For the remainder of this essay, then, I focus on the more modest, if only slightly less ill-defined, notion of "extended existence." We cannot clearly imagine immortality, but we can imagine average life expectancy extended by ten or twenty years, or perhaps even doubled; and were it doubled, those who lived extendedly would no doubt be able to imagine life extended yet again, even if we cannot.²⁶ Now, Williams would surely not find an additional ten or twenty years problematic. But if an extra twenty years would pose no difficulty, whereas an extra, say, approximately 257 years (as in Emilia's case) would, then this will require some explanation.²⁷ Williams arguments against the desirability of immortality, in effect, promise to provide an explanation.

Although I focus on the notion of extended existence, I shall have to leave unspecified, for now obvious reasons, the precise terms of such an existence. As for how much additional existence counts as "extended," choosing any particular end point would be hopelessly arbitrary. More important, as I hope to show, it would miss something critical to explaining the common longing for extended existence, namely, that insofar as we are autonomous agents, no natural stopping point presents itself.

Williams thinks that a natural stopping point does present itself—or at least that death, thankfully, provides a stopping point. He tells us that he will "pursue the idea that *from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is,*

it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil."²⁸ But what does he take these facts to be, and how is the intolerability of immortality supposed to follow from them?

As the passage just cited indicates, although Williams believes that immortality would be a bad thing, he nevertheless maintains, pace Lucretius, that other things being equal, death is reasonably regarded as an evil, and we rationally prefer a later to an earlier death. The thought that it is better to die later than earlier, he remarks, "will depend only on the idea, apparently sound, that if the *praemia vitae* and consciousness of them are good things, then longer consciousness of more *praemia* is better than shorter consciousness of fewer *praemia*."²⁹ A decent argument can be offered to support this idea, he thinks. Other things being equal, when a person desires something, he prefers a state of affairs in which that desire is satisfied, something that for most of his desires, death would prevent. To be sure, should he die, he will not know what he is missing, but "from the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of affairs in which his want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil."³⁰ Williams allows that many of the things we want we want "only on the assumption that [we are] going to be alive."³¹ This accounts, he thinks, for the situation of some elderly persons who may continue to want things even though they are ready, and may even wish, to die. But with respect to other things, wanting them will itself give us a reason to avoid death, which necessarily precludes getting them.

Williams here draws a distinction between *conditional desires* and what he calls "*categorical desires*."³² The distinction can be understood in terms of a difference in propositional content, and so a difference in what it would take to satisfy desires of each sort. The conditional desire, for example, to finish writing my book—to finish it, given that I'm alive—can be satisfied *either* by my completing the book (that is, by the truth of the consequent) or by my dying (the falsity of the antecedent). The categorical desire to finish writing my book, in contrast, can be satisfied only by my completing it, and for that I must live long enough.

If the distinction between conditional and categorical desires turns on a difference in propositional content and satisfaction conditions, its importance, turns on a supposed difference in motivational and rational implications: categorical desires, in contrast to conditional desires, both *motivate* a person to continue living and give her *reason* to live.³³ The categorical desire to finish my book, for example, motivates me, not only to secure time to write, to sit at my desk composing sentences, and so on, but to live; and it gives me reason to live, at least long enough to finish. The conditional desire to write my book likewise motivates me to do what it takes to write my book—it motivates me, we might say, relative to the desire's propositional content and my presumed existence. But it does not motivate me to live or give me reason to live, just reason to write so long as I am alive and not taking steps to alter the status quo. Call the difference in motivation a difference between being *life-motivating* and *content-motivating*. Call the difference in rational implication the difference between giving a *categorical reason* and giving a *conditional reason*.

The importance of categorical desires evidently derives, on Williams's view, not only from their being life-motivating but also, and more significantly, from their providing categorical reasons to live.³⁴

Williams's interest in the normative role of desire, and its bearing on the desirability of extended existence, becomes clear when he rejects the suggestion that all desires are conditional. He invites us to consider the "idea of a rational forward-looking calculation of suicide."³⁵ The suicidal man is in doubt about whether to remain alive. If he nevertheless decides to undergo "what lay before him," the desire that propels him forward "is not one that operates conditionally on his being alive, since it itself resolves the question of whether he is going to be alive."³⁶ Williams evidently thinks that either conditional or categorical desires might, as a matter of fact, propel a person into the future, but that only categorical desires can do so while resolving the doubts of the man rationally calculating suicide, for only they provide reasons to seek that future. Happiness, he contends, "requires that some of one's desires should be fully categorical, and one's existence itself wanted as something necessary to them."³⁷

Although Williams thinks that we can arrive at no interesting generalizations about what those categorical desires must be, he considers whether the bare desire to stay alive could be the categorical desire that propels the suicidal man forward. "The answer," he offers,

is perhaps "no." In saying that, I do not want to deny the existence, the value, or the basic necessity of a sheer reactive drive to self-preservation: humanity would certainly wither if the drive to keep alive were not stronger than any perceived reasons for keeping alive. But if the question [whether to remain alive] is asked, and it is going to be answered calculatively, then the bare categorical desire to stay alive will not sustain the calculation—that desire itself, when things have got that far, has to be sustained or filled out by some desire for something else, even if it is only, at the margin, the desire that future desires of mine will be born and satisfied.³⁸

When a person has reached the point of rationally considering suicide, a bare desire to live will not do, even if it is categorical and so reason-giving; something more will be needed to "sustain the calculation" in favor of life. According to Williams, the reasons any of us has for avoiding death derive from our (other) categorical desires. These desires not only give us reason to live but also to regard death as a misfortune.³⁹

Williams's claims about categorical desires seem doubtful. Consider his claim that happiness requires that some of our desires be "fully categorical." Williams does not argue for this directly. Perhaps he thinks his "rational suicide" case shows that happiness requires that some desires be life-motivating and categorical reason-giving. But a person could, it seems, derive happiness just from the things that she desires given that she is alive.⁴⁰ She might not wish to die but might also not desire to live as something necessary to her desires; she might simply have conditional desires and an ordinary "reactive drive to self-preservation." Her outlook, moreover, need not preclude believing that an early death is a misfortune. She

might think her life would be better *as a life* were her projects completed, perhaps because, as some might say, it would make for a better story. Even a preference for such a life need not be categorical or rest on categorical desires; it might rest simply on beliefs about the value of a life as a whole.

Williams's claim that categorical desires provide reasons to live also seems doubtful. Whether any desires provide or ground reasons is, of course, open to dispute.⁴¹ Still, if categorical desires do not provide reasons, they might at least be (fallible) indicators of reasons. Our categorical desires might be for things that are, or could become, a part of our good or for things to which we are otherwise reflectively committed; and our good and our reflective commitments can, and ordinarily do, give us reasons to live. Yet Williams appears to recognize no limits on the objects of our categorical desires. Now, perhaps any desire, regardless of its object, can be life-motivating. But one can reasonably doubt, for familiar reasons, that a desire can be reason-giving, regardless of its object, simply because its propositional content is not conditional.⁴² Insofar as desires ground or indicate reasons, one might argue, they must have as their objects things like participation in a seemingly valuable project or relationship. In fact, it is, most commonly, desires of this sort that we tend to experience as categorical when the threat of an early death would prevent the completion of a project or prematurely end a relationship. For example, a terminally ill father ordinarily wants to live as long as possible so he can continue to love and parent his children, for their sake and his. Some of our desires are for engagements with an internal shape or trajectory, and these in turn give our lives shape, putting us in a position to assess our lives as fulfilling or stunted, as meaningful or meaningless. Insofar as happiness requires that some of our desires be "fully categorical," it would seem to be because of what our categorical desires usually concern.

Let us grant for now, though, Williams's claims about the desire to live and the necessity of categorical desires. Why does he think it follows from these supposed facts about human desire and happiness that an extended existence would be intolerable? Why think it follows that Emilia's fate would be our own? Williams offers two distinct lines of reasoning against the desirability of immortality. The first argues from a certain claim as to why nothing would be gained, the second, from the necessity to any desirable human life of what would be lost.

2.1 Nothing Gained

Williams argues that "nothing would be gained" by living extendedly, because "[t]here is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever."⁴³ It follows that a person could not rationally desire a life that would have more of some such property or have it more unqualifiedly. A desire for a better life in *that* sense could not be among her categorical desires; it could neither give her a reason to live extendedly nor contribute to her happiness.

Williams's premise is, of course, open to dispute; surely hedonists and some proponents of desire and objective list theories would reject it. So long as we would

continue to enjoy our activities and relationships, for example, pleasure seems an obvious candidate for a relevant desirable property. And if the value of a life were additive, then an interest in our own enjoyment and in having more rather than less valuable lives would seem to favor extended existence.⁴⁴ In any case, Williams does not explain why vindication of our attraction to extended existence would require that there be some property of the sort he describes.⁴⁵ Why wouldn't it be enough that life continue to have, only just as unqualifiedly and in roughly the same quantity, whatever desirable properties it now has? Why wouldn't it be enough that we continue to lead the happy, apparently meaningful lives we are already living?

2.2 Something Lost

Williams does not address the latter questions directly, evidently because he is convinced that extended lives would cease to have whatever desirable properties and meaningfulness our actual lives have. The supposed facts to which his more central, and more promising, "something would be lost" argument appeals concern not only human desire and happiness but human character.

