Ageing, in its later stages, is a process of physical decline. Physical decline brings loss: loss of physical and mental capacities, but also, very often, loss of friends and loved ones, loss of opportunities, loss of interests, loss of much that made life worthwhile, loss of hope. For many, the result is mental and physical suffering, and for the least fortunate among us, the suffering will be unbearable. It is very natural to think that physical decline is at the heart of this. But it is also very natural to think that, in principle at least, we might find ways of slowing the processes of physical decline, or even ways of stopping them completely. Would this not be a very good thing? If ageing was no longer a process of physical decline, then perhaps the very old would no longer present us with any distinctive kinds of medical problem at all – nothing over and above the problems that may arise at any age.

Many philosophers have thought that this is not so. These philosophers think that there is a kind of suffering that great age will inevitably bring, which is independent of any process of physical decline. If they are right, then even the most optimistic prospects for improvements in physical therapies will leave untouched the real core of the suffering of the very old. For these philosophers, death, at some point, is a good thing, at least in contrast to the alternative of yet more life. Such thinking is, no doubt, at the heart of the common belief that there is a ‘natural’ lifespan, after which death is to be welcomed [1]. It is a view that leads some bioethicists to condemn ‘techno-scientific’ medical interventions aimed at extending life beyond a ‘natural’ lifespan as an improper use of medical science and research [2]. Medicine science must know its limits: it is not responsible for (because it is incapable of) fighting all the forms of suffering that nature inflicts upon us, and no matter how much we might desire a longer lifespan, it is not within the proper remit of biomedicine to satisfy this desire [2]. In contemporary philosophy, the locus classicus of this pessimistic view is found in the work of Bernard Williams.

In 1972, Williams gave an invited lecture at the University of California, Berkeley. The lecture was one in an annual series funded by a bequest, and the terms of the bequest required the lecturer to speak on ‘the immortality of the soul or other kindred spiritual subject’. Williams’s kindred spiritual subject, as he drily explained, is the mortality of the soul. A version of the lecture later appeared in a very widely read collection of Williams’s essays, ‘Problems of the Self’, with the title ‘The Macropulos Case: Reflections on the tedium of immortality’ [3].

‘The Macropulos Case’ is the title of a play by the Czech writer Karel Capek, which then provided Janacek with the libretto for his penultimate opera, also called The Macropulos Case. Completed in 1925, the opera was little known outside Czechoslovakia until 1964, when it was produced in London by the Sadlers Wells Company to great critical acclaim – Sadlers Wells, which later became English National Opera, a company on whose Board of Directors Williams served for 20 years. Almost certainly, he knew the Macropulos Case from its operatic incarnation.

The central character of the opera, Elena Macropulos, is, at the time of the action, 337 years old. That is the strict and literal truth of it, but it would be more revealing to say that she is 37 years old, but has been 37 for 300 years. Her father, a 16th century court doctor, tried out a formula for an elixir of life on his daughter, and it seems to have worked. As a result of taking the elixir, she has remained in the physical condition typical of a vigorously, robustly healthy 37-year-old. But her mental condition is one of great suffering. Her potentially unending life has become unendurable to her. At the climax of the drama, she refuses to take another dose of the elixir, ages rapidly and hideously, and dies. The formula is then destroyed by a young woman, over the protests of the bystanders – older men, for the most part.

The details of Elina Macropulos’s remarkable physical condition are left underspecified by the play, but we naturally think of her as physically outwardly normal, for a 37-year-old. So, for example, she is not an immortal. She shares our vulnerability to injury and disease. She therefore shares our normal motivations to avoid those things. And she has avoided them successfully; she has not been badly injured, and she has not suffered debilitating disease. She is in good health, and has no particular reason to
doubt that she will continue to be so, provided she keeps taking the elixir. But her mental state is truly dreadful. She cares about nothing, finds value in nothing. She retains the instincts that serve to keep her going from one day to the next, but they are now alien to her since the preserve nothing she is able to care about. This is the ‘tedium of immortality’ of Williams’s subtitle. And so she becomes in effect a suicide, a choice which Williams approves – and a choice that a good many people might approve for Elina Macropulos.

