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The Future of Death and Immortality

Irving H. Buchen

Man shares the experiences of life with all animals, but he stands alone in the consciousness of death. Death presumes a sense of identity. The awareness of self is therefore an awareness of mortality. But the self desires immortality, and thus plays havoc with creation.

Ihab Hassan. "Silence, Revolution and Consciousness." (1969)¹

The reason man does not live forever or at least for very long is that each generation has only a certain stretch to it. Once a collective identity begins to assume shape and brings with it the settling comfort that form offers, then more often than not what was initially flexible begins to stiffen and reassurance takes the form of excluding that which is not. Continuity becomes a supreme virtue, and as the circle of collective identity is completed there is the finished image of a hermetic seal. However, when that secure intactness is confronted or assaulted by radical change, a curious hunger for death is regularly heard: "Thank God, I won't live long enough to see that!" But science, allied with technology, has been doubly inconsiderate: it not only has caused things to happen faster than ever before, but also is keeping us alive longer to witness what we did not want to live to see. In short, immortality as a prospect for man has to be comprehended not solely as what has been taken away from man, but also as what man eagerly has surrendered.

Now I am a futurist which means among other things that I am committed to studying change, the geometric rate of its incarnation, so as to develop precrisis alternatives to what may be coming. But constantly informing and defining any futuristic study is the image of man or rather the images of man in history; for although it is true that history makes man, it is equally true that man makes history or ultimately that man making himself is history. In other words, futurism is committed to the future as the time of the eternal present—as really the only way man has of dealing with the present. Futurism thus seeks no matter how indirectly to deliver time and history back into man's hands. Now, to be sure, the business of futurecasting is clearly an arrogant enterprise; and yet is also a humble one, for every futurist is probably aware that the first futurists were the Prophets and nobody listened at least for very long to them. It is therefore with a combined sense of hubris and humility that I should like to present the point of view of a futurist on the subjects of death and immortality.

I

The study of death and dying has become almost fashionable. Death has its own institution and mainline journal, is insinuating itself in many academic fields and is developing a corps of professionals and para-professionals who offer death-counseling. The basic rationale for this entire enterprise is clearly respectable.

It rightly questions the procedures and public relations games of funeral and cemetery directors. It properly chastizes many religious leaders and doctors on their euphemistic peek-a-boo game of speaking about the great divine when clearly and especially in cases of terminal disease death should be accepted and faced as a fact. Above all, the study of death justifies itself as a sign of the increasing maturity of a society that wants as adult an attitude toward death as it has toward sexuality.² As a futurist, I naturally endorse any argument for a more mature, freer outlook but I also think we are studying death for a number of other reasons, some of which may be hidden or futuristic or both (often, the secret and the futuristic are synonymous).

The most obvious secret reason for studying death is that it is merely the latest secular substitute for roles previously performed by religion. Whatever one privately or professionally thinks about religion and its various denominational forms and beliefs, what is clear is that religion at its best always sought to confront the experiences of loss honestly, squarely, and to the best of its theological ability. Moreover, it did something else which the present psychological counselors are unable or uninterested in doing: namely, structuring the entire experience of grief and mourning through ritual.

Ritual is man's earliest attempt to create system. A death ritual is structured consolation. It guides the uninitiated through a dark labyrinth so that he will not be lost forever. Death ritual in short is rescue. It deals with the condition of alienation not just from society but from life, and its rites of passage shrewdly try to steer between two extremes: the pitfall of intense despair or melancholia which may lead to suicide; and the abyss of intense anger or secularity which may lead to blasphemy or hedonism. But modern researchers in this area frequently are notoriously ignorant about death rituals both in concepts and details. They talk about the false consolations of the after-life and are ignorant of many death rituals in which no after-life is mentioned or assured. They make a to-do about various collective aspects of ritual or mourning societies which intrude upon personal grief and are totally unaware of the cathartic value of legitimate and structured individual and group collapse before the incomprehensible. But no matter how ineptly and with how much insensitivity some of the new counselors of grief may be studying the subject of death, what is futuristically unmistakable is that Freud is increasingly becoming God and that the increasing dispossession of religion from a position of centrality has found its latest manifestation in the study of death as a totally secular and psychological problem.

