

9. More life

Jon Turney

‘Death is no different whined at than withstood.’ This is Philip Larkin, whose work returns again and again to his dread of oblivion. Larkin, my edition of the *Collected Poems* tells me, was the best-loved poet of his generation. I love him too. But does his gloomy protest about the inevitable end of life tell us anything special about our culture? No, death has preoccupied us throughout history. What may be special about our times, though, is the number of people who seem determined to do something about it.

Human beings are the only creatures endowed with both an awareness of death and an imagination. So the stories we tell to console ourselves invariably offer the possibility that death can be evaded or transcended. Logically, this might happen in a number of ways. If there is a soul, ghost or spirit separate from the body, maybe it will survive in an immaterial realm, or find a new host through reincarnation. There might be some trick which negates ageing and allows the body to carry on – a form of physical immortality. There might be resurrection, through supernatural agency. Or, failing any of these, we may simply contribute to posterity and be ‘remembered’, either genetically or culturally.

To deal with death, a mixed strategy seems best. A good twenty-first century hedge might be to live as a devout Christian who raises children, writes essays and works in a lab researching cures for ageing. Such a person would be maximising the chances of their genes, their

ideas and even their body surviving, while believing that God will ensure eternal life when Earthly striving ceases.

I daresay there are people who do all these things. But you cannot help noticing the current popularity of the notion that physical immortality, or at least radical life extension, is the one to bet on. Books on the topic abound. Biotech companies with names like Elixir, Chronogen and Juvenon raise venture capital for ultimate medicines. Newspaper columnists debate whether it could really be true that the first human who will live to be 300, or even 1000, has already been born.

A brief history of immortality

Why now? A historical sketch suggests that this is where modernity has taken us in the West. The ancients, lacking plausible technologies, told stories about immortals but set their sights on the afterlife. That promise carried over into Christianity, in which original sin lost us the infinite life of the Garden of Eden, but gave us a chance of redemption after death. The enlightenment, and the science it brought in its wake, fashioned a new narrative of progress, and of a human paradise (re)created on Earth through collective effort sustained down the generations. Over time, science weakened the faith which underpinned the afterlife, but the rise of evolutionary thought reinforced the notion that improvement was possible. But the new, secular faith in social progress also faded in the twentieth century, leaving only the hope for fulfilment during the individual life. So let it last as long as we can make it.

The final ingredient is that this shift in belief goes along with a new-found sense of scientific possibility. If physical immortality is the only remaining option for denying death's dominion, it also looks more attainable. No more snake oil and monkey glands. We have molecular genetics and, maybe soon, nanotechnology. Our society has already stretched average life expectancy. Surely we will, we must, go further?

I think this sketch is basically sound. Look, for example, at Robert Ettinger's 1965 book *The Prospect of Immortality*, the first proposal for

extending life which was inspired by serious, real-world science.¹ OK, the science is a pretty generous extrapolation of some experiments with freezing organisms or parts of organisms – the real breakthroughs are assumed to lie in the future, when the preserved dead will be revived from their ‘dormantories.’ Still, Ettinger’s is a technically informed recipe for resurrection: ‘Most of us now breathing have a good chance of physical life after death – a sober, scientific probability of revival and rejuvenation of our frozen bodies,’ he declares.

But his promise extends beyond immortality. This scientific, rather than supernatural, resurrection will nevertheless take place in something like Paradise. It will contain, for example, ‘intelligent, self-propagating machines,’ which will ‘scoop up earth, or air, or water, and spew forth whatever is desired in any required amounts,’ as well as repairing themselves and improving their own design. (A couple of decades later, this fantasy machine would become a nanotechnological assembler, but its function is the same.) A materialist Paradise, then, but one which Ettinger suggests is enough to tempt anyone who is unsure about being frozen. ‘Before long nearly everyone will see the Golden Age shimmering enchantingly in the distance, and will not dream of relinquishing his ticket.’

