Death and the Human Animal

Mary Midgley

Here Mary Midgley, now in her 90s, reflects on the profound implications of attempting to abolish death. The more one thinks it through, the less desirable the prospect seems. An earlier version of this article appeared in Philosophy Now, March-April 2012

Till lately, people discussing death didn't have to consider the idea of actually abolishing it. Now they do. The 'new immortalist' movement declares its intention to 'end the scandal of involuntary death'. It holds that (as Aubrey de Grey puts it) 'humans have a right to live as long as they wish'. (We must ask later what kind of a right this is). And it claims that they will indeed soon be able to do this. The prediction is that, quite soon, the recent increase in the human life-span will start to accelerate faster than people age. When the human race achieves this 'longevity escape velocity' we will effectively be immortal. In fact, the first person who will live to be a thousand may already have been born.

This gospel is being spread rapidly by the Immortality Institute in the United States and to some extent here too. Starting from the way in which the human life-span has indeed lately become longer in rich countries, immortalists argue that this increase both can and must be taken to its logical terminus. Normal dying must stop altogether. Except for occasional accidents and murders we should all live in perfect health for ever. I should emphasise right away how different this is from just saying that we ought to lengthen lives by treating the diseases of old age – a point on which we might all agree. Proposing the actual removal of death is a different kind of step which alters the meaning of life itself. It needs to be looked at separately.

Death and Individualism

When I first came across this idea, I thought it made no sense at all. And I have to say that, after attending to it for a time, I'm inclined to come back to that opinion. But I don't think that it is actually as cheap or as easy to reach as it first appears. Immortalism is rooted in a great many ideas that are current and accepted today. It fits in too well with the individualism of the Enlightenment to be dismissed as a casual aberration. For a start, our current thinking surely does view the saving of human lives as a pre-eminent obligation. As Immortalists point out, we all welcome any effective life-saving and call anxiously for more of it. We don't even allow people to die when they want to – however much they want to. In fact, human life is now the only thing that is universally agreed to be sacred – a word which, in other contexts, is viewed with great suspicion today. By contrast, many people view the killing of other animals, for meat or other purposes, as perfectly normal and harmless. And, as for the Earth itself , though we've lately begun to grasp that it can be seen as a living whole which is entitled to reverence – Gaia – that reverent view of it is certainly not yet our normal, official attitude.

Behind this special emphasis on preventing human death lies the rather extreme kind of individualism that is now prevalent – the quasi-deification of the ego, the great reverence for the self as the one remaining valuable thing in the world – which can seem to make its indefinite preservation absolutely necessary. And the ideas that used to balance this reverence aren't as influential as they once were. The old certainty that we are bound to die because we lie under the same conditions as the rest of nature is countered today by a belief in the transcendent, all-conquering powers of civilised Man.

Here humanism shades into transhumanism – an ardent belief in an indefinite, perhaps endless vista of possibilities that are supposed to lie open to our species. Our faith in technology, especially medical technology, is backed here by a deeper message that, as humans, we are virtually exempt from earthly conditions anyway and ought to take advantage of that exemption. Both actual technological successes and science-fiction's images of further technology have impressed us so much that we are no longer sure that anything is actually impossible. As Arthur C. Clarke pointed out, it is quite hard now to distinguish between technology and magic, and magic has no limits. Prophets urge us to believe that we have moved right outside the bounds of nature – that we are now effectively supernatural and ought to live up to that status.

This rather mysterious widening vision is what has made startling proposals like immortalism look plausible ever since writers like Wells and J.D. Bernal started to express them. And it accounts for the remarkable way in which these proposals combine a factual with a moral meaning. We are told both that human immortality is bound to happen and that we must strain every nerve to make sure that it does. Like the Marxist revolution, immortality seems somehow to be both inevitable and obligatory. The double force already felt in words like progress spreads out here to cover the idea of evolution in a way quite foreign to Darwin, and we are asked to put our backs into bringing about this inevitable future.

