RESULTS OF FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECTS

THE IMMORTALITY PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE
JOHN MARTIN FISCHER, PROJECT LEADER

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# Contents

**PREFACE**.................................................................................................................................................. 3

**SCIENCE PROJECTS**.................................................................................................................................. 4

  Shaun Nichols and Jay Garfield .................................................................................................................. 5
  Mel Slater and Maria Sanchez-Vives ........................................................................................................... 6
  Shahar Arzy .................................................................................................................................................. 7
  Daniel Martinez and Diane Bridge ................................................................................................................ 9
  Sam Parnia .................................................................................................................................................... 10
  Ann Taves, Tamsin German, and Michael Kinsella ..................................................................................... 12
  Kurt Gray ...................................................................................................................................................... 13
  Kelly James Clark and Melanie Nyhof ......................................................................................................... 14
  Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski .......................................................................................................... 16

**PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY PROJECTS**.............................................................................................. 17

  Ajume Wingo and Dan Demetriou ................................................................................................................ 18
  Eric Schwitzgebel ........................................................................................................................................ 20
  Mikel Burley ................................................................................................................................................. 21
  John Davis ................................................................................................................................................... 23
  Christopher Belshaw ................................................................................................................................... 24
  Ben Bradley, Travis Timmerman, and Kirsten Egerstrom ......................................................................... 25
  Stephen Burwood ....................................................................................................................................... 27
  Yuval Avnur .................................................................................................................................................. 29
  Yitzhak Melamed and Oded Schechter ........................................................................................................ 30
  Meghan Sullivan ......................................................................................................................................... 31
  Kevin Timpe and Tim Pawl ......................................................................................................................... 33
  Andrew Eshleman ....................................................................................................................................... 35
  Luca Ferrero ................................................................................................................................................. 36
  Mark Rowlands .......................................................................................................................................... 37
  Christina Van Dyke .................................................................................................................................... 38
  Aaron Segal ................................................................................................................................................ 39
  Philip Ziegler ................................................................................................................................................ 40
  T. Ryan Byerly and Eric Silverman .............................................................................................................. 41
  Cody Gilmore .............................................................................................................................................. 43
  Mark Wrathall ............................................................................................................................................. 44
PREFACE

The Immortality Project was a 3-year, $5M interdisciplinary grant sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation (2012-2015). It was led by John Fischer, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. To date, it is the largest humanities grant ever awarded.

The Immortality Project focused on significant and traditional topics that have long been important to human inquiry—e.g., the significance of death, the desirability of immortality, what makes for a meaningful human life. Though important, these topics have been relatively under-theorized in academic circles, especially in analytic philosophy and the sciences. One goal of the grant was to put major resources into these areas. Another goal was to generate interdisciplinary dialogue on these topics. A third goal was to reach out to the general public and present ideas on these topics in a way that makes public conversation on these topics more fruitful. The grant seems to have been a resounding success with respect of each of these goals.

The Immortality Project was able to fund 34 research projects (9 more than anticipated) by extremely talented and well-regarded researchers from around the globe. The competition for funding was very keen, and we were unable to fund many worthwhile projects. We held two conferences, one during the Midpoint of the grant in May 2014 and one to conclude the grant in May 2015. Grantees presented the developments of their funded research results at both conferences. The conferences were extremely fruitful, generating much interdisciplinary dialogue on the issues.

Due to the grant’s size and scope, covering many different topics in the sciences, philosophy and theology, there is no helpful way of summarizing even the results we know of that does justice to the many different strands of research. In what follows is a collection of summaries – many of which were provided by the researchers themselves – and current listing of publications and summary outputs of the grant. However, we want to emphasize that the research is incomplete at this time, and we anticipate many additional papers and some books to be published in the next few years.

The significant public outreach of the grant is evidenced by the extensive media coverage received during the grant period and after.
SCIENCE PROJECTS


**Shaun Nichols**  
Professor of Philosophy, University of Arizona

**Jay Garfield**  
Doris Silbert Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy, Logic, and Buddhist Studies, Smith College

**Project Title:** “Death and the Self”

**Summary of Results**

“A central tenet in all Buddhist philosophical systems is that there is no self, and no personal identity over time. One consequence of this view is that the fear of death is irrational, as there is nothing that dies. Most Buddhist also believe, however, in rebirth. Hindus share this belief in past and future lives, but believe that there is a self, or atman (soul) that persists through lives. Christians share that belief in a soul, but not in rebirth. This allows us to compare the impact of belief in a self and belief in rebirth on attitudes towards death. In our studies, we compared attitudes about the self and death in US Christians, orthodox Hindus, and Tibetan Buddhists. We found that Tibetan monastics did in fact maintain that there is no self that continues across time. They expressed this in a number of ways, both explicit and implicit. By contrast, the US Christians and Hindus were strongly inclined to affirm that there is a core self that stays the same across time. To measure attitudes about death, we had participants use a scale for “fear of personal death”. This scale has several subscales, one of which is fear of “self-annihilation”. Our primary interest was in this subscale, but we also wanted to measure performance on the rest of the scale. When the fear of self-annihilation subscale is excluded, there is no difference in reported fear of personal death between US Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists. Our prediction was that when we focused just on the fear of self-annihilation, the Buddhists would exhibit much less fear than the Hindus or Christians. However, to our great surprise, we found exactly the opposite. The monastic Tibetans (who said that there is no core self) had much greater fear of self-annihilation than either Hindus or Christians. We also found, using a test that taps the implicit valuation of ones’ own life versus that of others that the monastic Tibetans valued their own lives above those of others to a much greater degree than do Christians and Hindus.” – Shaun Nichols

**Publications**

Mel Slater  
ICREA Research Professor, University of Barcelona, Spain

Maria V. Sanchez-Vives  
ICREA Research Professor, IDIBAPS, Barcelona, Spain

Project Title: “Modeling Immortality in Immersive Virtual Reality”

Summary of Results

“The main purpose of this project was to create a virtual alternate reality in which groups of physically remote participants were be immersed for extended periods in a shared virtual environment where they will be able to interact with one another. The project exploited immersive virtual reality, a technology whereby a person can bodily enter into and participate in a surrounding computer generated simulation of a world, experiencing the illusion of presence in that world. In this virtual reality participants had an experiential model of a complete life-cycle (birth, maturity, decay, death, and post-death survival) operating in a realm that is fundamentally different to our experiences in the normal world of everyday reality.

The experiment was carried out with 15 people (experimental group) and a waiting control group of 16 people. Each of the 15 in the experimental group attended the virtual reality session 6 times, and in groups of three experienced the life-death cycle as described above.

Our findings are that across a series of measures the control group showed changes in their life changes inventory towards a more positive outlook on life, reminiscent of changes reported by people who have had Near Death Experiences.

The environment was on display at the Human+ Exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Culture, Barcelona, October 2015 - April 2016. Additionally, we repeated a version of the experiment with a large number of participants who attend the exhibition.” – Mel Slater

Publications

**Shahar Arzy**  
Specialist in Neurology, Hadassah Hebrew University

Project Title: “The Life-Review Experience: Phenomenological, Psychological and Neuroscientific Perspectives”

**Summary of Results**

“The life-review experience (LRE) is a component of near-death experience, in which people describe seeing a “movie” of significant segments of their own life. This is of much importance, as it demonstrates the existence of mental representation of one’s ongoing life-experience in the human brain. This is indeed crucial for cognitive science and psychology, clinical neurology and psychiatry as well as for philosophy of mind. Notably, the cognitive and clinical research of autobiographical memory focuses mostly on discrete life-events rather than on the ongoing experience, though in real life continuous life-experience is taking place. Moreover, these studies investigate memories but not necessarily meaningful ones. Our multimodal LRE project enables a better understanding of the LRE as an aperture to a new approach to one’s autobiographical memories and subjective experience as a succession, endured and interrelated on the phenomenological, psychological and neuroscientific levels. Moreover, our results are translated into the clinical theatre in order to better understand, diagnose and follow patients with life-experience difficulties such as in dissociative disorders, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD).

