

# Choose Your Own Essentia

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**Abstract** None of us are immortal. We do not have an infinite time to live; we are not temporally endless. Yet we *could have* lived an infinite number of ways, rendering us *modally endless*. We argue that modal endlessness leads to a puzzle similar to one that Jorge Luis Borges raises in “The Immortal.” After explaining this puzzle, we walk through some responses that do not work, and present two revisionary responses that do. One of these solutions requires radically reassessing our values, while the other requires accepting that certain modal facts are shaped by agency and choice.

## I.

Here is a reason to be glad you are not immortal, according to Jorge Luis Borges: if you were immortal, you would eventually witness every sort of event, entertain every sort of thought, write every sort of book, and accomplish every sort of deed; in so doing, you would render yourself exactly the same as every other immortal being. Borges presents the worry as follows:

Homer wrote *The Odyssey*; given infinite time, with infinite circumstances and changes, it is impossible that *The Odyssey* should *not* be composed at least once. No one is someone; a single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and world - which is a long-winded way of saying that *I am not*.<sup>1</sup>

Across an immortal’s life, writes Borges, every possibility will be realized. Thus “it is impossible that *The Odyssey* should *not* be composed” by an immortal. Likewise for all immortals. All immortals, therefore, must eventually compose *The Odyssey* at least once. Of course there is nothing special about *The Odyssey* in this case. Anything that can be accomplished or experienced – whether composing *The Odyssey*, wrestling a lion, or cooking the perfect egg-lemon soup – *will* be accomplished or experienced by every immortal. Thus, the lives of immortals must all be qualitatively alike. And being alike in this way, writes Borges, is a way of *not being* at all. Call this argument *Borges’ Temporal Worry*.

Borges’ Temporal Worry rests on the idea that *a life has value at least partially because it is unique*. The uniqueness of your experiences, in other words – the fact that nobody will ever live a life

*quite* like yours – seems to give your life a certain sort of value. If your life were exactly the same as someone else’s, in terms of accomplishments, choices, thoughts, and feelings – if neither of your lives were novel in any qualitative sense – then your lives would seem to lack this value.

This idea that we value uniqueness is a ubiquitous theme in both literary and philosophical work. Kurt Vonnegut, for example, explores this idea in his short story “Harrison Bergeron”.

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.<sup>ii</sup>

Part of the horror of this story is to imagine a world where everyone is more or less qualitatively alike: everyone can only do as much as anyone else, no one excels at anything. Such a world invokes a sense of dread. Indeed, the two heroes of the story only flourish when they shed their handicaps and indulge in the abilities and activities that distinguish them from others (before they are brutally murdered by the Handicapper General).<sup>iii</sup>

In Casati and Varzi’s “Room 88”, the protagonist finds himself in a room with what appears to be a window into a parallel world containing an exact copy of himself. The exact duplicate does and says and behaves exactly as the protagonist does, with eerily perfect timing and precision. Our hero increasingly despairs, doubting that any of his actions are unique, or that his choices are uniquely his own, eventually driving him to madness.

The idea that *uniqueness has value* is not just an exploratory theme in literature. In our own, everyday lives, things lose value when they are no longer singular. The rarity of an object makes it more monetarily valuable; the novelty of an idea or creation makes it more cherished. If I come up with a brilliant idea for a paper, only to find that another philosopher has had this same idea before me, it seems to diminish the importance of the idea (or to diminish my pride in having come up with it.) Things seemingly get worse if 500 other people came up with the idea, let alone 5,000,000 or more. So, it is not just that we value our *lives* being unique, we value our creative projects being unique, too. Novelty makes

things treasurable. Yet if so, and if Borges is right that two immortal beings would eventually lead qualitatively similar lives, then a puzzle arises: immortality diminishes a life's value by removing its qualitative uniqueness.<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps, you think, there is not much cause for alarm. We can imagine that Sisyphus rolls a rock up a hill forever. A creature just might, for whatever reason, do nothing but wash dishes for eternity. While these things may be unlikely and undesirable, they are at least conceivable. Immortality, it seems, does not necessitate a life rich with diverse activities; eternal monotony, however unwelcome, certainly seems *possible*. So, a crucial premise in Borges' worry seems mistaken: two immortal beings would *not* necessarily eventually lead qualitatively similar lives. If you and I were immortal, you could lead an eternal boring life by doing the same thing forever, and I could do a different boring thing, forever. Yet because we are engaged in *different boring things*, the infinite sets of our monotonous activities are discernable, ensuring our distinctness as immortal beings.

Moreover, we tend to think that, as far as the events in our lives go, *order matters*. If I am a hero first and a philosopher second, while you are a philosopher first and a hero second, this difference in order of events distinguishes the unique lives we've lived. I am a *hero-then-philosopher*, while you are a *philosopher-then-hero*. So, comparing the unordered sets of activities and accomplishments of two immortal beings will be irrelevant: for again, order matters. Contra Borges, then, we are not "lost between indefatigable mirrors," and being immortal does not render anyone indistinguishable.<sup>v</sup>

Finally, of course, we can rest easy with the fact that *our lives are finite*. We are not immortal.<sup>vi</sup> Most of us don't know anyone who is. So, the chances of any two people living qualitatively identical lives is negligible. Living a unique life, in other words, seems virtually guaranteed to each of us. Thus, we can easily avoid Borges' Temporal Worry.

