

Limits to meaningful enhancement: why ought we keep boredom as part of very long lives?

Abstract.

Bernard Williams wrote that the life of the fictional Elina Makropulos became pervasively empty and painful to her because it lacked meaning¹. This meaninglessness was caused by the boredom of living hundreds of years as the same forty-year-old woman. Williams intended the example in support of his argument that immortal individuals would all, necessarily, feel boredom and become tired of life in this way once categorical desires were exhausted. This would make death, if not good, then at least a comparative good.

A trend exists in favour of human life extension, with the increasing chance of replicating some of the conditions from the fictional case described by Williams as a matter of course. Trends are common in medicine as in society, but this part of the transhumanist project seems to carry the risk of altering the way changes trends, norms are experienced by the individual. Work in pursuit of negligible senescence², immortality, ought to be scrutinised in terms of risk to normativity as well as existential risk to individuals. It is right to be dubious of attempts to change things about us which affect, or could stand to change, our moral responsibility, social and interpersonal identity; our understanding of flourishing. In this paper I also reject arguments suggesting the change involved poses too great an existential risk as such, arguing instead that the *care* needed in navigating the implementation of the aims of the transhumanist project show that being beings capable of having norms is vital.

The trouble with transhumanism³, then, is the trouble with aiming to transcend limits despite feeling we need limits. Of any attempt to soothe Elina Makropulos' meaninglessness by smoothing out her experience, so she does not struggle or suffer, there is justified suspicion. It is not clear that the pain of her boredom is the real problem to be addressed, nor that it would be for anybody who became bored after four hundred years of life having achieved all they wanted. The task is to enhance without removing important limits which allow for meaning⁴.

This paper will explore the good of keeping boredom and experiencing boredom as part of meaningful identity over time, in answer both to Williams' initial argument and some recent responses⁵. I will suppose that some experience of boredom is useful, and that a relationship with pervasive or dangerous boredom can be managed over time, compatible with a sense of stable identity, and remedial against risks of enhancement (in particular, risk of a less stable experience of norms as the result of extreme longevity).

¹ Williams, Bernard (1973) *Problems of the Self*. ch 6 The Makropoulos Case: reflections on the tedium of immortality. Cambridge University Press

² De Grey, A Founder of Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence (SENS). Famously has written about the wholistic approach needed in order for humans successfully to live death-less lives. I take this interest in the whole as inspiration for including more than the medical interventions in which de Grey is primarily interested, and considering social and emotional aspects of identity.

³ For example More, M (1990) *Extropy* vol6. gives a good overview of the transhumanist project, describing a futurist philosophy engaging with enhanced meaning.

⁴ Boredom in particular can be useful as a measure of the limited meaningfulness of our activities and projects, so boredom-responsiveness seems to be a useful human trait, perhaps one that should not be touched by enhancement engineering at all.

⁵ Bortolotti & Nagasawa (2014), Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2009). Responses tend to focus on whether the boredom is necessarily to affect every person, whether it could be avoided, and seem to suggest that situational boredom is not part of habitual boredom.