

Immortality could be within our grasp

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‘Surely God would not have created such a being as man, with an ability to grasp the infinite, to exist only for a day! No, no, man was made for immortality.’ Abraham Lincoln

Human beings have pondered immortality since our brains were capable of deep thoughts. The band Queen asked the question ‘who wants to live forever?’ when love must die. Stephen King espoused that each life ‘makes its own imitation of immortality.’ Of course, many religions indicate that we will have everlasting life after our time here on earth is over. Death, according to Peter Pan, will be ‘an awfully big adventure.’ For centuries, humans have been trying to prolong life and cheat death. Today, modern medicine has advanced to the point where our lifespans have increased and living upwards of 120 may very well be commonplace within the next decade. Since we can’t cheat death or prevent the inevitable just yet, how do we achieve a bit of immortality? Well, we may just be able to maintain our essence, again thanks to modern technology. There have been numerous science fiction tales centred around uploading a person’s consciousness into a computer, android or similar device. Okay, floating around the memory core of a laptop may not be the ideal situation, but if our ‘soul’ is saved to the desktop of everlasting life, won’t that do? Okay, I’m taking a ‘giant leap for mankind’ here, or maybe not. The big trick is trying to condense our massive brain power into something more manageable. Our brains contain close to 90 billion neurons and we have more synapse connections than stars in the Milky Way. It’s not just our brain power and capacity, but our lump of fatty tissue is always changing, making new connections and learning every second of every day. Unlike our computers, there does not seem to be a maximum capacity for our brains. Nevertheless scientists believe it’s theoretically possible to upload and download our memories. We’ve taken theory to reality countless times over our history. Air travel was considered crazy 100 years ago and space travel was considered fantasy just 60 years ago. Our smart phones are only 10 years old and only a few years ago, electric cars were still on the drawing board. The practical applications are limitless. Putting our immortality aside, think about giving vivid memories, dreams and experiences to those in vegetative states. What about transferring life experiences to young, bright university students? How about uploading wisdom and common sense to every politician around the globe? Could everyone become a musical virtuoso with the flick of a switch? Why stop there? What if we could connect every human brain on the planet? Okay, this Internet of the human brain concept may seem a bit far-fetched, but I am an eternal optimist. Back to Honest Abe’s quote. Why do we have such massive, complicated brains if we don’t use them? Is it part of a yet-unknown evolutionary process? Is it to prepare us for the possibilities? Are there secrets hidden in our brains that will one day become activated when the time is right? I suppose in order to ‘evolve’ and one day reach immortality, we all have to agree on a few things. And one of them is to identify just what our consciousness is. Can you explain it to someone if they asked you? Countless PhDs have spent their lives trying to answer this one. It’s really all that we are, and includes everything from tip to toe – our knowledge, emotions, senses, sights, sounds, tastes, how beach sand feels between our toes and the smell of sour milk. It’s the good and the bad, from belly button lint to marriage and raising children. It’s the way we sneeze and laugh. According to David Chalmers in his 1994 paper, the ‘hard problem’ is finding out how consciousness occurs in the right arrangement of brain matter. It’s sort of like this: a physics genius may know every equation of how mass and gravity interacts, but we don’t know why. But lovable TV character Sheldon Cooper was on to something because to understand the ‘whys’ we have to have a grasp on relativity, quantum mechanics and string theory. Maybe humans aren’t smart enough. But aren’t our brains immensely capable? Solving the whole ‘consciousness’ thingy requires that we separate ourselves, stand back and take an objective approach. But we can’t. Perhaps we’ll just leave all that up to the legal experts hired to sort out the whole ‘transfer of consciousness’ contracts of the future. Just how far off are we? A new company called Humai hopes transfer people’s consciousness into a new, artificial body. The company’s CEO says his team will resurrect their first human within 30 years. ‘We’re using artificial intelligence and nanotechnology to store data of conversational styles, behavioural patterns, thought processes and information about how your body functions from the inside-out. This data will be coded into multiple sensor technologies, which will be built into an artificial body with the brain of a deceased human. Using cloning technology, we will restore the brain as it matures.’ Can you imagine putting your brain into another container, giving you the freedom to live another lifetime? Heck, I could use a body upgrade! There are skeptics, who say the technology to extract thoughts and ideas out of an organ made of living tissue is nowhere near anything we have yet. Notice the word ‘yet.’ Hope and optimism are so human that I pray these qualities find themselves in our immortal lives. Hope to see you on the other side one day!

