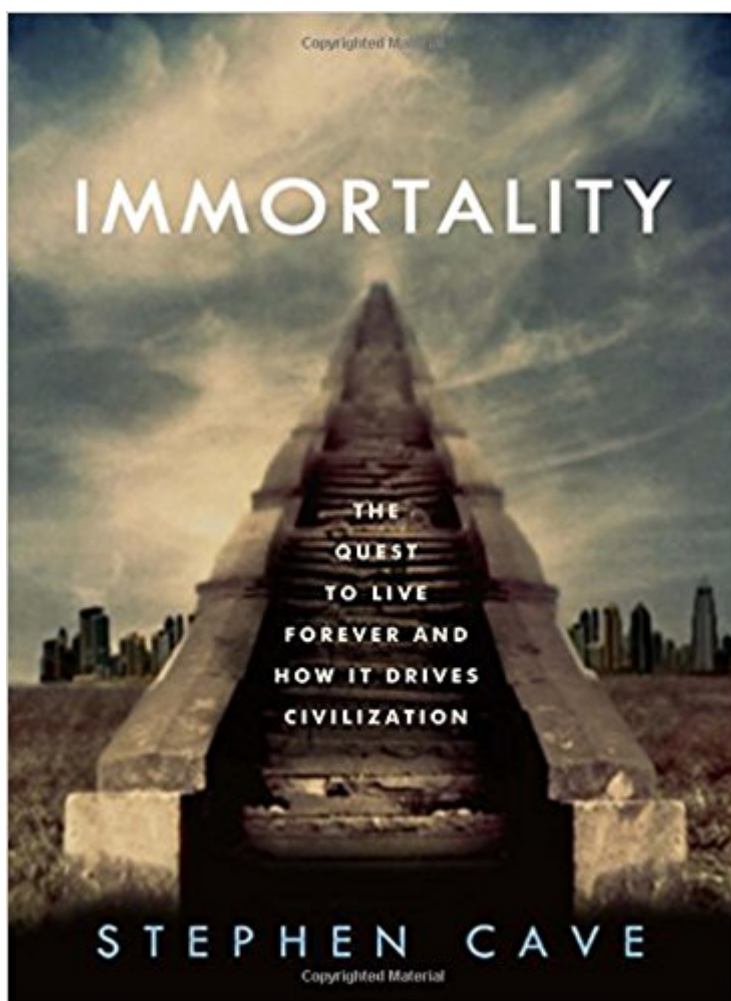




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Immortality: The Quest To Live Forever And How It Drives Civilization



Synopsis

A fascinating work of popular philosophy and history that both enlightens and entertains, Stephen Cave's *Immortality* investigates whether it just might be possible to live forever and whether we should want to. But it also makes a powerful argument, which is that it's our very preoccupation with defying mortality that drives civilization. Central to this book is the metaphor of a mountaintop where one can find the Immortals. Since the dawn of humanity, everyone – whether they know it or not – has been trying to climb that mountain. But there are only four paths up its treacherous slope, and there have only ever been four paths. Throughout history, people have wagered everything on their choice of the correct path, and fought wars against those who've chosen differently. While *Immortality* takes the reader on an eye-opening journey from the beginnings of civilization to the present day, the structure is not chronological. Rather it is path driven. As each path is revealed to us, an historical figure serves as our guide. In drawing back the curtain on what compels humans to "keep on keeping on," Cave engages the reader in a number of mind-bending thought experiments. He teases out the implications of each immortality gambit, asking, for example, how long a person would live if they did manage to acquire a perfectly disease-free body. Or what would happen if a super-being tried to round up the atomic constituents of all who've died in order to resurrect them. Or what our loved ones would really be doing in heaven if it does exist. Or what part of us actually lives in a work of art, and how long that work of art can survive. Toward the end, we're confronted with a series of brain-rattling questions: What would happen if tomorrow humanity discovered that there is no life but this one? Would people continue to care about their favorite sports team, please their boss, vie for the title of Year's Best Salesman? Would three-hundred-year projects still get started? If the four paths up the Mount of the Immortals lead nowhere -- if there is no getting up to the summit -- is there still reason to live? And can civilization survive? *Immortality* is a deeply satisfying book, as optimistic about the human condition as it is insightful about the true arc of history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Informed and metaphysically nuanced” Cave presents his arguments in a brisk, engaging style, and draws effectively upon a wide-ranging stock of religious, philosophical, and scientific sources, both ancient and contemporary. —Weekly Standard “In his survey of the subject, Stephen Cave, a British philosopher, argues that man’s various tales of immortality can be boiled down into four basic “narratives” — For the aspiring undying, Mr Cave unfortunately concludes that immortality is a mirage. But his demolition project is fascinating in its own right. If anything, readers might want more of Mr. Cave’s crisp conversational prose. —The Economist “A must-read exploration of what spurs human ingenuity. Every once in a while a book comes along that catches me by surprise and provides me with an entirely new lens through which to view the world. Such is the case with Stephen Cave’s book Immortality. Cave presents an extremely compelling case — one that has changed my view of the driving force of civilization as much as Jared Diamond did years ago with his brilliant book Guns, Germs and Steel. —S. Jay Olshansky, New Scientist magazine “Cave explains how the seeking of immortality is the foundation of human achievement, the wellspring of art, religion and civilization...The author is rangy and recondite, searching the byways of elixirs, the surprises of alchemy, the faith in engineering and all the wonder to be found in discussions of life and death...Luminous.” —Kirkus