## II.

True, we are not immortal. Yet it is plausible that we are the modal equivalent: *modally endless*. Imagine someone who, rather than living an infinite amount of time, *could* have lived an infinite number of ways. Instead of a life that is temporally infinite, this individual's life is *modally infinite*.

To make this idea especially vivid, let's assume modal realism and counterpart theory for a moment.<sup>vii</sup> Imagine that all possible worlds - including *this* one - are metaphysically on a par. Things are possible or impossible for you depending on whatever your counterparts in other possible worlds do (or don't do). Across those worlds, and through the actions of those counterparts, your life plays out in infinitely many ways. Possibly, you are a philosopher iff there is a possible world where a counterpart of yours is a philosopher. Necessarily, you are not a poet iff you have no counterparts in any possible world that is a poet. All of what you can and cannot do is captured by the set of all your counterparts, including you in the actual world. This set captures your modally rich character, your *fullest* modal self. It contains who you in fact are and what you in fact do, but also what you could or might do. Call this your *modal profile*.

Given your modal profile, are you modally endless? No matter how long your life is, it could have been two minutes longer, or one minute longer, or thirty seconds longer, and so on. You could have had a different eye color or a different height. You did not compose *The Odyssey*, but you could have, under the right conditions. In fact, for every pattern of humanly possible experiences or accomplishments, it seems that you could have experienced or accomplished them, in infinitely many ways. Your counterparts, so to speak, have done it all. This is how we are modally endless.<sup>viii</sup>

Of course, being modally endless does not entail that *everything* is possible for you. Having infinitely many counterparts in infinitely many worlds still allows that there are plenty of possibilities that are *not* included in your modal profile. There are infinitely many ways your life could have gone, but this does not mean that you could have been a slice of pizza, or a song from the '60s. A modally endless being can still have modal limitations. A statue, to illustrate with a famous example, is modally endless: it could have come into existence a second earlier, it could have gone out of existence just a little bit later, it could have been a little bit bigger, and so on. So, too, with the lump of clay that constitutes the statue. It, too,

could have been created a second earlier, or destroyed just a bit later, or been a bit bigger, etc. Yet even if the statue and the lump of clay are created and destroyed at the exact same time, they nonetheless have distinct *modal* profiles.<sup>ix</sup> In terms of possible worlds, the statue does not have counterparts that are squished and survive, although a lump of clay that constitutes the statue does. A lump of clay does not have any counterparts that lose parts and survive, although the statue that the lump of clay constitutes does. We can extrapolate any number of other examples from there: neither the statue nor the clay has counterparts that are kangaroos, tennis shoes, cataclysmic cosmic events, and so on. So, despite being modally endless, it is not the case that *everything* is possible for the statue or the clay.

Nor is a modally endless object the same as a necessary being. A necessary being is modally endless, but a modally endless being need not be necessary. A necessary being requires having counterparts in *all* possible worlds, not just infinitely many. As an analogy, being *omnitemporal* requires existing at all times, yet being *immortal* does not. Someone might be born in 1950, and yet still be immortal because they live forever after. Likewise, a person might have counterparts in an infinite number of possible worlds yet fail to have counterparts in all of them.

We appear to be modally endless. Yet if so, we face a philosophical problem that is analogous to Borges' Temporal Worry. Like you, I could have composed *The Odyssey*. Like you, I could have had a different eye color or a different height. I could have had your name and looked exactly like you, and you could have had my name and looked exactly like me. Any way that you could have been, is a way that I could have been, too. Indeed, *any* two people, because they are modally endless, share the same infinite potential with respect to accomplishments and experiences. Because modally endless beings seem to have *indistinguishable modal profiles*, in the same way Borges claims the lives of immortals are indistinguishable, call this problem *Borges' Modal Worry*.<sup>x</sup>

Borges' Modal Worry assumes that our modal profiles (in part) constitute who we are. I am who I am not just because of what I *in fact* do but because of what I *could* or *might* do. I am brave not just because I in fact happen to do brave things, but because even if circumstances were slightly different, I still would do brave things. We would do lots of different things if circumstances were different, and

these counterfactual facts, together with the actual facts, constitute *who we are*. Yet if so, there is a certain generalized description of each of us that *matches up*. Both of us have counterpart philosophers in some worlds and counterpart heroes in others; our counterparts wear blue shoes in some but not in others; and so on. If the collection of all of these counterparts is infinite, and if this collection of counterparts is what constitutes our modal profile, then we are like Borges' immortal beings: qualitatively indistinguishable.

