

IMMORTALITY: LIBERTY'S FINAL FRONTIER

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*"If a mass death sentence defines man's condition, then rebellion, in one sense is its contemporary. When he refuses to recognise his mortality, the rebel simultaneously refuses to recognise the power that makes him live in this condition."*¹

Albert Camus

The continuing fact of death renders all talk of liberty ultimately futile. Brave notions of freedom which passively accept the certainty of personal extinction are increasingly seen as so much empty rhetoric. The gods have deserted us and our clever excuses for oblivion are wearing thin. In our hearts we know that there is something very wrong with our condition, and yet faced with the seeming inevitability of our fate we recoil from the obvious implications: we must save ourselves or perish.

THE APPROACHING VOID

Denied the prospect of survival through supernatural agency secular Western man has become psychically traumatised. Increasingly life seems meaningless and absurd, and the fear of death and nothingness lie just below the surface of everyday consciousness. Al-

though the structures and institutions of religious belief linger, their function is now largely sentimental and ceremonial. The once faithful have deserted to the post-psychedelic spiritual supermarket in a frantic search for new answers to the problem of death. One of the modern prophets of scientific immortalism, Alan Harrington, argues that the anticipation of death is now the most important single determining factor in human behaviour.²

The effects are subtle but unmistakable. By limiting our horizons to a single lifespan the approaching void adds an urgency and desperation to our projects. There is a noticeable quickening of pace, a sense of little time left. Sometimes this is seen as a response to the threat of mass nuclear death; but collective mortality is an abstraction: death is only comprehensible at the individual level where it is experienced. In any event, concern with the manner of our departure is dwarfed by the growing certainty that nothing follows it. Without the prospect of continuity there is a truncation of perspective and short-termism dominates in a hot-house world. Our concern for the future begins to disappear with the likelihood of our own extinction. And yet to avoid emotional collapse we are compelled to devise defensive strategies.

Cultural Notes No. 27

ISSN 0267-677X

ISBN 1 85637 059 3

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

“WE DIE BEFORE WE DIE”

A common response is to hide from our fate by seeking distractions which help to reduce our sense of separateness, in the words of the song, in “sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll”. We throw ourselves into work and play; into conformity; and by living other people’s systems and creeds. Through communal action and the organic warmth of the crowd we achieve a swamp-like collective immortality, but at a heavy price. By becoming quite literally “Mind-less”, the precious ego which dissolves in death is deliberately scrambled ahead of time. As Harrington puts it, we “die before we die” and “commit suicide on an instalment plan.”³

Tragically, by sacrificing the rational ego we destroy the only true key to our salvation.

Others rage at death. Faced with only a fleeting appearance in life’s arena desperate men seek ever more bizarre ways to erect monuments to their existence. The mass murderer, the assassin, the roof-top sniper and the lone hijacker are all saying: “Don’t forget me. Kill me if you must - but don’t forget me.”

Responses from more ‘sophisticated’ men appear profound but, since they leave our condition unchanged, are just as futile. Subtle posturing (“A man who is afraid of death has never really lived”); and word games (death does not really exist); sound plausible. But in the middle of the night, alone with the void, the clever fatalist wants what we all want: survival. Lacking the courage to rebel openly he is driven to rely on ever more diluted and indirect notions of continuity. The traditional *ersatz* form of “immortality”, being succeeded by our descendants, has now spawned a variant: survival through our genes. So Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* can argue that the sole function of the human body is as a vehicle to promote the survival of our DNA.⁴ The final development of this line of thought is that the body is, in the last analysis, pure Energy and therefore ultimately indestructible: death merely brings a change of form! Such sophistry may appeal to some in a bloodless sort of way, but it can only delay our assault on the one true enemy - personal oblivion.

PERSONAL PHYSICAL IMMORTALITY

Another group, professing a concern for dispassionate scientific enquiry, but harbouring a thinly disguised religious impulse, clings to the vestiges of Cartesian dualism. But as brain science increasingly uncovers the physical basis of behaviour and experience, they are in perpetual retreat, pursuing the ‘God of the Gaps’. Any evidence of ‘independent’ mental activity, however insubstantial, is seen as the last refuge of the soul and with it the hope of a disembodied immortality. Parapsychology provides a fertile source of examples. Arch-debunker James Randi, quoted by John Taylor in *Science and the Supernatural*,⁵ commenting on how a

band of PhDs in physics, chemistry and mathematics could reach convictions so contrary to their science, says: “Because I have seen what grown men will do to satisfy a deep need to believe.” And yet supposing the psi people are right; can we really conceive how an incorporeal immortality could be satisfying. All the evidence suggests that personality grows with the body and is inseparable from it. As Wittgenstein observed: “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.”⁶ What we want is personal physical immortality, nothing less. We need to survive as a psychosomatic unity with all our memories, thoughts, hopes and desires intact.