According to Williams, Emilia lives an empty life for quite explicable reasons: she has ceased to have categorical desires and, thereby, anything that would give her an interest in life and a reason to live. Emilia's problem, which presents itself precisely because she has been living too long, is boredom—

a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of [her age] had already happened to her. Or, rather, *all the sort of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character*; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.⁴⁶

Boredom, he seems to want to say, is the inevitable consequence of having a human character *and* too much time on one's hands.

Suppose we grant that boredom is the enemy—the real threat that must be warded off to vindicate the longing for extended existence.⁴⁷ Ordinary boredom, it's worth remembering, is not a problem at all, any more than ordinary ambivalence is. Both express a deep fact about us, one which I'll later suggest is important to explaining the rational appeal of extended existence. The problem, rather, is the sort of *enervating* boredom that apparently afflicts Emilia; only the latter could be any true threat to the desirability of extended existence. We have simple, familiar remedies for ordinary boredom and malaise: make a change, find something else to do. Why believe that extended existence would result in a boredom beyond the reach of our usual cures?

Emilia's existence, Williams observes, satisfies one of two conditions that must be met if a person's hope for an endless life is to be fulfilled, namely, that it be she who survives endlessly. Emilia's existence fails, however, to satisfy a second condition: that the person who continues to survive live in a state adequately related to

the aims for the sake of which the person wants to survive.⁴⁸ Even supposing that a person was propelled into the future only by the categorical desire that "future desires of [hers] be born and satisfied," it must be intelligible to her, given her own character, how these future desires could be *her* desires.⁴⁹ Otherwise, presumably, neither this categorical desire nor "her" future categorical desires would give *her* reason or motivation to live.

Williams maintains that Emilia's difficulty was due not to her particular character but, rather, to the fact that she had a character, and so in virtue of our each having a character, extended existence would—for any of us—be incompatible with the second condition being met.⁵⁰ The source of the alleged incompatibility, however, remains obscure. The problem cannot be, say, that you, from your standpoint at the moment of being offered the elixir, would be unable to see your "survivor state" as adequately related to the aims you have in wanting to survive. You might easily—and accurately—picture your surviving self (that is, *you*) writing the novel you would now, looking forward, have yourself write, or embarking on those travels which you would now, looking forward, have yourself begin, or watching your grandchildren grow just as you now, looking forward, long to do. Williams gives us no compelling reason to doubt that at any particular point, as you look forward to the next year or two or ten, the surviving you would be in a state adequately related to the aims you had in wanting to continue.⁵¹ It seems the second condition, like the first, would ordinarily be met.⁵²

The problem must instead be that although all might look well at any particular point as we consider the next year or two or ten, we can see how grim things would be when we reflect and, so to speak, take the long view. Suppose that given what it is to have a character, everything that could happen and make sense to a person would, at some point during an extended existence, have already happened. At that point, then, perhaps there would be nothing more for her to desire—not even, per impossibile, that future desires of hers be born and satisfied. And so her future desires couldn't be adequately related to her aims in wanting to survive because there wouldn't be any.

One might think that the difficulty could be escaped so long as a person's categorical desires included desires for things that never lost their appeal. But Williams does not consider this a real possibility. In the process of living a human life, he claims, any individual will have acquired a character, with certain interests, likes, and dislikes. We cannot imagine any unending state or activity that wouldn't, in the end, become boring, at least if a person "remains conscious of himself." When it comes to eternity, Williams contends, "Nothing less will do... than something that makes boredom unthinkable. What could that be? Something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing? But if a man has and retains a character, there is no reason to suppose that there is anything that could be that."⁵³ If Williams is right, a person would indeed be unable to conjure up an image of future categorical desires coming to be born that would be her desires. Given her character, nothing can endlessly interest her, and at some point, she will have desired and done everything it can make sense to someone like her to desire and

do.⁵⁴ For these reasons, the boredom extended existence would induce could not be relieved by making a change or finding something new to do.

An extended life would thus be tedious. What's more, it would be *meaningless*.⁵⁵ Williams does not say what makes for a meaningful life, but he appears to think an important connection exists between categorical desires and both happiness and meaning. Perhaps he thinks that meaningfulness depends on happiness: a person's life is meaningful insofar as it is happy, which requires that she have life-motivating and categorical reason-giving desires. Or perhaps he thinks that happiness depends on meaningfulness; it requires just that a person have reasons for living, which only categorical desires can provide. Either way, "death gives the meaning to life" by ending it before categorical desire ceases and ceaseless boredom ensues.⁵⁶ Extended existence would exhaust categorical desire, something essential to happiness and meaningfulness, and so to any desirable human life.⁵⁷

Williams's "something lost" argument seems to rest heavily on two basic claims about what supposedly follows from the fact of our each having a character: a person can find nothing that would perpetually interest her and so make boredom "unthinkable," and, given enough time, she would run out of things that could interest her at all and so serve as the object of a categorical desire. Williams may be right, but he has, so far as I can see, provided no substantial support for either claim.⁵⁸

One difficulty for Williams's view is that he seems to suppose a near conceptual or necessary connection between having a character and, given enough time, the exhaustion of categorical desire. But he does not explain, at least within his critique of immortality, what he thinks a human character is and how, precisely, having one would necessarily create a problem for extended existence.⁵⁹ He seems to assume a view of character that treats it as rather strictly limiting, in scope and duration, an individual's desires and interests.⁶⁰ Yet, even if those who have argued against the existence of global character traits have sometimes overstated their case, we can reasonably ask whether, on a more conceptually nuanced and empirically adequate understanding of character, having a human character is as limiting of our futures as Williams seems to think.⁶¹

Williams is surely right that in virtue of having something like a human character, or at least a certain physiological and psychological makeup, we will each encounter some built in limits to the sorts of undertakings and lives that could hold any interest for us. Still, whether an extended existence would be problematic in the ways he describes would seem to be a purely contingent matter. It would depend, for starters, on the terms of an extended existence and the circumstances of an individual's existence, which may or may not be sufficiently varied and engaging. It would also seem to depend on individual character. We all know people, for example, who seem to find just about everything interesting, whose inquisitiveness and capacity for enjoyment seem nearly boundless. We all know people who are easily contented with what may seem to us meager offerings. Of course, some people do have a limited capacity for enjoyment and especially rigid aims and interests. But nothing necessarily stops even those of a more "unfortunate"

character from continuing to enjoy their narrow interests. Perhaps the moral, then, is not that extended existence would be undesirable simply because of what it is to have a human character and live a human life, but that it would be undesirable for those whose circumstances will be seriously impoverished or for those who have, as a matter of their individual characters, both limited interests and a tendency to become easily and intolerably bored.⁶²

As for meaning, whatever Williams's view about what makes for a meaningful human life, the clash between meaning and extended existence remains to be explained. It would seem to be enough not only for the desirability of extended existence but also for meaningfulness that a life continue to have, only just as unqualifiedly and in roughly the same quantity, whatever desirable properties it now has; there need be no desirable property that life has more of or has more unqualifiedly. And for all Williams says about character and desire, whether categorical desire would cease, and so whether an extended existence would be not only tedious but meaningless, seems to be a contingent matter.

Williams's discussion of meaning faces a deeper difficulty. If he says little about what he thinks makes for meaningfulness in a life, he says nothing about what he thinks meaningfulness is. Williams is not alone, of course, in making claims about meaning in life without offering an analysis of *what it is for a life to be meaningful*. Unfortunately, we lack an adequate account of what normative assessment is made of a life when we appraise it as meaningful, rather than as morally valuable, aesthetically pleasing, or personally good.⁶³ Assessments of meaningfulness certainly appear to be distinctive. When we appraise a life that is good for an individual as meaningful, we are surely not expressing the tautology that the life that is good for her is good for her.

Whatever Williams thinks is the precise relationship between categorical desires and meaningfulness, categorical desires would seem to figure neither in a plausible substantive account of a meaningful life nor in a plausible analysis of what it is for a life to be meaningful. As a substantive matter, if we treat common judgments as our guide, categorical desires, as Williams seems to describe them, are neither necessary nor sufficient for meaningfulness. Categorical desires are unnecessary, because we can imagine lives that people would regard as paradigmatically meaningful but that are animated wholly by conditional desires; or, if animated partly by categorical desires, then by ones that bear no important relationship to why we assess the life as meaningful.⁶⁴ Imagine, for example, a Mother Theresa who wants to serve God by aiding the poor of Calcutta, given that she is alive, but who has no particular desire to live on that account, perhaps because she views her life as in God's hands and desires only that "his will be done." Categorical desires are also insufficient. So long as there are no restrictions on their object, a person could have categorical desires to pursue utterly trivial ends. Not just any categorical desire can be reason-giving; likewise, not just any categorical desire can play a part in rendering a life meaningful. Consider how our assessment of Mother Theresa's life would change had the categorical desire that propelled her forward been the desire to spend all her days merely reciting the Hail Mary. As a matter of

analysis, if lives can be meaningful without categorical desires or meaningless with them, then *being meaningful* is not itself a matter of having categorical desires.

