

Killing Death / Sharing Life

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ABSTRACT: It has been claimed, most emphatically by transhumanists, that individual death is the greatest evil and that we therefore need to do everything we can to defeat the disease of human senescence and mortality. In other words, we need to kill death. I have argued elsewhere that we actually benefit from death and that death is, all things considered, not an evil at all. However, in this paper, I am not disputing the claim that death is an evil. Instead, I suggest that it can only be an evil for us if we understand our existence as separate from all other existence, which is by no means inevitable. The independent, autonomous self whose annihilation we fear is the product of a particular self-conception, a particular way of seeing ourselves in relation to others. There is an alternative. If we understand our own lives as prolonged and extended in the life that surrounds us, then our own individual death loses its significance. When life is shared and being understood as shared, then there is no need to kill death.

KEYWORDS: Death, Ageing, Life Extension, Temporal Immortality, Transhumanism, Autonomy.

Once upon a time, the planet was tyrannized by a giant dragon. The dragon stood taller than the largest cathedral, and it was covered with thick black scales. Its red eyes glowed with hate, and from its terrible jaws flowed an incessant stream of evil-smelling yellowish-green slime. It demanded from humankind a blood-curdling tribute: to satisfy its enormous appetite, ten thousand men and women had to be delivered every evening at the onset of dark to the foot of the mountain where the dragon-tyrant lived. Sometimes the dragon would devour these unfortunate souls upon arrival; sometimes again it would lock them up in the mountain where they would wither away for months or years before eventually being consumed.

Thus begins the transhumanist Nick Bostrom's *Fable of the Dragon Tyrant* (Bostrom 2005: 273). It ends, naturally, with the dragon's death. After centuries of acceptance, centuries of hesitation and centuries of cowardly sugar-coating supported by the empty rhetoric of those who think the dragon is not so bad after all, the people on that planet finally find the means and the

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courage to attack the evil scourge that has made their lives miserable for so long, and they kill the dragon. The people are jubilant: now, finally, they can live their lives without fear, the only regret being that they did not do it earlier. So many lives wasted, for no good reason.

The dragon does of course represent death, or more precisely human senescence: the fact that we all age, that we cannot (as yet) halt the biological processes that eventually, inevitably, will end our existence. We will all die of old age if nothing else kills us before we reach it. We may die of other causes, but ageing *condemns* us to death. Bostrom's fable is intended to rouse us from our complacency, to persuade us that there is no good reason to accept this fate. Just as there is nothing good about the dragon, there is nothing good about death and ageing (understood as a slow progression towards death) either. It is simply evil. And while for a long time there was nothing really we could do about it, this is no longer the case. We already have a fairly good understanding of why we age, and it looks like it is only a matter of time before we finally figure out how to stop (and possibly reverse) the ageing process (or more precisely processes). However, we have no time to lose because the longer we wait the more people will die. So we need to pull our resources together and figure it out *now*. No more excuses, Bostrom's fable tells us: let us do it, let us kill death.

Other radical life extensionists such as Max More (1990), Aubrey de Grey (2007), or John Harris (2007) fully agree with Bostrom's assessment of the situation. They all believe, and encourage us to believe, that death is "the greatest evil," and ageing, because it inevitably leads to death, the worst disease. Max More even argues that as long as we have to die it is not possible for us to live a meaningful life. Mortal life is per definition meaningless because there is no point really in trying to achieve anything if we are all going to die anyway. Only the possibility of "boundless expansion" of the self into an unlimited future can make our lives truly meaningful. Fighting and eventually killing death must therefore be our priority. Everything else can wait. "Death is a malfunction of the human experience", says Zoltan Istvan (who currently travels the United States in his Immortality Bus as the presidential candidate of the Transhumanist Party): "It's a reversible error, a transitory cloak of emptiness, a curable disease — a highly curable disease if dealt with properly" (Istvan 2013: 271). Various companies are already working hard on it. In 2013 Google announced a new company, *Calico* (California Life Company) Labs, whose CEO is the biochemist and biotech manager Arthur Levinson. *Calico's* mission "is to harness advanced technologies to increase our understanding of the biology that controls lifespan." (<http://www.calicolabs.com/>) They are now collaborating with the *Broad Institute* of MIT and Harvard and with QB3 (the University of California's *Institute for Quantitative Biosciences*) to advance the understanding

