

## Pro-Immortalism and Pro-Mortalism Yujin Nagasawa

### Abstract

According to what I call ‘pro-immortalism’ it would be better, all else being equal, to be immortal than otherwise. Pro-immortalists typically argue that if death is the end of a person’s existence life is absurd or meaningless because it does not matter whether we live as saints or as sinners. We die sooner or later anyway and whatever we do will not matter in millions of years. Only if we are immortal, they maintain, can life be meaningful. According to what I call ‘pro-mortalism’, on the other hand, it would be better, all else being equal, to be *mortal* than otherwise. Pro-mortalists typically argue that immortality, not mortality, makes life absurd or meaningless because immortal life is boring and repetitive and there is no urgency to do anything. Only if we are mortal, they maintain, can life be meaningful. It is puzzling that pro-immortalists and pro-mortalists reach such opposing conclusions. In this paper, I offer a meta-analysis of the debate between pro-immortalists and pro-mortalists. I argue that arguments that are commonly used to defend either pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism fail to establish that one half of the immortality/mortality dichotomy is always better than the other. At most they establish that one is better than the other *in some specific respects* or that some but not all forms of immortality, or of mortality, are better than others. I then propose a hypothesis that there is no successful, general argument for pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism because while the best possible form of immortality is better than the best possible form of mortality the worst possible mortality is better than the worst possible immortality.

### 1. Introduction

Recently, I received an email from a reader of my work who has suffered from apeirophobia, that is, the fear of living forever, since childhood. He worries that if he is immortal he might eventually run out things to do and fall into eternal depression. Interestingly, he is also a Christian and worries about the possibility that death marks the ultimate end of his existence. Fearing immortality and mortality at the same time in this way appears contradictory but such an internal conflict is not uncommon.

Conflicting views concerning mortality and immortality are presented in many films and works of literature in both the West and the East. In Woody Allen’s film *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), for instance, Allen as TV producer Mickey Sachs is obsessed with the idea that he has a brain tumour. After several examinations, his doctor tells Mickey that a tumour has not been found and that there is nothing for him to worry about. Mickey is very happy—but only for a short period. When he leaves the hospital he realises that everyone in the world, including himself, is going to die sooner or later anyway. He concludes that mortality is not desirable because it makes life meaningless.

The concept of mortality plays an important role in Eastern religion and art. Many death poems, which often concern the imminent deaths of their authors, reflect the brevity and fragility of life. For example, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), one of the greatest daimyō of the Sengoku period, writes:

露と落ち  
露と消えにし  
我が身かな  
浪速のことも

夢のまた夢

I appeared as a dewdrop  
and disappearing as it is  
All of my beloved Naniwa (Osaka)  
is just a dream of dreams.

Despite his political success and prosperity, he considers life transient and impermanent, if not absurd, like a dewdrop or a mere ‘dream of dreams’. The Sōtō Zen Buddhist monk Ryōkan Taigu (1758–1831) also writes:

散る桜  
残る桜も  
散る桜

falling cherry blossoms  
those remaining  
also will fall

Cherry blossoms are a symbol of the impermanence of life. Life is, like cherry blossoms, beautiful but fragile and even those that survive for a while will eventually see their ends. As in *Hannah and Her Sisters* we can see a hint of pessimism in these poems<sup>1</sup>.

Consider, then, examples that illustrate the opposite view of life. In Harold Ramis’s film *Groundhog Day* (1993), Bill Murray as weatherman Phil Connor is trapped in a time loop and wakes up to the same morning over and over. Instead of enjoying his immortality he becomes depressed and tries to escape the trap by committing suicide many times without success. The film concludes with the happy ending in which Phil succeeds in escaping the time loop and regains mortality. The lesson of Phil’s experience seems to be the opposite to that of Mickey’s: life can be meaningful *because* we are mortal and live only once.

An idea similar to the above is presented in a best-selling Japanese picture book, *100 Mankai Ikita Neko (The Cat that Lived a Million Times)*, by the author Yoko Sano (1977). The main character of the story is a tabby cat, who has lived and died one million times. He has lived as a pet for all sorts of people: a king, a sailor, a magician, a thief, and so on. Every time the cat dies his owner at the time cries but he has never cried himself. He is a selfish cat who is not afraid of dying as he is always reborn. One day the tabby cat meets a beautiful white cat and falls in love with her. He has babies with her and wishes to live forever with her. When he wakes up in one morning, however, he finds the white cat dead beside him. He cries and cries. In fact, he is so deeply saddened that he dies. The story ends with a picture of a plain field overlaid by the remark that the tabby cat was not reborn this time. Despite the ultimate end of the tabby cat the last page of the picture book leaves the reader with a strangely comforting rather than negative feeling. It makes us think that mortality might be better than immortality after all.

