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What about Eternal Life? A Transhumanist Perspective

Loredana TEREK-VLAD¹

Abstract

The human individual has been preoccupied with the phenomenon of death since death expresses the end of the existence on earth. The issue of life and death has not lost its actuality, whereas nowadays life extension (and why not immortality) is considered the ultimate goal of scientists.

The aim of this article is to highlight the problems that will arise along with the achievement of eternal life. In this regard, I shall focus on human enhancement and the principle of procreative beneficence as means of achieving this objective. In addition, I shall bring into question the fact that the principles of bioethics are being violated along with human enhancement: the principle of respect for autonomy and beneficence, avoiding harm-causing behaviours and the principle of justice. Given that the researchers in the field of transhumanism argue that the penetration of the new technologies into the private sphere of the individual is inevitable, I shall present arguments that prove the fact that the principles of bioethics are being violated along with the achievement of eternal life, given that human enhancement is only accessible for an elite both in terms of costs as well as in terms of the Christian values.

Keywords: *Bioethics, transhumanism, human enhancement, eternal life, fundamental principles.*

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1. Introduction

The term „life” has multiple senses that reveal universal openness within the history of interpretation: the Greek philosophical interpretation, the sense from the Old Testament, the establishment of Christianity, redefining the issue of life from the biological perspective, the perspective of the philosophy of life or the perspective of the sciences of the spirit, the phenomenology of life; therefore, there are different meanings of the idea of life from the religious, theological, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic, ethical etc., perspective (Ciocan, 2013).

According to the Christian tradition, eternal life means life after death and life after the second coming of the Messiah, which was shown precisely by Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. In the Apocryphal Gospels, one can note man’s concern for the life after death, and the Holy Fathers advise the Christians to live their lives in such a way as to please God because in the other world the ones who have followed the right path will experience eternal happiness alongside God (Beke, 2009). Man’s bet is to reach another level of life, another life – the eternal life –which is the Kingdom of God (Ciocan, 2013).

The concern for the afterlife has existed from the ancient Egyptians - who buried their dead together with clothes, objects or food-, the Hindu or the Indian tradition (Beke, 2009). The idea of soul transmigration and the fact that births occur in ontological order can be found not only in the ancient cultures, but also in the evolved nations; this is, in fact, the law of Karma (Beke, 2009). Since the world where Christianity arose was dominated by the Platonic philosophy, one of the most popular beliefs was that the biological body is just a shell that houses a soul, and after the death of the biological body the soul can either ascend to heaven or eternal punishment lies ahead of him (Beke, 2009).

Today we are facing fundamental changes regarding the idea of life and its quality. Scientific developments have brought important contributions in almost all the areas: philosophy, biology, physics, chemistry, genetics etc. in order to help the human species overcome its condition. It is not only about the scientific findings in terms of genetic engineering, but also the artificial (we may say) achievement of eternal life – which until recently was being analysed only from the Christian perspective: life after death.

In this paper I shall bring into question the issues that will arise along with immortality, since I believe that, as human goal, it will entail the violation of the current society’s values, jeopardizing the fundamental rights of the individual.

2. Are we afraid of death?

Each of us has surely felt fear of death at a certain point, or better yet fear of something that we do not know rather than death itself; anyway, this process of passing over has been associated with physical pain since, the physical and mental illnesses of the human individual cause suffering. Perhaps Christian traditions and doctrines have made us believe that passing from life on earth to eternal life is (physically) difficult and painful especially since, depending on his sins from the life on earth, the individual can spend eternity in the fire of hell or in the paradise promised within the holy books; that is why the issue of death is a taboo subject (Alvarez Chicano, 2002).

