Suffocating Deathism: We Have Given It the Oxygen of Publicity for Long Enough

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“It is almost always a mistake to give wingnuts the oxygen of publicity.”

—Richard Dawkins

JUST A FEW DAYS from the time of this writing, I will ever-so-quietly celebrate the 20th anniversary of the first time I discussed SENS in depth with expert colleagues. The 1-day workshop that I convened for this purpose, hosted in the laboratory of Bruce Ames in Oakland, led to an article coauthored by all the participants¹ that proved decidedly challenging to publish, because the concept of multipronged damage repair as a therapeutic antiaging strategy departed very sharply from the prevailing paradigm. However, as regulars here know well, that era is long gone, with the past decade having featured several high-profile reiterations of the concept, of which one in particular² has attained a status approximating holy scripture in terms of the frequency and manner with which it is cited.

For precisely that reason, my topic today is not the scientific legitimacy of SENS, but another battle that I have been fighting for just as long, and which remains very much ongoing despite not only my efforts but also those of an increasingly large and articulate band of fellow crusaders. The issue in question, of course, is whether the defeat of aging—be it feasible or not—is desirable.

The people to whom Dawkins was referring in his comment quoted previously were the creationist community. His position is that the scientific debate about the relative merits of evolution versus creationism has gone on for such a long time, with such a long succession of claims that such-and-such a feature of such-and-such a species could not have arisen by evolution having been straightforwardly and decisively rebutted, that the only way that someone can still believe that the question is not yet settled (let alone that it has been settled in the creationists' favor) is whether they are unable or unwilling to engage in objective debate at all.

I think it is time to start taking that same position in relation to the more frequently heard arguments that purport to cast doubt on the importance, or even the desirability, of bringing aging under proper medical control. If (courtesy of the wonders of the Internet) one goes back to the responses I was giving a decade or more ago to the Tithonus error (the assumption that such control would result in a “global

nursing home,” as Fukuyama once put it), or the concerns about environmental impact, or about immortal dictators, or about access only for the rich, or about payment of pensions, one will (I hope) discern a few minor refinements in my more recent interviews and talks—a little more humor here, a little more good-natured irritation there—but one will undeniably find that the main themes were the same all those years ago. Given that I have done in excess of 1000 such interviews and talks, many of them in very high-audience fora, and also that others have increasingly been giving the same answers in their own words, we must ask ourselves: how are people still propounding these idiotic arguments as if they had not been rebutted? The only reasonable conclusion, I claim, is that people are willfully letting the rebuttals go in one ear and out the other, so as to maintain an ability to put aging out of their minds. And that, dear reader, has got to stop, because it is slowing us down and costing lives.

I was stimulated to offer this view now by the recent publication, courtesy of the formidable Tina Woods, of a report aimed at policy makers in the United Kingdom.³ This report includes an admirably comprehensive series of commentaries on the state of progress against aging, and as such it is the sort of report that we need to be thrusting into faces in the corridors of power as often and as forcefully as possible. But what struck me most about it was what it does not say. Specifically:

- There is only as much qualification of “longevity” with “healthy” as is absolutely necessary. By repeatedly using the word “longevity” unadorned, both in the names of organizations and in text, we subliminally get into the heads of the audience the realization that healthy and total longevity just do go hand in hand and that it is just childish anachronistic to continue to bleat about the difference between the two as if it were a reason to be cautious in pursuing antiaging goals.
- When there is explicit mention of “healthy longevity,” it is never accompanied by any nonsense about compression of morbidity being the goal, that is, implicit apologies that increasing healthy longevity has the

implicitly unfortunate side effect of increasing total longevity too. Similarly, there is no suggestion that the goal is to increase healthy longevity only within some magic “natural limit” on total longevity.

- Perhaps even more conspicuous is the virtual absence from the document (except Lynne Cox’s contribution, and there is not much of it even there) of the word “aging.” That is sooo welcome. It has seemed to me for 20 years that conversations with those in power instantly become basically useless when they start to revolve around that word—it seems to be absolute kryptonite—but honestly I have always thought that we were stuck with it, just because everyone who says they work on aging (whether the biology or the sociology or what) has seemed so intent on continuing to say so. If we can concertedly just stop using the word in documents like this, it will be huge.

If this can become the norm, the bleatings of the deathists will wither away much faster. People will increasingly come to be simply embarrassed to make fools of themselves by rehearsing the same old nonsense.

References

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