The first part of Williams’s paper contains a discussion of the views of Lucretius and Epicurus on the subject of death, and against those authorities Williams argues that death is sometimes a harm to the one who dies, and is therefore, sometimes, rightly feared. And his argument articulates a version of the view we now label ‘comparativism’: death is a harm to the one who dies when, and to the extent that, the life they would have had, had they lived longer, would have been a better life (would have had more of the good things of life) than the one they actually had. Williams thinks that this is often the case, although not always. Many of us will have lives less good than the lives we would have had, had we lived a little longer. But for some, this is not so. And when it is no longer true that more life might be better life, death is not a harm to the one who dies. In particular, death is no harm to Elina Macropulos, for whom there is no longer even the bare possibility that more life might be better.

So far, many will sympathize. But then, in the heart of the article, Williams goes on to defend a very different and very striking claim. He argues that it is not a contingent fact that Elina Macropulos’s life has led her to a condition of unbearable suffering, for this condition awaits us all, if only we live long enough. It took 337 years for Elina Macropulos to get there, and in some perhaps it would take still longer (but also in some it might come much quicker). Here, there is contingency: but in that fact that we will all get there in the end, according to Williams, there is no contingency at all. An eternal life, for a human being or anything resembling one, would inevitably become one of unbearable suffering, and in a way which no longer admits even the bare possibility of relief. That is surely a very remarkable claim, and it would take a very remarkable argument to persuade us of its truth. Does Williams offer such an argument? That question has been debated at some length in the literature, and in this discussion, it seems to me, find explicitly most of the elements of a distinctive kind of metaphysical conception that is often just below the surface in our more immediately practical reflections on so-called ‘end of life’ experiences.

It is important that Williams’s argument concerns, not what we can imagine or conceive, but what we can want, or desire, or hope for. The argument is not intended to show that the idea of a life of eternal felicity is unintelligible. There are all sorts of ways, some of them very obvious, in which a person might live forever in a state of contentment. The obstacle presented by this possibility is not an obstacle to the intellect: it is an obstacle to the will. We can imagine a life in which we never die, but we cannot hope for it; and insofar as we are inclined to think we do hope for it, according to Williams, it is only because the object of our hope is kept in very soft focus. Once we try to fill in the necessary details, we will hope for it no longer.

It is also important to be clear about the way in which Elina Macropulos’s choices – to take the elixir and live on, or to refuse it and die – relate to the hope to avoid death. At no point does she choose immortality: the elixir offers her the possibility of living on from here, not the possibility of living forever, and that is the choice she eventually refuses. So Williams has to show that, at some point, all of us would refuse the choice to live on. That is much harder than to show that, at any time, each of us would refuse the choice to live forever. It is actually quite plausible that each of us, on reflection, would refuse the choice of immortality, in anything like our human condition since that choice would permanently foreclose the possibility of relief from unbearable suffering, should things work out badly. But what the elixir offers, at any time, is a regularly repeated offer of going on from here for a while. Williams’s claim is that all of us, eventually, would refuse that offer. And that, I think, has far less immediate plausibility.

Why exactly would we all refuse the offer eventually? Here, given only the materials Williams explicitly supplies, some further assembly is required. The central thought, though, is this. If escape from death is something for which I can hope (and now we should do this in the first person), then two conditions will have to be satisfied. First, it will have to be clear that it is me that is to go on living. Call this the constancy requirement. And, second, the eternal life I live will have to have sufficient variety to stave off indefinitely Elina Makropulos’ condition of unendurable boredom. This is the variety requirement. Williams’s reflections are intended to make it plausible that nothing that satisfies both requirements will count as a prospect for which we will hope. Constancy and variety will pull apart. Eventually, we will find that either the variety requirement has been satisfied in ways that make it no longer plausible that it is me that is living forever, or that (to paraphrase Williams) everything that can happen and make sense to one person of a certain constancy of character has already happened – in which case, it would seem, boredom ensues.

Actually, the constancy requirement is a little more complicated than that. In thinking about the desirability of a future life, something more than the bare thought that it will be me that will live this life is required. There may be ways of going on from here on which, although it is clear that it really is me that lives on, I have changed in ways that are not acceptable to me. If I were to know that my survival would result in me becoming a very cruel person, for example, I might think that the price is too high to pay. Williams expresses the constancy requirement, therefore, in terms of sufficient continuity of character.

