Introduction

The first part of this book is about Greek conceptions of immortality, and in the second part I discuss death in Greek and Roman philosophy. Considering the topics in that order, immortality before death, will, I hope, seem more reasonable in the light of passages that use the language of immortality to describe the best human lives. Plato's *Timaeus* describes how during their lives people can, to an extent, attain immortality, and Epicurus calls 'immortal' the good things enjoyed in a virtuous person's life. When we consider what comes after life, there is a widely recognized disagreement between Plato and Epicurus. In several Platonic dialogues Socrates argues that the soul is immortal and persists everlastingly after death, whereas Epicurus argues that at death the soul loses all cognitive capacity and is disintegrated. Epicurean discussions of death try to make the prospect of non-awareness and non-existence a source of mental resilience, not despair.

In the first part of this book I draw attention to another ancient debate, less recognized in recent work on ancient philosophy, about what it means to be immortal. This other debate is related to philosophical theories about the 'immortal' gods and the cosmos, but it also emerges when philosophers use immortality in their discussions of human beings and human ethics. The ethical side of the debate will come into view in chapter 2, where I examine Plato's writing about immortality and love. The cosmological or theological strand can be introduced by the following question: if gods are inhabitants of the cosmos, and if, as some philosophers hold, the cosmos as we know it will eventually come to an end, can the gods be immortal? The philosopher-poet Empedocles and the early Stoics, especially Chrysippus, try to retain the gods' immortality in a world-system of merely finite duration, and this affects what they say about human immortality as well. Their answer is, roughly speaking, to distinguish between (a) death as a regular feature of the world we know and (b) the end of this world-system. Calling the gods 'immortal', which in Greek suggests 'deathless', is

to say that they, unlike human beings, are not subject to the intra-cosmic process called death; it is not to call them everlasting, as they will not outlast the end of this world-system. In early Stoicism there is nothing irreverent in that view of the gods' immortality. But Platonists and Epicureans, despite their disagreement on other questions, would unite in rejecting it. For example, the Platonist Plutarch says, with the Stoics as his target, that it is absurd to regard gods as immortal and yet not everlasting. But then Platonists and Epicureans never had to confront the problem of immortal gods in an impermanent world-system. Platonists hold that the world-system in which we currently live will last forever. Epicurean gods are not, at least in a straightforward sense, inhabitants of this world: either they live outside the visible world, or, according to a different interpretation of Epicurean theology, the gods are our own mental constructions of what an endless, perfectly happy creature would be.

This might seem a case of philosophers bringing obscurity to a subject, immortality, that had previously been clear and uncontroversial. But there are ambivalences in immortality going back to the earliest surviving Greek poetry. In Homer, immortality is primarily a quality of the gods, and according to some Homeric passages the standard for immortality is set by the gods, not by the criterion of everlastingness: something is 'immortal' if it belongs to the gods or is appropriate for them, even if it does not last forever. And yet in Homer the gods' own immortality marks their infinite lifespan, which suggests that other immortal items should last forever. Philosophical theories about the cosmos proved to be a new source of pressure on the gods' immortality, but we do not know of a time when immortality had not already become, in some way, an ambivalent or uncertain term in Greek writing. I hope that the discussion of immortality in the first part of the book will make readers of Greek philosophy today less confident in applying to the ancient world their own intuitions about what immortality should or must mean.

The following chapters are about death. I try to get away from a view of ancient writing on death as a battleground between dogmatic Epicureans, insisting that death is the end of us, and equally dogmatic partisans of the soul's immortality. To that end, I illustrate the variety of Epicurean discussions of death, partly within Epicurus' writing but also across the Epicurean tradition. The Epicurean Philodemus' writing about death does not merely use against fears the doctrine that death ends the soul's existence and awareness; he also discriminates between the fears and pangs of anxiety prompted by thoughts about death, aiming to show which of them really

