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## Chapter 5

### The Technology of Immortality, the Soul, and Human Identity

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We have already discussed situations in which something barely distinguishable from reincarnation could conceivably come about by technical means. What would happen if, in the future, a person who was identical to you in every way were brought to life? Would that mean that you had, in some sense, been reincarnated?

There would be very little difference between the *effect* of Buddhist-style reincarnation and the emergence, after your death, of someone whose inner experience of self was very similar to your own.

David Darling (1995, p. 183)

When it was revealed in 2002 that Baseball Hall of Famer Ted Williams, the last major league baseball player to hit .400, had expressed the desire to have himself cryogenically preserved in order to be reanimated in the future, technological immortality became more than a fantasy for millions of Americans.<sup>1</sup> Ted Williams was not a man taken to wild speculation. He was, by all accounts, a clear-eyed, pragmatic fly-fisherman, World War II and Korean War fighter pilot, Sears spokesperson, and one of the finest pure hitters to ever play the game of baseball. So what does Ted Williams's frozen head have to do with technological immortality?

Everything if we believe it is possible, but of course not everyone is so charitable or optimistic. There are many who believe that human desires for immortality are no more than selfishness and vanity. They reason that even if the technology exists, motivations for using it should be questioned, and that the answer to that question is that cryogenics should not be used as a means to immortality. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes on the popular reactions to the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix*:

The intimate connection between perversion and cyberspace is today a commonplace. According to the standard view, the perverse scenario stages the 'disavowal of castration.' Perversion can be seen as a defense against the motif of 'death and sexuality,' against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference. What the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of human finitude (1999, pp. 24-25).

Are all longings for human immortality Žižek's "perversions," or can the legitimate evolution of technology and human intelligence mediate a defensible "immortality?" In this paper, I argue that eventually human beings will achieve *immortality*, but that that immortality will be neither the theistic promise of immortality of the soul nor the resurrection of the physical body. Rather,

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1. Williams hit .406 in 1941. See "Ted Williams Frozen In Two Pieces," <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/12/20/national/main533849.shtml> [accessed September 21, 2006].

I suggest that technological immortality—the ability through pure *techne* to reproduce any human life ever—is not only possible, but almost inevitable. In “Against the Digital Heresy,” Žižek comments on this:

We reach a kind of omnipotence, being able to change from one to another reality by the mere power of our thoughts—to transform our bodies, the bodies of our partners, etc. etc.: ‘With this technology, you will be able to have almost any kind of experience with just about anyone, real or imagined, at any time.’ The question to be answered here is: will this still be experienced as ‘reality’? For a human being is ‘reality’ not ONTOLOGICALLY defined through the medium of RESISTANCE—real is that which resists, that which is not totally malleable to the caprices of our imagination? (2001, p. 51).

Žižek goes on to portray the Internet as the initial chronotope for a collective identity<sup>2</sup>

wherein one may change identities (sex, age, race) in chat rooms and participate vicariously and anonymously in the pornographic. Further, Žižek argues that the political dimension of virtual realities constitutes the post-capitalistic marginal production of fetishes of false-consciousness.

Beyond the immediate, extant social and technological realities, I argue that at some future time, death, the “ultimate disability,” will be subdued by technological methods. So where Žižek is critical, I am optimistic. Moreover, more than a cursory survey of the biological research, computer technology, fictive literature, and film, I also examine the normative dimensions of these near-future technologies. In other words, what will these new definitions of human life and the immortal *soul* mean for *human identities*?

### The Nature of the Soul

Plato’s arguments in *Alcibiades* and *Phaedo* suggest that the soul is more perfect than the body. The Platonic soul is a *simple* without parts, and a thing without parts cannot be separated. Because it is indivisible, the soul is eternal. The idea that the body (*soma*) is somehow only the material vehicle for the eternal soul is also shared by Christian and Hindu religions. Problems concerning the resurrection of the body—the psychophysical person (*soma pneumatikon*)—complete with recognizable personality, presents fatal problems for Plato’s conception of the soul. A soul without parts can have neither memory nor the distinguishing aspects of personality.

