

Embodied Immortality

Philosophical and Religious Implications

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Abstract: In this article the author studies the possibility for embodied (physical) immortality and its philosophical and theological implications. The author pleads for a consciousness that is widened, deepened and renewed to cope with the technological advancements. Finally enhancement of life is advocated as the key criterion for sound scientific, technological and philosophical developments.

Keywords: Superhumans, consciousness, death, values, vision, meaning, eternal life, God of life

"Being born is not a crime; so why must it carry a sentence of death?"
(Ettinger 1964).

"Death is a disease; cure it!" (Ettinger 1964).

Introduction: Crises, Opportunities

It is with such challenging and provocative statements that the anti-ageing research marches forward.¹ Today's world, which has witnessed unprecedented technological growth, has experimented with the human body, with human life and is at the point of experimenting with human death too. What are the religious and philosophical implications?

This article is a modest attempt to relate the possibility of anti-ageing or embodied immortality to religion and philosophy. I do not affirm that embodied immortality is possible now. For the sake of the article I only assume that embodied immortality is plausible and then put forward its philosophical and religious challenges and implications. My goal is to show that embodied immortality is not the eternal life promised by religion. I also argue that embodied immor-

tality, if at all attainable, may be warmly welcomed by religion critically, creatively and constructively.

Terminological clarifications: By the term “anti-ageing” I assume the possibility that ageing can be stopped and even reversed. Further, when I speak of embodied immortality or physical immortality, what is suggested is that death may be either conquered or postponed indefinitely. “Age-reversing” guarantees the vitality of youth more or less in spite of the temporal progress. So, by embodied immortality is meant a sufficiently long life-span which borders on immortality. For instance, if the life-span of human beings can be prolonged to more than a few thousand years, we can assume that for our practical purpose they have attained embodied (or physical) immortality.

Since the topic is vast, I am forced to be selective in my approach. I will cover briefly two religious traditions (Christianity and Hinduism) and see how embodied immortality can be meaningfully responded to and accepted by both of these traditions.

1. Scientific Fact: Death a Matter of Fact

a. Death as a Natural Phenomenon

Phenomenologically speaking, just like everything that lives in nature, humans too are born, grow and die. What is specific to humans is that we are aware of it, particularly of our own death. Death, “the possibility of our impossibility” has disturbed us from primordial times. What is death? How is it related to life? Is there any life after death? The answers to these penetrating questions have been diverse. In 497 BC the Greek writer Sophocles maintained that death is the only thing from which man cannot flee (Kremer 1972: 4).

One of the predominant philosophical views is that death is natural. Either death is nothingness or it leads to nothingness. Beginning with Democritus of the Greek tradition and the Carvakas of the Indian tradition and, in our times, logical positivists and materialists, death is regarded as a natural process, following the law of matter (or more scientifically, the law of entropy). Thus, a famous historian could claim “death is the price paid by life for an enhance-

ment of the complexity of a organism's structure" (Arnold Toynbee quoted in Enright 1987: 3).

This sentiment is turned to a joyous one by "Seneca the Younger," the eclectic Roman philosopher (63-65 AD) who exhorted: "Let us go to our sleep with joy and gladness; let us say: 'I have lived; the course which Fortune set for me is finished;'² and if God is pleased to add another day, we should welcome it with glad hearts.... When a man has said: 'I have lived!' every morning he arises he receives a bonus" (Bolt 1998: 52). These scholars regard the *thanatos*, the death instinct as powerful as the eros, the life instinct. In fact, *thanatos* restores the higher organization to a simpler, pre-vital state.

b. The Possibility of the Impossibility of Dasein

Similar philosophical views on death are proposed by Martin Heidegger. The human way of existing is Dasein, "being-there," i.e., being there in an inseparable relationship with the world. Existence is potentiality-for-being. As potential (or possibility), human being is inherently incomplete. "If existence is definitive for Dasein's Being and if its essence is constituted in part by potentiality-for-Being, then, as long as Dasein exists, it must in each case, as such a potentiality, not yet be something" (1962: 276). Therefore, the basic constitution of Dasein is that there is constantly something still to be settled. Still more poignantly, Dasein's inherent incompleteness moves, not towards completeness, but towards death. The "end" of Being-in-the-world is death. This end, which belongs to the potentiality-for-Being – i.e., its very existence – limits and determines in every case whatever totality is possible for Dasein (1962: 276-277). Therefore, for human beings, to be alive is to be incomplete, and for one's life to have been completed would be to be dead. "As long as Dasein is as an entity, it has not yet reached its "wholeness." But if it gains "wholeness," this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the-world. Hence, Dasein's possibility of Being-a-whole must at the same time be a Being-unto-death. Therefore, the meaning of human existence is to be found within. Human life is realised not by ignoring mortality, but by taking the inevitability of death fully and frankly into account (Hick 1976: 97-101). Death therefore becomes the "possibility of the impossibility" of Dasein.

c. Natural Longing to Overcome Death

Death is natural. It is definite and certain. It is important for us to realize that the “survival instinct” is as natural as and more compelling than the “death instinct.” From our very beginnings, evident from the rudimentary wall paintings found in paleontological tombs in France, we human beings have been speculating on the meaning and implications of death.

