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The Case for Mortality

LEON R. KASS

WHY SHOULD WE DIE? Why should we, the flower of the living kingdom, lose our youthful bloom and go to seed? Why should we grow old in body and in mind, losing our various powers—first gradually, then altogether in death? Until now, the answer has been simple: We should because we must. Aging, decay, and death have been inevitable, as necessary for us as for other animals and plants, from whom we are distinguished in this matter only by our awareness of this necessity. We *know* that we are, as the poet says, like the leaves, the leaves that the wind scatters to the ground.

Recently, this necessity seems to have become something of a question, thanks to research into the phenomena of aging. Senescence, decay, and even our species-specific life span are now thought to be the result of biological processes that are, at least in part, genetically controlled, open to investigation, and in principle subject to human intervention and possible control. Slowing the processes of aging could yield powers to retard senescence, to preserve youthfulness, and to prolong life greatly, perhaps indefinitely. Should these powers become available, “Whether to wither and why?” will become questions of the utmost seriousness.

I think they should be serious questions even now, for several reasons. First, the project to control biological aging is already underway and is part of the mission of the new National Institute on Aging. Whether and how vigorously to pursue this project is thus already a matter of public policy and demands most thoughtful deliberation. Second, the consequences of any success in the campaign against aging are likely to be vast and far-reaching, affecting all our important social institutions and fundamental beliefs and practices. No other area of present biomedical research promises such profound alterations of our way of life, not to say of our condition.

But there is a more far-reaching reason for looking at the project to control aging, inasmuch as its objectives are, in many respects, continu-

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ous with the aspirations of modern medicine for longer life and better health. Indeed, prolongation of healthy and vigorous life—and ultimately, a victory over mortality—is perhaps the central goal and meaning of the modern scientific project, associated in its founding with men like Bacon and Descartes. Bacon it was who first called mankind to “the conquest of nature for the relief of man’s estate,” and there is ample suggestion in Bacon’s writings that he regarded mortality itself as that part of man’s estate from which he most needs relief. Bacon himself engaged in immortality research and may well have been its first martyr, sacrificing his life on the altar of longevity: he apparently contracted his fatal illness while performing freezing experiments on a chicken.

Descartes, in a famous passage in Part VI of the *Discourse on Method*, rejects the speculative philosophy of his predecessors in favor of a new practical philosophy that would “render ourselves as masters and possessors of nature.” “This is not merely to be desired,” he continues, “with a view to the invention of an infinity of arts and crafts which enable us to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth and all the good things which are to be found there, but also principally because it brings about the preservation of health, which is without doubt the chief blessing and the foundation of all other blessings in this life.” Descartes prophesied “that we could be free of an infinitude of maladies both of body and mind, and even also possibly of the infirmities of age, if we had sufficient knowledge of their causes, and of all the remedies with which nature has provided us.”

Examining the campaign against aging might therefore shed some light on our entire scientific and technological project—its promise and its danger, its benefits and its costs. Thought about this future—albeit somewhat futuristic—prospect may along the way illuminate current practice and belief. At a minimum it will cause us to re-examine some of the basic assumptions on which we have been proceeding—for example, that everything possible should be done to make us healthier and more vigorous, that life should be prolonged and death postponed as long as possible, and that the ultimate goal of medical research is to help us live in health and vigor, indefinitely. Most important, we might become more thoughtful about the meaning of mortality and its implications for how to live.

I

But allow me first to set out some preliminary observations and assumptions.

1. By *aging*, I mean the biological processes, distinct from disease, that make the body progressively less able to maintain itself and to

perform its various functions. Aging entails a gradual decline in vigor, a gradual degeneration of bodily parts and functions, an increasing susceptibility to disease, and an increasing likelihood of death. These changes are thought to be governed by a built-in “biological clock” or clocks, whose rate is species-specific and genetically determined.

2. By *life span*, I mean the biologically determined upper limit on longevity, different for different species, between ninety to one hundred years for human beings. This would be the life span of most of us in the absence of specific mortal diseases and fatal accidents. Thus, this specific age represents a “biological wall” against further increases in longevity by further improvements in medicine or our habits of life.

3. The biological clock and its midnight hour are probably linked; slowing of the rate of aging could very well lead to a longer life span. Most knowledgeable people agree that the rate of aging probably can be slowed, but how much slowing or lengthening of the life span is theoretically possible or technically feasible is anybody’s guess.

4. The processes of aging are extremely complex and variable. Very little is known about their causes or about how to retard them. Still, the many theories that have been advanced now stimulate a growing amount of research. Other researchers believe that methods to slow aging can be discovered empirically, in advance of a full understanding of the causes. Such research is also currently being pursued.