Like Borges' Temporal Worry, the Modal Worry assumes that *our unique potentials give our lives value*. The uniqueness of what you could have accomplished, in other words - the fact that *you* could have been a unique sort of hero, say - seems to give your life a certain sort of value. If you never could have accomplished anything different from what anyone else could have accomplished, then your life seems to lack this value. Modal endlessness diminishes a life's value by ensuring that this life lacks any qualitatively unique potential.

Yet unlike Borges' Temporal Worry, we cannot avoid the Modal Worry by insisting that it does not apply to us - for while none of us are temporally endless, all of us are modally endless. So how do we resist the puzzle?

### III.

Consider *Essential Sisyphus*, an unfortunate creature whose every counterpart rolls a rock up a hill in every possible world in which they exist. Essential Sisyphus is modally endless, yet he is also modally *monotonous*. If such a creature is conceivable, then modal endlessness does not entail modal *diversity*. Moreover, you and I are both modally endless, but so are tables and chairs and lots of ordinary objects – ordinary objects with distinct modal profiles. So, one response to Borges' Modal Worry is to *deny that modally endless beings must have similar modal profiles*, for modal endlessness is consistent with modal discernibility. Call this the *Discernibility Response*.

The problem with this response is that it fails to notice a crucial assumption in Borges' original temporal worry - namely, that Borges is focused on beings *of the same kind*. The beings under consideration in his story are immortal, sure, but they are also beings with particular agency and desires.

They have (or at least start out having) the sorts of intentions, desires, beliefs, goals, and capacities for action that human beings have. Borges does not imagine, for example, that one of the beings could be a housecat, or a slice of pizza. He does not seem concerned that, if both my cat and I were immortal, then over the course of an eternity, both she and I would risk doing the same sorts of things, thinking the same sorts of thoughts, writing the same sorts of literary masterpieces, thereby undercutting our individual significance. So it seems that the temporal worry is restricted to a concern about *beings of the same kind*.

Similarly, in the modal version of the argument, we should be restricting our concern to *beings of the same kind*. Yet if so, then our concern is with beings who have particular modal profiles. A human being is different from a housecat, for instance, in part because each persists and flourishes under different potential conditions; that is, persistence conditions are just another way of outlining a thing's modal profile. But then this seems to guarantee that, by assuming the modal worry concerns beings of the same kind, our concern is thereby already restricted to beings with qualitatively similar modal profiles.

Let's think of it this way. Imagine gathering up all the counterparts in all of the different possible worlds that make up my modal profile, and then we gather up all the counterparts in all of the different possible worlds that make up your modal profile. Intuitively, there will be a 1-to-1 correspondence of these counterparts: each of us will have counterparts that are philosophers, counterparts that are heroes, counterparts that are wearing blue shoes. Neither of us will have counterparts that are bigger on the inside than the outside, or are thinking entities without existing. We can understand you and I *being the same kind of thing* provided that our respective sets of such counterparts are qualitatively indistinguishable. But then the possibility of unfortunate creatures such as Essential Sisyphus drops out. The Discernibility Response is correct that *mere* modal endlessness does not entail modal diversity. Nonetheless, the modal worry remains a threat if we limit our scope to *modally endless beings of the same kind*. Everything one modally endless being of a certain kind could do, another modally endless being of that same kind could do, too. Borges' Modal Worry remains.<sup>xi</sup>

#### IV.

Borges' Temporal Worry assumes that *order doesn't matter* when it comes to the events in an immortal's life. This is an assumption worth questioning in the argument against immortality. Yet is it also a place to resist the *modal* worry? What is the modal equivalent of temporal ordering?

One way to understand ordering across possible worlds is through *closeness*, which can be cashed out in terms of resemblance and relevance. Suppose we are both actually philosophers and only potentially heroes, yet *your heroism is more probable than mine*. Suppose that you would have been a hero if only your parents called you one; that's all it would have taken. Meanwhile, much more would need to have taken place, and events would need to have played out in a *vastly* different way than how they actually did, in order to make me a hero. In other words, your heroism is a *closer possibility* than mine. The worlds in which you are a hero are more similar to the actual world than any worlds in which I am a hero. You are actually philosopher and *nearly a hero*; I am actually a philosopher and *only remotely a hero*. Thus, by appealing to closeness, we get something like temporal ordering, an appeal to which might provide a respectable response to the modal worry. Call this the *Ordering Response*.

Unfortunately, this response won't work. One reason for this is that closeness between worlds is variable and context dependent. Temporal ordering is not. If we are both philosophers, yet your potential for heroism is a closer possibility than mine, this is likely because we are holding certain background conditions fixed: how we grew up, our environment, our history, our actual temperaments, and so on. Change any of these things, and the counterfactuals shift. Perhaps if both of us had been born in 1800, my heroism would have been much more probable than yours. Modal closeness is *shifty*. Being nearly or remotely a hero is dependent on which factors we hold fixed, and what sort of features of comparison we are interested in. Temporal ordering is not. Either you are a philosopher-then-hero, or a hero-then-philosopher, but whichever way it is, no change of context will swap the order of events. So while an appeal to temporal ordering might be a way to thwart the worry about immortality, an appeal to modal ordering (in terms of closeness of worlds) is not an adequate response to the worry about modal endlessness.