deserve a place in the good life, and which derive from attitudes that are best avoided throughout life, not only when people think about death. Another important strand of philosophical writing about death was sceptical or agnostic, and the fullest surviving example is the first book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. Stoics and other non-Epicurean philosophers make use of the so-called Symmetry argument, which compares non-existence before birth and after death, and, as we will see, when philosophers use that argument it does not follow that they are committed to the soul's destruction at death. They may suppose merely that annihilation is one possible outcome of death, or alternatively they may use the Symmetry argument in order to engage with a particular view of personal identity, as in the dialogue *Axiochus.* Plato's *Phaedo* is also discussed in my chapter on ancient scepticism; its inclusion there will surprise some readers, given the arguments it contains for the soul's immortality. Partly I aim to show what made the dialogue suitable for appropriation by the Roman sceptic Cicero. Plato's dialogue also explores doubts about the human capacity to discover what happens at death, and at the end of the debate Socrates does not simply silence those doubts, but modulates them so that they are heard as a call for further inquiry more than as a critique of human reason. The *Phaedo* suggests that the soul resembles the 'divine', and in reflections on doubt and certainty that view of the soul cuts both ways. It makes problematic the supposedly pious reflex of belittling human reason in comparison with the gods and divine pronouncements. But, as we will see, the orientation of the soul towards the divine throws into doubt what might seem a small and isolated pocket of certainty, the assumption that a soul will, if it survives death, be united with other souls. In the *Phaedo* Socrates goes to his death fearless but no longer certain that unions with other people, or their souls, will be part of his future. An advantage of holding back detailed discussion of the *Phaedo* until this point in the book is that it allows us, in the section on immortality, to consider Plato's other discussions of immortality and the soul (*Symposium, Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*) in their own terms, without letting the *Phaedo* set our expectations.

Whereas the part of the book on immortality focuses on philosophical writing by Greeks, the chapters on death are an opportunity to introduce and explore some Roman philosophy. Often, particularly in the study of Stoicism, scholars have to rely on Roman philosophers, simply because so much Hellenistic philosophical writing has been lost, but it is now recognized that Roman philosophical texts should not be treated as a way of accessing the lost Greek tradition without first examining the Roman authors' own philosophical profiles and aims. When Roman texts are approached in that spirit, they have more than enough philosophical

interest to keep attention fixed on themselves, and scholars who use Roman texts as sources for the Greek tradition frequently end up studying them as philosophical artefacts of intrinsic importance. It is still unusual to find contemporary philosophy turning to ancient Roman predecessors as much as to the Greeks, but the philosophy of death is an exception: it often refers to the Roman Epicurean Lucretius and his arguments against the fear of death.

The final chapter is about suicide. The ethics of death in ancient philosophy was not just an endeavour to achieve, through reasoning, a state of fearlessness. Philosophers also reasoned about how to act in relation to death (how to grieve for dead friends, how to make provision for loved ones who will outlive you, and so on), and debates about the appropriateness of suicide have survived in particularly large quantity. In this chapter, I focus on how the interests of other people, moral obligations to them and religious and political obligations feature in ancient discussions of suicide. The discussion of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo* seems to suggest that only religious or theological considerations have a bearing on decisions about suicide, and a passage of Cicero suggests that, in Stoicism, only the agent's own welfare and prospects make a difference. But for both Plato and the Stoics a wider range of considerations carry significance, including the interests of other people.

PART I

Immortality

CHAPTER 1

Immortality in Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy

1 Ino and Elina Makropulos

Bernard Williams' reflections on immortality use as their model of an immortal life the frozen existence of Elina Makropulos.[1] The opera by Leoš Janáček, based on and sharing the name of Čapek's comedy *The Makropulos Case*, portrays a singer, Emilia Marty, who captivates the men around her but is insulting or indifferent to them, unmoved even when a young admirer kills himself. Eventually, she reveals her original name to be Elina Makropulos and 'Marty' to be one of a long series of aliases. She has been pursuing the formula for an elixir, discovered and tried on her by her father, that added 300 years to her life; she is now in her fourth century and in need of another dose. At the end of the opera, she renounces her pursuit of the elixir and dies, realizing that her life should not have been extended so long. A much younger woman has the insight it took Makropulos, or 'Marty', centuries to reach, and she goes one step further by burning the formula for the elixir. The elixir would have protected either woman not only from death but also from further aging. But in other regards it left Makropulos with a human life, embodied and social, although her inability to love or feel empathy made her emotional range much less than a human's should be. Had she continued to take the elixir, her human (in a non-normative sense of 'human') existence would have extended endlessly into the future, although the Christian tone at the end of the opera raises an awkward question about the end of the world – what would have become of Makropulos at Christ's Second Coming?

[1] Williams 1973, chapter 6 ('the Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality'). Clark 1995 offers a much wider range of models of immortality, drawn from poetry, science fiction and other literature.

