Longer Lives—Whose Good?

DANIEL CALLAHAN *The Hastings Centre* and *Harvard Medical School*

The most difficult ethical arguments to assess are those that try to determine what present course of conduct is most acceptable to give us some long-range desired, though uncertain, outcome. The question before us is whether aggressively to pursue research aiming to significantly extend average life expectancy, which may or may not be scientifically possible, and may in addition to some benefits have some untoward health and social outcomes even if possible. Assessment becomes all the more difficult if (a) the means to the desired end are themselves contentious: what are the risks and benefits of conducting such research, whose final outcome may be long in the future? And even more difficult if (b) there is disagreement about whether the end sought will be good or bad: would we be better off as individuals and societies if we all lived much longer?

There is also a further consideration: are there some possible technologies whose impact is likely to be so significant for everyone in the future that a collective societal decision should be made to permit or discourage its pursuit? The usual practice with new technologies is that corporations, researchers, inventors, and entrepreneurs are now free to develop and market what they like, and think they can sell, and then to leave it to individuals to take it or leave it. Is that the way life-extending technologies should go? As one more consumer choice?

As it turns out, there are two overarching perspectives meant to deal with this entire range of questions. One of them is the precautionary principle, most visible in the environmental movement, seeking to find ways of moving with great caution in the assessment of new technologies and environmental interventions (look before you leap). The other is what I call the "gambler's principle," which rejects the precautionary principle and ethi-

Dialogue **XLV (2006), 567-75**
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217300001086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cal hand-wringing in general as dangerous obstacles to bold research and progress (leap, and then look).[1]

Overall appears to belong in the second camp. The tip-off comes when she says that the choice about longevity should be left to the individual: "the prolongation of life should be a matter of individual human choice" (Précis, p. 546). That is the classical move of those espousing the gambler's principle, eliminating with one blow any move to take seriously the social implications of the *aggregate* impact of individual human choices, that is, any serious consideration of the kind of society we will (all of us) get when there is the freedom to make such a choice.

Overall is correct to note that "the argument from burdens to society is not sufficient to show that immortality is undesirable from the point of view of an individual" (ibid., p. 543). Of course not: all of us at one time or another in our lives want something as individuals that will be a burden to society. It would be much more convenient for me to throw my trash and junk in the Hudson River outside of my apartment than to tiresomely sort it out and have it removed in an environmentally friendly way. Fortunately for everyone else, most of us resist such solipsistic inclinations.

I mention those points because, for all the imagination and philosophical subtlety Overall brings to her brief for life extension, it is hard to discern an organized methodology in her efforts. She is, for instance, very imaginative in citing "the infinite possibilities for new experiences and relationships" (ibid.), not to mention innumerable and unending projects, that a much longer life span could bring. But she is far less imaginative in projecting all the ways things could go wrong, e.g., great bodies but no mind, or great mind and awful bodies. At the least one could, methodologically speaking, ask for a level playing field: the good and the bad need equal speculation.

Moreover, if imaginative scenarios are to be projected, they will have far more plausibility if they are constructed from available evidence, of a kind that lends itself to the devising of future scenarios (as in, say, United Nations projections of world population growth in coming years, featuring different trajectories devised from different but plausible present growth data). But Overall's fancies are cut from whole cloth, with few gestures toward evidence of any kind. We seem to be expected, as a matter of faith—in science, as it happens—to simply accept her rosy scenarios as theoretically possible (and who can say much against anything at the abstract level of the theoretically possible?). That possibility is then treated as if it is self-evidently plausible, and that plausibility then transmuted into the solid gold of the obviously desirable.

Slow down. We all love Pollyanna, but some Cassandra is in order as well. What might Cassandra point out to us? Let me begin with my own observations, from the perspective of someone who is 76 and in good health, still writing articles and books on this and other subjects. I begin

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217300001086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with a few observations that almost anyone can verify with their own eyes. One of them—which first led me to talk of a "natural" life span"—is that I have never been to the funeral of someone over the age of 80 that was marked by weeping or any comments about the lost opportunities of the deceased. It is sometimes a sad event, but rarely treated as a tragic one. Why is that? I believe it is because most of us do not, at bottom, judge a finite life span as an inherent evil; or, if that is their cognitive judgement, it does not necessarily represent some deeper level of judgement. Maybe that is just old-fashioned fatalism displaying itself, but maybe not. And, in any case, how could one prove it was nothing more than fatalism?

Another observation is that it does not follow that, if dying at 70 or 80 is better than dying at 40 or 50, then 110, 120, or 130 would be even better. As those who sell stocks and bonds are required to say, past performance is no guide to future performance. In any case, life is filled with limited events and activities that we do not demand go on and on to be satisfying: Great novels and plays end, as do athletic events, dances, papers and books, parties, and conferences. Would *Hamlet* be a better play if it lasted for years rather than hours?

