

BORGES AND THE VALUE OF IMMORTALITY: AN ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Due to the complexity of the views Borges developed regarding immortality, certain unresolved (and, it may be, irresolvable) tensions lurk within the works in which he treats of immortality as a problem in ethics. This article proposes to examine a few of those tensions and their implications from the perspective of the analytic tradition of philosophy regarding the value or otherwise of immortality, and, by natural extension, the nature and limits of the value of human life.¹ To this end, it clarifies some of the philosophical issues involved in conceptualizing and evaluating immortality, and proceeds, thence, to analyze and assess Borges's treatment of those issues.

I. IMMORTALITY AND ETHICAL EVALUATION

The basic *ethical* question that immortality poses is whether we can have reason to choose, if we could, some form of infinite life over the narrowly circumscribed ones that, so far as we know, we happen actually to lead, and, if so, what that reason could possibly be. When Borges came to con-

1 Nothing in this paper assumes that Borges was in effect some kind of analytic philosopher *manqué* whose intention was to construct and illustrate perfectly self-consistent theories. Nevertheless, beneath the surfaces of his speculations lie structures of rigorous reasoning, and to analyze any such structure *as if* it were that of a strict philosophical theory may aid in understanding Borges, who constantly drew upon the modes and materials of philosophy, including analytic philosophy, in his works.

sider the question of immortality most deeply and at greatest length, he himself assumed the primacy of this ethical value question—as, for instance, when he called “El inmortal” “ese bosquejo de una ética para inmortales,” and its subject “el efecto que la inmortalidad causaría en los hombres” (OC 629).

Now in many ways the simplest (and, for many proponents of immortality, the most attractive) model of immortality consists in a person’s living an unaging and infinitely extended life in our everyday world that is otherwise identical to the life of an ordinary mortal human. And since it is this model of *personal immortality* that elicits Borges’s most scrupulous (and most destructive) attentions, it is this model that we must begin by considering.

II. PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Those who find personal immortality preferable, all told, to mortal life typically do so for one of two reasons:

1. *The Identity Reason*: Personal immortality protects its possessors for all eternity from the loss of their unique personal identities, and thus vouchsafes them an endless duration in which to be themselves.

2. *The Experience Reason*: Personal immortality confers upon its possessors an endless series of desirable experiences.

The first reason presupposes that a given self can, because it is unique, be distinguished by clear principles of individuation from every other self; that personal immortality consists in the preservation of this unique individual self through all time; and that such eternal preservation is better than the extinction of that self in death. These three claims form the basic structure of the Identity Reason in favor of personal immortality that, for instance, Miguel de Unamuno defends in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*.² Nothing in these claims requires that the lives of immortal persons contain anything they deem desirable *over and above* their supreme desid-

2 Unamuno’s passion for personal immortality neatly counterpoints Borges’s aversion to eternal continuance. Borges claims incomprehension: “[Don Miguel de Unamuno] repite muchas veces que quiere seguir siendo don Miguel de Unamuno. Aquí ya no entiendo a Miguel de Unamuno; yo no quiero seguir siendo Jorge Luis Borges, yo quiero ser otra persona. Espero que mi muerte sea total, espero morir en cuerpo y alma” (“La Inmortalidad,” *Borges oral* 29-30). An almost exact inverse of this is found in Unamuno: “Querer ser otro, es querer dejar de ser uno el que es. Me explico que uno

eratum of personal continuance. This type of immortality may be called *single-self personal immortality*.

The second reason implies that personal immortality offers its possessors the opportunity of having an endless series of experiences; that these experiences are ones that they desire or will desire to have; and that this serves to make personal immortality better for them than a limited mortal life. Nothing here demands that an immortal person have anything like a constant, distinct, and unique personal identity over the span of an endless lifetime: it is sufficient for immortality to be desirable for the Experience Reason that an immortal life contain an inexhaustible series of desirable experiences *whether or not* the person P_{100} who will have desirable (for P_{100}) experiences at some far future time T_{100} can be said to be *the same person* as the person P_1 who has desirable (for P_1) experiences at present time T_1 . In extreme cases, a proponent of the Experience Reason can even affirm a form of immortality in which a single numerically continuous body hosts, over an endless duration, an infinite set of more or less distinct “persons” many or most of whom will be utter strangers to each other. We may call the ideally fluctuant form of this kind of immortality *multiple-self personal immortality*.³

In “El inmortal” Borges sets out to refute the claim that there is *anything whatsoever* that is good or desirable about personal immortality, either of the single-self or of the multiple-self variety, by discrediting each of the main reasons advanced in favor of it. Examining some of the philosophical objections to the implications and underlying assumptions of those reasons will help us understand better the arguments that operate in “El inmortal.”

deseo tener lo que otro tiene, sus riquezas o sus conocimientos; pero ser otro, es cosa que no me la explico” (15).