Reviews “A dramatic and frequently surprising story of the pursuit of immortality and its effects on human history. —Booklist “A beautifully clear and entertaining look at life after death. Cave does not shrink from the hard questions. Bold and thought-provoking. —Eric Olson, author of The Human Animal and What Are We? “Immortality plumbs the depths of the human mind and ties the quest for the infinite

prolongation of life into the very nature of civilization itself. Cave reveals remarkable depth and breadth of learning, yet is always a breeze to read. I thoroughly enjoyed his book. It's a really intriguing study. David Boyd Haycock, author of *Mortal Coil* and *A Crisis of Brilliance* "I loved this. Cave has set himself an enormous task and accomplished it in spades. Establishing a four-level subject matter, he has stuck to his guns and never let up. As he left one level and went to the next, I was always a little worried: Would he be able to pull it off? This was especially true as he approached the end. There is a sense in which each level, as he left it smoking in the road, looked easy as he started the next. In fact, the last level, while it is the most difficult, is the best, the most satisfying. I am happy to live in the world Cave describes." Charles Van Doren, author of *A History of Knowledge* "Cave is smart, lucid, elegant and original. Immortality is an engaging read about our oldest obsession, and how that obsession propels some of our greatest accomplishments." Greg Critser, author of *Eternity Soup* "In Immortality Stephen Cave tells wonderful stories about one of humanity's oldest desires and comes to a wise conclusion." Stefan Klein, author of *The Science of Happiness* and *The Secret Pulse of Time* "Cave has produced a strikingly original and compelling exploration of the age-old conundrum: Can we live forever, and do we really want to?" John Horgan, science journalist and author of *The End of War*

Stephen Cave holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Cambridge University and, before turning to full-time writing, worked as a diplomat. He writes regularly for the *Financial Times* and also contributes to the *New York Times*.

A very well-written book. The author presents very good arguments showing there is no soul, no reincarnation and no immortality. For example, Chapter 7: "The Lost Soul" Pages 186-187. If your optic nerves in your brain are sufficiently badly damaged, you will no longer be able to see - you will go blind. This tells us very clearly that the faculty of sight is dependent upon functioning optic nerves. Yet curiously, when many people imagine their soul leaving their body, they imagine being able to see - they imagine, for example, looking down on their own corpse or on their own funeral procession. They believe, therefore, that their immaterial soul has the faculty of sight. But if the soul can see when the entire brain and body have stopped working, why can't it see when only the optic nerves have stopped working? In other words, if blind people have a soul

that can see, why are they blind? This question has no satisfactory answer, and indeed some thoughtful theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, have accepted that a soul without a body cannot see. Seeing is something that is done by a body and brain with eyes and optic nerves in working order. But we now know that, just as damage to the optic nerve can destroy the faculty of sight, so damage to other parts of the brain can destroy faculties like memory and reason. Increasingly, evidence suggests that all aspects of the mind and personality are in this way dependent on the brain. So, paralleling our question about the blind person, we can ask about someone with brain damage who is unable to think rationally or feel emotions: "If they actually have a soul that is able to think rationally or feel emotions, why can't they think rationally or feel emotions? Why would localized brain damage stand in the way when destruction of the whole brain and body does not?"

The only thing I would love to see in the book, that I didn't - but I think it's not the author's fault, but the editor's whim - is that there is no reference for the quotes, just the name of the author and the quote itself, but no book. As a bookworm and as a person who studies death attitudes I would have loved to have the references. But still, the book is great, easy-to-read and informative. Love it! Thank you a lot, Stephen!

Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization by Stephen Cave "Immortality" is the fascinating and thought-provoking book about life, death and civilization. It's about humankind's quest by one or a combination of four paths that promise immortality and whether any of these paths can deliver on that promise. Finally, with the newfound wisdom it's about following a philosophy of life that provides us with a meaningful existence. Stephen Cave holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Cambridge University and a writer who skillfully provides the reader with a gem of a book that is enlightening and a joy to read. This 338-page book is broken out into four parts that correspond to the four narratives of immortality and a conclusion: Part I. Staying Alive, Part II. Resurrection, Part III. Soul, and Part IV. Legacy. Positives: 1. A well written, accessible book for the masses. 2. A mesmerizing topic: immortality. The author treats the topic with utmost care and respect. 3. A fantastic format that follows logically with the author's overall thesis. 4. The four immortality narratives: Staying Alive, Resurrection, Soul, and Legacy. The entire book revolves around these four main paths. 5. The author clearly presents three main goals upfront and thoroughly succeeds in achieving them. 6. Each chapter begins with an interesting historical vignette in which the author highlights the main topic of the chapter. 7. In the first path of immortality the

author goes through a number of examples that clearly show how the determination to stay alive and reproduce is one thing that all life forms have in common.⁸ The Morality Paradox. The immortality narratives were created to resolve the paradox.⁹ Great use of secular, religious and scientific viewpoints to go through all the arguments. Great stuff!¹⁰ Thought-provoking quotes and ideas: "These psychologists were testing the hypothesis that we have developed our cultural worldviews in order to protect ourselves from the fear of death". Interesting.¹¹ The author goes through various and diverse civilizations to explain his thesis. Thus keeping the book fresh and interesting. "Civilization is built on the promise of immortality".¹² Attempts to engineer immortality. The Engineering Approach to immortality. Transhumanists...¹³ The significance of resurrection and the three major problems with it.¹⁴ The impact of Paul to Christianity.¹⁵ The importance of rituals, "This is the function of religion at its grandest: enabling mere mortals to attain cosmic significance, to become one with their gods and so to attain immortality."¹⁶ Cryonics, interesting stuff.¹⁷ My favorite section of the book, the thorough debunking of the soul.¹⁸ The idea of the soul, its claims and the implications.¹⁹ The history and evolution of the concept of the soul. From soul to self...²⁰ The argument from neuroscience against the existence of the soul.²¹ The concepts of heaven.²² Scientific and religious looks at the soul. Eastern and Western religions.²³ Legacy what it means and how it is achieved. Great examples.²⁴ Great quotes, "Jean Rostand wrote in 1939, "Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a god."²⁵ Fascinating facts, " By spring 2011, Facebook, had over 600 million active users and counting."²⁶ The "bundle theory" of the self and the problems associated with it.²⁷ Nation's myth of common ancestry.²⁸ Planet Earth, the biggest superorganism, Gaia. Global consciousness.²⁹ The author does a wonderful job of summarizing his finding into a satisfying conclusion.³⁰ A positive, secular outlook to death. The Wisdom Narrative.³¹ Some great closing thoughts that will stick with me, " This is no doubt why medieval European rulers found Christianity so useful--it taught their exploited subjects to avert their eyes from the horror of their daily lives and dream instead of a future paradise."³² How these narratives contribute to what our civilizations are.³³ A look at the impact of infinity. Enlightening.³⁴ The three virtues on our view of life and death.³⁵ A page turner of a book.

Negatives:¹ No formal bibliography.² A notes section was provided but it was not linked to the body of the book.³ The author overstays his welcome a tad with the last chapter. That is, it was too long and started becoming preachy but if that's the worst thing I can find about this book well you know you got yourself a gem.⁴ Charts and illustrations would have added value. For example, a chart illustrating the worldview on immortality would have been welcomed.

In summary, I really enjoyed this book. First of all, this is philosophy at its best. It asks the big questions and it

follows a path that is logical and reasonable. It tackles fascinating topics surrounding immortality and it ends with a satisfying conclusion. My favorite part of this book was Part III. The Soul; finally, an author who spends some time addressing the soul in a comprehensive manner. This book was a real treat for me, treat yourself and get it! I highly recommend it. Further suggestions: "Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100" by Michio Kaku, "Paranormality: Why we see what isn't there" by Richard Wiseman, "Scientific Paranormal Investigation: How to Solve Unexplained Mysteries" by Benjamin Radford, "The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark" by Carl Sagan, "The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths" and "Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time" by Michael Shermer, "The Problem Of The Soul: Two Visions Of Mind And How To Reconcile Them" by Owen Flanagan, "God Soul Mind Brain: A Neuroscientist's Reflections on the Spirit World (LeapSci)" by Michael S. A. Graziano, "The Brain and the Meaning of Life" by Paul Thagard, and "The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life" by Jesse Bering.

An interesting book. Ultimately asks questions it is unable to answer, but offers some interesting insights along the way.

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