Beytulhikme Int J Phil 16 (2) 2026
Doi: 10.29228/beytulhikme.90444
Research Article: 773-784

Is the Theistic Understanding of Immortal Life Preferable? *

Ölümsüzlüğün Teistik Anlayışı Tercih Edilebilir mi?

SELEN FETTAHOĞLU
İbn Haldun University / METU

ATİLLA ARKAN
İbn Haldun University

Received: 07.04.2026 | Accepted: 28.06.2026

Abstract: Islam offers heaven to those who have faith and do good deeds on Earth. However, there are problems with the preferability of an immortal afterlife, as Bernard Williams argues. Immortal life can be boring, one may not maintain her identity for such a long time, or the life may not be recognizable as a human life. The problem lies in the categorical desires. If categorical desires — the desires that motivate us to live— change over time, one cannot remain the same person throughout time. If, however, the desires do not change, the life cannot be recognizable as a human life. We claim that al-Fārābī's approach can help us to sidestep this challenge, compatible with an Islamic perspective. al-Fārābī thinks that a moral life is required for happiness. We suggest that moral life is an unchanging categorical desire, but the ways of satisfying this categorical desire can change.

Keywords: Afterlife, immortality, al-Farabi, moral life, theism, Islam, happiness.

* We would like to thank Murat Baç, Rıza Tevfik Kalyoncu, Enis Doko, and Cansu İrem Meriç for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. We are also grateful to the participants at the 2024 Muslim-Christian Workshop on Science and Religion at Ibn Haldun University, where SF presented this paper. Finally, we would like to thank TÜBİTAK for the financial support provided to SF.

✉ Selen Fettahoğlu
İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Fakültesi, Felsefe ve Yapay Zeka Bölümü
34494, İstanbul, Türkiye | selenfettahoglu@ihu.edu.tr
Ortadoğu Teknik Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Bölümü
06800, Ankara, Türkiye | selenfettahoglu@gmail.com

✉ Atilla Arkan
İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, İslami İlimler Fakültesi, Felsefe ve Din Bilimleri Bölümü
34480, İstanbul, Türkiye | atilla.arkan@ihu.edu.tr

Giriş

Death can be seen as the loss of the joys of life, therefore, as something bad. When we die, we lose our existence. Therefore, all the good experiences that we had and could have would be lost. However, many religious views have the idea of the afterlife to compensate for the loss of the joys of life. The forms of the afterlife vary, some in the form of reincarnation, some in the form of recreation somewhere else, etc. Some religions, such as Islam and Christianity, offer the idea of an afterlife. In the immortal afterlife, all the suffering that we had in our time on Earth could be compensated by happiness, and all the loss of the joys of possible future experiences would be overcome. This is what would happen if you had a moral life in your time on Earth. If you are a good person with faith, both Christianity and Islam promise life in heaven, which is a very beautiful place where there will be no sign of boredom. But would it be preferable to nonexistence? In the end, eternity is an extremely long time; and one may think that it seems boring. Surely, this is what famous philosopher Bernard Williams thinks. He claims that immortal life would create two lines of problems. Either you would lose your identity and not be you anymore, or you would be bored, and everything would lose its attraction. In both ways, immortal life would not be preferable. Now, Williams' claim seems to cause serious problems for theism, as both Islamic and Christian theism promise an attractive heaven to you (the same person that you are now, without any change of identity). To the best of our knowledge, despite the vast implications, Williams' article is not widely discussed from the perspective of Islamic theology. In this article, we aim to fill a gap in the theological literature by addressing the problem raised by Williams' "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality."[1] Our purpose here is to respond to Williams' article from an Islamic perspective. We claim that the Islamic conception of heaven is preferable, despite Williams' arguments. Firstly, we will introduce Williams' article and the Makropulos case. Then, we will present John Martin Fischer's response to

[1] We attempt to oppose Williams' argument and show that the Islamic conception of heaven would be preferable and, therefore, Islam would not be harmed. However, it must be noted that even if Williams was right, this will not debunk Islam. Some early kalam scholars claimed that heaven cannot be eternal, as only God can be eternal. So, one can hold this religious view along with Williams' perspective.

it, in which he claims that immortality is preferable. And very shortly, we will present the understanding of heaven in Islamic theism and show that Fischer's response fails to show that the Islamic understanding of heaven is preferable (he did not aim to show this)[2]. As a solution, we will introduce the famous 9th-10th-century Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī's understanding of happiness. He claims that moral life is the way towards happiness. We will claim that taking moral life as a categorical desire could be a way to sidestep the problems of Williams' article for Islamic theism.