Functionalist philosophers, like Jeffrey Olen, have argued that the mind *is* the soul. In his paper, “Personal Identity and Life After Death,” Olen contends, “If the soul is thought to be the crucial element of the person, it is difficult to see how it could be anything but the mind. If it is our character traits, personality, thoughts, likes and dislikes, memories, and continuity of experience that makes us the persons we are, then they must belong to the soul” (2003, p. 331).

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2. However, the Internet is not the initial posit. From the very early speculations of von Neumann’s “game theory” concerning the evolution of artificial life expressed in the ubiquitous Game of Life (a computer program in which “life forms” evolve), to SimCity and SimWorld, there has been a wary opposition to the terrorism of manipulation these artifices entail. Books like David Gelernter’s *Mirror Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), subtitled “The Day Software Puts the Universe in a Shoebox . . . How Will It Happen and What Will It Mean,” portray virtual worlds as achievable. The deep irony is that while these technologists create the possibilities, there is the creeping suspicion that while we might create and play these games, *we* are being played.

As a functionalist, where consciousness is independent of its modality (i.e., brain or computer), Olen concludes, “If it is possible to ‘program’ another brain to have the same psychology as the brain I now have, then it is possible for me to change bodies. And if it is possible for me to change bodies, then it is also possible for me to survive the death of my body” (ibid., p. 333).

Thus, the “continuity of consciousness” constitutes the reincarnation of the soul. From time-honored classics like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to drugstore paperbacks like Curt Sidomac’s *The Brain*,<sup>3</sup> there has always been a popular interest in the possibilities of technical and medical triumphs over human mortality. Given the rapid progress in DNA technology, stem-cell research, cognitive science, and computer technology, there appear to be real possibilities for technological immortality.

The popular imagination is awash in cinematographic imagery of transpersonal identities, survival of the soul, and life after death. Films like *Being John Malcovich*, *Vanilla Sky*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Brainstorm*, and *The Seven Grams*, to name but a few, lend credence to the ideal that minds can be transferred from one body to another. Where these films whet the appetite for immortality, the techniques for “capturing” the mind/soul on magnetic substrates comes from computer science.

### The Technology of Immortality

In 1988 Hans Moravec, then at the MIT Media Labs, wrote a seminal book entitled *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. If I read Moravec correctly, he argues that physical death is the one problem that has caused more human misery and worry than any other. He further posits that not only is solving this problem within the technological capabilities of humankind, but that this is also its ultimate purpose. As a first stage, Moravec sees no difficulty with the “transmigration” of human consciousness to more durable robots. The movies *Bladerunner*, *I Robot*, and *AI* immediately come to mind. He writes, “So what about replacing everything, that is, transplanting the human brain into a specially designed robot body? Unfortunately, while this solution might overcome most of our physical limitations, it would leave untouched our biggest handicap, the limited and fixed intelligence of the human brain. This transplant scenario gets our brain out of our body. Is there a way to get our mind out of our brain?” (1988, p. 109).

Moravec argues that the threshold density for computer storage techniques is just a few generations from having the capacity to record the contents of consciousness. This “snapshot” of consciousness could then be downloaded onto computer software, where it could be stored (and/or augmented). Once a year, like renewing a driver’s license, one would store a copy of consciousness. Of course, critical consciousnesses (e.g., creative geniuses and political leaders) would have their consciousnesses scanned daily; this back-up procedure would protect against lost cogno-bytes. Real-time scanning of human consciousness for storage and retrieval would then only be a few innovations removed. Storage for the billions of neuronal energy patterns would require holographic, laser-encoded, crystal-optic, molecular quantum-level storage techniques (HLCOMQST). But the quantum addressing, storage and retrieval techniques are currently within the imagination’s production, if not technological production. Moravec writes:

Though you have not lost consciousness, or even your train of thought, your mind has been removed from the brain and transferred to a machine. In a final, disorienting step the surgeon lifts out his hand. Your suddenly abandoned body goes into spasms and dies. For a moment you

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3. This was a particularly memorable pulp sci-fi novel from the late 1950’s. In this novel a mad scientist transplants his brain into another person’s body.

experience only quiet and dark. Then, once again, you can open your eyes. Your perspective has shifted. The computer simulation has been disconnected from the cable leading to the surgeon's hand and reconnected to a shiny new body of the style, color, and material of your choice. Your metamorphosis is complete (ibid., p. 110, italics in the original)..

Moravec believes that your children's children will be perhaps the last generation to face the prospects of physical death. Thus freed from fear, post-humans will be enabled to complete sentient beings' work in the universe.

It is not only the transference of human memory and personality that Moravec envisions. John Barrow and Frank Tipler also agree. They write, in a "*Final Anthropic Principle*" (FAP): *Intelligent information-processing must come into existence in the Universe, and, once it comes into existence, it will never die out*" (1988, p. 23). Thus Moravec's technological storage and retrieval of human memory and the computer software necessary to simulate an ongoing existence is more than the "jacking-in" of human consciousness into *Neuromancer's* "Cyberspace."<sup>4</sup> In fact, in my estimation, Moravec's position is highly teleological: the purpose of intelligence in the universe is to transform the physical universe itself into an intelligent universe.

Computer technology is a hardware means to encode the "wet-ware" of human brain-state consciousness into a software, which in turn can be transformed from a continuous analog process into a digital format. The Rapid Fourier-Transforms necessary to reduce the complex variations of human neural electromagnetic wave output activity onto a DVD-like substrate and store it in computer memory is on the technological horizon. The recording of the soul therefore need not be beyond logical possibility. In the concluding chapter of *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, "The Future of the Universe," Barrow and Tipler write:

An intelligent being—or more generously, any living creature—is fundamentally a type of computer, and is thus subject to the limitations imposed on computers by the laws of physics. However, the really important part of a computer is not the particular hardware, but the program; we may even say that a human being *is* a program designed to run on a particular hardware called a human body, coding its data in a very special type of data storage devices called DNA molecules and nerve cells. The essence of a human being is not the body but the program which controls the body; we might even identify the program which controls the body with the religious notion of a *soul*, for both are defined to be non-material entities which are the essence of a human personality. In fact, defining the soul to be a type of program has much in common with Aristotle and Aquinas' definition of the soul as 'the form of activity of the body' (ibid., p. 659).

In light of Moravec's contention that technological immortality is only a few generations of innovation in computer storage and retrieval away, the question remains: even if we could, why would we want to do this? Would it be ethical, and would it make us less human?

### Heaven or Hell?

By many interpretations, Albert Camus' great essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" is a denial of the possibility of a repetitive hell. Sisyphus, in contemplating as he walks back to the bottom of the hill that "he's done it again," finds heroic affirmation in the nihilism of the eternal recurrence. Camus writes, "Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling"

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4. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Science Fiction, 1984). Gibson coined the word "cyberspace." Here, I'm also reminded of the highly unusual film *Tron*, where humans enter the computer electronic simulacrum of a computer game.

(1955, p. 90). I raise this issue because before I can consider the normative aspects of post-human identity in technological immortality, some justification for why this prospect *can* be chosen must be sought.