LIFE’S TERMINATION IN NOTHINGNESS

The great issues of death and survival were once the business of philosophers and theologians. But neither have been left untouched by the general spread of disbelief and both have retreated into narrower concerns. Academic philosophy has largely abandoned metaphysics in favour of arcane linguistic analysis, and the church has turned its attention to more mundane social and ecumenical matters. Death now seems something to be either ignored or accepted as the great given. In any event philosophy, according to Montaigne,⁷ consists in learning how to die. So Alan Harrington argues that precisely because it teaches accomodation to death, philosophy’s practical usefulness has come to an end: “The philosophy that accepts death must itself be considered dead.”⁸

Only the existentialists come closest to a true understanding of the fundamental significance of death. Those writing as atheists - commonly and rightly seen as the purest representatives of the school - recognise the central paradox: that the necessary freedom entailed by the absence of god is negated by life’s termination in nothingness. So Heidegger argues that to live authentically we must face squarely and constantly the boundary set by death and accept the anxiety that this brings. Sartre’s doctrine of “bad faith” performs a similar function, uncovering our strategies of self-deception, and attempts to avoid a personal response to death. For example by seeking significance for ourselves as part of some deified abstraction like ‘Mankind’, ‘Humanity’ or ‘Nature’, rather than accept that we alone must decide the meaning of our life and death. Camus, protests against the “incompleteness of human life, expressed by death” rejects despair and calls for rebellion against the implicit consequences of extinction: “If nothing lasts then nothing is justified.”⁹

Although the existentialists offered a particularly clear-eyed analysis they could in the end advocate only a kind of stoical acceptance of our condition; not shirking the anxiety it entails but seemingly lacking the means to challenge it. Even Camus’ call for rebellion, although admirable, is ultimately impotent. Perhaps the Existentialists were trapped in a transitional phase -

science had undermined the religious worldview but not yet begun to offer its own solutions.

WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF PRACTICAL SPECULATION

If Camus is right and death is the real enemy then it is not life after death that we want but the end of death itself, at least as an inevitable consequence of being born. Who then will take up the challenge against the conventional wisdom? Most ‘serious’ thinkers, although driven by the same emotional imperatives as the rest of us, fight shy of any public discussion of the topic, other than in mocking tones. So we see, for example, occasional coverage of the cryonics and life extension movements portrayed very much in ‘flat earth’ terms. A mainstream scientist who strays into these areas is quickly marginalised as an eccentric by bemused colleagues. As Thomas Kuhn pointed out, science is far from the purely rational and systematic process it pretends to be.¹⁰

Fortunately a small but growing band of heretics - fringe scientists and speculative writers - are challenging the current paradigms, and providing a platform for a legitimate discussion of the field. They argue with increasing confidence that science and technology can deliver what religion once promised; the age-old dreams of immortality may not have been wrong but they depended more on faith than fact. Scientific progress has now begun to allow personal immortality at least to be brought within the bounds of practical speculation.

Science fiction, in keeping with its revolutionary - paradigm shattering - function, has long provided a test-bed for exploring scientific responses to the problem of death. Immortality and extreme longevity are recurrent motifs in SF, which has explored both the mechanical aspects and also the social and psychological implications. SF editor and critic Peter Nicholls, surveying the field, noted that “in some stories immortality is the beginning of limitless opportunity, in others it represents the ultimate stagnation and the end of innovation and change.”¹¹ But there is a general recognition that such themes exert a continuing power, typifying the Promethean spirit which is the essence of the genre. Although sometimes criticised as “escapist”, SF may in fact be helping to prepare the ground for a quite literal escape from death.

“IN THIS REALM WE ARE KINGS”

Polymath writer and neo-existentialist philosopher Colin Wilson¹² has always shown a strong interest in the topic. His strongly optimistic view of man’s potential to evolve to God-like status through consciousness expansion foresees a greatly increased lifespan as a consequence. He has acknowledged that in his novel *Philosophers Stone* he was trying to write, like his mentor Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*, a “parable of lon-

gevity”.¹³ Shaw can tolerate no limit to human possibility. He rejects religious concepts of imperfectibility and predestination (as well as the scientific concept of biological determinism). Wilson is similarly motivated, but in a survey of his novels, writer Nicolas Tredell¹⁴ notes an important difference in the attitudes of the two men. For Shaw, longer life produces greater consciousness; for Wilson greater consciousness yields longer life. So for Wilson longevity in itself is a legitimate aim, which he suggests will be achieved by an act of will. Both he and Shaw seem to agree that man somehow chooses death, often through lack of an overall purpose, and a willingness to accept a passive life at the ‘animal’ level. Wilson argues that this is reversible when men develop a sense of evolutionary purpose. In support of this he even asserts that philosophers, scientists and mathematicians as a group are more long-lived than poets, artist and musicians.

Alan Harrington, author of *The Immortalist* - a key philosophical treatise for the life extension movement - is a spiritual ally of Shaw, Wilson and the existentialists. Like them he rebels against all forms of determinism but takes this rejection to its logical conclusion: “Death is an imposition on the human race and no longer acceptable.”¹⁵ His project is twofold: first to strip away the protective myths and psychological strategies we use to avoid the central fact of existence: that we die meaninglessly and disappear into the blackness. Second: to encourage us to believe that through science we not only can, but must, construct our own divinity. Applauding the future of Unnatural Man Harrington quotes Bertrand Russell with approval:

“We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in the world of value Nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than Nature ... In this realm we are kings and we debase our kingship if we bow down to nature.”¹⁶

A CURE FOR THE DISEASE OF DEATH

In a practical sense, although unannounced as such, the road towards immortality has already begun. Medical technology continues to stretch our understanding of clinical death to the point where there is no longer a universally agreed definition of what the term means. Multiple organ transplants promise to replace more and more of our bodies with artificial equipment, offering the possibility of an almost indefinite postponement of death.