3 This kind of multiple-self immortality is similar (but not identical) to what Bernard Williams has termed the “Teiresias model” of immortality (94). It is noteworthy that this 1972 essay by Williams, which has generated a sizeable subsidiary literature, does not cite Borges but adopts lines of argument very similar to the ones present in “El inmortal.” Borges had already recognized, as Williams later came to, that the central problem with personal immortality is that it is in constant tension between not being worth living and not being the eternal continuance of a single person.

A. THE IDENTITY REASON FOR PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Since most philosophers believe, for a variety of reasons, that personal identity is not the same as physical or numerical identity, and that the conditions that establish the latter do not serve to establish the former, let us assume that persons are neither their bodies alone nor their minds alone but some kind of embodied minds.⁴ To say this does not as yet tell us how we are to determine whether or not the embodied mind that a person is at some time T_1 is identical to the embodied mind which that person will be at some later time T_5 . Must the contents of that person's mind be exactly the same at T_5 as at T_1 for the person at T_5 to be identical to the person that he or she is at T_1 ? Must the constituent particles of that person's body be exactly the same? Or is it sufficient that some proportion of each be the same? If so, what proportion of each?

The underlying problem is the very ancient one of assessing the diachronic identity of any changeable thing, except that the question is exponentially complicated, in this case, by the anomalous kind of thing a person happens to be. It is, indeed, entirely likely that the problem is not amenable to any solution and that, as Derek Parfit has suggested, we must talk not of the diachronic identity of persons in the abstract but of the kind of continuity between them that seems relevant to the kind of question we are asking (245-80). Restated thus, the question that concerns us will be: Can every stage of an immortal person's life be related tightly enough to every other stage of that life for us to say that he or she is for all intents and purposes "the same person" throughout his or her life? Those who think that such a thing *is* possible can defend their view by making either of two claims: (a) there are certain features of a person's self that will never change, no matter how long he or she lives, and those features serve, by being constantly present, to establish the kind of relatedness relevant to our judgment of his or her sameness over infinite time; or, (b) although there is nothing in a person's self that will not have changed between some time T_1 and some far distant time T_{100} , those changes are gradual and not synchronized with each other, so that a person's self at T_1 is continuous with a marginally different self at T_2 , which in turn is continuous

4 Jeff McMahan's is perhaps the most rigorous and detailed defense of this view in the literature on personal identity (66-94).

with a marginally different self at T_3 , and so on until we reach the self at T_{100} , which, by transitivity of the continuity-relation, is shown to be continuous with the self at T_1 .

Claim (a) can be rejected: even if there are features that never change over a mortal person's life (and it is far from certain that there are), we cannot safely derive from a fact that holds for a conventional span of three-score-and-ten any fact that will hold for all eternity.

This leaves the second claim. Does the sort of continuity it posits suffice for personal immortality? Two points are worth noting in this regard. First, for a person at T_1 , a "self" at some sufficiently distant future time T_n is likely to be so different an entity that he or she could not recognize anything of himself or herself in it. If so, the person at T_1 cannot be related to that future entity at T_n by any bond of *self-regarding concern*: one cannot, beyond a limit, care for "one's own" future continuance any more or any differently than one could for the future life of an entirely different person. Second, the reverse is also true: for a person at T_n , a "self" at a sufficiently distant past T_1 is likely to be so different an entity that he or she could not recognize anything of it in himself or herself. If so, the person at T_n cannot be related to that past entity at T_1 by any connection of *memory*. Even if we assume, with John Locke, that personal identity consists in the preservation of consciousness by means of, *inter alia*, memories, no possibility of conserving all or even most memories *through all eternity* seems available.⁵ In time, all or most memories will probably be extinguished, and immortality, as the figure of Homer in "El inmortal" suggests, is far more likely to be a long forgetting than an eternal remembering.

B. THE EXPERIENCE REASON FOR PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Though proponents of the Experience Reason for personal immortality vary widely in their choice of experiences deemed robust enough to sustain an infinite life, they seem to agglomerate into two overlapping classes.

5 See, especially, Locke 244-57. Borges rejects the Lockean view when he says in ("La nadería de la personalidad": "No hay tal yo de conjunto. Equivócase quien define la identidad personal como la posesión privativa de algún erario de recuerdos ... si arraiga la personalidad en el recuerdo, ¿a qué tenencia pretender sobre los instantes cumplidos que, por cotidianos o añejos, no estamparon en nosotros una grabazón perdurable?" (*Inquisiciones* 85-86).