Another reason why we are studying death is even more hidden and when all its implications emerge, they may be more frightening than death itself. I think we are studying death because people are, ironically, living longer. Senior citizens now constitute 10% of the the population in the United States. The average age of all people over 65 now is 82. By the year 2000 (less than thirty years away), the projection is that 25% of the population may be over 65. Living longer has poised more people for dying leisurely than ever before in history. Decay can be studied as it were in slow motion; and the examination of human obsolescence can take place in a

human time laboratory. Indeed, I would go further and maintain that the problem of senior citizens has become a metaphor to comprehend the decay and perhaps death of senior urban centers, of senior transportation systems, of senior Nature and ecology, etc. In other words, what I am putting forward is not so much a futuristic view of the study of death but that the study of death is in its own right a futuristic venture—that it seeks initially to anticipate and to deal with a personal or psychological problem that rapidly may be becoming a general or collective one.

To reinforce and to clinch that point let me rapidly compound the situation by claiming that we are studying death now, whether we are aware of it or not, because intuitively and conceptually many recognize some of the grim possibilities that the population explosion may have, especially between 2000 and 2050. Let me rapidly document the situation.

1. World population now stands at 3.6 billion.
2. Each year earth gains 10 million people.
3. The doubling time of global population is approximately 32 years, although decreasing.
4. Between 2000 and 2010 only about 30-35 years away, world population will be 7 billion.
5. Even with decrease in doubling time as a result of population growth, there will be 14 billion by 2050.
6. All predictions indicate that the earth cannot sustain a population in excess of 14 billion.³

Now there are two crucial conclusions to be drawn from the hidden or futuristic reasons for studying death. First, largely because nature-induced evolution has been replaced by man-induced evolution, and largely because natural disaster and diseases rightly have been countered by the efforts of that man-induced evolution, death has become less and less a creation of nature and more and more a creation of man. That is a humanistic burden without precedent in history. And one of the dreadful possibilities that emanates from that burden is the real possibility that from a futuristic point of view the study of death is preparing the future for the prospect of its death.

Second, it is not totally inconceivable to me, especially because of the preponderance of psychologists and behaviorists in the field of study, that what may lie ultimately behind the study of death and death-counseling is an echo of Huxley's *Brave New World*—namely, death conditioning. Moreover, when one adds to this research, that being done in the field of pharmacology and ESB (Electrical Stimulation of the Brain) and the availability already of temporary amnesia drugs, dream-producing agents, memory drugs, suggestibility drugs, etc., it becomes clear that we are developing all the structures, systems and hardware to undertake death-conditioning. That these same drugs also could be used in the direction of extending man, of setting him further along an immortality line, is not contradictory but only suggests the supreme paradox that is at the heart of any discussion, especially futuristically viewed, of death and immortality. For just as many experts on senior citizens note that perhaps the wrong segment of the population is getting the drugs

—a variation of G. B. Shaw's quip that youth is wasted on the young—and that drugs should be made available to the old; so it is equally reasonable to argue that if the global situation reaches the point of becoming a senior citizen and releases for many unbearable anxieties, it would be only humane to prepare man with counseling and drugs for his end.

There is one final futuristic interpretation of the study of death I should like to put forward which deals directly with the issue of man's changing image and which will become enmeshed in my subsequent discussion of immortality. I think we are studying death now because we are dying more often *while we are alive*. The image of man is changing. Traditionally, we led lives that were a series of singularities: one God, one wife, one family, one university, one discipline, one part of the country, one country, one planet. The ingredients of this conference dramatize a completely different image. Thirty years ago there might be only theologians here; 30 years from now there might be only futurists. Multiplicity has replaced singularity; the interdisciplinary approach is competing with the singular one. Our own contemporary lives have not followed the traditional pattern of being a series of successive links through which runs the common thread of continuity and which is finally severed by death the terminator. Rather, we are becoming increasingly discontinuous and amorphous; or as one of my nervy students replied to the question of who he was: "You mean now? Today?" The ideal embodied and reserved exclusively for artists who died with the completion of each work and were then reborn with the creation of another has now become a collective possibility. As a result, death has become a more intimate experience, a more regular and familiar one, one that has data to give because it is a partner in existence rather than something that stands outside of existence. In short, the study of death derives at least part of its momentum and thrust from an increased sense of the possibilities of life. And that heightened sense of life has also resulted in renewed interest in immortality.