Bernard Williams' Challenge for the Preferability of Immortal Life

We will start by introducing Williams' article. There are different opinions among philosophers about the evil of death. Some ancient philosophers, such as Epicurus (341-270 B.C.E.) and Lucretius (99-55 B.C.E.), claim that death is not bad, as you cease to exist, and something cannot be bad for you if you don't exist. Thomas Nagel, on the other hand, considers that death can be bad, as when we are dead, our joys of life are taken away from us (Nagel, 1970). Bernard Williams, on the other hand, thinks that death is what gives meaning to our lives. Death takes away our sufferings. He says: "death provides an end to great suffering" (Williams, 1973, p. 83).

Elina Makropulos, also known as Emilia Marty or Ellian Macgregor, is a character in Karel Capek's famous play. Makropulos' father is the Court physician, and he made her take an elixir of life, which would extend her life. As long as she continued to take the elixir, she would never die and never get old. At the time depicted in the play, she was 342 years old. She first tried the elixir at 42 years old, and after this, she never got old for 300 years. But her life lost all its attraction for her. She experienced practically every possible thing she could, and her life became joyless and full of boredom. When she was 342, instead of continuing to take the elixir again to live more, she preferred to end her suffering by stopping taking the elixir. She preferred to die (Williams, 1973, p. 82).

Williams thinks that immortality is not preferable and explains his opinions in terms of a dilemma. He thinks that in immortal life, the life is

[2] Still, we think mentioning Fischer's discussion is important because his article paves the way for a theistic answer to some extent, and he introduces the recognizability challenge, which has an important place in this article. Fischer's views are also important for understanding the general discussions on immortality.

either not the life of the same person because the person loses her identity, or the life is not attractive anymore. Either way, immortal life is not preferable. In his famous article "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality", he frames the problem in terms of categorical desires.

Categorical desires are the desires that we want to be realized even though we cease to exist. These are the unconditional desires that motivate us to continue to live (Williams, 1973, p. 86). To exemplify, many patriots are willing to die for the purpose of saving their countries. They want their country's good even though they cease to exist. Likewise, raising money to help other people is a categorical desire (Fischer, 2012, p. 4). Now, Williams claims, in an immortal life, our categorical desires would change over time. If such fundamental desires change, then we would lose our identity. We would not be ourselves anymore. John Martin Fischer calls this challenge the "identity challenge", and we will do the same hereafter. This is the first horn of the dilemma. Alternatively, if we continue to do the same things over and over again, then we would experience every single possible thing in an immortal life. Then, our lives would lose their appeal, and we would get bored. This is what Fischer calls the "attractiveness challenge" from Williams' dilemma. This is the second horn of the dilemma that Williams handles. Because we are doomed in both ways, immortality is not preferable, according to Williams.

Fischer's Response

John Martin Fischer, in his article "Immortality" (2012), first introduces Williams' idea and then adds another challenge to the aforementioned ones. He adds the "recognizability challenge", which means that in immortal life, the life would not be recognizable as human life. This differs from the identity challenge because, in the identity challenge, the life is not recognizable as *that particular person's* life, rather than failing to be recognizable as *any* human's life. If categorical desires change, we are faced with the identity challenge; if the categorical desires don't change, we are faced with the recognizability challenge. The recognizability challenge states that in the immortal life in which our categorical desires don't change, our characters would fall apart, and we would lose virtues that shape our identity, such as courage (Fischer, 2012).

