

A Brief Dialogue on the Desirability of Immortality

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Adrian and Patrice are two philosophy students, discussing whether it is desirable to be immortal.

Adrian. In the Apology, Socrates said that since death involves one of two alternatives, either nonexistence or transition to a better place, then it is not to be feared. Now I think he was absolutely wrong about this for the simple reason that non-existence is a frightful alternative. For those of us who love life, who want to continue living—and admittedly, that's most people in the world—the prospect of ceasing to exist is a cause of legitimate fear.

Patrice I disagree. In fact, I think Socrates was right. How can death be rationally feared? When we die we cease to exist. If we don't exist then we don't feel any pain, neither physical nor psychological. We won't feel any toothaches, and we won't experience any remorse, loneliness, boredom, guilt, rejection, humiliation, etc. So there's really nothing to fear about death. The only thing to fear are bad states of physical or psychological pain, and death involves neither of these.

Adrian. But *if* we continue existing after our deaths then we might very well experience some new pains.

Patrice. It's purely fanciful to think that we really do continue to exist in another place after we die. If anything is apparent, it's that life is finite, that every living organism has a beginning and an end. When we die, the physiological and psychological processes that constitute life simply cease. The body is like an engine; when its running, it's alive; and it ceases to be alive when it stops running. The body itself then decays and, over time, disintegrates. There is no surviving death; the very idea is an affront to human experience. Instead death will be like a deep sleep stretching over eternity – as Socrates suggested – and we, the sleepers, won't notice the passing of time.

Adrian. OK, let's not argue about whether we are immortal, for it can't be proven one way or another. You are assuming that a human being is just a physical system, but you know very well that there are many thinkers who recognize that there is more to a human being than a body. We have souls, and souls are not subject to the laws of physical decay and disintegration. But never mind this metaphysical distinction. Let's stick to the issue whether a continued existence after death would be *desirable*, and whether the prospect of death should disturb us. Now, I certainly agree that if we don't exist then we won't feel pain, and if you insist that the only thing we can fear is pain then we shouldn't fear death. However, maybe fear isn't the right concept here. When we are dead we won't feel anything at all, including all the pleasures and enjoyments we experience in this life,

especially the enjoyment we get by being around our friends and loved ones. Undeniably, death is a state of *deprivation*, viz., being deprived from everything that is good about life, our friends, our families, our physical pleasures, our aesthetic enjoyments. The thought of not existing and deprived of these things still disturbs or upsets us, makes us ill at ease, at least those of us who reflect seriously about such things. Such emotional reactions to the prospect of death are fully rational.

Patrice. I really wonder whether these emotions are rational. How can death be a deprivation? To be deprived of something, say, a certain medicine that you need, is a state of not having that thing and yet needing or desiring it. But to be in states of need or desire presupposes that you exist. Consider. Being deprived of food is to be in a state of hunger, and you surely can't be in a state of hunger unless you exist. Or, again, to be deprived of certain enjoyments, say, the visual experience of seeing an "A" on your philosophy final exam, is possible only if you are around and are not experiencing those enjoyments. Again, being in prison is to be deprived of freedom, and being lonely is to be deprived of companionship. All these states or conditions are possible only when the deprived person exists. A person who is dead no longer exists. Consequently, it is not accurate to speak of that person as "deprived" of anything.

Adrian. Well, that doesn't seem right. Surely a dead person is not alive, and if that he is so then he or she is certainly lacks something, that is, he or she is deprived of life, experience, enjoyment, and existence. Even if we agree with you and think death is the end of everything, isn't it still true to say that the dead people are deprived of life. Haven't all the people who have passed on been deprived of life?

Patrice. What you just said sounds odd to my ears. I don't think that it's true to say of a person that he or she "lacks" anything at all if they're not around. *Lacking* is a state of existing and not having something, and it *is* disturbing to us if the thing we lack is a good that we desire. But even if we allow that a dead person lacks life, and life is a good, then I wonder if mere deprivation of this sort is so disturbing. Usually, what makes deprivation so painful is that we are aware that we do not have certain goods, e.g., freedom, or companions. That realization of a lack is painful, without doubt, and the prospect of it should give us some concern. But we could not have this realization unless we existed. When we die we no longer exist, and if we no longer exist then we are certainly not aware of our being deprived; we will not "miss" our friends and family members, we will not "lament" not being able to enjoy things as we did before.