5. The primary biological effects of age-slowness technologies could vary considerably—from increases in vigor with no gain in longevity, to a longer life span with all stages prolonged, to a longer life with a prolonged period of decline or with partial or uncoordinated increases in vigor (for example, stronger joints but weaker memory)—and cannot now be predicted. I shall here assume what is held to be the most attractive prospect, an increase in life span with parallel increases in vigor, for ten to twenty years, but perhaps longer. I shall also assume an anti-aging technology that is easy to administer, inexpensive, and not burdensome or distasteful to the users—that is, a technology that will be widely demanded and used.

All these observations and assumptions warrant critical examination of the evidence and much further discussion. (See, for example, *Assessing Biomedical Technologies: An Inquiry into the Nature of the Process*, chapter 4, “Retardation of Aging,” The National Research Council-National Academy of Sciences, 1973.) Yet they suffice to provide a plausible and concrete basis from which to approach our more fundamental questions. And though one should not spend too much time deliberating about the impossible, one should not unduly encumber discussions of desirability with details of technique. Besides, it is ends, not means, that I wish to consider here.

II

Aging research is pursued and supported by those who aspire to longer life for man, recognizing as they do that medicine's contributions to longevity have nearly reached their natural limit. As more fatal diseases and other causes of death are brought under control, more and more people are living out the natural human life span. But aging research is also pursued and encouraged by many more who hope that it will help to prevent or treat the infirmities, degenerations, and general loss of vigor that afflict the growing number of old people. These ailments are, in large part, the hitherto necessary price for the gift of longevity, a gift made possible by previous advances in hygiene, sanitation, medicine, and general living conditions. The benefits of success for individuals are obvious—who would not like to avoid or minimize for himself or his loved ones the burdens of weakness, immobility, memory loss, and progressive blindness, deafness, and dementia? These burdens to individuals are also costly for the society: there is loss of productivity and expensive medical and social services. By reducing these losses and these costs, the community, too, would presumably benefit from alleviating the handicaps and dependencies of the aged.

Yet this is but a narrow view of the social implications of retarding aging and contains a rather shrunken view of the old. The elderly are related to us not only as non-producing objects of care and expenditure. They are, it should go without saying, in the first instance human beings—now our ancestors, soon ourselves—most of whom do not think of themselves as belonging to a separated class, insultingly called “senior citizens.” Especially as they are fit and able, they participate as individuals in the complex network of functions, institutions, customs, and rituals that bind us all together. Yet for some purposes it is useful to recognize what each of the age groups has in common and to notice as well the interdependence of these groups. It should then be clear that one cannot change the lot of one segment of the population without affecting the entire network of relations.

To begin with, if life were extended ten to twenty years, what would be the effects on the size and distribution of the population? The percentages and number of people over age sixty-five continues to increase: in 1900 they were 4 percent, today more than 11 percent of our population; in 1900, roughly 3 million, today, roughly 26 million. How would still further increases in these numbers and percentages, or the growing numbers of nonagenarians and centenarians, affect work opportunities, retirement plans, new hiring and promotion, social security, housing patterns, cultural and social attitudes and beliefs, the status of

traditions, the rate and acceptability of social change, the structure of family life, relations between the generations, or the locus of rule and authority in government, business, and the professions? Clearly these are very complex issues, affected not only by changing demographic patterns, but also by social attitudes and practices relating these various matters to perceived stages of the life cycle, and also by our ability to anticipate and plan for, or at least to respond flexibly to, dislocations and strains. Still, even the most cursory examination of any of these matters suggests that the cumulative effect of the result of aggregated individual decisions for longer and more vigorous life could be highly disruptive and undesirable, even to the point that many individuals would be *sufficiently worse off* through most of their lives as to offset the benefits of better health afforded them near the end of life. Several people have in fact predicted that retardation of aging will present a classic instance of the Tragedy of the Commons, in which genuine and sought-for gains to individuals are nullified or worse, owing to the social consequences of granting them to everyone.

Let me illustrate with one example. Consider employment. How will the large numbers of seventy- and eighty- and ninety-year-olds occupy themselves? Less infirm, more vigorous, they will be less likely to accept being cut off from power, work, money, and a place in society, and it would seem, at first glance, to be even more reprehensible than it now is to push them out of the way. New opportunities and patterns for work or leisure would appear to be needed. Mandatory retirement could be delayed, permitting the old to remain active and permitting society to gain from the continued use of their accumulated skills. But what about the numerous tedious, unrewarding, or degrading jobs? Would delaying retirement be desirable or attractive? Also, would not delayed retirement clog the promotional ladders and block opportunities for young people just starting out, raising obstacles to the ambitions and hopes of all—save for longer job security for those who have made it aboard?