In his paper Williams takes immortality to be 'a state without death'.[2] This risks misleading us about ancient Greek reflections on immortality if it is taken to mean removing *only* death from a human life and otherwise leaving human existence untouched. Immortalization looks different if the dominant cultural model is not Elina Makropulos but Heracles or Ino, and if it is thought to mean not prolonging human life but apotheosis.[3] Heracles is a familiar character from Greek myth; Ino, a mythical woman from Thebes, was transformed into the sea-goddess Leucothea, and in the *Odyssey* she rescues Odysseus from drowning. For the purpose of understanding Homeric immortality, Ino has more to offer than Heracles, as Homer comments on the process that made her divine: 'in the past she was a mortal of human speech, but now she has received some prerogative in the sea from the gods' (5.334–5).[4] The contrast suggests that she ceased to be a mortal not merely by being made deathless, but by receiving this 'prerogative'. The Greek word (τιμή) is often translated 'honour', but in Homeric theology it means something different: the region or sphere where a deity has authority to act, such as the domains of Hades, Poseidon and Zeus – the murky underworld, the sea and the sky (*Iliad* 15.187–190).[5]

In Homer becoming immortal is not just a matter of prolonging one's existence. It is to become *an* immortal, a god, and that means acquiring the ability to act as a god, in Ino's case by rescuing drowning sailors. In what follows, I start by exploring Homer's attributions of immortality, and I will show how they are affected by the fact that his immortal items, in the central or focal meaning of the word, are gods, not endlessly preserved human beings. In starting with Homer, I do not mean to suggest that Greek philosophers responded uncritically to his attributions of immortality. On the contrary, one of the earliest comments by a philosopher on immortality takes aim at the traditional – Homeric but far from uniquely Homeric – distinction between immortals and mortals:

> Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living the others' death, dead in the others' life. (Heraclitus B62)

[2] Williams 1973: 82. [3] So Kahn 1974: 436.

[4] For Ino see also Pindar *Olympian Odes* 2.29–30 and *Pythian Odes* 11.2. In the case of Heracles' apotheosis Homer describes only the outcome: his image or phantom is in Hades, but Heracles himself has a joyful existence 'with the immortal gods' (*Odyssey* 11.601–4). Currie 2005: 42–4 provides a valuable survey of immortalization in early poetry, including the lost epics, such as the *Cypria* and *Aethiopis*.

[5] Compare the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* 2.85; Herodotus 2.53.

There is no agreement on how to interpret Heraclitus' words, but clearly he is trying to prevent his readers from regarding some items, or creatures, as exclusively immortal: there is some 'life' in respect of which they are dead, and they live by virtue of 'deaths' of some kind.[6] It may be significant that Xenophanes, an early philosopher-poet who openly rejects the Homeric representation of the gods, does not call gods 'immortal' in the few surviving parts of his poetry, although in such fragmentary material arguments from silence are particularly untrustworthy. Xenophanes almost certainly accepts that gods last forever, for he draws contrasts between gods and 'mortals' (B18, B23). But, he may think, this is not the most important difference between the gods and human beings, or the quality of the gods that needs most emphasis in his own poetry. Despite what Homer suggests, gods' bodies are quite unlike ours (B23): they do not reproduce, and so have no need for sexual organs; they do not perceive by means of specific parts of themselves, and so gods do not have sense-organs like ours (B14, B24). The gods' thoughts and understanding are also unlike ours (B23). In Xenophanes' view, his readers and listeners need to recognize these distinguishing bodily and intellectual features of gods, not (or not only) the gods' immortality.

All the same, the fundamental connection in Homer between immortality and godhood retained its importance for other Greek philosophers. This makes ancient Greek conceptions of immortality in a way more demanding than those in contemporary philosophy, but in another way less so. If immortalization means becoming a god, or at least becoming godlike, then prolonging existence may not be enough: someone who dragged out her or his life forever, with the cognitive and bodily limitations of other human beings, is not a god or even, except in respect of duration, like a god. But Greeks may have been more willing than we are to accept that there has been immortalization in cases where the creature or person has somehow been changed. We are likely to ask ourselves whether there is sufficient *continuity* to make the immortalized item identical with the human being, or former human being. This is treated by Williams as a necessary condition: 'it should clearly be *me* who lives for ever'.[7] In

[6] Betegh 2013: 252–3 takes Heraclitus to be referring to physical stuffs, such as air and water, which never pass out of existence altogether but undergo 'deaths'. Competing interpretations are defended in Hussey 1991 and Finkelberg 2013: 155. For Heraclitus' criticism of Homer, see B42 and B56.

[7] Williams 1973: 91 (emphasis original). For more recent philosophical discussion of personal identity and the afterlife see, for example, Johnston 2010, especially chapter 1 ('is heaven a place *we* can get to?'). In this part of the book Johnston focuses on the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection, not immortality.

