The cheated god: death and personal time

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You are a god. You would have enjoyed the normal immortality of an Olympian god. However, a demon cursed you to live in a stop and go fashion that makes you indistinguishable from an ordinary mortal. Anticipating Adrian Moore’s (2001: 228) meditations on ‘veiled immortality’, the demon divided your existence into a Zeno sequence: You live half your life, followed by a trillion years of nothingness, then a quarter of your life followed by a trillion years of nothingness, then an eighth of...
your life followed by a trillion years of nothingness, and so on, ad
infinitum. During the intermissions, everything stops (except perhaps for
the ticking of a clock in a remote corner of the universe).

You will live forever. But you will not have a better life than a mortal.
The demon has harmed you as gravely as death harms mortals.

1. Nagel and the symmetry argument

Epicurus argues that death does not harm the person who dies. For a man
is harmed by his death only if his future non-existence is bad. But this
post-mortem non-existence is no worse than his prenatal non-existence.

Thomas Nagel objects that there is an asymmetry. He could not have
been born earlier because he owes his existence to a particular sperm-egg
combination that could not have arisen earlier. Therefore, he was not
deprived of time prior to birth. However, his death will happen earlier
than it need happen. Therefore, his death will deprive him of some life.

More generally, man's

existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future,
containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so
tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the
world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he
finds himself the subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not
essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how
inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible
goods. (1970: 79)

However, the demon has not closed your future. He has converged your
life to a limit without killing you.

So how is Nagel to explain the death-like character of the harm? The
demon has cheated you of many possibilities. But not any that lie beyond
your actual lifespan. You do not face the prospect of eternal nothingness.
You have eternal life.

Nagel might extend his theory by adding the assumption that there is
a smallest amount of time for value. After a while, you will only have
increments of life that fall below that threshold. The infinitely many slices
of your life yet to come are too thin to matter. You are as good as dead.

This time limit wrongly condemns leisurely forms of immortality. Con-
sider the harmonic series formed by adding the reciprocals of natural
numbers: \( 1/1 + 1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + \ldots \). The addends get smaller and smaller
but the sum surpasses any finite value. If you were conscious for a day,
then a half day, then a third of a day, and so on, your total amount of
consciousness would be infinite. Growth in value can be ever slower
without converging to a limit.
If there really were a time limit for value, then the demon could have cheated you with a simpler stop and go existence. He just divides your life into finitely many slices that are thinner than the minimal unit. From the inside, your life seems exactly as before. But given the time limit, your life is without value. This underestimates the value of your life.

As suggested by the applicability of calculus in economics, value is continuous. The demon’s original curse produces a life whose value declines asymptotically with time. The amount of remaining value approaches zero but never reaches it. At any given moment, there is more value to come. One should not ignore small, imperceptible benefits (Parfit 1984: 75–82).

How much life do you want? Faced with the choice of dying in the next five minutes or living another week, Nagel will always choose to live another week. He infers that he ‘would be glad to live forever’. Miguel de Unamuno would be more than glad:

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. 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. (1921: 60)

Immortals extend this hunger for life. An immortal prefers to live every future day rather than the abridged alternative of living every other future day. Normal immortality is better because at any given time, more value has accumulated. Our preferences between different forms of denumerable immortality are anticipated by utilitarians working out the ethical implications of an infinite future (Vallentyne and Kagan 1997).

What of superdenumerable immortality? Faced with the choice of living for a number of days equal to the set of natural numbers and living a number of days equal to the power set of the natural numbers, the immortals prefer the power set. For the power set of any set is bigger than that set. Faced with the choice of living for a number of days equal to that power set and living a number of days equal to the power set of that power set, the immortals prefer the power set of that power set. The immortals want more and more and more.

We are the same way. Christians and Islamists believe they continue forever in an after-life. The founder of transfinite arithmetic, George Cantor, believed that he was on a mission from God to reveal the infinite. He must have wondered how much of an infinite future he could look forward to. Since he believed that there is no highest transfinite number, Cantor may have regarded some disappointment as inevitable.
2. Personal time

As a cursed god, your apparent ‘post-mortem interests’ are illusory. For instance, your life insurance will never help the designated beneficiaries. If you came to believe that you are a cursed god, you would cancel your life insurance. You would continue to schedule most of your activities by the familiar calendar. But you would regard this temporal system as a convenient fiction.

Some details of this fiction have been worked out by David Lewis. He uses ‘personal time’ (roughly, time according to your wristwatch) to consistently interpret time-travel stories. Donald Williams’ (1951: 463) denied the consistency of the epilogue of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*. Wells writes of the time-traveller, ‘he may even now – if I may use the phrase – be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline seas of the Triassic Age.’ Lewis says that the contradiction turning on ‘now’ can be avoided by switching to an alternative time-like relation.

If you take the stages of a common person, they manifest certain regularities with respect to external time. Properties change continuously as you go along, for the most part, and in familiar ways. First come infantile stages. Last come senile ones. Memories accumulate. Food digests. Hair grows. Wristwatch hands move. If you take the state of a time traveler instead, they do not manifest the common regularities with respect to external time. But there is one way to assign coordinates to the time traveler’s stages, and one way only (apart from the arbitrary choice of a zero point), so that the regularities that hold with respect to this assignment match those that commonly hold with respect external time... . The assignment of coordinates that yields this match is the time traveler’s personal time. It isn’t really time, but it plays the role in his life that time plays in the life of a common person. (Lewis 1986: 69–70)

The idea of personal time can be extended to the time-traveller’s laboratory (if he chooses to travel with it). Indeed, it can extend to his hometown or local portion of the universe if he chooses to travel heavy. Lewis’s labels ‘external time’ and ‘personal time’ are misleading in this respect. The contrast is between genuine time and a time-like relation that can govern vast portions of the universe. Nevertheless, I will stick with Lewis’s terminology.

