



## Volume 118 *Archive Feature*: Gilbert Meilaender

*Mars Hill Audio*

*The utopian pursuit of endless youth*

### Synopsis:

Ethicist **Gilbert Meilaender**, author of *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging* (Erdmans, 2013), explains why anti-aging research cannot be a metaphysically neutral topic, and argues against the utopianism of escaping the body. The interview includes an audio clip of Ray Kurzweil discussing the body's disposability, and Meilaender points out why this futuristic hope is both unlikely and unwise. The desire to leave the body has its roots in the modern liberal tradition, and has to do with possessing versus being a body. Meilaender argues that this idea of remaking ourselves without any limit is an example of inappropriate desire for control, while recognizing the complexities inherent in these "ethical ambiguities." This interview was originally published on Volume 118 of the *Journal*.

### *Transcript*

#### **Ken Myers**

This *Archive Feature* was originally presented in 2013 on Volume 118 of the Mars Hill Audio *Journal*.

Ten years ago, the President's Council on Bioethics released a remarkable book called *Beyond Therapy, Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. One of the chapters in that book examined the ethical questions raised by research to combat the effects of aging, research in some instances that seeks to reverse or eliminate aging as such. In a chapter called "Ageless Bodies," the Council's members observed, "The scientific quest to slow the aging process is not explicitly aimed at conquering death, but in taking the aging of the body as itself a kind of disorder to be corrected. It treats man's mortal condition as a target for medicine, as if death were indeed rather like one of the specific fatal diseases. There is no obvious endpoint to the quest for ageless bodies. After all, why should any lifespan, however long, be long enough? In principle, the quest for any age retardation suggests no inherent stopping point, and therefore, in the extreme case, it is difficult to distinguish it from a quest for endless life. It

seeks to overcome the ephemeral nature of the human body, and to replace it with permanent facility and endless youth.”

One of the members of the Council that produced *Beyond Therapy* was theologian and ethicist Gilbert Meilaender. In Meilaender’s most recent book, he examines more closely the ethical ambiguities of aging, as he seeks some wise approaches for answering the question that’s posed in the book’s title, *Should We Live Forever?* In the book’s introduction, Meilaender explains that as he began thinking about this question, he soon realized that he couldn’t think about it in a metaphysically neutral way. Gilbert Meilaender.

### **Gilbert Meilaender**

I think that when I started the project, I thought I was just going to think about anti-aging research and its wisdom and so forth. I did that, but I gradually came to think that there really wasn’t any very helpful way of thinking about that that didn’t set it into a context of a whole worldview of beliefs that aren’t simply drawn from standard scientific outlooks.

### **KM**

For the most enthusiastic proponents of anti-aging research the goal is not just to escape aging, but to escape the body itself. This is utopianism in its most literal sense: a desire to be located everywhere and nowhere by escaping the body and its limitations entirely.

In a chapter called “Transitional Humanity,” Meilaender examines some of the hopes of the utopians who reimagine human beings as immaterial. “We are, according to this view, what our brains do. Mind and personal identity are located in the pattern of information housed in the brain, and our memories and emotions are simply the behavior of nerve cells. Having reduced mind to that, we can then imagine the possibility of transferring it to a computer program where the self would remain in entirely immaterial form.” Meilaender told me that he finds this so-called transhumanist vision of human freedom unattractive.

### **GM**

It’s very attractive to a number of people, though I have to admit that I often have a hard time understanding its attraction. I mean, I know that it doesn’t

particularly appeal to me. But there's no doubt that many people think of themselves as essentially brain and that that then becomes interpreted as a kind of pattern of information, really, that in theory could be preserved indefinitely in other hosts. So, yes, there are people who like to think of human beings that way. It of course loses the whole sense of embodiedness.

And once again, we run into a similar problem. If we really lose that it's not quite clear how we'd think of all the bodily relations and attachments that we have to other people. And I think that's part of why I don't find it appealing even. But you're right, it's pretty popular and it is connected with some of the the deep craving to find a way to preserve our identity.

## **KM**

One of the leading proponents of anti-aging research in the transhumanist mode is the inventor and self-designated "immortalist" Ray Kurzweil. On this video promoting a 2013 conference called "Global Future 2045," Kurzweil summarizes his views of the body and immortality.

## **Ray Kurzweil**

Well, we're going to become increasingly non-biological to the point where the non-biological part predominates and the biological part is not that important anymore. In fact, the non-biological part, the machine part, will be so powerful it can completely model and understand the biological part. So even if that biological part went away, it wouldn't make any difference because the non-biological part already understood it completely.

We'll also have non-biological bodies. We can create bodies with nanotechnology. We can create virtual bodies in virtual reality that the virtual reality will be as realistic as real reality, the virtual bodies will be as detailed and convincing as real bodies. We'll have different ways we can create bodies.