My aim in this paper is to explore how we reach such opposing views about the desirability of mortality and immortality by addressing ‘pro-immortalism’, according to which it would be better, all else being equal, to be immortal than otherwise, and ‘pro-mortality’, according to which it would be better, all else being equal, to be mortal than otherwise. In what follows, I offer a meta-analysis of the philosophical debate over this issue. I argue that we cannot establish a general view about the desirability of immortality or mortality because there

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<sup>1</sup> For other examples of death poems see Hoffmann (1986) and Takeuchi (2007).

cannot be a general axiological comparison between all forms of immortality and all forms of mortality. This paper has the following structure. In Section 2, I explain terminology relevant to the debate over pro-immortalism and pro-mortality. In Section 3, I introduce arguments that are often used to motivate pro-immortalism. In Section 4, I introduce arguments that are often used to motivate pro-mortality. In Section 5, I argue that we cannot establish either pro-immortalism or pro-mortality by appealing to those arguments because none of them establishes that immortality is overall more desirable than mortality or that mortality is overall more desirable than immortality. At most they establish that one is better than the other *in some specific respects* or that some but not all forms of immortality, or of mortality, are better than others. In section 6, I propose a hypothesis that there is no successful, general argument for pro-immortalism or pro-mortality because while the best possible form of immortality is better than the best possible form of mortality the worst possible mortality is better than the worst possible immortality. Section 7 concludes.

## 2. Terminology

The most fundamental metaphysical thesis concerning immortality is the following:

Immortalism: We are immortal.

The following metaphysical thesis is closely related to immortalism:

Survivalism: We survive our deaths.

Assuming that we all die at some point, immortalism entails survivalism. Survivalism has an interesting feature concerning its verifiability. If survivalism is true, then we exist after our deaths so we will be in a position to verify its truth. If survivalism is false, though, then we do not exist after our deaths so we will not be in a position to falsify its truth. Hence, survivalism is verifiable if true but unfalsifiable if false. This is what John Hick calls ‘eschatological verificationism’ (Hick 1966/57, pp. 177–78). Immortalism has an interesting verifiability condition as well. If immortalism is true, then we probably will not be in a position to verify its truth because there is no point in time when we can confirm that we have lived an infinite duration of time.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, if immortalism is false, then we cease to exist when our mortal lives end so we will not be in a position to falsify its truth either. In sum, immortalism is unverifiable if true and unfalsifiable if false. Perhaps because of this unique feature of immortalism philosophers normally focus on the following more modest metaphysical thesis:

Modal immortalism: We *can* be immortal.

If modal immortalism is true it leaves open the possibility that immortalism is true. On the other hand, if modal immortalism is false, then immortalism is also false.

Now contrast immortality with the existence of God. Philosophers of religion have for centuries addressed the following metaphysical thesis:

Theism: God exists.

They have also addressed the following more modest metaphysical thesis:

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the only possible way to verify our immortality would be to verify it indirectly by proving that we exist necessarily or that we are identical with immaterial, indestructible souls. The latter view is defended by Plato (1996/360BC).

Modal theism: God can exist.<sup>3</sup>

Yet some philosophers of religion have recently shifted their attention from theism and modal theism to the following axiological thesis:

Pro-theism: It would be better, all else being equal, if God exists than otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

Pro-theists are not interested in the metaphysical question concerning whether or not God exists. They are instead interested in the axiological question concerning whether or not the existence of God is better or more desirable than His non-existence. In this paper, I pursue a similar strategy in relation to immortality. I shift my focus from immortalism and modal immortalism to the following axiological thesis:

Pro-immortalism: It would be better, all else being equal, to be immortal than otherwise.

Whether or not we are immortal is an important question but whether or not immortality is better or more desirable than mortality is an equally important, or possibly even more important, question. Notice that immortalism and pro-immortalism are distinct. Pro-immortalism does not entail immortalism. Some might hold that while it would be better to be immortal, unfortunately, as a matter of fact, we are not immortal. Similarly, immortalism does not entail pro-immortalism. Some might hold that while we are immortal, it would be better not to be immortal than otherwise.

A mirror image of pro-immortalism is the following:

Pro-mortalism: It would be better, all else being equal, to be mortal than otherwise.

How can we determine the axiological values of immortality and mortality? This is a disputable question. In this paper, I assume, for the sake of simplicity, that they are determined by reference to the desirability of immortality and mortality. That is, the more desirable immortality (or mortality) is the higher its axiological value.<sup>5</sup>

Assuming that immortality and mortality are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, pro-immortalism entails the following:

Anti-mortalism: It would be worse, all else being equal, to be mortal than otherwise.

Similarly, assuming that immortality and mortality are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, pro-mortalism entails the following:

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<sup>3</sup> Modal theism is discussed especially in relation to the modal ontological argument, which has modal theism as one of its premises. See Nagasawa (2017a), Chapter 7. Also, many arguments against the existence of God purport to undermine theism indirectly by targeting modal theism rather than theism itself.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kraay (2018).

<sup>5</sup> We can also dispute the scope of desirability in pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism. Some might argue that pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism are concerned with the desirability of immortality or mortality for the one who dies while others might argue that they are concerned with the desirability of immortality or mortality for the world. Again, for the sake of simplicity, I set these issues aside in this paper.

Anti-immortalism: All else being equal, it would be worse to be immortal than otherwise.