In order to characterize the LRE in NDE patients we qualitatively interviewed people with LRE, extracting fundamental concepts in LRE, their relations to life events and the subjective experience using structured and semi-structured questionnaires. These interviews were (1) used as descriptions in our LRE manuscript, and (2) served as basis for constructing a questionnaire aiming to evaluate LRE in the general population. In addition, we have compared mystical texts from the 12th -16th centuries regarding both out bodily (including OBE) and dissociative (including NDE) experience, to contemporary neuroscientific and neurological results. Our results were gathered into a book published by Yale University Press.

The LRE clearly demonstrates that the traditional reflection of autobiographical memory as a collection of discrete events is inaccurate, and that there is a representation of life-experience as a continuum sequence. Moreover, phenomenological results show that a form of LRE is abundant in the general population, as probably based on a common cerebral representation. To this aim we scan healthy subjects and people with NDE/LRE by fMRI while being shown “movies” depicting sequences of their life-events in different scales, prominence and order. Following recent developments in fMRI signal analysis, we developed in the first year of the project an algorithm to handle spectral analysis to be applied in order to identify interconnected “gradients” of one’s life experiences as represented spatially on the human brain. The software we create takes the raw fMRI data, identifies gradients within the data and analyzes them accordingly. We have validated our algorithms on a “niche” pathology – the Brown-Sequard syndrome - which enables comparison of intact and disturbed gradients. Our algorithm was able to detect “gradients” in the healthy hemisphere and disrupted one in the affected hemisphere.” – Shahar Arzy
Publications


**Daniel Martinez**  
Professor of Biology, Pomona College

**Diane Bridge**  
Associate Professor of Biology, Elizabethtown College

Project Title: “Identifying and Characterizing the Genes of Immortality in Hydra”

**Summary of Results**

“The ability to escape aging is a rare occurrence among animals. So rare that for a long time aging was considered the unavoidable fate of all metazoans. Only recently have aging theories offered plausible explanations for negligible senescence and the cessation of aging. Our project studied an animal species that does not age—the freshwater cnidarian *Hydra*. *Hydra* belongs to one of the most basal groups of animals with true tissue differentiation and neurons. Of the approximately eight species in the genus *Hydra*, one is particularly interesting, *H. oligactis*. Under normal culturing conditions *H. oligactis* does not show any signs of aging and thus is effectively immortal. However, individuals of this species can be induced to age by lowering the temperature of the culture. Thus *H. oligactis* offers the unique opportunity to examine aging and non-aging animals with the same genetic background, and compare them at the molecular level to identify the genes that are active in immortal animals but inactive in mortal animals.

This project to determine what genes are implicated in immortality in *Hydra oligactis* was carried out in the laboratories of Dr. Daniel Martínez at Pomona College in California and Dr. Diane Bridge at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Using next-generation sequencing, the scientists compared the transcriptomes (the entire set of genes actively being expressed at a given time) of aging and immortal animals to determine the genes that were active in one group but inactive in the other. By experimentally altering the expression of selected genes, Martínez and Bridge hope to characterize in future studies the exact role of these aging or immortality genes in *H. oligactis*. This work could have important implications for human medicine, as the characterization of molecular mechanisms of immortality in *Hydra oligactis* has the potential to inform therapies for prolonging the human lifespan.”

**Publications**


Sam Parnia  
Associate Professor of Critical Care Medicine and Director of Resuscitation Research, Stony Brook University School of Medicine

Project Title: “A Multi-Centre Pilot Study of the Mind, Brain, Consciousness and Near Death Experiences during Cardiac Arrest”

Summary of Results

A number of recent studies have indicated that 10% of cardiac arrest survivors report memories and thought processes from their period of resuscitation. A small proportion of survivors have also described the ability to “see” and “hear” details of their cardiac arrest. Even though the significance and mechanisms that lead to these experiences are not fully understood, nevertheless their occurrence may have significant implications for establishing clinical markers of improved brain resuscitation, as well as long term psychological support of cardiac arrest survivors. The occurrence of cognitive function during cardiac arrest also raises the possibility that patients may have received improved “cerebral resuscitation” leading to consciousness and the activity of the mind.

Through a variety of psychological and physiological tests as well as cerebral monitoring techniques, we conducted a feasibility study examining the relationship between the human mind, consciousness and brain during cardiac arrest. Specifically, we studied the relationship between consciousness and the quality of cerebral resuscitation (as measured through non-invasive monitoring of brain oxygen levels and function). We also conducted tests of consciousness by using independent markers designed to objectively examine the validity of survivor’s claims of being able to “see” and “hear” during cardiac arrest.

The incidence and validity of awareness together with the range, characteristics and themes relating to memories/cognitive processes during cardiac arrest (CA) was investigated use a three-stage quantitative and qualitative interview system. The feasibility of objectively testing the accuracy of claims of visual and auditory awareness was examined using specific tests. The outcome measures were (1) awareness/memories during cardiac arrest (CA) and (2) objective verification of claims of awareness using specific tests. Among 2060 CA events, 140 survivors completed stage 1 interviews, while 101 of 140 patients completed stage 2 interviews. 46% had memories with 7 major cognitive themes: fear; animals/plants; bright light; violence/persecution; deja-vu; family; recalling events post-CA and 9% had NDEs, while 2% described awareness with explicit recall of ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ actual events related to their resuscitation. One had a verifiable period of conscious awareness during which time cerebral function was not expected.

We conclude that CA survivors commonly experience a broad range of cognitive themes, with 2% exhibiting full awareness. This supports other recent studies that have indicated consciousness may be present despite clinically undetectable consciousness. This together with fearful experiences may contribute to PTSD and other cognitive deficits post-CA.

Publications


As of May 2016, a posting at the [UK Clinical Trials Gateway website](https://clinicaltrials.gov) describes plans for AWARE II, a two-year multicenter observational study of 900-1500 patients experiencing cardiac arrest, with subjects being recruited as Aug 1 2014 and a trial end date of May 31, 2017.
Summary of Results

“Our interdisciplinary project built upon prior ethnographic fieldwork on near-death experience (NDE) groups in Santa Barbara, California conducted by Michael Kinsella with Ann Taves that identified these groups as part of a broader, emerging “Afterlife Movement”: a loosely organized collective utilizing near-death experience (NDE) narratives and practices modeled after the life review aspect of NDEs to transform behaviors and attitudes toward death, dying, and end-of-life care.

The primary aim of our project was to evaluate a series of hypotheses for what causes individuals to participate in the Afterlife Movement. In a series of experiments with members of the Afterlife Movement, Michael Barlev with Tamsin German found that in contrast to community controls, Afterlife Movement members were more likely to both report anomalous experiences and interpret them as paranormal. The latter was mediated by executive inhibition, suggesting an intuitive advantage for paranormal interpretations. Furthermore, a tendency to infer causal relationships and patterns in ambiguous information predicted reports of anomalous experiences, possibly because of the ambiguity inherent in some experiences (Barlev et al., in preparation). We are still evaluating other hypotheses, including ones pertaining to the effects of practices learned during participation with the Afterlife Movement on the above tendencies” – Michael Kinsella

Publications

Project Title: “The Immortality of Morality”

**Summary of Results**

“Is there life after death? The existence of the afterlife is extremely difficult to test, but science can investigate lay-beliefs of immortality concerning different targets. Who is perceived to maintain their presence after death? Our research reveals two broad predictors of perceived immortality.

The first key to immortality is morality. Whether someone is good and evil is important for our impression of their lives, and perhaps also helps them to live on after death. The persistence of good and evil after death is also suggested by the many religions that explicitly link the afterlife to morality. Although Christianity, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism have different conceptions of the afterlife, they all describe particular places or ways for the good and the bad to continue living—but no special places for the very beautiful, intelligent, or rich. Our studies revealed that good- and evil-doers are ascribed more immortality, albeit in different ways. Good-doers are ascribed “communal” immortality (i.e., legacy), living on abstractly within the hearts of others. Conversely, evil-doers are ascribed “paranormal” immortality, living on concretely in a specific location (i.e., ghosts). In other words, good people live on in our hearts, whereas evil people live on in their homes.

The second key to immortality is dying while conscious. Research reveals that people place substantial emphasis on endings. For example, the memory of a vacation is heavily influenced by what happened on the very last day. Our studies reveal that the memory of someone after death is heavily influenced by their consciousness at the time of death. When someone dies while lucid and aware, people think that they have mind more after death—and that it’s more important to follow their dying wishes. For example, people found it less immoral to neglect someone’s will when they died in a coma (vs. while awake).