Fischer responds to the three challenges mentioned above. About the identity challenge, he draws attention to the already changing features in our lives. Our beliefs, worldviews, what we enjoy, and what we dislike all change over time in our lifetime. So, why would the change of categorical desires make it so different that we are not the same person anymore? Fischer does not think that our change of categorical desires would make us a different person.

In responding to the recognizability challenge —the objection that we would not have a coherent character in an immortal life— Fischer first evaluates the claim that borders define the human life that we know, and that their absence would make a human life unrecognizable. We would lack borders in an immortal life because it would not have an ending to define it. However, Fischer claims that an object's one dimension's infinity does not make it formless. Also, as a version of the recognizability challenge, he responds to the claim that what makes human lives definable is their being shaped by anxieties. We are constantly living with the possibility of failure and death. If there is no risk and our lives are not fraught, the immortal life would lose its recognizability as a human life as we know it. But Fischer responds to this idea by underlining that human lives would still carry the risk of failure, and there could be other dangers, such as pain, even though there would not be the danger of death.

Another type of recognizability challenge comes from seeing human lives as narratives. Narratives have endings, but immortal life does not. However, Fischer still thinks that there are many other features that immortal life would share with narratives. Immortal life would be similar to serial movies without an ending. Lastly, he examines another type of recognizability challenge, which is the claim that immortal life is fundamentally different because we cannot apprehend it as a whole. He rejects the idea that we need to apprehend life as a whole.

Regarding the attractiveness challenge, he exemplifies some pleasures that are repeatable: "I have contended that such activities as sex, eating fine meals, listening to music, experiencing beautiful works of art or nature, meditation, and prayer might provide repeatable pleasures (although perhaps "pleasures" was a slightly misleading term)" (Fischer, 2012, p. 11). Thanks to these pleasurable activities, immortal life would be attractive.

Now, this brief summary demonstrates that Fischer (arguably) successfully responded to Williams' claims. However, the type of immortality that would answer Williams' challenges is not the immortality that Muslims understand as heaven in the afterlife. In heaven, we would not expect boredom and pain, given that it is a reward (see the Quran, 35:35). Yet Fischer assumes their existence to address the recognizability challenge. So, if we are claiming that heaven in Islamic theism is preferable, we need to resort to some other strategies. Here, instead of trying to modify Fischer's arguments, we will draw a different picture and propose an alternative response derived from taking al-Fārābī's approach. Both the recognizability challenge and identity challenge are important problems for Islamic theology. Heaven in the afterlife is a reward for those who have faith and do good deeds in their life on Earth. The rewarded person has to be identical to the person who did the good deeds on Earth. And life must be recognizable, as it is a continuity of our life on Earth. Also, the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam, promises that there will be recognizable things in heaven (see the Quran, 2:25). However, when categorical desires change, we fall into the identity challenge, and when they don't, we fall into the recognizability challenge. In the next section, we will propose that al-Fārābī's approach to happiness can help us to sidestep these challenges.

al-Fārābī's Approach as an Alternative Response

al-Fārābī is an Islamic philosopher who lived in the 9th and 10th centuries. He is known as "the Second Master", the first master being Aristotle. al-Fārābī wrote commentaries on Aristotle's and Plato's works, and the strong effect of Greek philosophy can be seen in his work. He is a very influential philosopher for those who came after him, especially Avicenna. He wrote on the philosophy of religion, logic, metaphysics, science, and the subjects of our interests: political philosophy, psychology, and ethics. In short, he was interested in philosophy as a whole.

As a Muslim philosopher, al-Fārābī believed that there is life after death, and humankind who does good deeds would be rewarded (al-Fārābī 1985, 305).[3] If a person who has faith does good deeds on Earth, her incorporeal soul would be sent to heaven, where she reaches the ultimate

[3] Islamic theism also promises punishment for sinners. However, because our subject here is the preferability of immortal life, we will limit the discussion to heaven.

happiness. According to al-Fārābī, our souls have a rational faculty and the rational faculty is what is responsible for human cognition; it is the faculty that allows us to contemplate and do science (López -Farjeat, 2020). He thinks ultimate happiness depends on rational faculty, and exercising rational faculty is required for happiness. In the afterlife, the rational faculty can work independently from the body. He states that ultimate happiness depends on living a moral and intellectual life because this is the way toward perfecting the rational faculty. He explains his views in the *Perfect State*. al-Fārābī takes moral life as a precondition for the happiness of individuals. He underlines that both moral life and the attainment of knowledge through intellectual activities without the influence of the immediate desires contribute to human happiness (Germann, 2021).

