

# Tech titans want to conquer death – but do you really want to live forever?

May 7 2015, by Richard Gunderman

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Deadlines aren't a bad thing. Credit: Matt Gibson, CC BY-NC

A recent Washington Post [article](#) quotes Oracle founder Larry Ellison as saying that death makes him "very angry." In the same piece, eBay co-founder Peter Thiel calls death the "great enemy" of humankind. And Ellison and Thiel are not alone. Other tech titans including Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin are investing many millions of dollars in attempts to extend the human lifespan and perhaps even conquer death. Says Thiel: "The great unfinished task of the modern

world is to turn death from a fact of life into a problem to be solved."

While few people are eager to die, there are difficulties with treating [death](#) as a technical problem that calls for a technical solution.

For one thing, [immortality](#) is and clearly will remain forever beyond the reach of humanity. Every biological organism that has ever lived has been designed to grow old and die. This includes even the world's oldest organism, the 4,800-year old "Methuselah" bristlecone pine in the California White Mountains. Compared to every other living organism, an immortal one might not be "alive" in the same sense.

Human beings are the product of millions of years of evolution, and the scale of complexity is mind boggling.

For example, the average adult human being is composed of some 75 trillion cells. Tinkering with the genes and proteins of our cells may have consequences that we cannot even foresee, let alone control. Numerous visionary works of science fiction, beginning with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, have explored the risks of the attempt to "perfect" ourselves. But there are still deeper problems with the tech titans' quest for immortality.

The quest to conquer death also faces mental, psychological and even spiritual obstacles. One form of immortality envisioned by the tech titans is to store memories in computers, where they could presumably persist indefinitely.

But what would life be like – or would it be life in any recognizable sense at all – to exist as a collection of memories stored in a computer? So far as we know, to live means both to be in a body and to be a body, and there is little evidence that mind and body can be so neatly separated.

From a psychological point of view, the prospect of death may provide one of our most powerful impetuses to seize each day.

## **In an infinite life there is infinite time to waste**

My decades of experience as both a student and faculty member support Parkinson's Law, which says that the amount of time needed to complete a task will expand to fill the time available for its completion. So often it is the limits on our time, such as deadlines, that actually spur us to action.

If we faced no deadlines at all, and the time available to complete every task were infinite, it is quite possible that we would get nothing done.

The prospect of mortality can also bring out the best in us. Facing the end of existence gets us thinking about what kind of legacy we want to leave. It encourages us to live for purposes that transcend our own lives. It illuminates the true meaning of courage, the willingness to put not only our property or our reputation but our very lives on the line for the sake of something greater than our selves.

Before we presume to extend our lives indefinitely, perhaps we should first demonstrate that we know how to live each day to the fullest.

## **Mortality gives us courage**

Some of the greatest works of humankind, including the Bible and Homer's Iliad, brim with reminders that our days are numbered. The Book of Psalms says, "Teach us to number our days, that we might gain a heart of wisdom." In the Iliad, the warrior Sarpedon, son of Zeus, explains to his comrade why he chooses to remain and fight, rather than fleeing to safety:

*"Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle, would be able to live forever, ageless and immortal, so neither would I myself go on fighting nor would I urge you on. But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us in their thousands and that no man can turn aside or escape them, let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others."*

In the Iliad, only humans can display courage. The gods, who cannot die, lead lives that are, by comparison, rather vain and shallow. Their days are composed largely of petty squabbles and interpersonal intrigues of the sort that populate daytime television drama. Only the human beings, the ones who stand to lose everything, can choose what to stake their lives on. Unlike the gods, they can act with genuine courage – that is, beautifully and well. Perhaps it is only in grasping what we might lay down our lives for that we discern the true purpose of life.

Homer highlights fragility and mortality as keys to compassion. It is in acknowledging our own vulnerability that we become fully open to the suffering of others. So long as we see ourselves as invincible, untouched and untouchable by fortune's outrageous slings and arrows, we are liable to cut ourselves off from humanity – and not only the humanity of others, but our own, as well. This is perhaps Victor Frankenstein's downfall – that he forgets he is human and mistakes himself for a god. Our mortality is not an inconvenience that happens to have been bolted on to us, but an essential part of what makes us human.

Here lies perhaps the most far-reaching critique of the quest to conquer death. In supposing that, of all the human beings who ever strode the face of the earth, we are the ones who deserve never to die, we may be falling prey to some of our worst vices: self-absorption, fear and an unwillingness to grapple with some of life's most meaningful and illuminating challenges.

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