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Exploring the Immortological Imagination: Advocating for a Sociology of Immortality

Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basińska ^{1,*} and Paula Kiel ^{2,*}¹ Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence (CFI), University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 1SB, UK² Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London WC2A 2AE, UK

* Correspondence: kn395@cam.ac.uk (K.N.-B.); p.kiel@lse.ac.uk (P.K.)

Abstract: The digital age has rekindled popular and academic interest in immortality. While the idea of immortality has long been recognized as fundamental to human societies, unlike death, within the field of sociology, immortality has not yet established itself as a distinct and autonomous field of study. This paper contributes to the recently emerging scholarship promoting a sociology of immortality. Drawing inspiration from C. Wright Mills's sociological imagination (1959) and building upon significant research in the field of immortality, we offer to use the concept of the immortological imagination as an analytical and conceptual tool for further developing a sociology of immortality. We refer to the immortological imagination as a complementary concept to Penfold-Mounce's *thanatological imagination*, seeing both concepts as stemming from two different lineages and academic traditions. After defining the immortological imagination and how it differs from and complements the thanatological imagination, the paper moves to discuss examples in popular culture establishing the potential impacts and influences of the immortological imagination, particularly within the digital context.

Keywords: sociology of immortality; immortological imagination; thanatological imagination; digital immortality



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1. Introduction

From time to time, we all encounter data-related issues, but they rarely impact matters of life and death in such a literal sense as experienced by Nathan Brown. After suffering severe injuries in a car accident, Nathan Brown, the protagonist of Amazon's *Upload* (Daniels 2020) is pressured by his girlfriend to decide whether or not to upload his mind. If he "uploads", he will still die, but his consciousness will survive digitally, and he will be able to stay with his girlfriend. Set in 2033, the series *Upload* (Daniels 2020) depicts a world in which individuals can upload their consciousness and enjoy an enduring digital afterlife. Nathan chooses to upload. After adjusting to his new "life", however, he breaks up with his girlfriend, who then stops paying for his account on his particular "heaven-provider". Nathan now is given to the mercy of a low-budget account in which the data limit is much smaller. As Nathan reaches his data limit, his actions gradually freeze, rendering him unable to speak, move, or in any way participate in the world. This pivotal moment, during which Nathan remains inactive until his monthly data allowance is renewed by his relatives living in the non-virtual world, highlights just one facet of the complex dynamics and implications inherent in the era of digital immortality into which we have already entered, mainly through the enduring survival of individuals' digital remains and their deep entanglement with the digital activities of the living. Drawing on Nathan Brown's perspective in this brief example, we offer, in this paper, to expand the available theoretical framework for discussing contemporary ideas of immortality, differentiating between the thanatological imagination and the immortological imagination.

In recent decades, immortality has gained significant popular attention from TV dramas such as *Black Mirror* (Brooker 2013) and *Upload* (Daniels 2020) to numerous TED talks, as well as academic and scientific research from biology and gerontology (e.g., De Grey 2005) to nutrition (e.g., Kurzweil and Grossman 2009) and philosophy (e.g., Sisto 2020). This widespread attention, as well as the emerging problems associated with it, such as the issue of afterlife data management, may seem recent, but the prospect of immortality has always been inherent to human societies (Jacobsen 2017a). While the sociology of death has, by now, fully established itself as an important field of study, the sociology of immortality has not yet obtained such a status.

Over the years, there have been significant contributions towards this end (e.g., Cave 2013a; Jacobsen 2017b; Savin-Baden 2019; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020). Nonetheless, this paper makes the case that there is still a need to further expand research on the sociology of immortality as a separate and distinctive field of study. Specifically, this paper focuses on some of the ambiguities we find in the current research on digital immortality. While providing valuable contributions, these studies often interpret and conceptualize immortality through a framework of bereavement and grief studies. Instead, in this paper, we contribute to the attempt to build a specific and complementing conceptual vocabulary to establish a theoretical framework for the study of immortality. We offer to use the concept of the immortological imagination as an analytical tool for further developing a sociology of immortality that is distinct within the more general framework of thanatology. A key distinction between the two is the subject: the thanatological imagination encompasses the experience of dealing with the death of others, while the immortological imagination we offer focuses on the experience of being a future immortal.