Even if we ignore how our modal talk is context-dependent, however, talk of closer and more remote possibilities still cannot resolve Borges' Modal Worry. This is because the worry concerns not only uniqueness but also its origins. To repeat a point from earlier, the intuition behind Borges' Modal Worry is that, if you never could have accomplished anything different from what anyone else could have accomplished, your life would lack a certain sort of value. We value modal uniqueness, certainly, but we also want this uniqueness to be an *accomplishment*. The sort of uniqueness we want our lives to have, and which Borges' Modal Worry threatens, is a uniqueness we want to *achieve*, not just something that *happens* to us. We want a kind of modal uniqueness that we can be responsible for, something that is a result of our choices, our struggles, and the series of deliberate interactions with the world that we call our *lives*. If we are both philosophers, yet your potential for heroism is a closer possibility than mine *simply because of* environmental factors, the closeness of your potential heroism seems to hold less significance for you as a person, or for your uniqueness as an individual. We don't just want to have unique potentials; we want to have unique potentials that we choose. Thus, the Ordering Response an insufficient answer to Borges' Modal Worry.

## V.

Since the Modal Worry is a problem about modality, it is tempting to look for solutions by talking about *modal ontology*. It is tempting to think that the solution might lie in *the denial that other possible worlds exist*. Since we introduced the worry in terms of possible worlds and counterparts in these worlds, perhaps it is this modal metaphysics that is the problem. If we reject modal realism, then perhaps worries about the indistinctness of our modal profiles disappears. Call this the *Ontology Response*.

The response won't work. To see why, consider the temporal analogue. Suppose someone tried to resist Borges's Temporal Worry by being a *presentist* - i.e., by claiming that the only things and times that exist are those that presently exist. A presentist still thinks that objects have a temporal profile, and that all the usual tensed claims that we think are true in the world are still true. Statements such as "*this leaf was green but will be red*" or "*this person was born yesterday, but will live forever*" have the same

truth value that we ordinarily think they do. Rather, it's the metaphysical facts about what *makes* the propositional claims true that the presentist will insist are different than the eternalist says that they are. Changing our temporal ontology doesn't entail a change in the truth value of our tensed claims. Ontology changes *how* our tensed claims are true, not *whether* they are. Moreover, denying the existence of other times does not show how two immortal beings would have different experiences. Assuming presentism, immortality is still possible: immortal beings would instantiate temporal properties, have a temporal profile, and - if Borges is right – their lives would lack a certain kind of value for being qualitatively duplicates. Thus, changing our ontology of time doesn't address the challenge that temporal qualitative indiscernibility poses to the *value* of the immortals' lives. Presentism cannot solve Borges' Temporal Worry.

Likewise for modal ontologies. Suppose someone tried to resist Borges' Modal Worry by being a *modal actualist*, the modal analog of a *presentist*. Nonetheless, an actualist still thinks that objects have a modal profile. All of the usual modal claims that we think are true in the world - *this leaf is actually green but could be red; she is a philosopher, but might have been a hero* - are still *true*, according to the actualist. It's just that the metaphysical facts about what *makes* the propositional claims true are different from, say, what the modal realist thinks. Changing our modal ontology doesn't entail a change in the truth value of our modal claims. Again, ontology changes *how* our modal claims are true, not *whether* they are. Moreover, denying the existence of non-actual possible worlds does not show how two modally endless beings would have different experiences. Assuming actualism, modally endless beings are still possible (and abundant): such creatures instantiate modal properties, have a modal profile, and - if the modal worry is right – have lives that lack a certain kind of value for being qualitative duplicates. Denying the existence of concrete possible worlds does not show how, given our infinite potentials, we could have accomplished exclusively different things. Nor would it address the challenge that such indiscernibility allegedly poses to the *value* of our lives. Actualism cannot solve Borges' Modal Worry.

Although Borges' Modal Worry is a problem about *modality*, it is not an *ontological* problem that can be addressed by changing our modal metaphysics. Instead, it's a problem about the modal *facts* -

regardless of how those modal facts are metaphysically accounted for metaphysically - together with our presumed unique potentials and what value we place on them.

## VI.

Another tempting response to Borges' Modal Worry is to deny the *value* of the merely possible, rather than denying its existence. Such a solution would deny that unique potential gives a life value, and therefore claim that the value of a human life is exclusively determined by what is actual. "Ignore what could have been" goes the response. "Focus on what *is*." This is a response to the Modal Worry that denies that *unique modal profiles add value to a human life* by denying that *modal profiles add value*, full stop. Call this *the Ignoring Response*.

