

## Editorial

# Trans-Simianism and Truthiness: Hints of Progress in the Debate on Whether Aging Is Good

Aubrey D.N.J. de Grey

“If people live to be 1000 years old, won’t that kill any ability for humans to take risks? Because if I know I’m gonna live to be 1000, I’m not gonna cross the street, because you can’t cure being hit by a bus!”

—Stephen Colbert

“Well, you’ll be able to get your grandmother to help you across the street, because she’ll still be well.”

—Aubrey de Grey

**A**N APHORISM APPARENTLY FIRST STATED by Schopenhauer, and repeated in a variety of forms by others from Gandhi to Haldane, characterizes the reception to radical new ideas as a sequence beginning with their being simply ignored and progressing through ridicule, outright opposition, and finally acceptance that tends to be phrased as denial that one ever thought otherwise. I have described the history of the reaction to SENS (“Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence,” my articulation of the idea that regenerative medicine can, in principle, be applied with great effect to aging) in very much these terms on various occasions in the past. For SENS, “Gandhi stage 3” (outright opposition) was mercifully short-lived, extending through 2005 and 2006 but transitioning toward “Gandhi stage 4” during 2007<sup>1–3</sup>: SENS is now sufficiently widely accepted as a plausible approach to combating aging that the Methuselah Foundation has recently been able to appoint a hugely prestigious 15-member research advisory board who have all given the concept their unequivocal seal of approval.

Progress thus far has been less smooth, however, in respect to converting the general public to the idea that defeating aging is desirable. As I<sup>4,5</sup> and others<sup>6–10</sup> have described at length elsewhere, the desirability and feasibility debates are much more tightly intertwined than one would wish: pessimism on either score strongly inclines people against thinking seriously about the other, creating an insidious catch-22. This problem does not occur to any great extent within the biogerontology community itself, almost

all biogerontologists being perfectly aware that aging is undesirable; but elsewhere, resistance to rational analysis of this topic is as strong as ever.

Are there any signs that change is on the way? I believe that there are.

The Schopenhauer sequence refers to the reaction of observers and commentators to a new idea. How does the other side of the conversation evolve, i.e., the way in which the originators or proponents of the new idea interact with their critics? It can actually be rather accurately described as the Schopenhauer sequence in reverse: first the originator humors his critics, then he takes them on, and, as their opposition becomes increasingly frustrated, he can advance to making fun of them and eventually just getting on with development of the idea as if they did not exist (which, for the most part, they probably no longer do). This is very much what happened with SENS within the biogerontology community—initially I did not highlight too aggressively the extent to which SENS departed from previous thought, but after a period of outright opposition I was able first to show that the residual knee-jerk criticisms SENS was receiving were based on unscientific reasoning, and for at least the past year I have been able simply to ignore those knee-jerk criticisms entirely (while, of course, paying just as much attention as ever to any criticisms that are based on data and on a proper understanding of what SENS proposes).

Which brings me to the focus of this editorial: the ways in which those who are convinced of the *desirability* of defeating aging communicate with those who are not. As in the case of the reciprocal communication, progress has been slower regarding desirability than regarding feasibility. Phase 1, where the proponents of intervention attempt merely to placate their adversaries, went on far too long and was far too craven, especially in regard to the absurd idea that intervention would deliver substantial “compression of morbidity.”<sup>11,12</sup> Phase 2 has begun in earnest with the Longevity Dividend initiative, which firmly shifts the emphasis of public advocacy away from compression of morbidity and into the realm of robust defence of *bona fide* extension of lifespan— not as the main goal, but as a

side-benefit (as opposed to a drawback!) of increasing healthy lifespan.

But here's the really good news: phase 3 has also begun. And it is that development, i.e., the emergence of ridicule of geronto-apologism by those who see aging for what it is, that gives me hope that the converse development, i.e., progression from ridicule (expressed in terribly genteel terms for the most part, of course, but ridicule nonetheless) to truly reasoned communication on such matters from the apologists, is also on its way. The absurdity of the apologist position has been a target of my and others' efforts for longer than I care to remember, but with depressingly little success; I am now coming round to the view that this may largely be because we have simply been too respectful.<sup>13-15</sup>

The first major salvo departing from this style of discourse was Bostrom's "Fable of the Dragon Tyrant."<sup>16</sup> While Bostrom would be the last person to be disrespectful to anyone, he recognized that a new way of expressing the horror of aging and the inexcusability of defending aging might be by way of allegory. The essay consists of a fairy story in which a hugely powerful dragon takes a vast number of a kingdom's lives each day, and the people are in such abject despair at this that they construct ways to accept it and put it out of their minds. They are brought to their senses by a child who is immune to these rationalizations, and whose simple expression of rage at the death of his beloved grandmother progressively rallies the populace to a determined and eventually successful assault that slays the dragon and liberates them from its slavery. This essay, published in 2004, rapidly and rightly gained iconic status among longevity proponents.

More recently, those less (shall we say) Oxonian than Bostrom have followed his lead. As one example, in connection with the publication of my general-audience book on SENS,<sup>17</sup> I was recently invited to appear on the satirical U.S. television show *The Colbert Report*, an honor so far conferred on only a few biologists, among them Richard Dawkins and Craig Venter. What was important about this appearance, in my view, was not that I held my own and gave what by all accounts was a good performance, but that I was allowed to. Being from the United Kingdom, I have not been a regular viewer of Stephen Colbert, but I am well aware that he does not generally make life easy for his guests. In my case, throughout the interview he made things astonishingly easy for me, essentially sharing with me in sending up various apologist arguments. Even the choice of which parts of the interview to cut for lack of time was made so as to make me look good. When someone with as much influence as Colbert has on U.S. public opinion gets on one's side, the light at the end of the tunnel truly brightens.

A more comprehensive satirical mauling of the apologists<sup>18</sup> appeared online in 2007, as an adjunct to a comic strip—a circumstance that may have contributed to its initial failure to attract the scale of attention that it deserved. In this piece, Aaron Diaz impersonates a technophobic academic of prehistoric times, railing against the (supposedly) absurd but dangerous pro-technology ramblings of another academic who predicts the emergence of such rarefied concepts as "tools," "writing," and "culture." Diaz's essay is a genuine masterpiece, which I am sure will in due course rank with the Dragon Tyrant as one of

the seminal contributions to the ending of the global pro-aging trance.

I can also offer evidence as to the effect that such articles will have on the apologists. I am fortunate to know a prominent and very thoughtful philosopher/theologian working in this area, Hava Samuelson, with whom I sparred recently at a conference in Arizona. Shortly thereafter, I sent Diaz's piece to her and encouraged her both to give her thoughts on it and to share it with her colleagues and solicit their reactions, and she kindly obliged. Some of the ensuing dialogue can be found online.<sup>19</sup> I was most gratified to observe that, while a number of contributors studiously missed the point, others readily (albeit tacitly) acknowledged that this was a new and powerful method of expression of the position that they so strongly oppose. But what really matters is the reaction of nonacademics: the general public, who at present remain deeply rooted in the pro-aging trance but who are typically far more influenced by humor than by dry step-by-step logic. If this trend accelerates, real changes to actual public opinion and public policy may be expected to ensue.<sup>20</sup>

This could really be the shape of things to come.

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