The planned undertaking of second and third careers could provide alternatives to later retirement, but with few exceptions such opportunities would require re-education during mid-career, especially now that knowledge and skills needed for work are increasingly sophisticated and require more and more specialized education. These same educational requirements render difficult the development of new and rewarding uses of post-retirement leisure, and it is far from clear that leisure is most fruitfully used when stacked up at the end of a life in which work is regarded as the main source of dignity. And, in any case, if the old are to be at leisure, the middle-aged will have to pay—a task they are unlikely to want to undertake, strapped as they are by the mounting costs of

caring for their young. A basic question we are already struggling with, and not very well, is how to accommodate our growing elderly population in a society whose young people are greatly troubled by feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and alienation. If people lived healthily to 100 or 120, if institutions were altered to meet their needs, we would likely have traded our problems of the aged for problems of youth. Retardation of aging could really mean prolongation of functional immaturity. Consider the young: isolated not only from the top of the ladders of power but also from some of their lower rungs, supported by or even living with parents into their thirties or beyond, kept in a protracted sexually mature "adolescence," frustrated, disaffected, rebellious or apathetic—the picture is not difficult to complete.

Clearly, to avoid such strains and disasters, great changes in social patterns and institutions would probably be needed, changes unlikely to occur except through strong centralized planning. The coming of such centralized planning will have consequences of its own, not all of them attractive or desirable, to say the least.

I have but scratched the surface of only one of the myriad areas of concern. The implications for society will be immense, and it boggles the mind to think of identifying them, much less to evaluate whether or not, on balance, we shall be better off. Some take a very gloomy view. One scientist colleague advised me in this matter to think of society as an organism, its individual members as cells. In this metaphor, unlimited prolongation of individual life would appear as a cancer, eating away at the body politic, and preventing new life and new growth—a matter to which I shall return. Still, one should stress that questions about consequences are always in large part empirical and cannot be assessed in advance—though it is none too early to begin to formulate the questions worth asking. One thing is clear: the stakes are very high and the issues very complex—enough to make us suspect utopian promises, projected from shallow glances through narrow lenses.

Against all these concerns about social consequences, it will be argued that we will soon enough adjust to a world of longevity. We will figure out a way. This confidence rests on what seems to be good evidence: we have always adjusted in the past. Let us grant this point. Let us for now overlook the fact that adjustment does not necessarily yield a more desirable state of affairs, and that not all change is progress. Let us not try to show that this technologically induced change may produce unprecedented changes, for which the history of past adjustments to novelty is an irrelevant source of optimism. Let us accept the optimist's view: longer life for individuals is an unqualified good; we will, in due time, figure out a way to cope with the social consequences.

III

Conceding all this, how *much* longer life is an unqualified good for an individual? Ignoring now the possible harms flowing back to individuals from adverse social consequences, let us consider only the question “How much more life is good for us as individuals, other things being equal?” How much more life do we want, assuming it to be healthy and vigorous? Assuming that it were up to us to set the human life span, where would or should we set the limit and why?

The simple answer is that no limit should be set. Life is good, and death is bad. Therefore, the more life the better, provided, of course, that we remain fit and our friends do, too.

This answer has the virtues of clarity and honesty. But most public advocates of prolonging life through slowing aging deny such greediness. Immortality, or rather indefinite prolongation, is not their goal—it is, they say, out of the question (one wonders whether this is only because they deem it impossible). They hope instead for something reasonable; just a few more years.

How many years is reasonably few? Let us start with ten. Which of us would find unreasonable or unwelcome the addition of ten healthy and vigorous years to his or her life, years like those between ages thirty and forty? We could learn more, earn more, see more, do more. Maybe we should ask for five additional years? Or ten more? Why not fifteen, or twenty, or more?

If we can’t immediately land on the reasonable number of added years, perhaps we can locate the principle. What is the principle of reasonableness? Time needed for our plans and projects yet to be completed? Some multiple of the age of a generation, say, that we might live to see great grandchildren fully grown? Some notion—traditional, natural, revealed—of the proper life span for a being such as man? We have no answer to this question. We do not know even how to choose among the principles for setting our new life span. The number of years chosen will have to be arbitrary, barring some revelation or discovery.

Under such circumstances, lacking a standard of reasonableness, we fall back on our wants and desires. Under liberal democracy, this means on the desires of the majority. Though what we desire is an empirical question, I suspect we know the answer: the attachment to life—or the fear of death—knows no limits, certainly not for most human beings. It turns out that the simple answer is the best: we want to live and live and not to wither and not to die. For most of us, especially under modern secular conditions in which more and more people believe that this is the only life they have, the desire to prolong the life span (even

modestly) must be seen as expressing a desire *never* to grow old and die. However naive their counsel, those who propose immortality deserve credit: they honestly and shamelessly expose this desire.

Some, of course, eschew any desire for longer life. They profess still more modest aims: not adding years to life, but life to years. No increased life span, but only increased health, increased vigor, no decay. For them, the ideal life span would be our natural fourscore and ten, or if by reason of strength, fivescore, lived with full powers to the end, which end would come rather suddenly, painlessly, at the maximal age.