The problem with the Ignoring Response is that it denies too much. The way that it denies the value of a unique modal profile is by denying the value of the merely possible *altogether*. Yet there are independent reasons for thinking that the actual value of human life is affected by whether its modal profile overlaps with that of another. Consider a possible world in which you and I share a life project: we are both political revolutionaries. The fact that we are both revolutionaries, moreover, is not just a fact about our actual deeds and beliefs; it is also a fact about what we are *capable of*. In dedicating ourselves to revolution, we assert that we are *alike* in certain modal respects, i.e. that we are capable of some things (e.g., sacrificing our free time for the cause) but not others (e.g., betraying the cause).<sup>xii</sup> In this case, the fact that our modal profiles are alike is important. Our modal sameness in these respects *adds* value to our lives by uniting us in a common purpose. If the Ignoring Response is true then we may dismiss Borges' Modal Worry, but we would also dismiss the datum that shared modal profiles can *add* value to life.

Let's put the point another way. Suppose you and I in fact live quite different lives: I am a philosopher, and you are a gymnast. And let us grant that, despite these differences in the actual world, our modal profiles are otherwise qualitatively similar. I very easily could have been a gymnast, you very easily could have been a philosopher, and many of our other modal features are similarly alike. Why don't we focus on our actual differences and ignore our merely possible sameness? If we ignore what

merely could have been, and focus instead on what is actual, won't this be enough to get out of Borges' modal worry?

To see why this won't work, consider the temporal analogue. Suppose Arty was born in 1950, Marty was born in 1980, and that both Arty and Marty are granted immortality in 1990. Does the fact that Arty was born in a different decade, with access to experiences in different world events *before* 1980 give us an adequate response to the original temporal worry? We can imagine that someone argues thus: "Look. It's 1990 now. After this, both Arty and Marty will live forever. But *right now*, in 1990, Arty and Marty are very different. Arty is 40 years old, while Marty is only 10; Arty has lived through the 60s, while Marty has not; Arty has excelled at certain hobbies, graduated high school and college, has gotten a job, paid a mortgage, and has been driving for 34 years. Marty has not. Once we focus on these differences, this should be enough to distinguish Arty from Marty, even granting they are both immortal from 1990 onward."

The problem with this argument is that even granting a finite number of differences with how Arty and Marty's lives *begin*, it is the fact that they are both *temporally infinite* forever after that makes all the difference. The real force of Borges' original temporal worry, we take it, is that the infinite temporal duration after becoming immortal will simply dwarf any of the finite experiences that might have made life significant, if one were mortal. It's the *sheer vastness* of qualitative similarities between two immortal lives that seems to engulf any initial finite difference. Clinging to a finite few distinguishing features at the start of any two lives does not make a difference if those lives carry on *forever* after.

Similarly, in the modal case. If we focus on actual differences and ignore what's merely possible, even granting some kind of minimal, origin essentialism, it won't help.<sup>xiii</sup> Suppose you are essentially made from a certain sperm and egg and I am essentially made from another. Even so, we take it that it's the unrelenting amount of our (infinite) modal similarities that dwarfs these meager (even admittedly essentialist) differences. Finite differences get swallowed by the infinite similarities. To put this another way, two modally endless beings need not be exactly qualitatively identical to generate Borges' Modal Worry. Earlier (section III), we imagined gathering up all the counterparts in all of the different possible

worlds that make up my modal profile, gathering up all the counterparts in all of the different possible worlds that make up your modal profile, and then comparing these sets of counterparts to reveal a one-to-one match. However, we contend that the threat to our uniqueness still abounds even if the overlap of our modal profiles is not exact, but *substantial enough*, such that the differences far outnumber the similarities. If we only happen to qualitatively differ in the actual world, but in all other ways our potentials are alike, this does not seem to give us the significant distinctness in our lives that we seemingly value. We don't want to be *merely* unique; we want to be *significantly* unique. Thus, the Ignoring Response won't work.

## VII.

Another way to resist Borges' Modal Worry is to deny that *modal uniqueness has value*. While uniqueness may give our lives meaning, perhaps reflection reveals that it doesn't - or *shouldn't*. Perhaps what should be valued is how *similar* we are, how none of us are very different from each other. Looked at in terms of our modal profiles, if anything that any one of us does or could do, someone else does or could do, too, this might encourage greater empathy and compassion.<sup>xiv</sup> Because this embraces rather than rejects our unexceptional-ness, call this *the Unexceptional Response*.

To be clear, the claim that *modal uniqueness adds value to life* is distinct from the claim that *a life needs modal uniqueness to have value*. Suppose that unbeknownst to you, you have a *complete modal doppelganger* - someone else who looks like you, acts like you, and has the same modal profile as you. This is your actual and modal twin, so to speak, of whom you know nothing about. Does having this complete doppelganger make your life any worse or less meaningful than if you didn't have such a twin?<sup>xv</sup> It is true that if you had a modal doppelganger, that person need not affect the perceived quality of your life in any way whatsoever. They would just be doing their thing, so to speak, as you do yours. Their life would not impact you, and so your life would seemingly not be deprived of any quality of experience.

Nonetheless, there would still be at least one positive value, which your life could not have, namely modal uniqueness. You would no longer be uniquely capable of something. Your life need not be

worthless for all that, but it would still be something you missed out on, through no fault of your own. Is this enough? Why should it matter if we lack a value that we do not qualitatively experience?

