

# Breaking the Trance? Enabling Dissenting Views on Immortalism

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From ancient stories, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, to modern snake oil merchants and science fiction enthusiasts, humans have long dreamt of overcoming death, or at least putting it off for a few years.<sup>1</sup> Recent breakthroughs in the understanding of aging have led some to believe that aging can be dramatically slowed, and researchers, such as Cambridge-based Aubrey de Grey, are suggesting that it could be reversed or postponed indefinitely, allowing humans to live for up to several thousand years.<sup>2</sup>

These optimists have spawned a movement of like-minded life extension enthusiasts who call themselves immortalists. The immortalist community is growing steadily as anti-aging breakthroughs and commentary from Aubrey de Grey and other leaders makes headlines in the mainstream press. In de Grey's opinion, people are "beginning to realize that the certainty that aging has always existed and been inevitable is becoming more and more fragile."<sup>3</sup>

Immortalists are working hard to spread the life extension meme and involve more people in the project. Their goal is to elicit support of the mainstream scientific community and close the massive gap between de Grey's predictions of 5000 year lifespans and the more conservative 125-150 year estimates of most biogerontologists.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps their most promising tool in this respect is The Methuselah Mouse Prize, which offers cash bounties for various life extension milestones reached during research on mice. The current prize is valued at well over \$2.5 million USD, and will be awarded to a researcher who is able to double the remaining lifespan of a middle-aged mouse which received no prior treatments.<sup>5</sup> It is hoped that seeing results like this in a mouse, a photogenic and media-friendly mammal genetically similar to humans, will attract massive media and

research attention and launch what has been called a "crash program" in life extension research.<sup>6</sup>

De Grey suggests most people have a "deep-seated ambivalence" toward death and aging. He argues this is a coping strategy that allows us to deal with the eventuality of death. We know we will die someday but accept that eventuality as a natural, necessary and even desirable occurrence. This leads to a "sort of trance-state, mutually induced, mutually maintained," that keeps us from worrying about death, but also keeps us from realizing we may finally be able to do something about it. De Grey and other immortalists feel they are the ones who have broken out of the trance, and everyone else holds humanity back.<sup>7</sup>

Sergie Moscovici's theory of social representations provides a useful lens for examination of the understanding of life extension technology that has developed within the immortalist community. Moscovici suggests that even the most radically new ideas do not require completely new ways of thinking. When developing an understanding of new things, people draw from a vast body of culture and experience. These old notions and beliefs, ranging from common expressions to mythological tales, are assembled into what appears to be a new idea.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to remember that subjects are not limited to one representation. Different social groups can develop their own representations of the same thing, and often the alternate representations are not compatible with one another. In the case of life extension, the immortalists' view is countered by that of groups such as the President's Council on Bioethics which has released working papers on life extension. The Council claims that much of the pleasure of life is



derived from our knowledge that our lives are limited. By extending our lives, they argue, we could lose much of the pleasure of being alive.<sup>9</sup> Active opposition to the technologies immortalists hope for is emerging in certain areas. In November 2006, voters in Missouri will be presented with a “Constitutional Amendment Adding a New Article Pertaining to the Regulation of Cloning and Human Engineering Initiative.” The language of the amendment would ban human enhancement except in very limited cases, establishing any other form of human engineering as “a crime against humanity.”<sup>10</sup>

These representations of life extension – one portraying it as a tool to improve our lives, one as a menace that must be stopped to preserve our quality of life – require very different ways of thinking about the technology and life itself. Moscovici suggests that these opposing representations are formed when people bring very different priorities and backgrounds to their thought about new ideas.<sup>11</sup> With such diametrically opposing opinions, how can there be constructive debate on life extension technology?

While immortalists have discussed the numerous social questions raised by radical life extension, more than just enthusiasts should discuss the implications of such a potentially transformative technology. The belief in a pro-death trance has made it very difficult for immortalists to talk to outsiders about the incredible impact radical life extension could have.

In my research, I have looked at two faces of the immortalist movement. First, I interviewed Aubrey de Grey and attended his February 2005 lecture at the University of Calgary. De Grey represents the expert face of the immortalist movement. The second face is shown by the inner workings of the movement, observed through postings on the Immortality Institute Internet forum in March of 2005. Through an analysis of these sides of immortalist talk, it is possible to see their representations of life extension technologies and the extent to which competing representations have been excluded from debate.

In my analysis of these three sources, I borrow heavily from Norman Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach allows the interplay of semiotics and of other aspects of the practice of immortalists, such as imagery, location, and music.<sup>12</sup> CDA also allows me to take the role of a researcher/advocate, promoting in this case the active involvement of dissenters in the debate around life extension in an effort to confront the social issues surrounding the technology, which sometimes seem harder to answer than the technical ones.<sup>13</sup>

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Although the research is not yet complete, there are some areas of interest that have emerged. First, the immortalists’ views of religion are less than favorable. One comment on the ImmInst Internet forum suggested that opposition to life extension only comes from a “perverse Luddite culture of repressed puritans.”<sup>14</sup> Another area of potential conflict comes from the immortalists’ understanding of aging as a disease. To them, any life extension medicine is not a challenge to the natural order, but instead “is saving lives, and saving lives is good.”<sup>15</sup>

Some of these differences may be insurmountable. It is unlikely that diehard proponents or opponents of extending human lifespans will agree on a compromise position or change their minds completely. However, I do hope that some of the pressing and unsolved issues relating to the technology, such as overpopulation and universal accessibility, will receive more serious consideration than they have in the past. While the gulf between the positions may never be resolved, seeing the extent to which outsiders have been excluded from the debate may generate discussion within, and may encourage a search for allies in the political struggles to come. I look forward to presenting my results to the immortalist community and hearing their comments.

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For more information about immortalists and life extension technology, please visit Aubrey de Grey's website at <<http://www.sens.org>>, or the Immortality Institute at <<http://www.imminst.org>>. For any questions on my own research, please feel free to email me at: [gmcullen@gmail.com](mailto:gmcullen@gmail.com).

\* To protect confidentiality pinpoints have not been provided.

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3. *Ibid.*
4. Sherwin Nuland, "Do You Want To Live Forever?" (2005) 108:2 *Technology Review* 37, online: Tech-

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6. *Supra* note 2.
7. \* *Ibid.*; Internet Member Forum, Immortality Institute (March, 2005), online: Immortality Institute <<http://www.ImmInst.org>>.
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13. *Ibid.*
14. *Supra* note 7.
15. *Supra* note 2.