There is the pervasive sense that the “perversion” of infinite existence would entail an uneliminable ennui. There is even a certain sense of dread associated with Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, as being somehow trapped in the Karmic Wheel: that if we are condemned to endlessly repeat each act for eternity, we ought to consider each act *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is a positive affirmation of what John Dewey refers to in *Art As Experience* as the notion of a certain Mr. Hinton who “portrayed the whole endless duration of life after death as a living over of the incidents that happened in a short life on earth, in continued discovery of the relationships involved among them” (1980, p. 44). The dizzying profligate ontologies of Borges’s “Garden of Forking Paths” comes to mind. For if Mr. Hinton’s conception of death is the resolution to its endpoint of each decision made in a lifetime, then the “plurality of worlds” takes on new meaning.<sup>5</sup> Yet I would argue that even these endless possibilities are insufficient justification to warrant desires for human immortality. Again, Hans Moravec provides the rationale.

“The ability to transplant minds will make it easy to bring to life anyone who has been carefully recorded on a storage medium” (1988, p. 122). Moravec’s comment here is not surprising, but what is astounding are the consequences he derives from this. He argues that “awakening the past” is the final objective for technological immortality. By awakening the past he suggests that the purpose of human existence—its ultimate (teleological) purpose—is to reanimate all the souls that have ever existed. By deploying mathematical algorithms and the fact that a single strand of DNA contains all the essential information for previously existing beings, one might resurrect not only my dead father,<sup>6</sup> but also Genghis Khan. Moreover, Moravec surmises:

More radically, we could ‘download’ our minds directly into a body in the simulation and ‘upload’ back into the real world when our mission is accomplished. . . . In all cases we would have the opportunity to recreate the past and to interact with it in a real and direct fashion. . . . It might be fun to resurrect all the past inhabitants of the earth this way and to give them an opportunity to share with us in the (ephemeral) immortality of transplanted minds. Resurrecting one small planet should be child’s play long before our civilization has colonized even its first galaxy (ibid., pp. 123-124).

Again, welcome to *The Matrix*! This Moravecian “great conversation” is like tuning a radio receiver, where one might tune into any prior part of reality in the past—all salient information having been conserved, encoded, and stored—and download a selected consciousness to experience any prior experience experienced by any experiencer. Like 4-D videotape, this vicariousness would allow etherealized, electronic “brains in a vat” the almost endless diversion of living life after life of all the lives ever lived. Of course, Americans are already inured to

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5. I am struck here by the many films I have viewed in the past year involving “split-realities” (e.g., *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Sliding Doors*, and *Melinda and Melinda*).

6. This is of course the sense of Carl Sagan’s *Contact*, where alien intelligence communicates with a human by creating a pure simulacrum of a beach and putting a perfect hologram of the “dead father” into a conversation with his daughter. This was an affirmation, a promise, that humankind’s worst losses are recoverable. The book also instantiates what I have come to term “the Law of the Conservation of Information”: once information has been created, it cannot be destroyed; it can only change forms. Digitizing and storing information concerning a life is a manifestation of this law.

these speculative fantasies, having understood the simulated worlds of the “Holodeck” broadcast for years on the television program *Star Trek*.<sup>7</sup>

Sharing the lived experiences of others also has the Hindu sensibilities of the God of the Brahman being the God’s-eye-view of the totality of individuated Atman souls. This is the perspectival view from everywhere that would transform the individual into the summation of all possible individual perspectival views. Again I’m reminded of the television engineers who imagine beyond HDTV and TiVo a perspectival television driven by massive parallel computing, where you can see the action from any perspective. For example, in watching a baseball game, one could see it from the pitcher’s, catcher’s, batter’s, any of the fielders’, any of the spectators’, or astoundingly, the ball’s perspective. What Moravec envisions is a total interface of all souls and the possibility of gaining the wisdom and ethical perspective that this entails. Perhaps human justice, human equality, and a universal human identity will only be possible if it is possible to salvage and learn from the totality of all human struggles. Allowing each reincarnated soul to walk a mile in the souls of every other soul would achieve the egalitarian closure—the “event horizon”—for what it means to be human. As Benjamin Kunkel writes in his recent novel *Indecision*:

I am imagining a paradise in which there is no lack of time. I would like for everyone to have so plentifully much time, and everyone such an excellent memory, that eventually, over time, everyone will have *been* everyone else. Do you see? In the length of history everyone will have been all the other people in the world. And then for once finally we will treat each other well. You and I will treat each other perfectly (2005, p. 207).