Humans rebel against death, refuse to acknowledge it and seek to escape from it. The Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan is emphatic when he affirms: “Man is not an aggregate of chemical compounds. He is not a slot in the machine with predictable responses to outside stimulations. He is neither a puppet in the hands of fate nor a pawn in the cosmic chess, moved by the impersonal forces of Nature, Fate or Destiny. He is the master of his Fate, the captain of his Soul” (quoted in Rao n.d.: 194).

So the question before us is about death or the overcoming of death. We are in a bind. “The thought of death gives us the thrill of annihilation; that of Immortality gives us the thrill of endless duration. And, strange, in each case the result is identical. Anguish oppresses our heart, and we catch ourselves saying: No, this cannot be” (Mainage & Lelen 1930: 241).

We have seen that death is the normal pattern of nature. At the same time the longing to overcome death is also intrinsic to humans and to nature. So, the question is: is not the longing for the death of death also as natural as death itself?

2. Phenomenological Religion: Death a Matter for the Spirit

Faced with definite death, we rebel at the thought expressed by the poet William Blake

“I am an outcast –

I am left to the trampling foot and the spurning heel.”

When asked what the greatest wonder in the whole world was, the ancient Indian sage, King Yudhisthira replied: “That we see people dying all around us and never think that we too will die”

(Brahmaprana 2001: 337). To the natural and inevitable phenomenon of death, the human response has been one of rebellion or denial. We can claim that the typical human way of coping with death is a religious one. Religion tries not only to understand the phenomenon of death but also to transform it into a victory.

This view is strongly supported by the Indian guru Bhagavan Rajneesh and more coherently by the philosopher Cupitt: “Religion survives, surely, because the progressive weakening of religious institutions and religious thought does not alter the fact that at the deepest level religious needs and impulses are as great as ever ... We are still prompted to religious dread and longing by the thought of our own death, our own littleness, and the precariousness of human values in the face of Nature’s vast indifference. What immense epochs there were before us and will be after us, of which we know nothing and that know nothing of us” (1984: 32).³

Now, let us study how Christianity and Hinduism encounter the mystery of death from their diverse perspectives.

a. Christianity: Victory over Death

Unlike Judaism, which does not have an explicit theory of life after death,⁴ the Christian religion cannot be separated from its firm belief in the after-life. The cornerstone of Christian faith is resurrection, which is the affirmation of life in its fullness, including life after death. Though resurrection may be interpreted differently, what the Christian faith generally asserts is the resurrection of the body (or person) of Christ, which is the symbol of our individual resurrection. Christian faith is not about the immortality of the soul. Unlike Platonism⁵ or Hinduism, Christian faith radically denies the death of the body (or person) and asserts that what survives is not merely the soul of the person, but the person in his or her totality.

Therefore, resurrection asserts that with death the person does not “pass away” but “pass into” a (glorified) transformed existence.⁶ That is why Paul, one of the first preachers of the Christian vision, revels in challenging death! He boasts:

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Cor 15: 54-57)

Thus, Christian faith is a radical denial of the finality of death, and the affirmation of the death of death, whereby death is transformed into the fullness of life. With death the contingencies of human life are transcended, and we enter into a phase where we are embraced by the unconditional love of God. In clear terms, faith for a Christian is the living victory of life over death.

b. Hinduism: Victory over Birth and Death

Not so definitive and clear is the Hindu way of understanding life and death. Here the opposition is not seen primarily in terms of life and death, as is the case with Christianity, but in terms of birth and death. Not just death, but the opposition between birth and death is overcome in Hinduism.

In the Hindu world of *samsara* (changing world), where we are controlled by *maya* (illusion)⁷ and where *kala* (time) has a role to play, birth as well as death are natural. Death for Hinduism is the departure of the subtle body (*sukshma sarira*) from the worn out gross body (*sthula sarira*). At the same time both are not really real. Birth is an epiphenomenon and so is death.⁸ What is significant in Hindu tradition is to realize the “vanity” of both birth and death and to realize that truly we are beyond both. Truly we are part of the eternal, cosmic Spirit, which is Brahman. The world of *Prakrti* and *Purusha* (the eternal dual principles)⁹ is to be overcome so as to realize the true nature of oneself.

Oh, wonderful! Oh, wonderful! Oh, wonderful!
I am food! I am food! I am food!
I am a food-eater! I am a food-eater! I am a food-eater!
I am a frame-maker! I am a frame-maker! I am a frame-maker!
I am the first-born of the world-order (*rita*),
Antecedent to the gods, in the navel of immortality!
Who gives me away, he indeed had aided me!
I, who am food, eat the eater of food!
I have overcome the whole world!
He who knows this, is a brilliant shining light.

Such is the mystic Upanishad. (Taittiriya Upanisad 3.10.6)¹⁰

In the Indian tradition the school of Vedanta sees death as a harvest time wherein the culmination of a lifetime of actions and desires determines one's destiny (Brahmaprana 2001: 340). Be that it may, the Tibetan Buddhists and Near Death Experience specialists are one with brain researchers, depth psychologists, yogis and all mystics of various religious traditions in affirming (or, at least, pointing) that a human being dies into a "reality far more amazing than anyone of us can possibly imagine" (Tugwell 1990: 163).

c. Life as Accepting Death and Going Beyond

The general pattern of facing death in the case of a human person has been broadly classified as (Moody 1975):

1. Denial
2. Depression
3. Anger.
4. Bargain.
5. Acceptance

Studying the death of Moses on these lines the theologian Berkowitz maintains that even Moses exhibited his desperate attempts to avoid death, was willing to give up almost anything, including his very humanity, in order to avoid death (2001: 305). Finally, without being able to enter the promised land, he accepted death.

