

Philosophy in Review



Michael Hviid Jacobsen, (ed.), "Postmortal Society: Towards a Sociology of Immortality."

Surya Bowyer

Volume 40, numéro 1, février 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068152ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068152ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bowyer, S. (2020). Compte rendu de [Michael Hviid Jacobsen, (ed.), "Postmortal Society: Towards a Sociology of Immortality."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(1), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068152ar>

Copyright Surya Bowyer, 2020



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ed. *Postmortal Society: Towards a Sociology of Immortality*. Routledge 2018. 242 pp. \$155.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781472485588); \$49.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367085384).

At the end of episode two of *Forces of Nature*, physicist Brian Cox explains, with his trademark smile, that ‘in spacetime, if I leave an event, it doesn’t cease to exist when I’ve left it ... all those summers you spent with your mum and dad, or that first Christmas with your grandparents long ago, all those most precious memories of people and places, all those summers and winters passed and seasons yet to come are out there, somewhere in spacetime.’ Earlier in the episode, Cox outlines the implication this statement holds for our understanding of temporality: ‘the division of time into past, present, and future is an illusion. Our intuition is wrong.’

Illusion or not, and regardless of the efforts of modern physicists such as Cox, the division persists. Physics may judge our perceptions of time as ‘wrong,’ but this does not render those perceptions insignificant. Routledge’s book series *Studies in Death, Materiality, and the Origin of Time* explores these perceptions. The series has the self-stated aim of departing from science’s abstract understanding of time by examining ‘the ways in which bodily death and material decay are central points of reference ... which offer key insights into human perceptions of time.’ *Postmortal Society*, the most recent title in the series, addresses death obliquely by looking at various ways humans attempt to avoid it.

After death comes immortality. This point has been repeated, in one form or another, by almost every religion. It is repeated in two ways in this book’s introduction. Jacobsen notes (9) that in the 1990s, sociology ‘finally began to take the study of death and dying seriously;’ now, he argues, it should do the same for immortality. He also notes (6) that ‘humans are the only creatures, presumably, that are concerned with immortalizing themselves by projecting their lives, identities and ideas into the future through the production of lasting pieces of work ... or through carefully preparing and nurturing their self-images for memorialization after their deaths.’ This form of immortality relies on non-bodily extensions of the self-keeping someone alive, in a symbolic sense, even after their body has died.

To most people, however, immortality does not principally relate to the symbolic continuation of oneself after death, but rather to the absolute absence of bodily death. Only one chapter, by Bonifati, addresses this genuine form of immortality at any great length. The author outlines recent developments in science and technology that attempt to overcome biological limits by artificially enhancing human beings, developments often closely allied to the transhumanist philosophical movement. This is a topical subject. Recent mass-market books addressing this topic, such as journalist Mark O’Connell’s *To Be a Machine* and historian Noah Harari’s *Homo Deus*, have proved extremely popular. O’Connell’s work, the first full-length account of transhumanism, shines a gonzo-style light on to the movement—and won both fame and the Wellcome Book Prize for its efforts. Harari, himself made extraordinarily famous by *Sapiens*, argues in its sequel (Penguin 2016, 21) that the twenty-first century will see humankind ‘make a serious bid for immortality,’ and reproduces claims such as those by transhumanist Bill Maris that it is possible for a human alive today to live to be five hundred years old (24).

Transhumanism has faced its fair share of criticism. Philosopher and former medical scientist, Raymond Tallis, argues in his essay ‘Technoimmortalization’ that both transhumanists and the scientists working on these life-extending developments overstate the possibilities of science. His chief criticism concerns what many transhumanists believe is the most likely route to genuine immortality:

uploading the mind onto an enduring non-biological substrate. Tallis is unconvinced by this idea. He argues that in the digital conversion of mind into information something is always lost. For information to be such requires a mind in the first place, so ‘it is topsy-turvy to think of the mind as boiling down to information’ (*Philosophy Now* 128, para. 17). My own objection is simpler: namely, it is boring (and futile) to try to predict where science will take us in the future. The best explorations of the subject, such as Haider Warraich’s *Modern Death* (St. Martin’s Press, 2017), avoid facile conjecture and instead colour scientific advances with wider social context. Warraich suggests these developments are part of a wider culture of death avoidance, in which the boundaries between life and death have been blurred. We now favour extending life, and often have the ability to do so, even if recovery is unlikely to occur. In so doing, argues Warraich, we have elongated the process of dying. Bonifati makes a similarly smart point that this elongation ‘reduces human life to the expression of optimal parameters’ (166). In other words, by avoiding death, we forget to live.