There are some further alternatives:

Equalism: All else being equal, being immortal and being mortal are equally good or equally bad.

Incommensurabilism: All else being equal, none of the following is true: (i) being immortal is better than being mortal, (ii) being mortal is better than being immortal, (iii) being immortal and being mortal are equally good or equally bad.

Agnosticism: We do not know, all else being equal, which of the following is true: (i) being immortal is better than being mortal, (ii) being mortal is better than being immortal, (iii) being immortal and being mortal are equally good or equally bad.

Mysterianism: We cannot know, all else being equal, which of the following is true: (i) being immortal is better than being mortal, (ii) being mortal is better than being immortal, (iii) being immortal and being mortal are equally good or equally bad.

Equalism says that immortality is neither better nor worse than mortality because it is as good or bad as mortality. Incommensurabilism says that immortality and mortality are value incommensurable. If this thesis is true, then pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism are non-starters because there cannot be a valid axiological comparison between them. Agnosticism says that while immortality and mortality *are* value commensurable we currently do not know if either of them is better than the other or if they are equally good or bad. Mysterianism says that while immortality and mortality are value commensurable our cognitive limits preclude us from determining if either of them is better than the other or if they are equally good or bad. Some mysterians might argue that it is impossible for us to calculate the axiological value of immortality in particular because it is cognitively impossible for us, as currently living beings, to know what it is like to exist beyond death. In what follows, however, for the sake of simplicity, I focus only on pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism.

### 3. Arguments for Pro-Immortalism

There are many arguments concerning immortality and mortality that are commonly used to support pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism. In this and the following section, I introduce these arguments. It should be noted that not all arguments are distinct. Some of them make similar points or overlap with one another.

Consider, first, arguments that are often used to support pro-immortalism. They all try to establish the *desirability* of *immortality* by showing the *undesirability* of *mortality*. In other words, they can be construed as arguments *against* pro-mortalism as well as arguments for pro-immortalism.

#### *The No Ultimate Justice Argument*

People who perform morally wrong actions deserve appropriate punishment and people who suffer from wrongdoing are owed appropriate compensation (Metz 2003, p. 164-170). Also, people who exemplify goodness deserve appropriate rewards. If we are mortal and death marks the end of every person's existence, however, then there cannot be satisfactory compensatory or retributive justice; we cannot punish, compensate or reward deceased people. Only through immortality, therefore, can ultimate justice be achieved.

### *The No Permanent Significance Argument*

If death is the ultimate end of every person's existence what we do in life is utterly insignificant. Thomas Nagel considers the idea that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. He points out that we often feel that life is absurd when we realise that "we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe. . ." (Nagel 1971, p. 717). Robert Nozick writes, similarly, that "Death wipes you out. . . A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life" (Nozick 1981, p. 582). If we are mortal we cannot leave any permanent traces. Whatever we do is insignificant from a cosmic viewpoint; no person's actions will matter in a million years. Only by being immortal can we avoid insignificance and impermanence.

### *The No Ultimate Moral Consequence Argument*

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky suggests that if we are not immortal everything is permitted.<sup>6</sup> William Lane Craig also remarks, "If life ends at the grave, then it makes no difference whether one has lived as a Stalin or as a saint" (Craig 1994, p. 43). If we are mortal every person dies sooner or later. Indeed, everyone in the world dies sooner or later, and even our universe disappears sooner or later. If so, what we do makes no ultimate moral difference; acting morally or immorally does not have any ultimate or permanent consequences. Any moral difference would be limited and temporary. Only immortality makes ultimate moral consequences possible.

### *The No Transcendence Argument*

Nozick contends, "Attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life" (Nozick 1981, p. 594). If we are mortal life cannot be meaningful as we are constrained by limits as animal selves that we cannot possibly overcome. Only by being immortal we can transcend such limits.

## **4. Arguments for Pro-Mortalism**

We have seen some arguments that are commonly used to support pro-immortalism. Let us consider, then, arguments that are commonly used to support pro-mortalism. They all try to establish the *desirability* of *mortality* by showing the *undesirability* of *immortality*. In other words, they can be construed as arguments *against* pro-immortalism as well as arguments for pro-mortalism.

### *The Infinite Postponement Argument*

We cannot flourish if we are immortal because there is no urgency to do anything in the context of immortality. We can take life seriously when we know that our time is limited. Leon Kass writes, "Could life be serious or meaningful without the limit of mortality? . . . To know and to feel that one goes around only once, and that the deadline is not out of sight, is for many people the necessary spur to the pursuit of something worthwhile" (Kass 2001, p. 21). The Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl highlights this point by considering the indefinite postponement of activity which immortality allows. He contends that, "If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Dostoevsky implies that everything is permitted without God as well as immortality. Exactly what Dostoevsky means here is, however, a matter of dispute. See, for example, Cortesi (2000) and Volkov (2011).

now or ten years hence” (Frankl 1953, p. 73).<sup>7</sup> We can take life seriously only if we are mortal because otherwise there is no imperative to maximise our time and opportunities in life.