This has much to recommend it. Who would not want to avoid senility, crippling arthritis, the need for hearing aids and dentures, and the degrading dependencies of old age? Yet leaving aside whether such goals are attainable without simultaneously pushing far back the midnight hour, one must wonder whether, in the absence of these degenerations, we could remain content to spurn longer life, whether we would not become still more disinclined to exit. Would not death become even more of an affront? Would not the fear and loathing of death increase, in the absence of its antecedent harbingers? We could no longer comfort the widow by pointing out that her husband was delivered from his suffering. Death would always be untimely, unprepared for, shocking.

Montaigne saw it clearly, as he wrote in "That to Philosophize Is to Learn to Die":

I notice that in proportion as I sink into sickness, I naturally enter into a certain disdain for life. I find that I have much more trouble digesting this resolution when I am in health than when I have a fever. Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them, I come to view death with much less frightened eyes. This makes me hope that the farther I get from life and the nearer to death, the more easily I shall accept the exchange. . . . If we fell into such a change [decrepitude] suddenly, I don't think we could endure it. But when we are led by Nature's hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us into this wretched state and makes us familiar with it; so that we find no shock when youth dies within us, which in essence and in truth is a harder death than the complete death of a languishing life or the death of old age; inasmuch as the leap is not so cruel from a painful life as from a sweet and flourishing life to a grievous and painful one.

Withering is nature's preparation for death, for the one who dies and for those who look upon him. We may wish to flee from it, perhaps, or seek to cover it over, but we must be cognizant of the costs of doing so.

By the way, it is well worth pausing to ask, Of *what* will we die in that golden age of prolonged vigor? Perhaps there will be a new spate of diseases, as yet unknown. More likely, the unnatural or violent causes

will get us, as they increasingly do: some by auto, some by pistol, some by fire and some by drowning, some by lightning and some by bombing, some through anger and some through mercy, and some by poison from their own hand. Should we wish to avoid spilling blood, or desire a clean technological solution, we could require that our drink from the fountain of youth be accompanied by the implantation into our midbrains of an automatic self-destruction device, preset to go off at an unknown time some eighty to one hundred years hence. The control of natural decay might intensify the fear of violent death.

But to return from these macabre speculations to the main point: It is highly likely that either a modest prolongation of life with vigor or even only a preservation of youthfulness with no increase in longevity would make death even less acceptable, and would exacerbate the desire to keep pushing it further away—unless, for some reason, such life should also prove to be less satisfying.

Could longer, healthier life be less satisfying? How could it be, if life is good and death is bad? Perhaps the simple view is in error. Perhaps mortality is not simply an evil, perhaps it is even a blessing—not only for the welfare of the community, but even for us as individuals. How could this be?

IV

It goes without saying that there is no virtue in the death of a child or a young adult—or the untimely or premature death of anyone—before they have attained to the measure of man's days. I do not mean to imply that there is virtue in the particular *event* of death for anyone. Nor am I suggesting that separation through death is ever anything but pain for the survivors, those for whom the deceased was an integral part of their lives. Nor have I forgotten that, at whatever age, the process of dying can be painful and degrading, smelly and mean—though we now have powerful means to reduce much of, at least, the physical agony. Instead my question concerns the fact of our finitude, the fact of our mortality—that is, the fact that we must die, the fact that a full life for human beings has a biological, built-in limit, one that has evolved as part of our nature. Does this fact also have value? Is our finitude good for us—as individuals? (I intend this question entirely in the realm of natural reason and apart from any question about a life after death.)

To praise mortality must seem to be madness. If mortality is a blessing, it surely is not widely regarded as such. Life seeks to live, and rightly suspects all counsels of finitude. “Better to be a slave on earth than the king over all the dead,” says Achilles in Hades to the visiting

Odysseus, in apparent regret for his prior choice of the short but glorious life (*Odyssey*, Book XI, 489). Moreover, though some cultures—like the Eskimo—can instruct and moderate somewhat the lust for life, ours gives it free rein, beginning with a political philosophy founded on the fear of violent death and on the mastery of nature for the relief of man's estate, and reaching to our current cults of youth and novelty, the cosmetic replastering of the wrinkles of age, and the widespread, and not wholly irrational, anxiety about disease and survival. Finally, the virtues of finitude—if there are any—may never be widely appreciated in any age or culture, if appreciation depends on a certain wisdom, if wisdom requires a certain detachment from the love of oneself and one's own, and if the possibility of such detachment is given only to the few.

It is, I recognize, awkward, and perhaps improper, for a relatively young man—I am forty-four—to praise mortality, especially before his elders. Doubtless, there are people reading this essay who are close to death, who may indeed know that they or a loved one is dying, and my remarks may give offense or may appear insensitive. More important, because of the apparent remoteness of my own end of days, I may simply not know what I am talking about. If wisdom comes through suffering, perhaps only among the old can there be wisdom about mortality. I am acutely aware of these possibilities, but I persist, offering as my excuse that, if I am off the mark, time will teach me my lessons, and that, in any case, whether my answer be right or wrong, the question is certainly worth thinking about.