At this point, we would like to underline that Williams already has a paragraph in his article that addresses the idea of intellectual activities as a way of happiness:

> Some philosophers have pictured an eternal existence as occupied in something like intense intellectual enquiry. Why that might seem to solve the problem, at least for them, is obvious. The activity is engrossing, self-justifying, affords, as it may appear, endless new perspectives, and by being engrossing enables one to lose oneself. It is that last feature that supposedly makes boredom unthinkable, by providing something that is, in that earlier phrase, at every moment totally absorbing. But if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such an activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the conditions that it should be me who lives forever, and that the eternal life should be in prospect of some interest (Williams, 1973, p. 96).

As can be seen, he thinks that aiming for intellectual activities and taking them as a categorical desire faces a challenge. This life is not recognizable[4] as a human life. Although we do not think this is a strong objection to the preferability of immortal life,[5] for now, we will assume that he is

[4] Although in this quotation, he says, "it should be me who lives for ever", since the categorical desire does not change, we think his objection here is a form of recognizability challenge instead of the identity challenge.

[5] We think developing a similar way to the one we suggest about taking moral life as a categorical desire can also be possible for taking intellectual activities as a categorical desire. But for now, we will ignore this opinion.

right. When we read Fischer's response to Williams, we see that Fischer, too, does not make use of intellectual activities to face the attractiveness challenge. He sees the repeatable pleasures, which are mostly biological pleasures, as a way to respond to the attractiveness challenge. Now, as it is clear from Williams' quote above, seeing intellectual activities as a categorical desire could mean that we have to face either the recognizability challenge (if it doesn't change through time) or the identity challenge (if it changes through time). So, if we are to take into account what al-Fārābī says about happiness, we are left with the "moral life" choice. We claim that taking moral life as a categorical desire will not cause a similar problem. Indeed, al-Fārābī does not consider intellectual activities per se as a way towards happiness. He does think that the rational faculty ought to be perfected to reach happiness. However, happiness requires a moral life along with intellectual activities (Az, 2017). He suggests that if one does not live a moral life despite having great intellectual activities, that person is not a philosopher. A moral person who does not have these intellectual activities can be considered more of a philosopher than the former (Galston, 1992, p. 110). As it may seem, we do not think that taking only intellectual activities as a categorical desire would be compatible with al-Fārābī's approach. al-Fārābī states that just like it is the aim of a human to live a happy life, so too, the aim of the cities is to reach happiness. This happiness can be reached by its citizens having a moral life. According to al-Fārābī, a virtuous city is governed by a philosopher-king who allows a multicultural and multilingual presence in his country and who cultivates morality. This leader is the epitome of moral virtues and governs his city morally and justly. He guides his citizens to live moral lives. In a morally virtuous city, citizens cooperate with each other, and in this way, individuals reach perfection. He approaches the city teleologically and claims that the aim of the city is felicity. The citizens work to realize what is good for the community, and there are rules that are constructed for the flourishing of society. Social harmony is achieved through the moral lives of individuals. This moral life leads a city to perfection and happiness.

al-Fārābī contrasts a city with moral virtues with an immoral city in which individuals care for only their desires, personal honor, domination, and their pleasure (al-Fārābī, 1985). As can be seen, al-Fārābī does not

praise pleasure. Still, one could have an alternative idea to make the afterlife preferable. Wouldn't immortality be preferable if our biology in the were modified by God in such a way that we always get pleasure? However, this would treat us as if we were no different than a non-human animal (see Kagan, 2012, p. 242), and we would have to face the recognizability challenge again. Moreover, al-Fārābī would not see this as real happiness. In his view, pleasures that are caused by our senses, e.g. eating, do not lead to real happiness, and in fact, they are the obstacles to real happiness. He states that immediate pleasures are followed by pain, but moral life is followed by happiness (al-Fārābī, 2007, p. 113-4; al-Fārābī, 1987, p. 178).[6]