of age-related diseases and longevity. But the goal is not merely theoretical, but primarily practical: to combat ageing and save us from the plight of death. Other companies pursue a different, more unusual path to achieve the same objective. Thus Australian startup company *Humai* (Human Resurrection through Artificial Intelligence) with its CEO Josh Bocanegra aspires “to reinvent the afterlife”: “We want to bring you back to life after you die. We’re using artificial intelligence and nanotechnology to store data of conversational styles, behavioural patterns, thought processes and information about how your body functions from the inside-out. This data will be coded into multiple sensor technologies, which will be built into an artificial body with the brain of a deceased human.” (<http://humaitech.com/>) If we cannot keep people alive, then we shall do our best to raise them from the dead¹. This is to be achieved by cryoconserving the brains of the freshly deceased and then constructing an artificial body to house the brain, which can then (it is hoped) be reanimated.

Projects such as these are motivated by a moral imperative that transhumanists believe follows from the fact that death is wrong, something that clearly *ought not to be*. “In the future”, writes Collin Duncan (2015), “death simply won’t be a choice or a technologically eliminated disease. It will be fundamentally, morally wrong at a very deep level. To allow death will be to enable it, much as we see passively handing someone a gun to self-annihilate as assisted suicide today.” Teaching children to believe in an afterlife and accept death will be seen as tantamount to child abuse, and rightly so. A political reorientation is urgently recommended (“The proliferation of anti-AI talk needs to stop. The advances of neo-ludditism upon the technocratic future need to be rejected. This isn’t an alternative. This isn’t an option. This is an imperative.”), and a supposedly purely rational utilitarian reasoning is employed to derive the desired result: “Transhumanism produces an infinite hedonic score at an infinite magnitude higher than the alternative to the greatest number of individuals (death vs non-death).” Therefore, Duncan argues, human life *must* be upheld “at all costs”. In pursuit of this goal, the Australian branch of *humanity plus* just (in January 2016) launched a petition “to deem ageing as a disease”, which we are encouraged to sign before it is sent to “governments around the world”².

Now if ageing is indeed a disease, then it is clearly by far the worst disease ever. Not only has it the highest possible fatality rate, namely 100% (so that if you have it, you will certainly die), but it is also a disease that

1. The idea of bringing back the dead through technology is not entirely new. It was already promoted more than a century ago by the Russian proto-transhumanist Nicolai Fedorovich (Burdett 2011: 25–28).

2. <http://www.transhumanism.com.au/petition>.

everyone suffers from right from the moment they are born (so *everyone* will die from it). There are other terrible diseases out there, but at least you have a good chance to avoid them. From this one, there is no escape.

But is death, or the certainty of it, really the greatest evil? I have argued elsewhere (Hauskeller 2011) that death is not really an evil at all. While our own death is not bad for us (from which it does not follow that we cannot be harmed by having our life taken away from us), the death of others is actually good for us, so that on the whole we benefit from our mortality (the fact that everyone will die sooner or later). Death, as a basic fact of life, is nothing to be feared, but, on the whole, something to be welcomed. We ourselves only exist because of the death of others. Our lives have been made possible by the death of others, just as our death will make other lives possible. However, since this is not the point I wish to make in this paper, I am not going to reiterate the arguments for these claims here. Instead, I want to propose a different way of looking at life and death altogether.

Davide Sisto (2014) has convincingly argued that death is part of the very fabric of life. It is an agent of change and renewal, deeply embedded in our biology, and it is therefore misleading to see death as the opposite of life, which can then be removed from the process of life without thereby destroying what life actually is. “Death begins before death and life goes on after life.” (Sisto 2014: 45) Yet we can easily concede this point and still insist that *real* death, the kind of death that we fear and wish to overcome, is something different entirely, namely the total annihilation of the individual self, and that it provides little consolation that life goes on after life because *that* life is not really *my* life; it is somebody else’s life. But is it? Is the distinction between my life and your life really as clear-cut as it appears to us? Is it a fact of nature that your life is not my life and my life not your life? Or is it a question of how we *look* at ourselves in relation to others, how we understand our own life in relation to life as a whole? When we decry death as the greatest evil, we are actually not thinking about the end of all things or the end of life as such; we are thinking about the end of our personal life, the end of this particular individual self, not death in general, but, ultimately, *my* death (or for you, *your* death). We are not so much concerned about the fact that people have to die, but about the fact that *we* (or more precisely, *I*) have to die. But life (we suppose) goes on without us. Life goes on after life. We do not doubt that, at least not on a theoretical level, but it doesn’t help to calm our fear because we conceive of ourselves as separated by an ontological gulf from all other life.

