

The Wall Street Journal

Shelly Kagan on the Future of Death When We Can Live Decades Longer

The Yale Professor Ponders Living to 160: Will a Second Brain Have the Memories of the First?

By

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July 7, 2014 4:21 p.m. ET

Death isn't going to be overcome anytime soon. So the most fundamental fact about the human condition—we live, and then we die—is going to stay the same. Accordingly, the most common basic attitudes toward death (fear of death, and a wish for immortality) are likely to remain in place as well.

But though death will remain undefeated, it may yet be delayed. It is possible that in the not-too-distant future, medical science will have progressed sufficiently that we may be able to significantly expand the normal human life span, adding perhaps 40, 60 or even 80 healthy years to the current upper limits.

Such a change would be unprecedented in human history. Although average human life expectancy has increased over the centuries, this is entirely due to reduction in premature deaths (primarily from disease). The Bible's idea of a long life—about 80 years—is still more or less on target, more than 2,000 years later. So if we do find ourselves facing the real possibility of living healthy lives for 120, 140 or 160 years, this will be a change unlike any we have faced before.

Delaying death in this way will require radical changes in society. Consider the fact that, for most of us, parenting and raising children occupies an absolutely central part of our adult lives. That would have to change. An additional 80 healthy years might mean that women would be fertile for twice or three times as long as they are now. But if that meant having two or three times as many children, the resulting population explosion would be utterly unmanageable.

On the other hand, if typical families still had only two or so children each, the raising of those children would occupy a much smaller portion of one's adulthood than it does now (16%, perhaps, compared with almost 40% now). Would family life become a much less significant part of our lives? Or would the roles of grandparent, great-grandparent and great-great-grandparent (and so on) take on new and unfamiliar significance? We don't know.

Extra Retirement?

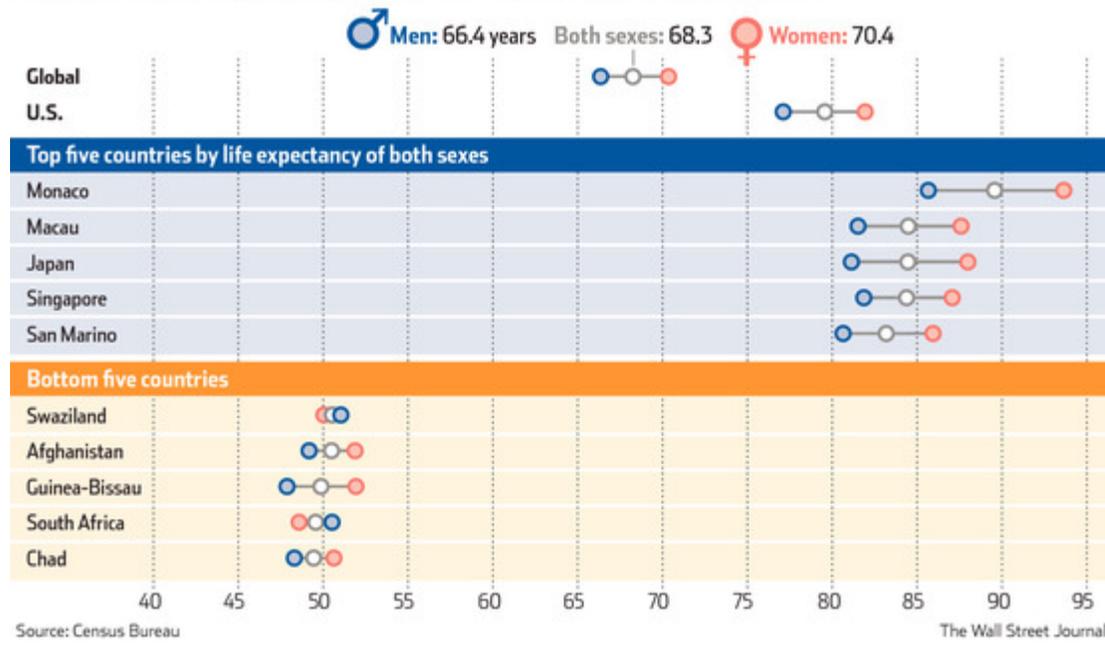
Similar questions arise when we think about the impact of longer life on one's career. Where exactly would the extra years "go"? Would they be added to the years one spends in retirement? But many people don't save enough for retirement as it is! How could we possibly manage to earn enough in our working years to pay for an additional 80 years of retirement?

So will the extra years be spent working? But many people are already sufficiently unhappy with their jobs to be counting the time until they can retire. How will they put up with needing to work for an additional 80 years? And even those of us who currently love our jobs might well grow bored if we had to work at them for over a century!

Perhaps people will change careers. Maybe after a half-century at one type of career, people will routinely switch tracks and have a completely different second (or third) career. That might well solve the problem of boredom. But who wants to start over again at the bottom of the corporate ladder—not to mention making an entry-level salary—at the age of 70 or 80?

In posing these questions, I don't at all mean to suggest that they cannot be answered. Humans are remarkably adaptable, and I have no doubt that various sorts of social arrangements would eventually emerge. Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that we cannot readily predict exactly what those new arrangements will look like. But at the very least we must avoid the naive assumption that we can just take an extra 80 years and simply "drop them" into the sorts of lives we currently have, while everything else stays the same.

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Being a philosopher, I cannot resist speculating a bit further. Even with tremendous advances in biology and medicine, presumably human bodies will eventually wear out. So let's imagine that in the future, suitable replacement organs—and perhaps even entire bodies—can be synthetically grown at will. That will allow us to delay death even further.

But what about the brain? I imagine that even the healthiest brain will eventually break down. Mustn't that signal the end?

Hopes and Fears

Not necessarily. Suppose that we can also grow replacement brains! Imagine that as your old brain nears the end of its ability to function properly, scientists upload your entire set of memories, beliefs, goals and desires onto a computer, and all of that content is then downloaded onto the replacement brain, which is then neatly slipped into your skull. When you wake up from your brain transplant, you will have all the same thoughts and hopes and fears as you had just before the operation. Won't that mean that death has been put off even longer?

That's actually a surprisingly difficult question to answer. There is a lively debate among contemporary philosophers about the underlying metaphysical requirements for personal identity—what it takes for a given person to continue to exist from moment to moment. On some views, the person who wakes up from the operation will indeed be you, the very same person who went into the hospital. But on other views, the person who wakes up will be just a *copy* of you, someone who mistakenly *believes* he is you, but who isn't really you at all. Tragically enough, the real you will have died on the operating table.

Suppose we take the more optimistic view, and decide that the person who wakes up really would be you. Won't that mean, then, that death has been more than delayed, that it has actually been defeated? Given the possibility of transplant after transplant, won't the age-old dream of immortality finally be ours?

No, not even there. For some day the sun will burn out, and all life on Earth will end, even ours.

Death can be delayed. But it cannot be denied.



Shelly Kagan is the Clark professor of philosophy at Yale University and author of the 2012 book "Death."