#### *The Infinite Repetition Argument*

Even if immortality is temporally linear and does not involve such a time loop as the one described in *Groundhog Day* immortal life is doomed to be repetitive because, with immortality, no matter how much time we spend engaged in specific activities there is always an infinite amount of time ahead of us. Many things in life, and life itself, are considered meaningful because they are assumed to take place only once. Repeating the same activities over and over makes a person’s existence pointless. Only by being mortal can we avoid this problem.

#### *The Severe Boredom Argument*

In Karel Čapek’s novel *The Makropulos Affair*, the main character Elina Makropulos lives for 300 years without any sign of ageing. She initially has an intense love of life and enjoys a successful career as an opera singer. As time passes, however, she develops detachment from people and loses interest in life. She laments that living forever does not give life meaning or direction. In the end, she decides not to take the elixir that would extend her life for another 300 years. Referring to this story Bernard Williams (1973) presents a dilemma concerning immortality: If we live immortal lives with *unchanging* interests and life goals, there are only a limited number of experiences we can have. After satisfying our interests and achieving our goals, we would be severely affected by boredom to the point that our lives would no longer be worthwhile. On the other hand, if we live immortal lives with *changing* interests and life goals then our lives remain exciting and worthwhile, because there are new interests to satisfy and new life goals to attain. In this case there is however no continuation of personal identity in immortal life because interests and life goals make us who we are. Hence, only by being mortal we can avoid both severe boredom and the loss of personal identity.

#### *The No Ultimate Virtue Argument*

Virtuous acts make life meaningful. The most virtuous act that a person can ever perform is an extreme form of altruism, where one sacrifices one’s own life to save others (Nagasawa 2017b, p. 86). Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Conventual Franciscan friar who volunteered to substitute for a stranger who was going to be sent to a starvation bunker in the Auschwitz death camp, is a well-known example. If we are immortal, however, the realisation of such ultimate virtue is impossible because death does not mark the end of a person’s existence. Mortality is, hence, indispensable for instantiating ultimate virtue.

### **5. Assessing the Arguments for Pro-Immortalism and the Arguments for Pro-Mortalism**

We have seen numerous arguments that are often used to support pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism. In what follows, I discuss what we can learn from these arguments. In doing so, however, apart from some particular cases, I do not quibble over specific details of individual arguments. That is, I refrain from raising any specific objections to the arguments. I argue

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<sup>7</sup> Brook Alan Trisel considers recent psychological studies that are relevant to the Infinite Postponement Argument. These studies arguably suggest that explicit reminders of mortality encourage people to focus on more ‘meaningful’ goals that are relevant to building personal relationships and improving the world rather than pursuing their own wealth and fame (Trisel 2015, p. 66). These studies (and perhaps the Infinite Postponement Argument itself) are not directly relevant to pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism because they are concerned with the desirability of *believing* that we are mortal rather than the state of *being* mortal.

instead that while these arguments, if they are sound, may teach us something important about immortality or mortality they do not establish the truth or falsity of pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism. That is, neither pro-immortalists nor pro-mortalists can use these arguments to establish their views. More specifically, I make the following five claims: (a) The arguments for pro-immortalism show at most only that some but not all forms of immortality entail undesirable consequences and that some but not all forms of mortality avoid them; (b) the arguments for pro-mortalism show at most only that some but not all forms of immortality entail undesirable consequences and that some but not all forms of mortality avoid them; (c) the arguments for pro-immortalism do not tell us much about the *overall* undesirability of mortality or the *overall* desirability of immortality; (d) the arguments for pro-mortalism do not tell us much about the *overall* undesirability of immortality or the *overall* desirability of mortality; and (e) ultimately, the arguments for pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism are not directly relevant to the truth or falsity of either pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism.

*(a) The arguments for pro-immortalism show at most only that some but not all forms of mortality entail undesirable consequences and that some but not all forms of mortality avoid them.*

Again, pro-immortalism is the thesis that it would be better, all else being equal, to be immortal than otherwise. It is a thesis based on an axiological comparison between immortality and mortality *in general*. The arguments for pro-immortalism in question try to motivate pro-immortalism by showing that mortality entails some negative consequences, such as the absence of ultimate justice, permanent significance, ultimate moral consequence and the transcendence of animal selves. The implication here is that immortality is preferable to mortality because if we are immortal we can avoid these consequences. To assess these arguments, therefore, we have to ask the following two questions: (Q1) Do the arguments really show that mortality in general entails the undesirable consequences? and (Q2) Do the arguments really show that immortality in general avoids the undesirable consequences?