An infinite amount of personal time can be squeezed into two minutes of external time. During the first minute, the pseudo-immortal lives the first day of his life. During the next half minute, the pseudo-immortal lives the second day. During the following quarter minute, a third day passes.
Since there are infinitely many junctures in this sequence, the pseudo-immortal will enjoy infinitely many personal days.

If the pseudo-immortal discovers his veiled *mortality*, then he knows he will be dead in two minutes. Will he be bothered by his future non-existence?

All objections to Epicurus' symmetry argument imply that the pseudo-immortal would be deeply troubled. He would prefer to have his personal time coincide with external time to avoid the terror of death.

Admittedly, I prefer to have my personal time coincide with objective time. I like appearances to match reality. But I would not be keenly disappointed to learn that my region of the universe must be organized by personal time rather than by external time. Life as a pseudo-immortal would be almost as sweet as life as a genuine immortal. Death would have lost its sting.

So let us put together the two cases. In the opening scenario of veiled immortality, you have an infinite external future but a finite personal future. That is as bad as death. In the pseudo-immortal scenario, there is an infinite personal future but a finite external future. That’s far better than death and indeed it is about as good as immortality. So the pair of cases suggests that we care about personal time rather than external time. Death gets its sting from limiting our personal time.

3. Parfit and our temporal bias

Derek Parfit has a psychological explanation of the asymmetry between post-mortem non-existence and prenatal non-existence. According to Parfit (1984: 170–86), we are biased toward future goods. We are indifferent to past goods. Therefore, we are indifferent to our prenatal non-existence but dread our post-mortem non-existence.

Parfit’s psychological explanation is not intended to *justify* our preference. He thinks we might be better off if we were temporally neutral. For then we would be open to the comfort Epicurus offers with his symmetry argument.

Parfit does not hold out much hope of removing the bias. The bias probably evolved because only the future can be changed. The practical benefits of the bias probably prevent it from it being a matter of choice. Perhaps the practical benefits justify the bias; it is better that we have the bias because it leads to better consequences.

Parfit’s psychological prediction is that those who come to believe that they have veiled immortality should be relieved. Contrary to what they feared, there will be no future non-existence. They might wish for more active life in the way people wish they could spend more time awake. If you believe you are a cursed god, you may lament that you suffer from a kind of sleeping sickness. But you do not fear future non-existence.
Harry Silverstein says that post-mortem non-existence is worse than prenatal non-existence because we can only fear post-mortem non-existence. Like Parfit, Silverstein predicts that those who become persuaded that they have veiled immortality should rejoice. They will be relieved that they no longer live under a death sentence.

But belief in veiled immortality does not bring substantial relief. Whatever dismayed you about death would persist, in substance, after you came to believe that you will go on and on. You would prefer to be a pseudo-immortal. Yes, as a pseudo-immortal you would face imminent death. But your personal future would be infinite. And that’s what counts.

4. Being born earlier

The psychology of veiled immortality also exacerbates a weakness in Nagel’s account. He was immediately and frequently criticized for denying that a person could have started his existence earlier than he actually did. In a footnote, Nagel (1970: 80) discusses Robert Nozick’s objection that there might be creatures for whom prenatal existence did constitute a deprivation. If we were like spores that can be activated early, then we might regard the failure to gain this extra time as a deprivation. Yet this deprivation does not have the existential punch of death.

The lack of impact is even more striking with a spore god. This god has veiled immortality (and so suffers no future deprivation) and did not get the early activation (and so suffers past deprivation). The past deprivation of the spore god can be increased indefinitely. Conditions are ideal for eliciting existential punch given that deprivation explains what is bad about death. Yet the punch fails to materialize.

The demon could bypass issues of temporal deprivation by organizing your existence so that you have neither a beginning nor an end. One schedule is suggested by a temporal interpretation of the following sequence: ... $-1/16$, $-1/8$, $-1/4$, 0, $1/4$, $1/8$, $1/16$, ... At the present moment, you are at the midpoint of your life. From this zero point, there is a Zeno sequence that goes forward much as before. The difference is that the quantity to be divided is the remaining half of your life. The other half has already been divided backwards: the first previous quarter of your life is preceded by the previous eighth, that eighth by a sixteenth, and so on. Since each part has intermissions, you have already lived infinitely many years. There is no time before all the moments of your life. You have no beginning. You have no end.

Given this schedule, the demon has deprived you of much. But the harm has no more to do with your future than with your past. All harms must now take place within your lifespan, for your lifespan is comprehensive.
The belief that your life is organized in this way, safeguarded from prenatal non-existence and posthumous non-existence, is not comforting. Life may even be worse because of the illusory status of the prenatal past. Artefacts in museums no longer give you an antiquarian thrill.

Veiled immortality is not all bad. If we must endure eternal suffering, let us hope it is meted out on the schedule of veiled immortality. If you yearn for death, you will not be disappointed by the demon’s limit.

Bernard Williams feared that immortality would be a bore. Martha Nussbaum (1994: 225–32) contends that immortality would change our values. And existentialists insist that death is needed to shape our lives. But only a limit to your personal time is needed, not death per se. If you believed you operated under this limit, you would still feel that your personal time is a scarce resource. You would curse the demon. But you would pass on to the business of making the best of your limited lot.¹

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References

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