Let us, then, consider the problem of *boredom* and *tedium*. If the life span were increased—say by twenty years—would the pleasures of life increase proportionately? Would professional tennis players really enjoy playing 25 percent more games of tennis? Would the Don Juans of our world feel better for having seduced 1,250 women rather than 1,000? Having experienced the joys and tribulations of bringing up a family until the last left for college, how many parents would like to extend the experience by another ten years? Similarly, those who derive their satisfaction from progressing up the career ladder might well ask what there would be to do for fifteen years after one had become president of General Motors or after one had been chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee for a quarter of a century. Even less clear are the additions to personal happiness from more-of-the-same of the less pleasant and fulfilling activities that so many of us engage in so much of the time. It seems to be as the poet says: "We move and ever spend our lives amid the same things, and not by any length of life is any new pleasure hammered out." (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book III, 1080)

The problem of boredom is worse for us than it once might have been

because of how we have come to understand it. For us, with our self-centered views, the fear of boredom is the fear that sooner or later the world and its objects will fail us. For the medievals, boredom meant that we will fail the world. They regarded boredom as a defect within oneself. It was an aspect of sloth—one of the seven deadly sins, according to Thomas Aquinas—a sin against the Sabbath, that is, against the created order, not, as we might think, against the workweek.

The question of boredom leads directly to the second and more serious question, the question of *seriousness*. Could life be serious or meaningful without the limit of mortality? Is not the limit on our time the ground of our taking life seriously and living it passionately? To know and to feel that one goes around only once, and that the deadline is not out of sight, is for many people the necessary spur to the pursuit of something worthwhile. To number our days is the condition for making them count and for treasuring and appreciating all that life brings. Homer's immortals, for all their eternal beauty and youthfulness, live shallow and rather frivolous lives, their passions only transiently engaged, in first this and then that. They live as spectators of the mortals, who by comparison have depth, aspiration, genuine feeling, and hence a real center to their lives. Mortality makes life matter—not only in the chemist's sense.

There may be some activities, especially in some human beings, that do not require finitude as a spur. A powerful desire for understanding can do without external proddings, let alone one related to our mortality; and, as there is never too much time to learn and to understand, longer, vigorous life might be simply a boon. The best sorts of friendship, too, seem capable of indefinite growth, especially when growth is somehow tied to learning—though whether real friendship doesn't depend somehow on the shared perceptions of a common fate is a good question. But, in any case, I suspect these are among the rare exceptions. For most activities, and for most of us, I think it is crucial that we recognize and feel the force of not having world enough and time.

A third matter: *Beauty*. Death, says the poet, is the mother of beauty. What he means is not easy to say. Perhaps he means that only a mortal being, aware of his mortality and the transience and vulnerability of all natural things, is moved to make beautiful artifacts, objects that will last, objects whose order will be immune to decay as their maker is not, beautiful objects that will bespeak and beautify a world that needs beautification, beautiful objects for other mortal beings who can appreciate what they themselves cannot make, because of a taste for the beautiful, a taste perhaps connected to awareness of the ugliness of decay.

Perhaps the poet means to speak of natural beauty as well, which beauty—unlike that of objects of art—depends on its impermanence. Does the beauty of flowers depend on the fact that they will soon wither? Does the beauty of spring warblers depend upon the fall drabness that precedes and follows? What about the fading, late afternoon winter light or the spreading sunset? In general, is change necessary to the beautiful? Is the beautiful necessarily fleeting, a peak that cannot be sustained? Or does the poet perhaps mean not that the beautiful is beautiful because mortal, but that our appreciation of its beauty depends on our appreciation of mortality—in us and in the beautiful? Does not love swell before the beautiful precisely on recognition that it (and we) will not always be? It seems too much to say that mortality is the cause of beauty and the worth of things, but not at all much to suggest that it may be the cause of our enhanced appreciation of the beautiful and the worthy and of our treasuring and loving them.

Finally there is the matter of that peculiarly human beauty, the beauty of *character*, of *virtue*, of *moral excellence*. To be mortal means that it is possible to give one's life, not only in one moment, say, on the field of battle—though that excellence is nowadays improperly despised—but also in the many other ways in which we are able in action to rise above attachment to survival. Through moral courage, endurance, greatness of soul, generosity, devotion to justice—in acts great and small—we rise above our mere creatureliness for the sake of the noble and the good. We free ourselves from fear, from bodily pleasures, or from attachments to wealth—all largely connected with survival—and in doing virtuous deeds overcome the weight of our neediness; yet for this nobility, vulnerability and mortality are the necessary conditions. The immortals cannot be noble.

