

On Immortality

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Immortality. More time; all the time in the world, in fact. Who would say no to the opportunity to speak to your ancestors or grandchildren eight generations away? Think of all the knowledge one could gain with an infinite amount of time on their hands. New discoveries would be made at an exponential rate. There would be little fear of death, because death would become an unlikely occurrence amongst the abundance of life. There would be little stress, no rush to get everything that is expected to be done in the span of a human lifetime. Is there a downside to immortality? Is there a reason to question the wish generations have desired for centuries? Through computational neurology, this notion may not be that far away, and the consequences of this technology would have everlasting effects.

I will begin by noting that I don't believe science will ever get this advanced, and this worry may always remain a theory, yet it is worth discussing; both for considering the future possibility and examining the philosophical morals behind our desire for it. Michael Burley, author of "Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate," doesn't believe that it is useful to theorize thought experiments such as immortality and other fantastical considerations of future events that may remain theoretical impossibilities. While he criticizes philosophers for engaging in seemingly childish imaginations or constructing fictional worlds that don't resemble our own, such experiments reflect our moral thought processes behind our decision making, and even if entirely theoretical, the boundaries we construct in our imagined worlds reveal how we structure our moral judgements. Many of these imaginary dilemmas often depict real-life scenarios metaphorically, and too often, moral decisions are made from biases against the subject itself, so neutral subject matter can assist in reducing biases. Though immortality is a speculative, maybe even an immature ideal, if we look at human life in a different perspective (in this case, an unending perspective) we may better contemplate what makes a life meaningful as a mere mortal, if viewed from the perception of an eternal being.

The question then becomes, what constitutes a human life? If our brains are nothing but neural receptors that mimic computational feedback loops as many scientists believe, is there anything that distinguishes us from our silicone counterparts?

It is the essence of being human, I believe, that marks the difference.

So, one might ask, what does it mean to be human? It is difficult to pin down a definition, though all of us clearly agree that there is something unique about being born into the world rather than being created by a science fiction realization. While not a complete definition, humanity might be loosely described as possessing consciousness, emotions, personality, free will, character, and individuality, or collectively, a soul. These traits are difficult to replicate in a computer simulation. Underlying these traits is the belief that as humans, we each have inherent value, and a unique place on the planet. This is a special right that machines cannot claim, and without such traits, would make the question of continued existence controversial.

Some computer programmers believe these human traits function on a biological level which can be replicated through a binary system of input and output signals just as neurons and brain circuits operate biologically. While neurologists don't understand certain aspects of consciousness and other human traits connected to the mind, these scientists believe that these aspects will be discovered in the future, and we will be able to directly apply this knowledge to computer programming. Uploading a brain will be as easy as entering a series of commands modeled after the human brain.

Some critics, however, don't believe traits like consciousness will ever be reproduced in computer form. Even if consciousness is a biological function, it may be operating with other aspects in the human being, thus creating the assumption that the mind is more than the sum of its parts. Some philosophers call this the "natural brain." Though biological, there is more to consciousness than connecting a few neurons together like puzzle pieces and expecting consciousness to appear. Additionally, consciousness may not be biological at all. It may be founded upon aspects of the mind, which would likely be impossible to

encode in a machine. The knowledge of uploading consciousness may someday be discovered and described in thorough detail, but it is likely that consciousness will not be reproduced through these procedures.

A similar case could be made for emotions, personality, and individuality. Scientists may be able to replicate these functions on an elementary level, but it is unlikely they will ever evolve to maturity and be able to sustain life after death as a being who has free will and morality as the human it was before its biological death. Additionally, the uploaded brain will resemble the brain of its original carrier, but it will not be the same brain; therefore, it will not be the same person as they were when they were alive. This brings another issue of identity crisis and leaves the new immortal with an internal conflict about the state of its being and opposing desires of both remembering who it was in the past and the attempt to become who it wants to be in its infinite future.

Furthermore, immortality would trigger a domino effect of moral conflicts in everyday life, such as who gets uploaded, consent, criminal justice, and the ultimate decision to turn someone off. These issues are too much to address in this paper but should be explored in depth when addressing the prospect of immortality.

The moral question then is, is it moral to want to become immortal? One might say that it is egotistical to want to witness everything and have your existence be known throughout history. Yet, if the uploaded mind could not guarantee personal authenticity, free will, or consciousness, one might argue that continued existence should not be an ideal that is strived for.