We are not sure which is the reason why ever since ancient times man has been trying to achieve eternal life without the help of divinity; whether it is about the fear of suffering (divine punishment), or about the individual trying to play God because God is associated with power, today the issue is much more complex than it seems, since the researchers in the field of the new technologies have discovered how to clone the human or achieve artificial blood, and in a not too distant future will be able to achieve head transplants (Sandu, 2015) or how to upload the individual's memory so that he no longer needs a biological body in order to survive. These issues are extremely complex and call for debate regarding life and death since the researchers are divided into two camps: those who support the transformation of the human condition through the new technologies and those who believe that only God is able to decide upon our purpose on earth, since He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Since eternal life is a goal, the supporters of transhumanism believe that once we achieve eternal life there is no way back, since once we discover synthetic life and the way to survive without using a biological body we will actually kill death (Terec-Vlad, 2015). Eternal life built in a perfect society (similar to Heaven) has been the subject of various writers, dramatists and social engineers (Mitchell, Kilner, 2003), but now the subject belongs to the "techno-utopians", who believe that by means of the new technologies a perfect society, with perfect persons, on a perfect earth can be built (Mitchell, Kilner, 2003).

This goal can include the posthuman individual, who has been cognitively modified in order to be better and whose conscience can be uploaded or downloaded, who has managed to achieve eternal life through human enhancement, who is connected to a universal system and who lives in perfect harmony with the other posthuman "beings". Kurzweil believes that when these events occur, we will witness technological singularity; however, being singularitarian means many things:

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- The right means to live long enough to live forever (Kurzweil, 2005)
- The body is temporary (Kurzweil, 2005)
- We should strive to improve these patterns by optimizing the health of our body and extending the reach of our minds (Kurzweil, 2005)
- Information is not knowledge (Kurzweil, 2005)
- Death is a tragedy, it is not demeaning to regard a person as a profound pattern (a form of knowledge) (Kurzweil, 2005)
- A primary role of traditional religion is deathist rationalization (Kurzweil, 2005).
- The purpose of the universe reflects the same purpose as our lives: to move toward greater intelligence and knowledge (Kurzweil, 2005)
- We can apply the enormous leverage provided by the acceleration of technology. An example is achieving radical life extension through a bridge to a bridge to a bridge (Kurzweil, 2005)

The supporters of transhumanism believe that we can imagine a posthuman world where humans as we know them would no longer exist: we can wake up in a computer and still be ourselves, with all our memories, and what makes us what we are: we would be able to communicate with other people from other computers, we would be able to communicate with people still residing in a biological body, and we could experience all the pleasures of a biological body, but avoiding fatigue, indigestion and AIDS (Rael, 2001). We could also meet sexual partners living in other computers and have lasting relationships with them, including sexual relations, up to the point of wanting to live together in a virtual house (Rael, 2001).

However, we believe that once eternal life can be achieved, all the values that we believed to be primordial so far will be replaced, since not the entire society we are part of will benefit from mind uploading, but only those persons with a good financial situation and who are willing to give up the human life for a virtual one. The concepts of autonomy or justice could be removed from the sphere of the values or could have a different meaning, adapted to the new virtual society. An example of the violation of the principle of autonomy is moral bioenhancement (Persson, Savulescu, 2014), whereas - in our opinion - if we improve ourselves morally, we will not be able to assess whether our actions are moral or (bio) ethical. I believe that the transhumanist discourses, which bring into focus the idea of eternal life, could get anyone drunk with cold water since, in order to become reality, artificial eternal life requires experiments - which will be conducted on human individuals, not robots - as we cannot yet introduce a chip into a robot's brain, because it has

no brain. However, we must outline the fact that the transhumanist discourse brings back into the attention of researchers and philosophers the issues related to ethics and morality and calls for debates regarding the human rights, the human condition and the evolution of the human being.

3. Human values and posthuman values

Lydia Feito believes that, from the transhumanist values, one promotes all those values that would lead to posthumanism, whereas the posthuman individual could have a life that is worth more than the life of the current individual (Feito, 2007): in order to become posthuman, the individual needs certain technologies and a certain social organization that would enable safe exploration and certain conditions: global security, technological progress, open access of all the persons (Feito, 2007). The implementation requires the existence of derived values such as individual freedom and the ability to choose the enhancement technologies, morphological freedom – that is the individual choice of enhancement, enhancement of enhancement (open mind, critical thinking, investigation, philosophical failibilism, pragmatism, science and technology, becoming more intelligent individually and collectively, diversity (of the species, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, lifestyle), lifesaving (Feito, 2007). However, in this respect we can only speculate since there is no evidence and no research showing that after the individual's physical death his consciousness can be uploaded.