We do need a body. Our intelligence is directed towards a body, but it doesn't have to be this frail, biological body that's subject to all kinds of failure modes. Well, I think we'll have a choice of bodies. We'll certainly be routinely changing our apparent body in virtual reality. So today you can have a different body in something like *Second Life*, but it's just a picture on a screen. Although research has shown that people actually begin to subjectively identify with their avatar.

But in the future it's not going to be a little picture in a virtual environment you're looking at. It'll feel like this *is* your body and you're in that environment and that your body is the virtual body, and it can be as realistic as real reality and the environment can be as realistic as real reality. And so we'll be routinely able to change our bodies very quickly, as well as our environments, in virtual reality, but it will feel very real.

We'll ultimately be able to do that with real reality too, like self-organizing swarms of nanobots that can link themselves up into a virtual body. If we had radical life extension only, we would get profoundly bored. We'd have a profound existential *ennui*, running out of things to do and new ideas.

But that's not what's going to happen. In addition to radical life extension, we're going to have radical life expansion. We're going to have millions of virtual environments to explore. We're going to literally expand our brains: right now we only have 300 million pattern recognizers organized in a grand hierarchy that we create ourselves in our neocortex, but we can make that 300 billion, or three hundred trillion. We can expand it.

The last time we expanded it with the frontal cortex we created language and art and science. Just think of the qualitative leaps that we can't even imagine today when we expand our neocortex again — we'll be thinking grander, deeper, more hierarchical thoughts than ever before, creating whole new institutions like art and science that we could not articulate. So we're not going to get bored. If that weren't the case then I think, you know, living for hundreds, thousands of years would be a profound philosophical nightmare, but instead we're headed for radical life expansion.

## **KM**

Ray Kurzweil has long been convinced that, given the rate of increase in computing capabilities, human immortality should be achievable by mid-century. Born in 1948, Kurzweil is eager to live long enough to get to mid-century. A 2008 profile in *Wired* magazine reported that he takes 180 to 210 vitamin and mineral supplements every day, “so many that he doesn't have time to organize them all himself. So he's hired a pill wrangler who takes them out of their bottles and sorts them into daily doses, which he carries everywhere in

plastic bags. Kurzweil also spends one day a week at a medical clinic receiving intravenous longevity treatments.”

In December 2012, Ray Kurzweil was named Director of Engineering at Google, which gives him a prominent platform from which to advance his ideas about the nature of human knowledge and human well-being, and his reductionist assumption that human consciousness, emotion, and spirituality are simply the products of computation, the kind of computation that Google search engines do.

Ray Kurzweil is mentioned in Gilbert Meilaender’s book on the ethical ambiguities of aging, and when we talked about his book, I suggested that there was something pathetic about Kurzweil’s hopeful pill-popping and longevity treatments.

## **GM**

It’s one of the peculiar things about what you might call the outer reaches of the anti-aging research movement. Now some of it is much more down-to-earth ordinary science — examining certain ways to try to prolong life and retard aging — but the kind of outer reaches that really think of preserving an individual’s identity, which does usually mean “brain,” a pattern of information, which think of preserving that sort of indefinitely, and perhaps even without quite the same kind of bodily connection as we know.

I admit that I myself have, without claiming scientific expertise, I have real doubts about the feasibility of some of this. But the peculiar thing is that you’ve got some very smart people like Kurzweil working on this and — what shall we say? — deeply, deeply committed to it. But really, at the present time what it means is simply using all sorts of what we might think of as ordinary health kind of measures, though using them in an intense, extreme fashion, in order to try to keep oneself alive long enough until the hoped-for scientific breakthrough comes. The idea is that you just got to keep yourself in good health so that you’re able to profit from it when the day arrives. Now, as I say, I myself have some real doubts whether that kind of day will arrive.

## **KM**

But as you say, what we hope for tells us a lot about who we are.

**GM**

Oh, indeed. And the thirst for this is enormous. I mean, the very fact that a smart guy like Kurzweil is willing to put himself through what you described tells you something about how deep the commitment is. I mean, we should all be so committed to the projects that we think are important, I guess.

You're not wrong to have said there's something almost pathetic about it. And I think the pathos will build if the day doesn't arrive for which they're waiting. But I just don't know what to make of those folks at what I call the outer reaches of the project. They seem to me to be after something that I have doubts about. But as I said, I wouldn't claim that I have the expertise — I can't say that what they're after can't be done. I just don't know.

**KM**

But you do question whether or not it's ultimately a worthy end because of how it treats the body as a kind of disposable—

**GM**

Disposable soma?

**KM**

Yeah.

**GM**

Oh, yes! And the one question is whether it *can* be done, and that's a sort of a technical question about which I wouldn't claim expertise. But the more interesting question is what I said before is the normative question: whether this is a good thing to do, whether it's wise to try to do this. And whatever we say about some of the more I guess what we might call ordinary garden variety approaches to age retardation, these really unusual — I'm always tempted to say *bizarre* — attempts that the folks like Kurzweil are after, I don't think we should even commit our time or resources to that.