For the *hedonists*, such experiences involve the pleasure that follows upon the gratification of desires, whether sensual or eudaimonic. The *agonists*, by contrast, propose a single experience (or set of closely related experiences) that consists in the tireless, asymptotic pursuit of some ideal.

Now since, for hedonists, personal immortality consists in the endless formation of desires and their endless satisfaction, they are called upon to show that human beings *are* in fact capable of forming and pleasurablely satisfying an infinite series of desires vigorous or novel enough to give them a reason to go on living for all eternity; and it is implausible, given what we know of our redoubtable capacity for jadedness even in our finite lives, that they can show any such thing.⁶ Borges observes that, even in our mortal lives, among the desires that call out for satisfaction is the desire to cease to exist, and suggests that since this desire conflicts with the desire to continue to exist and undercuts all desires that assume or require continued existence, the very formation of those latter desires will eventually prove fatally exhausting:

Tenemos muchos anhelos, entre ellos el de la vida, el de ser para siempre, pero también el de cesar [...] Todas esas cosas pueden cumplirse sin inmortalidad personal, no precisamos de ella. Yo, personalmente, no la deseo y le temo; para mí sería espantoso saber que voy a continuar, sería espantoso pensar que voy a seguir siendo Borges. Estoy harto de mí mismo, de mi nombre y de mi fama y quiero liberarme de todo eso. (“La inmortalidad,” *Borges oral* 36)

The problem facing the agonists’ view is the somewhat different one of showing that there can be an ideal (or set of ideals) at once compelling enough to attract eternally all our powers of purposive striving and elusive enough to thwart always our final attainment of it. It is difficult to see how this could be shown: it seems highly plausible that after a few dozen millennia of pursuing a frustratingly elusive ideal, the immortals will recognize the untenable contradictoriness of their condition and succumb to the temptation to throw it all up as a bad job. It is even possible

6 See, for instance, Williams’s argument that human beings *cannot* sustain an infinite series of “categorical” desires (viz., desires whose expected satisfaction gives us a reason to go on living, as opposed to the “conditional” desires we wish to have satisfied inasmuch as we happens to be alive), and will, therefore, soon begin to experience immortal life as crushingly tedious (82-100). It must be added that there have been several attempts to show that Williams’s argument is defective or unfounded.

that they will then come to look upon the meager products of their erstwhile striving with violent revulsion. Borges suggests that this might be so, for the immortals in “El inmortal” proceed assiduously to reconfigure the perfect city they once built into a savage perversion of intent and order that, under Homer’s guidance, they dedicate to the demented tutelars of their condition:

Con las reliquias de su ruina erigieron, en el mismo lugar, la desatinada ciudad que yo recorrí: suerte de parodia o reverso y también templo de los dioses irracionales que manejan el mundo y de los que nada sabemos, salvo que no se parecen al hombre. (OC 540)

But even this revulsion does not long serve to supply the immortals with vital resolve:

Aquella fundación fue el último símbolo a que condescendieron los Inmortales; marca una etapa en que, juzgando que toda empresa es vana, determinaron vivir en el pensamiento, en la pura especulación. Erigieron la fábrica, la olvidaron y fueron a morar en las cuevas. (OC 540)

And the “pura especulación” that the immortals come to engage in is itself merely a pleasant way to pass the time, not anything high-mindedly purposive.

C. THE DILEMMA OF PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Upon inspection, it becomes clear that the Identity Reason and the Experience Reason cannot be proposed simultaneously or in conjunction, because they are fundamentally incompatible. Even if “personal identity” in some sense can be maintained over an infinite span of time, thus meeting the Identity Reason, a person’s (*ex hypothesi*, single-self) immortality will require him or her to abandon all hope of having anything more than a finite set of desirable experiences in an endless life, it being overwhelmingly likely that an immortal life as an immutable self will prove, by stages, crushingly tedious (inasmuch as it will fail to supply experiences variegated enough to solicit desires through all eternity) and cruelly confining (inasmuch as the individuating features of a changeless self will begin to operate as implacable limits placed upon capabilities of will and action). Conversely, even if it were possible for human beings to enjoy an infinite series of desirable experiences forever, those who choose personal im-

mortality for the Experience Reason would have to abandon all hope of existing as single, unique, and coherent persons through eternity, it being virtually inevitable that an immortal life rich enough in diverse experiences that it could hold their interest and sustain their vital energies for all eternity would lead, by imperceptible degrees, to radical changes in their selves that could not long be papered over by any conception of personal identity worth the name. Defenders of personal immortality are, therefore, required to choose between the Identity Reason and single-self immortality, on the one hand, and the Experience Reason and multiple-self immortality, on the other.