It is the belief that there really is such a separation that lets us cling to our individual life as long as possible and that explains and justifies the way medicine is largely practiced today: as a determined effort to prolong life as long as possible, no matter what the costs. If there is a chance that a medical

intervention can help us live only three months longer, even if we have to spend those three months alone in a hospital or a nursing home, away from those we care about and “cut off from all things that matter to us in life” (Gawande 2014: 9), it is considered worth it, because nothing can be more important than being alive as long as we can. We are no longer allowed to die at home and in peace. We are no longer allowed to become and be old or ill or disabled and at the same time continue to live our lives in the midst of others, in mutual support and appreciation, not only because it is too demanding for those who live with us and who have to take care of us, but also because it is simply too risky. It might kill us. Safety has priority here. Continuing to share our life with others, and to take part in their lives, has not.

Yet while, as a society, we work on the assumption that our individual death is the worst that can happen to us so that we have (or the medical profession does) a moral duty to postpone it as much as we can, we on the other hand treat the elderly and severely disabled as if they were already as good as dead, as if they had already lost what makes life worth living in the first place, as if they had no business anymore to hang around and occupy space in the world of the living. So off they go to hospitals and other institutions where they can be properly taken care of and where they can then safely continue the rest of their lives for as long as possible while at the same time being cut off from anything to live for, anything that may still make their lives meaningful and worth living. As the American surgeon Atul Gawande in his latest book, *Being Mortal*, observes, “it seems we’ve succumbed to a belief that, once you lose your physical independence, a life of worth and freedom is simply not possible” (Gawande 2014: 75).

There is not really a contradiction between those two attitudes: the prolongation of individual life at all costs and the (attitudinal and practical) devaluation of the life of those with diminished capacities. Both are grounded in what Gawande calls the “veneration of the independent self” (Gawande 2014: 22) When we get old, we increasingly become weaker and frailer, and thus gradually lose our independence. And because the increasing dependency of the old on other people also infringes upon the autonomy of those who they become dependent on, we cart them off to nursing homes where they no longer stand in the way of our own treasured self-realization. Dependency is widely considered bad because it undermines our self-conception as an autonomous subject, just as death is considered bad because it terminates our existence as such a subject.

Ironically, though, the independent, autonomous self that we fancy ourselves to be and that, in our modern society, we aspire to develop and protect as much as we can, does not really seem worth protecting if that is all we have got in our life. If nothing matters to us but our own individual

well-being and survival, or if nothing matters as much as that, then there is, frankly, not much that matters, and, for most people, it is actually too little to live on. When the transhumanist Max More claims that only a life of “boundless expansion” is ultimately meaningful and worth living, he is in fact partly right. The error consists in seeking this boundless expansion diachronically in the unlimited prolongation of the existence of the atomic self, instead of synchronically in the *enlargement* of that self, in such a way that it includes more than just itself. The individual self, when perceived as being isolated from the rest of the world, as ontologically self-sufficient, has nothing but itself to hold on to. The consequence is that, for it, life does *not* go on after life. The end of the self becomes tantamount to the end of the world: it is the worst possible outcome. However, we can also see our own life as being embedded and extended in the life that we share with others. Then what I am is not limited by the boundaries of my subjective consciousness and my body, but extends beyond it. This not only gives meaning to our lives, but it also makes our own death appear less important to ourselves. As Gawande points out with reference to Josiah Royce’s philosophy of loyalty: “The only way death is not meaningless is to see yourself as part of something greater: a family, a community, a society. If you don’t, mortality is only a horror.” (Gawande 2014: 127) The more we identify with the life that surrounds us and the more we find value in the world rather than ourselves, the less of a horror our own death becomes. It becomes a matter of little concern because our death is no longer the death of everything that matters. It is after all, just I who dies, the individual self that I have learned to identify myself with first and foremost, but this I is not everything I am. To put it paradoxically, I am, or can be, more than just me.