These allegedly competing desiderata, identity over time understood in terms of something like continuity of character and a variety of experience sufficient to stave off boredom, are the key themes in Williams’ discussion, and both are problematic. Now, Elina Macropulos does indeed seem to exhibit a remarkable constancy of character throughout her long life. As Williams notes, she seems at 337 very much as she was at 37. And such an inability to grow, to develop, to mature, one would have thought, might very well result in one being in a very bad way after 300 years. But why think that inevitable? Why think that, in general, each of us will get stuck at some age or other – some perhaps perpetual adolescents, some perpetual 200-year-olds (whatever 200-year-olds turn out to be like)? Even it turns out that we do all in fact get stuck, that would surely be a contingent fact. And so, if something is holding Elina Macropulos in her 37-year-old condition, is that not a contingent fact, perhaps even a pathological one? Perhaps she needs medical help. In the normal course of life, a person depressed –
certainly someone suicidal – might seek counselling to help them come to terms with changes they feel unable to face. I may feel like giving up because I have been in the same job too long, or because I cannot come to terms with the fact that my little girl has grown up and moved away from home. I may need a new line of work, or a new hobby – but it would be a bizarre counsellor who advised me simply to give up and embrace death in the face of either monotony or ‘identity changing’ variations in my life patterns. Why just assume that sheer chronological age must, at some point, render something otherwise unacceptable advice sound? I shall come back to that thought, but first we must look at the other player in Williams’s argument, boredom.

Actually, it is not at all obvious that deep problem for Elina Macropulos is boredom. Rather, it appears to be a very deep kind of apathy. Or, better, it is a constant inclination to collapse back into a state of apathy. After all, she is the main protagonist of a drama, and the unfolding narrative hinges on her attempt to make some things happen. This reveals things that she cares about, at least intermittently, but she seems unable to care with enough focus and consistency for her projects to hold anything other than momentary and passing significance for her. Always, there is the pull back towards a condition in which she cares about nothing at all. Apathy. And it seems to me worth noting that this apathy does not show itself only in an inability to find anything of value in her future. Her past, and with it, the possibility of a kind of integrity in her long life, is also something about which she cannot care with any kind of focus and consistency either. The main action of the drama, after all, is her attempt to secure a legacy for a family who are in fact, and unknown to anyone but herself, her own remote descendants, offspring of an illegitimate affair with a nobleman. Her inability to care, with any kind of fixity, about whether she is able to bring about a kind of closure to a troubled episode in her own past, seems to me to suggest what is worst about Elina Macropulos’s condition, which is her inability to care about herself.

Well, be that as it may, what matters here is that Williams thinks that irreversible, perpetual boredom is inevitably the fate that awaits us all, and we need not worry too much whether Elina Macropulos exemplifies that condition. But why think that? Well, take any activity you enjoy, or find rewarding, or absorbing. Now imagine doing it again, and again, and again … It seems quite plausible that, sooner or later, you will become tired of it. Now imagine any complex of enjoyments, and imagine them repeated forever, perhaps in varied orders. Once again, it would seem, boredom will come in the end – so long as we retain the kind of awareness of ourselves and our pasts that Williams thinks, plausibly enough, necessary for these enjoyments to be enjoyments of mine. I do not know if there is necessity here, exactly, but it is true, as Williams points out, the plausibility of the line of thought does not seem to depend at all on the details of your particular set of enjoyments, or the particular kind of person you are.

Suppose that shows that we will get bored of the things we (now) enjoy. But that falls a long way short of Williams’s dismal conclusion. To begin with, not everything we care about is an enjoyment, or any other kind of activity. More importantly, though, nothing in that line of reflection suggest that boredom will set in finally and irreversibly. The antidote to boredom is variety, and why think that variety will run out?

Perhaps the constancy requirement plays a role here. Perhaps the idea is that, so long as I retain a character, which will limit the kinds of variety that might provide me with any prospect of relief from boredom. But that thought seems to me to have very little force. Whatever kind of fixity of character is required for it being me in the future, it cannot have the consequence that the kinds of new thing that have meaning for me at 60 must be the same as, or even very closely related to, the kinds of things that provided meaningful variety at 16. Character grows and develops, and the concept of character has at least as much complexity as to allow for the thought that the ways in which character grows and develops themselves reveal aspects of our character. Characters are partly given to us, no doubt, and partially shaped by circumstance, no doubt, but they are also – and crucially – things that we develop, that we work on. And we do this, sometimes, in characteristic ways. And it seems to me that development of character interacts with the possibilities of meaningful novelty in very complex and unpredictable ways – far too complex and unpredictable to permit confident conclusions about inevitable boredom from a priori reflection alone. It may very well be that some combination of Elina Makropulos’s character and the circumstances of her long life conspire to leave her without the resources to resist the pull towards terminal boredom, or apathy, but that is contingency, not any kind of necessity. I do not see much plausibility in the thought that she is representative of something about escaping from the inevitability of death.