II

The study of immortality is more complex than that of death partly because the issue of death can be subsumed under that of immortality and partly because the data about immortality is scarcer. My approach to immortality is identical to my approach to futurism, for to me they are synonymous. Or as Kierkegaard put it better:

He who fights the future has a dangerous enemy. The future . . . borrows its strength from the man himself, and when it has tricked him out of this, then it appears outside of him as the enemy he must meet. Through the eternal we can conquer the future.⁴

Allow me to call upon the English professor in me to help out the futurist. Tragedy as a form measures the span of death; comedy the span of life. The function of tragedy as both a literary and cathartic form is precisely to confront death and

to rescue the broken fragment of a hero contemplating the eternal "No!" from falling into the abyss of nihilism. It does so by cresting his blasphemy and bringing about a readjusted view of God and man and the world. But no matter how glorious the form of tragedy is it never deals with immortality. Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to say that immortality would destroy the form it seeks to contain, the hero in a mortal mold of triumph. But when many writers and philosophers and even theologians write about immortality they tend to speak of the immortality of the Gods in a comic mode; certainly Kierkegaard and Nietzsche favored the form. And of course we should recall the title of Dante's supreme Catholic epic, the *Commedia*. Now it so happens, conveniently for my case, that the dominant mode of contemporary art is not tragedy but comedy. The reasons are not hard to find, even for so-called black comedy.

The discussion of tragedy like most academic or theological discussions of immortality tends to be grim and urgent and often pompous; and the error of that tone is that it is at variance with the nature of immortality. Tragedy deals with being; comedy with becoming; tragedy with the given and the static and finite; comedy with that which is eternally unfinished and yet to be. The ending of tragedy has to appear inevitable like mortality; but for comedy an ending is almost a contradiction in terms; it leads toward endless sequels. Now because discussing immortality does not confer it upon us, and because clearly we are transitional types between what is changing and what will be altered even more radically, it is necessary to adjust the present and the future, to view immortality as both a serious and a playful possibility. Or to put it another way, if man created God and not the reverse as Voltaire rationally maintained, and if the Devil was created in the image of man as Dostoevsky diabolically maintained, then perhaps the way to view immortality is as a simultaneous creation of both man's God and Devil. In other words, immortality is inevitably ambiguous. It involves both aspiration and presumption, devotional sincerity, and flirtatious play, selfless absorption and egotistical aggrandizement, the adult and the child. Death, on the other hand, is seldom ambiguous. It is a certainty, a fact of existence; whether it also is convertible into a purpose of existence is problematical. When death does appear ambiguously to embody both attraction and repulsion, the approach is usually determined by fear whereas immortality theoretically at least is stirred by desire. My subsuming of death under the aegis of immortality therefore has as its first aim the possibility that death has imparted to the subject of immortality a degree of fear and a commitment to the tragic point of view that has obscured its thrust of desire and the comic point of view.

The operating law of death is the law of scarcity; the operating law of immortality is the law of plenty. Death imparts to life the shape of a final clinch; existence is a funnel narrowing toward an inevitable and unalterable closure. The three Greek Fates operated an assembly line: one put together the particular ingredients of the thread of an individual life; another spun it out; and the third with her fatal shears cut it off. To be sure, one had free will: one was free to die earlier. The comic approach is more pliable, less grim, more evasive. Writers like Joseph

Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. negotiate with death. Heller's Yossarian decides that when his time comes he plans to check into a hospital because at least there death has been taught to behave and to have decent manners. Vonnegut wants a zany kind of free will. He proposes that suicide parlors should be built alongside Howard Johnsons' and feature twenty-eight different ways to go. Now what Heller, Vonnegut and other cosmic comedians are jesting about in earnest is their way of having immortality; that is, of sneaking immortality past death into life and thereby of forcing death to be civilized or at least responsive to human striving which seeks that which is either unfinished or perfectionist in nature. In other words, to appreciate the true content of immortality it is necessary to see it not merely as the opponent or eliminator of death, but rather as a force that makes such overwhelming demands that immortality may be more terrifying to some than death itself. And here once again we are in the area of the various images man has of himself and of his possibilities.