But one troublesome entailment of the mutual incompatibility of these reasons is that it also configures a dilemma for attackers of personal immortality: establishing that an infinite lifetime spent confined within the contours of a fixed, discrete personality will eventually prove torturous will not cast any doubt on the desirability of an immortality in which its possessor is *not* so confined; and, conversely, showing that a form of immortality in which the personality of its possessor melts and flows beyond all recognition is superfluous will not demonstrate the superfluity of a form of immortality in which the personality of its possessor remains more or less constant and durable. An argument against single-self immortality is not yet an argument against multiple-self immortality or vice-versa.

This is a dilemma that Borges perceives quite clearly, for in “El inmortal” he devises a solution to it by crafting for his protagonist an altogether novel form of immortality. We may call it “*Rufus-type immortality*.”

D. RUFUS-TYPE IMMORTALITY

Rufus-type immortality oscillates between single-self and multiple-self immortality without being reducible to either. The key feature of this type of immortality, as Borges proposes it, is that it wreaks such havoc on the individuating contours of its possessors’ identities that they are soon unable to distinguish between themselves at one of their own life-stages and altogether different persons.⁷ As Rufus/Cartaphilus eventually discovers, the relentless ongoingness of his life has eroded the quiddity of his self

7 As Rufus says of Argos: “pensé que acaso no había objetos para él, sino un vertiginoso y continuo juego de impresiones brevísimas” (OC 539). His own self, as an intemperate and temporally extended entity, is one such object that Argos cannot recognize.

and transformed it into something as fungible as language: “No es extraño que el tiempo haya confundido las que alguna vez me representaron con las que fueron símbolos de la suerte de quien me acompañó tantos siglos” (OC 543-44).

This is the multiple-self element in Rufus-type immortality. But *at the same time* (and this is the single-self element in it), the links between the immortals’ own life-stages are not so weak that they are wholly unable to recall those life-stages and identify them as having been *their own*. Argos remembers having once been Homer, and Cartaphilus’s account (and therefore the very text we are reading) could not have existed had Cartaphilus not been able to remember having once been Rufus.

It is on the basis of this *simultaneity* of multiple-self fragmentation and single-self continuity that Borges suggests that Rufus-type immortality is superfluous at best and intolerable at worst. It is *superfluous* because its fragmentation makes it no different, even for its possessors, than a set of different mortal lives led by different mortal people: “en un plazo infinito le ocurren a todo hombre todas las cosas... Nadie es alguien, un solo hombre immortal es todos los hombres” (OC 541).

And it is *intolerable* because its continuation burdens its possessors with an immitigable sense of tedium that follows naturally from their realization that they are condemned always to remain themselves, forever denied the radical self-effacement of death.

E. THE CONTRADICTION IN RUFUS-TYPE IMMORTALITY

However, for all the elegance with which it confutes both reasons advanced in favor of personal immortality, Rufus-type immortality houses an ineliminable contradiction. That kind of immortality can be *tedious* for its possessors only if they are aware that it is indeed they, as discrete individual selves, who have lived through all the life-stages that seem to them in many respects dissociated from each other. If those life-stages were as fully disconnected as the multiple-self element of Rufus-type immortality implies, they would make the life of an immortal no more tedious than the life of any of us is made by the fact that other mortals, wholly different from us, have led, are leading, and will lead other lives than our own. Conversely, Rufus-type immortality can be *superfluous* for its possessors only if there is in fact *no* notable difference, for them, between the series of life-

stages they live over a long span of time and a concatenation of different mortal lives led by different mortal people. But the single-self continuity a Rufus-type immortal actually perceives between those life-stages, no matter how tenuous, happens indeed to be precisely such a difference, because that kind of continuity does not and cannot hold within any concatenation of different mortal lives led by different mortal people. In a Rufus-type existence, I may end up having led every kind of human life, but this does not mean that such an existence is identical in every salient respect to the set of all human lives, since in the former case it will have been *I* who led all those lives; and it will have been *I* who led them precisely because the single-self continuity intrinsic to Rufus-type immortality will have prevented me from dissolving altogether into a stream of serial lives. A world in which Homer exists and I exist is not identical to a world in which I come to exist as both Homer and myself. As the orthodox of Tlön pointed out, with perfect justice, “una cosa es *igualdad* y otra *identidad*” (OC 438). That so, Cartaphilus’s statement that a single immortal man is all men can thus be true only in a very approximate, figurative sense. Indeed, it may be observed that when he says “un solo hombre immortal es todos los hombres,” and goes on to say “soy dios, soy héroe, soy filósofo, soy demonio y soy mundo, lo cual es una fatigosa manera de decir que no soy”⁸ (OC 541), he is committing a fallacy whose lineaments Borges himself traced when, elsewhere, he observed:

Ser una cosa es inexorablemente no ser todas las otras cosas; la intuición confusa de esa verdad ha inducido a los hombres a imaginar que no ser es más que ser algo y que, de alguna manera, es ser todo. (“De alguien a nadie”, OC 739)

To be individuated as “*un solo hombre immortal*,” an entity must necessarily be “*una cosa*,” and so, inexorably, cannot be “*todas las otras cosas*”;

8 Borges elsewhere refers to an epigraph to *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum* by Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim in which Agrippa says: “Soy filósofo, dios, héroe, demonio y el universo entero” (“La nadería de la personalidad,” *Inquicisiones* 87). This epigraph is not an invention of Borges’s: it reads, in Agrippa’s Latin, “Ipse philosophus, daemon, heros, deus, & omnis” (Agrippa, unpaginated prefatory material). It emerges that Cartaphilus’s avowal of the fungibility of his self, by virtue of being an unacknowledged quotation, itself exhibits that fungibility.

and the intuition that not to exist and to exist as everything are, one way or another, the same thing betrays, under *this* view of Borges's, a confusion.

Briefly put, therefore, the dilemma Borges faces is this: *Rufus-type immortality can be tedious only if it is not superfluous and superfluous only if it is not tedious*. Borges's immortals cannot deem any life or life-stage of theirs *simultaneously* tedious and superfluous, because to do so they would have to deem that life or life-stage both their own and not their own at the same time. And one cannot resolve this contradiction by arguing that a life can be *one's* in some sense and *not one's* in some different sense. It is only one's own life that one can find tedious in the *relevant* sense (the lives of others one may find irksome or superfluous, but only one's own life can afflict one with *this* kind of tedium), so that if one finds a life tedious in *this* sense, that life can only be one's, and being one's, simply cannot be another's.

A solution to (or at least a circumvention of) this aporia in "El inmortal" may be reconstructed from suggestions made by Borges in various works in which he typically opts to stress the superfluity of immortality rather than its tediousness, and supports his view by denying outright the basic assumptions of both the Identity and the Experience Reasons for deeming personal immortality desirable. It is to one such argument that we must now turn.

III. BEYOND PERSONAL IMMORTALITY: BORGES'S DEFENSE OF TRANSPERSONAL IMMORTALITY

A. THE IDEA OF TRANSPERSONAL IMMORTALITY

Whether or not an infinitely extended life as oneself would prove tedious to one may ultimately be a matter of one's taste and temperament, but whether or not there is any such thing as a "self" is a matter neither of taste nor of temperament but of rigorous metaphysics. If there is in fact no such thing as a self, the identity-preservation reason in favor of personal immortality is refuted from the bottom up, for nothing can be preserved at all, let alone eternally, that does not exist. Everything hinges, therefore, upon the existence of a unique and distinct personal self, and it is precisely the existence of such a self that Borges denies.

Borges repeatedly levels against the existence of such a self an argument derived from David Hume, who famously observed that, howsoever hard he introspected, he was unable to find anything in his mind that corresponded either to the vernacular or to the philosophical notion of “the self”: all he ever found were perceptions following rapidly upon perceptions with nothing perceptible beneath that was doing all the perceiving. This compelled him to conclude that “the self” was no more than a non-existent (or, at any rate, undemonstrable) substrate fictively posited to give some semblance of tractable unity to a collection of more or less random perceptions:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception . . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement . . . They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed.⁹ (Hume, 252-53)

Now if, as Borges followed Hume in asserting, the self is a collection of successive perceptions and not some indivisible, idiosyncratic thing that takes up its occult habitation somewhere within us, what differentiates one self from all others can only be the way in which that particular collection of perceptions happens to be put together. Each self will, in other words, be a bundle of perceptions distinguishable from every other such bundle only by the number, nature, sequence, and interrelations of the perceptions that constitute it. No intrinsic quality of “selfness” will subsist beneath those perceptions and infuse them with some induplicable savor. From this “bundle theory” of the self, Borges builds an idea of *transpersonal* immortality that emerges from arguments and speculations scattered across several of his essays and lectures.

⁹ Borges addresses Hume’s views in many places, including in “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” where he quotes (in Spanish) the passage quoted above (OC 757-71).