In sum, Williams does not offer compelling reasons to think extended existence would be tedious or meaningless. The dismal outcome he predicts neither follows inevitably from the facts nor, so far as his arguments show, from any non-contingent considerations about human life and character.

3. EXPLAINING THE APPEAL OF EXTENDED EXISTENCE

Williams allows, as we have seen, that other things being equal, a later death is preferable, that "longer consciousness of more *praemia*" is better, that a rational person prefers (what death tends to preclude) that his desires be satisfied. These remarks aside, he does not attempt to explain why, if his verdict is so obviously correct, the idea of extended existence has long had broad and seemingly rational appeal. One might argue, of course, that people do not so much desire to continue living as fear dying. But not everyone fears death, and we have no reason to suppose that so many have mistaken aversion for desire. One might also argue, for different reasons, that the desire for extended existence is irrational or at least misguided, that Williams was right in his conclusion, if not in his reasoning. I briefly consider one such line of argument later. In the remainder of this essay, my interest will lie with explaining the rational appeal of extended existence.

As a starting point, consider that Williams's conclusion seems to depend most critically on two claims: the first concerns categorical desire as a source of reasons to live; the second concerns human character and the inevitable extinction of categorical desire. Williams makes no appeal to sources of reasons apart from desire or to features of our nature apart from our character.⁶⁵ Yet, this may be precisely what is needed if we are to account for the rational appeal of extended existence.

In what follows, I shall sketch an alternative framework, one that looks to another source of reasons and to a different aspect of our nature. My aim is not to defend this alternative so much as to shed light on what Williams's framework overlooks.⁶⁶ Of course, insofar as an alternative captures overlooked considerations, insofar as it might better explain the lure of extended existence, there is something to be said for it.

3.1 The Value of Simply Being

Let's set aside the rational suicide case and consider the more ordinary case of persons who are not actively contemplating ending their lives. What might give them (us) reason to live? Even if we allow that categorical desires, or the value of their objects, can provide reasons to live, our most fundamental reasons may have

a different source. We need to understand what that might be if we want to understand the appeal of extended life—indeed, if we want to understand the central act that drives Čapek's play, namely, that Emilia seeks to extend even her own empty life, a life, if Williams is right, in which categorical desire has exhausted itself.⁶⁷

In writing of a "bare desire to live" or a "reactive drive to self-preservation," Williams points to something we have in common with nonhuman animals. To explain their self-preserving behavior, we would presumably appeal to basic features of their motivational systems, and no doubt, a similar explanation could be invoked to explain our own drive to preserve ourselves. Yet, we experience something more than a mere reactive drive to self-preservation. For whatever we may have in common with the other animals, we humans are peculiarly *agential* animals.

The point I wish to make borrows from some of Karl Marx's observations in "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" of 1844. "It is obvious," Marx tells us, "that the *human* eye enjoys things in a way different from the crude, non-human eye; the human ear different from the crude *ear*, etc."⁶⁸ He elaborates:

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses—the practical senses (will, love, etc.)—in a word, *human* sense—the humanness of the sense—comes to be by virtue of *its object*, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.⁶⁹

As I would understand the phenomenon Marx describes, the history of the development of our human senses is the history of our development as beings with the capacity to transform nature and ourselves, and so to realize and experience apparent value.⁷⁰ Our nature and development is such that we create and experience not mere sounds but *music*, not mere forms but *beauty* of form, and so on, for our other physical and "mental" senses. As we exercise and develop our capacities for discrimination, we both refine what we create and alter what it takes to gratify us. We create a "humanized" nature and a rich human sensibility to match. Our history manifests our nature as agents, beings with the capacity for autonomy, who can deliberately act on the world and bring about what we can come to appreciate and apprehend as value.

For present purposes, it does not matter how the phenomenon just described is best explained. Perhaps the capacities that constitute us as agents—among them, our capacities for reason and higher-order reflection—equip us for tracking objective values and for creating and coming to appreciate what instantiates them. Or perhaps value, real or apparent, just is, in some sense, a product of the exercise of our agential capacities, which tends to bring about a rough match between our world and our critical sensibility as we act and shape them both. What does matter is the upshot, which is a world that we do not experience simply in terms of desire—bare, conditional, or categorical.

Suppose, then, that human senses and sensibility and human engagement with the world are distinctive in something like the way Marx suggests.⁷¹ Then perhaps our experience is also distinctive when it comes to those drives or bare desires we may share with the other animals—including the “reactive drive to self-preservation.” In the latter case, it certainly seems so. Although we tend to be moved automatically to preserve our lives, we can *rationaly entertain* the possibility of ending them—a fact Williams’s rational suicide case exploits. Moreover, we can *act* to end them or to allow them to be ended for us; we can choose extinction over life, not only directly, by suicide, but indirectly, by committing ourselves, with full cognizance, to a risky cause or endeavor. Even as we feel the grip of that drive, we can stand reflectively apart from it and reject it as normative—as giving any reason for choice or action. We do not experience the drive to self-preservation as utterly inexorable, then, either motivationally or rationally. But neither do we experience categorical desires merely as such. For just as we can stand back from our drives and bare desires, we can stand back from our categorical desires and judge them as not worth having, or their objects as not worth pursuing.

We need, then, to look for a more fundamental source of reasons. To locate it, we might start by considering, as Williams claims to do, “what it is to live a human life.” But what it is, what it is *like*, involves something more than our experience of desire. Williams comes close to stumbling upon it when he quotes a passage from Miguel de Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life*. He aptly describes this work as giving “extreme expression” to the desire to be immortal.⁷² Indeed. Unamuno writes, “I do not want to die—no, I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever and ever.” But the passage continues, “I want this ‘I’ to live—this poor ‘I’ that I am and that I feel myself to be here and now, and therefore the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul, tortures me.”⁷³

Unamuno writes not merely of wanting to live but also of wanting “this I” to live—the I that he feels himself to be here and now. If the first part of the passage emphasizes the desire to live, the second points to what gives it its insistence: the *felt desirability of just being, of persisting as the conscious being that you are*.⁷⁴ The felt desirability of just being should not be confused with another kind of felt desirability in living. The latter rests on the myriad mundane pleasures we experience. You awaken in the morning, aware of the morning light seeping into your room, the feel of the sheets against your skin, the warmth from the blankets. You hike through the woods awash with fall color, listening to the soft thud of your boots striking the ground and the snap of the twigs beneath your feet. You pause from your reading and take notice of your breathing, the expansion and contraction of your lungs as the air slides down your throat and slips back out again. As Joseph Raz expresses it, we experience the pleasure that comes with being “saturated with valued sensations”: “the skin and one’s muscles feel good, and one is full of the pleasure of living, even while just walking the street looking at familiar sights.”⁷⁵ Raz reminds us that we commonly experience not only pleasurable but also painful sensations, not only pleasing but also heartrending thoughts and imaginings; and so, he concludes, the value of a life is determined by the value of its contents, and

life itself is not unconditionally and intrinsically valuable.⁷⁶ But the felt desirability of just being is distinct from the pleasure of living, and so the fact that we have conscious moments of physical and emotional pain is inapposite. In any case, my point is not that *life itself* is unconditionally and intrinsically valuable, whatever that might mean.

The experience I have in mind need involve no conative state of the sort we ordinarily associate with pleasure; and yet, we certainly may find satisfying our awareness of our own conscious existence—of the “I” we each are, here and now. The experience of just being is deeply attractive, pleasing in that sense, and that it shows up in our resistance to the extinction of our consciousness, even as we feel pain and even as we may rationally consider ending our lives.⁷⁷ These considerations bear on our interest in extended existence, for the longing we may feel to linger beyond a normal human life span is, at least in significant part, a longing that we continue simply to *be*. We care, of course, about the quality of our being here, about what we do while here, but except under quite dire circumstances, and often despite them, being here—that is, existing as the conscious being each of us is—has an attraction all its own.

How, though, might the felt desirability of existing bear on the *reasons* a person has to live? It might, if it were responsive to some value, and so an indicator of something inherently reason-giving. Just how it might be responsive to some value is a difficult question, but no more difficult than the question of how any of our experiences might be responsive to, and indicators of, value. In any case, to make sense of the appeal of extended existence we need only see how our experience might be *as if of something valuable*, and so of something more than a mere drive or want.⁷⁸

Consider candidate experiences of something as having value: looking with wonder at a fine painting, joyfully listening to a symphony, loving our family and friends. These experiences exhibit a common structure: each, phenomenally, involves a seemingly fitting emotional engagement with some seemingly worthy object, activity, or being.⁷⁹ But why think that, in these cases, our experiences are as if of something with value, rather than merely of something we enjoy or desire? There are certain standard indicators that we treat something as a matter of value, chief among them, that we treat the thing itself or responses to it as appropriately subject to critical assessment. For example, we may judge that a particular sonata doesn't merit appreciation or that another is better and more deserving. If ever we have what is plausibly an experience of something as if it were valuable, our experiences of appreciative engagement with the arts and loving connection with others count as such. In the same way, we can have an experience of something as of value in appreciating our own existence.⁸⁰

How might the structure of paradigmatic experiences as if of value exhibit itself in the experience of one's existing?⁸¹ The object of seeming worth cannot be merely life or being alive, but *your* (or *my*) being alive, *your* (or *my*) existing as individual agent with a distinctive vantage point. How might this be thought an object of value? One possible answer might draw on broadly Kantian ideas.⁸² Suppose that

persons have what seems an unconditional value on account of special features they possess. These might include capacities to reason and assess, to explore and discover, to create and appreciate beauty of form and sound, to will and to love—in short, the agential capacities that enable us to realize and experience a world of seeming value. In virtue of our having such features—of our being valuers—we can also value our selves as beings with those very features.

