

# Ethical issues in the future of life extension

(and their implications for the present)

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# Some arguments that don't provide good reasons to reject life extension...

- ▶ “Radical life extension will change the face of society”
- ▶ “We'll get tired of life”
- ▶ “We'll lose our sense of personal identity”
- ▶ “There are better uses of resources than prolonging the lives of those who have already had many years”
- ▶ “The planet will become overcrowded”

... but should give us reasons to think!

# “Life extension will change society”

- ▶ **Argument:** Living to 150 and beyond will produce social changes with unknown consequences
  - For example, it will become commonplace to know your great-grandchildren, and to have two or more working career lifespans, or to have a very long retirement
- ▶ **Counter-argument:** We have already seen social change as a result of increased lifespan
  - Change is not necessarily a bad thing
  - We shouldn't avoid it just because the consequences are uncertain
- ▶ **What this should prompt us to think about today:**
  - These changes have (in some cases) happened without much forethought or policy planning!
  - What should we be thinking about now in order to shape thoughtful policies for a life-extended future?

# “We’ll get tired of life”

- ▶ Argument: Extended life will eventually become burdensome
- ▶ Counter–argument: Well, we can always choose to stop living!
- ▶ What this should prompt us to think about:
  - Do we pay enough attention to issues of welfare and social care for the aged today?
  - If life is or becomes burdensome for many people in the later years of life, why is this the case?
  - Clearly we don’t think this should be addressed by suggesting they stop living!
  - What else can we do about it?

# “We’ll lose our sense of identity”

- ▶ Argument: If you live for an extremely long time, you will eventually cease to be the same person; therefore extending life is meaningless as it does not mean ‘you’ yourself will continue to exist
- ▶ Counter-arguments:
  - Dependent on how we understand identity and what is important to us about existence
  - Continuity can be important even during process of gradual change
  - We already experience radical changes to our sense of self and identity during the ‘normal’ lifespan
- ▶ But we should also think about:
  - What are the challenges to identity and selfhood that are experienced by ageing people living through social change over several decades?
  - Are we sufficiently prepared to help them deal with this?

# “There are better things to do”

- ▶ Argument: instead of spending our resources on prolonging the lives of relatively few, we should allocate our health care / research resources
  - where they will do more good
  - where the good they do will be more fairly distributed
- ▶ Counter-arguments:
  - Not a reason to *reject* life extension as such
  - Some of these resources aren't available for other purposes
- ▶ The reality today:
  - We *already* have a massive problem of justice in how we allocate health care and research resources on a global scale! What are we going to do about this?
    - Not just life extension / ageing therapy... most of medical treatments in the developed world!

# “The planet will become overcrowded”

- ▶ Argument: If ageing postpones death indefinitely but people keep reproducing, the population will grow to unsustainable levels.
- ▶ Counter-arguments:
  - We could always impose limits on reproduction
    - Surely this is better than imposing limits on life?
  - Technology might find a solution
- ▶ The reality:
  - The world’s population is already at a level that poses a problem for sustainability at our current rates of consumption
  - We need to worry about this today, not when ageing research is perfected!

# Summary

- ▶ None of these arguments provide adequate reasons to reject anti-ageing research and life extension
  - ▶ But they do highlight problems we already face today
  - ▶ We should be addressing these now, not pretending that avoiding (further) life extension will make them go away!
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