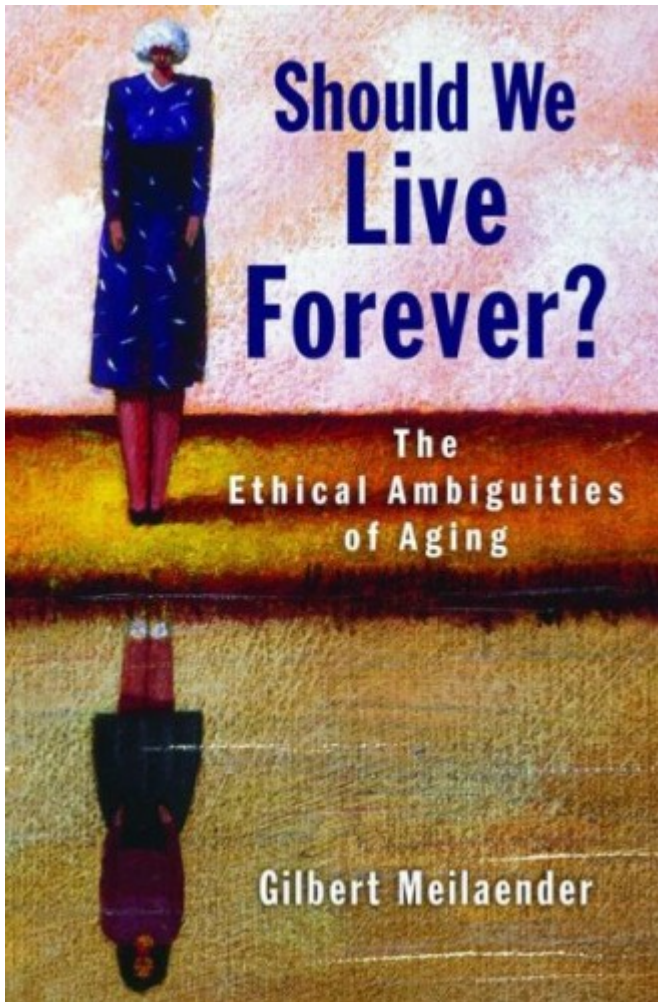


Should We Live Forever? by Gilbert Meilaender

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Should We Live Forever?

by Gilbert Meilaender
Eerdmans

By book 10 of his *Confessions*, Augustine has completed the narration of his long, often tortuous spiritual journey from paganism to Christianity. He has not, however, found a resting place. Having gone through a cathartic conversion, Augustine might

now be expected to provide his readers with insights into the nature of the Christian faith and the meaning of life. Instead, he acknowledges his continued ignorance and intractable limits: “What then am I, my God? What is my nature?” He concludes that the answers are not found within but only from and in God. “I dive down deep as I can, and I can find no end.”

Augustine’s narrative serves as an analogy to the journey on which Gilbert Meilaender takes readers in *Should We Live Forever?* A professor of Christian ethics at Valparaiso University in Indiana, Meilaender considers the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the modern technologies that promise to extend our physical existence. With daily developments in the scientific fight to battle aging, we can live longer and longer. There is a day on the horizon—perhaps in the not too distant future—when those with the will and the resources might be able to extend their biological lives indefinitely. Meilaender notes that “we often desire, even greedily desire, longer life” but wonders “whether what we desire is truly desirable.” We soon may be able to live much longer lives, but should we pursue such a goal?

Meilaender does not ask this question from a position of fear; he does not oppose science and modern medical advances. Indeed, he served for almost a decade on the President’s Council on Bioethics and recently received a grant from the Templeton Foundation to study the implications of antiaging research as part of the University of Chicago’s New Science of Virtues project. He believes that we should try to eradicate disease. But does this mean we should also try to eradicate aging?

Meilaender’s path to an answer is not a linear one. He does not provide a logician’s argument in opposition to technological efforts to extend life indefinitely. Instead, the volume emerges as a meditation on life and mortality, circling around certain themes from multiple perspectives and relying on the insights of poets and novelists as often as the arguments of medical researchers.

Meilaender turns to analogies of banquets and flower arranging, for instance, to develop the point that life is meant to have a narrative shape—a beginning, a middle and an end. He writes, “One very old way of depicting that shape is to picture life as a banquet, with a succession of courses through which one proceeded—and also . . . having a stopping point beyond which the banquet cannot be prolonged without destroying its pleasure.” And there is beauty in the later years of life. Meilaender quotes Daniel Callahan: “An imaginative flower arranger . . . said that the secret lies in learning how to work with the material at hand, not longing for flowers not

available. He then demonstrated what he meant by fashioning a wonderful arrangement from roadside weeds." For Meilaender, we are enriched by the aging process, even by aspects that some people consider problematic. To deny aging is to deny something that is essentially human.

But some essential aspects of humanity are incompatible with the goal of living indefinitely. Meilaender develops the concept of generativity: the "human virtue that makes us ready, even eager, to produce those who will replace us and to sacrifice ourselves on their behalf." It is for good reason that humans' generative nature has been the focus of centuries of discourse, from ancient myths and scripture to modern novels and movies.

What would happen if the natural succession of human generations were to cease? What would be the implications of living indefinitely for family roles, the relationship between old and young, and the promise offered by those who are yet to come? "Whatever the gain might be of retarding aging and extending life indefinitely," Meilaender concludes, "doing so could undermine the relation between the generations that shapes and defines so much of our lives."

Precisely because of our mortality and our lack of control over it, we are able to develop virtues such as dependence on God and patience as we wait for God to deliver us from this life. These virtues could be lost in a world in which we define the time of our own exit, scheduling death on the basis of individual will and personal resources.

The common premise of Meilaender's various arguments is that our lives are leading to something more important than the here and now; that there is something to be patient for; that we can have faith in the Christian promise that there is something greater than this world. As Meilaender writes:

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 . . . drawn out of ourselves toward God, and satisfaction of that longing could not possibly come from more of this life, however long extended.

Meilaender argues that the essence of human life is found in a multistage process that has not only a beginning and a middle but also a worldly end. Like Augustine before him, he holds that this human journey, no matter how long it is extended on

this planet, can never be complete until it finds rest in God.