Kunkel’s vision for *democratic socialism* is informed by this paradigmatic possibility for human egalitarianism in absolute intersubjectivity. But what if someone does not want to play?

### **The Impossibility of Suicide**

Albert Camus understood that the primary existential position is the decision not to kill oneself. This decision is an affirmation. Once this is affirmed, freedom’s responsibilities begin. Given an infinite enough temporal expanse for each monadic soul to “reflect” on each other soul, is it possible that boredom, exhaustion, and last, ironically enough, Kunkel’s *abulia* (indecision) might lead a “soul” to opt out of this electronic, platonic “heaven above the heavens”? Does not the lack of the possibility of an actual non-existence deprive an existent actual freedom? I will return to this issue in the final section of the paper. For now, what of an expanse of time so huge that immortality might appear boring (or painful)?

Noted science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany’s novel *Trouble on Triton* is a fascinating portrayal of how the future attempts to handle “boredom.” In Delany’s novel, recombinant DNA, molecular engineering, and the conquest of aging have led to possibilities for changing human identities at the cellular and atomic levels. Thus, tired of living for two hundred years as a white man, one is able to be re-engineered to become a black woman. Men can experience what it is to be a mother. The one hundred fifty years into the future of which Delany writes is

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<sup>7</sup>. Since I wrote the first drafts of this paper, I’ve read Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* (New York: Knopf, 2006). In this utopian (dystopian?) novel Houellebecq creates just this scenario, where “Daniel 24” (i.e., version 24 of a digitally encoded and stored “Daniel”) is able to enter into discourse with any of his prior aliases (or anyone else’s). Thus, “Dan 15” and “Dan 23” are like MS Word 5.x ver. 3 and MS Word 6.x. The “reveal codes” of this profligate ontology is what our future means.

rapidly approaching given genetic engineering and biomedical science's accelerating prospects. In the preface to *Trouble on Triton*, Kathy Ackerman writes:

Delany's story refuses to find an ending, to end. Rather it turns on itself like one of the snakes Eurydice handles when she's ruler of the underworld; it becomes a conversation. A conversation, not only about identity, desire, and gender, but also about democracy, liberalism, and otherness. And perhaps more than anything, a conversation about societies that presume the possibilities of absolute knowledge and those societies whose ways of knowing are those of continuous unending searching and questioning (1996, p. *xii*).

For Delany the nuances of identity, democracy, and questioning reality will not exhaust humans in the short run. But what about the long run? Barrow and Tipler estimate that the thermodynamic "window"—that is, the time span in which temperatures in the universe are high enough above absolute zero to sustain the changes required for "thought processes"—at more than twenty billion years (Barrow and Tipler, 1988, p. 662). Thus, long before what Barrow and Tipler refer to as the "Omega Point," where the entire universe has become "intelligence," twenty billion years will have passed (and as James Joyce (2004, pp. 115-116) famously said in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, "Eternity would have scarcely begun"). What of post-human identity in twenty billion years? Will that be the *twilight* ennui of Žižek's "perversions," or the infinite *nuance* of Delany's unending great conversation?

Pondering just this issue, Hans Moravec writes, "If our successors somehow manage to wrangle for themselves a subjective infinity of time to think, will they eventually run out of things to ponder? Will they be fated to repeat the same thoughts over and over, in an endless and pointless cycle?" (1988, p. 149). Moravec speculates that the time spans involved would allow the resurrection of every being that has ever lived, the creation of Kunkel's Leibnizian-like monadic sharing of realities lived in real-time *Matrix* simulacra, and the exploration and population of the universe. As this actual universe "F"—a spherical wave front with Fourier transform signature—becomes confining and boring, immortal intelligence would begin to design an alternate virtual universe "V" with differing conditions, like time running at a much slower rate. Thus, intelligence creates the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics in virtual reality, David K. Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds*, and Fred Wolf's *Parallel Universes*.

