Thirst for life: Do we really want to live forever?

by Gilbert Meilaender in the April 17, 2013 issue

As the number of our years increases, as we age in that simple chronological sense, we also age in a more important and profound sense. Gradually but progressively our bodies begin to function less effectively, and that increasing loss of function makes us more vulnerable to disease and death. Nevertheless, we distinguish aging from disease. Unlike disease, aging is a normal stage of life that seems built in. Though it makes us more vulnerable to disease, it is not itself a pathology.

Is it any surprise, then, that we have mixed feelings about aging? We're a bit like the character in Wallace Stegner's novel *The Spectator Bird* whose "last Christmas letter contained a line that should be engraved above every geriatric door. He says that when asked if he feels like an old man he replies that he does not, he feels like a young man with something the matter with him." Our uncertainties can only become more pronounced as we find ourselves in a world where life prolongation and age retardation have become serious scientific projects pursued (and funded) by serious men and women.

For the moment this often means simply taking some rather conventional steps—diet, exercise, stress reduction—though, to be sure, taking them with intensity. But many hope that such measures will keep us in good health so that we can profit still more from an era, perhaps on the horizon, in which biotechnological

advances will ceaselessly repair the accumulated damage in our bodies that is the mark of aging. This repair may take many forms—chromosome replacement, regenerative medicine using cloned stem cells, drugs that mimic the effects of caloric restriction or that lengthen telomeres.

Whatever the precise route or routes may be, however, many are eager to move beyond the psalmist's depiction of our life as "threescore years and ten" or perhaps "by reason of strength fourscore." So, for example, on his widely read blog Instapundit, Glenn Reynolds often links to stories reporting on possible advances in antiaging technologies. And having linked to such a report, he then regularly adds his own very brief comment: "Faster, please."

Desirable as indefinite life prolongation may sound to us, at least in some of our moods it invites us to forget another kind of desire that those who are creatures should not quench. Josef Pieper observes that St. Thomas saw that "a being obviously directed toward something else 'cannot possibly have as his ultimate goal the preservation of his own existence!' In other words, the allaying of the thirst cannot consist simply in the mere continued existence of the thirster." Remembering this, we may wonder whether full speed ahead is the right attitude to take toward research aimed at indefinite extension of life.

How, then, shall we think about the related projects of age retardation and life prolongation? I imagine a conversation among three friends—Artie, Augie and Frank. None of them supposes he has all the answers. Each is intrigued by the views of the other two. But each surely thinks that his view best captures how we ought to think. It might go something like this.

Frank: I'm a little baffled by you two. Both of you say that you think life is a great good for human beings. You, Augie, even talk of it often as a blessing. But when I say we should try to prolong it as much as possible, neither one of you seems to agree. If life is so good, what's wrong with wanting more of it?

Artie: Of course, it's not wrong in every instance to want to prolong life. But have I ever really said to you that life itself, just more moments of it, is good? If I have, I should take it back. What's good is not simply more life but a complete life—a life that has a certain form and trajectory, that moves through stages that give it meaning. To die prematurely is to die before that trajectory is completed. But to want to hang on indefinitely after we've worked our way to the end of the story

doesn’t seem to me to get more of a good thing but instead to destroy what gives life its beauty.

Frank: Has it ever occurred to you that you might be too fond of the word *trajectory* ?

Artie: Well, I’ll try not to take refuge in it too often. But my point is simply that life is not just a series of identical moments, coming one after the other and capable of indefinite extension. The moments of our lives have different meanings—and a different feel—precisely because they have different places in the whole. Surely you understand that. You wouldn’t put the first paragraph of one of your essays at the end; its meaning depends on its location in the “trajectory” of the entire argument. For you more life is all that counts; for me a complete life is the good we should desire.

Frank: I can’t see that your notion of completion is more attractive than living on indefinitely at the peak of my powers, even if that means one moment is pretty much like those that come before and follow after it. They’d be good moments. More life sounds just fine to me.

Artie: Of course you assume it would be at the peak of your powers. Do you know the story of Tithonus?

Frank: Yes, I know it, and I’ve thought about it. I never said that prolonged senescence was a desirable outcome of extending life. Longer life has to come in tandem with retarding aging in all possible ways, physical and mental. But why be a skeptic about what researchers may be able to accomplish? It’s a brave man who bets against scientific progress.

Artie: I don’t bet against it. I’m just not sure I’m ready to agree with you about what would constitute progress. Augie, you’ve been awfully quiet. Where do you come down on this question?

Augie: Well, I’m afraid that I agree with you both—and disagree with you both. I surely do agree with Frank that this life, even with its (sometimes very great) dangers and problems, is a blessing. So wanting more of it doesn’t seem silly at all. But I also agree with you, Artie, that life seems to need what—avoiding the word *trajectory*—I’ll just call a shape. And one of the things that gives it shape is that at some point it comes to completion.

Frank: So you agree with both of us. I'm not sure how that helps, but what about the disagreement? You said you also disagree with us.