The moment of death is the most important moment of one's life. "It is the moment of focusing a whole life into a single point of incandescent surrender. It is the moment, where one is totally free – freed from every bond and bondage, and freed for Love beyond all reckoning" (Tugwell 1990: 163).

Even the agnostic philosopher Horkheimer is convinced of the significance of death in the personal life of human beings. He asserts that death reflects the hope and longing that the earthly life is absurd and not final.¹¹ Therein lies the meaning of death, obviously with a religious significance.

In this section, we have seen that religions enable humans to cope with the enigmas of existence, the most important of them being death. Religions provide us humans with a way of understanding, explaining and living out death. So they help us to confront the absurdity of death and make it still meaningful for us.

3. Religious Promise: Life Eternal

a. Salvation as Eternal Life

The general religious way prepares for and leads to eternal life. Most religious leaders and mystics have proclaimed a life beyond this world, a life unlimited by the contingencies of this life. It is in this context that we can understand the utterance of Jesus, “I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 6:12). As scripture scholars point out, Jesus meant a different mode of life, a life in the presence of God.

Elaborate theories have been developed in all religions regarding the fullness of life. Soteriology, or the theory of salvation, is precisely this. Further, eschatology, which deals with the “last things” and the life to come, also features the “final victory of good over evil” and a fulfilled life. In Buddhism the eight-fold path leads to such an eternal life. The three *margas* (ways of salvation) of Hinduism (*jnana marga*, *karma marga* and the *bhakti marga* – *ways of knowledge, devotion and action*) are ways for final self-realization, that is salvation and the ultimate annihilation of the self in the Absolute Brahman. Though terms and categories differ, basically all religions point to an ultimate reality which is beyond words and which refers to final fulfilment: a fulfilment beyond the temporary and existential limitations of our present-day existence.

b. Salvation as This-Worldly

Though most religions today have a rather elaborate theory of salvation (or final fulfilment) all religions recognise the tension between this worldly fulfilment and the other worldly (final) fulfilment. There are a few spiritualities which neglect or negate this world fulfilment. By and large, most religions see an ambiguous relationship between these two polarities: fulfilment in this world and the final fulfilment in the ultimate sphere.

By and large Judaism and Christianity are religions which are predominantly this-worldly. Still, popular piety assumes a fulfilment that is exclusively other-worldly. Today the majority of Christian scholars respond to this problem by bringing in the notion of “inaugurated eschatology,” which is the final fulfilment of humans but which is “already and not yet.” So Hans Küng affirms, “God’s heaven refers man to the earth. Hope of heaven must be rooted in the earth, if it is to remain human” (1984: 247). Even the Calvinist theory of predestination could be understood from this light. The Catholic Church also echoes the same sentiment.¹²

c. Eternal, Inaugurated Life

As already noted, the eternal life promised by religion already has a this-worldly dimension. This is also evident from the tension in Christian theology between this worldly Church and the other-worldly Kingdom of God. Theologians have been at pains to relate both, taking care not to identify them. The basic insight is that there is no salvation independent of this world or exclusively of this world. We can also see how this-worldly betterment is taken seriously by some groups in Hinduism. The ideal of the ascetic life in Hinduism is to obtain “liberation in this life” (*jivan mukta*). People try to attain this-worldly fulfilment, which is a symbol of final fulfilment, using alchemic or chemical means.

The search for ‘eternal youth’ is a characteristic feature of some Tantric schools like the Siddhas and Nathas, and of other sects derived from them like the Kapalikas and Aughars. All these resort to *rasa-yana*, that is, alchemy. According to the Siddha school of Hinduism, the *yogic* and alchemic practices known as *kaya sadhana*¹³ lead to an artificial extension of one’s life-span, with the aim of augmenting the possibilities for the attainment of living liberation (Filippi 1996: 102).

A scholar describes his own not so promising experience of seeing a case of anti-aging. “When she came to me she looked like a fifteen year old girl, but she is much, much older than that. Death cannot come to take her until she herself desires it. She remains naked, but covers herself with her long matted locks, and she carries a trident, Shiva’s symbol. Once I playfully asked her, ‘Why don’t you

let me see your real form?’ She showed me – and my God! It was horrible! I was nauseated by the sight; all her skin was wrinkled; her eyelids dropped down onto her cheeks and she had to pick them with her fingers in order to see me. She has become immortal [sic] through the use of mercury” (cited in Filippi 1996: 102). My point is only to note that such “crude” methods were in practice in ancient India.