With an infinity of virtual worlds, universes become ripe "like blackberries" for exploration and new experiences; individual human souls become the Bodhisattvas of space-time, exploring and assisting an infinity of worlds and their naïve beings attain the same wisdom. These virtual "V" universes, created for the purposes of relieving an infinite ennui, become lost and scattered in the prismatic fracturing of realities. As Moravec concludes:

In fact, the Fourier transform is but one of an infinite class of 'orthogonal transforms' that have the same basic properties. Each of these is capable of taking a description of a volume and operating over it to produce a different description with the same information, but with each original point spread to every location in the result. This leads to the possibility of an infinity of universes, each a different combination of the same underlying stuff, each exhibiting quantum mechanical behavior but otherwise having its own unique physics, each oblivious of the others sharing its space. I don't know where to take that idea (*ibid.*, p.196).

There is only one place to take this idea. Moravec appears to sense—but is unwilling to accept—his own conclusion. The only place to take these ideas is that *this* universe and the *souls* within it are the result of a similar process produced by other intelligent beings in the universe: ours being their "V" space. Moravec appears unwilling to take the final leap: the universe we assume as *natural* is in fact the result of *techne*. This was the real charm of Douglas Adams's



*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: planets can be created artificially, and, I might add, *mutatis mutandis*—universes can be created artificially.

Even a few theoretical physicists entertain the possibility that given continued progress in high-energy physics, humans will create black holes in the laboratory.<sup>8</sup> These micro-black holes, suspended in “magnetic bottles,” will “have no windows.” Created with their own unique initial conditions, these black holes will begin to evolve without their creators ever knowing what is occurring within them. Cosmologists agree that the universe has all the properties of the inside event horizon of a black hole. The idea that universes inexorably bud other universes from within, and that this universe is possibly the result of another sentience’s experiments in high-energy physics, has gained the popular status of an emerging paradigm, or oracle.<sup>9</sup>

Television programs like *Sliders*, where intra-dimensional travel is portrayed; *Stargate*, where wormhole travel occurs like dialing a telephone; and popular science fiction like Robert Metzger’s recent novel *Picoverse*, where small universes are created in the laboratory and subsequently explored, all portend the actualization of these dreams. The inventions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries taught us that “What one person dreams, another can create” is more than just an aphorism.

Even with the dizzying possibilities for technological immortality, the fact remains that some individuals are eager for completion—finality—that even fifty years is too long to linger in this “buzzing, blooming confusion.” Possibilities for absolute non-existence is a satisfying philosophical stance in a life-world riddled with Gödelian incompleteness, the yawning abysses of absolute regresses, and the terror of the infinities of reflecting barbershop mirrors. After a long life, completeness, finality, and non-being appear a comfortable alternative to the continuation of the conundrums that plague us. Immortality, technological or theological, appears to some to be no more than another form of human acquisitiveness, vanity, or perversion. So even if it is possible, is it something to be desired? Given the opportunity, should a person desire immortality? Ought it even be considered? I’d suggest, given Ted William’s head floating in a vat of liquid nitrogen at Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona, that we should at least consider the consequences.

### Master and Slave Scripts

In the Hegelian dialectic between theses and antitheses, there inevitably arises a third-moment synthesis. Even in the internal struggle between ideas concerning human mortality and immortality, there exists an essential dependence on each side of the marked binary.<sup>10</sup> According to Hegel, the development of the “Geist” requires the working-itself-out by way of contradiction. If we take death, in this Hegelian dialectical process, as the antithesis of life, then

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8. *Vide* Leon Ledderman’s *From Quarks to the Cosmos* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1989).

9. Here I allude to H. H. Bakhtin’s use of “oracle” to signify a powerful chronotope (i.e., a historically located cultural trope), which dominates the voices of others and is consulted for authority.