A standard indicator of when we treat something as a value rather than as a mere object of desire operates with persons, much as it does with putative intrinsic values, though in ways particular to the unconditional, equal value persons seemingly have. We judge one person's treatment of another as just or unjust, respectful or degrading; we assess her treatment of herself as fair or unfair, self-respecting or self-destructive. Our reactive attitudes, from outrage at mistreatment of another to indignation at mistreatment of our selves, suggest that we regard persons as having a special status and standing.⁸³

In our experience, then, of "this I" that we each are, here and now, we make direct contact with a seemingly valuable being. And just as with other experiences as if of value, there are modes of fitting emotional engagement with seemingly valuable beings, including oneself—most notably, respecting, caring for, and loving. Self-respect and self-love, appreciating and finding satisfying your existing, are appropriate responses to the worth you seem to have, much as having due regard for others' existing is an appropriate response to their apparent value. We ordinarily do appreciate our own existing, whether that engagement is enjoyment or mature self-love.⁸⁴

Now, if to continue living as the conscious beings we each are is to remain in touch with something of seeming value, then we can explain not simply the appeal of remaining alive but why we might have reason to live, quite apart from our desires. We can also more deeply appreciate why Epicurus's famous counsel provides cold comfort. It does little good to tell us not to fear death on the grounds that "when death is present, then we do not exist," for that is precisely the problem—when death is come, we are not: "this I" that we each are and feel ourselves to be, here and now, ceases to exist, and so we can no longer be apprehended, whether by self or others, as the valuable beings we apparently are.⁸⁵ Our resistance to dying isn't due merely to a reactive drive to self-preservation, any more than is our attraction to life: it is at least partly a revulsion at the thought of our not being.⁸⁶

In the ordinary case, and even in the rational suicide case, there would seem to be a thumb on the normative scale in favor of continued life. Yet, even if existing as the conscious beings we are has its own attraction, even if we are averse to the idea of our not being, more will be needed to account for the rational appeal of extended existence. For as already noted, we obviously care, and have reason to care, not merely about our existing but about the quality of our existence. This accounts for what force there may be in Williams's insistence on the need for categorical desires and his concern for their extinction. For reasons offered earlier, however, categorical desires just as such cannot explain the rational appeal of extended existence.

There is, to be sure, a place for categorical desires. But whereas on Williams's view, our categorical desires for things besides life itself give us reason to live, on the view I am exploring, what gives us reason to live gives us reason to have the sorts of projects and relationships that tend to be, and are capable of being (if they are to be categorical reason-giving), the objects of our categorical desires.⁸⁷ According to the latter view, we can explain how the felt desirability of our existing is an experience as if of value by appealing to our own seeming value, a value to which we respond appropriately with various forms of self-regarding engagement. Harry Frankfurt has remarked that a person expresses self-love by trying to find things that he can love, just as parents show love for their children by helping them to discover things that they can love.⁸⁸ That seems right, at least insofar as loving is a way of valuing as opposed to merely desiring. Because we are the sorts of creatures capable of realizing and experiencing seeming value, we are capable not only of valuing ourselves but, as we have already seen, a great many other things as well. Part of how we show proper self-regard is by filling our lives with activities and pursuits that we can love and see as worthwhile, that express and answer to our agential capacities. Part of how we show proper self-regard is, in short, by giving ourselves a good.⁸⁹ Among the most critical of the engagements that make up our good will be those that I earlier suggested tend to be the objects of our categorical desires, those that have an internal shape or trajectory, that give our lives shape and put us in a position to assess them as fulfilling or stunted, as meaningful or meaningless. Happiness may indeed require, as Williams contends, that some of our desires be "fully categorical" in the sense that we want to continue to exist in part because of those very desires. But insofar as that is true, that is because we are creatures with capacities that enable us to value and find reasons to live, and in particular, to value ourselves on account of those very capacities.⁹⁰

We can now understand what Williams's framework overlooks. We can also appreciate why his example of the rational suicide, which he employs to argue for the necessity of categorical desires, may mislead us. Suicide does not typically involve rational calculation, and where it does, the calculation may favor suicide only instrumentally in the service of a cause or, more sadly, in the interest of escaping recalcitrant and debilitating depression. Unsurprisingly, various adverse conditions can dull our ability to appreciate what ordinarily seems of value—including our own existence. People who suffer from depression commonly report a diminished capacity to enjoy or care about the things that would ordinarily excite their interest.⁹¹ But their problem isn't merely the loss of categorical desire. More fundamentally, as common reports of feelings of worthlessness would indicate, they have lost the satisfying appreciation of their own being.

Suicide is, no doubt, a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. In some cases, external rather than internal conditions may rob life of its appeal. Sadly, a person's circumstances may sometimes be so adverse that she faces a life of overwhelming horror. Consideration of both the adverse internal and external conditions a person may confront in leading a life brings into stark relief the normative burden that accompanies the choice of parenthood. We bring into the world a

conscious being, someone who will occupy a distinctive point of view. Our own experience may support a reasonable prediction that our child's existence will be for her, on balance, a good thing. But we cannot know for certain that the person we create will not be someone for whom the genetic lottery or calamitous circumstances renders existence a nightmare.

3.2 Agential Character and Alternate Possibilities

Emilia's life has become, if not quite a nightmare, then at least a long, dull dream. Although what drives Čapek's narrative is Emilia's quest to extend her life again, she does, in the end, forego the formula for the elixir, and so we can suppose that she regards any felt desirability in just being as outweighed—or better, as overwhelmed—by the negative features of her condition. Whatever else it might teach us, Emilia's case does illustrate how the desirability of extended existence depends on what it would be like. But as Williams correctly insists, what *it* would be like depends, in part, on what *we* are (and would be) like.

What we are like, however, is not simply a matter of our character. Our psychological and physiological makeup sets limits on what undertakings and lives could appeal to us. But the capacities that render us autonomous agents—that equip us to think creatively and act effectively within the parameters of the natural world—also enable us to think creatively and act effectively within the parameters of our own makeup and circumstances. We can reflect, reason, discover, imagine, and evaluate, and we can guide ourselves in accordance with our values, choices, and plans. In exercising these capacities, at least under favorable conditions, each of us decides what sort of life to lead. We also decide what sort of person to be or become, for the different lives we might lead will draw on and develop different facets of our makeup and lead us to have, in significant ways, different desires and interests.⁹² We can also reevaluate and reimagine, altering our plans, our lives, and our selves. Most often, we do so seeking improvement and personal growth, but sometimes we change our lives and selves, not to make them better, but to make them different. Given our capacities, it is unsurprising that the rational appeal of extended existence survives awareness of the limits of our human character. Our agential character leads us, in effect, to reject the suggestion that we would, in an extended existence, run out of things to desire and do.

My point is not merely that human agents happen to be particularly adept at imagining other possibilities and finding new interests. Rather, the capacity to imagine other possibilities is necessary to our *being* agents in the first place. Debates in the literature on free will and moral responsibility have often centered on what has been called the "principle of alternate possibilities," or "PAP." According to that principle, a person is morally responsible for what she has done only if she could have done otherwise. Philosophers have argued about what is required for it to be true that a person could have done otherwise, as well as about whether PAP, or some variant of it, is true.⁹³ Whatever we might conclude, the latter principle rests on a prior principle, what we might call the "principle of imaginative possibilities." As a rough statement of

the principle, we might say this: an individual could not *be* an agent, a being with the capacity for self-governance, unless she had the capacity to imagine otherwise. It must be possible for her to deliberate and decide what she shall do, but she cannot deliberate and choose except as between at least apparent possibilities. Whereas PAP concerns the conditions for morally responsible action, the principle of imaginative possibilities concerns the conditions for being an agent and a practical reasoner in the first place.

As with many of the capacities that have been thought to be necessary to or constitutive of autonomous agency, the capacity to imagine possibilities admits of degrees. Presumably, the most minimal exercise of that capacity, say, imagining one alternative on one occasion, is insufficient for self-governance. I cannot here address the difficult question of how generally the capacity must operate, but it's plausible to think that autonomous agency requires meeting some threshold and that beyond that threshold, individuals can be more or less autonomous.⁹⁴ As it happens, despite wide variation, human agents tend to have a fairly robust capacity to imagine possibilities. Otherwise, we would not find ourselves contemplating the desirability of extended existence so variously conceived. Of course, what matters to explaining our being agents and practical reasoners is not mere imaginative capacity but the capacity to imagine other seemingly *desirable* possibilities, and more precisely for present purposes, the ability to imagine other desirable lives we might live and the selves we would be living them. In the full exercise of our agency, with not only our imagination but our motivational and critical faculties engaged, we have just that capacity.