Now, we would like to underline that the way we see it, the desire for a moral life is a categorical desire. The reason is that a categorical desire must be unconditional and should not depend on an individual's being alive. Also, it should motivate individuals to continue living. We believe the desire for a moral life satisfies all of these conditions. In al-Fārābī's works, we see that the desire for a moral life is a desire for the city, it does not depend on one person's being alive. And it is the way to the ultimate happiness, which makes humans continue to live for it.[7]

At this point, we would like to clarify that we are not equating Williams' categorical desires with al-Fārābī's framework for moral life. We are merely stating that moral life is a form of categorical desire. Categorical desires are psychological motivations for persons to live. However, according to al-Fārābī's understanding of moral life, living a moral life is not a mere psychological desire: it is the necessary condition for the perfection of the rational faculty. Nevertheless, we believe that moral life is a categorical desire, a more particular form of categorical desire whose content is not certain actions but an orientation toward perfecting the rational faculty. Living a moral life function as the categorical desire which motivates us to continue to live.

[6] Here, we can see that al-Fārābī's approach is not in line with Fischer's solution to Bernard Williams' article. Fischer introduces "repeatable pleasures," which include activities such as eating and sex to respond to the attractiveness challenge (see Fischer, 2012, p. 11). However, in al-Fārābī 's view, these activities cannot bring happiness.

[7] We should underline that we are not trying to endorse al-Fārābī's framework as a whole. Instead, we are trying to adapt al-Fārābī's ideas to address a modern problem. His framework provides a general picture we can use to respond to Williams.

Fischer frames the problem of categorical desires such that if the categorical desires change, we face the identity challenge; if they don't, we face the recognizability challenge. As we already stated above, this is how Fischer presents Williams' challenge. And he responds to these problems in the way that was mentioned in the previous section. Now, the problem lies in the categorical desires. We propose that we can take the "moral life" as a categorical desire, and this would sidestep the problem. And since we would face the recognizability challenge if categorical desires do not change, we claim that *the ways of satisfying this categorical desire* would change. Indeed, there could be infinite ways to have a moral life! This way, changes would happen at the level of particular actions through which moral life is realized, but the categorical desire itself would remain constant. Since our ways of satisfying the categorical desires would change, we would not be facing the recognizability challenge. This way, we would have an alternative solution, and we would face neither the recognizability challenge nor the identity challenge. This is the way we can derive an alternative solution to the problems that Bernard Williams proposes against the preferability of immortal life[8].

Conclusion

In this article, we proposed an alternative way to respond to Bernard Williams' claim that immortal life would not be preferable. We claimed that a theistic immortal afterlife would be preferable. Firstly, we introduced Bernard Williams' famous article about immortality and summarized his claim that immortal life would not be preferable. This would be problematic for Islamic theism because, in Islam, those who have faith and do good deeds will be rewarded in the eternal afterlife. This afterlife has to be preferable; otherwise, it would not function as a meaningful reward. Williams claims that if our categorical desires change, then humans would

[8] One could state that the blurriness of which actions are good is a problem for our article. We cannot always agree on what is good. This may lead to problems in living a moral life. We think this could be a strong objection if al-Fārābī only proposed a moral life for happiness. But he also presupposed intellectual activities for happiness (al-Fārābī, 1983, p. 49). Isn't thinking about what is moral with the aim of living a moral life, a moral behavior itself (see al-Fārābī, 2019, p. 22)? If so, we think an objection that may come from the blurriness of what is moral will not be very strong. Still, we see this as a limitation to our argument here, and this point needs further discussion. One that is beyond the scope of this article.