However, how can we know which will be the values of the posthuman society? We can no longer talk about not killing, or not entering someone's private property, or not stealing. Still, which will be the values of posthumanism?

4. (Bio) ethical dilemmas

“Artificial immortality is not an individual given resulted from personal magic, but the culmination of the technological efforts of a humanity being on the way of self – transcendence” (Sandu, 2015). As stated above, achieving eternal life will be a landmark for all the beings on this planet. But even if this is achievable, it does not exclude controversy, pros and cons or even academic, religious or philosophical debates. In this chapter I intend to bring up for discussion the ethical and bioethical dilemmas (Sandu, Caras, 2013) that could appear along with the achievement of eternal life. First of all, a person or individual or citizen is composed of biological matter (that is why we can get their fingerprints and find out their DNA) and soul. Summing up, I am pointing out the fact that the individuals act according to their knowledge,

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depending on the socio-cultural environment and the beliefs and values of the society where they live.

However, if we take into consideration a man from the third world, who lived in a precarious environment, had no chance to study, and his only concern was to get food for himself and his family, how can we make him immortal? If we upload his mind on the computer, he will not be concerned with anything else but providing food for his family and safety. Of course, many would say that we can reprogram him: but wouldn't reprogramming this person be incompatible with his autonomy? Or with the right to express his will freely or the right to equality and justice? An answer to this dilemma might be the following: but we have achieved immortality – it is an important step for our future as self-conscious individuals.

Another aspect that draws attention regarding eternal life is related to the (bio) ethical implications of this subject. As we know, bioethics is defined as the systematic study of human behaviour in the field of life sciences and healthcare, analyzed in the light of the moral values and principles (Reich, 1995). When we achieve eternal life without the need for a biological body, we will no longer be able to bring into question the implications of bioethics, since we will lack the biological part of life. Soledad Cordoba Cuardado believes that virtual reality is the main tool aimed at achieving a posthuman individual that lives in the computer networks (Cordoba Guardado, 2007); once this objective that regards living in the virtual space is reached, we will be able to talk about the individual only as consciousness, not a human person.

Besides autonomy, one of the following victims of transhumanism is the equity of rights: if we start transforming ourselves into something superior what rights will these enhanced creatures claim, and what rights will they possess when compared to those left behind? (Fukuyama, 2004). The recent studies conducted in this field show that only the persons with an exceptional financial situation will be able to benefit from the enhancement of the human body in order to increase their physical capacities; hence results the fact that the concept of justice is violated from the very beginning. Since the priority of justice is a requirement that arises from the fundamental plurality of the human species and the integrity of individuals, sacrificing justice for the sake of general good means violating what is inviolable (Miroiu, 2008).

Another aspect that draws the attention upon the new technologies is related to the fact that not all the findings can be considered good; therefore, this aspect makes us carry through an assessment regarding the way the new technologies influence the quality of our life for the better, but also regarding the way their excessive use may lead to the infringement of the society's values

or the freedom of the individual as a person. Achieving eternal life in an artificial way or not is the goal of the vast majority of the individuals, since we fear death because we do not know what will happen with our spirit (consciousness) after the biological matter disappears.

5. Conclusions

Along with the new scientific findings arose a variety of moral issues that call for debates regarding the use of the new technologies, since we are in the stage of technological somnambulism where we innovate first and ask questions later (Metcalf Rosales, 2009).

In this paper I have analysed the idea of eternal life from the following perspectives: on the one hand, the Christian perspective and, on the other hand, the transhumanist perspective, whereas according to the latest research we are expected to achieve eternal life by year 2050. I believe that this goal of the scientists violates the bioethical and Christian principles, since one tries to set aside the Christian concepts regarding life and death, the idea of God, of Heaven and Hell. In addition, principles such as justice, equality and autonomy are being violated.

I have also brought into question the possible problems that the human individual might be facing if he were to accept the eternal life proposed by transhumanists. When we shall accept artificial immortality, we shall actually give up our condition of autonomous being that seeks happiness in rightfulness, justice and the equity of an imperfect society. I believe that we are being offered a wonderful new world (Huxley, 2011), a sort of artificial, robotized happiness, which hides soft slavery (Terec-Vlad, Terec-Vlad, 2013)

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Biodata



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