Now I want to suggest that, even if there is no perpetual activity that could make boredom "unthinkable," our agency might—at least, unthinkable enough to make sense of the appeal of extended existence. As we live our lives and exercise our capacities, we will find ourselves in countless situations in which we imagine and entertain various options, more than one of which might appeal to us. We might be drawn, for example, to a career in law and in the arts, to a life of public service and a quiet life in the country. We will envision differing things we might do, differing lives we might live, and the differing selves we would become in living those lives. From our standpoint as agents, our futures seem open, albeit not unrestricted, and our features seem flexible, albeit not entirely malleable. To be sure, it does not follow from the fact that we can imagine other possibilities for ourselves that we would be able successfully to realize those possibilities; it does not follow from the fact that we can imagine other selves we might become that we would be able successfully to become those others selves. It does not follow, then, that we would not, in fact, run out of things to desire or do. But these considerations bear on the actual—and, as I have stressed, contingent—desirability of extended existence.

It is worth noticing that our attraction to the idea of extended existence is rooted in the same capacities that make us susceptible to regret.⁹⁵ We are subject to regret because we are able to reflect on our lives and our selves and to imagine other lives we might have had and other selves we might have become. But we live our lives under conditions of material and temporal scarcity—we have just one life to live, and a limited one at that; we must therefore choose among the possibilities if we are to succeed in leading satisfying lives at all. The options we forego,

however, may lose none of their appeal, and so we are prone to experience the loss of our other lives and selves, not only at the time of choosing but also later in reflecting on our lives and choices.

Because of our nature, our imagining persists, of course, and appealing options continue to present themselves: As a consequence, even if our hearts must be whole enough to live happily the lives we choose, even if we must resolve our inner conflicts and be unified enough to act and live, we can reasonably expect that we will often be less than wholehearted, that we will often experience some ambivalence, that we will, in sum, find ourselves *less* than fully unified agents. The capacities that constitute us as agents are thus a continuing source of disunity, even as they enable us to constitute ourselves as cohesive individuals. Some may find this worrisome.⁹⁶ But I am inclined to put in a plug for the (in my view) healthy ambivalence and disunity to which our agency inclines us—to put in a plug for being less than wholehearted and fully unified. There is, after all, an upside to imaginative straying, to keeping a bit of one's heart in reserve. For it helps to increase the odds that when the lives and selves we have chosen fail us or cease to fit us, we will be able to find someone else to be and something else to do. It thus helps to ensure that the emotional engagement with our lives necessary to support categorical desire does not give out.

The appeal of extended existence, then, should come as no surprise. For insofar as the options we forego present themselves as desirable, as alternate opportunities for realizing value in our lives, insofar as our imaginings persist, alerting us to options that we must or will forgo, extended existence seems to hold out the tantalizing prospect of recouping some of our losses. But also of preventing loss, for it also holds out the prospect of continuing to live the lives we have chosen and still love, whatever the temptations of our imaginings. Either way, our agency would make not only boredom but regret almost unthinkable.⁹⁷ Whether or not an extended existence would be desirable, then, its rational appeal, it seems to me, is undeniable.

3.3 On the Need for an Ending

And yet, one might well deny it. As noted earlier, one might argue that the widespread desire for extended existence is misguided, that such an existence would, as Williams concludes, be problematic, but for reasons other than those Williams offers. I here consider briefly just one such line of argument, and this one in particular because like my efforts to explain the rational appeal of extended existence, it rests, in part, on considerations about our agency.

According to this line of argument, the desire for extended existence reflects a misunderstanding about the nature of personal good and the requirements of a meaningful life. Suppose, as David Velleman has suggested, that because later events can alter the meaning or significance of earlier events and thereby alter the welfare value of a life, an individual's welfare depends not simply on good moments, or benefit at a time, but on the "narrative relations" that hold among events in her life over time. Personal good thus has a diachronic as well as a synchronic dimension, and along its diachronic dimension, the welfare value of a life is a matter of its shape and, more specifically,

its "narrative structure."⁹⁸ Whether a person successfully completes a project or fails, for example, affects the welfare value of her life by determining whether her earlier efforts were vindicated or wasted. Whether she overcomes adversity or is overcome by her own recklessness likewise affects the welfare value of her life by determining whether her life's narrative is ultimately a story of personal triumph or a cautionary tale. Because narrative relations affect the relative welfare value of lives, even lives equal in their momentary welfare value may be better or worse for the persons living them. Personal good arguably could have this diachronic dimension only because, as agents, we have capacities that enable us to step back from our momentary experience and to reflect on and assess extended periods of our lives or even our lives as a whole.⁹⁹ Our good is, as it were, the good of creatures who are natural storytellers and who, in living and choosing, each constructs his or her own life story.

The "narrativity thesis" about welfare might seem to require that a life, like a good story, come to an end.¹⁰⁰ If a life is to be good for the person living it, it must play out and conclude a successful narrative arc, thereby resolving in a satisfying way what to think and feel about that life, considered as a whole. I have much sympathy for the idea that the narrative shape of our lives matters and that our capacity for storytelling has an impact not only on our welfare but even, as some have suggested, on the meaningfulness of our lives.¹⁰¹ But I do not believe such considerations help Williams's case.

Even as we respect the insights of the narrativity thesis, we must be careful not to confuse the need for endings with the need for an end or the need for shape in a life with the need for the shape of a single, completed narrative.¹⁰² Many successful human lives, even with our limited temporal and material resources, successfully complete one "story line" only to change course and open up a new one; and some successful lives become successful only after abandoning a failed story line. A life that takes the form of a single narrative, whatever that might require, is not obviously superior from the standpoint of welfare value or meaning to a life of "second acts," short stories, and sequels.¹⁰³ As for completion, we certainly have some need for *endings* and, in particular, for endings that mark the successful completion of a project or endeavor. This is particularly true of those projects and endeavors that I have suggested tend to be the objects of our categorical desires, that give shape to our lives and lend them meaning. It doesn't follow, however, that we have need for an end. Even if we did, an extended existence would have *some* end. And, as Williams's rational suicide case reminds us, we can choose our own end.

4. CONCLUSION

Let's return, at last, to Emilia's predicament and to the question of what morals we might draw for the mortal lives we lead. Emilia's life, we learn, is not only one of utter boredom but also of intolerable isolation. She does not appear to categorically

desire anything, but more important, she does not feel; she lacks emotional responsiveness and, it appears, the capacity to find value in anything.

Čapek offers scant evidence that Emilia ever imaginatively engaged with her life or cared for anyone or anything.¹⁰⁴ When asked whether she had had any children besides Ferdy, Gregor's great grandfather, she reports, "Twenty or so. I can't keep track of everything." When asked why she hadn't told Ferdy about the will, she replies, "I never cared much about my offspring."¹⁰⁵ She appears beautiful from a distance, but hideous up close, and her sometimes shocking indifference leads Gregor to exclaim in horror, "You're evil, Emilia, you're wicked and terrible. An animal, without human feelings.... Nothing matters to you. You're cold, like a knife, like a corpse risen from the grave."¹⁰⁶

Her coldness and detachment elicit reactions that only seal her isolation. Repeatedly, the men in her thrall express their desire to kill her or to kill themselves over her, and in the fourth act, Prus's eighteen-year-old son, Janek, does kill himself. When Emilia learns of his suicide, she casually responds, "Ah, well, so many have killed themselves," and goes about fixing her hair and ordering breakfast.¹⁰⁷ Earlier, she responds with equal indifference when Gregor threatens to kill her. "So he wants to kill me. See this scar here on my neck? That was another man who wanted to kill me. Shall I take my clothes off and show you all my other little love mementoes?"¹⁰⁸ She has become for others, in Gregor words, something "wild" and "terrible," something "wonderful," "provoking," "maddening." The tendency of men thus to objectify her expresses a certain sexism, but it is also a natural reaction to her emotional detachment. For our recognizing another as a human agent, our responding to her as such, partly depends on her exhibiting not only the relevant cognitive capacities but also the emotional capacities that equip us for human and inter-agential engagement.

According to Emilia, her extended existence has induced her nihilism, for what one sees when life goes on too long is that "nothing changes," "nothing matters," nothing merits our belief, "nothing exists"—not love or art.¹⁰⁹ She expresses envy of those with short lives who are "still close to things," for whom "everything means something," "everything has value."¹¹⁰ And yet Emilia points to nothing that would rationally connect a life's going on for too long with the claimed epistemic insight. What would one see in going on for 337 years about the value of a Picasso or the value of one's child that one couldn't see in living a currently normal lifespan? Why would everything mean something for eighty years, say, but not for 300? Surely the problem is not that if a person were to live an extended existence, she would see that nothing matters, but that she may reach a point at which, as it happens, nothing matters or could matter *to her*.

That is the point Emilia has reached, and for all that I have argued herein, were we to live long enough, each of us would meet a similar fate.¹¹¹ And yet it is hard to separate Emilia's fate from the peculiarities of her situation. What would one expect, after all, for someone whose father would follow so outrageous an order, thereby cutting his own child loose from human life as we know it and leaving her to drift alone through time? What would *that* do to a person? In the end, I'm inclined to

think that the real worry Emilia's story presents is that our lives might be extended in a way that eliminates what strikes me as truly indispensable, and that is not categorical desire so much as hope and the capacity to love. Without hope, we will not see our lives as holding out something to look forward to. Without the capacity to love—to connect—nothing our lives might hold out will seem to us to matter.