Adrian. But death is still a loss of everything that's good. How can we – those of us who love life – not be disturbed by the prospect of that loss?

Patrice. To live is a fine thing, and to love life is understandable, for life offers us the opportunity to have pleasurable and meaningful experiences, and such experiences are the very reason for existing at all. And yes, death does mean the end of those experiences. But consider; everyone of us gets bored after a while with virtually any sort of experience and any mode of activity. This is why we welcome change, growth, and adventure, in our own condition and in the conditions of our environment. This is why young people are

generally more excited about life than old people, for young people have novel experiences awaiting them, whereas old people have been through the usual cycles of life – they’ve “been there,” they’ve “done that” – and that’s why they are more ready to depart. Life is a continual quest after good experiences, but repetition is the bane of the good and the greatest enemy of novelty and enjoyment. This is why we are all fascinated by destruction – like large fires, and wars – for destruction means the end of something that imposes itself, and, therefore, that imposes limitations on other things. None of us would want to do the same thing, or live in the same way, for 200 or 2000 years, much less forever. We’d grow tired of it. I once asked an old uncle of mine what he thought people do in heaven. He said that they sing. That’s not a bad answer. I like singing, and I guess I could sing for quite a few years. But for 2000 years? For a few million years? For eternity? I doubt it. So my reasoning is this: A boring life is not worth living,. Repetition implies boredom. Living forever would involve endless repetition. Hence, living forever is not desirable.

Adrian. It’s true that some people get bored with what they’re doing and wouldn’t want to do it forever, and it’s also true that boredom or *ennui* sets in after repeating the same sorts of things again and again, and going through the same sorts of experiences. But why should we have to repeat ourselves and get bored? We find that here in this life there are always plenty of new things to do, different places to go to, and novel enjoyments to experience. We can always take delight in doing new things, tasting from new pots, and increasing our knowledge of the universe in which we live. Life contains untold possibilities of enjoyment, and there is no need to ever grow tired of it. So why shouldn’t I want to continue to live and to do these very things?

Patrice. You are absolutely correct that there are many things to do, places to see, pleasures to savor. In fact, our lives are too short to do all the things that are possible for us to do. Yet, I wonder whether after a while, we even grow tired of novel experience. For example, my grandparents have been fortunate enough to travel a good deal in their lives, and they have seen and lived in a great many places, New York, Istanbul, Paris, Beijing. Each place they’ve gone to has involved new and different sensations and enjoyments. But after a while the same patterns involved in travel began to repeat themselves, and the differences between their trips eventually became negligible. So, now they are content to stay at home and tend their garden. They have tired of travel itself. By analogy, life itself is a kind of journey, a traveling through the universe. Yes, there are plenty of new things to see and do. But eventually the same patterns of action and experience begin to repeat themselves. Okay, here’s yet another city to visit, another canyon to gaze at, another safari to take, another concert to attend. But eventually we get to know what’s involved and we grow tired of visiting cities, taking safaris, etc., and so it is that my grandparents have tired of travel. Is it not conceivable that we should tire of the very journey of life itself, that we should become weary of life’s adventure?

Adrian. Why so? Why shouldn’t boredom be an incentive to embark upon even greater adventures, engage in really different sorts of activities, investigate new areas you’ve never considered before? Surely there are still countless possible patterns of enjoyment,

countless things to learn about. Perhaps if we are immortal, we'd have untold possibilities to experience.

Patrice. I don't think that there are many possibilities as you imagine. What we experience, what we enjoy, is a function of two things: the external realities presented to us, and our own abilities to assimilate those realities. We can't do new things, we can't learn new things, unless we are able to. And if the new things you are thinking of require bodily activities, then we have to assume that our bodies are going to last as long as you want our lives to last – eternally, if immortality is what you are striving for. That seems a bit far-fetched, don't you think? In time, all physical objects decay, that's their nature.

Adrian. What's immortal is our spiritual part, our souls.