Unfortunately, we cannot answer (Q1) affirmatively with respect to some of the arguments for pro-immortalism. For example, the No Ultimate Justice Argument suggests that if we are mortal, that is, if death marks the end of a person's existence, then there cannot be satisfactory compensatory or retributive justice. This, however, does not mean that all forms of mortality entail the lack of perfect retributive justice. For example, as Thaddeus Metz contends, a form of mortality involving a *finite* duration of the afterlife with the intervention of a supremely just being like God would be sufficient to realise perfect retributive justice without requiring immortality (Metz 2003, p. 165). To take another example, the No Transcendence Argument suggests that if death marks the end of a person's existence then we cannot transcend our limits as animal selves. This, however, does not mean that all forms of mortality entail the impossibility of transcending these limits. For example, a form of mortality involving an afterlife of finite duration, that is, existence beyond death, is sufficient for us to overcome our limits as animal selves without requiring immortality. Hence, these arguments show, if successful, only that we face the undesirable consequences with some but not all forms of mortality. In other words, mortality is not a sufficient condition for all of the undesirable consequences mentioned in these arguments. This is problematic for those who wish to appeal to the arguments to establish pro-immortalism because pro-immortalism is a *general* axiological thesis that, all else being equal, immortality is better than mortality, not that some forms of immortality are better than some or all forms of mortality.

Unfortunately, we cannot answer (Q2) affirmatively either with respect to some of the arguments for pro-immortalism. Take, for example, the No Permanent Significance Argument. The argument suggests that if we are mortal a person cannot do anything of permanent significance. This, however, does not mean that if we are *immortal* a person *can* do something

of permanent significance. For instance, one cannot do anything of permanent significance with a form of immortality where one exists eternally in isolation. To take another example, the No Ultimate Moral Consequence Argument suggests that if we are mortal a person's morally significant actions do not make any ultimate moral difference. This, however, does not mean that if we are *immortal* a person *can* make an ultimate moral difference. For instance, a person cannot make any permanent moral difference with a form of immortality where we exist without morally significant freedom. Parallel reasoning applies to the No Ultimate Justice Argument. These arguments fail to show that we can escape the undesirable consequences of all forms of immortality. In other words, immortality is not a sufficient condition for avoiding the undesirable consequences. This is problematic for those who wish to appeal to the arguments to establish pro-immortalism because, again, pro-immortalism is a *general* axiological thesis that it would be better, all else being equal, to be immortal than mortal, not that some forms of immortality are better than some or all forms of mortality.

(b) *The arguments for pro-mortalism show at most only that some but not all forms of immortality entail undesirable consequences and that some but not all forms of mortality avoid them.*

We can make parallel claims about the arguments for pro-mortalism. These arguments try to motivate pro-mortalism by showing that immortality entails some negative consequences, such as infinite postponement, infinite repetition, severe boredom and the absence of ultimate virtue. The implication here is that mortality is preferable to immortality because if we are mortal a person can avoid these consequences. To assess these arguments, therefore, we have to ask the following questions: (Q3) Do the arguments really show that immortality in general entails the undesirable consequences? and (Q4) Do the arguments really show that mortality in general avoids the undesirable consequences?

Unfortunately, we cannot answer (Q3) affirmatively with respect to some of the arguments. Take, for example, the Infinite Postponement Argument. This argument suggests that if we are immortal a person can postpone his or her actions indefinitely, which makes it impossible for us to take life seriously. This, however, does not mean that all forms of immortality entail the problem of infinite postponement. For instance, we do not face this problem with a form of immortality in which God sets specific deadlines for a person's actions. This is because there is no necessary link between immortality and the freedom to postpone actions. To take another example, the Severe Boredom Argument suggests that, because personal identity requires unchanging interests and life goals, a person would be bored with immortality to the extent that life would be unbearable. While this might apply to a form of immortality such as the one described in *The Makropulos Affair*, where life, as we have it on earth, continues indefinitely, it does not apply to all forms of immortality. For instance, a form of immortality where God erases some of a person's memories every few years would avoid the problem without undermining anyone's personal identity. Hence, these arguments show, if successful, only that some, but not all, forms of immortality entail the undesirable consequences. In other words, immortality is not a sufficient condition for the undesirable consequences. This is problematic for those who wish to appeal to the arguments to establish pro-mortalism because pro-mortalism is a *general* axiological thesis that, all else being equal, mortality is better than immortality, not that some forms of mortality are better than some or all forms of immortality.

Unfortunately, we cannot answer (Q4) affirmatively either with respect to some of the arguments for pro-mortalism. Take, for instance, the Severe Boredom Argument. This argument suggests that if we are immortal life loses meaning as it becomes extremely boring. This, however, does not mean that if we are *mortal* a person *can* avoid extreme boredom. For instance, we face the same problem if we live with a form of mortality in which we live for a

very long, but not infinitely long, time. In fact, this is what *The Makropulos Affair* suggests; the main character Elina lives for a very long (i.e. 300 years) but not infinitely long time and experiences severe boredom. To take another example, the No Ultimate Virtue Argument suggests that if we are immortal it is impossible for a person to realise ultimate virtue, such as voluntary self-annihilation to save others, because there is no such thing as annihilation with immortality. This, however, does not mean that if we are *mortal* a person *can* make the ultimate sacrifice. For instance, a form of mortality in which our freedom is severely restricted does not allow us to annihilate ourselves. In sum, mortality in general is not a sufficient condition for avoiding these undesirable consequences. This is problematic for those who wish to appeal to the argument to establish pro-mortalism because, again, pro-mortalism is a *general* axiological thesis that it would be better, all else being equal, to be mortal than immortal, not that some forms of mortality is better than some or all forms of immortality.