We refer to the immortological imagination as a complementary concept to the *thanatological imagination* (Penfold-Mounce 2020a). We argue that both concepts emerge from two different traditions, with the former stemming from the lineage of the sociology of immortality (e.g., Bauman 1992a; Cave 2013a; Jacobsen 2017b; Lifton and Olson 1975), and the latter from the sociology of death (e.g., Ariès 1982; Kellehear 2007; Walter 1994, 2017). Mainly differentiating between these two traditions, we propose, is the subject at the center: a subject who survives the deaths of others and must deal with the aftermath of those deaths vs. a subject who is themselves a future immortal, a future symbolic posthumous survivor after her own passing (for instance, similar to Nathan from the example above). The concept of the immortological imagination, we argue, can be useful for focusing attention on the latter position (a future immortal subject). These two positions overlap in many ways, but they also differ in many other ways. It is this difference that we want to bring into focus in our contribution to the growing field of the sociology of immortality.

In what follows, we first delve into immortality as a field of study, delineating its distinctive historical and academic trajectory vis-à-vis that of thanatology. Then, we establish the usefulness of Mills's sociological imagination (Mills 1959) for studying death and mortality and briefly present Penfold-Mounce's thanatological imagination (Penfold-Mounce 2020a), inspired by Mills's work. Consequently, we move to define the immortological imagination, explaining how it differs from and contributes to the thanatological imagination. Finally, we discuss the potential impact and influences of the immortological imagination using examples from Western popular culture.

2. Immortality as a Field of Study: Its Traditions and Specificity

The concept of immortality has a long and diverse history dating back to approximately 1600 BCE, with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the European context. Throughout the centuries, immortality has primarily been explored in the domains of religion, art, and philosophy, with surprisingly rich traditions of medical or paramedical experiments revealing practical (and often radical!) approaches to this idea (Gruman [1966] 2003; Cave 2013a; Haycock 2008). Despite its various forms and manifestations, and although important works on immortality began to emerge alongside the development of death studies, immortality has never fully established itself as an independent field of research except within two

specific contexts of reflection known as “immortalism” and “immortology”. Immortalism is a moral ideology within a framework of transhumanism, based upon the belief that radical life extension and technological immortality are possible and desirable. (FM-2030 1989; More and Vita-More 2013). Immortology is a term coined by the Russian philosopher Igor Wiszew who, beginning the late 1950s, worked on a new academic discipline aimed at achieving immortality. Wiszew’s key concept was “practical immortality”, which was meant to be achieved alongside scientific and technological development (Olzacka 2016, pp. 47–63). Nonetheless, these examples remain relatively underdeveloped within the sociology of death and current research on immortality, specifically digital immortality.

Other significant contributions in academic work on immortality go back to over half a century ago to the work of Gerald Gruman ([1966] 2003), originally published in 1966, followed by Ernest Becker (1973), Robert Lifton (1973), and Zygmunt Bauman (1992a, 1992b). The second wave of prominent writers interested in the socio-cultural meanings of immortality includes David Haycock (2008), Stephen Cave (2013a), Samuel Scheffler (2013), and, most recently, Michael Jacobsen (2017a), calling for the establishment of a sociology of immortality.

All the authors mentioned above, representing a diverse range of academic disciplines from religion, anthropology, and philosophy to sociology and cultural studies, advocate for rehabilitating and re-establishing the idea of immortality in academic research. Interestingly, despite various approaches, three key themes consistently recur in these texts, providing a solid explanation for the necessity of working on this complex idea. First, there is a strong statement that pursuing immortality is deeply ingrained in culture and serves as the foundation of civilization. Second, the idea of immortality is culturally embedded and cannot be simply dismissed or erased. Third, throughout history and across cultures, the concept of immortality has been evolving, offering insights into the hopes, desires, dreams, and cultural practices of a given society.

As we entered the digital era, immortality took on a new meaning while retaining its timeless significance. Immortality in the digital age remains culturally indispensable, socially precarious, and psychologically and philosophically complex. However, no longer confined to religious beliefs, immortality has become a thoroughly secular concept. In the digital realm, immortality additionally gained a range of new affordances, transforming into programmable, editable, personalized, and interactive forms. Digital immortality has also become private, commodified, determined by market values, ethically uncertain, and legally complex, positioning it as a new (albeit old!) phenomenon to investigate, motivating a new cohort of scholars (e.g., Moreman and Lewis 2014; Jacobsen 2017b; Sofka et al. 2017; Lagerkvist 2022; Sisto 2020; Stokes 2021; Sumiala 2022).

