

Summary of Project Awards for the 2014-15 RFP: “The Philosophy and Theology of Immortality”

The Immortality Project, University of California-Riverside John Martin Fischer, Project Leader

July 1, 2014

1. **Yuval Avnur**

Professor of Philosophy, Scripps College, Claremont

This is a project in epistemology concerning the justification that human beings acquire in this life to believe things about an afterlife. PI aims to publish a lengthy paper critiquing empirical and a priori justifications for both belief and disbelief in an afterlife and argues that the most rational attitude is to accept that our rational powers fall short of telling us whether to believe in an afterlife.

2. **Christopher Belshaw**

Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, Open University

This PI will write a trio of articles and part of a forthcoming book (already contracted with Acumen/McGill-Queens) that will develop new questions about immortality along three dimensions: (1) The roles that memory and imagination can play both in an envisioned future life and in our present lives, (2) The significance of history and culture in relation to concerns about death and immortality, and (3) The relationship between death and meaning in life, particularly whether immortality would help or hinder meaning in life.

3. **Stephan Blatti**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Memphis

This is a project on the metaphysics of personhood, specifically the view called “animalism” – the idea that our fundamental nature as persons is given *not* by our psychological capacities (as John Locke thought), but by our biological constitution. More specifically, animalism claims that a person’s fundamental nature consists in being identical with an organism of the primate species *Homo sapiens* and, like all organisms, persisting through time and change just in case they continue living. PI proposes to work on a series of papers and part of a book (to be submitted to Oxford University Press) dedicated to developing a new and unique version of animalism, the implications of which, he argues, are that postmortem survival is impossible and that it is rational to fear death.

4. **Ben Bradley**

Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University

This team attempts to answer the following question: What emotions and attitudes are fitting or appropriate to have toward one’s death, and towards the possibility of radically extended life? In a series of papers, the team proposes to develop their answer by investigating the role of *contrastive attitudes* – i.e., a criterion of rationality for lamenting death, according to which it is rational to lament death in virtue of what *might* have happened in some suitably realistic alternative scenario.

5. **Mikel Burley**

Lecturer in Religion and Philosophy, University of Leeds

This is a project in the philosophy of religion. While some philosophers argue that an immortal life could not (or would not) be meaningful and others argue that it could (or would) be meaningful given the fulfillment of certain conditions, a common assumption of these arguments is that immortal life would be infinitely long. In a project consisting of two articles and a workshop, this PI aims to revitalize the debate over the meaningfulness of immortality by foregoing this assumption and employing both philosophical and theological ideas to see whether it is possible to give a coherent account of a meaningful immortal life in cases where that life is not infinitely long.

6. **Stephen Burwood**

Lecturer in Philosophy at School of Politics, Philosophy and International Studies, University of Hull

In a project consisting of scholarly articles, a book, and a workshop, PI proposes to explore several philosophical and theological issues surrounding the *trans-humanist* promise of immortality – i.e., the idea that, via the application of science and technology, human existence will be enhanced to where humans will not only be stronger, healthier, and cleverer, but also effectively immune to involuntary death.

7. **Ryan Byerly**

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Regent University

Eric Silverman

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Christopher Newport University

Despite the contemporary revival of philosophical work addressing traditional theological questions, very little philosophical work has been done on questions about the traditionally more positive side of the afterlife—paradise. PIs aim to remedy these deficiencies by commissioning expert essays on questions about paradise arising in every major area of philosophy and publishing a volume on the subject with a world-class press. The volume will also include new essays on paradise written by the PIs themselves.

8. **John Davis**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, California State University, Fullerton

PI aims to complete a book-length manuscript on a set of related ethical and social issues raised by the prospect of human life extension. Some of the central issues that PI discusses are whether radically extended life is good to have, and some ways in which widespread use of life extension may cause problems for society at large, including a possible Malthusian crisis and a general ossification of society and entrenchment of the powerful, and how the availability of life extension may change our own relationship with death.

9. **Helen De Cruz**

British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Somerville College, University of Oxford

This is a project in the philosophy of cognitive science and the philosophy of religion. In a workshop and a series of papers, PI proposes to investigate to what extent early-developed, intuitive, folk beliefs about postmortem survival and personal identity influence philosophical thinking on these subjects. PI's working hypothesis is that these intuitions play a significant role in contemporary philosophy of religion.

10. **Andrew Eshleman**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Portland

A realist view of religious language claims the following: When characterizing the afterlife, religious believers are understood to be making claims that can be objectively true or false about a postmortem existence and she or he believes those claims to be true. PI plans to write and develop a paper in which he rejects this realist view and offers a *non-realist* account. PI argues that, even if one rejects belief in the reality of an afterlife, engagement with language and imagery about an afterlife can serve important religious and moral functions in this life that are not otherwise easily accessible – e.g., pursuing ideals of reconciliation and restorative justice.

11. **Luca Ferrero**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

This PI aims to write a series of papers that will investigate the possibility of a basic *structure* of an immortal life that we can recognize from our current standpoint. PI claims that getting clear on this structure is a precondition for taking up the question whether human immortality is desirable and he develops an idea that he calls “vulnerability” which, according to him, is essential to rational agency and central to this basic structure.

12. **Cody Gilmore**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Davis

In an influential paper on the possibility of time travel, David Lewis famously distinguished *external time* (time itself) and *personal time* (roughly, the role played by time in the life of an ordinary person). PI plans to write a series of papers, the main thread of which is that the concept of *personal time* will be invoked in any adequate account of the nature of death and immortality, and that paying close attention to the concept of personal time will help us to make progress on questions about the possibility (or otherwise) of resurrection and intermittent existence.