**KM**

I was intrigued with your discussion of C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. You point out that Lewis, in a sense, anticipated this kind of posthumanist movement.

**GM**

I think it's really striking, actually. Lewis was a very imaginative writer, of course — we know that — and was also a kind of devoted reader of science fiction. That's true also. But *That Hideous Strength* is a book where he really is kind of ahead of his time, targeting or imagining these sorts of projects. Now obviously he's not imagining it in a scientifically very sophisticated way, and he wasn't a scientist, but he really was paying attention to this. And of course Lewis had read a lot of H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw and so forth, so that he paid attention to people who had these sorts of hopes.

But *That Hideous Strength* is very interesting. That's a book, after all, that was written at least sixty years ago or something, maybe seventy years — I think it would be mid-forties. And it's very interesting how attuned to these sorts of aspirations he really was.

**KM**

Even to the point of depicting a brain in a vat.

**GM**

Right, that's right — which has become a kind of metaphor for what we're thinking about here, if you think that what's really important to human identity is simply the brain as a pattern of information. That is what, in a kind of not very scientifically sophisticated way, Lewis precisely was picturing: a kind of a decapitated head that was still being kept alive in some way. I don't even know if "alive" is quite the right word for a severed head. But now in *That Hideous Strength* of course — and it's not unimportant for Lewis's own metaphysical commitments — but he's being kept alive to be used as the vehicle for demonic forces finally. That tells you something about where Lewis thought the project was headed.

**KM**

Now you point out that this desire to leave the body and a desire or a tendency to see ourselves just as brains — or “meat and wetware,” I think is the term of art in some circles — that it has its roots in the modern liberal tradition of seeing ourselves as *possessing* a body rather than *being* a body. What’s the difference between possessing a body and being a body?

**GM**

Well, if we think of ourselves as *possessing* a body, then clearly the body does not really carry one’s personal presence. It’s simply something that a person who is sort of fundamentally separate from the body uses, as a probably — at least for now — necessary vehicle to act upon the world. But it’s not really the place of the person’s presence.

And Christians, of course, though they have at various points in history been tempted in such directions, have always been drawn back away from that sense of the person as entirely separate from the body, been drawn back by some of the most fundamental Christian affirmations: Incarnation and Resurrection. Those are basic beliefs that finally require us to find ways to think about the connection of body and person and not to separate them.

**KM**

And by saying it has roots in the modern liberal tradition, how does the body get left behind in liberal thought?

**GM**

Well, I don’t know that it *always* does. I’m not sure I want to generalize completely, but insofar as that modern liberal tradition tends to identify the person with will, or autonomous will, then the body becomes simply a necessary appendage or prosthesis or tool that the will can use to enact its purposes in the world. But it’s not the essential presence of the person, and therefore from that perspective we’d be less likely to think about ways in which the body limits what we do or ought to do, things that we ought not do with the body, and everything becomes a matter of choice and will for autonomous human beings.

**KM**

You say at one point that for some members of this movement that it's not really death that's the enemy, it's not being in control that's the enemy.

**GM**

Well, that's right. That is at least the way they put it. And I do think that that tells us something about what the phenomenon is that we're interested in here. It is, of course, partly just a thirst for continued life. I think that is true, but it's on our terms, it's to be a kind of mastery that we achieve. And so once again, I do think that choice and will are central there, and the problem is not just death but contingency, something that's out of our control. And I think what I say is that it's an attempt to escape from contingency.

It really is a complicated matter. I think that, once again, from a Christian angle of vision, we think of human beings as what I usually call sort of two-sided creatures. On the one hand, as bodies we're located in a time and place, we're enmeshed in certain kinds of necessities. On the other hand, because human beings are made for God, we do transcend those givens, those necessities and limits, to some extent. And the question of how to live is always a question of when it's appropriate to transcend one of those given limits of life, and when the path of wisdom is to accept it and realize that to try to transcend it would, on this occasion, be to transgress it.

Now I don't think there's a cookbook that always tells us, you know, when we're at one point or when we're at the other. But there is a sense in which, at least at its outer reaches, the transhumanist part of the anti-aging program — and that's not the whole of it, but at those reaches — I think there is a tendency to try to think of human beings not in that two-sided way, but as just freedom, choice, will, and so forth, a freedom, therefore, to kind of remake ourselves without any limit. And that is, at least from a Christian perspective, a fundamental mistake.

Now I wouldn't say that about everybody engaged in anti-aging research by any means. They're not all engaged in trying to accomplish what the transhumanists have in mind. You know, there may be an easy movement from one level to another, but some of it is just an attempt to extend the maximum lifespan and

so forth, which by comparison with transhumanism is relatively tame, though it of course has its own problems and dangers as well.

**KM**

Gilbert Meilaender, author of *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging*. Meilaender holds the Phyllis and Richard Duesenberg Chair in Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University.

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