Our research has also examined the emotional nature of dying, and has revealed that it may be less negative than we might think. We examined the language of death row last words and the blog posts of terminally ill patients, and revealed that its emotional content is actually more positive than people predict.” – Kurt Gray

**Publications**


Kelly James Clark  
Senior Research Fellow at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, Grand Valley State University

Melanie Nyhof  
Postdoctoral Researcher, Indiana University

Project Title: “Afterlife Beliefs and Their Cognitive Mechanisms among the Chinese: Past and Present”

Summary of Results

“Cognitive studies of afterlife beliefs suggest that belief in life after death is intuitive and founded on pan-cultural cognitive processes. Researchers have established that as children increasingly understand biological death, they also increasingly attribute continued mental functioning to dead people yet are less inclined to attribute continuing biological attributes to the deceased; our natural cognitive mechanisms incline us to believe in psychological immortality. Little of this research has examined afterlife beliefs in Asian contexts, especially those Asian contexts that are alleged to be skeptical of an afterlife, those, to be specific, alleged to be Confucian. Our exhaustive database search of the earliest Chinese texts shows widespread belief in a two-part soul, hun and po. The hun soul, like immaterial Heaven, includes one’s intellect and virtue, while the po soul, associated with lumpen earth, includes one’s passions and vices. Upon death one’s hun spirit is flown up to heaven while one’s po spirit either remains with one’s body in the tomb or returns to the earth (or below the earth).

We go on to argue that in the early Confucian texts, afterlife beliefs are, along with god beliefs, morally and socially salient. We reconstruct a complete and canonical “Confucian” understanding of ritual sacrifice to ancestors. While students of early China are keenly aware of the importance of ritual in Confucianism, they typically ignore sacrifices to the High God and to ancestors. Yet in the ritual sacrifices, the goal was to create a unified and harmonious hierarchical society by bring “bring[ing] down the spirits from above, even their ancestors; serving to rectify the relations between ruler and ministers; to maintain the generous feeling between father and son, and the harmony between elder and younger brother; to adjust the relations between high and low; and to give their proper places to husband and wife. The whole may be said to secure the blessing of Heaven” (Book of Rights). Sacrifice, in the key human relationships (ruler-minister, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife), creates a hierarchy between the proper superiors and the proper inferiors, one marked by harmony, generosity, and reconciliation (one in consonance with the harmony of the cosmos, thereby securing the blessing of Heaven). How, if people are naturally inclined toward disobedience and disrespect, can a society secure “loving and happy harmony and joy” with “all in unison”? Ritualy cultivated reverence is the antidote to pride and excessive desire, character traits of a ruler that doom society to chaos. Sincere and reverential deference to Tian and the ancestors diminishes pride (thus encouraging respect and kindness towards those beneath one) and induces humility (thus encouraging respect and deference toward those above). The moral psychology implicit in this early Confucian conception of reality and ritual is deep and profound. Recent social scientific work suggests that beliefs, rituals, and other aspects of religious practice, of the sort we find in early Confucianism, are essential means of creating and strengthening a harmonious moral community. The experience of participating in rituals increases in-group affiliation to a greater degree than group activity alone. And religious rituals are powerful means for securing cooperation, solidarity and success in intergroup competition. Mutually reinforcing belief-ritual complexes expand community by galvanizing solidarity and reinforce prosocial behavior by increasing trust.

As of November 2016, Justin Winslett and I have completed two more chapters related to the project – one on the prevalence and metaphysics of the afterlife in early Chinese texts, the other on the nature and moral psychology of the sacrifices to ancestors as outline in the Book of Rituαl. We have submitted these two chapters along with others in a book to Oxford University Press.” – Kelly Clark
Publications


Jeff Greenberg  
Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona

Tom Pyszczynski  
Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Project Title: “Religious and Scientific Paths to Immortality: A Clash of Cultures?”

Summary of Results

“Our research was focused on people’s soul belief in an everlasting soul, and their attitudes toward medical science efforts to extend life indefinitely (ILE). First, we found in a number of ways that soul beliefs protect people from concerns about the possible extinction of our species. We also found that a number of factors contribute to positive or negative attitudes toward the prospect of extending life indefinitely. First, especially after being reminded of their own mortality, religious people were generally not supportive of ILE, whereas non-religious people were. These findings fit terror management theory, which posits that people must find some way to cope with the potentially anxiety-provoking knowledge of their mortality. Religious people rely on hope of life after death, whereas non-religious people invest in leaving a legacy, or in the possibility of ILE. Unexpectedly, we also found a strong gender difference, as men were generally quite supportive of the prospect of ILE, whereas women were not supportive of it. This gender difference seems to reflect the well-established tendency of women to invest more in spiritual beliefs and men to be more invested in science. Finally, we found that when people were lead to think that ILE is plausible, they became more concerned that the world be a just and fair place where morals are upheld.”

Publications


- A. Darrell, T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg, and U. Lifshin, “Mortality salience increases ambivalence regarding scientific attempts to extend the human lifespan” (in preparation)


PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY PROJECTS
Ajume Wingo  
Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Colorado, Boulder

Dan Demetriou  
Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Minnesota, Morris

Project Title: “Civic Immortality: Honoring Liberal Heroics in Africa and Abroad”

Summary of Results

“In this project, Wingo and Demetriou investigate something they call "civic immortality." Civic immortality happens when a citizen's memory is immortalized because of extraordinary accomplishment or sacrifice for their community. For instance, George Washington and Nelson Mandela have been immortalized by Americans, South Africans, and the world for their respective freedom struggles. Wingo and Demetriou argue that a culture of civic immortality is critical for democracy because being honored in this way gives subjects of oppressive regimes an incentive to risk their biological lives to gain the permanent recognition of their fellows. Since honoring civic heroes is something in everyone's power and cannot be coerced, it is an especially democratic incentive that anyone, including the poorest and most politically disenfranchised person, can allot. They also discuss how a robust culture of civic honor has the advantage of offering leaders unending fame in return for keeping their leadership within constitutional limits. In that way, civic immortality encourages great leaders to retire from power rather than struggle to keep it at all costs. Washington and Mandela are excellent examples of how civic immortality served the cause of freedom and democracy in these respects.

Demetriou and Wingo argue that the West is losing its ability to immortalize citizens because it confuses celebrating great citizens with granting them political supremacy. But the distinction between status and power is clear in traditional African societies, and was similarly obvious to the 19th century British, who were perhaps the greatest memorializers of citizens the West has ever known. The Immortality Project grant allowed Wingo and Demetriou to travel to London and various cities and villages in Ghana, South Africa, and Cameroon to study how civic heroes are immortalized in Africa and the West. In London, they researched British memorial culture with a special emphasis on the ways “liberal” civic heroes, such as William Wilberforce, were memorialized. They also interviewed Nathalie Delapalme, Executive Director of Research and Policy, Mo Ibrahim Foundation, on the topics of leadership, governance, corruption, and honor as a political motivator. In Ghana, the oldest post-colonial democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, they toured Ghanaian memorials and museums and carried out formal and informal interviews with academics, NGO directors, and everyday citizens. Demetriou and Wingo then traveled to South Africa, which is busily immortalizing Mandela while at the same time maintaining memorials to the colonialist and apartheid regimes he helped end. They found that unlike the stilted and poorly-received monuments one sees in many African cities, those being erected in South Africa are energetic and welcoming. They combine the best of Western architectural talents with those of the more communal forms of hero-veneration Africans excel at. For instance, the statue of Mandela at Pretoria's Union Buildings, with arms outstretched in welcome, please crowds who get to "hold hands" with the South African leader in photos if they stand in just the right place. In the final leg, Demetriou and Wingo visited Wingo's homeland of Nso, in Northwest Cameroon. Part of the Nso royal family himself, Wingo introduced Demetriou to the courts of this authentic and largely autonomous traditional African ruling structure. Such communities are time capsules that demonstrate how all-important honor used
to be in traditional communities, both in the West and East. There, civic immortality is not taken as a metaphorical sort of immortality. To be worthy of civic remembrance is life itself, and being unworthy of it is the only death that matters, whether one is "alive" biologically or not.