This is heady stuff for an author who offered a ‘sober, scientific’ prospect! But it fits the notion that immortality as a technological project is a substitute religion for a secular, scientific age. The next literary landmark, Alan Harrington’s *The Immortalist*,² made the idea even more explicit. Harrington’s fascinating book, first published in 1969, has a much wider range of cultural and philosophical reference than Ettinger’s, and was an influential text for the later transhumanist movement. But the message is basically a simple one. He begins, ‘Death is an imposition on the human race, and no longer acceptable.’ The answer is to face up to the inadequacy of religion, and take the matter into our own hands using the science we now know can be ours. ‘Our new faith must accept as gospel that salvation belongs to medical engineering and nothing else.’ An ‘immortality program’ would not be nearly as expensive as the Manhattan project or the moonshots.

So here we have the beginnings of what has since become a more common view. Turning away from religion and individual salvation through technology becomes a serious alternative. You could almost imagine a state-sponsored effort along the lines Harrington proposed. Not long after he wrote, President Nixon declared a ‘war on cancer’, inspired by the Apollo programme (it is a war we still seem to be fighting). Why not a war, not just against one dread disease, but against death itself? Enlist, and you have a chance not merely of contributing to posterity, but of witnessing it.

Yet this is not quite the whole story. We are now hearing more often that an effort to achieve physical immortality is a historic necessity. But some have always hoped that it *might* be possible. As Lucian Boia concludes in his engaging survey of ideas about longevity, *Forever Young*,³ all the ideas about ways to overcome death have been present since early in recorded history. And along with rage against the dying of the light, fables of immortality and trips to paradise, we find the Senecan tradition of Stoic wisdom, and stories – as popular now as then – of the ennui of eternal life, or the horrors of extended decrepitude.

Ending the blight of involuntary death

The fact that such a full spectrum of views has endured for so long suggests that the position one takes now is less logical than temperamental. And a reading of some of the more recent advocates of life extension tends to confirm this. They regard death as an affront, a design flaw and a challenge to be overcome through human ingenuity. And the hint of longer life becoming a real technological project lends an urgency to their rhetoric. They would really hate to be one of what Damien Broderick, the Australian science-fiction author and futurist, describes as *The Last Mortal Generation*.⁴

But it is not just the thought of missing out on a prize now within our grasp which drives the modern immortalists. There is a consciousness of death as the ultimate deadline, of the brevity of life, which precedes this new hope. How can we account for the rise of this particular disposition? I daresay it is one which has always existed, but

our culture does seem to have given it greater prominence. Perhaps a useful way to explain is to be personal. After all, death is something everyone has some attitude to, even if it is denial.

Forget immortality, which raises a host of fascinating issues but remains purely speculative. A more psychologically realistic question, I suggest, is to ask: given good health and sound mind, would you like to live another 20 years? This is a span most of us can imagine.

As it happens, I turn 50 in the month when I am writing this. My answer to the 20-year question is a loud yes. I don't exactly have a plan, but there are things I wish to do and see over the next two decades (the details don't matter, it matters that I want to be here to do them).

Come back and ask me the same question in 20 years' time, and my best guess is that I will say 'yes' again. Ask me a third time, at 90, and I am not so sure. But assume another affirmative, and ask me again when I am 110 in 2065. I can well imagine not caring much one way or the other. At the moment, I certainly doubt that I would keep on saying yes until the end of the century.

Do I underestimate my putative 110-year-old self's lust for life? Perhaps, but assume that the way I feel now does indicate how I might feel then. I do not know how common this disposition is, though it seems quite common among the comfortably off British folk that I know. But I believe it contrasts sharply with the advocates of life extension. They are clearly framing their lives in a different narrative. I have watched my children being born and my parents die, but I still don't feel, with Ray Kurzweil, that 'disease and death at any age is a calamity'. I am absolutely gripped by the idea that humans, in some form, will live for many millennia to come, but I don't find the idea of personal finitude an affront. To tell the truth, I don't feel old, but I do feel I have been around quite a long time already. Fifty years is a vanishingly small instant on a geological or cosmic time-scale, but days are where we live (Larkin again), and it adds up to 18,000 of those.

