

Is the quest for immortality worse than death?

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are obsessed with prolonging life – but they could be deluded in what they wish for.

By Adrian Moore



There are some people who find the prospect of death so abhorrent they arrange for their corpses to be frozen, in the hope that one day they can be resurrected. Others, such as the director of engineering at Google, Ray Kurzweil, think they might achieve immortality by having their [consciousness uploaded](#) to a computer. Some have [invested vast sums](#) in the research needed to develop such technologies. These people may or may not be deluded about the scientific prospects of immortality. But are they perhaps deluded in other ways? Are they deluded in what they wish for?

If there were an elixir of life, would you choose to take it? Let's assume immortality is an attractive prospect. If you wanted to live perpetually as a healthy twenty-year old, for example, then you could; if you wanted your loved ones to be immortal as well, then they would be; or if you preferred to have a never-ending supply of new loved ones, then you could have. But there's one catch. The elixir isn't reversible, and suicide isn't an option. If you choose to take the elixir, there will be no going back. Now would you choose to take it?

The British philosopher Bernard Williams addressed this issue in his article, “The Makropulos Case”, whose title was taken from a play by Karel Čapek. The play is about a woman named Elina Makropulos, who is the beneficiary of an elixir of life. She finds, after some three hundred and fifty years, that “her unending life... has come to a state of indifference, boredom, and coldness.” For Makropulos, though, death remains a possibility if she doesn’t take the elixir again. The play ends with Makropulos welcoming her own death.

The subtitle of Williams’ article is “Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”. For Williams, Makropulos’ case illustrates a general truth about life, and what gives it meaning and value. Without death, he argues, life would eventually become tedious – and unbearable.

Williams’ contention is that for any life to count as the life of one person, there are limits to how much change it can undergo; too much change and it eventually becomes the life of another person. On the other hand, for a life to be worth living and sustain interest for the person living it, there are limits to how little change it can undergo: too little and it eventually becomes unbearable. According to Williams, this balance can’t ever be struck. No life can have enough constancy to count as one person’s while at the same time having enough variety to count as worth living.

But many people disagree with Williams. One of these is the American philosopher Thomas Nagel. He writes that, given the choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes, he would always choose to live for another week, so long as there were no even worse catastrophes that his death could avert, such as endless suffering. Nagel treats this as tantamount to saying that he would be glad to live forever.

Williams thinks Nagel’s life would eventually become wretched – to the point that his death *would* be a blessed relief. This divide between philosophers who find immortality abhorrent and philosophers for whom death is abhorrent may be as much a temperamental divide as an intellectual one. In fact, Nagel himself asks, “Can it be that [Williams] is more easily bored than I?” Perhaps it can – but Nagel is offering an argument rather than a declaration of his own preferences, so we can still challenge him.

Suppose that given a choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes, I would always choose to live for another week. My weekly choices would keep me alive forever. But this isn’t tantamount to saying that I would be glad to live forever. I might have a clear preference not to live forever. In fact, I might be appalled at the prospect of living forever – perhaps because I see my inevitable death as a source of urgency and meaning in life. Yet I still might never want *these* to be my last five minutes.

This last point shows that there is no conflict between thinking mortality is preferable to immortality, and thinking that death is—as Nagel puts it—“a great curse”. In other words, there is no conflict between the idea that mortality is a precondition of life having value and meaning, and the idea that whatever value and meaning life has is bound to be destroyed by death.

But although there is no conflict between thinking these things, there may be an emotional conflict between living in the light of each of these thoughts. After all, if life without death has

no value and meaning, and if life with death has a value and meaning that death itself eventually takes away, then this signals one of the greatest tragedies of human existence. And it is a tragedy that no amount of technological innovation will enable us to escape.

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