It seems to me, therefore, that the constancy and variety requirements alone do not offer nearly enough support for Williams’s dismal conclusion. Why, then, have so many found it so plausible?

There is a further line of thought that may be playing a role here. And unlike the constancy and variety requirements, it concerns not so much the agent who must decide whether to go on from here, but rather the things of value that give life a meaning. I would be very loathed to attribute this line of thought to Williams, but it is a vivid presence in some sympathetic discussions of his view, and also more broadly in many discussions of death and, in particular, of suicide. It starts out from the peculiarity of the idea that the availability of novel and varied activity alone might be enough to give one reason to choose to go on. Surely that altogether misses out what is really important? A life of limitless novelty has no appeal unless the novel activities have some point, some kind of worthwhile goal, or function, or purpose. Surely, it will not be enough, to make me choose to go on from here, merely to know that I will always be entertained, or diverted – perhaps by an endless number of new children’s games, which I will become dull, ignorant and unimaginative enough always to enjoy?

And to this rather plausible thought, we now add something about decay and impermanence. Whatever it is that constitutes the goal that might seem to give value to our endeavours, it will not last, and a longer life will serve only to bring more and more experience of the inevitability of transience and loss. There is a memorably vivid and direct version of this in a book that is almost exactly contemporary with Williams’s article, by the American philosopher Richard Taylor. Taylor’s exemplification of the human condition is not Elina Macropulos, but the eternal labour of Sisyphus, condemned for all eternity to roll his rock to the top of the hill, only to watch it roll down again. I shall pick up his discussion at the point where he has imagined that the gods have shown mercy to Sisyphus, by allowing him to use the stones he must forever roll.
to the top of the hill to construct a beautiful temple, thus giving a point, a purpose, a telos for his labours. Will this give Sisyphus a reason to go on from here? Taylor writes:

This life of the world thus presents itself to our eyes as a vast machine, feeding on itself, running on and on forever to nothing. And we are part of that life . . . if we think that, unlike Sisyphus, [our] labours do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and, independently of our own deep interests in them, very worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough . . . For Sisyphus temple to make any difference it had to be a temple that would at least endure, adding beauty to the world for the remainder of time. Our achievements . . . like the sand swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities, while around them the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down . . . ([4], pp. 262–263)

And there it is. It has taken Elina Makropulos 300 years to see it, but then she had not the benefit of philosophy.

There is, of course, quite a lot to say about this, but little of it can be said here. Notice, though, the power that the idea of impermanence has in Taylor’s thought. The gods offer to Sisyphus the opportunity to build something of value, a beautiful temple. But even on the best case scenario, the labour will be done, and then the beautiful temple will begin the long, slow process of decline. And then it will all have come to naught.

I think there is a mistake here, and it may be that the same mistake has a role to play in the thought of those who find Williams’s argument for his dismal conclusion persuasive. It is the mistake of going from the undeniable claim that many of the things we value – beautiful things, for example – are impermanent, and will soon be beautiful no longer, to the conclusion that the value of those things is impermanent. And that is indeed a profoundly depressing line of thought, one that threatens to bring with it Elena Macropulos’s awful condition of frozen apathy. Against this, I offer only an antidote and a simple comment. Rather than bee keeping, think of gardening. To be sure, the garden that you have made beautiful today will very soon be beautiful no longer. Further attention will be required, and of course the doleful wisdom of the physicists guarantees a time when further attention will no longer be possible. The garden that is beautiful today is a transient thing, and soon will be beautiful no longer. But from this undeniable fact, nothing at all follows about value of the beauty that was.

This paper was presented on 9 December 2011 at the King’s College/Centre for Humanities and Health Workshop on Death. A report on this workshop [5] and three other papers from it [1,6,7] are also published in this issue.

References