Death, however, has not lost its significance in the era of digital immortality, and the exploration of both lineages of academic traditions remains equally important. Keeping death and immortality in homeostasis—as Zygmunt Bauman suggestively states—is a fundamental objective for every culture (Bauman 1992a). When death alone is at the forefront, it creates a culture of horror, while an overemphasis on immortality leads to a culture of illusion. Therefore, societies need socio-cultural behaviors, practices, and institutions that mediate this horror and make life with the knowledge of death more “livable”.

Drawing on this very brief reconstruction of the evolution and meaning of immortality as a field of study, in the following sections, we would like to highlight the role of imagination for both traditions alongside their socio-cultural implications.

3. From the Sociological Imagination to the Thanatological Imagination

Making stories and perpetuating hopes of immortality is one of the fundamental ways in which human societies mediate the awareness of death, as established in the previous section. Imagination is inherent to immortality. The power or comforting capacity of practices, institutions, technologies, and traditions of immortality stems from their provision of imagined forms in which one will “live on” after their biological death (Bauman 1992b; Cave 2013a; Lifton and Olson 1975). The theories we are working with here mainly

refer to different forms of symbolic immortality: individuals will die, but some part of them will endure in a symbolic fashion. According to these theories, the possibility of imagining a symbolic continuity to the self tames the horror created by the knowledge of death¹. To further elaborate and think about the relationship between the individual and the social and the importance of this interconnectedness, we find C. Wright Mills's *Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959) particularly helpful. According to Mills in this foundational text, one of the crucial roles of sociology is its capacity to identify and interrogate the connection between individual experiences and the larger social forces at play. According to Mills, the sociological imagination is a critical concept that calls to reveal and understand the significance and power of social structure, history, and values in shaping personal experiences, social roles, and individual identities (Mills 1959; Penfold-Mounce 2020a).

Death and mortality are fields in sociology in which the sociological imagination can be particularly fruitful, first and foremost, because death is both universal and individual. Nothing is more intimate and personal than death, an experience all individuals must themselves someday go through. At the same time, it is an experience shared by all humans. Moreover, as personal and individual as it may be, death is also necessarily dealt with, regulated, and mediated by social institutions and traditions (Backer et al. 1982; Blauner 1966; Walter 2012). These forms of mediation and regulation change over time and across societies and are informed by the specific structure, history, and values of a given society.

Penfold-Mounce (2020a) offers a similar application of the sociological imagination and suggests thinking of a *thanatological imagination*. According to Penfold-Mounce, the thanatological imagination, which she defines as a subcategory of the sociological imagination, "offers a publicly consumed space of 'thinking sociologically' through a lens of death", specifically as produced in popular culture (Penfold-Mounce 2020a, p. 56). Such "morbid spaces" carved out in popular culture enable individuals to consume issues of mortality and explore their "morbid sensibilities" (Ibid, p. 55) without facing the full-blown horror of the ever-looming threat of death.

Specifically, according to Penfold-Mounce, representations of the "undead" in popular culture are helpful to explore the thanatological imagination. The undead, such as zombies or deceased celebrities, are "reanimated corpses, which are consumed as entertainment," eliciting diverse emotional engagements and allowing audiences to "consume mortality and to connect with broader social themes" that are related to death and mortality (Penfold-Mounce 2020a, p. 56). Posthumously active and productive undead celebrities highlight the role of non-academics and non-thanatologists (such as filmmakers and advertisers) in stirring and stimulating the thanatological imagination, creating a space for individual consumers to engage with issues of mortality. Specifically, Penfold-Mounce points to the legal and ethical consequences that emerge from the presence of undead celebrities.

Penfold-Mounce's insightful analysis using the concept of the thanatological imagination, we contend, further establishes the need for creating unambiguous and distinctive frameworks for thinking about immortality separately from other notions of death. This gap is made particularly clear in her analysis of the impact of the undead. Therefore, inspired by the idea of the thanatological imagination, we want to suggest an *immortological imagination*, which, paraphrasing Penfold-Mounce, would stimulate a space for "thinking sociologically" through a lens of immortality.