Looking at my own age group, and a bit beyond that to those over 80, I see little evidence, even among the most healthy and vigorous, of new opportunities of any strenuous nature being pursued, much less whole new possibilities of life opening up. They exercise with some regularity, take cruises, do some part-time volunteer work, work in a "semi-retired" status, slowing down a bit—sometimes to a creep. At best, there are those, of which I am one, who keep doing what they always did (reading, writing, and lecturing), not forced to retire. But we are in a distinct minority, and it is rare to attend any professional meeting where the proportion of those my age or older is more than 10 percent.

I once was part of a debate with the scientist Gregory Stock before about 150 researchers, all working on life extension.[2] I asked how many there were over 70. Five hands went up. That is about typical for all professional meetings I attend, whatever the subject. If I want to know what is going on in my own field even, I turn to a younger person—assuming, usually correctly, that my age group peers no longer keep up in any serious way. To be sure, every large marathon features at least one person over 90, and my own mother took up painting at 70, even winning some competitions before she died at 86. But, though she was much loved, no one cried at her funeral, and no one said a word about the opportunities that death denied her. They said that she "lived a long and full" life, and "we will miss her"; and that was enough to say.

These and other experiences have convinced me—anecdotally, to be sure, but that is about all we have to work with—that talk of radical changes in the way people will experience and live out their aging rests on little if any supportive evidence from present experience. I do concede,

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however, that those who display the "seriatim self" seem to embrace aging better than those whose way of life centres on the "career self." In talking about life extension with very elderly people, my own (limited) sample shows that about 50 percent would like to live much longer lives, and 50 percent feel they have already lived adequately long lives and are ready to die. My wife, at age 72, and someone who could read novels and psychology journals forever it seems, is among the former (though she stipulates that spending money for research on life extension should be a low priority given many more pressing social needs).

As I try to understand my own response to the problem, well below the formal, tidy, and rational philosophical level, I have an analogy that has stayed in my mind for some years: that of the way we recollect satisfying and pleasurable events in the past. Everyone who has had a nice vacation can recall wishing it could go on longer. But it is rare, many months later, to regret the loss of that additional time. It is soon forgotten. That extra time itself would, in any case, have come to an end long ago as well.

It is true, as Overall says, that this is the only life we will have (for those of us who are non-religious), but at some point it *will* end, and, in light of the infinite number of years we will be dead, a few years longer of life seems inconsequential, particularly after we have already lived a full life, one in which much was accomplished and experienced—albeit not everything possible. Almost every elderly person I have ever met has said "how fast it has all gone," and I suspect they would say exactly the same thing at the age of 125 or 150. And, to make matters worse, the older one gets the faster time seems to pass.

While contending that an immortal life might not be one that is recognizably human, Overall then goes on to say that there is "no good reason to regard a finite life of any *particular* length as a good thing" (p. 544). But that seems to leave her with an unrecognized dilemma: if no particular finite life span could be considered a good thing, then nothing will suffice *but* immortality. Moreover, by projecting all extended life spans as opening up endlessly new vistas and experiences, "the goods of experience and action" (p. 541), she is making an utterly wild and Panglossian leap into the future. What assurance would we have, for instance, that the future will open up only good possibilities, not bad ones? Even if one is in good health, the past history of human life offers no assurance whatever that the future will necessarily be better than the past. That may happen in the legendary "best of all possible worlds," but that is not the one we live in now, and nothing portends that we would live in it in the centuries to come.

Overall does leave open the possibility that people who choose much longer lives could later opt out of them. But by her standards of the grand possibilities and prospects cancelled by death at the end of a life of any "particular length," then choosing to end it at any particular point would be wholly irrational. If she does not want to call it irrational, that must be

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because she tacitly understands that the splendid projected future may not turn out all that well, and maybe some would just get tired of it, however alluring the future they would be passing up—a future, by her definition, always filled with splendid prospects. Is it unimaginable, even in her world of infinite possibilities, that someone could be sorry that they ever made the choice of a longer life? To be sure, anyone who embraces the gambler's principle must in principle banish such dour thoughts: think positive!

My "apologist" view is that a life of 80 years or so is sufficiently long to experience most of the goods of a human life, and that there is no special reason—other than an unrealistic and overactive imagination—to think more years will add significantly to those goods. My apologist alternative, widely accepted, is simply to allow average longevity to continue to increase at its present rate—1.1 year per decade for women—aiming to improve the quality of life within the context of a finite life span (the compression of morbidity position).[3] Just why such a position, or any similar "apologist" position, should be judged "morally untenable" escapes me. Longevity is already slowly increasing and has been for many years. Is Overall's point that the present pace is wrongly slow and that the immorality lies in accepting that pace?