Is it a good thing, then, that we are not immortal? As I have explained, unlike Williams, I think the question too ill-formed to admit of a determinate answer. As for a merely "extended existence," we can only guess at how our psychologies and our ideas about how to build and shape a life would change were our temporal resources doubled or quadrupled. Of more interest, I think, is the question of why the idea of extended existence might reasonably have a hold on us. The answer I have sketched appeals to our peculiarly agential character. As agents, I have suggested, we are able to experience a seeming value in our being and in other things besides that makes us self-propelling into the future; we have, moreover, capacities that incline us to be hopeful by inclining us to imagine worthwhile possibilities, perhaps most important among them, possibilities for engagement with others. These things are related, obviously, but more to the point, they are related in a way that makes explicable why it has seemed to many that "man needs more time to live." In seeing ourselves, our own existence, as valuable, we see it as we do any seemingly unconditioned or intrinsic value, as fit for valuing *timelessly*. And we respond appropriately to our own (seeming) value, as well as that of others, by seizing possibilities for connecting and for creating and securing value in our lives.¹¹²

NOTES

1. Čapek, 1999, p. 248, spoken by Vitek, assistant to the lawyer, Dr. Kolenaty.
2. She had many other aliases besides: "I was Ekaterina Myshkina and Elsa Müller too, and God knows who else. One can't live with you people for three hundred years with the same name" (Čapek, 1999, p. 239).
3. *Ibid.*, 1999, p. 242.
4. I say "seeming effects of this extension" because despite Emilia's claims about herself in the fourth act, it's unclear what is cause and what is effect of her sad condition.
5. Emilia is also unaware that the testator is deceased. Her surprise upon learning of Josef ("Peppy") Prus's death is initially puzzling, but as the story unfolds, we learn that she had revealed her secret and given him the formula, which apparently killed him.
6. Emilia thus does not arrive in order to reveal the existence of the will but ends up revealing it simply in the course of inquiring about the case. The story does not make this clear, but insofar as her disclosure is deliberate, it is in the form of a quid pro quo: Gregor and his lawyer will get the will, she will get the rest of "the Greek papers" (Čapek, 1999, p. 188).
7. Williams, 1973. Williams mentions that Čapek's play was made into an opera. I have not seen the opera and do not know how closely it follows the play, but Williams's recounting of the story omits some important details. For instance, he describes Emilia as refusing to take the elixir again, and, she does, in the end decline to take it, but only after going to some lengths to obtain the formula.

8. Williams, 1973, p. 82.
9. Williams seems to acknowledge this imperative when he tells us that he does not mean to deny "the existence, the value, or the basic necessity of a sheer reactive drive to self-preservation: humanity would certainly wither were the drive to keep alive not stronger than any perceived reasons for keeping alive" (1973, p. 86; see also p. 98).
10. For a survey of competing views about the relevance of immortality to life's meaning, see Metz, 2003.
11. Of course, not all people long for an extended life, let alone for an immortal life, yet it's undeniable that a great many do. Perhaps most commonly, the desire for extended existence finds expression in religious beliefs about an afterlife, but contemporary efforts by doctors and scientists to discover ways of extending average human life expectancy offer further testimony. See Temkin, 2008, pp. 194–195, for a brief discussion of research on longevity. Consider also, as Sarah Payne has reminded me, the "transhumanist" and cryogenics movements. When I talk in terms of the "desire" or "longing" for an extended existence, this should be understood to include a range of stances from genuine longing to mere standing readiness to continue living, other things equal, for as long as one can.
12. Wordsworth, 1807.
13. Temkin, 2008, pp. 195–196, assumes, when he undertakes to engage with the question of whether "living longer is living better," that each of us will be able to choose the biological stage of development at which we will live extendedly, perhaps indefinitely, and that living longer does not mean undergoing physiological or psychological decline. It should be clear why I do not think this is enough specificity to enable reasonable assessment of extended existence. In any case, even if we could carefully stipulate the terms of an endless existence, more than one stipulation would be available to us, and so more than one answer to the question of whether an endless life would be desirable.
14. Williams, 1973, p. 90, also briefly poses this question, and considers as well other contingencies, such as deterioration with old age, that may in fact make death desirable.
15. As I shall explain, though, this seems to be just what Williams, in effect, denies.
16. I'm inclined to add that no one would want to live endlessly in a world of deprivation or devastation, but I acknowledge that this introduces serious complications. The will to live is remarkably resilient even under quite horrifying circumstances, though perhaps it would disappear if one knew those circumstances would never improve.
17. Thanks to Judith Ferster, who reminded me of the Tithonus myth, and to Gil Chesbro, who directed me to Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem, "Tithonus," which takes a few liberties with the original story. Tennyson captures wonderfully the imagined point of view of Tithonus:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn...

Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174656>, June 28, 2012.

18. Temkin, 2008, pp. 203–204, observes that, were we to live forever, changes in our psychologies might enable us to envision new, and presumably appealing, life plans. But he confesses to sharing Williams's doubts about whether he would have much reason to be interested in an immortal life in which he would develop a psychology and pursuits so unlike those that make him value and take an interest in prolonging his actual life. Of course, Temkin's musings point to further ambiguity in the question of whether it would be desirable to be immortal. The question might concern whether it would be desirable for we actual humans—just as we now are—to live forever, or whether it would be desirable for some humans at some time. It may well be a good thing that we are not immortal, but that hardly entails that immortality would not be desirable for any humans. Presumably, any realistic extensions of human life expectancy would occur over time, and for persons other than us. I have already expressed skepticism about our ability to clearly imagine immortality or to predict how immortal persons would think about what it is to live a human life. Given Temkin's observations, noted above, I assume he would agree.
19. Even the idea of living forever in one's "prime" is insufficiently determinate. Some additional practical complications are explored in Lenman, 2004. One could, in any case, rationally doubt the desirability of foregoing future experiences of learning and mastering a craft in favor of pursuing an already mastered craft. Michael Jordan's much-ridiculed experiment with a second career in baseball was not about nothing. Of course, he couldn't have carried on at his peak in basketball for more than a few additional years. Still, people often deliberately change track, giving up for a new undertaking an activity in which they could have excelled for the remainder of their active lives.
20. For a picture of endless existence that seems to combine the worst imaginable conditions, see Swift, 1726/2010, part 3, ch. 10. Among the many regrettable features of the condition of the Struldbruggs, they were "incapable of any Friendship, and dead to all natural Affection, which never descended below their Grand-children," and owing not only to this but to various other features of their condition, they were "cut off from all possibility of Pleasure." Thanks to Kent Mullikan for the reference.
21. Čapek, 1999, p. 256
22. Perhaps the most striking example of her callousness occurs when news arrives that Prus's son, Janek, who believes himself to be in love with Emilia, has committed suicide. Emilia, seeking to secure the Greek papers, agrees to have sex with Prus. Janek sees his father enter her hotel, waits outside for two hours, then shoots himself in despair. Upon receiving the news, Emilia evinces no feeling, no sympathy for Prus (Čapek, 1999, p. 223). I discuss these distortions in Emilia's affect and her relations with others briefly toward the end of this essay.
23. Williams, 1973, p. 90
24. *Ibid.*, 1973, p. 83, emphasis added: "EM's state suggests at least this, that death is not necessarily an evil, and not just in the sense in which almost everybody would agree to that, where death provides an end to great suffering, but in the more intimate sense that it can be a good thing not to live too long. It suggests more than that, for it suggests that it was not a peculiarity of EM's that an endless life was meaningless."
25. See the quotation in note 24. This is important, because it means that Williams's arguments, if successful, would bear more generally on things like longevity research and the ambitions of some transhumanists.
26. Allen Buchanan has observed, in conversation, that average life expectancy has increased and that people seem to have had no difficulty adjusting to the extension.

My framing of the issue in terms of “extended existence” draws on this thought. I leave claims about actual increases in life expectancy aside, however. As I understand it, such claims may be misleading, because the increase is due largely to such factors as a decrease in the infant mortality rate.

