

Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley is selling an ancient dream of immortality

Human beings are the only animals to have evolved an insight into their own death

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In 1999, the futurist Ray Kurzweil published a book entitled *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. He looked forward to a future in which the “human species, along with the computational technology it created, will be able to solve age-old problems . . . and will be in a position to change the nature of mortality.”

Mr Kurzweil is now an executive at Google, one of whose co-founders, Larry Page, launched a start-up, Calico, in 2013 with the aim of harnessing advanced technologies that will enable people to “lead longer and healthier lives”.

Others go even further. Aubrey de Grey, co-founder of Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence, a research centre, believes that ageing is just an engineering problem. Technological progress, he maintains, will eventually enable human beings to achieve what he calls “life extension escape velocity”.

As for Mr Kurzweil, earlier this year he announced that he had “set the date 2045 for the ‘Singularity’ which is when we will multiply our effective intelligence a billion-fold by merging with the intelligence we have created”. In this “transhumanist” vision, once we turn ourselves into “spiritual machines”, we will be able to live forever.

Although mortality denial is currently fashionable in Silicon Valley, it is not new. On the contrary, it is one of the most successful products ever designed and has been on the market for millennia.

Because human beings

are the only animals to have evolved an explicit, consciously experienced insight into their own finitude, there is a robust and enduring demand for this particular psychological sleight of hand. Unfortunately, death is not just something the Chinese have invented to make America less competitive. Empirical evidence and rational argument converge on the simple, sobering fact that all of us will eventually disappear for good – sooner or later, more or less gracefully, and with more or less suffering.

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It is hard to face this fact in an intellectually honest manner. Human beings have a problem that no creature before them had: the human cognitive self-model explicitly tells its user that everybody dies, thereby creating a toxic form of self-knowledge, a deep existential wound. My emotional deep structure tells me there is something that must never happen, while rational thought tells me that the ultimate accident is inevitable. Religion was an early-stage adaptation to



this neurocomputational bug.

Aiding and abetting human self-deception in ingenious and sophisticated ways is therefore a lucrative business.

In its most primitive form, represented by organised religion down the centuries, mortality denial has consisted in just that – simple, outright denial. In the religious perspective, the good news is that all of this is not true – the dead will be resurrected. You are loved and accepted by an omnipresent divine being. And if you manage to accept yourself as accepted, you will finally be able to feel at home in a strange and hostile world, reacquainting yourself with the early childhood emotion of security.

The gospel of alternative facts comes in many different flavours and varieties. In organised self-deception, there are levels of sophistication. For example, a Buddhist may claim that she does not even want to be reborn, that her highest goal is to liberate herself from the cycle of death and rebirth. If things don’t work out with nirvanic giga-bingo in this life, then, unfortunately, something in you is forced to survive death.

Other versions of denial involve tying your self-esteem to your tribe or nation. You can stabilise your sense of self-worth by being a good communist, a pious Catholic or by becoming a complacent secular humanist – all you need is a set of values that you can live up to and a mutually reinforcing community of believers.

Others strive for symbolic immortality by seeking to make a genuine and lasting

contribution to science, philosophy or culture. Imagine writing a book that will be read centuries after your death, or composing a piece of music or creating art that will be admired by thousands long after your physical body has shrivelled and perished.

Silicon Valley tech evangelism and trans-humanism are merely the latest forms of culturally evolved self-deception. They present us with a new metaphysical placebo for existential palliative care. Will we upload ourselves into virtual reality? Perhaps a benevolent superintelligence can help us break through into a life beyond all suffering? Could the church of the technological singularity be right in proclaiming that immortality is nearer than we think?

It is tempting to dismiss scientifically inspired presentiments of immortality as arrant nonsense, but we should not underestimate the way ideas like transhumanism speak powerfully to our unconscious need for delusion. This is not only a new religion that does without God and churches – it also is a marketing strategy for new technology. A novel form of cross-promotion and co-branding, tech evangelism really aims at a deeper and more efficient penetration into the digital marketplace by offering mortality denial in the same package.

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