

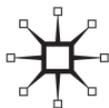
# Longevity and the Good Life

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# Longevity and the Good Life

Anthony Farrant

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# Introduction

Human beings, as with most other animals, appear to have a biologically limited life span. There is no reasonable evidence of any human being having lived much longer than 120 years, and relatively few people have achieved such a long span of life. The search for a way to increase longevity, along with a concomitant prolongation of the quality of health, has a long history and cultural presence. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* may be the earliest tale of a search for a means to prolong life while the idea of a 'fountain of youth' is an old, culturally diverse and widespread myth.<sup>1</sup> Gerontological knowledge about why human beings age and the implications of this for restricting how long we can live improved considerably over the course of the last century, and continues to develop. Along with the potential of biotechnologies, this knowledge suggests it could now be possible to enable people to live longer, healthier lives.

Medical interventions that enhance human functions and form raise considerable anxieties, and endeavours to increase life spans are no different. The unease felt about biotechnologies concerning, for example, the effects of their use on human nature, can be placed within wider concerns about modern technology and their impact in shaping and determining our values. Longevity may be valuable, but the very real prospect that we could increase life spans raises questions about the role of technology in distorting our values. The search for longer life spans may have an extensive history, but it is not an endeavour that has gone unopposed. It is from within the context of this wider debate that I consider some of the ethical implications of increasing life spans for the pursuit of the good life.

Throughout, I take a humanist approach, and broadly restrict my focus to the way in which life extension affects our moral relationships with others. I include among these others nonhuman animals for reasons that will become more obvious as the argument progresses. Nevertheless, my inclusion of nonhuman animals points to a pervasive theme in my argument about the search for longer, healthier lives as a humanist endeavour.

Central to my assessment is the idea that the good life is fragile, that it is subject to the contingencies of life, which in turn shape and contribute to our values. The extension of life spans beyond their apparent biological limit represents an attempt to control one of the

fundamental vulnerabilities of life, namely, death and the uncertainty of when it will occur. To be successful at increasing longevity will demonstrate a triumph of reason over the non-rational aspects of life, the contingencies that defy control and destabilise the pursuit of the good life. In so doing, it will give the impression of further distinguishing human beings from the natural world, including nonhuman animals. To conceive of increases in longevity in this way is not an understanding that I will endorse, but it will be an underlying theme throughout my argument.

The idea that prolonging life spans is to control death points to another constraint on my argument. My concern is with increases in life spans and, by its very nature, this does not involve the attempt to make human beings immortal. This constraint exists for two reasons. First, even to remove completely the biological causes of the limitations on human longevity would not make people immune to death. Second, I take the positive view that advances in medicine will be such that people will live longer, healthier lives. Nonetheless, any increases in life spans will be gradual and there is no prospect in the immediate future, if at all, of a significant extension to longevity such that people might live for hundreds of years.<sup>2</sup>

There are three final caveats concerning my argument. In taking a humanist approach, I restrict my analysis to the implications of increasing longevity on Western values; it may be the case that in different cultures some of the issues I discuss will not arise. Furthermore, I make the assumption that any increases in life spans will apply to every individual in society. In practice, this may not be the case, but a crucial aspect of my argument concerns the consequences of extending life spans on the idea that human beings are fundamentally equal. In this regard, I do not address the practical issues as such of prolonging life; my aim is to isolate the key values that increasing life spans will affect. Finally, as may be obvious from the title of this book, I approach the issues from a non-consequentialist perspective on ethics.