In many ways, almost every aspect of our existence seems to be a manifestation of death. Our personal limitations and knowledge, our inability to do or to complete all that we may desire, the restrictions that are imposed on us by our culture and civilization, the encumbrances that naturally weigh down our bodies, especially as we get older—all these and a whole host of other finite contingencies are all rehearsals for death—are in a curious way an affirmation of death's rightness. Lamentable though such limitations may be, they may appear attractive, even comforting under the withering pressure of immortality which in the name of plenty demands more than death does in the name of scarcity. Immortality thrusts itself into life, bursts the seam of narrow closure and transforms the funnel-like structure of existence into an end that is as open as its beginning. Its unrelenting pressure is that of the unfinished, never to be resolved life; and for some that may pose a greater terror than death.

The protean face of immortality is very much like the bountiful promise of the future; and those who are withered by one may be withered by the other. There is an old Talmudic tale that nicely dramatizes the various kind of reactions that are possible. Four wise rabbis ascended in a chariot to enter the inner chamber of chambers. The first entered and went crazy. The second entered and immediately became an atheist. The third entered and died. The last—Rabbi Akiva—entered "in peace and emerged in peace." No wonder immortality alternately attracts and repels. We are drawn to it by a desire to be more than our limits. At the same time, immortality compels man to consider whether his limitations are not really limitations but secret arrangements or bargains to leave him safe and secure in the finite. William Blake, the English romantic proclaimed, "He who restrains his desire does so because his desire is weak enough to be restrained." Immortality for many may expose the extent to which they and their image of man, for all their protestations to the contrary, are actually happier with tragedy than with comedy. Immortality like comedy constantly jeopardizes form and the striving for enduring form. It puts new and dislocating stress on all that is spontaneous and ephemeral. In short, if immortality ever became a real possibility for man a great deal of psychological

counseling would have to be done to prepare man for it. First in line would be the death counselors who would have to be restructured and turned inside out if they were to perform the new function of becoming immortality counselors.

Now just as there were certain contemporary and futuristic trends that converged to accent a study of death, so there are certain similar and different trends that account for the revived interest in immortality. The business of dying more often and the entire prospect of multiplicity replacing singularity, already noted in the case of death, functions in a similar way for immortality in that the more one dies and is reborn the more one is closer, at least through cyclical approximation, to an immortal run. This is adjusted immortality. Man becomes similar to some of the new art forms like the happening and the anti-novel which celebrate transience because that which does not last must be remade again and again. A similar adjustment of immortality is available to man by virtue of the fact that nearly every single previous stage of history now coexists on a global scale. In effect, the entire world has become a time-machine which one can literally dial and journey to; space exploration has added the dimension of time-space machine. To have all the past available in the present and perhaps in the future; and to add the time dimensions of outer space travel is not total immortality but it is at least a mortally adjusted view of eternity—mortality stretched to approximate immortality.

Science and technology also have brought man physically closer to tangible versions of immortality. The experiments with freezing of the body, with the manufacture of artificial organs, with genetic engineering and programming making man immune to all fatal diseases, the entire commitment of medicine to the retardation and perhaps elimination of decay—all these current and futuristic developments are moving immortality from science fiction to science fact. Moreover, the notion that the science of technology, because it is data-oriented, has demythologized the notions of religion and is therefore antithetical to immortality as a prospect not only ignores the developments mentioned above, but even more important obscures the extent to which futuristic science is creating its own theology.

Consider the following chain of presumptions. The futurist Gerald Feinberg of Columbia in his book *The Prometheus Project* seriously puts forward the notion that, because all ecology programs may fail to achieve their ends, as an alternative man will have to consider creating a totally man-made world, devoid of animals and plants, and subsisting on chemical foods and solar energy. Add to that proposal those in Ramsey's *The Fabricated Man* and in Francoeur's *Utopian Motherhood* which deal with the entire new field of artificial insemination. Compound this situation by the experiments in genetic engineering which promise among other things the possibility of creating new creatures—earthmen creating martians. Finally, top it all with the latest pursuit of immortality. When you put all these futuristic possibilities together and string them out, you have a total arc of presumption: Man as God, creating a New World, fashioning New Creatures and finally becoming like one of Us and living forever. Given such ambitions, it is not at all surprising that one futurist entitled his book *The Second Genesis* and another *Future Shock*.

