

The technology of immortality

We can't decide whether to make ourselves obsolete or make ourselves immortal, or both redundant and immortal. How do you even begin to choose? But we do seem pretty sure that we can achieve these goals.

Yes, Ian Malcolm, you hit the nail on the head, way back in "Jurassic Park": we're so busy trying to see whether we could do something, we never pause to ask whether we should do it. That has never changed.

Obsolete? Redundant? Well, why not? Facebook tycoon Mark Zuckerberg has vowed to build a robot that will take care of his house, mind the baby, and help him run his business. Have any of you ever told your wife or husband, "You can be replaced by a machine"? Maybe that's not such an idle threat anymore.

At the same time, another so-and-so in hi-tech fantasyland has announced a plan to freeze human brains before the owner dies; and then, later, thaw 'em out and transplant them into a "bionic body". Y'mean you wind up in a robot body, like Robo-Cop? Or in a genetically-engineered, perfect, young, strong, incredibly beautiful human body? Didn't Edgar Rice Burroughs already do this, in "The Master Mind of Mars", back in 1927?

Whatever it means, they're not quite ready yet to do the deed. They estimate they'll need another thirty years to iron all the bugs out. But when the scheme is well and thoroughly baked, supposedly we're looking at a 500-year lifespan—maybe even, if they can really fine-tune it, no more death at all.

Imagine keeping Nancy Pelosi around for another 700 years.

Robotic slaves and practical immortality will be for everybody, right? Not just for the super-rich and famous. Otherwise there might be a problem with folks who can't afford

it. I mean, if you think the 99% is ticked off now, wait'll they find out that they have to die but the 1% don't. There'll be some hard feelings over that, I shouldn't wonder.

But if Mr. Zuckerberg's robo-nanny really can do just as good a job of child care as public school or television can, think how liberating it would be. No more messy diapers. Mom and Dad will be free to compose symphonies, paint great pictures, or write cowboy poetry.

Or not.

See, if everyone's immortal, if social justice can be stretched to the point where everybody's brain gets the old Birdseye treatment...

And meanwhile your domestic robot does all the cooking, all the cleaning, and gently shovels food into your mouth when you say "Feed me..."

Under these idyllic circumstances, who's going to have children? Immortals don't need to keep the species going; they are the species. After all, brain-freezing and transplantation is likely to be expensive. How would we manage it for billions of people?

No, we won't need babies anymore—not if our brainsicles are allowing us to live forever. Planets get too crowded if immortals keep having babies. You could look it up. (Where, I don't know, it's not my problem.) Imagine how many babies one couple could make, if they kept at it for 500 years. It'd be like the rabbits in Australia.

But Science will find a way, you can count on that. People who are smart enough to invent robot nannies and freeze brains so they can be re-installed elsewhere ought to be able to solve even these challenging problems that I've mentioned. Would Science lie to you? And then we really will be as gods. The Serpent in the Garden wasn't conning us: we really and truly

will be as gods.

Well, some more than others, at least.

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