(c) *The arguments for pro-immortalism do not tell us much about the overall undesirability of mortality or the overall desirability of immortality.*

Again, the arguments for pro-immortalism try to motivate the view by establishing that we face some undesirable consequences with mortality and we avoid them with immortality. I have argued above, however, that they fail to establish this claim. Suppose, however, in favour of these arguments, that they succeed in establishing it. Even so, it is still unclear if immortality is *overall* desirable. Take, for example, the No Ultimate Justice Argument. This argument says that if we are mortal a person cannot have perfect compensatory or retributive justice. Even if that is correct, it might well be the case that there are other good things that make mortality overall desirable. Something can be overall desirable without being perfect. The same point applies to all the other arguments. If we are mortal, perhaps, as the arguments say, we face the absence of permanent significance, ultimate moral consequence and the transcendence of our animal selves. Yet the fact that we face these undesirable consequences with mortality does not entail that mortality is overall undesirable. A successful argument for pro-immortalism must show that, overall, not merely with respect to some specific features, immortality is desirable.

I argued above that even if the arguments for pro-immortalism are right in saying that we face undesirable consequences with mortality it does not follow that we can avoid those consequences merely by being immortal. Yet even if we grant that we *can* avoid them merely by being immortal, it still does not follow that immortality is *overall* desirable. This is because even if we can avoid all the abovementioned undesirable consequences with immortality we could still face other undesirable consequences with immortality. In fact, that is what the arguments for pro-mortalism try to show. Pro-mortalists can appeal to those arguments to show that immortality is overall undesirable because it entails such unwelcome consequences as infinite postponement, infinite repetition, severe boredom and the absence of ultimate virtue.

At this point, some pro-immortalists might insist that mortality *is* overall undesirable because mortal life, which entails the absence of ultimate justice, permanent significance, ultimate moral consequence and transcendence of animal selves, is not worth living. This response, however, faces a familiar problem: Even if it is true that mortal life is not overall desirable it does not follow that immortal life is overall desirable. In fact, the above arguments for pro-mortalism can be construed as showing that immortal life is not overall desirable.

(d) *The arguments for pro-mortalism do not tell us much about the overall undesirability of immortality or the overall desirability of mortality.*

We can make parallel claims about the arguments for pro-mortalism. Again, these arguments try to motivate pro-mortalism by establishing that we face some undesirable consequences with immortality that we avoid with mortality. I have argued above, however, that the Infinite Postponement Argument, the Infinite Repetition Argument, the Severe Boredom Argument

and the No Ultimate Virtue Argument fail to establish this claim. Suppose, however, in favour of these arguments, that they succeed in establishing it. Even so, it is still unclear if mortality is *overall* more desirable than immortality. Take, for example, the No Ultimate Virtue Argument. This argument says that if we are immortal a person cannot instantiate ultimate virtue. Even if that is correct, it might well be the case that there are other good things that make immortality overall desirable. Again, something can be desirable without being perfect. The same point applies to all the other arguments. If we are immortal, perhaps, as the arguments say, we face infinite postponement, infinite repetition and severe boredom. The mere fact that we face these undesirable consequences with immortality and avoid them with mortality does not necessarily, however, make mortality overall better than immortality. A successful argument for pro-mortalism must show that, overall, not merely with respect to some specific features, mortality is desirable.

I argued above that even if the arguments for pro-mortalism are right in saying that we face undesirable consequences with immortality it still does not follow that we can avoid these consequences merely by being mortal. Yet even if we grant that we *can* avoid them merely by being mortal, it still does not follow that mortality is *overall* desirable. This is because even if we can avoid all the abovementioned undesirable consequences with mortality we could still face other undesirable consequences. In fact, that is what the arguments for pro-immortalism purport to show. Pro-immortalists can appeal to those arguments to show that mortality is overall undesirable because it entails such unwelcome consequences as the absence of ultimate justice, permanent significance, ultimate moral consequence and the transcendence of animal selves.

At this point, some pro-mortalists might insist that immortality *is* overall undesirable because immortal life, which entails infinite postponement, infinite repetition, severe boredom and the absence of ultimate virtue is, simply, not worth living. Yet this response faces the same familiar problem: Even if it is true that immortal life is not overall desirable it does not follow that mortal life is overall desirable. In fact, the above arguments for pro-immortalism can be construed as showing that mortal life is not overall desirable.

*(e) Ultimately, the arguments for pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism are not directly relevant to the truth or falsity of either pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism.*

The arguments for pro-immortalism purport to show that mortality entails undesirable consequences. I argued above for the following three theses: (i) not all forms of mortality entail these consequences, (ii) not all forms of immortality avoid them, and (iii) even if all forms of mortality entail them and all forms of immortality avoid them it is still unclear that immortality is overall desirable. Meanwhile, the arguments for pro-mortalism purport to show that immortality entails some other undesirable consequences. I argued above for the following three parallel theses: (i) not all forms of immortality entail these undesirable consequences, (ii) not all forms of mortality avoid them, and (iii) even if all forms of immortality entail them and all forms of mortality avoid them it does not follow that mortality is overall desirable.