Thus Wingo and Demetriou observe that the West, where institutions are (wrongly) assumed to be so strong as to no longer require civic heroism, is forgetting how to honor basic liberal heroics. In contrast, Africans are generally excellent at honoring, but tend to honor illiberal leadership. Their audience therefore spans specialist and general readers in both Africa and the West. They wish to draw on African honor traditions to create a plausible vision for Africans—and ultimately non-Africans—of what a culture encouraging liberal heroics would look like.” – Dan Demetriou

Publications

- Civic Immortality (co-authored book in preparation)


Eric Schwitzgebel  
Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Riverside  

Project Title: “Speculative Fiction on the Philosophy of Immortality”

**Summary of Results**

Schwitzgebel wrote several short science-fiction stories on immortality and life extension during the grant period. At the 2015 Capstone Conference, he presented “The Dauphin’s Metaphysics”. Schwitzgebel explained the origin of the story in an interview with *Unlikely Story*, a sci-fi magazine:

I’d been thinking about “singularity upload” stories, like Greg Egan’s *Diaspora*, where characters destroy their biological bodies to have their mental patterns instantiated in a computational device. These stories raise fascinating questions about personal identity, but they have an air of unreality about them because they aren’t currently technologically possible, and who knows if they ever will be. (One of the best known skeptics about computer consciousness is John Searle, who was one of my PhD supervisors at Berkeley.)

So I wanted to write an upload story that didn’t require magic or future technology. My father was (among many other things) a licensed hypnotist, and there’s a large psychological literature on how easy it is to implant false childhood memories into people even without hypnosis, so that seemed a natural direction to develop the idea.

The center of the story is the Dauphin’s upload – but I thought it would be interesting to contrast the case of the Dauphin’s putatively being one person across two bodies with another case arguably interpretable as two different identities in a single body. Hence the story of Fu Hao’s radical break from her childhood self. Chemistry Professor Zeng, though not as fully explored, presents a more ordinary case of slow character change over time.

“The Dauphin’s Metaphysics” was published in *Unlikely Story, Issue 12 (October 2015)*. It was given a “recommended” by *Locus Magazine*, the leading magazine of science fiction reviews. As of November 2016, a Chinese translation of “The Dauphin’s Metaphysics (trans. Yulan Fan) is forthcoming in *Science Fiction World*, the world’s most-read science fiction magazine.

**Publications**

- “Fish Dance”, *Clarkesworld*, 118 (July 2016)
- “Momentary Sage”, *The Dark*, Issue #8 (May 2015), pp. 38–43
- “Out of the Jar”, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 128 (Jan/Feb 2015), pp. 118–128
- “The Tyrant’s Headache”, *Sci Phi*, Issue #3 (Jan 2015), pp. 78–83
Summary of Results

“This project has both a critical and a constructive aspect. On the critical side, it argues that the long-running debate among philosophers over whether immortality, in the sense of “living forever,” would be desirable for beings like us lacks a sufficiently firm conceptual grounding to generate useful or interesting conclusions. On the positive side, it explores an area of Christian theological discourse that offers conceptions of immortality or eternal life that involve an acceptance of the finitude of any human lifespan.

Building upon previous published work of mine, my critique of what, with reference to a well-known essay by Bernard Williams, I call “the Makropulos debate” comprises four principal lines of argument. Chief among these is my contention that evaluating the desirability of an imaginary life requires imagining what that life would be like. But in the case of a purportedly endless life, we face a dilemma: either we must imagine what it would be like for us in a world much like the one we know or we must imagine what it would be like in an entirely different world. Choosing the first option results in failing to imagine an endless life at all, for any world much like our own could not sustain such a life; the whole of nature would have to be dramatically transformed. Choosing the second option, meanwhile, results in a drift into fantasy, from which no credible conclusions can be drawn. To paraphrase Kathleen Wilkes, we do not know what we would want to say about anything in a world indeterminately different from the one we inhabit. My other three lines of argument can be viewed as elaborating this central contention in various ways.

One of the general problems at the heart of the Makropulos debate is the lack of connection between, on the one hand, the notions of immortality and eternal life with which many of its participants are operating, and, on the other hand, the religious contexts that are among the main sources from which terms such as “immortality” and “eternal life” gain the senses that they have. The positive or constructive aspect of my project thus explores a particular religious conception—or cluster of conceptions—of eternal life that occurs within certain areas of Christian theology. My purpose in doing so is not to argue for the truth of this conception, but merely for its intelligibility and for its ethical and spiritual profundity. This in itself is a worthwhile task, given that the conception at issue has been largely neglected not only within the Makropulos debate but also within the philosophy of religion.

The conception in question can be termed that of eternal life as an exclusively present possession—that is, as something that pertains solely to the temporally finite life one is presently living as opposed to being some infinite prolongation of this life or a further life that begins subsequent to death. In order to augment my explication of pertinent theological ideas, I draw conceptual resources from theoretical physics and the philosophy of time, in which the notion of the universe as a four-dimensional spacetime manifold makes possible an understanding of our lives as both finite in extent and yet also “eternally real.” I also examine interpretations of New Testament teachings that fall under the broad heading of “realized eschatology,” this being the idea that the Kingdom of God, rather than being a future event, has been realized already in or through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.
I have reached five main conclusions:

1. There are serious conceptual problems that vitiate the Makropulos debate, i.e. the philosophical debate over whether living forever would be desirable for beings like us.
2. There is a conception of eternal life that is not merely compatible with an acceptance of human finitude, but has that acceptance as one of its constitutive elements. Versions of this conception—which can be termed eternal life as an exclusively present possession—are discernible in the ideas of several Christian theologians, especially those who emphasize the significance of the Johannine writings. The conception is both intelligible and of ethical and spiritual importance.
3. The religious notion of eternal life as an exclusively present possession can receive conceptual support from theories of eternalism and four-dimensionalism in the philosophy of time and theoretical physics, which themselves bear a resemblance to certain theological representations of how the entire history of the universe is perceived by God. Although these purely philosophical and scientific theories do not themselves generate specific ethical or religious values, they offer a way of making sense of the contention that a human life is both temporally finite and eternally real.
4. Interpretations of Christian eschatology are available that open up conceptual space for understanding the Kingdom of God as having been realized in or through the ministry of Jesus Christ, thereby avoiding the need to attribute to Jesus a prophecy of an imminent cataclysm that never eventuated.
5. The methods of investigation deployed in this project exemplify ways in which philosophy of religion can be brought into fruitful engagement with related disciplines, most notably theology, biblical studies, the philosophy of time, and theoretical physics.” – Mikel Burley

**Publications**


Additionally, as part of his project, Burley organized an interdisciplinary symposium at the University of Leeds titled *Life after Death? Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, Anthropology and Literature*, which took place on March 20, 2015. It featured presentations by Burley and four other contributors, plus audience discussion. Recordings of the presentations are available under the “Audio” tab [here](https://www.endofimmortality.com).
John Davis
Associate Professor of Philosophy, California State University, Fullerton

Project Title: “Forever for Now: Should We Slow Human Aging?”

Summary of Results

“I worked on writing a book about the ethics of life extension. By “life extension” I mean slowing or halting human aging. At its extreme this would be endless youth, the sort of thing we know from myths and science fiction. As wild as this may sound, many mainstream bio-gerontologists now publicly state that we may soon learn how to slow aging in humans.

Despite its obvious appeal, life extension is controversial. Some bioethicists have serious concerns about it, and surveys reveal that these concerns are shared by many ordinary citizens. In general, I acknowledge a variety of drawbacks to making life extension available, but argue that they are offset by the advantages of substantially longer life. There are many issues; here I will mention just three: the desirability of extended life, the threat of a Malthusian crisis if people live far longer than they do now, and issues of justice raised by the likelihood that, at least for a time, not everyone will have access to life extension.

I argue that extended life would be a desirable life, at least for most people, and that concerns that it might become very boring, or that we have so little in common with our distant future selves that we have no reason to care about them, are not good reasons to inhibit development of life-extending technologies.

It is too early to know whether making life extension widely available will bring on a Malthusian crisis of overpopulation, pollution, and resource shortages, but we cannot dismiss that possibility and must plan for it. The best way to deal with the possibility of a Malthusian crisis is not to prohibit life extension or inhibit its development. Instead, the best way is to institute a policy of Forced Choice, which requires those who extend their lives to restrict the number of children they have. I sketch out the details of such a policy to show how it can be feasible.