Through genetic engineering, man for the first time has the means consciously to influence biological evolution. So if various organisms have differing ‘natural’ lifespans governed significantly by genetic factors, then different or modified genes might permit longer life. It follows that if, as some surmise, aging is due to an accumulation of mistakes in the replication of DNA, then in theory at least new healthy material could be inserted into genetically defective cells.

Many healthy individuals are claiming benefit from life extending therapies aimed at slowing down and even reversing the aging process. Diet, exercise and the avoidance of some obviously damaging lifestyle practices, all play a part. Support is coming from the science of gerontology with nutrition appearing particularly important. Roy L. Walford,¹⁷ a pathology professor at UCLA, and his colleagues have shown that by severely limiting the caloric intake of rats, significant increases in life-span were achieved. Walford believes a similar approach could be applied to human beings, and follows such a regime himself.

The mental influence on health is well attested. And as far as aging specifically is concerned, there also appears to be a strong cultural component at work. Social gerontologists note that age is not just physical, but also social. People are expected to behave in certain ways appropriate to their age, but most of the expected behaviour is not related to any biological process and shows great variation across societies and periods of history. Labelling an individual as 'elderly' or a 'senior citizen', if incorporated into his self image, may produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. The expected decline in performance and health duly appears seeming to confirm the original description. David Lewis, in his book *Life Unlimited*,¹⁸ sees gold watch presentations and other retirement rituals as the Western equivalent of Aboriginal and voodoo death curses. Where such symbolism is deeply embedded in a culture its effect on physical and mental health can be profound. To see aging, at least in part, as a social construct is to begin to bring it under our control.

So the battle to conquer aging and death is underway, albeit in a fragmented and uneven fashion. Sober gerontologists in respectable institutions are making solid if unspectacular progress, and are at one with the movement's radical wing, the proponents of cryonics and suspended animation, and those who speculate about the mechanical storage of human personalities: "electronic soul". All are ultimately engaged in the same project although, with no consensus yet on the causes of aging, the field lacks a unifying principle, and as Harrington observes, awaits its Einstein.¹⁹

Perhaps before science will respond more fully to the challenge we must, as Lyall Watson argues,²⁰ break the rigid cultural linkage between death and permanency by regarding death simply as a disease and therefore temporary, and sometimes curable. Once this paradigm shift has been achieved it will be no more "unnatural" to seek a cure for aging and death than for illness.

TURNING INTO GODS

We know we must do it and that the effect will be profound. Jonathan Schell, in *The Fate of the Earth*,²¹ although discussing mankind as a whole, nevertheless echoes our project: "By acting to save the species, and

repopulating the future, we break out of the cramped, claustrophobic isolation of a doomed present, and open a path to the greater space." With the creation of an open-ended future for individual men, we allow more space for reflection and wisdom. Shaw saw this in *Methuselah* and Walford believes that a world with an active population of 200-year-olds would not only be wiser but morally better - saner, more in control of human passions.

There is little doubt that the heretics are gaining ground and that we will grow up and seek immortality in the only way possible. It will be science, intellect and analysis that will be our salvation - not mysticism. In Harrington's words: "We can only engineer our freedom from death not pray for it ... having invented the gods we can turn into them."²²

NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *The Rebel (L'Homme Revolte)*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962, p. 30.
2. Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist*, Sphere Books Ltd., London, 1979.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 11, p. 129.
4. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976.
5. John Taylor, *Science and the Supernatural*, Granada Publishing Ltd., London, 1981, p. 171.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1968, Part 11 (iv), p. 178.
7. Michel de Montaigne, quoted in Peter Burke, *Montaigne*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 66.
8. Harrington, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
9. Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
10. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1970.
11. Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, Granada Publishing Ltd., London, 1981, p. 307.
12. Like many of Colin Wilson's ideas, his views of longevity and immortality tend to be repeated frequently in his prolific writings. In the present context, see particularly *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., London, 1969, p. 259 and 294.
13. George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1939.
14. Nicolas Tredell, *The Novels of Colin Wilson*, Vision Press Ltd., London, 1982.
15. Harrington, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
17. *The Mail on Sunday*, "The Birth of Bionic Man", April 15, 1984. A book length elaboration of Walford's vision is *Maximum Life Span*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1983.
18. David Lewis, *Life Unlimited: Maximum Performance After 40*, Methuen, London, 1987.
19. Harrington, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
20. Lyall Watson, *The Romeo Error*, Coronet Books (Hodder & Stoughton), London, 1976, p. 47.
21. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, Pan Books, London, 1982, p. 172.
22. Harrington, *op. cit.*, p. 21, p. 203.