



Brave New World of Immortality

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Link to the video: <https://lab.sapienship.co/brave-new-world-of-immortality/>

Transcript

Over the course of the last two centuries, the average human lifespan has more than doubled, stretching from just 29 years to 71 years. Much of this change came about because of improved sanitation and vaccines that eliminated the threat of many infectious diseases and lowered the infant mortality rate. But despite this increase in the average lifespan, the maximum age that humans can reach has remained relatively stable. But will it always stay that way, or will we one day live forever?

In this video, we'll look at the quest to defy death – from radical life extension to simulated minds. And we'll consider how attempting to live forever might transform human nature in the 21st century and beyond. This is A Brave New World of Immortality.

In the 1860s, the oldest known person was 101. Nowadays, the oldest age we know a person has managed to reach is 122. That's pretty impressive, but it's nothing compared to some other species. On the island of Saint Helena, in the South Atlantic Ocean, there's a giant tortoise named Jonathan who hatched from an egg back in 1832. Jonathan has lived for nearly 200 years – through the entire reign of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth the second, two world wars, and the rise and fall (...and rise...and fall...) of skinny jeans.

Is there any hope that humans might one day live as long as Jonathan? Some scientists certainly think so. A whole host of new experimental treatments aim to slow or reverse aging—to wind back the biological clock and increase human longevity. According to researchers, the first people who will live for several hundred years are already alive today. Some of this research takes a preventative approach by focusing on stopping the aging process in its tracks, using techniques, such as calorie restriction and dietary supplements, that prevent cells from breaking down. Other scientific endeavors are more remedial, and examine how damaged cells can be repaired. In 2005, one lab began giving old mice transfusions of blood from younger mice. Within a month, the muscles and organs of the old mice started to regenerate.

Scientists are racing to see if the same process might work in humans – but nobody knows whether the side-effects will include an aversion to daylight, garlic, and crucifixes!

For those who can't wait for experimental treatments, there's another ticket to immortality. It's called cryonics, and it

involves freezing a human body in extremely low temperatures soon after death. The idea is that at some point in the future, when technology has advanced enough, it will be possible to revive these bodies. This process has never been successfully tested, and many doubt that it will work at all. But there are several companies out there that—in exchange for a big pile of cash—will happily keep your body on ice for centuries (or, at least, for as long as they can pay their energy bills).

And what if you don't fancy coming back to life after centuries of subzero temperatures? If you'd prefer a different route to immortality, you might just be in luck. Advances in neuroscience could soon let us create detailed digital brain scans, that might simulate someone's consciousness – even after they have died.

Apart from sounding like total science fiction, the prospect of this kind of digital immortality raises lots of philosophical questions. Does it really count as immortality if a simulated version of me lives on after I die? Some people might understandably say no. But others might point out that human beings change all the time anyway. Our personalities, and our likes and dislikes can change unrecognizably over the course of a lifetime. Maybe the transition to a virtual lifeform would be just one more twist in our life story?

Some companies are already using artificial intelligence to help people create a digital avatar or a chatbot that will mimic their personality and speak with their loved ones after they die. As machine learning improves and as people leave more and more traces of themselves in cyberspace, this kind of digital afterlife will only become more common and sophisticated. And it's not such an outlandish idea: in many parts of the world, people participate in ritual communication with their ancestors as part of religious life, and some even believe that this is how religions started. Historically, people have sought different ways to live forever – In ancient Greece, warriors were motivated to fight courageously, hoping that their exploits would become legends after they died. This would give them a form of immortality. Today, all it takes is enough data to keep a digital version of ourselves alive—no grand gestures required. Each new technological promise of immortality seems to offer us something that was previously considered a miracle – Eternal life. Or at the very least, a much longer life.

Of course, death is a sensitive topic, and not everyone supports attempts to escape it. For some philosophers, the very fact that life is finite is what makes it precious and gives it meaning. Others say that it is simply human nature to push at boundaries, and that death is just another problem to be solved. With a longer lifespan, we might actually get around to reading all those philosophy books... But if we're honest with ourselves, we'd probably rather spend the extra years scrolling through social media.

And anyway, what would happen if we did live forever, or even to, say, 150? That would cause a huge rise in population - could planet Earth sustain so many people? What about retirement? Would we have to work until we're 100? Not to mention the widening gap between people who could afford life extension treatments, and the unprivileged who'd be left to face the march of time. These are all questions we should consider before taking a longevity pill. So, do you want to live forever?

Questions for reflection and discussion

The following questions can be used for a group activity (in a classroom or otherwise) or for personal reflection after watching the video.

1. If it were an option, would you like to live forever?
2. What would be the pros and cons of living forever? What would be the implications on politics, employment and the environment?
3. If cryonics were possible one day, would you ever consider having your body frozen after you die, for possible revival in the future?
4. How about other longevity treatments? Would you pursue anti-aging medical treatments that could add more years to your lifespan?
5. Do you think it will be possible one day to upload people's minds to computers? And if so, do you think this "digital clone" would be the same person?
6. Would you consider uploading your mind to a computer and leave your body behind, if it were possible?
7. Would you like to have a chat-bot or actual AI robot that could mimic a loved one that had passed? If a company promised to create a robot that looked, behaved and talked exactly like someone you loved but who had passed away, would you order one?