That is why I have always been intrigued by the philosophy of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, especially his philosophy of death, which he develops in paragraph 54 of the first volume of his masterwork *The World as Will and Presentation*, published in 1819³. I find myself very much inclined to believe that what Schopenhauer argues here must be true: that we don’t die, that death is not real, that it is, ultimately, just an illusion. For Schopenhauer this conclusion follows logically from his metaphysical premises, according to which the world we know and we live in is merely an appearance. What we perceive is not the world as it is, but rather what our cognitive apparatus makes of it. It is a representation. Of what? Of the will, which is the true nature of all things, ourselves included. The world is the way the will appears to itself. If we imagine the will to be looking

3. As well as, in a more comprehensive form, in chapter 41 of the second volume (published 25 years later, in 1844).

into a mirror, then the image reflected would be the world. And we are that will, just as everything else is. “Since will is the thing in itself”, writes Schopenhauer (2008: 326),

the inner substance of the world, that which is essential to it, while life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will, the latter will accompany will as inseparably as its shadow accompanies a body; and if will exists, so too life, the world will exist. To the will for life, life is thus certain, and so long as we are filled with the will for life, we cannot be concerned for our existence, not even at the sight of our death.

By distinguishing the will, which is the only really real thing, from its representation, which is a mere shadow, Schopenhauer, drawing very much on Kant’s transcendental philosophy, manages to separate reality from its forms of appearance, which include causality, space, and most importantly, time. So in other words, time is an illusion. But if time is an illusion, then change must also be one. And if change is an illusion, then death is too. We don’t die. It just looks (to others) as if we did.

Now if we had to accept Schopenhauer’s metaphysics and its corollary, that time is not real, to appreciate his argument for what he calls “temporal immortality”, then it would perhaps be of little interest to anyone. It is just too difficult to believe that time does not exist. I doubt that it even makes sense to claim that. However, it seems to me that Schopenhauer’s argument for temporal immortality does not require us to believe in the non-existence of time. It is in fact very complex and draws on many different sources and reflections. Much of it is based on peculiarities of the way we experience life and death. For one thing, although we don’t really, on a theoretical level, doubt that we, too, will one day have to die, we are also, deep down, convinced of our own personal immortality. It is just impossible to imagine that one day we could have ceased to exist, that the world will continue to be, but we will no longer be in it. How can there be a world if we are not there to perceive it? From our perspective it will be as if the world had never existed. It will end when we end. So if the world (the object) continues to exist (as we suppose), then we (the subject) must too.

The main point, though, is this: our individual existence is linked to our consciousness. This *particular* consciousness (with its specific attitudes, beliefs, and memories) can cease to exist, but that is only part of what we are, and perhaps a very superficial part. What makes us alive in the first place is not subjective consciousness, but something deeper and less fleeting: a material urge, a force that pervades physical nature, an *élan vital* (as the French philosopher Henri Bergson called it) or will to live (as Schopenhauer calls it). This force of nature, this will, continues to exist when “we” die, and in fact it does already exist in many other forms and ways. This force is

active in me, as it is active in you and every other living creature. And to the extent that each of us ultimately *is* this force, this will to live, we always exist not only in this particular form, which we call our individual self, but also in everything else. When you look into the world with your eyes, perceive it with your senses, live in it with your body and your mind, then I look and perceive and live with you, because you are only another version of myself, just as I am only another version of yourself. Accordingly, when I die I will live on in you, and when you die, you will live on in me. In any case, the presence cannot be lost: “Above all, we must distinctly recognize that the form pertaining to will’s phenomenon, thus the form of life or reality, is only the present, not future nor past: these exist only in concepts, exist only in the context of cognizance so far as it follows the Principle of Sufficient Ground. No human being has lived in the past, and none will ever live in the future; rather the present alone is the form pertaining to all life, but it is also its sure possession, which can never be torn from it. The present always exists, together with its content; both stand firm, without wavering, like the rainbow on the waterfall. For life is sure and certain for will, and the present for life.” (Schopenhauer 2008: 329)⁴

In his book *Death and the Afterlife* (2013), Samuel Scheffler speculates that the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction shortly after our own death (“doomsday”) would affect us more than the knowledge of our own mortality currently does. If we knew that all human life would disappear from the face of the earth 30 days after we die, then this would render much of what we do today meaningless. We would react with ennui and despair, which, Scheffler believes, shows “the limits of egoism” or in other words that we not only care for things that do not directly affect us (we won’t, after all, be there to experience the end of humanity), but also that we actually care more for what happens to humanity than for what happens to ourselves as individuals (in the sense that we find the idea of all human life coming to an end in the foreseeable future more disturbing and more destructive of life’s meaning than the idea of our own certain death).