My reservations about the rosy prospects for individuals to come out of the prolongevity agenda are mainly speculative, just as Overall's are, but I think less so than her enthusiastic musings about that agenda. Far more important are the potential social consequences of a radically longer average life expectancy. I have yet to see any detailed attempt on the part of any prolongevist to deal with those consequences. They are either ignored altogether or waved away with vague assurances that, just as societies have adapted to the increased longevity of recent centuries, so also they will work out solutions to any future problems.

Contrary to the notion that developed societies have, so far, found good ways to deal with aging societies, every developed nation is increasingly anxious about the near future in that respect. The primary anxiety arises from a feature of aging societies that no prolongevist, or Overall, even mentions: that of a shift in the wrong direction of the dependency ratio, i.e., that of the number of young working people providing financial support for the elderly retired. The ratio now in Canada and the U.S. is at present roughly one in four workers for every elderly person, but expected to decline to 2 or 2.5 workers over the next thirty years.

Demographic trends in recent decades show birth rates well below the 2.1 children per woman necessary to maintain population stability (replacement level). The trend, that is, lies in the direction of a decline in population size, where the decline is in the number of young people—exactly those people needed to support older people, whose numbers will proportionately rise.[4] Even those countries that are worried about that trend are at a loss to know how to develop social, family, and economic

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policies that might decisively reverse it. The most effective strategy appears to be that of France and Sweden, both of which have worked to develop family policies that make childbearing and working women more compatible; but neither country is close to reverting to the population replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.

Now prolongevists might respond to the dependency problem by putting a positive spin on the kind of elderly we could have in the future. They might say that all such present worries are irrelevant and anachronistic. First, the new elderly (let us call them) would be in fine health, thus lessening the need for the financial support of the working young; that would become a non-issue. Second, full of zip and beans and fresh enthusiasms, they would keep working for many more decades than at present, and be delighted to do so. Not for them the early retirements, the boredom with continued work that marks many present old folks. Another non-issue. Third, with their new, reformed bodies sexually recharged, procreation can take place well into the eighties and nineties and beyond. Depopulation thus becomes a non-issue—and, anyway, come to think of it, supportive children would not be needed if the elderly continued working.

But let us take a closer look at the prolongevist's future. It would be helpful if it were spelled out, with some carefully developed details, just how social policy might be managed. Assuming, to follow Overall, that longevity would be left to individual choice, we might wonder what sort of differential policy would govern at least three likely distinguishable groups: (1) those status quo apologists (my crowd) who would be happy to die at an average age of 80 but would want at least economic and medical support in their retirement so that they would not have to keep working until they dropped dead; (2) those prolongevists who wanted to live on indefinitely, (a) finding no good time to die given their great future prospects, but some of whom might actually like to spend their (self-determined) later years in retirement, and those (b) willing to work on, and on, and on; and (3) those semi-apologetic prolongevists who just want to live to, say, 120, but with some final years in relative peace, comfortably retired. Some questions arise.

Ought those apologists who decide to stick with the present pattern expect the prolongevists to pay taxes to support that choice? Or, by making that apologist choice, have they forfeited any claim to help from the prolongevists who make a different choice? Conversely, ought the apologists be expected to contribute tax money to those prolongevists who, many decades later, may want it for their retirement years, or should younger prolongevists be taxed to help those who are, say, 100 years older than they are? In short, to what extent do people retain some responsibility for the welfare of those who choose differently from them?

Or, if individual choice is to rule the day, will a purely market model apply? That is, if you choose one course rather than another, will you then

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bear personal responsibility for whatever the outcome, without looking to society to rescue you? Or, to put the matter differently, if we continue to harbour some sense of responsibility for the welfare of the old, do they include those who push their old age into the indefinite future? I do not expect Overall to respond in detail to these questions. That would require a battalion of bureaucrats to work out the details and the resurrection of John Rawls and Aristotle to determine a fair way of treating the variety of possible choices and our mutual obligations in light of them. I will be satisfied with an acknowledgement that they are worth taking seriously.

Consider also the analysis of the late American economist Kenneth Boulding who wrote an article focusing on the importance of "age specific role structures" when considering life extension.[5] Each of us has, at different stages of life, different roles to play in society with correspondingly different responsibilities and expectations. We do not expect children to provide civic leadership or to take charge of the different sectors of society, just as we do not expect the elderly to procreate and raise children. Biology determines part of that role structure, but society specifies the way they are played out. So important are those age structures in all societies that any "major extension of active human life would create a crisis for the human race almost beyond imagining" (p. 495).