Facts, Values and Politics

When facts get mixed with values like this it is usually best to start by separating them, so perhaps we should begin with a few facts about possibilities. At the scientific level, Immortalists can bring forward serious reasons for supposing that immortality can be achieved. (Of course more orthodox scientists oppose this with equal fervour, but they agree in taking it seriously). There is more room for debate than might be expected about possibility here because the physiological causes of aging and death have never been quite clear. There seems to be no specially-wired mechanism designed to make us age and die because, of course, none was ever needed. Outside causes of death always cleared away the passing generations in the course of nature, leaving room for their successors. Evolution went on without any special culling mechanism. Thus these questions about strictly medical possibility still remain on the table.

If, however, we turn to ask about political possibility, things get harder. We need to ask: what would life be like in an immortal society? When a whole community has been immortalised, what happens to the population question...? Even optimists on this subject agree that resources can't be stretched for ever to supply indefinitely-increasing crowds. Very soon, if not at once, it would surely be necessary to give up having children almost completely...This is a pretty dramatic change. Is it actually a change for the better? Children are, of course, often annoying but people still seem fairly sure that they want them, as the Chinese are finding out. And what would adult life be like if no new people ever arrived in society?

Things are no less puzzling at the other end of life because, of course, that other end will vanish. What, for instance, happens to retirement and pensions? Recent proposals to raise the pension age to accommodate that very increase that Immortalists celebrate have produced cries of outrage. But if nobody ages or dies any longer, would there still be any pensions? Would people stop working at all? Newspaper headlines now often ask such questions as,` Who pays for longevity?' and, from where we now stand, this seems to be a fair question.

Besides these difficulties about organising a universal death-free society there are also awkward questions about equality. How do we get there in the first place? Who gets this new privilege first? Which of the politicians or press-lords whom we least want to see around us for ever would be at the front of this queue? (It is as well to remember that other people, as well as oneself, will get this awkward gift). Starting (again) from where we now are, there's surely no doubt that the first immortals would simply be some of the most privileged people in the most privileged countries. This would produce a rather special form of inequality which those of us who were left behind might surely refuse to tolerate.

Immortalists reply that these are just local difficulties which can be dealt with by revising a few current arrangements. Is that right? Or do they indicate deeper trouble? On the face of things, they certainly seem to. Old age and death form, along with childhood, a feature of life's pattern which pervades all human cultures. At present, they shape the whole way in which we conceive of our lives. They make up a fixed cycle, a crescendo and diminuendo that frame human efforts everywhere, a rhythm that links us to the natural world in which we live. They mark us out as creatures akin to the rest of life, beings that are at home on the earth, not supernatural outsiders crashing in to conquer it.

We have no idea how we would get on without that context. No doubt we would devise some other world-picture to replace it, but what would that picture be? Would the overcrowding be dealt with by colonizing space - a potent dream that has long ruled science-fiction. This dream was first shaped in the thirties by J.D. Bernal, who predicted that the intellectual elite (mostly scientists) would live on as fully mechanised, fleshless bodies in hollowed-out asteroids, established for ever in those cold celestial silences that so frightened Pascal. Or do we prefer the milder multiworlds of Asimov and the Starship Enterprise, which are what Stephen Hawking apparently looks forward to – a rather less alarming prospect but perhaps not really a more plausible one? As things now are, we do quite enjoy those dreams but we have certainly not ceased to feel that the earth is our home. As Tennyson's Tithonus put it -

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall.
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath...
Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men,
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

This isn't a thought that strikes us every day but it is isn't an eccentric one either. It resonates very widely with our tradition. Indeed, no less a prophet than Steve Jobs expressed it lately when he was describing how he reacted to the discovery that he had cancer. This shock, he said, had suddenly made him get back to work as nothing else could have done. He added -

> *Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things all fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is important..... No-one wants to die. Even people who want to go to Heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the best invention of life. It is life's change-agent.*
> *(Guardian, October 7 2011, pp. 9 & 51)*

This is, of course sound biology and to my mind it is also human common-sense. The imperative to save life has always been balanced by a clear sense that it can't be saved for ever – that all life is, by its nature, something vulnerable and passing. Even while it lasts, we know we are subject to all sorts of chance disasters which we can't possibly dodge for ever. The command to save life is, like so many of our principles, just one side of a dialectic – an imperative that constantly has to be balanced against its opposite. Nobody supposes that it's always wrong to allow a death.

