

Arguments against Life Extension and religious implications

Advancements in biotechnology have made it possible that life-extension technologies could turn into a reality. Life extensions can be perceived in different timeframes. While short-term life extension can be achieved through adopting a healthier diet and lifestyle or medical breakthroughs of smaller impact, this journal primarily explores the possibility of long-term life extension by a factor of a hundred to a thousand years. There is even a possibility that death is no longer inevitable and one can no longer die a “natural” death. In such a scenario, the line blurs between life extension and immortality. However, one may still die due to other means such as accidents, assassination or suicide. This journal explores two possible reasons against life extension.

Natural vs unnatural argument

One of the most commonly raised arguments is that Life Extension is *unnatural* and therefore bad or wrong. However, many medical interventions today can be said to be *unnatural* too. Examples include antibiotics, chemotherapy and even Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). When someone suffers from a cardiac arrest, which is *natural*, based on the premise above, there should not be intervention as it is *unnatural*. Here, we see how the *unnatural* argument falls apart quickly. Conversely, it can be shown that *natural* does not make something good. For example, many types of viruses and bacteria cause diseases in humans. These are natural, but it is obvious that they are not beneficial to us.

Some may draw a distinction and argue that CPR is a therapeutic use of enhancement technologies, while Life Extension is an augmentative use. The rationale is therapeutic use is acceptable, while augmentative use is not. However, we have seen from earlier journals and class discussions that Adderall, a drug used to treat ADHD (therapeutic use) can also be used for memory stimulants (augmentative use). Here, we revisit the concept of normality, where society's *normal* determines whether a technology is therapeutic or augmentative. The concept of normality, which is determined by science, environment, and social and cultural norms (as discussed in Journal 1), is a constantly evolving construct and cannot be solely relied upon to determine the ethical implications of technology.

Appeal to nature is the logical fallacy describing the *natural* argument. It follows this line of reasoning: “A thing is good because it is ‘natural’, or bad because it is ‘unnatural’” (Wikipedia contributors, 2023) Therefore the *natural vs unnatural* argument has very weak or outright false premises and cannot lead to an objection against life extension. In short, unnatural does not imply unethical behaviour.

Religions in a post life extension world

In a world where humans live for thousands of years or are even immortal, society would change drastically. The changes extend to every aspect of life - social, political, economic, familial relationships, religions and more. The concept of death is a core and recurring theme in many religions, and it serves as a fundamental aspect of their belief systems and practices. However, when death is no longer inevitable, people may believe they are superior or even *god*. Religions as we currently recognise may then cease to exist and will play a diminished role in society. However, it is worth noting that the change may not be as drastic as one imagines as the world is currently moving towards a less religious and more

secular society. The number of people with no religious affiliations has been increasing in Singapore, to 20 per cent in 2020. (Chew, 2021) The remainder of this journal discusses Buddhism's view on life extension at a high level.

Buddhism's view on life extension

In "A Buddhist Perspective On Human Enhancement and Extension of Human Lifespan", Hongladarom (2015) argued that Buddhism has "nothing in principle against human enhancement or lifespan-extending technology". A principal aspect of Buddhist teachings in the three various sects (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana) is the underlying motivation which determines the ethical value of an action. Following this line of reasoning, life extension by itself cannot be said to be good or bad, but it is ultimately the motive that determines its ethics.

Although Buddhism does not say if life extension is good or bad, I present my view on why I believe Buddhism would be in most cases unsupportive of life extension. A tenet of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. These are: 1. Life is suffering. 2. Suffering is caused by craving. 3. Suffering can have an end. 4. There is a path which leads to the end of suffering. (Brown, 2022) Another related point to the Four Noble Truths is Saṃsāra, which is the "suffering-laden, continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth, without beginning or end". (Wikipedia contributors, 2023a) It is generally considered unsatisfactory, and perpetuated by humans' cravings, attachments and desires. Thus, it can be observed that life is suffering, and the ultimate goal in Buddhism is to achieve Nirvana - to break out and end the cycle of suffering, the beginningless cycle of repeated rebirth, existence and death. There are two types of Nirvana, one attained and maintained during life and final nirvana, achieved on death, allowing one to escape the cycle of rebirth and death. In such a scenario, immortality seems to be at odds with final nirvana, since one can no longer die. Here, Buddhism would not be supportive of life extension.

However, one may point out that life extension allows one to spend more time to achieve Nirvana. This is true, and hence the first point raised about the ethics of an action is not based solely on the consequences, but on the underlying motivation. However, in most cases, a desire to enjoy life may be the primary motivating factor and will be considered not good. Altruistic motives are another reason why life extension can be viewed positively by Buddhism. In Chinese Buddhism (Mahayana), the idea that "becoming a bodhisattva is a more important goal for individuals than achieving nirvana." (Brown, 2022) Essentially, a bodhisattva will not enter final nirvana until all living beings are freed from suffering.

Conclusion

Two possible arguments against life extension were presented in this journal. The *natural* argument is an *Appeal to Nature* Fallacy and cannot be used to object to life extension. Life extensions may trigger seismic shifts in society and the future of religions, but the current trend towards irreligion in some places, including Singapore, suggests that such a reality may be possible with or without life-extension technology. Buddhism does not appear to judge whether life extension is good or bad by itself per se but relies on the motivation of life extension as a key factor. However, to truly eliminate suffering according to Buddhism, one should not strive for life extension or immortality, as the end goal is to achieve Nirvana and escape suffering and the cycle of rebirth. Thus, in most cases, Buddhism would not object to life extension but is unlikely to support it, especially if it hinders the end goal of Nirvana.

References

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