Augie: Whether our ideal is simply more life or a complete life, in either case something would still—it seems to me—be missing. I think of us as being on the way toward something we can't quite seem to get hold of. There's a thirst in us that is not just a desire for more life and not just a desire for a complete life. I always think of our lives in relation to God. So in one way it makes no difference whether our lives are long or short; every moment in them is equidistant from God. In another way, of course, it does make a difference, since this life has a God-given shape that brings it to a kind of earthly completion. That much Artie has right. But ours is a composite nature—we are organisms, but organisms who are drawn out of ourselves toward God—and Artie sometimes sees only one part of that picture. You, Frank, also see a part of the truth. It must be true that we should often use our freedom to make life better, but if that freedom to make and remake ourselves without limit were the only truth about us, we'd be thinking of ourselves almost as gods, rather than seeing ourselves as creatures in relation to God.

Artie: I'm not sure that's quite fair. I grant that we have what you call a composite nature, that we're not just bodies. I just don't know where all this talk about God comes from. Why don't we try a slightly different angle? Part of a complete life is that we produce those who will come after us and, having produced them, we must eventually give way to them. So even if it seems paradoxical, part of flourishing as the creatures we are is going to seed and, eventually, dying.

Augie: You're right, I think, that producing and nurturing the next generation, accepting that they will take our place, makes us better people. It teaches us gratitude for the gift of our own lives.

Frank: Gratitude to whom?

Augie: I suppose that's a question that Artie and I will have to take up another time.

Frank: I can't say that I feel any strong urge to produce my replacement. I'm quite content to hang onto my life for as long as I can.

Augie: I didn't say you could be replaced; I said others would take your place. There's a difference.

Artie: You know, Frank, I'm not sure I believe that you would be content just to hang onto your own life indefinitely. It's natural to want to have children, to care for them and to hand on to them our culture and beliefs. Not wanting to be replaced strikes me as narcissistic, not virtuous. In fact, in your quite different ways both you and Augie seem to forget that living on and on almost forever might become rather boring. We're bodies, after all. Human beings have limited capacities, and we'd eventually run out of new sources for enjoyment. The goodness of anything, even the best of things, eventually loses its power to delight.

Augie: Anything? What about the face of someone you love? Doesn't it at least suggest to you that there must be a face you would be content to love forever?

Frank: *Natural*, as someone once said, is a word to conjure with. What's natural, it seems to me, is to exercise our rational freedom (call it "God-given freedom" if you like, Augie) in order to make our lives better and satisfy our desires more fully. Artie, you think we'll get bored if we live too long, because the capacities of human beings are limited. But let your imagination soar a bit. Already we're learning to take baby steps to enhance and reshape our lives. We're not bodies, we're free spirits who for now have to use our organic bodies as the best prosthesis available. Some day we'll cast them off and be free of the limits you seem to like so much. And we'll get a real immortality, not the sort that Augie tries so hard to sell.

Artie: Those are fine words, Frank, though perhaps tinged with just a hint of desperation. But I don't think you can actually live in accord with your theory. I don't think you can love others, share a life with them and be fully involved in their lives, while all the time thinking of yourself as detached from the body that connects you to them. And there's something wrong with a theory that can't be lived.

Augie: And I marvel, Frank, that you find my talk of a resurrected body to be an unbelievable flight of fancy! What you can't tolerate, I'm afraid, is some contingency and mystery in life. But it's just that contingency that makes life sweet and, at the same time, suggests the promise of something more.

Clearly, this is a conversation that could continue indefinitely; it need not come to an end here. But we can pause and take stock for a moment. Three general angles of vision compete for our allegiance. Not all are equally persuasive or wise, in my view, but each makes central an aspect of our nature that is genuinely important, hence each has a place in the conversation.

We may focus on the fact that human beings are organisms, embedded in the finite, natural world and following the trajectory of all organic life through relatively fixed stages of life—from modest beginnings to full blossoming of capacities (including the capacity to generate a successor generation) and eventually “going to seed.” From this first perspective, our commitment to age retardation brings not only benefits but also harms and should, in any case, be a modest commitment.

We may, by contrast, focus on that which distinguishes human beings from other organisms, namely, the freedom and reason that allow us indefinitely to transcend the limits of our finite condition, to make and remake ourselves in ever new ways that may promise (or threaten) to transcend our organic beginnings. From this second perspective, the projects of age retardation and life prolongation testify to what is most human about us—a freedom that knows few limits.

A third alternative is to discern in humans a nature marked not only by organic limits and rational freedom but by something we may describe as “ecstatic.” That is, we are characterized by a thirst that can be quenched neither by making our peace with the beauty and pathos of the limits of organic life nor by continual progress in the improvement and extension of our lives. We are, in this view, drawn out of ourselves toward God, and satisfaction of that longing could not possibly come from more of this life, however long extended. From this third perspective, we can and should think it a blessing that our lives are of limited duration—not because this life is not good, but because it cannot finally bring the completion needed for us truly to flourish.

My own view, like Augie’s, is that the third perspective best captures the truth of who we are and who we are yet to become. There is sometimes good reason, as we age, to feel that something is the matter with us. There is also good reason to feel that we are young—with the youthfulness of eternity.

This article is adapted from Gilbert Meilaender's book Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging*, just published by Eerdmans.*