I claim no virtue for this position, merely that it differs sharply from those who think that the current life span is not nearly long enough. If they are more vocal, and their voices more insistent, are

they prompted by some other feature of our culture than secularisation and technological prowess? Many in the West now live longer, but seem to feel short of time. We are offered an extraordinary volume of cultural product, as well as a repackaging of ‘experiences’ both as the moments which make life worthwhile, and as items that can be bought and traded. Somewhere in this culture of 24-hour information, with boxed sets of all the TV shows you never watched the first time round, and a profusion of lists of ‘100 things you must do before you are 30’, we live our everyday lives, cash rich but time poor. And we are told that the path to happiness lies in ‘living life to the full’, whatever that may mean.

How much is enough?

So if the wish for longer life is part of the human condition, late capitalism works on that wish in its own unstoppable way. The critique is familiar. We clock in and clock out of work, but our time off work is redefined as ‘leisure’ and colonised by leisure industries. Their need to shift product means they must try and perpetuate our juvenile craving for novelties, or sell us substitutes for non-commodifiable goods like community or conversation.

At the same time, the culture surrounding us is, in its way, astonishingly rich and exciting. We create more now, if only because there are so many humans alive; we recover more of the past; we know more of other cultures. And everything is available to all, all the time. Again, we come up against the human incapacity to sample more than a minute fraction of the world.

So are the advocates of life extension oppressed by lack of time? They do not always say so directly, but you can see it in occasional asides. James Hughes, for example, considering that he is executive director of the World Transhumanist Association, writes a commendably balanced account of the prospects for human enhancement in *Citizen Cyborg*.⁵ But he gives a glimpse into what drives him when he suddenly declares that he has always resented sleep, as a time when nothing happens, a waste of a third of one’s life.

If any lapse in consciousness is a flaw, then the final dissolution of

consciousness is a looming calamity. But if you regard sleep as a rather pleasant part of the day, or even wakefulness as a potentially rewarding interlude between naps, then Hughes' declaration may seem puzzling. No knitting up the ravelled sleeve of care for him.

All the various ways of dealing with mortality, possibly excepting stoicism, can lead to zealotry. But the difference today is that for the first time those pressing for research on life extension may actually be able to implement their programme in a way which alters the facts of the matter. This is one respect in which the meek certainly will not inherit the Earth.

So if the prospects for life extension are likely to be shaped by those who feel strongly enough to do something about it, it is worth the rest of us thinking harder about what problem they think they are trying to solve. It is hard to see how it can be one of ultimate meaning, whatever the rhetoric suggests. Recommending a search for immortality seems to me a counsel of despair, not hope. As completely unlimited life is out of the question, what is the appeal of staking all on such a fantasy? If a life limited to 100 years is devoid of meaning, why would living to 200, or even 2000, improve matters? There would still be infinitely many years of non-being to follow. Of course, a much-extended life might enable one to survive into an era when human beings are modified in other ways, in which case the terms of the discussion will change in a manner we cannot predict. Then all bets are off. But until then, we seem to have an emerging lobby for the virtues of mere duration.

A contrasting view is offered by the environmentalist Bill McKibben, who suggests that we should agree on what is 'Enough'.⁶ McKibben assumes that most other people share his outlook on life. I think I might do. But I also see a great number of people who feel otherwise. Their spokesman is surely Ridley Scott's searingly memorable stand-in for any man meeting his maker in *Blade Runner* – the near-perfect but short-lived replicant, Roy, confronting Tyrell, the industrialist who supervised his design. Tyrell asks, nervously, what he can do for his creation. Roy cuts in harshly: 'I want more life, fucker.' Larkin would approve wholeheartedly.

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Notes

- 1 R Ettinger, *The Prospect of Immortality* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1965).
- 2 A Harrington, *The Immortalist: An approach to the engineering of man's divinity* (London: Granada, 1969).
- 3 L Boia, *Forever Young: A cultural history of longevity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).
- 4 D Broderick, *The Last Mortal Generation* (Sydney, Australia: Reed Natural History, 1999).
- 5 J Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why democratic societies must respond to the redesigned human of the future* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).
- 6 B McKibben, *Enough: Staying human in an engineered age* (New York: Times Books, 2003).