10. I would like to thank Professor Pushpa Parekh for suggesting this fertile line of thought. Dr. Parekh suggested that I “clarify and explore linkages to what is considered ‘postcolonial identities or address how these identities are implicated at the crux of gender/disability/technology in conceptualizing ‘immortality.’ ” This caused me to ponder whether “dying” could be considered revolutionary (anticolonial) or counterrevolutionary (serving the ends of imperialism, which in the postmodern era could be equated with “technology”). If, as I alluded to earlier in the paper, “death is the ultimate disability,” should people be entitled to the “freedom” and “rights” immortality would bestow? Rather than interpret technology as always perverse, I have taken the unpopular stance that (in cosmological timescales) these trends are teleologically inevitable and unavoidable.

death is a necessity. Just as Hegel argued that the “slave” was a logical necessity for the meaning of a “master,” can it be argued that without the possibility for physical death life can have no possible meaning? Further, without subjectivity, is human intersubjectivity possible? Without death, is it entirely possible that there can be no life?

Franz Fanon (2004, 1963), writing in *The Wretched of the Earth*, correctly portrays how the dependence of the subaltern upon a “superior” colonizing culture produces severe psychiatric problems in the colonized (pp. 181-233). Fanon argues that only by violence can the debilitating effects of the colonizer be replaced by self-affirming identities. If, metaphorically, human beings have been held hostage by death, colonized and exploited, then the post-colonial space is the technological immortality I have outlined. But what if it’s the other way around? Philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres captures the essence of this subtlety:

The ‘decolonial attitude’ has a generous and receptive subject as its basis. . . Imperialism also enacts a certain logic of the gift. But the gift of the master works like a venom that shatters a number of possibilities for the colonized to become mature human beings. The master is also a privileged giver: he gives and takes but never receives. Both Americanism and Eurocentrism, leftist or not, work according to this logic. That is why it is necessary to find some impenetrable core in culture, or some unique radical element that can penetrate other cultures but which can’t be penetrated. Like the imperial gift, the decolonial gift is a venom too, but in this case what it kills or attempts to kill is imperial identity itself. The decolonial gift is the gift of death (2005, p. 67).

However, if the postmodern issues of identity fragmentation brought on by the end of colonialism, *mutatis mutandis*, portend an even greater destruction of what it means to be human, why pursue immortality? Perhaps the idea of human immortality itself is an extension of imperial logics, which seek to reinstate the hegemonies of a dominant, albeit technological, power: which to resist *is* to die. Is it possible that death is a necessity for flourishing human identities?

Jacques Derrida affirmatively illuminates this question in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida argues that death is the only way that an infinite god can share love with a finite being:

Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to *become finite*, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self (1996, p. 51).

What this means within the context of the current discussion is that mortality, as a necessary concomitant for human responsibility, is irreplaceable. If we as irreducible “singularities” become wholly “other,” we cease being human. If as Derrida—echoing Heidegger—puts it, “the sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability” (ibid., p. 45), then death is an essential category for being human.

If it is one’s death that makes one irreplaceable, and death is a necessary antithesis for life in the world as fully human, then the synthesis of these provides the third-moment in a new dialectic. Just as the human now struggles for new identities in the third-moment between the thesis of colonialism and antithesis of post colonialism, the quest for identity and purpose will continue as the human works out the contradictions in a post-death, immortal moment—even if it is a technological immortality. Thus in a highly Hegelian manner, the Geist resolves all contradictions—including life and death—and achieves “freedom.” Death becomes a historical steppingstone along the souls’ achievement of absolute freedom.