Homer, by contrast, all that he says is that the goddess used to be the mortal woman Ino. It was open to Greek philosophers, when writing about immortality, to raise questions about personal identity and continuity, but the cultural connection between immortalization and becoming something different or new makes it rather less surprising that they do not pursue those questions with the urgency we would think appropriate.

Williams was, of course, aware that, from antiquity to the present, believers in personal immortality have not expected a future like that of Elina Makropulos: 'it was not in this world that they hoped to live for ever'.[8] But putting the point in terms of a different world looks too narrowly to Christianity, or to the version of Christian eschatology that puts the afterlife in 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21.1, Isaiah 65.17).[9] Of the Greek philosophers discussed in this book, those who believed in personal immortality saw it rather as a godlike or divine existence in, or concurrently with, the present world. This brings me to the main point of Williams' paper, his suggestion that immortality, at least for creatures like us, would inevitably become tedious and meaningless. In an ancient Greek context, this invites a theological response: the endless length of a god's existence does not make it tedious or devoid of meaning.[10] (Empedocles stands off to one side of this exchange, as his gods do not last forever.) The activities undertaken by god, or the gods, do not lose their value, interest or meaning by being extended over infinite time. The pressing questions in this theistic context are whether we could emulate such gods, and whether there is some part of us that is capable of these divine activities and could value them as a god does, rather than merely as a welcome liberation or distraction from mortal existence.

In their discussions of immortality Plato and Aristotle treat divine activities as cognitive or intellectual. When Williams considers an eternity of intellectual activity, he focuses on cases in which the thinkers are so engrossed or absorbed that they could be said to 'lose themselves'. He then asks how an eternity of losing oneself could satisfy a desire for personal immortality.[11] But some Greek descriptions of supreme cognitive achievement do not suppose that the thinker

[8] 1973: 94.
[9] Constraints of space have prevented me from including a comparison between Greek conceptions of immortality and the Christian promise of resurrection. For the contrast between Platonic and Christian eschatology, see Long (forthcoming b).
[10] Fischer 1994: 269 n.4 similarly considers how Williams' argument applies to God's existence.
[11] 1973: 96–8. Fischer (1994: 259–60) persuasively uses, against Williams, a distinction between content and ownership: even if I do not feature in the content of my own thoughts, it does not follow that I lose ownership of those thoughts.

or philosopher loses self-awareness.[12] Consider Socrates' description of the escaped prisoner in Plato's famous image of the Cave. Here he is describing someone who has not only escaped but has also succeeded in the most demanding task of all – looking at the Sun, which in the imagery represents understanding the Form of Goodness. Such a philosopher, who has advanced beyond Socrates himself, might think of life down inside the Cave:

> Suppose he recalled his former habitation and what passes for wisdom there, and his former fellow-prisoners. Don't you think he would congratulate himself for the change and pity them? (*Republic* 516c4-6)

Our metaphor of 'losing oneself' in an inquiry may be unhelpful when reading philosophers who thought it possible both to understand something timeless or eternal and to appreciate the supreme value, for oneself, of that understanding. The Form of Goodness is impersonal, but knowledge of goodness has a personal application: people who understand goodness will also recognize why it is good for them to have that understanding and to keep directing their attention towards its object. Otherwise it would be hard to explain the philosophers' reluctance to go back inside the Cave: they must be aware of what is at stake for them.

2 Immortality and Godhood in Homer

In our exploration of Greek expectations for immortality the first step is to see when in Homer immortality is attributed to people, gods and things, and when it is not.[13] On occasion I will look beyond Homer to other poetry. I aim in particular to see whether endless duration into the future was the primary consideration in Homer's attributions of immortality. If there is such a thing as immortality for human beings, the immortal item might be the human being himself or herself, or a part of them, such as the mind or soul, or it might have some other connection with them, such as their reputation. The question then becomes: if something associated with a person in one of these ways will never cease to exist and will continue endlessly into the future, is it *ipso facto* immortal? And is the person, by virtue of its continued existence, immortal? In what follows I will occasionally draw

[12] In what follows I focus on human cognition. But the strongest contrast with Williams is provided by Aristotle's account of divine intelligence, which thinks *exclusively* about itself (*Metaphysics* 12.1074b15-35).

[13] The Homeric words explored in what follows are ἀθάνατος and ἄμβροτος (on which see Buttmann 1861: 80), both of which I translate as 'immortal'. There is a further word ἀμβρόσιος, but I will not comment on uses of this word, as it is not taken up by philosophical writers.