27. If we assume, as I have in the text, an average life expectancy of 80, then given her current age, Emilia will have lived an extra 257 years.
28. Williams, 1973, p. 82, emphasis added
29. *Ibid.*, p. 85. For a different take on why death is bad, see Fischer, 2005, p. 390.
30. *Ibid.* p. 85.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Fischer, 2009 uses the label “conditional desire.” Thanks to David Velleman for helpful suggestions regarding how to clarify and sharpen Williams’s distinction.
33. The latter, I take it, is supposed to be a conceptual point. On the motivational role of categorical desires, see Williams, 1973, p. 100.
34. See, e.g., Williams, 1973, pp. 87–88. A person can, of course, have categorical reason to do something without having overriding reason to do it.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
40. Thanks to David Velleman for suggesting that I develop this point.
41. See Williams, 1973, p. 87, describing reasons for avoiding death as “grounded” in categorical desires. For criticism of desire-based accounts of reasons, see, e.g., Darwall, 1983 and Scanlon, 1998. I talk in terms of the desire providing a reason, but, presumably, it is not the desire itself but (in part) the fact that one has that desire that would provide a reason.
42. Just apply, in this context, common examples—the person with a desire to count blades of grass or to exact revenge for trivial slights. Contra Williams, some interesting generalizations likely can be made about categorical desires. Fischer, 2009, p. 89, suggests that desires for “repeatable pleasures” might have the propelling force of categorical desires, though that doesn’t quite address whether they are reason-giving.
43. Williams, 1973, p. 88. Presumably, when Williams says that there is no desirable property “life” would have, he means to be talking about an individual person’s life. That is to say, “life” should be read as a count noun rather than a mass noun. Thanks to David Velleman for suggesting the need for clarification of this ambiguity in the passage from Williams.
44. Fischer, 2009, pp. 85–90, distinguishes between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures, where the former include things like the pleasure of climbing Mt. Whitney; and the latter, the pleasures of sex, fine food, and beautiful music. Insofar as pleasures are repeatable, and insofar as the value of a life is additive, a longer life might well be a life with a higher total of pleasure; and in this respect, a better life. For competing views as to whether the value of a life is additive, see Velleman, 1991; and Feldman, 2006, ch. 6.
45. See Fischer, 2009 for extended criticism of Williams’s apparent assumption that an immortal existence must answer to a different set of standards than mortal existence.
46. Williams, 1973, p. 90, emphasis added.
47. For discussion of the effects of boredom in an ordinary life, see Frankfurt, 1999a, pp. 88–89. By “vindicating” our longing for extended existence, I do not mean showing that such longing is correct but, rather, that it is not irrational or without reason.

48. Williams, 1973, p. 91.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
51. David Velleman has suggested that perhaps Williams means to say the following: if happiness and meaningfulness in an extended future depend upon a person's future categorical desires, then her rational interest now in having that extended future requires that she have a categorical desire now that those desires be fulfilled. But those future desires would be unrelated to the categorical desires she has now, and so she wouldn't be able to recognize them as hers, and it would make no sense for her to have a categorical desire now that they be fulfilled. The reply, Velleman observed, is that even if there is no moment at which a person has reason to want an infinite future, for each moment, she will have had reason to want the finite period up to and including it. I take it that the suggested reply essentially expresses in different terms the point I am making in the text, though I may read Williams a bit differently. There is, however, more we can say in response to Velleman's suggested interpretation. For in fact, we can't assume that a person's future categorical desires would be unrelated to the categorical desires she has now; we simply don't know. Consider how things work in our actual lives. I don't know what my desires might be twenty years from now, anymore than I knew two years ago what my desires would be today. The shifts in our desires are typically, though not always, incremental, and even when our new desires surprise us, only rarely do we regard them as utterly alien. Unless a person has reason to believe she is likely to come to have desires so alien to what she can make sense of valuing, it seems entirely rational to assume that her future desires will be hers and adequate to the aims she has in wanting to survive. See also note 52.
52. Of course, one might then suspect that even if a person's aims, at any particular time, will be adequately related to those she had in wanting so survive at an immediately prior time, cumulative changes in character will cause a failure of the first condition. But as Williams sees it, Emilia meets the first condition, so this cannot be the problem he means to raise. Even if it were, as both Fischer, 2009, pp. 89–90, and Temkin, 2008, pp. 200–201, observe, an appropriate relationship between a person and her future desires can obtain even if her character and aims change over time. Fischer emphasizes that how a person would view her changed self and her new aims depends upon how and why these changes came about; in this respect, immortal existence need be no different from mortal existence. Temkin argues that on Williams's own desire-based view of reasons, what matters isn't that a person's character and commitments remain constant over time but that she have, within her current motivational set, "an unconditional desire that [she] have, a future flourishing self... even if it is radically different than [her] current self." In any case, he argues, Williams ignores the fact that a future self that may now seem vastly different from a person's present self usually gets that way through a process of gradual change, with significant continuity between any one stage and the next. "As long as there is significant continuity of character from period to period, that is enough for us to be self-interestedly concerned about the preservation and wellbeing of our evolving self. Thus... there could well be reason to seek immortality, even if there would not be constancy of one's deepest projects, commitment and character over time" (p. 201). On Temkin's own view, as he explains, there are also value-based reasons, and a person may have such reasons to seek immortality, if that would be better for her, even if her character, projects, and commitments were to change over time (p. 201).

53. Williams, 1973, p. 95. See Fisher (2009: 82–84) for criticism of what he takes to be Williams's suggestion that there must be some *single* activity that is endlessly fascinating and that any activity must be *endlessly* fascinating.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
56. Williams might seem to have in mind something like what Frankfurt, 1999a, has described in writing about the necessity or usefulness of "final ends." His emphasis on categorical desires, however, falls short of Frankfurt's suggestion that for our lives to be meaningful, we must engage in activity that seems to us to serve some point, that is "devoted to something [we care] about," for caring about is a more complex attitude than desiring, and one can categorically desire things that serve no particular point at all (Williams, 1973, p. 85). For commentary and reply, see Wolf, 2002; and Frankfurt, 2002.
57. Williams, 1973, p. 89.
58. For a different reply to the worry about boredom than the one I shall offer, see Fischer, 2009, pp. 84–88. Fischer's reply draws on his distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures. Given an adequate mix and distribution of repeatable pleasures, he contends, an endless life need not be a one of abject boredom. Temkin, 2008, pp. 202–204, expresses some sympathy for Williams's worry about boredom but also stresses as a key difference between their views that he thinks even a very boring life might well be worth living.
59. Of course, he does offer an account of character elsewhere, most notably in Williams, 1981b. Elijah Millgram has suggested that Williams's essay must be read, not only in conjunction with his essay, "Internal and External Reasons," but also in connection with much of the rest of his corpus. I'm less certain than Millgram about the propriety of this interpretive strategy because of doubts as to when we may fairly read into earlier work views that may not have been developed until later. But even if we suppose that Williams's later views about character ought to be read into his exploration of *The Makropulos Case*, I doubt it helps his case. On the contrary, it seems to create additional difficulties for him. Williams treats a person's character as constituted by her desires and projects. He is free, of course, to stipulate a meaning for the term, but his isn't the ordinary notion of character. It would seem to have the result, for example, that a person's character changes continuously, in smaller and larger ways, over the course of a lifetime, whereas the more common, and more intuitive view, would be that a person's character might remain relatively stable even as her desires and projects change. In any case, it seems implausible that unless a person's future self is executing her current projects, she will be unable to see that future self's aims as adequately related to her own. If that were so, we might expect to be as alienated from our adult selves or elderly selves as from our extended selves. Temkin, 2008, pp. 200–201, considers Williams's view of character and likewise concludes that so long as there is continuity from one period of life to the next, it would be enough to provide reason to continue living. The more common view of character that I suppose Williams to hold in his essay on the Makropulos case is, I believe, both more plausible than his view of character elsewhere and more consistent with the arguments in his essay.
60. For remarks suggesting such a view, see Williams, 1973, pp. 90–91.
61. For a recent and especially thoughtful treatment of issues about the stability of character traits and virtue, see Railton (2011).
62. Nagel, 1986, p. 224, writes that "given the simple choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes I would always choose to live for another week; and

- by a version of mathematical induction I conclude that I would be glad to live forever. Perhaps I shall eventually tire of life, but at the moment, I can't imagine it, nor can I understand those many distinguished and otherwise reasonable persons who sincerely assert that they don't regard their own mortality as a misfortune." He cites Williams as an example of the latter sort of person, asking, "Can it be that he is more easily bored than I?" (p. 224, n. 3).
63. For a couple of rare efforts to unpack the concept of a meaningful life (or of meaning in life), see Metz, 2001; and Wolf, 2010.
 64. But see Wolf, 1997. Perhaps meaning in life arises, as Wolf has argued, when "subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness"—when an individual is happy and engaged in objectively worthwhile pursuits. But if that is true, it is not because a life's being meaningful just is its being happy and engaged with worthwhile pursuits; such a view would fail to distinguish a life's being meaningful from its being good for the person living it. For further development of her view about meaning in life, see Wolf, 2010.
 65. The framing perhaps already hints at his own later view of "internal reasons." See Williams, 1981a. A great deal of ink has been spilt trying to interpret Williams's view. For extensive discussion, and a novel take on Williams, see e.g., Finlay, p. 2009. Williams, 1973, p. 88 does acknowledge that there may be other reasons for regarding death as a misfortune than the sort he explores (those that are grounded in categorical desires).
 66. Defending this framework would be quite an undertaking, much as would be defending the framework Williams himself deploys.
 67. My interest lies not with understanding the psychological or biological basis of our desire to remain alive, but with understanding how the widespread longing to continue—and Emilia's—might be rational, or more precisely, might be supported by reasons. Consequently, I am also not concerned with Emilia's own explanations of her actions or her expressions of a fear of death.
 68. See Marx, 1978, p. 88.
 69. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.
 70. Throughout, I talk chiefly in terms of apparent value rather than value, because the alternative framework I sketch can be understood and elaborated in either realist or irrealist terms. I take the expressions "apparent value," "seeming value," and so on, to be neutral on the question of whether what we see as valuable really is as we see it.
 71. We would need to take care, of course, to avoid any too-crude distinction between human and nonhuman animal.
 72. Williams, 1973, p. 98.
 73. Unamuno, 1954, p. 45.
 74. My claim is not, I should stress, that people would report their experiences in just this way, that they would claim to have an experience as if of something with value, though people do talk all too commonly about the value of life, about how "good it is to be alive," about valuing their own lives and those of the people near and dear to them.
 75. See Raz, 2001, p. 116.
 76. Compare Nagel, 1979, p. 2: "We need not give an account of these goods [that life contains] here, except to observe that some of them, like perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life. They are widely regarded as formidable benefits in themselves, despite the fact that they are conditions of misery as well as happiness, and that a sufficient quantity of more particular evils can perhaps outweigh them. That is what is meant, I think, by the allegation that it is

good simply to be alive, even if one is undergoing terrible experiences. The situation is roughly this: There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely neutral: it is emphatically positive. Therefore, life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents." Although I agree with much of what Nagel says, as will become clear, it does not yet capture what I have in mind.