A world where the Haves get life extension and the Have-nots don’t is unequal in ways that are unjust. However, equality does not require leveling-down (denying life extension to everyone as a way of preventing inequality), so the fact that life extension will not be available to everyone (at least at first) is not a justification for retarding the development of life extension. Instead, those who lack access to life-extension should either be given access once it is possible to do so, or compensated in other ways.” – John Davis

Publications


Christopher Belshaw  
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, Arts, The Open University (UK)  

Project Title: “Immortality, Memory and Imagination”

Summary of Results

This project developed 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.

Publications

- On the Value and Meaning in Life (book in preparation)

- “Life, Death and Hereafter” (article in preparation)

- “Death and Extinction” (article in preparation)


Ben Bradley  
Allan and Anita Sutton Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University  

Travis Timmerman  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Seton Hall University  

Kirsten Egerstrom  
Lecturer, Southern Methodist University  

Project Title: “Death, Rational Emotion, and Meaningfulness”  

Summary of Results  

“Our project focused on questions about the rationality of attitudes towards death and immortality, and how such attitudes are justified (or not) by facts about the badness of death and the meaningfulness of life.

Ben Bradley investigated the question of what attitude it is appropriate to have towards death. In “How Should We Feel About Death?” he argued that the comparative nature of death’s badness poses problems for the deprivationist if she wishes to say that ordinary non-comparative negative attitudes, such as fear, are warranted towards one’s own death. He defended a view according to which these attitudes are justified if they are based on justified comparative attitudes such as preferences. This paper was published in Philosophical Papers. In “Existential Terror” he argued that the intense existential angst that people often feel when contemplating their future nonexistence is unwarranted. The most plausible justification for this feeling would be grounded in the thought that future nonexistence renders life meaningless, but this thought cannot be defended. This paper was published in the Journal of Ethics.

Travis Timmerman focused on the relationship between death’s badness and fitting attitudes toward death. A near universal assumption in the literature is that you should lament your death (for self-regarding reasons) if and only if your death will be bad for you. Call this assumption the Nothing Bad, Nothing to Lament Assumption. In his research, Timmerman demonstrated that the following two theses are true. First, the most widely accepted account of the badness of death (deprivationism) cannot accommodate the Nothing Bad, Nothing to Lament Assumption. Second, the Nothing Bad, Nothing to Lament Assumption is false.

In light of the second discovery, Timmerman also worked to develop a positive account of appropriate attitudes toward death. He ultimately argued that people should have two distinct attitudes toward death. The first kind of fitting attitude is determined by how well one fares relative to her subjectively justified beliefs about her expected quality and quantity of life. The worse one fares relative to her subjectively justified beliefs, the more she should, in one sense, lament her death and vice versa. The second kind of appropriate attitude is determined by the amount of good one was subjectively justified in believing was metaphysically possible for her to have obtained had not died when she did. The more metaphysically possible good that death precludes, the more one’s death is, in one sense, lamentable. Thus far, Timmerman’s research on these topics has produced two papers (see below).
In two papers, Kirsten Egerstrom examines the connections between death, immortality, and meaningfulness in life. In “Immortality and Meaninglessness,” Egerstrom develops a conception of meaninglessness in life before evaluating the desirability of immortality. She argues that even if immortal lives are not necessarily meaningless, during an eternity, immortals would inevitably face the sorts of crises (e.g., trauma) that instigate periods of meaninglessness in a person’s life – making them more likely to enter a period of meaninglessness. In contrast, many of us will be lucky enough to avoid these crises during our finite lives. Therefore, Egerstrom suggests that fear may be a fitting or rational emotion to have toward the possibility of immortality. In “The Meaning of the Afterlife,” Egerstrom objects to Samuel Scheffler’s (2013) argument that the collective afterlife – i.e., the continued existence of other human beings after our deaths – matters more for the meaningfulness of our lives than our own continued existence. She argues that much of the importance of the collective afterlife for the meaningfulness of our lives derives from our inability to directly confront our own mortality. In defending this claim, Egerstrom draws from the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker and social psychologists from the terror management theory tradition.” – Travis Timmerman

**Publications**


- Kirsten Egerstrom, “Immortality and Meaninglessness” (in preparation)

- Kirsten Egerstrom, “The Meaning of the Afterlife” (in preparation)

- Travis Timmerman, “Avoiding the Asymmetry Problem”, forthcoming in *Ratio*


Stephen Burwood
Lecturer in Department of Politics, Philosophy, and International Studies at University of Hull

Project Title: “The Philosophy & Theology of Immortality: Trans-human Immortality”

Summary of Results

“For many people, faith no longer offers a sufficient assurance of “conquering the blight of involuntary death” (Immortality Institute), so they turn instead to science to provide what William Godwin called ‘earthly immortality’. Hence the recent growth in interest in the trans-humanist movement, which anticipates the enhancement of human existence via the application of science and technology. Many trans-humanists believe that this will not only make us stronger, healthier and cleverer, but will also deliver us from death. Diverse technological possibilities present themselves: cryonics or cryopreservation, various forms of bio-rejuvenation and regenerative medicine, organ cloning and brain transplants, cybernetics and mind uploading. While no worldly technology can offer eternal life, proponents of these trans-human scientific fixes claim that they offer something that is the next best thing, extreme life extension rather than mere longevity.

Our project aimed to explore these philosophical and theological difficulties and approach some traditional questions concerning immortality in a framework with much contemporary interest. The three themes or central areas of enquiry that our project addresses are (A) Embodiment, Identity and Trans-human Survival (e.g. digital modes of being, trans-humanist ‘somatophobia’ and the erasure of embodiment from subjectivity in trans-humanist narratives of the self), (B) Desirability and Meaningfulness of Trans-human Survival (e.g. the implications of radical life-extension for the value of human life, trans-humanist responses to Williams-type arguments against the desirability of immortality, and the distinction between indefinite and immortal life spans and its implications for the meaningfulness and desirability of trans-human survival) and (C) Technological Eschatologies and Trans-human Survival (e.g. technology not as mere tool for achieving immortality but ascribed and inscribed with (quasi) religious meanings; salvific narratives of technologies blurring technology available today with speculative technology; spiritual and material/technological practices of self-perfection).

Apart from on-going publications (see below), we held a one-day workshop on Trans-human Immortality, with a small number of invited participants and an international residential conference under the more general title The Philosophy & Theology of Immortality, both held at the University of Hull, UK, in May 2015. The conference attracted 45 speakers from the following countries: Belgium, Canada, China, Germany, India, Iran, Israel, Netherlands, Nigeria, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland, UK, and the USA. The three keynote speakers and their topics were: John Harris (University of Manchester), ‘Immortality and Biological Enhancement’; Eric Olson (University of Sheffield), ‘Varieties of Immortality Worth Talking About’; and Richard Swinburne (University of Oxford), ‘How the Possibility of Heaven Makes Life on Earth More Worth Living’. More details of the workshop may be found here.” – Stephen Burwood

Publications

- Trans-humanism and the Philosophy of Immortality (book in preparation – collection of papers from the workshop and invited contributors edited by Burwood, Daniel Came and Alex Ornella).
- Stephen Burwood, “Disclosing a World: Embodiment, Spatiality and Motility” (journal article in preparation)

- Stephen Burwood, “Descartes’ Conception of an Afterlife” (journal article in preparation)


- Daniel Came, “Death and Its Denial” (journal article in preparation)

- Daniel Came, “Trans-humanism and the Denial of Death” (book chapter in preparation – contribution to above edited collection, Trans-humanism and the Philosophy of Immortality)


Yuval Avnur  
Associate Professor of Philosophy, Scripps College

Project Title: “An Epistemology for the Afterlife”

**Summary of Results**

“Do we survive bodily death? Is there something for us beyond this life? These are metaphysical questions. Any answer will bring with it whatever reservations we have about metaphysical speculation. However seriously (or not) one takes such reservations, it is worth noting that there is a related question that is not explicitly metaphysical:

*The Doxastic Question:* Which doxastic attitude—belief, disbelief, suspense of judgment—about the afterlife is (epistemically) rational?