The Meanings of Death

In fact, the question of how to view death isn't a duel between black and white – saving it or losing it. It really is a choice of evils - one of those clashes where, as Aristotle saw, we have to navigate between equally unwelcome extremes. I have often been puzzled by the way philosophers, from Epicurus on, have argued abstractly about whether death is 'an evil'. It seems so obvious that the question about evils must always be 'is this one worse than the alternative?' A great many things, such as pain and grief, are bad and frightening in themselves but are still essential parts of our existence. Pain and grief are not just necessary means to life's good things, they are necessary aspects of life as a whole. Sympathy and sensibility, discouragement and disappointment expose us to a lot of pain, but we would probably still choose to keep them rather than be given a permanent emotional analgesic.

The trouble about fitting death into our lives is, then, that we need both to remember it and to forget it. We have to be clear that it is there, but not let it stop us doing what we have to do meanwhile We know things can always go wrong. This uncertainty is upsetting but we can't get rid of it merely by removing death. Plenty of other things can shatter our plans just as effectively and, if death were removed, people would probably take to fearing those instead. The game itself would go on and would surely not get any easier. Indeed, it might even get harder - more worrying - if we knew that we had to play it for ever.

And after all – as Steve Jobs points out - the only thing that makes it possible for any of us to be here now is that our innumerable ancestors all had the good manners not to live for ever but to die when their time came. Without that, they could never have developed the way of life that we now enjoy and could certainly not have passed it on to us. Thus, when the Immortalists claim that 'humans have a right to live as long as they wish, the right in question seems to be a right of a particular generation – a right held against our possible rivals, against those future people who might take our place after us but who won't now have the chance to. Did our ancestors also have that same right? Were they entitled to prevent us from existing? This seems wrapped in mystery.

In any case, not all humans have wanted to claim such a right. Plenty of them have expressed, as Steve Jobs does, their acceptance of the thought that we cannot live for ever.. As Edmund Spencer put it -

> *Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,*
> *Peace after war, death after life doth greatly please.*

But this acceptance is the polar opposite of the temper that inspires the New Immortalists and other Transhumanists today.

An Endless Prospect

This brings us to the social and psychological side of the matter. How would our life become different if normally no-one died? What, in fact, would an endless earthly life be like?

This is the aspect of the matter that I find most intriguing, but it hardly seems to interest Immortalists at all. Their aim is much more to avoid dying than to achieve some particular way of living. They only touch on these social issues when they are forced to defend themselves against political objections, and even then they clearly don't think much of them. Thus Robert Ettinger, the high-priest of cryonics, explains that he hopes great multitudes will take advantage of their new opportunity to get themselves deep-frozen so as to last until the blessed future comes. People object that, when they are all revived, the flood of newly-thawed-out citizens might raise population-difficulties. But Ettinger is not alarmed. He writes -

> *The frozen population would increase by four billion every thirty years. If it takes 300 years for civilization to reach the immortality level, there would then be some forty billion people to revive and relocate – if we assume, for simplicity, that it all happens at once.... There is ample room on our planet for forty billion people.*
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> *(Quoted by Bryan Appleyard, How To Live Forever Or Die Trying, p.199, emphasis mine)*

(Incidentally, the number actually frozen so far is apparently just sixty-seven, but about a thousand more, including de Grey, are signed up for possible future treatment).

De Grey himself usually answers these wider objections by saying that immortalists will deal with them when the particular difficulty arises. He explains that he doesn't see himself as a general theorist searching for large truths but as an engineer, looking for solutions to particular practical problems. He thinks this is best done by tackling only one problem at a time, and he sees the extension of human life as just one such problem. The trouble with this is, of course, that, even for engineers, problems don't come separately packed, and, when we are dealing with living creatures, the great network of interconnections, both within them and around them, is crucial.. Population pressure and savage inequality aren't just future complications which might arise some day. They are already rampant evils today and increasing the human lifespan seems likely make them worse. So they can't possibly be kept separate from it.