First, modal uniqueness is a distinctive value. Modal features are necessary, and they constitute who we are. Because they are necessary, they do not always affect the quality of our experience. You cannot tell the difference between the taste of contingently-vanilla ice cream and the taste of essentially-vanilla ice cream, for instance. Secondly, affecting the quality of our experience is not the only way for something to be valuable. Even if I do not experience anything that happens after I die, I still value that my loved ones honor my dying wishes.<sup>xvi</sup> I still value that someone is honest with me, even if counterfactuals are such that, had they been deceitful, I never would have found out. Furthermore, because our modal features are *constitutive of who we are*, they should still matter to us even when they don't contribute to the quality of our experiences. If bravery is a crucial part of my character, even if I never experience myself as brave, never come to know this about myself, and never happen to find myself in a situation where my bravery is evident to me, bravery still seems to matter, and is important for my identity. Finally, we do not need to be committed to the claim that modal uniqueness is the *only* feature that gives our lives value. We might also value love, friendship, or virtue, in addition to being modally special. The modal worry assumes that qualitative uniqueness is one feature that we value; it need not be the only one.

Still, one viable response to Borges' Modal Worry is to insist that, even if we *do* value modal uniqueness, *maybe we shouldn't*. If we are modally endless beings of the same kind, entailing our modally indiscernibility, then perhaps this gives us motivation to re-think what persons are and how we ought to treat each other, instead of despairing that we're non-unique. To some, this might seem morally revisionary. To others, this might align with long-prescribed worldviews not commonly accepted in the west.

According to Huayan Buddhism, for example, the self is illusory, and the idea of a *unique* self is doubly so. Rather than cling to individual exceptionalism, we should acknowledge our interdependence on one another and embrace our collective contribution to a larger, transpersonal reality. In the

*Avatamsaka Sutra*, the metaphor of Indra’s jeweled net illustrates this interdependence. Imagine a cosmic net with bright jewels at every node. Each jewel is so bright that it reflects all the other jewels on its surface, such that no one jewel can be seen (or understood) without seeing (or understanding) all of the others. This is an apt metaphor for the Unexceptional Response in reply to the Modal Worry: each of our qualitatively similar modal profiles might be interpreted as a jewel in Indra’s Net, emphasizing our connectedness and repeatability, and eliminating our erroneously assumed uniqueness.<sup>xvii</sup> While we lack the space to explore this option here, we conclude it has promise and has long-standing precedence in Buddhist and Hindu thought. So, one way to avoid Borges’ Modal Worry is to embrace our non-uniqueness and *accept the Unexceptional Response*.

Yet it is not the only option. We can respond to the worry *and* be exceptional. The next proposed solution explains how.

### VIII.

The last solution to Borges’ Modal Worry requires us to re-examine a thesis held by Jean-Paul Sartre: *existence precedes essence*. Sartre means “essence” in the Aristotelian sense, which is to say a proper function, by which we and our lives are properly evaluated. Sartre’s point is that *pace* Aristotle, we do not have any pre-established purpose or proper function. We exist *first*, in other words, and then decide our essence *after*:

What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence?” We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. (EH, p. 22)

When Sartre says, “to begin with he is nothing,” the word “nothing” has the same meaning as when Borges’ claims that an immortal is *not*. In each sense, the person is unlimited, thereby lacking any definition. Borges’ immortal, by having eternal life, is unlimited by time, thereby becoming the same as any immortal. Sartre’s “man” is unlimited by any essence that “defines” them, because a human being is someone who “first exists ... and only afterward defines [themselves].”

Importantly, Sartre's position is *not* that we each lack an essence; if that were the case, there would be no essence for existence to precede! Rather, Sartre's point is that each of us, as individuals, must define what our own individual essence is for ourselves. But how, exactly? Do we just declare it, or what? According to Sartre, a person's essence comes from their "total commitment" across a life, or as we might say today, their *life projects*:

What the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic; there is always the possibility that one day the coward may no longer be cowardly and the hero may cease to be a hero. What matters is the total commitment, but there is no one particular situation or action that commits you, one way or the other. (*EH*, p. 39)

Thus, nobody is "born a coward" or "born a hero;" instead, we define ourselves as heroes or cowards through "total commitment." If I want to become a hero, I must commit to heroic actions throughout my life. By doing that, and only by doing that, I may acquire a hero's essence.

To put it in contemporary terms, Sartre is not denying that we have modal profiles. Instead, he claims each of us must define our modal profiles. This cannot be accomplished with a single choice among options, like ordering a meal. Instead, we choose a modal profile by carrying out certain projects over the course of an entire life. To acquire the modal profile of a hero, you must live a whole life dedicated to heroism. Indeed, according to Sartre, we only acquire a modal profile once our lives are *complete*, which is to say once we have stopped living.