The famous indologist M. Eliade also narrates how important these practices are. The “elixir” obtained by alchemy corresponds to the “immortality” pursued by *tantric* yoga; just as the disciple works directly on his body and his psychomental life in order to transmute the flesh into a “divine body” and free the Spirit, so the alchemist works on matter to change it into “gold” – that is, to hasten its process of maturation to “finish” it (1969: 283). Further, Eliade quotes from an authoritative source in Buddhism, Vagisvarakirti said that he “conjured up quantities of the elixir of life, and distributed it to others, so that old people, 150 years old and more, became young again.”¹⁴

This is further corroborated by the famous ancient traveller Marco Polo. Referring to the *chugchi* (*yogins*) who “live 150 or 200 years,” he writes: “The people make use of a very strange beverage, for they make a potion of sulphur and quicksilver and mix together and this they drink twice every month. This, they say, gives them long life; and it is a potion they are used to take from their childhood.”¹⁵

Though such attempts at bodily immortality was made, it is obvious that such alchemic practices have not been successful. Can the modern scientists do something where alchemists have failed? If immortality has become at least a theoretical plausibility, it has profound philosophical and religious implications. In the next section I show that religions do not need to be defensive in the face of the plausibility (or even possibility) of human immortality. Simultaneously we need to realize that embodied immortality challenges our present world-view, which does not allow death to have the final word. Such a (theoretical) shift is enough to make us take seriously the question of the plausibility (though not the possibility) of bodily

immortality in the realms of philosophy and religion. Such a world-view challenges our basic assumptions about human life.

4. Philosophical Challenges: Crucial Concerns

a. Who am I? The Meaning of Self

One of the crucial questions that everyone has to face is: Who am I? In the context of the possibility of physical immortality, this becomes all the more problematic. Assuming that there is the possibility of age-reversing and eliminating death (or postponing it to an indefinite future), the question becomes still more problematic.

Am I my body? Since I do not need to get rid of my body through death, can't I be fully identified with my body? What about the "spiritual" dimension of myself? Can I be regarded as a beautiful and complex machine? How do I explain the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and mystical dimensions of my everyday life?

It is natural that we use things and employ them to improve our capabilities and even to broaden our own self. We long for more things to better and perfect ourselves. Does this process of self-expansion turn to self-aggrandisement? Since we long for everything and we become "everything," and in the process we seem to cease to be what we are. We become what we adore.

Furthermore, when we look at the evolution of human society, a slow process of evolution of the self is discernible. Early people identified themselves with the tribe or the clan. In medieval societies, one's identity was rooted in the family. Today we have a highly developed personal identity, which is radically different from the early communal, tribal identity. If physical immortality is possible, this will further alter our identity. We shall identify ourselves more with our bodies. In such a situation what is the role of society? Of religion? Of the spiritual?

b. What is life? The Visions of Life

It is self-evident that the beauty of life lies in its paradoxical aspects. There is pain and pleasure; there is death at every moment. Life today is so precious because it is so fragile; it is cherished so

much precisely because it is not fully understood. Life is beautiful today because we cannot control it fully.

That is why the spiritual masters of today speak of self-abandonment and letting go as necessary features of life. Picturing life as a seed which necessarily has to die so that it bears abundant fruit, they visualise life as an ever open encounter with different people, circumstances and events. There is unpredictability, and it makes life so thrilling.

Further, facticity does not exhaust our lives. It is possibility – openness to the totally unknown – that makes today’s human life attractive and treasured. This constitute the transcendence of human life.

The existential question to be posed in the context of physical immortality is: Does it rob life of this transcendence? Does it make life a complicated machine, totally predictable, totally controlled and so totally worthless? That brings to mind the frightening scenarios of the “Brave New World” or “1984.” Will the quest for embodied immortality reduce itself to furthering the “culture of narcissism” (Küng 1984: 239)?

It is important to keep in mind that at the core of human existence, there is so much chaos, unpredictability, self-emptying. Human beings are essentially paradoxical and mysterious. These mysterious dimensions of life can be expressed in different ways. If we eliminate these dimensions altogether, won’t we cease to be human?

c. Should I Act? The Horizon of Values

Closely related to the paradoxical dimensions of human life is the element of altruism present in human beings. However we may try to explain it (Dawkins 1996), our present human existence is constituted by love. Every religion points to this self-giving or self-sacrificing aspect of life. Every great person points to the “selflessness” that is intrinsic to an authentic human life.

That is why the Beatitudes of Christ (Mt 5) are still meaningful for humanity. That is why the *nishkama karma* advocated by *Bhagavad Gita* resonates with us. That is why even atheists can vi-

brate with the hymn of love as given in 1 Cor 13. There is something in us which makes giving holier than taking and suffering for others a worthy cause. There is, in short, something in us which makes love an absolute value: something which is greater than our own selves. It is a value for which I am ready to pay even with my life! Without such unconditional values, human life, as we know it today, is not worth living.

We need to ask ourselves if the quest for immortality is a quest for a personal, selfish gain. The highest degree of selfishness is if I can buy for myself physical immortality and cause others to pay for it. Will personal immortality be a “profitable business” where greed and money rule? Will we eliminate all values from our lives? By making a group of human beings immortal, are we creating a society which has forgotten to give, to value, suffer and so to love? That would be tragic. A society without values will perish because it finds nothing to live for. That would be the paradox of an amoral, immortal society, which decides to eliminate itself because it does not know what to live for.