When considering the limitless potential of time, immortals may become bored with their remarkable achievements, and struggle to make life worth continuing. However, Senyo Whyte of Iowa State University, insists that there are everlasting categorical desires that will make life worth living and continually self-fulfilling so there is no fear of becoming bored or relying on the availability of certain certitudes to make one happy. Categorical desires might include appreciating art, nature, writing, or

spending time with a spouse. These activities do not have an end goal and are fulfilling within themselves rather than after their completion. One can imagine living forever and endlessly enjoying these simple pleasures. This requires, of course, the presumption that your spouse, nature, and other categorical desires are also immortal, but for the sake of argument, we will assume they are.

In general, one might claim that the meaning of life is to strive to make the world a better place. In most cases, people devote their time to work, relationships or helping the next generation, all of which contribute to the greater good, and may be considered categorical desires. Everyone wants to feel a part of something larger than themselves because they understand that a single human lifespan is not enough to make any lasting impact on humanity. Thus, to make life meaningful, they must be a part of something that will last beyond their years which is a sliver in time compared to the universe when reflected upon as a whole.

It is our human essence that causes us to desire to make the world a better place and connect to something larger than ourselves. Artificial intelligence can attempt such connectivity through detailed machine learning, but ultimately, will not feel connected, nor have a desire to be connected to the world around it because it is not biological, and it does not have human essence.

Because we are biological beings, we have an innate interconnection with nature and the world around us. We look upon it with reverence and respect. We feel connected to it, perhaps, because our chemistry is similar, and we have a need to be near the ground which we are created akin to. Will a being with a machine body feel such a connection to the world at large upon viewing the stars at night, or a peaceful walk in the woods? Will a mechanical mind feel a sense of awe or transcendence when seeing a glowing sunrise begin each new day? These are unique human experiences that we have daily and have a great impact on our lives as we consider how little our individual life has compared to the grand scheme of things. I am of the opinion that if we were immortal, we would soon become very unhappy, as everyday would not be a gift, but a reminder of our infinite presence in a world that may be too different from the one we once knew.

Similarly, everything in nature is meant to die, decompose, and rebuild again. Nature functions in this way to clear out the old and make room for the new. What kind of consequences might this have if the old never leaves and continuously overpowers the new? There may be fatal catastrophes if we don't let nature take its course and allow the new to replace the old. Every generation strives to better the world. Even if we don't get to a better place, due to the mere fact of being human, each generation continues to attempt to make it better, and without a new generation filled with hope and new ideas, would the world as we know it age along with the cynic cyborgs?

If we need not be immortal to make a difference, how then should we spend our short time on earth? I believe we must find our place in the world, whether big or small, and strive to improve it and make it the best version we can. If we are actively improving the world, we will, as a result, improve ourselves and therefore continue improving the world. It is true our time is short, but it is not insufficient. Of all the gifts of human life, the gift of time is of special significance. Being mortal gives everyone a clear purpose, and I believe time is the only thing that makes us close to being equal. We all come from different backgrounds, but the one thing we are equally allotted is time, and we have the freedom to choose to spend it in the best way we deem possible. Through our allotted time, and the prospect of our inevitable death, we live life to the fullest extent possible. How different might our lives be if we knew we had only one day left to live? Would our behavior change if we knew we had infinite time?

Supporters should proceed with caution if they consent to uploading upon death. We should not want to be immortal because it is unnatural and lures us away from our duties as humans living in a human world with other humans. Our drive to learn, create and share is precisely what we are on earth to do, not become gods on earth who roam the grounds with an uncanny pride. Immortality is a lofty ideal, and due to nature, both human and ecological, we simply can't conceive an immortal existence, nor should we aspire to be everlasting if our identity and the world around us would be threatened as a result.

The length of the human life gives appropriate restraints for everyone. The evil cannot live forever, guilt will not linger for eternity, and pain and suffering will be temporary. Similarly, the end propels agency,

and one's demise drives ambition. While science may advance and increase the average lifespan, immortality through the unnatural means of brain uploading will not embody the essence of humanity, and therefore would be immoral as these cyborgs would become slaves to their creators behind the programmed curtain, not humans striving to connect with the world around them and find the meaning in their existence.