Technological immortality will not become a normative problem of “oughtness.” Given the vastness of space and time, and the potential for an ongoing evolution of consciousness (human and cybernetic), this reality will eventually obtain. Philosopher and scientist David Darling has presented scenarios consistent with the arguments of Barrow and Tipler as well as Hans Moravec. Darling muses:

As mind grows and its power to observe and comprehend nature at all levels expands, so will its ability to watch quantum systems in the past. Thus from increasingly remote points in the future, an increasingly powerful creative beam of observation will reach back to earlier and earlier times. And so will the cosmic mind-to-come project more and more into the past the very reality that is necessary and sufficient to give rise to it. As the Final Anthropic Principle suggests, this will go on until, in the infinitely remote future, there is a single all-encompassing mind, coextensive and coinclusive of the entire universe, that through a single, final observation completes the loop joining alpha to omega: the watcher at the end of time (1993, p. 188).

We, all together, become our own individual “watchers at the end of time.” When we, individually, get there, we will understand the part we played here and now. In writing just this, I ponder whether it is my future self at the end of time reaching back to me in what philosophers refer to as “backward causation.” Darling continues:

And man? It seems that we may be the very reason and the purpose that there is a universe—we, our progeny, and any fellow intelligent races that have sprung up elsewhere in space. If so, then we can look to the future with confidence and optimism. Even though our personal consciousnesses may dissolve at the point when our brains die, we shall inevitably be involved in the cosmic consciousness that is to come. Everything that we ever were, throughout our human lives, will gradually be reincorporated into the spreading awareness of the universe (ibid., p. 189).

As T. S. Eliot said in “Little Gidding,” “We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.” How many iterations of Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence or precessions of Baudrillard’s Precession of Simulacra<sup>11</sup> does it take to completely forget?

So, *As I Lay Dying*, I will not be thinking of William Faulkner’s portrayal of ignominious death and poverty of the mother, Addie, rotting and stinking in her wooden box. Nor will I be thinking of William Golding’s *Pincher Martin*, already torpedoed and drowned in the North Atlantic, imagining his recapitulated life. As I lay dying, I will be thinking of David Darling, Hans Moravec, and Barrow and Tipler’s visions for technological immortality. I will be thinking of a time billions of years from now when the Sun goes nova sending a spherical shockwave into the abyss, engulfing the Earth—sweet Terra—and every trace of what every individual soul contributed to this common struggle. Converting the Earth into a new energy wave front and spewing that information across the vast reaches of the cosmos will leave a trace. A signature in energy that my last thought was of you and the consciousness that in a few more billion years, I shall have the opportunity to know you better. David Darling sums this up:

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11. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994). Baudrillard’s book is the book Neo is reading in the opening scenes of *The Matrix*. Baudrillard writes:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

it masks and denatures a profound reality;

it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

What will it be like to be that future cosmic mind—to be God by any other name? . . . It will mean the final unification and reconciliation of our two ways of seeing the world: the scientific and the mystical, the left brain and the right, the male and the female, because when mind includes every particle in the universe—when mind is everything—whatever is observed becomes instantly and physically a part of consciousness . . . The circle will be closed, the universe complete; and the equations of eternity solved for all time (1993, p. 190).

A hundred years ago, Bertrand Russell argued brilliantly in *The Problems of Philosophy*, “In contemplation . . . we start from the not-Self, and through its greatness the boundaries of the Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share of infinity” (Russell, 1959, p. 159). Russell understands that philosophy is the journey of Self to un-Self; that consciousness can contemplate infinity, making infinity a part of consciousness, enlarging it. Yet at the same time, self is nothing. Žižek reminds us that the real lesson of *The Matrix* is “Not to convin<sup>12</sup>ce myself that I can twist the spoon, but to convince myself that *there is no spoon* . . . However, what about *myself*? Is it not that the further step should have been to accept the Buddhist proposition that I *myself*, the subject, do not exist?” Žižek, 1999, p. 20). Bertrand Russell’s transformation of self to unself complete, the subjective completely objective, and vice versa, yin to yang, and vice versa, and then what? Clear-eyed, in death’s desuetude, we can begin again to try to be human.

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