13. **Yitzhak Melamed**

Professor of Philosophy, Johns Hopkins University

Oded Schecter

Postdoctoral Fellow, Johns Hopkins University

In a project consisting of papers and workshops, this team aims to present, motivate, reconstruct, and explore the implications of the *Spinozist* theory of death. On the Spinozist theory, our common understanding of death as annihilation relies on deep anthropocentric misconceptions about the nature of human existence, and moreover, death as annihilation is an imaginary notion: death is actually a transformation that a certain ontological unit (“soul”) undergoes.

14. **Carl Mosser**

Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Eastern University

This is a book project which attempts to develop a new theology of Christian *deification* – the idea that the afterlife of the redeemed is to be understood as being infused by the immortality, incorruptibly, and glory that is properly God’s alone and thereby elevated to a new level of human existence. PI departs from contemporary Christian scholarship, which focuses on the *history* of the idea of deification, and aims to give an account of deification that is biblically grounded, ecumenical in breadth, and philosophically informed (in that PI attempts to explicate the metaphysical commitments presupposed in the classic formulations of the doctrine of deification and address himself to some of the philosophical challenges to it).

15. **Timothy Pawl**

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of St. Thomas

Kevin Timpe

Professor of Philosophy, Northwest Nazarene University

This team proposes to run an intense writing workshop in theology – consisting of ten professional philosophers and theologians, as well as five graduate students (across disciplines) – to discuss the philosophical and theological ramifications of, and implications for, an idea they call “the interim state” – the interval between the time of death and the final resurrection from the dead. PIs have modeled their workshop on the successful LOGOS conference at the University of Notre Dame.

16. **Mark Rowlands**

Professor of Philosophy, University of Miami

PI proposes a book project that will develop a way of thinking about meaning in life that is immune to the objections that the standard philosophical views on meaning must face. PI’s core idea is that an immortal life can be meaningful to the extent that it involves activities that are engaged in for their own sake rather than for the sake of anything else they might allow one to get. PI argues that the person who engages in these activities *intrinsically* values them.

17. Eric Schwitzgebel

Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Riverside

PI proposes to write several publishable stories of speculative fiction that touch upon nearly all of the categories in this year's RFP. PI's philosophical aims are (1) to use these stories to open readers' minds to possibilities involving immortality or radical life extension, encouraging the reader to consider such possibilities epistemically live, and (2) to consider the consequences for the meaning and value of human existence.

18. Aaron Segal

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Yeshiva University

PI proposes to write and develop an article in which he develops a novel view on the desirability of immortality. PI argues that an immortal life could be desirable, and that, *if* a given immortal life is desirable, it is in virtue of some feature or features that, at least in principle, a mortal life could possess. In short, immortality just as such is not desirable.

19. Meghan Sullivan

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame

In a series of articles, PI proposes to investigate and discuss the ways in which principles of diachronic rationality – roughly, principles that say something about what mental states we are rationally required to be in *next*, given what mental states we are in *now* – inform our views about immortality. This project combines issues in the contemporary debates on practical reasoning and classic debates in the philosophy of death literature.

20. Patrick Todd

Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

PI plans to write a paper assessing the theistic claim that it is essential to the experience of being "in heaven" that one enters heaven *freely* – i.e., the claim that, if some humans won't repent their sins, it is *not* the case that God bypasses their freedom, thereby *making* them enter heaven. PI argues that this "freedom constraint" on getting into heaven substantially depends on what the nature of heaven *is*, and that progress on debates about who gets in can be made only by comparing different "models" of heaven.

21. Christina Van Dyke

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Calvin College

PI proposes to work on a manuscript in Aquinas scholarship in which she argues that investigation into the standard Christian theological account of immortality suggests that perfect happiness involves less a fulfillment of human nature than a transcendence of what it means to be human—and that what we transcend is our need for the body. The central questions for PI's project are 1) whether this view of immortality can be made sense of, philosophically and theologically, and 2) whether such a view can provide a meaningful account of perfect happiness in the afterlife.

22. **Ajume Wingo**

Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Colorado, Boulder

Dan Demetriou

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Minnesota, Morris

This team proposes to write a monograph in philosophical anthropology on “civic immortality” – the idea of a person’s reputation and standing in the historic memory of a culture and her/his influence on people in that culture. Specifically, PIs combine their expertise in honor cultures, liberal democratic politics, and African spirituality to explore how uniquely African notions of immortality, civic virtue, and leadership could be adapted to encourage liberal heroics.

23. **Mark Wrathall**

Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Riverside

PI proposes to host a series of seminars and write a book manuscript on the *temporal* implications of different ways of understanding the afterlife. PI plans to employ a phenomenological methodology to answer questions such as the following: How does faith in immortality alter the structure of my expectations of the future? Given that faith in the afterlife changes my expectations of the future, how does this alter the significance of the current activities, events, and projects in which I am engaged?

24. **Philip Ziegler**

Senior Lecturer, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, University of Aberdeen

This project involves an international team of Christian theologians in sustained collaborative investigation of the following interrelated questions concerning the concept of human immortality: (1) What is the significance and consequence of conceiving of immortality first and foremost as an attribute of God and an aspect of the divine life, and only thereafter and derivatively of human existence? (2) What are the consequences for the present life of conceiving of the reality of the future promise of human immortality as an eschatological gift of God?