

## Review

THE IMMORTALIST MANIFESTO:  
STAY YOUNG AND SAVE THE WORLD

Richard Elixixr calls himself an immortalist: someone who dares to admit that his or her greatest desire is to stay young and live forever. An immortalist is not satisfied with consolations such as staying “young at heart”; s/he wants actual physiological youthfulness and physical immortality.

This has been humanity’s secret or not-so secret desire from the beginning, Elixixr asserts. In his view, the whole human civilization has really been about achieving sufficient knowledge and technology to gain control over nature in order to increase life span and ultimately make physical immortality possible. With the breakthroughs such as the mapping of the human genome or therapeutic cloning, this goal is finally within reach, the author states. The problem, he says, is that our thinking is still shackled with mortalist beliefs and values. The mortalist ideology is fighting hard to slow the progress.

Humanity seems to be caught up in a strange psychological paradox, Elixixr explains. On the one hand, everyone instinctively wants to stay young and live forever; it’s part of our drive for self-preservation. On the other hand, we learn to hide this desire. We are afraid that it’s childish, unrealistic, narcissistic, immature, unethical. Or else we think that it’s either naïve or arrogant or both to dare imagine that humanity can override nature to such an extent. These beliefs, together with settling for the typical “immortality surrogates”—immortality through having children, through fame or in afterlife—keep us from uniting to demand more funding for life extension research.

At this point, only calorie restriction has been shown to significantly slow down aging and extend maximum life span. Elixixr, now in his mid-40s, has practiced calorie restriction for over 20 years. He consumes a diet of 1200 calories a day. His blood pressure and cholesterol are more typical of twenty-year-olds, he says; based on the findings of animal studies, there is no reason to doubt him. He boasts that he looks much younger than his age. But he has no illusions: neither a calorie-restricted diet, nor supplements nor daily exercise—useful as they are for preserving health and extending average life span—can make humans immortal. In fact, “do-it-yourself-ism” equals death, the author warns. Only dedicated, extensive teamwork can achieve significant results.

The hope for true victory over aging and death lies in an all-out effort in basic research into the biology of aging and the resulting biotechnology. Anti-aging research should be every nation’s top priority, Elixixr states. The race to the moon showed us what can be accomplished when an ambitious project is taken seriously and sufficient resources are dedicated to it. When the best minds work together toward an inspiring goal, that which only yesterday seemed impossible has a good chance to become reality. There is no compelling reason to think that eradication of aging and the debilitating suffering that comes with it would be an exception.

#### Mortalist versus immortalist (regenerative) medicine

Considering the success of the moon race, why isn’t there a comparable race against aging and its terrible diseases? Why is there so much opposition to promising developments such as therapeutic cloning or stem cell research? Why is modern medicine, and society at large, investing so much in trying to extend the last years of life (often spent in a nursing home) instead of trying to extend the period of youthful vigor?

Mainstream medicine, called by Elixixr “Mortalist Medicine,” operates from the mortalist paradigm: it assumes that aging is “normal” and nothing can be done about it. Weight gain, hearing and vision loss, a rise in blood pressure, a decline in muscle mass—all these are regarded as normal manifestations of aging. Since aging is not regarded as a disease, much less the most important disease, it is acceptable to treat only the symptoms of this universal, underlying degenerative syndrome. It is OK to treat heart



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disease or Alzheimer's, but not OK to try to slow the aging process itself, much less aim at physiological rejuvenation—even though this would be the most cost-effective solution to the catastrophic rise in medical costs as the population ages.

Elixir thinks medicine badly needs a paradigm shift. Aging itself must be classified as a disease—"the master disease, the one disease that will sooner or later kill every one of us on this planet, unless we decrypt its legal code." This view of aging is already accepted by regenerative medicine, which tries to regenerate and rejuvenate the body. Physicians practicing regenerative medicine understand that the most cost-effective approach to combating various "diseases of aging" is to keep the patient physiologically young.

Aside from mainstream medicine, the food industry is another roadblock on the way to extending human life span. At this point, we can't count on the breakthroughs in the biosciences to come in time for most people who are now already middle-aged. They must do something to "hang in there" and buy time. Calorie restriction seems the best way to accomplish this goal. The food industry, of course, promotes the very opposite of calorie restriction.

Elixir's argument against what he calls the "Death Society Diet" is quite compelling, and particularly relevant in light of recent studies that single out obesity as the number one killer, ahead of cigarettes and alcohol. Yet the food industry relentlessly promotes precisely those foods that cause premature aging and degenerative diseases due to excess calories, excess fat, excess sugar and excess salt. This diet is harmful not only to any individual who consumes it, but also to the planet. The life-extending diet is based on nutritional quality, not quantity. Growing older should be no excuse for getting fat. Medical and social acceptance of obesity as normal rather than pathological results not only in higher mortality, but also in sky-rocketing medical costs.

Philosophical, religious and economic issues

"Immortalism is based on our primal and undying desire to stay young and live forever," Elixir states. He is also aware that those who believe in immortality are being judged as immature and narcissistic. He asserts that we must not be afraid to deconstruct the mortalist beliefs that give rise to such vehement opposition of the very idea of non-aging and physical immortality. Take for instance the main argument, that death is good for humanity because life without the prospect of death would be shallow and devoid of meaning. Would life then be more meaningful if our life span happened to be shorter, say a maximum of 40 years?