I don’t want to go into the details of the argument here (which relies rather heavily on the plausibility of Scheffler’s prediction of certain reactions to hypothetical situations such as the doomsday scenario), nor the problems that it faces⁵. Suffice it to say that I find what I take to be the core of Scheffler’s “afterlife conjecture”, namely that we do care about the ongoing

4. For a more recent version of this argument see Zuboff 1990. Zuboff argues, without recourse to Schopenhauer, that your self and my self are in fact the same self, that, based on the logic of experience, there is in fact only one self.

5. For a precise analysis of the argument’s logical structure and a helpful discussion of some of the objections raised, see John Danaher’s blog post on the issue: <http://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/meaning-value-and-collective-afterlife.html>.

existence of humanity (what Scheffler calls the “collective afterlife”), rather persuasive. It may of course be difficult to predict how exactly we would react if we knew that the human world would definitely come to an end very soon after our death. Some people might despair, some might rediscover the value of human solidarity, some might feel licensed to live even more ruthlessly (freed of any concern for the well-being of future generations), some might remain largely unaffected and continue to enjoy their life, ignoring what they cannot change and what doesn’t directly affect them, and some might even positively welcome the eradication of human life as an opportunity for Mother Earth to heal her wounds or something to that effect. But I think whatever our reactions may be, it is pretty clear that few of us are entirely indifferent to the fate of humanity. We do care about the collective afterlife. The question is why.

Now it may be the case that when contemplating the doomsday scenario and feeling disturbed by it, we are actually suffering from a delusion that is similar to the one that Epicurus thought was responsible for our fear of death. Just as we may fear death mostly because we imagine ourselves being dead and somehow experiencing our own state of being dead (lying in our coffins, in the dark and cold, for all eternity), which of course we won’t, we may also fear doomsday because we imagine ourselves still being there when it occurs, and either being destroyed in the process or, perhaps even more disturbingly, being the sole survivor, the one who witnesses it all and is left all alone in an empty world. However, even though such a confusion may play a role here, I don’t think that is all there is to it. It seems to me that by emphasising the “limits of egoism” in the context of his afterlife conjecture, Scheffler really is on to something. We not only care for ourselves, for our loved ones, and perhaps for particular people that we happen to know. We also care for people in general. To a certain degree we tend to identify with humanity as a whole, tend to see ourselves in others. We tend to perceive humanity as a project that we all take part in.

At least that is how I feel, and since I have no reason to think that I am unique in this respect, I am assuming that many others share those feelings. When I look at my eight-year old son, I see myself in him, as I was when I was a boy, and it gives me comfort to think that he still has his whole life ahead of him, with all its opportunities, its rich fabric of experience, its joys and wonders. And although I am well aware that there will also be suffering, that there will be real losses and frustrations and disappointments, I cannot help feeling that on balance life is well worth living, an adventure well worth having, and that it is imperative that it continue, as Hans Jonas argued in his *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984). And it seems to me, when I look at my son, that in him I am getting another opportunity at life, that he will be living my life for me, that in him I will have a part in the future of the

world. Now this feeling is not restricted to my son or my children in general. I also have it, though perhaps less poignantly, when I see other children at play, or lovers embracing, people chatting and laughing, students engaging with new ideas, the old couple on our street walking along the road hand in hand, my dog chasing a ball, fully immersed in the sheer joy of running, of being alive. I identify with all of them, in the sense that I feel my own life extended in and through them. I feel that, in some way that I cannot fully understand (though Schopenhauer helps in this respect), they are me. Even my dog, or any other dog, or indeed any other animal. So perhaps it is not humanity alone that we feel connected with and in whose survival we take an interest. Perhaps the project of humanity is itself part of an even larger project, the project of life. And if we imagine another doomsday scenario, one in which not only humanity vanished from the face of the earth, but all living creatures, so that not only the history of humanity came to an end, but the history of life itself, then we may find this even more disconcerting, even more destructive of meaning than if it were only humanity that came to an end.

So why do we care about doomsday? I think the reason is that we realize that with the extinction of humanity (or even more so life itself), we would die all over again, and this time for good. As long as life goes on after life, our own individual death is nothing to be feared. There is no need to kill death. What we need to learn instead, or to re-learn, is how to *share* life.

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