These values are crucial because they enable us to relish and enjoy life. They enable us to love and enjoy life. It is tragic to usher in immortality after robbing us of the capacity to cherish joy in life.¹⁶

5. A Creative Response: Affirmation of Life

The responses to the frightening or fantastic scenarios and scientific possibilities described above may be summed up as total opposition (active denial), orphic admiration (passive submission) or creative appreciation (prophetic acceptance).

a. Active Denial

Opponents of this project advocate the policy of “denying or delaying” the whole issue of search for physical immortality. According to them, science is constantly creating new opportunities for us, but new opportunities always generate new problems for society. These social problems inevitably fall into the hands of our politicians and the general public and affect life negatively. The first impulse of these people is to be cautious, apprehensive and overly critical. The first instinct, prompted by religious zealots, will be to ban it.

“It’s new; it’s something that’s never been done before; therefore it must be wrong – perhaps evil.” After all, wasn’t that the immediate reaction to the news that a sheep had been cloned? “Ban it!” cried the presidents of the U.S. and France. The scientists are trying “to play God!” (Peters 1998: 33), they chanted. The Clinton administration wanted to pass a law outlawing human cloning.¹⁷

This way of responding reminds us of active denial or positive confrontation and will only lead to conflict between science and society or religion and offers no creative contribution. The greatest drawback of this method is that it simply does not work. If we persist in blocking all progress, one day the block will block us out of existence. Society (or religion) can suppress the scientific quest for some time but one day it will break through and then it will pay back with vengeance. In the long run such a method is counter-productive.

b. Passive Submission

The diametrically opposed view is characterised by total admiration and blind absorption of the new changes brought about by science. There are enthusiasts who crave for new technologies, without in any way personalising or critically reflecting on them. Again, the pressure to push such research forward as rapidly as possible and make the results available to everyone will be overwhelming. We are talking of life and death here, and the basic animal drive to stay alive is far too powerful to deny or even delay. No matter how expensive it may be, no matter how much it distorts our society, people will want to extend their lives as far as they can.¹⁸

The problem with such an approach is that it simply does not contribute anything constructive to society. If society is constantly carried on and pushed forward by science, the dominion of science over society will never stop. If we swim all the time along with the current, the current will never cease carrying us on. So we cease to have our own identity, our own convictions or values.

c. Prophetic Acceptance

So what is called for, I believe, is a creative appreciation, a prophetic and affirmative response to the scientific revolution. We should be aware that the research may not develop in the way we wish. The promised immortality may not arrive. It may take longer than imagined. There is a theoretical possibility and a practical probability that physical immortality is achievable, but it may just be hype and hope that will never be realized.

The role of religion and society in general is to guide and shape the human longing, not blindly follow the steps science has taken. Such a view nurtures hope for the future and evaluates the dangers posed by technology. It affirms life and even immortal life, without belittling our weak and fragile life.

This demands a genuine dialogue between science and society, an enriching partnership between the two and trusting critique of one another. This calls for a readiness to listen and to change stands based on informed opinion and calculated facts given by the mutual encounter of both society (religion) and science. This calls for commitment both to the larger values of society and to the particular values of scientific progress as well as possible physical immortality. It is a commitment that also demands at times a definite “no” to some directions of lopsided growth.

We should recall that “living longer” does not necessarily lead to “living fully.” “Longer life is not necessarily a happier one, a more fulfilled one.” Quantity of life has to be matched with quality of life.

6. Religious Implications: Let Life Be

a. Bodily Immortality vs Ontological Dependence

Humans are contingent, finite and limited. Emptiness exists in all dimensions of our life. Besides our spatio-temporal limitations, we experience limitedness at the moral, existential, aesthetic and ontological levels. Given our limitedness and the awareness of our limitedness, humans tend to transcend them.

It may be recalled that resuscitation (*Auferweckung*) is not resurrection (*Auferstehung*) nor is ever-lasting life eternal life. In the

same manner, embodied immortality is not the fullness of human existence. We may take 'unending life' or 'endless life' as equivalent to 'everlasting life,' 'life without any end,' 'life for ever and ever.' But eternity is different and implies that 'temporal features are not the whole story' or that things pass beyond the spatio-temporal dimension. Simultaneously, eternity could contain time (Ramsey 1960: 95-96).¹⁹ If we do not maintain this distinction between "everlasting life" (similar to *Auferweckung*) and "eternity" (similar to *Auferstehung*) the assertion of St. Bernard may become true of us: "They will be finished without finishing, they will die without dying."²⁰ Or, we can say with John Hick, if we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way our visual field has no limits (1976: 104).

If we keep the above distinction in mind it becomes obvious that embodied immortality cannot be the sole goal of any healthy eschatological hope, though we cannot ignore it either. Eschatological hope is, in short, the assertion that humans are dependent (temporarily, physically, psychologically, spatially and finally ontologically) on God the Fullness of Being. Only when humans can acknowledge their ontological dependence can they claim that their eschaton has arrived. So we will always remain "two-legged gods" in the words of Hegel, even if we attain embodied immortality (Küng 1984: 249). We would never have attained *nirvana* promised by Eastern traditions or union with God.

Physical immortality is one of the steps to overcome the temporal limitations imposed on us. It has to be definitely welcomed. It is hoped that along with the "curing of death," cures for most other diseases will be found. Both are to be appreciated. At the same time it would be inappropriate to consider it a panacea for all our human limitations.

Basic human brokenness, existential angst, philosophical emptiness and ontological vacuum are to be considered seriously as part of human existence. Physical immortality is only one step, a right step, in this direction of fostering life. What we, as serious and committed philosophers, need to reflect on is our own basic ontological finitude — our basic ontological dependence!