Borges begins by assuming that if a self is reducible, without metaphysical residue, to a bundle of perceptions, it will not be one indivisible thing but the conglomerate of those perceptions. Consequently, each of those perceptions will be a portion of that self. And if the self does not add some unique ingredient of its own to each of those perceptions (as, by defensible assumption, it cannot, it being nothing *but* those perceptions), those perceptions can be replicated perfectly in other selves. It is thus that Borges can say in “Nueva refutación del tiempo:”

[P]odemos postular, en la mente de un individuo (o de dos individuos que se ignoran, pero en quienes se opera el mismo proceso), dos momentos iguales. Postulada esa igualdad, cabe preguntar: Esos idénticos momentos ¿no son el mismo? (OC 763)

And, further:

La escribo, ahora, así: Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos — noche en serenidad, parecita límpida, olor provinciano de la madreSelva, barro fundamental— no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo en esa esquina hace tantos años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. (OC 765)¹⁰

But since every perception in a self is a portion of that self, the duplication of that perception in another self amounts to a duplication of a portion of itself in that other. Moreover, Borges suspects, the number of complex experiences obtainable by permuting and combining the elementary perceptions is not infinite: “Sospecho... que el número de variaciones circunstanciales no es infinito” (OC 763). And again:

Es evidente que el número de tales momentos humanos no es infinito. Los elementales —los de sufrimiento físico y goce físico, los de acercamiento del sueño, los de la audición de una sola música, los de mucha intensidad o mucho desgano— son más impersonales aún.¹¹ (OC 765)

10 This passage, from “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” is identical to one that occurs in “Historia de la eternidad” (OC 367). This repetition of the passage in two essays widely separated in time is not merely appropriate to the sense and implications of the passage itself, but also indicates that it stated an insight that was important to Borges.

11 The idea that such elementary perceptions are finite is not original to Borges. As J. Agassi notes: “Berkeley and Hume clearly declare all experienceable space, geometry, colour, sound, etc., to consist of a finite set of discrete segments. And so, it seems, did even Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*” (291).

The finitude of these elementary perceptions, and of the complex experiences that they combine variously to create, ensures that each of a self's perceptions or experiences will end up being replicated in other selves over and over again. Consequently, this finitude makes it the case that each self avails itself, through all time, of a partial, sporadic, and combinatorial form of immortality in the selves of others: "la vida es demasiado pobre para no ser también inmortal" (OC 765). Such immortality consists precisely in this, that since my self and other selves are constituted from the same finite set of elementary perceptions that goes into the compounding of all experiences, any time anyone anywhere has an experience of any kind, that experience, since it will have been compounded of the same finite set of elementary perceptions as my own experiences were, will, in effect, resurrect a portion of my self.

We may note that this is not "personal immortality" of the kind usually demanded by those who demand immortality, but for that very reason it does not suffer from the objections to which that self-insistent kind of immortality falls prey. It also makes personal immortality entirely superfluous in a way that Rufus-type immortality does not quite manage: if the self is identical to a bundle of perceptions, then it cannot matter to the question of its immortality whether the perceptions of which it is constituted are reiterated in *that* bundle or in some *other* bundle; so long as they are reiterated at all, no matter where, the self of which they once were parts will continue partially to live. Transpersonal immortality has the further merit that we do not need to conceive of a counterfactual universe in order to secure it, since it bases itself on nothing more than the metaphysics of selfhood as it actually and already happens to be. It is of *this* earth that Borges speaks when he says, "otros serán (y son) tu inmortalidad en la tierra" ("Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro", OC 35).

B. PROBLEMS WITH TRANSPERSONAL IMMORTALITY

If successful, Borges's theory of transpersonal immortality will have supplanted the notion of personal immortality by refuting the two reasons most commonly advanced in its favor. But does the theory succeed? There appear to be two problems with it, each of them grave enough to trouble us: one metaphysical, and the other ethical.

The metaphysical problem has two lemmas. The first is that, even assuming the soundness of a bundle theory of selves under which each self is made up of compound experiences that are in turn made up of elementary perceptions, and assuming further that all the elementary perceptions in that bundle are themselves reiterable in other bundles, it does not seem to follow that the self is divisible *without residue* into those elementary perceptions alone. The self could theoretically be (and, phenomenologically, appears to be) an emergent entity on a higher integrative level, interwoven out of elementary perceptions *plus* specific relations between those perceptions within each compound experience *plus* specific relations between all those compound experiences *inter se*. If this is so, however, the reiteration of such elementary perceptions in other bundles would spell continuance for a self no more than the current existence of all the elementary particles that once constituted it spells continuance for the statue of Ozymandias. What is lacking in those perceptions taken in isolation is precisely what is lacking in the particles that once made up that statue: the set of ordered relations in which they stood when they made up, in the case of those perceptions, first, those compound experiences, and second, that self, and, in the case of those particles, first, a mass of stone, and second, that statue. But if such a set of ordered relations is indeed relevant to the constitution and individuation of a person, it is simply false that a person has no synchronic personal distinctness: his or her standing in all the relations of that set secures precisely that distinctness for him or her. And it follows that the mere reiteration of the elementary perceptions which stand in one or more of the relations in that set cannot reproduce *that person* even partially.