Patrice. Suppose this is so – thought I have a hard time imagining what a soul can “do” or “experience” or “enjoy” without a body. Still, suppose I have a soul and that it is immortal. It still has to be *my* soul that is supposed to do and experience these novel things you are talking about. Now my soul, inasmuch as it is mine – or is me – has built-in limitations. What makes *me* up, as a soul, is nothing more than (i) a complex of experiential patterns, “ways” in which I receive and process information, and (ii) a succession of events of experiencing in accordance with those patterns. I will never be a great mathematician; I'm not smart enough. I will never be a creative poet; I simply don't have the poetic spark. My own patterns of experience, thought, feeling, and emotion, limit what I can experience. No matter how much you alter the content of what I perceive, the same patterns of perception, the same patterns of reflection, of memory, of imagination, will be repeated. And it is these patterns that I will eventually grow tired of. After a long enough time, I grow tired of what I am, of who I am, and of how I experience what I do. No living thing can endure endless repetition. I'm told that even planaria grow bored swimming down the same channels. They would long for extinction.

Adrian. Perhaps you will have new abilities in the afterlife; ones that you've never dreamed of in this life. Perhaps we will undergo an unending evolution and never face the problem of boredom..

Patrice. Look, if it's me that continues to exist, then there must be something that remains the same, something that "defines" me. Change all my attributes and capacities, remove my limitations and replace them endlessly with others, and you lose me. What you will have is a succession of new beings, and that succession is not me. As long as it's me that's there, then will be repetition and boredom. Eventually, whether its 75 years, 95 years, 200 years, or even a millennium, I will long for a complete end to it all.

Adrian. There's something else we haven't mentioned yet, and it's absolutely central in understanding what makes life worthwhile. I am speaking of our deep attachments to our loved ones, be they are parents, our children or our lovers. Our associations with our loved ones, our wonderful hours we spend in their company, these are what we enjoy more than anything else. The prospect of their company always gives us joy, and the thought of being eternally separated from them is impossible for a sensitive person to

bear. Surely, eternal life with our loved ones is something good; not something boring or to be avoided.

Patrice. I will readily admit that friendship, familial love, and romance are great goods. But they are valued, appreciated, and sought after because we are social beings and need one another for enjoyment, protection, and comfort. But if we were immortal, we would tire of the company of any given person, even the one's we love the most. We would want escape from human company and all the restraints and pain it brings.

Adrian. What you say sounds horrible! You seems to be saying that you don't really love anyone! You are saying that you don't really like being you, that you don't enjoy your life!

Patrice. Not at all, you haven't been listening. I enjoy being me, and I enjoy the company of those I love. But in order to enjoy these things it is essential that I last for only a finite time. *Death is what makes life meaningful.* In fact, let me explain why there is such a thing as death. Think of the Universe as a single goal-driven reality. It wants novelty. It grows tired of any single activity, any experiencing, that repeats the same old patterns. It constantly craves satisfaction through new patterns of activity. So it must give constantly generate new individuals, and new types of organisms, new forms of life. This is the deep reason for evolution, and why evolution is a good thing. Death is a way of making room for novel patterns, and for new undreamed of experiences. Massive environmental changes are ways of generating new forms of life. Massive wars give rise to new societies, new civilizations, new cultural traditions, new ways of life and feeling. Nature wants a continual succession of different life forms, not the continued existence of a given life form, whether of the species or the individual. So, immortality of the individual organism is not desirable, neither by the individual who seriously considers it, nor by nature itself.

Adrian. Still, I cannot dismiss the thought that by welcoming extinction you are turning your back on life itself. No body who does that can really love life. Those of us who love life say "Yes!" to life, and we want life never to be extinguished. There is no way that we can welcome death and extinction.

Patrice. You have a point there. Maybe there's a compromise position. Maybe what's important is not so much that MY life continues – why should I not make way for other living things – but that life itself continues, in some form or another. Or, if you're really so keen that YOU exist forever, maybe we should consider the possibility of reincarnation, but a reincarnation that requires that we *forget* what we've previously done so the possibility of endless boredom is never realized.

Adrian. I am not satisfied with either of these options, because in neither case is it ME who survives, and that's what I want and that what's most people want. However, the hour has grown late and I am weary. Let's meet again tomorrow and continue our reflections.

Patrice. Agreed. I will never tire of discussing philosophy.

Adrian. Never? How interesting. You're beginning to sound like Socrates of the *Phaedo*.