It seems to me that religions can welcome physical immortality creatively, constructively and critically. Religion owes it to humanity to point to the need for “transcendence” that even immortal human beings have. Religion need not feel threatened by embodied immortality, for a God who is intimidated by humans does not deserve to be a god.²¹ Such a god may be comparable to the *asuras* or *devas* of Hindu mythology, not the absolute Brahman.

b. God as God of the Living

It would be beneficial to keep the conceptual difference between contingency (perishability and dependence) and immortality (non-perishability and dependence). Only temporal contingency is ruled out by immortality. Again it is useful to recall that God is the God of life and is life-enhancing. Further, both science and religion, as human enterprises are meant to foster and promote life.

In general, religions affirm, in no uncertain terms, that God is the sole creator and sustainer of the world and specifically of human life. Theologically this means that we are eternally dependent on Him, not that human life necessarily needs to be temporally finite. The crucial point to be noted is that even our possible temporal immortal life is ontologically dependent – totally and completely – on God.²² The angels, for instance, are examples of beings who are immortal and at the same time eternally dependent on God. So God as creator of human beings does not necessarily require that humans must be mortal.²³

We should ask if the immortality that science promises brings with it betterment of other human contingencies. Does human immortality necessarily eliminate suffering and pain? It may be remembered that immortal life is not identical with the eternal life that Jesus promises to give. It may be emphasised that we cannot have eternal life without immortality, not vice-versa. Eternal life implies the eschatological fullness of life. Eschatological concerns are valid even in an immortal human existence. Eschatological fullness deals with human “salvation,” “*nirvana*” our final, ultimate “yes” to human life and it involves axiological, ontological fulfilment, besides temporal fulfilment: only the last is assured by immortality. Immortality does not rule out total ontological dependency.

Thus ethical concerns are still valid in an immortal human society. These ethical concerns have to inform human life and behaviour and life even if we live an immortal life. Only that can lead to human fullness. Besides ethical concerns, the ontological dependency of humans on God also needs to be asserted even in an immortal (temporal fullness) human life.

With these cautions, we can say that since God is life-affirming and the human task – both from religious and scientific perspectives – will be to seek for immortality, if such a task is ever feasible. So the search for immortality can very well be conceived of as a “sacred duty,” “*sanatana dharma*” or “holy task” provided we realise that such a task does not imply replacing God or “playing God” (Peters 1997).

We worship God not because we will die, but because we are alive. Or as the Hindus say, we worship God since we need to realize our ultimate oneness with the Divine. God is the God of the living, not of the dead or the would-be-dead. Therefore, theologically, belief in God is not necessarily for the concerns of the future only; the concerns of the present are enough to postulate or affirm God.²⁴

If the “glory of God is a human being fully alive” then obviously a human being who is “immortal” gives “more” glory to God. Such humans are more to the image of God. Such humans make us “created co-creators” (Peters 1998: 33) in the most appropriate sense. This implies that the God we believe in is not the “God of the gaps,” the God who satisfies one only at the limit situation of one’s death. We do not need crisis moments to lead us to God. It is the conviction of a genuine believer that God can be found in the depths of our daily lives and not only at the end of our lives. God is present both in limit-situations and in the everyday life of people as well as in our strengths and glorious achievements.²⁵

c. Emerging Consciousness

Our basic concern is that immortality and superhuman status is being limited to a privileged few. The editorial of *Geneletter* echoes this view: “While I am optimistic about technology providing us

with new ways to attack important social problems, I do not think it is a cure-all. Making sure everyone can benefit from the new, genetically-informed medicine is a moral and political dilemma as much as a technological challenge. To be properly dealt with, it will require continued broad-based, informed public debate and democratic action” (Billings 2000).²⁶

An immortality limited to a privileged few will mean that the same economic structure that exists in today’s world will go on. Some of the people will be able to enjoy the advantages of science while the majority of the people will remain untouched by it. Can we allow such a situation to exist when we are dealing with life in its totality?²⁷

Can we humans allow a superhuman status obviously limited to a few wealthy people? This might lead to the destruction of the human race and to the possible emergence of another race. It would be no problem if the emergence of such a new species is the outcome of a “natural” evolution where humans will gradually evolve into superhumans. Here the scenario is frighteningly different.

On the other hand, should we humans not evolve a radically different way of behaviour which accepts the motto: “Eine welt oder keine Welt!” (one world or no world)? Unfortunately, the tragic disparity that exists today between human beings, which makes 80% of our humans almost superfluous, by not really producing anything and not even consuming properly, just cannot go on in the new ethical framework.

It is calculated that the development of a single medicine through gene technique costs \$500 million (Boombranche 2000: 12). So the achievement of immortality and superhuman status is economically a Herculean task. Should we allow multinational companies like Celera, Human Genome, Millennium, Affymetrix and Medarexs to shape the future of the human race using mainly economic criteria? That would be a horrendous prospect. In a situation where life and precisely the totality of the sacred human life is at stake we cannot allow “market economy” to control the procedure. Can patent rights limit or foster our very human survival and evolution?²⁸

This critical situation demands that science and religion (the two pillars of today’s civilisation) work together and enrich each

other. They have to critique and dialogue, leading to a new life style. There should be serious discernment: the criterion must somehow include the “sacredness of life.” It might lead to enlarging the horizon of ethics and deepening its commitment to life, including human, animal and even super-human life. An interdisciplinary approach, where diversity and individuality are respected and at the same time transcended, is inevitable.