Of this, too, the poets teach. Odysseus, long suffering, has already heard Achilles' testimony in praise of life, when he is offered immortal life by the nymph Calypso. She is a beautiful goddess, attractive, kind, yielding; she sings sweetly and weaves on a golden loom; her island is well ordered and lovely, free of hardships and suffering. Says the poet, "Even a god who came into that place would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within him." Yet Odysseus turns down the offer to be lord of her household and immortal:

Goddess and queen, do not be angry with me. I myself know that all you say is true and that circumspect Penelope can never match the impression you make for beauty and stature. She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless. But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for is to go back to my house and see the day of my homecoming. And if some god batters me far out on the wine-blue water, I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me, for already I

have suffered much and done much hard work on the waves and in the fighting. (*Odyssey*, Book V, 215–224)

To suffer, to endure, to trouble oneself for the sake of home, family, and genuine friendship is truly to live and is the clear choice of this exemplary mortal. This choice is both the mark of his excellence and the basis for the visible display of his excellence in deeds both noble and just. Immortality is a kind of oblivion—like death itself.

V

Though in arguing the case for mortality I have tried to show that necessity is the mother of virtue, some might argue that I am rather trying to make a virtue of necessity, and, soon, not such a necessary necessity. Perhaps if we lived indefinitely, we would have no need of engagement, seriousness, beauty, or virtue. For we would be altogether different beings, perhaps capable of other satisfactions and achievements—though God only knows what they would be. And if mortality were such a blessing, why do so few cultures recognize it as such? Why do so many teach the promise of life after death, of something eternal, of something imperishable? We must face this challenge, for it leads us to the very heart of the question about mortality and the way we think about it.

What is the meaning of this concern with immortality? We are interested here not in the theological question but in the anthropological one: Why do human beings seek immortality? Why do we want to live longer or forever? Is it really first, and most, because we do not want to die, because we do not want to leave this embodied life on earth or give up our earthly pastimes, because we want to see more and do more? I do not think so. This may be what we say, but it is not what we mean. Mortality as such is not our defect, nor is bodily immortality our goal. Rather mortality is at most a pointer, a derivative manifestation, or an accompaniment of some deeper deficiency. That so many cultures speak of a promise of immortality and eternity suggests, first of all, a certain truth about the human soul: the human soul yearns for, longs for, aspires to some condition, some state, some goal toward which our earthly activities are directed but which cannot be attained during earthly life. Our soul's reach exceeds our grasp; it seeks more than continuance; it reaches for something beyond us, something that for the most part eludes us. True happiness, a genuine fulfillment of these deepest longings of our soul, is not in our power and cannot be fully attained, much less commanded. Our distress with mortality is the derivative

manifestation of the conflict between the transcendent longings of the soul and the all-too-finite powers and fleshly concerns of the body.

What is it that we lack and long for? Notwithstanding their differences, many of our poets and philosophers have tried to tell us. One possibility is completion in another person. In Plato's *Symposium*, the comic poet Aristophanes speaks of the tragedy of human love and its unfulfillable aspiration. You may recall how we are said to spend our lives searching for our own complement, our own other half, from whom we have been separated since Zeus cleaved our original nature in half:

When one of them—whether he be a boy-lover or a lover of any other sort—happens on his own particular half, the two of them are wondrously thrilled with friendship and intimacy and love, and are hardly to be induced, as it is said, to leave each other's side for a single moment. These are they who continue together throughout life, though they could not even say what they would have of one another. No one could imagine this to be the mere sexual connexion, or that such alone could be the reason why each rejoices in the other's company with so eager a zest: obviously *the soul of each is wishing for something else that it cannot express, only divining and darkly hinting what it wishes* [italics added]. Suppose that, as they lay together, Hephaestus should come and stand over them, and showing his implements should ask: "What is it, good mortals, that you would have of one another?"—and suppose that in their perplexity he asked them again: "Do you desire to be joined in the closest possible union, so that you shall not be divided by night or by day? If that is your craving, I am ready to fuse and weld you together in a single piece, that from being two you may be made one, that so long as you live, the pair of you, being as one, may share a single life; and that when you die you also in Hades yonder be one instead of two, having shared a single death. Bethink yourselves if this is your heart's desire and if you will be quite contented with this lot." Not one on hearing this, we are sure, would demur to it or would be found wishing for anything else: Each would unreservedly deem that he had been offered just what he was yearning for all the time, namely, to be so joined and fused with his beloved that the two might be made one. For this is the cause, that our ancient nature was this way and we were wholes: to the desire and pursuit of the whole, then, we give the name *eros*. (*Symposium*, 192B–193A)

Plato's Socrates both agrees and disagrees with Aristophanes. He agrees that we long for wholeness, completeness, but not in bodily or psychic union with a unique beloved. Rather, *eros* is the soul's longing for the noetic vision—that is, for the sight of the beautiful truth about the whole: our soul aspires most to be completed by knowledge, by understanding, by wisdom; for only by possessing such wisdom about the whole could we truly come to ourselves, could we be truly happy. Yet Plato too strongly hints that wisdom is not given to human beings, at least not in this life; *philosophia*, yes, the love and pursuit of wisdom, yes, but the possession of wisdom, no.