One of the benefits of living for centuries would be much more concern for the environment. Instead of piously invoking "the future generations" while continuing to pollute and overconsume, the living would themselves be faced with the consequences of environmental destruction.

As for affordability, Elixir points out, "One Stealth B-2 bomber costs over twice as much as the entire National Institute of Aging's budget for biological aging research, which is your only hope." He reminds us that the U.S. government has no trouble finding 100 billion dollars for an anti-missile missile system, the need for which is questionable at best. The problem is clearly one of priorities.

Can we afford to put more money into anti-aging research? Perhaps the right question is rather, Can we afford not to? It is the costs of "health care" (read: "disease care") that are threatening to bankrupt Western societies. The most logical and cost-effective way of eliminating or at least minimizing the incidence of diseases is to extend youthful "health span."

The section on religions and mortalism is particularly interesting and thought-provoking. "Christianity and Islam offer an afterlife in the crudest and most blatant way. This is why they have become the world's foremost religions," Elixir asserts. Early Christianity could even be called immortalist, since it developed the doctrine of bodily resurrection and physical immortality after the Second Coming. Likewise, the popular versions of Buddhism and Taoism offer an afterlife, the author points out. Noting the decline of liberal Protestantism, he comments, "Even in this day and age, churches which promise 'eternal life' will prevail any day over the ones which offer only Reason, Good Works and Demythologizing."

Ironically, however, even though the desire for everlasting life has been the fountainhead of religions, religions are generally hostile to the efforts to extend life span. Without the need for an afterlife, humanity would find little appeal in most of today's religions—even though these religions have been functional as shields against the terror of death while nothing could be done about it. But progress in anti-aging research points to a different path. One of the key sentences in the Immortalist Manifesto is, "The great leap forward in our spiritual evolution will occur when we realize that there is no salvation outside the human race. The kingdom of God is within us."

Elixir repeats the commonly accepted assertion that the popularity of religion is greater when life is harsh. He becomes provocative again when he points out that Americans are much more religious than Western Europeans. "This is because life under U.S. market capitalism is so much harsher, economically and psychologically, than life in Western Europe. This is also why Black Americans are much more religious than White Americans," the author states.

At the same time, Elixir knows that we need spiritually oriented individuals to become supporters of the Immortalist movement. Thus, he points out that there is no inherent logical contradiction between physical and spiritual immortality. An immortal spirit could certainly manifest itself in an immortal body. The issue is outside of the realm of science, and need not be seen as another roadblock. The author points out that early Christianity was an example of an immortalist religion that saw no conflict between the desire for physical immortality and the belief in the existence of a spiritual realm. Seeing the body as a sinful, discardable “container,” and this beautiful planet as the “Vale of Tears” was a later distortion.

Some readers will no doubt be dismayed by Elixir’s critique of “Mortalist Capitalism.” Yet it is hard to deny that many people renounce their dreams for the sake of financial security, especially security in old age. They accept overwork and too little leisure, virtually insuring their own premature aging—all for the sake of “retirement benefits.” Again, we see that the specter of aging leads to distorted priorities. The whole idea of retirement should be discarded in favor of “mini-retirements,” the author proposes. He is particularly appalled by sacrificing the enjoyment of life for the sake of hoarding money against the expected hardships of old age.

“The stability of the Mortalist social order depends on our saying no to Life, on our dying little ‘deaths’ along the byways and highways of Life,” the author observes. “We are allowed to live, to eat, only if we submit to a life of punitive toil.” He hastens to point out that Soviet-style communism is not the answer. A giant, corrupt bureaucracy, it only magnified the problem of alienated labor, becoming “an instrument of Death, as demanding of self-denial and sacrifice as its Capitalist foe.”

Elixir argues that Immortalism is the Third Way. It would do away with glaring economic inequality and unite humanity in dedicated teamwork. The first priority of every government would be life extension research. The right to medical care, including access to anti-aging technologies, would be recognized as a fundamental human right. Is the author being too Utopian? Probably, but the point of the book is to challenge and even shock the reader in order to break through the armor of old beliefs.

In summary, this is not a book for the complacent. It is indeed a radical manifesto. Even readers who accept the thesis that life extension research needs to be our number one priority, and that physical immortality is within reach, will find at least some of Elixir’s solutions controversial, and some of his reasoning too simplistic. Perhaps the best way to digest this book is to see it as a book of questions rather than answers. This is still an “underground” type of manifesto, meant to mobilize us to take a true “pro-life” action, such as exerting pressure on the government to put more resources into biomedical and biotechnology research.

This research is still seriously underfunded and is not proceeding fast enough. Furthermore, the time lag between a discovery in the lab and its translation into medical practice is unacceptably long, resulting in much unnecessary suffering and loss of life. This provocative book is a call to action. “Mortals of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your mortality!” is the manifesto’s fitting last paragraph.

—Ivy Greenwell

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