From here to eternity

Tyler Jamieson has a strict daily routine. He goes jogging every morning at 6 a.m., reads the newspapers, then (1) sets off to work an eighteen-hour day.

Tyler is the CEO of a huge corporation and works in a pressured and stressful environment. But despite this – and the fact that he is nearly 100 years old – he has no serious health problems. In fact, Tyler expects to live for many centuries more. His original body ‘died’ several years ago, but his brain lives on in an avatar robot.

This may sound like an idea from a science fiction film script, but it actually comes from a serious business proposal. In 2013, a thirty-one-year-old media entrepreneur called Dmitry Itskov sent a letter to billionaires offering them a new lease of life. Itskov had thirty scientists working on an immortality project whose aim was to transplant a human mind into a robot body by 2023. ‘Our research has the potential to free you, as well as the majority of all people on our planet, from disease, old age and even death,’ claimed Itskov in his letter. ‘A person with a perfect avatar will be able to remain part of society. People don’t want to die.’

Fundamentally, he’s right. Most people’s shelf life is a mere eighty-five to eighty-nine years, so it’s hardly surprising that we want to (2) put off the inevitable. Even the world’s oldest man, 116-year-old Jiroemon Kimura, insisted that although he was tired, he didn’t want to die. But is eternal life as attractive as it sounds? What would be the consequences of immortality?
From a purely practical point of view, immortality poses quite a few problems. The most obvious is the increase in overpopulation, putting more pressure on our planet’s already strained resources. Other problems would stem from the effects on society. Crime rates would rise because a few years in prison would no longer deter criminals, and how could the state afford ‘life sentences’? Another big change would be in the length of our working life. People could spend thousands of years in the same job, resulting in severe depression. There would be fewer career opportunities for younger, less experienced generations, too.

Immortality would also influence how society develops and progresses. As demographics changed and the population grew older, there would be more resistance to progress. Imagine if everyone from the eighteenth century were still alive today. Chances are that racial segregation would still exist and women wouldn’t have the right to vote. Older generations need to die in order to let the younger generation breathe life into new concepts and allow society to progress; in a brave new ‘immortal’ world, older people could continue to (3) fend off innovation in favour of the status quo. ‘A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light,’ said Nobel physicist Max Planck, ‘but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with the idea from the beginning.’

Itskov claims that people from every walk of life will benefit from immortality, but in reality, only the very rich and powerful will be able to afford it. It could lead to a new world order with billionaire immortals living charmed lives and running the world in much the same way as the gods ruled the ancient world in Greek mythology. The divide between the rich and the poor could widen to the extent that they may even become two different species.
Yet those in favour of immortality projects argue that it’s unethical to condemn everyone to death when the possibility of indefinite life exists. Modern medicine cures diseases and keeps people in the prime of life for as long as possible; surely, they argue, immortality is the next logical step? People could explore endless possibilities, witness how the human race evolves and dedicate themselves to doing good. Supporters don’t believe that the novelty of life might one day (4) wear off. They don’t consider that once we have passed all the milestones in life and (5) crossed everything off our bucket lists, we could be condemned to an eternity of boredom.

Today, it is not only Dmitry Itskov who is promising the gift of immortality; scientific research is also uncovering nature’s secrets of longevity. Living forever really is a matter of life and death and the problems it creates cannot be easily (6) shrugged off. Ultimately, by accepting that life is finite, we’re able to give more value to the time we have, and to think carefully about how we are using it and what we hope to achieve, because we might not get another chance. As a wise man once said, ‘The bad news is, time flies. The good news is, you’re the pilot.’