Ultimately, however, neither the desirability nor the undesirability of immortality and mortality is directly relevant to pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism. Again, pro-immortalism says that it would be *better*, all else being equal, to be immortal than otherwise, and pro-mortalism says that it would be *better*, all else being equal, to be mortal than otherwise. These are not categorical claims about the overall desirability or undesirability of immortality or mortality; they are, rather, comparative claims about the axiological values of immortality and mortality. It is coherent to say that while  $x$  and  $y$  are both overall desirable  $x$  is *more desirable* than  $y$  or that while  $x$  and  $y$  are both overall undesirable  $x$  is, relatively speaking, *more undesirable* than  $y$ . Hence, even if immortality is shown to be overall desirable or undesirable it does not mean much to pro-immortalists unless mortality is shown to be overall *more*

desirable than (or as desirable as) immortality. Similarly, even if mortality is shown to be overall desirable or undesirable it does not mean much to pro-mortalists unless immortality is shown to be overall *more* desirable than (or as desirable as) mortality. Even if immortality and mortality are both overall highly desirable, or highly undesirable, pro-immortalism can still be true as long as immortality is overall more desirable than mortality. Similarly, even if immortality and mortality are both highly desirable, or highly undesirable, pro-mortalism can still be true as long as mortality is more desirable than immortality.

The above arguments for pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism would be relevant if we could accumulate all arguments like them to list up every single desirable and undesirable consequence of immortality and mortality and calculate the precise overall axiological values of immortality and mortality. We could then determine which half of the immortality/mortality dichotomy is on balance more desirable. However, the idea of making a precise axiological calculation like this is highly unrealistic. We cannot determine the overall desirability or undesirability of immortality or mortality merely by referring to an individual argument.

In sum: Arguments that are commonly used to support pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism show, if they are sound, only that some but not all forms of immortality or some but not all forms of mortality entail undesirable consequences. They also show, if they are sound, only that some but not all forms of immortality or some but not all forms of mortality avoid these consequences. This is not sufficient to establish that immortality in general or mortality in general is overall desirable or undesirable. Moreover, even if they establish the desirability or undesirability of immortality or mortality, they fail to establish which one is more desirable than the other. I conclude, therefore, that these arguments fail to establish pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism.

## **6. A Hypothesis Concerning the Axiological Values of Immortality and Mortality**

The implication of the above discussion is that what we need to establish pro-immortalism is an argument showing the following: all forms of mortality entail at least one negative feature and no form of immortality entails it; moreover, the negative feature in question is so negative that it makes all forms of mortality worse than all forms of immortality; furthermore, the negative feature is so negative that other negative features or positive features that immortality or mortality entail do not affect the axiological comparison between them. Alternatively, we can establish pro-immortalism if there is an argument that shows the following: all forms of immortality entail at least one positive feature and no form of mortality entails it; moreover, the positive feature in question is so positive that it makes all forms of immortality better than all forms of mortality; furthermore, the positive feature is so positive that other positive features or negative features that immortality or mortality entails do not affect the axiological comparison between immortality and mortality. One might claim that the following argument meets the first set of criteria.

### *The Death as the Ultimate Harm Argument*

If we are mortal, death is the annihilation of a person's existence. This is the worst possible harm done to a person; other forms of harm also affect a person negatively but only in a limited sense. However, annihilation wipes out a person's very existence. Only by being immortal can we avoid such ultimate harm.

If we are mortal and we cease to exist upon death, then, as the argument says, we have to face annihilation. Setting aside the Epicurean and Lucretian point that death cannot harm the dead it appears reasonable to think that annihilation is the ultimate harm that can occur to a person. Moreover, no form of mortality can escape it because mortality, by definition, entails death as the ultimate end. This applies to all forms of mortality. On the other hand, if we are immortal,

by definition, we do not face annihilation; every person's existence continues indefinitely. This applies to all forms of immortality. Since annihilation is so bad, proponents of the argument may say, no matter how many positive features we can enjoy with mortality or no matter how many negative things we can suffer with immortality, immortality remains better than mortality. The Death as the Ultimate Harm Argument, therefore, they may conclude, establishes pro-immortalism.

The Death as the Ultimate Harm Argument seems better than other arguments for pro-immortalism that we have seen. This argument is not successful, however, because, contrary to what the argument assumes, annihilation is not always worse than existence. For instance, annihilation may be more desirable than a form of immortality which involves significant pain and suffering for an infinite duration. If so, after all, the argument is as limited as other arguments for pro-immortalism; it shows only that some but not all forms of immortality—in particular, forms of immortality which do not involve excessive pain and suffering—are better than mortality.