Let *modal existentialism* be the two-part thesis that (a) each person is modally endless while they live, and (b) each person gains a modal profile upon death, and only upon death, at which point their life-long projects determine their modal profile. According to modal existentialism, you have the same modal profile as any living person, provided you are alive. While you live, your modal profile is no different from anyone else's; you could be a hero, a philosopher, a friend, and so on, just like anyone else. Once you die, however, many of these potentials evaporate. Instead of having the same modal profile as any other living person, you acquire one that is unique, or at least as unique as the sum of your specific life projects. If you consistently devoted yourself to your family, for instance, always choosing that project over others, then you acquire a certain modal profile upon death: the profile of someone, who *was*

*essentially devoted to their family*. That profile was not available to you while you lived, since as long as you lived, you could have chosen to abandon that project. Yet your death “cements” the project, making it permanent. Thus, by pursuing projects in life, you choose the shape of your modal profile upon death.

The modal worry assumes that, since we are all biologically human, we all have the same potential. Anything that is possible for one of us should be possible for all of us. According to modal existentialism, however, our potentials are *not* solely determined by the fact of being human. Instead, our potentials depend on which life projects we consistently choose to act on. Once our lives are over and our life projects have ceased, we gain distinct modal profiles. Thus, Borges’ Modal Worry evaporates and we achieve modal uniqueness, albeit at the end of our lives.

Modal Existentialism also explains why Borges’ Modal Worry isn’t *worrisome* for people who share life projects. If you and I dedicate ourselves to the same cause over the course of our entire lives, then presumably we *want* to share a great number of modal traits, such as being incapable of betraying that cause. Thus, in sharing life projects, distinct people may hope for their modal profiles to be qualitatively similar, even if, in light of the modal worry, they should not hope for their profiles to be exactly alike. Furthermore, modal existentialism explains why it seems bad to *lack* life projects. A person with no life projects is *capable of anything*. Consider the eponymous protagonist from Camus’ *The Stranger*, and how murder was possible for him because *he didn’t care*. He had no life projects, and so a murderer was destined to be among his counterparts (including, unfortunately, in the actual world). A total absence of life projects—a lack of convictions about anything—is repellent to us, for specific reasons related to modality. Modal existentialism explains why.

Nonetheless, we anticipate the following objection. Suppose that, over the course of my life, I consistently dedicate myself to a cause – a revolution, say. Modal existentialism would entail that, upon death, I become someone who was *never* capable of betraying the revolution. In that case, I could rightfully be praised for my commitment since my betrayal was impossible. At the same time, I could *not* be so praised, since while I was alive, all (human) possibilities were open; so, I *could* have betrayed the revolution. Contradiction.

Fortunately, this apparent contradiction is easily resolved. To say that I am *capable of betraying the revolution* is to say that my doing so is consistent with a set of facts. Exactly *which* facts, however, depend on the context of utterance. In the same way that I might be *capable of speaking Finnish* given my physiology, yet *incapable of speaking Finnish* given my personal history and education, so might I be *capable of betraying the revolution* given my agency as a living human being, yet *incapable of betraying the revolution* given my life as a completed project.<sup>xviii</sup> My potential to betray the revolution is consistent with one set of facts (being human), but inconsistent with another set of facts (being a revolutionary). Contradiction averted.

In our discussion of the Ordering Response, we presented two reasons why it is inadequate: first, that the varying likelihood of certain possibilities is fluid and context-dependent; and second, that the kind of modal uniqueness we want is something *achieved*, which one can be responsible for. In response to the puzzle of whether a dead revolutionary could have betrayed their cause, modal existentialism again appeals to the idea of modal claims being fluid and context dependent. In addition to this, however, modal existentialism says that one's modal profile is an achievement. It says that the only way to refine and distinguish one's modal profile is through choices that reflect one's values and commitments—the sorts of things that we normally take to express a person's character and social identity. In this way modal existentialism not only picks up where the Ordering Response falters, but also accounts for what it's missing.

Modal existentialism claims that we each *decide for ourselves* what our modal profile is, as well as who we hope to share it—or more correctly, parts of it—with. We are not guaranteed *absolute modal uniqueness*, since it's possible for two people to share all and only the same commitments in the same proportions and at the same times throughout their respective lives, but that state of affairs seems extremely unlikely—to the point of a *near-guarantee* of absolute modal uniqueness. More importantly, however, we are guaranteed the kind of modal uniqueness that is important to us: uniqueness that we achieve, which we are responsible for, and which reflects our commitments and choices.

## IX.

This paper has two aims. The first is to present Borges' Modal Worry as a philosophical problem, and more specifically one that we cannot escape in the same way one might escape Borges' Temporal Worry from "The Immortal." The second aim is to present possible solutions to this modal worry, along with their philosophical consequences.