That will enable us to cope with the futuristic embodied immortality of human beings and further human evolution into super-human beings. This calls for both openness to life and commitment to values. The whole life is at stake – we cannot afford to be lethargic here.

It must still be affirmed that the possible future immortal scenario raises fundamental moral problems, demanding from us a totally new consciousness which is:

1. A renewed consciousness: The very idea of moral consciousness as one branch of religion or philosophy is at stake. An informed ethics has to shape the future world of ours and include all branches of human knowledge and particularly philosophy, religion and science. Thus a new moral consciousness is called for.

2. A broadened consciousness: This includes not just individuals with their formed conscience, but humans as a totality and also the whole living species. The vision such an ethics fosters is a holistic, integrating and life-respecting one.

3. A deepened consciousness: It is based not on any given norms (deontological ethics) but in consonance with the technological wonder. It is not one which opposes totally or agrees with fully, but which guides and co-determines the destiny of the whole human life in particular and life in general. The ethical norm of love may still be valid but it has to be interpreted to include non-human beings as the “face of the other.” It must be complemented by the wisdom (*jnana*) or enlightenment of the Eastern traditions.

Conclusion: Enhancement of Life

Throughout this article we have been appreciating the marvelous technological possibilities that have taken us to the dawn of

embodied immortality, at the same time creatively critiquing it and maintaining an attitude of “prophetic acceptance.” We are in a position now to acknowledge that embodied immortality would not merely be a technological accomplishment, but a human achievement. As a human achievement it is a collective, conscious, committed and cosmic decision that the whole of humanity takes about itself. A collective decision where all humanity, not a privileged few, is informed of the consequences; a conscious decision where the community of humans take responsibility for what is happening to itself; a committed decision, where we commit ourselves for the enhancement of life; a cosmic decision where we are aware that the decision we make will have truly cosmic consequences. Promoting and fostering life is the driving force of our quest for this technological progress.²⁹

We also take care not to reduce science to technology. Science is a more comprehensive, general, global vision which humans have of themselves and of the cosmos. Similarly religion is not to be reduced to ethics. Religion propels us to a sacred spirit, where we can be truly human and divine at the same time. Therefore, the quest for physical immortality is not merely one of technology, but of science and of the human spirit.

Let us be aware that there are many unhealthy and growth-demoting factors in our human life. The greed for money, the orientation for profit, human *hubris*, and the craving for instant success are serious human factors which can make technology extremely dangerous. Let us realize that together with the widening of technological capabilities, we need to expand our moral consciousness and deepen our religious vision. The opportunities are really great: the emergence of a new species, very close to gods themselves. What is needed is a healthy humility before God and before the cosmos. Technological achievement untempered by humility leads to dehumanization and disaster.

The danger we are confronted with is colossal. What is at stake is everything: the whole of humanity. The extinction of humanity is a real possibility. So too the final flowering of humanity. The choice is ours. Let us make a collective, conscious, considered choice for life – including embodied immortality! Let us remain humble in our technological achievement and respectful in our religious convic-

tions. That will lead us closer to Hindu *nirvana* and Christian salvation.

Notes

1. This article is part of a larger project on research physical immortality. For supporting this project, I am grateful to John Templeton Foundation (www.templeton.org) and to Dr. Stephen Post. His editorial comments have been valuable.
2. This is a quote from the first century B C Roman poet Vergil, *Aeneid* 4. 653.
3. It may be noted that even secular scholars and philosophers have joined in this effort. "Recovering the value of death, and recovering the value in death, is important to us all... There is now an important congruence of the religious and the secular and ... they can now reinforce each other in a human attitude to death" (Bowker 1991: 42).
4. G.F. Moore "Jeder versuch, die jüdischen Vorstellungen über das "Zukünftige Leben zu systematisieren, zwingt sie in eine Ordnung und Logik, die sie nicht haben. Wie schon bemerkt, ihre religiöse Bedeutung liegt in der ausdrücklichen Etablierung einer Vergeltungslehre nach dem Tod und naciht in der Vielfalt der Wege, mit der Mensch sich dies vorstellt" (quoted in Schmitz 1992).
5. There is an insightful criticism that St Paul and Augustine have made Christianity Platonism (Christy 2000).
6. For an elaborate treatment on resurrection, Bultmann, Marxsen, Schlette, Pesch and Pannenberg may be consulted (Soares-Prabhu 1980).
7. *Maya* is termed the "advaitin's Gordian knot" (Nayak 1987: 48).
8. *Samsara* is the world of flux, of activities, the passing world. *Maya* is popularly translated as illusion. *Kala* is time the temporal dimension of the world and is also the word for the God of death.
9. *Prakrti* stands for the material principle and *Purusha* for the conscious principle. Both are eternal and uncreated.
10. *Rta* means also rhythm, order, etc.
11. Sie [die Religion] kann aber dem Menschen bewußt machen, daß er ein endliches Wesen ist, daß er leiden und sterben muss; daß aber über dem Leid und dem Tod die Sehnsucht steht, dieses irdische Dasein möge nicht absurd, nicht das Letzte sein. So for an individual, when he accepts his own death, it becomes a promise of life. (See K Pandikattu and K Suriano, *Promises of Life*, Media House, New Delhi: 2001.)
12. In many documents of the Church the tension between this worldly and other worldly is maintained and this worldly is never totally ignored.

