

Ethical Questions in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*: A Utilitarian Perspective

Ahmad Hussain Muheisen

MA Candidate – Al-Bayan University – College of Education – Department
of English Language

E-mail: Ahmed.husseini2203@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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Abstract:

This paper explores the ethics of cryopreservation, how it redefines the traditional notion of life and death, and its impact on human identity. It showcases the consequences of the possibility of a better future through the process. It is a method through which humanity can hypothetically defy death and is subject to ethical concerns, which this paper will assess through the lens of consequentialist utilitarianism, where relevant.

Keywords: Ethics, immortality, science fiction, utilitarianism

1. Introduction

"The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and where the other begins?"

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Premature Burial"

Cryonics is the process of preserving the human body by cooling it to very low temperatures with the hope that this would enable the body to be preserved into the future when hypothetically, curing the illness the individual was suffering from is possible. Due to the nature of the process, it carries an attitude of skepticism from various aspects including the legal and the moral (Minerva, 2018). The subject of cryonics is explored in fiction. *Zero K* (2016) by Don DeLillo (1936-) is about billionaire Ross Lockhart whose wife Artis Martineau suffers from an illness so he seeks immortality through cryopreservation for both himself and his wife. The novel is told in first-person and Lockhart's son; Jeffrey Lockhart serves as the narrator (Bender, 2023). Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that posits that the maximization of happiness and well-being should be the primary criterion of ethical action (Doyle, 2018).

2. Mannequins as Humans: Reconceptualizing Death

The concept of manipulating the intricate mechanisms that underlie nature is not new to science. The recent decades have witnessed major progress regarding reproductive technology, namely, the process of in vitro fertilization (IVF) which is a technology that enabled a higher degree of control over the early stages of human development to treat infertility allowing for millions of births that were deemed impossible since 1978. In 1983, it also became a reality that embryos could be cryopreserved in liquid nitrogen (Minerva, 2018). On the other hand, in the case of cryonics, suspended animation, which is the state of the body where the metabolism is either significantly slowed or paused to stop the aging process (Stratmann, 2015), calls into question any traditional definition of death since it becomes insufficient at describing the moment an individual is declared dead. This can be illustrated by examining the conventional notion of death, how the concept of cryonics alters it, and how the novel deals with that notion.

The idea of defining death is ethically significant for a variety of reasons which include medical, legal, and societal consequences (Veatch & Ross, 2016). It may also offer us a guide on, for example, the timing of the removal of organs for organ transplantation. However, the notion of when to declare a person dead was not a subject of debate until the middle of the twentieth century. Prior to this, a person was simply declared dead when their heart ceases to function. The developments of the biomedical field required further investigation into this notion. Demands to redefine death exclusively as the death of the brain have been made by various medical ethicists and philosophers such as Henry Beecher (1904-1976) and Robert M. Veatch (1939-2020) and it received opposition from others (Brennan & Stainton, 2009, p. 100). In the United States, the Uniform Determination of Death Act (UDDA) proposes that an individual can be declared dead in two ways: the first is the loss of functions in the respiratory and circulatory systems and the second is when the brain loses its functions (Veatch & Ross, 2016). Given that there are cases where humans can be conscious but paralyzed and unable to move or communicate, as is the case with patients who suffer from the locked-in syndrome whereby some of them exhibit brain activity that is not substantially different in comparison to those who are considered brain-dead, a new criterion is needed for death. According to another criterion called the higher-brain standard, death occurs when an individual's consciousness can no longer be restored. Cryonics further complicates the matter since it changes these commonly held

definitions of death. It introduces a new definition which is that an individual is dead only when the information within the individual's brain is lost or corrupted. This is based on cryonicists' view of what constitutes a person since they define a person by the information collected within the brain (Minerva, 2018). In *Zero K*, this definition of the self is provided by an unnamed woman who spoke about solitude in the state of suspended animation stating that the self is "[e]verything you are, without others, without friends or strangers or lovers or children or streets to walk or food to eat or mirrors in which to see yourself" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 67). The character Ben-Ezra tells Jeffrey, "[w]e reverse the text here, we read the news backwards. From death to life" (DeLillo, p. 128).