To make his case, Boulding focused on the potential impact of prolongevitism on the family and important social institutions such as universities, business, and government. Speaking of the "enormous benefits that the institution of death has brought to mankind," he wryly and wisely notes that "it is the propensity of the old, rich and powerful to die that gives the young, poor, and powerless hope. When death is postponed, so is promotion" (p. 500). Before her retirement, my wife taught in a psychology department where few professors retired before their seventies, where the average age of the faculty was 55 or so, and where, for over a decade, not a single young person could gain a job. Science will have to devise future new generations: of the elderly, who will welcome working indefinitely, and of young people, who will be happy to stand in line for a few decades waiting for jobs and promotions to open up. Perhaps, when their patience paid off, they could do to the next generation just what their elders had done to them: block their way by refusing to die or to retire. Not nice, but that is the way it would most likely go.

It would be most helpful if Overall could sketch out a scheme for academic appointments, advancements, and senior tenure and perks in light of greatly extended life expectancies of senior faculty members and the likely despair of new PhDs in finding jobs at all, much less advancing in due course through the ranks. And then, as a footnote, Overall could provide a clue as to how the analogous problem of job entry and advancement in the business sector might work itself out. The young will have to queue up there as well. If smart, they will lobby for mandatory retirement

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ages, but will probably be told that such ideas are at best ageist and at worse subversive of a prolongevist philosophy. The prolongevist, it seems reasonable to guess, would require that the elderly keep working *ad infinitum* to pay for the *ad infinitum* good things that come from life extension *ad infinitum*. And the young will get that as well . . . just not right away. The ancient notion that delayed gratification can be good for people will surely be put to the test.

In determining the social implications of a greatly extended life expectancy, one defensible assumption and two questions seem to me paramount. The assumption is that a greatly extended life span would, for better or worse, force massive changes in the way we arrange our social institutions and live our collective lives. It would not be a trivial social change. In that context, one can ask just what present social problem would life extension solve? War? Poverty? Domestic violence? Crime? Discrimination? I know of no one who has ever argued that it is precisely our present average life spans that create those or any other social problem, or that extending life expectancy would solve them.

My other question is the obverse side of that coin: what additional social benefits would longer lives confer on our societies? Unless we declare that satisfying individual preferences is a benefit *per se*—whatever the preference—then it is hard to imagine how a community or a society would improve its collective welfare. Some prolongevists might contend that the elderly have much wisdom, and greater numbers of elderly would mean more wisdom. My own experience of living with old people, including my friends, is that they are not wiser than others, not at all (and that, unfortunately, probably includes me). But, if greater wisdom is not to be had, what other social benefits might there be? Someone, anyone, please mention even one. Overall advances the idea of many individuals simply wanting to live longer, but I see no social benefit whatsoever in trying to satisfy such desires. Social benefits, I hold, are more worthy of pursuit than satisfaction of personal desires, all the more so when the social consequences of personal choices—here, life extension—will determine in some important ways how we will live together as a community.

Two final thoughts. The notion that life extension will allow many women to gain goods that their earlier life had unfairly denied them assumes that their social and economic conditions would somehow improve in such a regime. What reason is there to make such an assumption? If there are fewer young people than at present to support them, their lives could become worse. But that point aside, there is nothing in a life-extension research agenda that automatically assures a promising set of improved living conditions, sufficient to give women what they have missed earlier in their lives. That would require a different kind of research agenda and a (wholly overdue) set of social reforms. If one wants to improve the lot of women, the time to start is when they are young, not

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old; old age as catch-up time strikes me as a strange, even regressive, goal. If men can have a full and rewarding life before they get old, should women not have the same benefit? And if living longer is no guarantee of a good life without many parallel social and welfare supports in place, then the earlier they are sought, the better.

My last question is this: if life extension is a matter for medical research, and if such research involved human subjects, as would be necessary, then how should science devise the clinical trials necessary to test the agent, drugs, or devices that would afford longer life? If the goal is a life span of 120 years, then the trial might have to last for 100 years to see how it all turns out. Would the researchers themselves have to be that old to follow it from beginning to end? Or would a researcher relay team have to be established? And what would count as success? A great body and mind? Or a minimally tolerable body and mind? There are more questions that could be asked, but we can leave that to the institutional review board (IRB) assigned to judge the research protocol. For those members of such boards who like challenges, they will have a good time.

Notes

1 These categories are more fully developed in Daniel Callahan, *What Price Better Health: Hazards of the Research Imperative* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 129ff.

2 Stock's debate can be found in Gregory Stock and Daniel Callahan, "Point-Counterpoint: Would Doubling the Human Life Span Be a Net Positive or Negative for Us as Individuals or as a Society?" *Journal of Gerontology: Biological Sciences*, 59a, 6 (2004): 554-59.

3 United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2005), p. 47.

4 Jonathan Grant et al., *Low Fertility and Population Aging: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Options* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 2004).

5 Kenneth Boulding, "The Menace of Methuselah: Possible Consequences of Increased Life Expectancy," *Washington Academy of Sciences*, 55, 7 (March 1965): 171-79; reprinted in the *Population and Development Review*, 29, 3 (September 2003): 493-504 (page references are to this version).

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