4. From Thanatological Imagination to Immortological Imagination

There are many practices and conceptualizations of immortality. Here, we are mainly thinking of how individuals engage in practices that provide them with a "sense" of immortality (Lifton 1973): the feeling that they will continue to exist and have some form of a lingering social presence after their own death. These ideas, hopes, stories, practices, and traditions of symbolic immortality are inherently social; or, to use Bauman's terms, posthumous survival is a social construct (Bauman 1992b). Thus, exploring the immortological imagination necessarily lends itself to analyzing and reflecting on the interrelations between individual experiences and larger social structures and histories.

Therefore, we refer to the immortological imagination as a realm encompassing both material and discursive practices of posthumous survival which entail a spectrum of social implications. While it overlaps with certain aspects of the thanatological imagination, it also extends it, shedding light on a new set of issues which emerge from contemporary individual experiences of immortality in the digital age.

One of the key features in which the immortological imagination differs from and complements the thanatological imagination is the subject position at focus. The immortological imagination draws attention to *individuals as future-undead* (which differs from the position of bereaved individuals dealing with the already dead). That is, while Penfold-Mounce, like many others, focuses on the ethical and other commitments that the living should or could have towards the dead, we want to draw attention to the consequences that emerge from the promise of and need for engaging in practices that ensure one's own continuous posthumous survival. These different subject positions also point to the different traditions and motivations on which they draw; most significantly, one is motivated by actual events of death and the other by the always looming potential that one could (and someday will) die. Importantly, we use the immortological imagination inclusively as a complementing concept to the thanatological imagination, emphasizing the importance of both lineages.

Focusing specifically on digital immortality, we find that in much of the research, the lack of differentiation between and specificity of these traditions (immortality-oriented and death-oriented), more often than not, ends up focusing on the position of the bereaved and practices of memorialization and grief. To put it in more concrete terms, for example, digital cemeteries are deeply embedded in the thanatological imagination. At the same time, Rothblatt's Lifonaut project comes from an immortological source of imagination (Rothblatt 2014, 2015), both being responses to the same death anxiety.

We contend that in order to comprehensively understand the relationship between social structure and individual experience in the context of mortality awareness, it is not enough to think "thanatologically"; it is also essential to think "immortologically". For example, what limitations, if any, should there be to the social agency of the undead? What rights should the undead hold, along with their families? What about the privacy of the undead? What is our moral obligation towards the communicative remains of the undead? Some of these questions have been partly discussed within legal scholarship, for instance (Conway 2016; Baglow 2007). But applying the immortological imagination and looking at the perspectives of the future undead, we suggest, points to additional questions beyond these frameworks. Moreover, previous work mainly dealt with the idea of physical remains (the possessions one leaves behind) whereas we are also drawing attention to the specificities of digital remains (and the undead) that both afford ordinary individual extensive forms of becoming future undead (e.g., through the posthumous careers of the dead; see, e.g., Penfold-Mounce 2020a; D'Rozario 2017) but also further problematize (and complicate) the relationship between the living, the dead and the undead (Öhman and Floridi 2017; Harbinja 2017; Morse and Birnhack 2020; Edwards et al. 2020). Drawing on this scholarship in particular, we offer to elaborate the discussion by incorporating both a thanatological imagination as well as an immortological one. That is, in addition to exploring the ethical, legal, and other aspects of how the living engage with and care for the dead, the immortological imagination enables questions emerging from the desire *to be symbolically posthumously present as the future "undead"*. It is from such critical reflection that the idea of immortological imagination (drawing on the sociological imagination) encourages.

Both traditions, which we broadly refer to as thanatological and immortological, are essential to how cultures manage the awareness of mortality. Therefore, if the thanatological imagination generates easily consumable images of death that allow individuals to face mortality in a non-threatening manner, the immortological imagination extends this further by providing hopes and practices of immortality to ordinary individuals, allowing one to imagine themselves as, in some ways, never dying (e.g., through the imagined immortal endurance of their digital remains, such as Facebook profile or digital photos). Ideas and practices of symbolic immortality (geared towards the future undead) are just as essential

for managing the horror caused by mortality awareness and for preparing individuals confronting pain and loss, as are practices of care for those already deceased. The cultural significance of immortality is evident, for instance, in its thriving industry. From cryonics to longevity clinics, from research in gerontology and nutrition to the “digital afterlife industry” (Öhman and Floridi 2017), immortality, like death, is a lucrative business.