In this way, through cryonics, humans defy traditional definitions of death, and even if subjects appear lifeless, as long as the information within their brain is retrievable, they are not considered dead. *Zero K* depicts the people frozen in this state of cryopreservation as objects, not humans, and Jeffrey is unfamiliar with the idea that what seems like a lifeless object has the potential for life. His instincts are at odds with the environment of 'The Convergence,' which is the name for the place that carries out the cryopreservation process. He also felt a "sense of enclosure and isolation" (DeLillo, p. 16). Upon his visit to the place, he recounts seeing mannequins. He expresses admiration of them only insofar as art is admired, as if seeing "the first glimpse of art" (DeLillo, p. 52). Those mannequins are, in reality, cryopreserved humans. Since Jeffrey has a fascination with words and definitions, the only word that he could find in his mind to describe the place where the mannequins are is the word "catacomb." To Jeffrey, "the sight was overwhelming, and the place itself, the word itself—the word was catacomb" (DeLillo, p. 133). Because they are actual humans, Jeffrey questions the feeling he has upon encountering them asking, "how could it be that mannequins had this effect," despite appearing as "pieces of plastic, synthetic compounds draped in dead men's hoods and robes" (DeLillo, p. 146). Jeffrey himself at some point could not resist but to "think of them as brainless objects" even after becoming aware that they are in reality humans. The novel does not spare any details about the sight of those lifeless human mannequins. Jeffrey recounts,

Here were figures submerged in a pit, mannequins in convoluted mass, naked, arms jutting, heads horribly twisted, bare skulls, an entanglement of tumbled forms with jointed limbs and bodies, neutered humans, men and women stripped of identity, faces blank

except for one unpigmented figure, albino, staring at me, pink eyes flashing (DeLillo, p. 134).

Cryonics challenges an idea that defines life “the defining element of life is that it ends” (DeLillo, p. 70). In the novel, the twin characters that Jeffery calls “the Stenmark twins” make remarks on such questions and one of them is, “Isn’t death a blessing? Doesn’t it define the value of our lives, minute to minute, year to year?” and “what will poets write about?” (DeLillo, p. 69). Although the twins dismiss these questions on the basis that the mission of cryonics is to “stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human—stretch and then surpass” (DeLillo, p. 71), consequently, a question must be asked, is death bad? Does it justify turning humans into mannequins?

In a conversation between the character of the monk and Jeffrey, the monk asks, “What’s the point of living if we don’t die at the end of it?” (DeLillo, p. 40). When asked in philosophical terms, this question can be weighed against nonexistence. If nonexistence is viewed as bad, then death will be viewed as such. The Roman philosopher Lucretius does not view death as inherently bad; he maintains that it is a state of nonexistence and one should not be concerned with death in the same way one was not concerned about their state before existence. In his poem *De rerum natura*, Lucretius states,

Therefore death to us
Is nothing, nor concerns us in the least,
Since nature of mind is mortal evermore.
And just as in the ages gone before

We felt no touch of ill, when all sides round (Lucretius, 1916, 3.828-834).

Assuming the goodness of life, the American philosopher Thomas Nagel (1937-) puts forth the argument that death in this case is the “deprivation” of the individual from the experience of life.

If we are to make sense of the view that to die is bad, it must be on the ground that life is a good and death is the corresponding deprivation or loss, bad not because of any positive features but because of the desirability of what it removes (Negal, 2012, p. 4).

However, Nagel does not limit the goodness of life to positive experiences and asserts that “life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own” (Negal, p. 2). From the perspective of preference, it may be that people prefer to keep living. That means that humans cling to life regardless of the circumstances (Minerva, 2018).