A similar point can be made about arguments for pro-mortalism. The implication of the above discussion is that what we need to establish pro-mortalism is an argument showing the following: all forms of immortality entail at least one negative feature and no form of mortality entails it; moreover, the negative feature in question is so negative that it makes all forms of immortality worse than all forms of mortality; furthermore, the negative feature is so negative that other negative features or positive features that immortality or mortality entail do not affect the axiological comparison between them. Alternatively, we can establish pro-mortalism if there is an argument that shows the following: all forms of mortality entail some positive feature and no form of immortality entails it; moreover, the positive feature in question is so positive that it makes all forms of mortality better than all forms of immortality; furthermore, the positive feature is so positive that other positive features or negative features that immortality or mortality entails do not affect the axiological comparison between immortality and mortality. One might claim that the following argument meets the first set of criteria.

*The Existence as the Ultimate Harm Argument*

According to David Benatar, existence is always a harm. He writes, “Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. . . . However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence” (Benatar 2006: 1). We should think, therefore, that mortality, which entails the termination of existence, is always better than immortality, which entails the eternal continuation of existence.

If Benatar is right in saying that existence is always a serious harm, then immortality, that is, endless existence, appears to be the greatest possible harm we could experience. The only way to escape such a harm would be to be mortal. This reasoning applies to all forms of mortality and immortality. Since endless existence is so bad, proponents of the argument may say, no matter how many positive things we can enjoy with immortality or no matter how many negative things we can suffer with mortality, mortality remains better than immortality. The Existence as the Ultimate Harm Argument, therefore, they may conclude, establishes pro-immortalism.

The Existence as the Ultimate Harm Argument is however based on a misinterpretation of Benatar's argument. His claim that coming into existence is always a harm does not entail that it is always better to terminate existence than to continue it. He writes, “the view that coming into existence is always a harm does *not imply* that death is better than continuing to exist, and a fortiori that suicide is (always) desirable” (Benatar 2006, p. 212, emphasis in the

original). This is because even if *not coming into* existence is always better than existing, once we exist it might be better for us to continue existing. In other words, while existence is bad enough to make non-existence preferable it might not be bad enough to make annihilation (such as suicide) preferable. There is also a more fundamental reason to think that Benatar's argument is irrelevant to pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism: his argument is based on comparing existence with *non-existence* while pro-immortalism and pro-mortalism are based on comparing a certain form of existence (immortality) with another form of existence (mortality). Benatar's thesis that non-existence is better than existence is silent about which form of existence is better. Hence, even the Death as the Ultimate Harm Argument and the Existence as the Ultimate Harm Argument fail to establish their intended conclusions.

The failure of the Death as the Ultimate Harm Argument that we saw above seems to motivate the following hypothesis: the worst possible form of immortality is worse than the worst possible mortality.<sup>8</sup> Suppose that the worst possible existence is one that involves the severest possible pain and suffering. If we have to experience such pain and suffering as long as we exist mortality appears to be better than immortality, because mortality terminates the pain and suffering while immortality does not. This hypothesis can be illustrated as the following axiological hierarchy:

*The worst possible mortality → the worst possible immortality*

A mirror image of this hypothesis is the following: the best form of immortality is better than the best possible form of mortality. Suppose that the best possible form of existence is one that involves supreme bliss and pleasure. If we can have them as long as we exist immortality is better than mortality because immortality sustains supreme bliss and pleasure indefinitely while mortality terminates them eventually. This hypothesis can be illustrated as the following axiological hierarchy:

*The best possible form of Immortality → the best possible form of mortality*

The best possible form of mortality is, of course, better than the worst possible mortality. Hence, assuming that 'better' in this context is transitive, we can combine the two hierarchies as follows:

*The best possible form of immortality → the best possible form of mortality → the worst possible mortality → the worst possible immortality*

Given this combined hierarchy, it is no surprise that there is no argument showing that immortality is better than mortality *in general* or that mortality is better than immortality *in general*. Insofar as immortality and mortality alternate in the hierarchy there cannot be any general axiological comparison between them suggesting that any form of immortality is better than any form of mortality or that any form of mortality is better than any form of immortality. We can show only that some forms of immortality are better than some or all forms of mortality or that some forms of mortality are better than some but not all forms of immortality. Therefore, neither pro-immortalism nor pro-mortalism, as I define them, is tenable.

## 7. Conclusion

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<sup>8</sup> I call this a hypothesis because to compare any forms of immortality and mortality precisely we to have list up all positive and negative features entailed by each of them and calculate which form achieves a higher overall axiological value.

We have seen that the arguments that are used to motivate pro-immortalism fail to show that immortality is overall better than mortality in general and that the arguments that are used to motivate pro-mortalism fail to show that mortality is overall better than immortality in general. We have also seen that we can postulate a hypothesis according to which there is no successful argument for pro-immortalism or pro-mortalism because while the best possible form of immortality is better than the best possible form of mortality the worst possible mortality is better than the worst possible immortality.

Let us recall the Christian reader who suffers from apeirophobia. On the one hand, he fears immortality and thinks that mortality is desirable. On the other hand, he fears death and thinks that immortality is desirable. What we have seen in this paper suggests that it is not always irrational to fear immortality and mortality at the same time (or to desire immortality and mortality at the same time) in this way. Depending on which forms of immortality and mortality we compare we are likely to reach radically opposing conclusions concerning their desirability. Therefore, it is likely that the apeirophobic reader need not think that he is being irrational.

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