Immortality’s essential role in human societies has also drawn scholars’ concern to it being a stratifying factor (Bauman 1992a); the higher one’s social status, the higher one’s ability to obtain an enduring symbolic immortality. Moreover, while other scholars define immortality through a more “democratic” set of practices accessible to many (e.g., Cave 2013a; Lifton and Olson 1975), these practices also speak to social hierarchies since fundamental to the concept of immortality is an implied need in the conservation and perpetuation of the existing social order. Immortality—no matter the specific narrative, technology, or faith it engages with—assumes different extents of continuity. Therefore, focusing explicitly on the immortological imagination necessarily lends itself to critical reflection on questions of class, gender, and race (see, e.g., Sutherland 2023; Penfold-Mounce 2020b), as well as other questions of power and structure and how they produce the experiences and narratives of individuals. These questions are especially pertinent in the digital realm, in which social stratification is determined and measured by new parameters such as access, engagement, or the digital literacy of users but also through the control held by big tech companies (see, e.g., Kneese 2023).

The usefulness of the immortological imagination is particularly evident in places where ethical or other consequences or obligations might be at odds with those that emerge from the thanatological imagination. Such tensions or collisions imply that there are different imaginations at play. The immortological imagination allows for an expansion of the space of exploring and understanding the presence of mortality in popular culture and recognizes the different traditions and histories that motivate or allow specific articulations of mortality. While the thanatological and immortological traditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive (and are often intertwined), there can be moments in which they are at odds with one another. Having the immortological imagination as a complementing concept would help identify such tensions and unpack their meanings.

5. Immortological Imagination: Its Influences and Impacts

In this section, we provide robust examples of the “activation” of the immortological imagination in the 21st century. Subscribing to immortological imagination in the digital age leads to a diverse set of practices, technological solutions, and pop culture representations. All these narratives—broadly understood as an “ensemble of texts, images, spectacles, events, and cultural artifacts that “tell a story”” (Bal 2009)—play a significant role in shaping perceptions and understanding of certain phenomena. As shown for other technologies (Craig et al. 2019) these cultural stories influence public awareness, developers’ objectives, and system regulation. We suggest that a similar influence can be observed in relation to the immortological imagination, which is collectively constructed.

In popular culture, we encounter various themes and motifs that explore and problematize the concept of digital immortality, from big-budget Hollywood films like *Transcendence* (Pfister 2014) and TV dramas such as *Upload* (Daniels 2020) to documentaries like *The Story of God* (McCreary and Younger 2016) and *The AI Race* (O’Neill 2017), as well as TED talks with more than a million views from speakers like Adam Ostrow (2011), Martine Rothblatt (2015), and Stephen Cave (2013b); these are but a few prominent examples of a digital-immortality theme that recurs frequently. Interestingly, alongside fictional narratives, as purposefully highlighted in this enumeration, there is a range of non-fiction narratives featuring the voices of activists, philosophers, entrepreneurs, scientists, and other experts exploring the immortological imagination. In all of these examples, there is need to apply both a thanatological imagination as well as an immortological imagination, that is, not only the perspective and experience of managing the loss of a loved one but also that of being a future immortal.

Vis-à-vis these popular texts, a new cohort of digital technology developers has emerged, with some drawing explicit inspiration from pop culture representations. For instance, Marius Ursache pointed out that the platform Eterni.me was explicitly inspired by *Black Mirror* (Brooker 2013) and the novel *Goodbye for Now* (Frankel 2012)². Additionally, fictional representations of parents using technology to resurrect their deceased children, as depicted in shows like *Devs* (Garland 2020) or Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg 2001), have become a reality in the South Korean context, where a mother could virtually meet her deceased daughter (Park 2020). Furthermore, the emergence of Chat GPT has given rise to even cheaper and more accessible technologies for resurrecting the dead based on their digital footprints within the controversial Project December, which offers digital immortality for 10 dollars (Robitzski 2021). Moreover, the development of the immortological imagination over the last two decades has led to the emergence of many companies related to digital immortality, in turn drawing scholars' attention to a growing "digital afterlife industry" (e.g., Öhman and Floridi 2017; Arnold et al. 2018). In such an industry, the position of the future dead is particularly important as, in some cases, they are key stakeholders whose interests might be in conflict with those of the living (See for instance, Kiel 2023).