Regarding the second aim, we have narrowed possible solutions to two: one challenges the value of modal uniqueness; the other, modal existentialism, claims that certain modal facts are shaped by our agency. The first is compatible with certain views of morality that give up, rather than embrace, our exceptionalness. The second says that your essence is something you decide; you establish it yourself, by fulfilling projects over the course of an entire life. Your modal limitations are neither the same as everyone else's, nor assigned on the basis of such involuntary factors as species or embryology. Instead, your essence is up to you; you choose your own *essentia*.<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Borges (1949) "The Immortal" in *El Aleph and Other Stories*. Editorial Losada, Buenos Aires. Reprinted in (1998:191) *Collected Fictions*. Translator: Andrew Hurley. Viking Press. Emphasis in the original. Hereafter abbreviated *TI*.

<sup>ii</sup> Vonnegut, Kurt (1961) "Harrison Bergeron" in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Reprint in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, New York: Dell Publishing (1968:7-14)

<sup>iii</sup> Casti, R. and Varzi, Achille (2004: 7-9) "Room 88" in *Insurmountable Simplicities: Thirty-Nine Philosophical Conundrums*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Borges' Temporal Worry differs from another, better-known objection to desiring immortality, which is that *immortality would be dreadfully boring*. See Williams, Bernard (1973) "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in B. Williams (ed.), *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Nussbaum, Martha (1994). *The Theory of Desire: Theory and Desire in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton University Press; Fischer, John Martin and Mitchell-Yellin, Benjamin (2014) "Immortality and Boredom" *The Journal of Ethics* 18(4): 353-372; and Smuts, Aaron (2011) "Immortality and Significance" *Philosophy and Literature* 35(1): 134-149. Smuts worries about whether our motivation to *do* anything would collapse, were we immortal, since our

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usual motivations assume that we have limited time for action. In contrast, our understanding of Borges' primary concern in "The Immortal" is that immortality would undermine our existence as *distinct, singular* individuals.

<sup>v</sup> "Everything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *ad vertiginem*. There is nothing that is not as though lost between indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur but once, nothing is preciously in peril of being lost." (TI, p. 192)

<sup>vi</sup> Our concerns here do not revolve around how to understand immortality, e.g. Bricker, Phillip (1985/2020) "On Living Forever" unpublished manuscript available online in 1985; printed in Bricker, *Modal Matters: Essays in Metaphysics* (2020), CH. 12: 315-323; Bricker, Phillip (2020) *Modal Matters: Essays in Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press; Sorenson, Roy (2005) "The Cheated God: Death and Personal Time" *Analysis* 65(2): 119-125; Gilmore, Cody (2016) "The Metaphysics of Mortals: Death, Immortality, and Personal Time" *Philosophical Studies* 173(12): 3271-3299; Fischer, John Martin (1993) *The Metaphysics of Death*. Stanford University Press. Fischer, John Martin (2005) "Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative" *Philosophical Papers* 34(3): 379-403. All that is necessary for our discussion below is to accept that being immortal entails having an infinite temporal extent.

<sup>vii</sup> Lewis, David (1986) *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>viii</sup> Consider all the versions of Evelyn Wang, shown at 1:39:03 - 1:39:40 in Kwan, Daniel and Scheinert, Daniel. (2022). *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. A24 Films.

<sup>ix</sup> Gibbard, Allan (1975) "Contingent Identity" *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 4: 187-221.

<sup>x</sup> Borges' Modal Worry is distinct from questions in Chisholm, Roderick (1967) "Identity Through Possible Worlds: Some Questions" *Noûs* 1 (1):1-8, which are concerned with which, if any, essential properties could distinguish Adam and Noah, as well as questions about haecceitism raised in Lewis, David (1979). "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*." *Philosophical Review* 88 (4):513-543. Our focus is, in contrast, about the *value* of a unique modal profile.

<sup>xi</sup> One might object that it is our *modal indistinguishability* that is the source of the problem, not our *modal endlessness*. It is true that qualitatively indistinguishable modal profiles having a one-to-one correspondence - irrespective of whether such profiles are modally endless - will generate Borges' worry. Yet, while we admit that such modal indistinguishability is *sufficient* for undermining our uniqueness, it is not *necessary* (a point that we will address in more detail below, section VI). Moreover, since we human beings *are* modally endless, it is worth exploring what follows from this feature.

<sup>xii</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1946). "Existentialism is a Humanism." Reprinted in Elkaïm-Sartre, Arlette. (2007). *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. New Haven: Yale University Press; hereafter, *EH*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Kripke, Saul (1972) "Naming and Necessity", in *Semantics of Natural Language*, D. Davidson and G. Harman (eds.), Dordrecht: D. Reidel; reprint Kripke 1980; Kripke, Saul (1980) *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; expanded version of Kripke 1972.

<sup>xiv</sup> Priest (2014). *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>xv</sup> Thank you to Sam Cowling for this objection.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Feinberg, Joel (1987) *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law Volume 1: Harm to Others* (New York, 1987; online Oxford Academic Nov. 2003) <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195046641.001.0001>

<sup>xvii</sup> Cook, Francis H. (1977) *Hua-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, Penn State Press.

<sup>xviii</sup> Lewis, David (1975) "The Paradoxes of Time Travel." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (2):145-152.

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