The second lemma of the metaphysical problem is that, even if the bundle theory of selves assumed by transpersonal immortality manages to survive the foregoing objection, the number of complex experiences that any reasonably fleshed-out set of elementary perceptions can form is so staggeringly large¹² that, even in an infinite universe, occurrences of

12 If the number of all elementary perceptions is p , and the number of all instants in a life is t , the number of possible complex experiences *at any instant* in a life will be $2^p - 1$, and the number of possible complex experiences *in a life* will be, not the relatively tractable $t2^p - 1$, which is merely the number of all possible isolated, instantaneous complex experiences for t instants, but the much larger $2^{pt} - 1$, since *real* experiences, the ones we actually have in our lives, involve the interaction of complex experiences

any of the complex experiences that a person had in his or her life are likely to be separated by eons in which no such experiences happen to turn up at all. It would be deeply odd to think of these sparse occurrences as constituting *immortality* of any kind: what they *do* constitute seems more an infinite temporary resurrectibility against a normative background of nothingness. By analogy, we may note that even if random movements of matter in the world end up reconstituting the whole of the pharaoh's statue, or even just its nose or left thumb, they will not remain in existence for very long.¹³ And if the occurrences relevant to transpersonal immortality are taken to be those of the elementary perceptions themselves rather than of the compound experiences that they create in any given human life, this kind of immortality would be, not far too sporadic, but far too faint and spectral to deserve the name. It cannot persuasively be argued that Shakespeare and Averroës pop back into existence every time someone in the world smells baking or sees the color blue,¹⁴ and that in this consists their continuance, any more than it can persuasively be claimed that wherever an atom that once made up the stone pharaoh turns up, the statue of Ozymandias turns up there too, and that in this consists its indestructibility. Perhaps we ought not to expect anything more from the universe than this weak form of quasi-continuance. Schopenhauer, for one, found not merely comfort but also a degree of exhilaration in the prospect of his dissolution into particles that would be recycled into something that was not Schopenhauer (2: 472), and Borges often avowed a similar

across differing numbers of instants. Of these $2^{pt} - 1$ possible experiences, any given life can actually contain, at maximum, only t experiences, since it contains only t instants; and the difference in magnitude between $2^{pt} - 1$ and t is so enormous that a very large number of lives with t experiences in them can exist without notable repetitions of any of those experiences.

13 For a treatment of this claim by Borges, see "La doctrina de los ciclos" (OC 385-92).

14 So when Borges, echoing a Tlönian school of thought which holds that "Todos los hombres que repiten una línea de Shakespeare, *son* William Shakespeare" (OC 438), asks "¿Los fervorosos que se entregan a una línea de Shakespeare no son, literalmente, Shakespeare?" ("Nueva refutación del tiempo," OC 763), and proceeds to claim that "Cada vez que repetimos un verso de Dante o Shakespeare, somos, de algún modo, aquel instante en que Shakespeare o Dante crearon ese verso" ("La inmortalidad," *Borges oral* 42-43), we may respond by doubting whether, when the possession of Shakespeare's entire memory did not, in "La memoria de Shakespeare," suffice to make Hermann Soergel Shakespeare, *we* become Shakespeare when we happen merely to recite a line of his.

response to his own future death. But however pleasant we may find the posthumous possibility thus offered us, we must, if only in the interest of calling things by their right names, withhold from it the form and title of “immortality.”

Turning to the *ethical* problem with transpersonal immortality, it may be noted that assurance of transpersonal immortality costs us our conception of the uniqueness of individuals. In sacrificing that conception, however, we also undercut our strongest (and perhaps only) justification for the proposal, made by virtually all respectable ethical theories, that an individual be treated as if her life were irreplaceable and therefore of unquantifiable (or at least very high) value. The most stringent ethical requirement conformable to the metaphysics that generates Borges’s transpersonal immortality appears to be that we ought always to allow *the requisite number* of humans to exist, where that requisite number is the minimum that ensures at least one iteration of every elementary perception in the set of such perceptions.¹⁵ This number, ominously, will not be very large (since, according to Borges, the number of those elementary or atomistic perceptions is not very large), but will nevertheless suffice to secure transpersonal immortality for not merely every actual but also every *possible* human being. And as for the surplus humans who happen to exist at any time, we have no reason, unless we rig one up *ad hoc*, not to think them dispensable, for how can we concern ourselves about the life or death of someone who is immortal already?