What, however, would it be like for everybody to look forward to an endless death-free future? It is not a new thought that this prospect is actually quite alarming. Long before the New Immortalism arose people have suggested that we need death in order to give a shape to life – a shape without which life can become meaningless. Thus in Bernard Shaw's play Back to Methuselah Adam and Eve appear when they have just discovered the death of animals. At first they are appalled to think that the same thing might happen to them. But then they wonder about the prospect of going on for ever without an end and they start to suspect that that would be even worse. Adam cries out 'I can't face the horror of having to be with myself for ever...I do not like myself. I am tired of myself. And yet I must endure myself, not for a day or many days but for ever. That is a dreadful thought'. Similarly Milan Kundera, in his novel Immortality, remarks, 'What is unbearable in life is not being but being oneself'.

Shaw's Adam and Eve decide to settle instead for a lifetime of three hundred years. And, as it happens, a woman who has just lived for three hundred years is the central figure in Karel Capek's play The Makropoulos Affair (which provided the script for Janacek's opera). Here a woman who once took an immortality-potion has reached the point where she will need another dose of it in order to go on. At first she tries desperately to get hold of the recipe. But when she gets it, she gradually realises that, after all, she isn't going to take it. She really has no reason to go on living, so she's content to die. Her successive lives have been good but she has had enough of them and she doesn't want to repeat them. She is tired of repetition. There is no reason for her to go on.

Bored Stiff?

Critics have suggested that this must be because of accidental features in her life. But Bernard Williams, in a fascinating essay on the story, rejects this. He believes -

> *that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies, that an endless life would be a meaningless one and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of or have more unqualifiedly if we lasted for ever...[As Aristotle said about Plato's Form of the Good]``nor will it be any more good for being eternal; that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day'...*
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> *(Problems of the Self; pp. 89-.100)*

Williams is surely right that the value-associations which have always coloured words like immortal and eternal can't stay with them once we begin to talk literally. Just going on and on without stopping is not what people have always meant by eternity. Medical immortality simply isn't a religious concept because value is always relevant. Richard Dawkins tried to exploit those value-associations when he wrote that 'the genes are the immortals' but this is a con; what lasts a long time is not necessarily divine. There is nothing paradoxical about Williams's conclusion that, for humans, a life that is eternal in this sense would be too repetitive to be liveable. The notorious difficulty of spelling out how an endless life could be lived singing hymns in Heaven shows the force of this difficulty.

Again, in his collection, *Labyrinths,* Jorge-Luis Borges writes the story of a Roman soldier who eagerly searches for the Fountain of Immortality. He finds a strange, meaningless, empty city which he is told is the City of the Immortals, and near it are some miserable, naked people who don't even seem to be able to talk. He tries to teach one of them to speak, and for a long time can't succeed. But at last he is astonished to hear the man say something about the Odyssey. He asks him 'What do you know of the Odyssey?' `Very little' the man replies. 'It must be a thousand and one hundred years since I wrote it'. Their river, from which the soldier has himself been drinking, is indeed the Fountain of Immortality. These people are ageless, and repetition has wiped all meaning from their lives long ago. So the soldier promptly sets out in search of the Fountain of Mortality in the hope that it will reverse this dreadful process.

Some immortalists recognise this problem about what to do with one's immortality, or even with one's extended life. Nick Bostrom, who is an Oxford philosopher, has suggested that people's brains may need to be enlarged so as to cope with maintaining interest in an almost limitlessly extended life. This surely shows an amazing faith in the reliability of medical technology - a faith which does, indeed, pervade many aspects of this project. He adds, however, that not everybody may need this expansion; some people may just not mind doing the same things repeatedly for ever.

This whole difficulty has been described as a form of boredom. Aubrey de Grey briskly replies that boredom can easily be dealt with; we just need better education and training. As he

says, 'nobody with a good education gets bored, only those people who have never been given the skill to make a lot out of life'. Whatever may be thought about this generalisation, de Grey is surely right to ask for a rather less casual, more penetrating name for this trouble than boredom. Boredom can cover all sorts of failure of motivation. Meaninglessness, however, is something more specific. It indicates a particular kind of trouble – the absence of a ruling pattern, a pervasive rhythm, bringing the elements of life together as parts of the whole.

For humans, of course, this pattern of meaning always spreads far beyond a single life through communal enterprises involving many others, enterprises lasting far longer than a single life-time. In fact, it is this sense that one is part of a larger whole – in fact, many larger wholes - that can make death seem less than catastrophic. Notoriously, too, many people have found, as Steve Jobs did, that the shock of expecting death, whether for oneself or others, is what makes them aware of this background pattern.