77. What about sleep? Sleep is not, of course, the extinction of our consciousness, both because the mind is active, often consciously, while we sleep, and because our consciousness does not literally go out of existence when we sleep.
78. See Marx, 1978, p. 88.
79. Variations on this rough idea can be found, e.g., in Moore, 1993/1903; and Darwall, 2002. For an extremely helpful explication of Moore's view, see Hurka, 1998.
80. Again, I describe the experience "as if" of something valuable, because there may be no real values. This is, obviously, consistent with our having experiences that seem to us as of something that genuinely matters, and these experiences are quite different from our experiences of merely wanting or enjoying something.
81. For a different model of how our experience of someone might be an experience as if of value, see Darwall, 2002, p. 70. According to Darwall, in feeling sympathetic concern—toward other or ourselves—we experience a person's plight as mattering because we experience her as mattering.
82. See Kant, 1959, but I stress Kantian, to make room for any number of ways of attempting to make out the special normative status of persons. For criticism of extant views about the value of rational nature, see Regan, 2002. For a reply to Regan, see Sussman, 2003. I draw on Kantian ideas herein for illustrative purposes.
83. For a recent well-developed view about the nature of this special standing, see Darwall, 2006.
84. For illuminating discussion of the significance of self-love, see Frankfurt, 2000.
85. Epicurus, 1994, p. 29.
86. For related thoughts, see Nagel, 1986, pp. 223–232. Our trepidation might arise from a confused "fear of the unknown," but it needn't; the nonbelievers among us may dread death while denying there is anything to know, and so any unknown to fear.
87. See *supra* text accompanying note 29.
88. Frankfurt, 2000, p. 10. For related discussion, see Rosati, 2006b.
89. See Rosati, 2006a and 2007. Of course, under particularly dire conditions, we may express a regard for our own seeming value by choosing to forego continued life. For some discussion in the context of questions about the justification of physician-assisted suicide, see Velleman, 1999.
90. These remarks about agency should not be confused with the thought that we are autonomous agents insofar as we pursue the good. For all I have said, agents can reflect and act against what they judge to be of value. For differing views about whether agents necessarily act "under the guise of the good," see Stampe, 1987; Stocker, 1979; and Velleman, 1992.
91. See, e.g., Casey, 2001.
92. When I talk about deciding what sort of person to be or become, about altering or changing our selves, and as I do later, about our "other selves," I obviously do not mean to suggest that we could each literally become a different person.

93. For a classic challenge to the principle of alternate possibilities, see Frankfurt, 1969.
94. Thanks to David Sobel for raising the question of how much exercise of imaginative capacity is enough.
95. The claims about regret in this paragraph draw on Rosati, 2007.
96. Frankfurt, 1999a, for example, suggests that a kind of dissolution of the active self may result from boredom, which according to Frankfurt, consists in the absence of any compelling cares or interests. And he describes ambivalence as another threat to the active self, because when a person is ambivalent, some aspect of her self will be sacrificed when she chooses. See Frankfurt, 1999b, p. 139, n. 9. But it isn't clear how strictly Frankfurt means for us to take claims like these. The wholeheartedness he thinks essential to the self involves her being, not wholly undivided, but unequivocal as regards her most central concerns. For critical discussion of Frankfurt, see Velleman, 2002.
97. I emphasize almost, for at least two reasons. First, there would be no real "do-overs" in an extended existence, and so we would certainly still be subject to regret. And whether we would experience problematic boredom would remain a contingent matter. So we need not be concerned that extended existence would make choice seem less significant. Thanks to Valerie Tiberius for raising this concern and also for observing that our choices would still involve some loss and so occasion for regret.
98. See Velleman, 1991. (For discussion of the kind of understanding narrative peculiarly provides, see Velleman, 2003.) For related ideas about how narrative structure bears on a life's welfare value, see, e.g., McMahan, 2002, pp. 175–180; and Brännmark, 2003.
99. See Velleman, 1991, pp. 69–71, explaining why the welfare of nonhuman animals does not have the diachronic dimension that he has described.
100. Although David Velleman has, in conversation, expressed some sympathy for Williams's view about extended existence based on considerations about the narrative structure of a life, I do not mean to attribute the argument I consider to Velleman or to any other proponent of the idea that the welfare value of a life partly depends on its narrative structure.
101. On the latter point, see, e.g., McMahan, 2002, p. 178, and, more generally, pp. 175–180; and Brännmark, 2003, p. 337.
102. Fischer, 2005, likewise rejects the need for a life to have an end or to take the shape of a single narrative, and like me, he rejects the idea that considerations about narrative structure count against the desirability of an extended (he says "immortal") existence. Fischer's take, however, rests on ideas that I am inclined to reject. Fischer observes that on the view of narrative explanation developed by Velleman, 2003, narratives must have endings, so it would follow that if our lives are narratives, they must have endings, and so an immortal human life would lack narrative value or meaning. Fischer evidently accepts that if narratives must have an ending, then "this is correct." But he thinks an immortal life could have "something very much like narrative meaning." Each part of an immortal life might be considered as a narrative even if that life as a whole could not be. Such a life would be like a "collection of shorts stories" or a "series of novels" rather than a novel. Fischer tries to salvage narrative value and meaning by suggesting that we can consider parts of a life as narratives. In my view, what we ought to do instead is remind ourselves that our lives are not narratives or stories, even if they can be recounted as stories, and we should reject Fischer's idea that there is a distinct narrative value or meaning (which is not quite the view that

Velleman, who Fischer in large part follows, himself defends). I attempt to make sense of the narrativity thesis and of how storytelling might affect welfare value in Rosati, manuscript.

103. There are, to be sure, complicated questions about how to individuate narratives and how to distinguish narrative continuity from narrative change. But any adequate answer to these questions should not affect what I have said about lives. A life of successive narratives might, in short, have whatever in the way of value conferring structure a good life requires.
104. She seems to show some genuine emotion on learning that Peppy Prus, the testator, is dead and remarks that she loved him best of all. Life, she says, "was sweet" with Maxie, too (Čapek, 1999, p. 240).
105. *Ibid.*, p. 240, and see p. 241.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
108. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
109. *Ibid.*, pp. 255–256.
110. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
111. Temkin, 2008, while criticizing Williams's argument, offer various reasons—some pertaining to the quality of an individual's life, some to the negative social, political, practical, and moral effects—for thinking that Williams may be right after all about the merits of an immortal existence. See especially pp. 202–207. For a recent literary depiction of the practical complications of extended existences, see Saramago, 2008.
112. This chapter was first drafted in the fall of 2006, during a year in which I had the good fortune to be supported by the John E. Sawyer Fellowship at the National Humanities Center. Warm thanks to Geoffrey Harpham, Kent Mullikan, and the Center for creating an ideal work environment. I presented the first version on two occasions to two very different audiences. In the spring of 2009, I benefited from a stimulating discussion with members of the philosophy department at the University of Vermont. But earlier, just after drafting the paper, I presented it at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, through Duke University Continuing Studies. The rather skeptical audience, consisting of retired persons mostly in their seventies and beyond, asked just the sorts of insightful questions one would expect, quickly impressing on me the downside of aging. But when I asked, "what if you could have had an extra ten years in the middle?" nearly everyone responded, without skipping a beat, "that would be great." This is, in microcosm, the phenomenon that interests me herein. Besides the opportunity to learn from both audiences, I have benefited from conversations with Allen Buchanan, Cheshire Calhoun, Gil Chesbro, Chris Maloney, and Susan Wolf. David Velleman provided extremely helpful comments on the initial draft, and David Sobel, Valerie Tiberius, and the editors of this volume, on a later draft. Elijah Millgram offered helpful comments on the final draft, which I was unable to address in time with the care they deserved. Some twenty-odd years ago, I first read and was captivated by Bernard Williams's essay, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality." I sent my mother, Elaine Rosati, a copy of the essay, and over the years we have revisited it any number of times in our wide-ranging conversations. In talking with her, I have benefited not only from the wisdom she has acquired over years of working with geriatric clients, first as a social worker, and later as lawyer, but also from her willingness to engage in shared reflection, from our different vantage points, on what it is like to live a human life. This essay is for her.

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