lose their identity in an immortal life. Alternatively, if we continue to do the same things, then we get bored. Either way, these are problematic for Islamic theism. Secondly, we introduced John Martin Fischer's way of responding to Bernard Williams. Before responding, he first summarized Williams' position and then added the recognizability challenge to Williams' two challenges. If categorical desires do change, humans would lose identity, and if they do not change, immortal life would be unrecognizable as a human life. Fischer's response makes use of danger and pain in immortal life, which should be absent in heaven according to Islamic theism. So, his way of response is only partially applicable to an Islamic theist's defense of immortal life. There was a need for an alternative response. In the third section, we proposed al-Fārābī's understanding of happiness. He thinks moral life is the way towards ultimate happiness. We proposed that having a moral life is a categorical desire. However, to avoid the problem that we could face if the categorical desires do not change, we proposed that the ways of satisfying categorical desires would change. This way, we would have an alternative solution which sidesteps both the recognizability challenge and identity challenge.

References

al-Fārābī. (1983). Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda (C. Al-Yasīn, Ed.). Dār al-Andalus.

al-Fārābī. (1985). *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (R. Walzer, Ed.). Clarendon Press.

al-Fārābī. (1987). *Risāla tanbīh ʿalā sabīl al-saʿāda* (S. Khalifat, Ed.). Manshūrāt Jāmiʿat al-Urduniyya.

al-Fārābī. (2007). Directing Attention to the Way to Happiness. In J. McGinnis & D. C. Reisman (Eds.), *Classical Arabic philosophy: An anthology of sources*. (pp. 104-20). Hackett Publishing Company.

al-Fārābī. (2019). *Mutluluğun kazanılması* (A. Arslan, Trans.). Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları. (Original work published ca. 10th century)

Az, M. (2017). Fârâbî'de Ruhun Ölümsüzlüğü Meselesi. *Journal of Turkish Studies*, *12*(20), 85–100.

Fischer, J. M. (2012). Immortality. In B. Bradley, F. Feldman, & J. Johansson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of death* (1st ed., pp. 336–354). Oxford University Press.

Galston, M. (1992). The Theoretical and Practical Dimensions of Happiness as

Portrayed in the Political Treatises of al-Fârâbi. In C. E. Butterworth (Ed.), *The political aspects of Islamic philosophy* (Vol. 114, pp. 95–151). Harvard University Press.

Germann, N. (2021). al-Farabi's Philosophy of Society and Religion. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/al-farabi-soc-rel/

Kagan, S. (2012). *Death*. Yale University Press.

López-Farjeat, L. X. (2020). al-Farabi's Psychology and Epistemology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/al-farabi-psych/

Nagel, T. (1970). Death. *Noûs*, *4*(1), 73-80.

Williams, B. (1973). The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality. In *Problems of the self* (1st ed., pp. 82–100). Cambridge University Press.

Öz: İslam ve Hristiyanlık; dünyada iyi eylemler yapanlara cenneti vaat eder. Ancak Bernard Williams'ın bahsettiği gibi, ölümsüz yaşamın tercih edilebilirliği ile ilgili problemler mevcuttur. Ölümsüz yaşam sıkıcı olabilir, kişi bu kadar uzun bir sürede kimliğini koruyamayabilir, ya da bu yaşam insan yaşamı olarak tanınabilir olmayabilir. Buradaki problem kategorik arzulardan kaynaklanmaktadır. Eğer kategorik arzular (bizi yaşamak için motive eden arzular) zamanla değişirse, kişi zaman içerisinde aynı kişi olarak kalamaz. Ancak eğer kategorik arzular değişmezse, bu yaşam insan yaşamı olarak tanınabilir olmaz. Biz burada, teistik bakış açısıyla uyumlu bir şekilde, Farabi'nin yaklaşımının bu problemi çözmede yardımcı olabileceğini iddia ediyoruz. Farabi'ye göre mutluluk için ahlaklı bir yaşam gerekmektedir. Bizim iddiamız, ahlaklı yaşamın değişmeyen bir kategorik arzu olduğu, ancak bu kategorik arzuların gerçekleştirilme yollarının değişebileceği yönündedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öbür dünya, ölümsüzlük, el-Farabi, ahlaki yaşam, teizm, İslam, mutluluk.