This is an epistemological question concerning the justification we acquire within this life to believe things about what lies beyond this life. So it doesn’t directly require explicitly metaphysical commitments. Instead, it requires reflecting on our sources of evidence and the limits of epistemic rationality. The Doxastic Question has received relatively little attention in the literature; this is what I set out to answer.

Ultimately, I concluded that the best response to The Doxastic Question is a kind of humility, one that is at odds with much of the dominant thinking on all sides. It is a form of agnosticism, but does not amount to thinking that there is a 50/50 chance of survival, suspending judgment about the afterlife, or any other straightforward first-order attitude. I argued for this while staying neutral on the more often discussed topics of empirical evidence for an afterlife, the connection between religious belief and the afterlife, and the concept of personal identity.

My conclusions are organized into a negative part and a positive part. The negative is a series of objections to the view that the answer to The Doxastic Question is “we should believe that there is no afterlife.” I focused on this because it is the dominant view among secular academics and scientists, and, at any rate, is the view I initially found to be clearly the most plausible. I found (to my surprise) that empirical evidence, including evidence that our minds are dependent on our brains or bodies, does not disconfirm the possibility that there is an afterlife; and conceptual arguments, especially those that appeal to the concept of personal identity and the self, fail to address what matters about the possibility of an afterlife, and therefore miss the mark. The positive argument then supports an alternative answer to The Doxastic Question. I call it “second-order agnosticism”: no first order attitude is particularly rational. Holding this position is at least technically compatible with also believing in an afterlife, believing that there is no afterlife, or suspending judgment on whether there is an afterlife. I explored the implications of this position, including whether it would be problematically *akrasia*ic to be a second-order agnostic who also has some first-order attitude such as belief, the relation of this to permissivism—the view that more than one first-order attitude is rational given our evidence—and the significance, or upshot, of disagreements and disputes between people who hold different first-order attitudes about the afterlife given acceptance of second-order agnosticism.

These results were originally organized into three essays. I plan to integrate them, along with another chapter on the role of wishful thinking in determining an answer to The Doxastic Question, into a book. I hope the book will be accessible to all intelligent readers, even those without degrees in philosophy.” – Yuval Avnur
**Summary of Results**

“In their excellent introduction to the recent (2013) *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death*, the volume’s editors note: “[M]ost non-philosophers seem to believe that each person has a nonphysical soul that continues to exist after the death of the body...But this view is not widely held by philosophers.” Strikingly, Spinoza seems to embrace a view diametrically opposed to the one just stated (while still rejecting any theory of afterlife). For Spinoza, the fear of death is the essential litmus test that distinguishes between the philosopher and the commoner. It is strictly impossible – claims Spinoza in the preface to the *Theological Political Treatise* (1670) - to free the common people from fear (of death). The more a person is guided by reason the less she would think of death. The concept of death, for Spinoza, is part of a certain natural conceptual scheme that dominates our behavior and that Spinoza calls “imagination [imaginatio].” The imagination, for Spinoza, is the lowest and least adequate kind of cognition. The more we are able to rationalize our pattern of thinking, the less we are governed by the imagination, and therefore, the less we have room for the notion of death.

In explicating our reconstruction of Spinoza’s views, we proceed in the following order. In the first part of this paper we will discuss Spinoza’s definitions of destruction and of the death of the body. In the second part, we will address Spinoza’s views on the relation between rationality and the employment of the concept of death. We will begin this section by clarifying Spinoza’s interpretation of the Biblical story of the Fall. In the third part we will attempt to explain the patterns of behavior and thought of Spinoza’s Free Man (or Woman). Specifically, we will explain how the free human being attempts to continue her existence and avoid death while not fearing it. In the fourth and final part of the paper we will explain Spinoza’s views on the “death” of the mind and the nature of the imaginary existence Spinoza calls “our present life.” – Yitzhak Melamed

**Publications**

Meghan Sullivan  
Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame  

Project Title: “Time Bias and Immortality”

**Summary of Results**

In a series of articles, Sullivan investigates and discusses 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. Sullivan also has a book manuscript in preparation on the subject. In what follows are abstract and publication info:

``Yet Another Epicurean Argument'' (co-authored with Peter Finochiarro)

In this paper, we develop an argument that is structurally similar to so-called Lucretian symmetry arguments. Most Lucretian arguments focus on the fittingness of our emotions about our death and pre-natal non-existence. Our argument, in contrast, considers whether it is rational to have asymmetric preferences about death and pre-natal non-existence. We defend a principle that a rational agent's preferences should not vary in arbitrary ways, connecting this principle to the literature on cognitive biases. We survey potential ways to resist the new symmetry argument and show that they all involve controversial assumptions about the metaphysics of time or the limits of rational preferences. Ultimately we claim that the upshot of this new argument is not that we should be indifferent about when we die, but rather that time-biased preferences about well-being are irrational.

``Time Bias, Rationality, and Value’’

An important part of the value we place in many activities depends on our beliefs about how these activities relate to those of other people, including those who existed before our birth and those who have yet to be born. Some philosophers---most recently Samuel Scheffler---have claimed that this sort of valuing is significantly time biased: what matters to us crucially depends on our relation to people who will live in the near future, and less so---or even not at all---on our relation to people of the distant future or the past. In this essay we present thought experiments aimed to show that this thesis is false: the temporal location of another person, by itself, does not systematically affect our valuing. The first part of the essay develops and defends our temporally neutral account of such valuing. We then apply our theory to a longstanding puzzle of meaning nihilism pressed by Leo Tolstoy and others: Given that humanity will eventually end and all will be forgotten, aren’t our lives meaningless? We argue that this puzzle is generated by an inconsistent application of time-neutral and time-biased theories of non-hedonic value. Once the inconsistency is removed, the problem disappears.

``Preferring to Go On’’

This paper considers whether it is rational to prefer that one go on into a (good) afterlife, given that that going would require a substantial change in one's preferences, character and experiences. I argue that the decision problem posed by the afterlife is structurally similar to certain natural life extension cases, and that a weak rational reflection principle offers the best
hope for solving all decision problems of this sort. I also argue that certain information, while emotionally valent, is rationally irrelevant in these scenarios.

**Publications**


- Meghan Sullivan, “Preferring to Go On”, commissioned for a special volume on religion and value theory edited by Dean Zimmerman.


**Summary of Results**

“Our project, “The Interim State,” was an interdisciplinary project exploring the time between death and the resurrection that many of the world’s religious traditions posit. Such a project is vital for understanding both the theological and philosophical questions that arise from the acceptance of immortality. Concerning the theological questions, one might wonder what sort of union could one have with God in this state, and what one should say about the utility of an interim state in considering what to say about those who die prior to the ability to form their characters or beliefs. Philosophically, one might wonder, supposing the person exists in an interim state, what entailments such a state would have for analyzing the ontology of the human person, or what philosophical entailments the acceptance of a state such as purgatory or limbo would have for views of the interim state.

Our project brought together ten scholars and five graduate students to discuss and further the participants’ research on the interim state. Some of the questions we explored are how different views of human nature (e.g., materialism vs. hylomorphism) impact understandings of the interim state, how memory might work in the interim state, and how the interim state relates to the doctrines of purgatory and limbo.