The Bible also teaches about human aspiration. Once we dwelled in the presence of God, the source of all goodness and righteousness; now we are estranged. That separation from God's presence occurs as the immediate result of eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, itself an act of autonomy (since all choice is non-obedience) and hence of separation. The serpent promised "and your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as God," but "their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked." No, we are not as God; we are naked, weak, not self-sufficient, possessed by powerful and rebellious desires that we can neither master nor satisfy alone. We are ashamed before ourselves, and we hide from God, even before we are caught and punished, and well before we are blocked from the possibility of tasting of the tree of life. The expulsion from the garden merely ratifies our estrangement from God and testifies to our insufficiency, of which our accompanying mortality is but a visible sign—or perhaps even God's gift to put an end to our sad awareness of deficiency.

The decisive facts about all these—and many other—accounts of human aspiration, notwithstanding their differences, are the following:

1. Man longs not so much for deathlessness as for wholeness, wisdom, goodness.
2. This longing cannot be satisfied fully in our embodied earthly life—the only life, by natural reason, we know we have. Hence the attractiveness of any prospect or promise of a different and thereby fulfilling life hereafter. We are, in principle, unfulfilled and unfulfillable in earthly life, though human happiness—that semblance of complete happiness of which we are capable—lies in pursuing that completion to the full extent of our powers.
3. Death itself, mortality, is not the defect, but a mark of that defect.

From these facts, the decisive inference is this:

This longing—any of these longings—cannot be answered by prolonging earthly life. No amount of more-of-the-same will satisfy our own deepest aspirations.

Even the Christian promise of the end of days, which includes a resurrection of the body, is not to be understood vulgarly as the beginning of a never-ending and greatly eased earthly life of the sort we know, an uninterrupted gala of wining and dining, of winters in the Bahamas and summers on the Riviera, of disco dancing in golden slippers and Super Bowls on the heavenly turf, of listening to Elvis Presley or Caruso, of playing ball with Babe Ruth or making love to Marilyn Monroe. The kingdom of heaven is a promise of redemption, of purity, of wholeness in the presence of love and holiness.

If this is correct, then the proper meaning of the taste for immortality, for the imperishable and eternal, is not a taste that the conquest of aging would satisfy: we would still be incomplete; we would still lack wisdom; we would still lack God's presence; we would still lack purity. Mere continuance will not buy happiness. Worse, its pursuit threatens human happiness by distracting us from the goal(s) toward which our souls naturally point. By diverting our aim, by misdirecting so much individual and social energy toward the goal of bodily immortality, we may seriously undermine our chances for living as well as we can and for satisfying to some extent, however incompletely, our deepest longings for what is best. The implication for human life is hardly nihilistic: once we acknowledge and accept our finitude, we can concern ourselves rather with living well, and care first and foremost for the *well-being* of our souls, and not so much for their mere existence.

VI

But perhaps this is all a mistake. Perhaps there is no such longing of the soul. Perhaps there is no soul. Certainly modern biology doesn't speak about the soul; neither does medicine or even our healers of the soul, our psychiatrists. Perhaps we are just animals, complex ones to be sure, but animals nonetheless, content just to be here, frightened in the face of danger, avoiding pain, seeking pleasure.

Curiously, however, biology has its own view of our nature and its inclinations. Biology also teaches about transcendence, though it eschews talk about the soul. Much as it acknowledges and delineates our capacities and instincts for self-preservation and our remarkable powers to restore and maintain our wholeness, biology, too, teaches us how our life points beyond itself—to our offspring, to our community, to our species. Man, like the other animals, is built for reproduction. Man, more than other animals, is also built for sociality. And, man, alone among the animals, is built for culture—not only through capacities to transmit and receive skills and techniques, but also through capacities for shared beliefs, opinions, rituals, traditions. The origins of these powers for culture and their significance are matters of dispute, but their existence is not.

Many have called attention to man's remarkable biological characteristics that prepare him for culture, including the following: (1) the prolonged period of neonatal yet still embryonic dependence and development, called by Portmann the period in the social womb, during which the child learns to speak and stand and begins to perform voluntary actions; (2) the upright posture, which permits a beholding of the world (in turn eliciting our curiosity), which exposes things at a

distance and at the same time frees the hands to fashion means for overcoming distance, which brings us face to face with our fellows, opposed but in communication; (3) our capacity for speech, requiring special laryngeal, respiratory, and cerebral development, as well as a relation to others with whom that capacity is actualized through a learned language; (4) a sense of time and powers of imagination and forethought for the future; (5) special social passions, such as friendliness, shame, pity, and respect, which permit and are cultivated in community; and (6) special ethical powers, including a capacity for acquiring a sense of responsibility, of fairness, and concern for posterity, which culture requires but also nurtures.