A related ethical problem arises regarding the value of people’s lives for themselves. If it is indeed the case that our selves can be reduced to elementary perceptions that are themselves iterable in the selves of others, we are left with no reason in engage in *any* form of activity on our own account, since whatever elementary perceptions we can induce in ourselves or in others by means of any such activity will be had by us or by them in some combination or another anyhow. Consequently, when Borges suggests that there is a sort of immortality that we acquires through our works, as when he says “En fin, la inmortalidad está en la memoria de los

15 If Borges’s argument were that it required the reiteration not of elementary perceptions but of complex experiences to resuscitate a person, the ethical problem noted here would not arise, but neither would we have any realistic prospect of transpersonal immortality, for reasons already mentioned.

otros y en la obra que dejamos” (“La inmortalidad,” *Borges oral* 43), and, again, “Esa inmortalidad se logra en las obras, en la memoria que uno deja en los otros” (*Borges oral* 44), the suggestion rings hollow. As Borges himself noted: “Homero compuso la Odisea; postulado un plazo infinito, con infinitas circunstancias y cambios, lo imposible es no componer, siquiera una vez, la Odisea” (*OC* 531).

This, presumably, is true of every work, not just of the *Odyssey*. But if it is, then none of us needs to bother to create a work at all: the very works that we omit to create will end up being configured in due course of time anyway. If you were to write a line of poetry that is remembered for all eternity, even though you yourself were forgotten, that line may revivify you every time someone speaks it, but you do not need to have written that line or any other to achieve revivification, for you are similarly revivified whenever anyone has any perception at all that formed a part of the bundle of perceptions that you once were. The unimportance that Borges noted as a feature of all the acts of Rufus-type immortals is also a feature of all the acts of his transpersonal immortals. Borges seems to have been registering precisely this unimportance when he said:

¿En qué puede diferir el que yo me sienta Borges de que ustedes se sientan A, B o C? En nada, absolutamente. Ese yo es lo que compartimos, es lo que está presente, de una forma o de otra, en todas las criaturas (“La inmortalidad,” *Borges oral* 42).

An immortality in which we partake merely by existing as ourselves, and that does not even require us to go on existing, cannot induce us to *do* anything in its name: it is, after all, already given us just as much as it is given Dante and Shakespeare and every other creature.

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Rufus-type immortality and transpersonal immortality being palpably flawed conceptions, what exactly, we may ask, was Borges’s final philosophical position on the question of immortality? He nowhere gives us any reason to doubt that he thought personal immortality possessed no value whatsoever. But was he committed to the idea of transpersonal immortality, or was that idea, for him, merely an interesting artifact of one metaphysical possibility among many equally viable or interesting ones?

One way of approaching this question is through the observation, made by Alazraki and Lyon, that in Borges's essays "the ideas being dealt with are evaluated or modified by theories which contradict those ideas, stripping them of all transcendent value in historical reality" (425-26). This "oxymoronic structure," as they term it, may also help explain the tension within the notion of immortality Borges posits in "El inmortal," which is so constructed that its undeniable persuasiveness is inextricably interwoven with its self-contradictoriness. But, "(a)t the same time, those theories function as oxymoronic modifiers in a different way—they restore the ideas, the subject matter of the essay, to a level where they regain their validity, not as a description of the world but as marvels of human imagination" (Alazraki & Lyon 426). In this light, Borges may be seen as performing a *double* restoration in and by his theory of transpersonal immortality: that theory restores the metaphysical insights upon which it is built to the condition of depth and vertiginousness proper to them, but it also restores to their proper place in our imaginations our everyday modes of understanding, and coping with, what we cannot but conceive of as our fragile and limited individual lives.

This may be the limit at which we must conclude—by conceding that, for all his investigations in heterodox possibilities of immortality, Borges ended with mortality as both the central fact and the essential value. The moral of Borges's accounts of immortality, if there is one, may simply be that although humans produce indefatigable fictions in which the universe is so contrived that it secures for us, by some charmed convolution of thought, some form of immortality or another, we have no real reason to doubt the soundness of our vernacular assessment that we live for a few years and then die, or that of the old Epicurean idea that, inasmuch as death makes us cease to exist, it cannot be bad for us. The self is erased everywhere in Borges. That erasure is rarely deemed something to rue, and is often, as in a passage of "El inmortal," considered the final guarantor of values that are the more, not the less, valuable for being delicate and temporary:

La muerte (o su alusión) hace preciosos y patéticos a los hombres. Éstos conmueven por su condición de fantasmas; cada acto que ejecutan puede ser último; no hay rostro que no esté por desdibujarse como el rostro de

un sueño. Todo, entre los mortales, tiene el valor de lo irrecuperable y de lo azaroso. (OC 542)

By contrast to these mortal values, immortality is a feeble thing, for the modes that secure such values—“lo elegiaco, lo grave, lo ceremonial”—cannot, to their loss, be held in reverence by immortals.

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