For instance, the Second Vatican Council Document asserts: “A hope related to the end of the time [death] does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives.” *The Church Today*, 21.

13. J. Parry calls it “physical culture.”
14. Edward Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*: 179 Cited in Eliade 179.
15. Sir Henry Yule, *The Bond of Ser Marco Polo*, ed. Henri cordie, II 365, Cited in Eliade 275
16. Such issues really ask if embodied mortality is catering to the collective selfishness of a privileged few. It definitely calls for a new mode of living where material poverty is eliminated and basic facilities are provided to all. A world where “Selfishness incorporated” reigns the very talk of embodied immortality could be ridiculous and funny. Some other philosophical difficulties associated with embodied immortality such as immortal boredom and “immorally inhuman” are not taken seriously by me in this article. Other issues like the scarcity of resources and the elimination of offspring in the case of embodied immortality are also ignored.
17. But while many people are justifiably wary of cloning humans, the offer of virtual immortality will be too powerful to sweep under the rug. Right or wrong, good or bad, no matter what the eventual consequences to society, most people do not want to die. Most people will leap at the chance to extend their lives indefinitely, to be youthful and vigorous for centuries or millennia. The politicians’ and the public’s second instinct will be to control the research. Write laws and set up bureaucracies that keep the scientists on a tight leash. Control the purse-strings for research, so that only compliant scientists can receive government funding. Delay the whole process as much as possible, so that we can at least postpone the problem.
18. The cyborg generation may not really care about their own individual or even human identity, but only about the survival which technology promises. Such a passive and uncritical submission, reminiscent of orphic adoration will not lead to true progress and the development of human destiny.
19. Boethius’ classical definition of eternity is noteworthy here: “Interminabilis vitae simul et perfecta possessio” or “the whole and perfect possession simultaneously of interminable life” (Küng 1984: 273). Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae* Vol. V, n. 6. time and eternity: G. Ebling. *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens, vol. III*, Tübingen 1979, 408-36.

20. "Sine fine finientur, sine morte morientur." *De diversis* 42.6
21. In spite of the Tower of Babel, I interpret the story of the Tower of Babel as an expression of human hubris, rather than God's arrogance.
22. This may call to mind the finite regress that is discussed in connection with the "proofs for God's existence."
23. This raises the issue if God wanted humans to be immortal when he created them. The answer to this question can only be guessed. Scripturally there does not seem to be any conclusive evidence for one way or another.
24. Cf. P Tillich and E. Gilson are two theologians significant in this area.
25. We can very well agree with Sartre, Augustine and Heidegger that humans are never satisfied unless they become gods and affirm that embodied immortality does not make them gods.
26. For this section I am indebted to the paper I presented in Human Condition and Genetic Manipulation at the Luso-American Foundation, Portugal, Lisbon 2000.
27. Such a possibility of human immortality has deep rooted religious consequences. Religions can ignore the challenges posed by immortality only at the danger of instant self mortality. The obvious danger of such a possibility is that each person becomes so preoccupied with his own individual immortality that he forgets the human community and life in general. The larger issues of providing justice for the impoverished, fostering of life in general and love as the most significant human value may be forgotten. At the same time, physical immortality does not render God superfluous, religion redundant and human longing unnecessary. Even in immortal humans there is scope for meaningful hope, relevant religion and a liberating God. At the same time, immortality necessitates a human hope that may be detached from physical death. In our ordinary understanding of human longing, death is the starting point of eschatology or human hope. That view has to be given up; we need to delve deep into the "inaugurated eschatology" which theologians have taken seriously. We still need to take death seriously, but death may not be given the supreme importance and inevitability that was its due once. Human hope and fulfilment has to begin with this present world, with the here and now. However, overcoming physical death and attaining physical immortality does not solve the problem of human contingency. The issue of human finitude has to be addressed in a much wider sense. The tendency of those seeking physical immortality – passive acceptance – is to reduce human life to a physicalistic or mechanistic view point, stressing that attainment of physical immortality – temporal unlimitedness – necessarily leads to human fulfillment. We need to focus on the existential and ontological contingency of human

condition, not merely that of the temporal conditioning.

28. The “Statement on the Patenting of Human Genes and DNA-Sequences” is significant in our context. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Humangenetik (German Society of Human Genetics) acknowledges the importance of patenting for the development of diagnostic and therapeutic products, but is opposed to the patenting of the human genome and its DNA sequences. Their position is based on the idea that the human genome is common property, the unrestricted access to which should be guaranteed, and that human DNA sequences are discoveries, not inventions. Furthermore, patenting human DNA sequences can hinder the use of specific sequence variants by others, and thereby impede further research. (From their website)
29. The larger society must have a role to play in determining our future, not just the few individual scientists who quest for knowledge, or the corporate managers who seek profit. Further, religions have a significant role to play in determining the destiny of life. So we suggest briefly a possible response to the technological marvel of (possible) embodied immortality.

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