

If the Super Rich Want to Live Forever, Our Planet is Truly Doomed

By John Harris, *The Guardian*, 2018

Welcome to the era of immortalists: scientists, dreamers and – crucially – billionaires, who want us to think of age as a curable disease, and our final end as something that could be indefinitely postponed¹.

“Death is sort of an affront to American life,” wrote Zadie Smith in 2003. “It’s so anti-aspirational.” In tech circles, this kind of distaste for mortality often blurs into the culture of “biohacking” (fasting, closely tracking your vital signs, ingesting supplements and “smart drugs”) which is one manifestation of transhumanism: to quote the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary, “a belief that the human race can evolve beyond its current limitations, especially by the use of science and technology”.

The sums invested in anti-ageing research by tech billionaires show what happens when such ideas meet big money. Thus plenty of companies are trying to somehow arrest ageing. Piercing through the research and journalism that surrounds what they are doing, there is usually a sense of fuzzy, hubristic ideas, and money that would be better spent elsewhere. But no company working in the field of anti-ageing research has yet managed to push any therapy to the stage of conclusive clinical trials.

Besides, what would be the social and cultural consequences of literally pathologising old age? If we lived much longer, would we also be expected to work indefinitely? How would the planet cope with a hugely increased population, and who would be first in the queue? I think I know some of the answers to the last two questions. Keeping the average rise in global temperatures to 1.5C demands that each of us is responsible for no more than two tonnes of CO₂ a year, whereas the richest 1% of the world’s population are on track to produce an average of more than 70 tonnes a head. Imagine such people jetting around until they were 140, or 200, or even existing forever.

Sizeable investments in attempts to eventually cheat death risk neglecting aspects of ageing that we all face right now. Half of all people in the UK aged 75 or over live alone – and half a million people over the age of 60 usually spend each day in solitude. Thinking about eternal youth may be a diverting intellectual exercise. But as a matter of scientific fact, we know that strong and stable relationships and immersion in communities result in people living longer and healthier lives, and the loneliness that too often grips people’s later years has the reverse effect.

Leaving aside huge questions about their personal and corporate tax arrangements, imagine if the most trailblazing, publicity-attracting projects of 21st-century billionaires involved not leaving the planet or living indefinitely, but the kind of earthbound things that could transform lives in the here and now. Such things wouldn’t be quite as head-turning as the unlikely promise of a world populated by deathless super-humans, but they would be a lot more useful.

Here is what the immortalism of famous capitalists rather neglects: that the most immediate route to living better and longer lies not in hacking our cells, but helping people to be more human.

1 – to postpone = remettre à plus tard / retarder