The chapter with immediate applicability for the most readers concerns another sort of technoimmortalization. In it, Sofka, Gibson, and Silberman ask, what happens to our data selves after we die? Their chapter explores the legal and ethical issues surrounding social media profiles, which belong to the deceased. It also surveys the options available to people who wish to live on online, such as various companies that are using artificial intelligence to create digital versions of a person based on their social media activity. Yet perhaps the most interesting conclusion from the chapter is the potential the internet holds not only for symbolic immortality through memorialization, but also for the bereaved as they move through the mourning process.

Indeed, it is by bringing together diverse perspectives on symbolic immortality that Jacobsen has carved this book into a strikingly multidisciplinary nexus of discussion. The book’s subtitle, *Towards a Sociology of Immortality*, does not do justice to the variety of disciplines and backgrounds represented by its contributors. Despite this heterogeneity, Walter’s opening chapter sets the scene well, exploring how various cultures have kept dead humans symbolically alive through ancestor veneration, theological tradition, and secular memory of the dead. Walter highlights an important anthropological distinction between those cultures that approach their dead through memory and those that do so through care. Care is where ‘living and dead look after one another in some kind of dynamic exchange;’ memory is where ‘all the living can do for the dead is remember them’ (26). To elucidate this distinction, Walter turns to the popular English-language phrase *in loving memory*. He explains (27) the phrase ‘leaves its meaning tantalisingly open: are the dead gone, but we can remember them with affection? Or does memory provide the means for love to continue?’ The former meaning aligns with the memory approach to the dead; the latter aligns more with the care approach, with love actively continuing even after the death of one of the people in the relationship. Moments like these give a sense of the breadth of Walter’s brush, as he moves from continent to continent, culture to culture, giving the reader a tour of symbolic immortality across the world. In this sense, Walter’s essay is well suited as the opening chapter. However, the book missteps slightly in placing his chapter before another by Lifshin, Helm, and Greenberg. Their chapter reviews the literature surrounding Terror Management Theory (TMT), introducing the theory. The issue here is that Walter tempers TMT’s universal claims with historical context. He argues that humans’ fear of death, and their resultant desire for immortality, has been amplified by cultural formations. This is a valuable modification to TMT, which is often too general in its claims, yet the book’s organization does not let it properly shine. Rhetorically, it would make more sense to have Lifshin *et al.*’s chapter precede Walter’s, so that TMT is first explicated and then complicated.

The book owes much to two individuals. The first is the late Zygmunt Bauman. Jacobsen’s chapter takes as its central focus Bauman’s concept of immortality as a temporary victory against

death. This postponement of death is, for Bauman, the type of symbolic immortality, which defines our current era. There are echoes of Bauman in Giles's argument that 'death is not a necessary precursor for immortalisation' (101). Indeed, aside from these two chapters, Bauman is referenced in four others. His presence is felt throughout.

The second individual is Michael C. Kearl, whose 1989 book *Endings* (Oxford University Press) was a groundbreaking step in the field of death studies. Kearl passed away in 2015; he and Jacobsen were friends, and Jacobsen dedicates this book to his memory. The final chapter is a reprinting of Kearl's 2010 essay on post selves in American culture. Thus structured, the book is flanked on both ends by peritexts of memorialization.

Postmortal Society is itself, then, a project in symbolic immortality fuelled by the afterlives of Bauman and Kearl's ideas. As Jacobsen puts it in his introduction, quoting Edvard Munch and directly addressing the departed Kearl: 'From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity' (15). This book, with its multidisciplinary approach, resembles a mixed bouquet. Some readers may bemoan the lack of any synthesizing concluding section. They would do better to let themselves get lost in the many fragrances, colours, and shapes.

Surya Bowyer, Sorbonne University