An Enclosing Pattern

In fact, it looks rather as if this need for an enclosing pattern is a fixed part of our nature. Immortalists, of course, clearly don't think that we have any such fixed, given nature that might block their plans. They see people either, in behaviourist terms, as infinitely malleable, or as being driven always by a single overriding motive – the fear of dying. But that prudent fear is certainly not an overriding motive; in fact, other motives override it all the time. Reminding people repeatedly about health and safety simply stops them listening. Quite normal humans engage constantly in dangerous sports like rock-climbing, motor-cycling and hang-gliding and the whole history of culture makes it clear how much they enjoy fighting. Fear of death is just one part of a whole forest of feelings that are natural to us, feelings which continually clash and jostle together and must be balanced as we try to live our conflict-ridden lives. Immortalists, like other Utopians, focus so exclusively on the one evil they want to root out that they forget to provide for the rest of life.

In fact, we are not abstract entities. We are mammals, members of a particular primate species, equipped with a jumble of natural motives that suits our characteristic way of life. We often forget about this common heritage and suppose that we are infinitely adaptable because the differences between our cultures interest us so much more than the nature that we share. But that nature is very powerful.

Immortalists want us to see the habit of dying as just a cultural quirk, a passing fashion that we can change. Of course they are right to point out that people often do change what seem to be fixed customs and may then start doing things they once thought were against their nature. For instance, we in the West no longer think that we have to fight duels or hang, draw and quarter traitors, and we are trying to give up usury and smoking. But some of these customs are in fact much harder to change than others. War and slavery are still very resistant and nobody has managed to get rid of alcohol. Polygamy has officially been abolished here but it is surely still with us, even if only in serial form. In short, though humans do like a change they are not infinitely adaptable psychologically any more than they are so physically – indeed, since brains are physical things the two aspects inevitably go together. There are limits to reshaping our motives. Some customs can be changed more easily than others.

Where, then, on that spectrum of mutability should we place this practice of dying? Transhumanists always want to put such practices at the shallow end as if they could be easily cleared away like wearing wigs. Thus that ardent transhumanist Plato advised that families should be abolished, children being brought up communally without knowing who their parents were. Like many other reformers, too, he wanted to get rid of private property. But nobody has made these ideas work, and most of us would agree that this is because, in spite of their many drawbacks, these things are essential to human nature. The question is; is dying also essential?

When immortalists talk of the 'scandal of involuntary death' they suggest that death is something bizarre, an anomaly, a strange fact that doesn't fit the order of the world we know. But actually, of course, what is strange and scandalous is not death but life. Even the simplest living things are so complex that the mere fact of their existing and functioning at all is miraculous, and in human beings that complexity is of course vastly greater. To expect such sensitive and delicate systems as these to work forever against all the chances of a violent world without wearing out is surely absurd, and would still be so however good the new medical maintenance arrangements might be. And since we are by nature so transient it is surely plausible that our emotional nature too fits that transience. However discontented we may be with our present mortality we might well (as these writers have suggested) find it still harder to adapt to the prospect of endless survival..

This change is indeed one of quite a different order from the shifts of custom just mentioned. Dying isn't just a local practice acquired by one culture or even a trait confined to our species. It's the life-pattern of all advanced animals whatever. The only creatures that don't die individually are very simple ones like amoebas which reproduce by dividing. In a sense these creatures are indeed, death-free. The original amoeba is, in a way, still with us. Its examples haven't changed, and that lack of change is exactly the price that they pay for being immortal. Steve Jobs is surely right; death is indeed life's best invention, its change-agent

What made possible the whole rich forest of later speciation - among whose twigs we now live - was indeed simply the invention of real, final, individual death. This happened when animals took to the more complicated sexual modes of reproduction which allowed variety and provided for innovation. Each member lived briefly, but the huge range of further possibilities constantly branched out further. In fact, death was the price paid for this whole development – the price of real life. It was what made possible that fruitful individuality that we now so much prize. But that kind of individuality is just what immortalists now want to freeze and ossify, thus ending the creative process for ever. This desperate attempt to keep the profits of human evolution without paying for them is surely one more case of tunnel vision – of reformers so hypnotised by a single cause that they quite forget its human context.

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