Participants benefited from the extended interaction with each other at the writing workshop, and have continued to engage each others’ projects since then. They have described the workshop as “incredibly helpful for my research,” “a source of very useful feedback,” and “a great encouragement.” In particular, participants valued the extended discussion of each paper and the friendships and professional relationships that the workshop fostered. A number of the papers written for our workshop have already been published, and an even higher number are currently under review at peer-reviewed journals or presses.” – Kevin Timpe

**Participants and Paper Info**

Faculty
- Susan Brower-Toland (Saint Louis University), "Interim Memory: Ockham on Memory and Self-Knowledge in the Separated Soul"
- Christopher Brown (University of Tennessee at Martin), "St. Thomas on the Interim State and the Perfect Happiness of the Saints"
- T. Ryan Byerly (University of Sheffield), "Hylomorphism and the Interim State"
- Caleb Cohoe (Metropolitan State University of Denver), "How Composite Dualists can Survive the Interim State"
- Jason Eberl (Marian University), "Consistent Hylomorphism: Answering Challenges to Survivalism"
- Jason McMartin (Biola University), "Holy Saturday and Christian Theological Anthropology"
- Timothy Pawl (University of St. Thomas), "Christ and the Interim State"
- Mark Spencer (University of St. Thomas), "What is it Like to be a Separated Soul?"
- Joshua Thurow (University of Texas at San Antonio), "Atoning in Purgatory"
- Kevin Timpe (Calvin College/Northwest Nazarene University), "An Argument for Limbo"

**Graduate Students**
Thomas Atkinson (Liverpool)
Robert Hartman (SLU)
Luke Henderson (Birmingham)
Turner Nevitt (Fordham)
Allison Thornton (Baylor)

**Publications**


Andrew Eshleman
Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Portland

Project Title: “The Afterlife: Beyond Belief”

Summary of Results

“When a Christian refers to the future full realization of the kingdom of God in an afterlife, it is typically assumed that she is expressing (or implying) beliefs about the existence and activity of God in conjunction with supernatural beliefs about an other-worldly realm and the possibility of one’s personal survival after bodily death. In other words, the religious language is interpreted in a realist fashion and the religious person here is construed as a religious believer. A corollary of this widely-held realist view is the assumption that if one were to conclude that there is no good reason to believe the asserted claims—for example, no reason to believe that we may survive our bodily deaths in a heavenly realm—then there is no reason to engage in the use of such religious language and the practices which accompany it. I argue that this assumption is false—that there is a meaningful way to use such language in a religious context that does not rest on believing supernatural claims. On the view developed here, the relevant religious discourse may be reinterpreted as a useful fiction employed through religious practice as a powerful and distinctive means of moral self-cultivation. Against the backdrop of Kant’s discussion of a kingdom of ends understood as a regulative ideal, I highlight an ideal of restorative justice that deserves to be called religious—one which has taken shape in the evolution of the Abrahamic faiths and become embedded in some of their eschatological depictions of an afterlife. Elsewhere, I have defended a fictionalist interpretation of language about God. Here, I will seek to extend the view to language about an afterlife in which the kingdom of God is brought to fruition.” – Andrew Eshleman

Publications

Luca Ferrero
Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Riverside

Project Title: “Agency, Scarcity, and Mortality”

Summary of Results

“Many philosophers argue that we should reconcile ourselves with our mortality because it is a constitutive feature of our existence. The necessary finitude of our existence, they claim, is essential to the fundamental temporal structure of our lives, the nature of deliberation, and the character of our basic motivations and values. In my research, I argue that this attempt at reconciliation fails because there seems to be at least one kind of immortal existence that we can coherently conceive and, possibly, desire. First, I claim that the temporal structure of our existence does not depend on the necessary culmination into a temporal ending. Even if lives have a narrative structure (which I doubt), narratives do not require closure as a temporal terminus. Second, I argue against the suggestion that temporal finitude is constitutive of the basic elements of diachronic agency, including the nature of our values and the structure of deliberation. In my view, the only finitude that is constitutive of diachronic agency is the scarcity of opportunities for action; this scarcity, I claim, can be present even in an endless existence. Hence, it is possible to conceive of an immortal existence that would support the core features of a recognizable form of diachronic agency. I thus conclude that we might never fully reconcile with our mortality. Although we might still end up embracing our inescapable mortality as essential to a fuller set of features of our existence, as far as our diachronic agency is concerned, we can justifiably regret our missing on an immortal existence.” – Luca Ferrero

Publications


Mark Rowlands  
Professor of Philosophy, University of Miami

Project Title: “Meaning in Mortal and Immortal Lives”

Summary of Results

“This project was inspired by Schiller’s observation that, into their stories of the immortal gods of Olympus, the Greeks injected their conception of the most enviable life possible to mortals. To Schiller’s observation, I added the additional idea that in their stories of those who had fallen foul of the gods – and were made to suffer for it eternally – were conceptions of the least enviable life available to mortals. The guiding theme in my project was that these portrayals of immortal existence – both positive and negative – could be used as raw materials for the construction of an account of meaning in life.

I use two unfortunates Sisyphus and Tantalus (the latter doubly unfortunate, given that he has been cruelly ignored in recent discussions of meaning in life) to show both that purpose is both required for meaning in life and anathema to meaning in life. This leads me to an examination of activities that have purpose of a certain sort: their purpose is intrinsic to them. These activities are all species of play. Because their purpose is intrinsic to them, so too is their value. More precisely, we value these activities intrinsically. The same is true not just of activities but also persons (broadly understood). I then use one of the most fortunate of immortal beings – Zeus – to defend the idea that meaning in life is to be found in play. And then broaden this to intrinsic valuing more generally – to mitigate some of Zeus’s more marked psychopathic tendencies.

The result is an account of meaning in life that is based on intrinsic valuing. Our lives have meaning to the extent there are things in them we value intrinsically – and these things can include both activities and persons. The account is a subjectivist one: it is based on the concept of intrinsic valuing, and does not require the objective counterpart, intrinsic value. I defend this account against standard objections. Finally, I argue that the quasi-realist program in meta-ethics, developed by Blackburn, can be appropriated and modified to make sense of the idea that statements about meaning in life are non-trivial, and can be true or false, even in the absence of objective value.” – Mark Rowlands

Publications


A book on this topic is also in progress.
Summary of Results

“How essentially time-bound are human beings? Most people believe that the afterlife—if there is one—involves never-ending experience and union with the Divine, and that this ‘eternal life’ will be one of perfect happiness. This project looks at Thomas Aquinas’s account of the relation between immortality and perfect happiness, for Aquinas both recognizes the difficulties inherent in temporal beings trying to live in unending union with an a-temporal God and proposes an interesting solution. In short, Aquinas claims that our experience will shift in the afterlife to a state of sempiternity. Neither time nor eternity, sempiternity is a state of changeless duration without end.

Does shifting to a completely different temporal framework change what it means to be human? In the face of the worry that human beings are intrinsically temporal, I argue that the framework of sempiternity can provide a plausible account of how beings like us could experience an everlasting afterlife with an eternal God. It is a well-known phenomenon that an event’s duration can feel quite different to us depending on various factors (such as how engaged we are in the activity, and what else is happening around us). Many medieval mystics describe union with God as feeling timeless, for instance, although they were experiencing that union over what we would characterize as an interval of time. Contemporary accounts of temporal experience also offer a philosophical framework in which to understand the experience of duration without time’s passing, while contemporary psychological theories—such as Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of ‘flow’—back up the claim that events with a particular duration can be experienced as much longer or shorter…or even as timeless. Although moving permanently to this sort of sempiternal framework would constitute a dramatic shift for human beings, I believe that it nevertheless remains within the bounds of human experience.

The Immortality Project supported a variety of different outcomes, including workshops, visiting fellowships (for time spent in Edinburgh, St. Andrews, and Sydney), 20-odd presentations (including a number in ‘non-academic’ settings such as chapels and community houses), and several publications. I also discussed project work during the week I spent at the University of Colorado at Boulder as a Distinguished Visitor, and won a $100,000 non-residential fellowship (with Robin Dembroff) for the 2015-16 academic year that builds on my Immortality Project: Principal Investigator for “Embodied Religion: Social Structures and Religious Experience,” via The Experience Project. I also organized a workshop called Eternity in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy at Princeton University (February 22, 2015) with Dan Garber (Princeton) and Yitzhak Melamed (Johns Hopkins)” – Christina Van Dyke

Publications

- Aquinas on Happiness: Immortality and the Afterlife (book manuscript, in progress)
Aaron Segal  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Yeshiva University  

Project Title: “Why Live Forever?”

**Summary of Results**

“Is there anything that immortality offers – anything we might reasonably want – that no mere mortal can have? I claim not. In making this claim, I am not joining the growing chorus of philosophical voices that declare immortal life to be positively undesirable. On my view, an immortal life could be quite desirable, and reasonable for us to hope and strive for. But even so, I claim, no such immortal life could be desirable even partly because it is immortal; indeed, no such immortal life could be desirable even partly because it possesses a feature that entails immortality. Rather, 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.