Additionally, the immortological imagination not only inspired cultural and technological advancements but also started prompting serious discussions about these technologies' ethical and legal aspects. For instance, Edina Harbinja advocates for post-mortem privacy and reimagining rights for digital immortals, with complementary work by Morse and Birnhack (2020) drawing attention to the posthumous "privacy paradox", which describes a gap between users' stated preferences to protect their privacy and their actual behavior. Nora Freya Lindemann's work on the "Ethics of Deadbots" (Lindemann 2022) addresses ethical concerns of using deadbots for users. Furthermore, Floridi and Ohman's "Ethical Framework for the Digital Afterlife Industry" (Öhman and Floridi 2017) is another noteworthy contribution to the evolving field of digital immortality scholarship and questioning the involvement of big tech companies in posthumous survival. While these works helpfully develop issues already explored in the context of non-digital remains, as well as speak to the specific challenges and issues of digital immortality, they often focus on the thanatological imagination, failing to account for the position of the future digital undead.

The examples mentioned above, while not an exhaustive list, demonstrate how the immortological imagination in the digital age influences public awareness, the goals of developers, and regulatory considerations. These spheres are mutually reinforcing, inspiring, and challenging one another, illustrating the process of collectively imagining immortality. Moreover, these examples draw on an imagination that does not stem necessarily from the experience of bereavement or dealing with a specific case of death but rather from awareness of human mortality and hope of continuity, thus establishing the importance of the immortological imagination. This interplay between technology and culture also reflects Lifton and Olson's observation that practices surrounding death and immortality can reveal volumes about a given society's values, hopes, and fears. In line with this thought, the immortological imagination may serve as a handy conceptual tool for further exploring the particularities of the digital immortality era.

However, it is paramount to note that all the examples provided in this section come from the immortological imagination specific to Western societies, especially English-speaking ones, and discuss "influences" and "impacts" for this particular context. While these examples are dominant and well-documented, it does not mean that immortological imagination in other cultural contexts does not evolve. Instead, it proves a significant shortage of other cultural representations (narratives), especially those from the Global South (Mostafa et al. 2017). Developing these culturally sensitive immortological imaginations could help break the exclusively Western monopoly for the immortological imagination and significantly enrich our discussion on potential futures of digital immortality.

6. Conclusions

Immortality—as Stephen Cave notes—“is the foundation of human achievement . . . It is embedded in our very nature, and its result is what we know as civilization” (Cave 2013a, p. 2). However, “what we know” often begins with what we can first imagine.

In this paper, we advocate for exploring the concept of the immortological imagination, which we propose as a counterpart to the well-established thanatological imagination. While immortality has gained substantial popularity in recent decades through various media forms and academic research, it has not yet received the same dedicated attention as death and mortality within sociological studies. Despite notable contributions in the past decade, a distinct field of the sociology of immortality remains in the making.

Contributing to this field, we believe that employing one or the other imaginative tradition—as a response to perhaps the loneliest, most intimate, personal, and thus far inevitable experience of human death—significantly influences the shape of society. By emphasizing the subject’s perspective as a future posthumous survivor rather than a survivor of another’s death, we delineate a clear distinction between these two perspectives. While the two overlap in many ways, they also differ, and such a distinction lies at the fundament of the evolving field of the sociology of immortality.

Twenty-first-century technologies play a significant role in both imaginative practices, especially digital media, mediating experiences of loss, grief, and bereavement while offering hope for preservation, continuity, and living on, whether feasible or not. These two traditions, amplified by technological developments (or a lack thereof), continually define the boundaries of what a given society knows and can imagine in response to death.

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Notes

¹ While there are cultural examples of fictional dystopian portrayals of immortality in the biological sense (e.g., Borges’ “The Immortal” discussed, for example, by Cave and Fischer 2023), our focus here is the comfort that individuals find *in imagining an option of continuity* in the face of knowing that their life will come to an end.

² This information is sourced from an unpublished interview conducted by the author of this paper with Marius Ursache in 2015.

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