To be sure, the present orthodoxy in sociobiology treats our sociality as but a fancy mechanism geared to the sole end of the survival of the human gene pool. A richer sociobiology might come to understand that it is not just *survival*, but survival of *what*, that matters. It might again remember that sociality and culture, admittedly part of the means of preservation, are also part of the end for which we seek to preserve ourselves, and that only in community and through culture do we come into our own as that most special animal. But however this may be, biology does teach that we must see ourselves as species-directed, and not merely self-directed. We are built with leanings toward and capacities for perpetuation.

Is it not possible that aging and mortality are part of this construction, and that life span and the rate of aging have been selected for their usefulness to the task of perpetuation? Could not overturning the process of aging place a great strain on our nature, jeopardizing our project and depriving us of success? For, interestingly, perpetuation is a goal that is attainable. Here is transcendence of self that is largely realizable. Here is a form of participation in the enduring that is open to us, without qualification—provided, that is, that we remain open to it.

Biological consequences aside, simply to covet a prolonged life span for ourselves is both a sign and a cause of our failure to open ourselves to this—or any higher—purpose. It is probably no accident that it is a generation whose intelligentsia proclaim the meaninglessness of life that embarks on its indefinite prolongation and that seeks to cure the emptiness of life by extending it. For the desire to prolong youthfulness is not only a childish desire to eat one's life and keep it; it is also an expression of a childish and narcissistic wish incompatible with devotion to posterity. It seeks an endless present, isolated from anything truly eternal, and severed from any true continuity with past and future. It is in principle hostile to children, because children, those who come after, are those who will take one's place; they are life's answer to mortality, and their presence in one's house is a constant reminder that one no

longer belongs to the frontier generation. One cannot pursue youthfulness for oneself and remain faithful to the spirit and meaning of perpetuation.

In perpetuation, we send forth not just the seed of our bodies, but also a bearer of our hopes, our truths, and those of our tradition. If our children are to flower, we need to sow them well and nurture them, cultivate them in rich and wholesome soil, clothe them in fine and decent opinions and mores, and direct them toward the highest light, to stand straight and tall—that they may take our place as we took that of those who planted us and who made way for us, so that in time they, too, may make way and plant. But if they are truly to flower, we must go to seed; we must wither and give ground.

To be fair, I must confess that to seek immortality through one's children can be a snare and a delusion, perhaps today more than ever. Continuity of lineage, and, more important, of mores and beliefs, is in no way assured, not least because our ethos has become less hospitable to the concern for transmission, in our effort to push back our own deaths and ensure our private rights to the endless pursuit of happiness, understood as end-less pursuit. But there is something that we can certainly preserve and perpetuate, and only through sowing fresh seed. To see this we need to look again at the nature of growing old.

Those who look primarily at the aging of the body and those who look upon the social and cultural aspects of aging forget a crucial third aspect: the psychological effects simply of the passage of time—that is, of experiencing and learning about the way things are. After a while, no matter how healthy we are, no matter how respected and well-placed we are socially, most of us cease to look upon the world with fresh eyes. Little surprises us, nothing shocks us, righteous indignation at injustice dies out. We have seen it all already, seen it all. We have often been deceived, we have made many mistakes of our own. Many of us become small-souled, having been humbled not by bodily decline and not by “the system” but by life itself. So our ambition also begins to flag, or at least our noblest ambitions. As we grow older, we “aspire,” as Aristotle puts it in the *Rhetoric*, “to nothing great and exalted and crave the mere necessities and comforts of existence.” At some point, most of us turn and say to our intimates, “Is this all there is?” and we settle, we accept our situation, if we are lucky enough to have been prepared to accept it. In many ways, perhaps in the most profound ways, most of us go to sleep long before our deaths. In the young, aspiration, hope, freshness, boldness, openness spring anew—even if and when it takes the form of overturning our monuments. Immortality for oneself through children may be a delusion, but participating in the natural and eternal renewal of human possibility through children is not—not even in today's world.

THE CASE FOR MORTALITY

For it still stands as it did when Homer made Glaukos say to Diomedes:

As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground, but the live timber burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. So one generation of man will grow while another dies. (*Iliad*, Book VI, 146–150)

And yet it also still stands, as this very insight of Homer's itself reveals, that human beings are in another and decisive respect unlike the leaves; that the eternal renewal of human beings embraces also the eternally human possibility of learning and self-awareness; that we, too, here and now may participate with Homer, with Plato, with the Bible, yes with Descartes and Bacon, in catching at least some glimpse of the enduring truths about nature and human affairs; and that we, too, may hand down and perpetuate this pursuit of wisdom and goodness to succeeding generations for all time to come.