My argument proceeds in two stages. First, I distinguish and elaborate three different conceptions of immortal life, conceptions that exhaust all the plausible candidates for what is meant by ‘immortal life,’ ‘eternal life,’ ‘a life that goes on forever’ and other allied terms: (1) an endless life, that is, a life that has no last time at which it is going on; (2) an unbounded life, that is, roughly, a life that goes on until the end of time; and (3) an infinitely long life, that is, roughly, a life that goes on for an infinite number of days. Second, I argue that none of the corresponding features, being an endless life, being an unbounded life, and being an infinitely long life, even partly explains the desirability of a life that exemplifies it. The first feature, I upon reflection, turns out to be evidently irrelevant to the desirability of a life. Indeed, some human beings might already have lived endless lives – even though they perished along with their bodies long ago – and they were no better off for it. The second and third features, I argue, are the wrong kind of feature to explain the desirability of a life. This is because each is “purely extrinsic,” which is to say that whenever a life has that feature, it has it not at all in virtue of how that life is in itself.

The significance of my claim lies not only in its intrinsic theoretical interest, but in its practical implications as well: it might indeed be reasonable of you to desire to live forever – contrary to the growing chorus – but, if I am right, it is not reasonable of you to do so even partly because your life would then go on forever. If you find yourself with such a desire based on such a ground, you really ought to lose your desire or find another ground for it, on pain of being unreasonable.” – Aaron Segal

**Publications**

- “A Puzzle about Points”, forthcoming in *Philosophical Perspectives*.
- “Why Live Forever?: What Metaphysics Can Contribute” (under review)
Philip Ziegler
Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, University of Aberdeen

Project Title: “Eternal God, Eternal Life-Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality”

Summary of Results

In December 2015 we ran a public workshop exploring theological aspects of the question of immortality in Bristol, hosted by Trinity College. Approximately sixty graduate students, clergy and others took part in a day of papers and discussion.

Then, in January 2016 we submitted the final MS of our book entitled *Eternal God, Eternal Life: Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality* to the publisher for copy editing. It is scheduled to appear in print from T&T Clark/Bloomsbury in September 2016 (Amazon link here). Taken together, its chapters set out to illuminate various aspects of our common thesis that in the sphere of Christian theology the concept of creaturely immortality is decisively shaped by how immortality is first understood as a properly divine predicate. They also variously undertake to show how in this theological domain the idea of ‘eternal life’ has a decisively qualitative and not merely quantitative meaning. The final content of the book is as follows:

Chapter 1 - ‘The Order and Movement of Eternity: Karl Barth on the Eternity of God and Creaturely Time’ (Tom Greggs)

Chapter 2 - ‘You are Good and do Good’: Some Remarks on Eternal Life and the Goodness of God’ (Christopher J. Holmes)

Chapter 3 - ‘The Resonating Body in Triune Eternity’ (Markus Mühling)

Chapter 4 - ‘Angels and Immortality’ (Don Wood)

Chapter 5 - ‘How new is new creation? Resurrection and creation ex nihilo’ (Susannah Ticciati)

Chapter 6 - ‘Toward a Doctrine of Resurrection’ (Katherine Sonderegger)

Chapter 7 - ‘The Enmity of Death and Judgment unto Life’ (Philip G. Ziegler)

Chapter 8 - ‘Eucharist and Immortality: Reformed Reflections on the Eschatological Dimension of the Sacrament’ (Paul Nimmo)

Chapter 9 - ‘The Incompleteness of the Completed’: Eternal God, Eternal Life, and the Eternal Now’ (Russel Re Manning)

Chapter 10 - ‘Technological Immortalization and Original Mortality: Karl Barth on the Celebration of Finitude’ (Robert Song)
T. Ryan Byerly  
Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield

Eric Silverman  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Christopher Newport University

Project Title: “The Paradise Project”

Summary of Results

“The Paradise Understood: New Philosophical Essays about Heaven” is an edited volume of seventeen philosophical essays that systematically investigates heaven, or paradise, as conceived within theistic religious traditions such as Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The volume contains essays authored by both senior and junior scholars addressing an unparalleled variety of topics concerning what life in paradise would, could, or will be like for human persons. While some essays offer novel approaches to questions about heaven of perennial philosophical interest, others break new ground by expanding the range of questions about heaven that philosophers have considered.

The authors of these essays wrestle with questions about human life in paradise that span the spectrum of the major subfields of philosophical enquiry. They critically examine, for example, the following questions:

- Is there a basic conception about the nature of paradise which can provide guidance for philosophical theorizing about paradise? If so, what is this conception?
- What is reasonable to believe about which epistemic achievements would or could be attained in paradise? Could or would paradisiacal persons be infallible or omniscient, for example?
- Which virtues would be possessed by human persons in paradise, and could there be growth in paradise with respect to these virtues?
- What would be the emotional and volitional orientation of human persons in paradise toward evil and wrongdoing?
- What would be the social dynamics of paradise? What other members of the paradisiacal community would there be, if any, besides human persons?
- How can bodily resurrection be secured for the human inhabitants of paradise? What implications does such a resurrection have for the ontology of persons, and for metaphysical theorizing more generally?
- What sort of free will could the human inhabitants of paradise possess, and how could they be safeguarded from employing this free will to do wrong?
- Is the kind of life that human persons would attain in paradise good, or desirable? Is it something for which it is reasonable to hope?
By employing both historical and contemporary philosophical resources, the authors of the essays in this volume together make a pioneering contribution toward answering these and other pressing questions about human life in paradise. Their work is sure to serve as a platform for future research on the topic, reinvigorating philosophical investigation into these neglected topics within philosophy of religion.”

**Publications**

Summary of Results

“My grant funded a year of research leave during which I drafted articles on the metaphysics of personal identity, death, and immortality.

In ‘A Cartesian Argument Against Compositional Nihilism’, I discuss the radical but increasingly popular view –compositional nihilism – that there are no composite objects, objects that have parts. According to compositional nihilism as it is typically developed, there are simples (subatomic particles or spacetime points), and some of them are arranged table-wise while others are arranged human-wise, but there are no tables or human beings, which would be composite objects if they existed. I explore a surprisingly neglected style of objection to compositional nihilism – viz., that it conflicts with the fact that I am conscious, a Cartesian certainty known introspectively. (If I am conscious, I exist, and if I exist, I am composite, in which case compositional nihilism is false.) Following in the footsteps of Lichtenberg, Russell, Carnap, and others, compositional nihilists typically seem to grant that there is some proposition in the vicinity of <I am conscious> that is certain via introspection, but they deny that status to <I am conscious> itself. It isn’t certain that I am conscious, they say, but only that there is an experience, or that there are some particles that are collectively collectively conscious. I examine a series of such ‘ersatz certainties’, and I argue that none of them captures the real certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious>.

In ‘Personal Identity, Consciousness, and Joints in Nature,’ I respond to Ted Sider’s recent argument to the effect that questions about personal identity over time (‘Would I survive teleportation to Mars?’ ‘Will I continue to exist as a lifeless corpse for a while after I die?’) are metaphysically shallow questions turning on facts about language use and may have no determinate answers. Sider’s conclusion is a fairly popular position and is often accepted even by those who think that questions about which entities are phenomenally conscious (‘Are spiders conscious?’, ‘Are jellyfish conscious?’) have determinate answers and are metaphysically deep. Roughly put, I argue that if the question about consciousness is determinate and deep, then so is the question about personal identity.

In ‘The Metaphysics of Mortals: Death, Immortality, and Personal Time’, I argue that in our theorizing about the metaphysics of personal identity, death, and immortality, much of our talk of time should be judiciously replaced with talk of ‘personal time’, in something like the sense of Lewis (1976/1986). According to Lewis, ‘the personal time of a particular time traveler…[is] roughly that which is measured by his wristwatch’ (1986: 69). He contrasts personal time with external time, i.e., time itself. I offer precise accounts of what it is to die at a time, and of what it is to be immortal, that invoke both external time and personal time, though in different ways.” – Cody Gilmore

Publications


Mark Wrathall  
Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Riverside

Project Title: “The Phenomenology of Immortality”

Summary of Results

Wrathall hosted a series of seminars and worked on a book manuscript and other writings on the temporal implications of different ways of understanding the afterlife. Wrathall discusses a “phenomenological methodology” in connection with 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?

Publications

- “Trivial Tasks That Consume a Lifetime: Kierkegaard on Immortality and Becoming Subjective”,  
  *Journal of Ethics* 19: 419-441. DOI: [10.1007/s10892-015-9213-6](10.1007/s10892-015-9213-6)