III

At a minimum, a futurist seeks to work in an intersecting matrix. His time-scheme is always three-fold: he deals with the immediate, with the near and with the far. But hemming and informing that series of interfacing time slots, there must always be a diaphanous frame which constantly expands and contracts to breathe life into his models. For the futurist death and immortality function as the two supreme parameters by which to enlarge and to restrict the possibilities and limitations of the future. Immortality is valued by the futurist because it is the future—it is the eternal promise—it is open-ended, unfinished comedy—it is the ideal of the perpetual motion machine. But death is also valued because it functions as an antidotal partner exerting pressure on unrestrained egotism and fantasy. Indeed, no futurist can ignore death anymore than he can ignore the supreme irony that immortality as a real possibility for man has come about precisely at the same point in history that the mortality of the earth as a terrible possibility is within view. In other words, the ambiguity of attraction and repulsion that is at the heart of immortality and of death when it is subsumed under immortality is of a piece with the futuristic straddling of the finite and the infinite. But sooner or later—and everything is becoming sooner rather than later—ambiguity cannot postpone decision. And, given the global projections mentioned earlier, it is my judgment that the quest for immortality as a real and implemented possibility for man is nothing less than irresponsible. Immortality as a metaphor, as a paradigm, as a new scientific theology, within which to stir and to sustain legitimate humanistic aspirations, that is another matter.

As a metaphor, immortality can perform the enormously releasing function of accommodating new concepts and expectations and images of life. Specifically, it can house and justify a shift from scarcity to plenty, from singularity to multiplicity; and it can temper if not remove the unnecessary guilt that frequently accompanies legitimate self-fulfillment and aspiration. Immortality used this way could generate a new image of man as demi-god—a fusion of mortal and immortal elements. The promises of the after-life can be converted into this life pretty much as the notion of reincarnation as a series of separate lives can be transformed into the notion of a series of lives lived within a single life. Scientifically, the search to create permanent man could be adjusted to life by slowing up or eliminating the aging and decaying process. Such a process not only would preclude some of the anxieties about both death and global peril, but also might alter the intransigence that frequently accompanies aging and decay. Surely, something is amiss when we start our demanding ecstasy, become older and then ask for happiness, and finally settle for peace. Given such compromises, it is no wonder that as I indicated at the outset each generation seems to have limited stretch to it. The point is not to outwit or triumph over death—that is the vanity of vanities—but to negotiate with death so that it does not cut short fulfillment but climaxes it.

Finally, such a new composite of man made up of both mortal and immortal strands would go far toward supporting another hybrid man has to become—a

collectivized individual. The clear triumph of the last 150 years in human terms has been the triumph of the individual, especially in Western civilization. Never before in history was so much been lavished so rightly on the individual. And in many ways the shift from nature-induced evolution to man-induced evolution is largely the accomplishment of that commitment to individuality. But what the finite pressures of ecology are telling man is that the individual *uber alles* is an extinct dinosaur. The notion of any one individual, firm, segment of a society, nation, or even planet going it alone and doing whatever is best for itself is happily over. In its place will be a series of new interfacing creations with the image of man as the individualized everyman providing the supreme model. Moreover, just as the individuality of this new demi-God will find his ego extended, strengthened and absorbed by the collective strength and detachment of the group, so the metaphor of immortality will extend and enrich his personal life not forever, but to the fullness of possibilities that forever always promised. Finally, it is only through such a convergence of mortality and immortality, individuality and collectivism, that we shall begin to breathe the bracing and heady air of the cosmic comic spirit. And while we spin and play our eternal variations on our mortal multiplicity, and find our desires stronger than our fears, we may find not just consolation but even justice in the comic finality that "All's well that ends well."

NOTES

- ¹ *The Massachusetts Review*, XXXVI (Summer, 1969), 467.
- ² Death and sexuality are by no means strange bedfellows as Geoffrey Gorer pointed out in his perceptive chapter "The Pornography of Death" in his equally prophetic *Death, Brief and Mourning* (New York, 1965).
- ³ Dennis L. Meadows, "The Predicament of Mankind," *The Futurist*, V (August, 1971), 138-44. The global moden described by Professor Meadows of M.I.T. and supported by the Club of Rome is in my judgment the first most comprehensive attempt to deal with the global predicament.
- ⁴ One of the earliest futurists to make use of Kierkegaard and to explore futurism in terms of man's images of himself is Loren Eiseley in *The Firmament of Time* (Philadelphia, 1960).