In *Zero K*, this corresponds with remarks made by the Stenmark twins, “Do we need a promise? Why not just die? Because we’re human and we cling” (DeLillo, 2016, 74). In this case, based on preference utilitarianism, it would be an obligation that these preferences be fulfilled (Doyle, 2018, p. 21). One can assume, however, that this preference can be attributed to two factors, namely, the sunk cost fallacy where people tend to invest more in a particular task or mission because they have already invested significant resources into it, or in the tendency to maintain the status quo and resist change (Kahneman, 2011) such that they cling to life and desire immortality, because they have invested resources into it and or refuse to change the status quo. Nevertheless, whether or not this decision is based on these two factors is a judgment that bears no ethical relevance to preference. In what ways do people favor cryonics? In this context, Nagel argues that people favor cryonics because they view it as a “continuation of their present life” (Nagel, 2012, p. 2). This is different from the perspective of the novel, whose characters desire a different life, which will be discussed in the third section. Suffice to say that Ross emphasizes the human lifespan. Jeffrey recounts, “I was thinking about the remarks my father had once made concerning the human life span, the time we spend alive, minute to literal minute, birth to death. A period so brief, he said, that we might measure it in seconds” (DeLillo, 2016, 234). In Jeffrey’s mind, the imagery of the mannequins remains associated with the bodies of the cryopreserved humans. When Ross’ capsule through which he would undergo cryopreservation was prepared, Jeffrey remarks, “[m]y father’s capsule next to Artis was ready. I tried not to think of the mannequins I’d seen on the earlier visit. I wanted to be free of references and relationships” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 232).

3. The Ethics of Cryopreservation

Cryonics is a technology that relies on the future; it is designed to preserve the body until future treatments for the particular underlying conditions become available, and as such, the human body can be preserved for possibly hundreds of years in suspended animation (Doyle, 2018, p. 114). Concerning the question of its possibility, forms of cryopreservation are present in nature, such as the wood frog *Rana sylvatica*, which employs a natural cryoprotectant to survive the harsh winter (Conlon et al., 1998). But for humans, cryonics is a hypothetical technology that is a subject of debate due to ethical concerns.

3.1 A Wasteful Use of Resources

Two arguments can be made against cryonics concerning the financial factor. It can be argued that cryopreservation expends large amounts of financial resources that could be used to help others (Doyle, 2018). The other argument is that it may only benefit the wealthy as cryonics technologies may become an extension of capitalism (Vint, 2021). It is worth mentioning that resources are not simply limited to money, but also include biological organs that can be used for organ transplantation, hence on a large scale, it also decreases the possibility of patients needing organ transplants to receive them (Minerva, 2018).

The first argument contains some complexity. Having resources, which life should be saved? Would it be appropriate to sacrifice many to save a few? Generally, utilitarianism would suggest that it would be ethical to sacrifice a few to save many. Hypothetically, assuming that a healthy patient is coming to a hospital with some routine examination and within the hospital, five other patients are dealing with serious and fatal medical conditions that require organ transplants. By also assuming that all the legalities of the case have been addressed, such as by killing the healthy patient through some arranged accident, if the organs of the healthy individual could save the five dying patients, it would be ethical for utilitarianism to sacrifice the healthy individual to save the dying five. This act would seem counterintuitive and problematic since it would violate the healthy person's right to live (Bailey, 1997).

This thought experiment could also be compared to the popular trolley problem. A term given by the American philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929-2020) in her article *Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem* (1976), the trolley problem is a thought experiment whereby a train is on its course to kill five people and an individual standing by can pull a lever and change the course of the train to another one where only a single person would be killed (1976). Should that individual redirect the train to sacrifice a single individual and save the other five? The utilitarian would again favor that decision (Bailey, 1997). Given that generally, individuals undergoing cryopreservation are either deceased or on the verge of death, and their organs are not to be used for organ transplantation, the argument is that these are wasted organs. This paints cryopreservation as a selfish practice (Minerva, 2018). It is worth noting that although cryopreservation usually implies that the subject is either deceased or dying, in *Zero K*, Ross chooses to be frozen prematurely, "twenty years before his natural time" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 111) in a unit called

“Zero K” where assisted death takes place, “predicated on the subject’s willingness to make a certain kind of transition to the next level” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 112).

However, there is an alternative to whole-body cryopreservation called “neuropreservation” that preserves only the brain rather than the entire body. As previously stated, what defines a person for cryonicists is the information stored within the brain so this alternative could be a solution to this problem. Furthermore, it is much less expensive if the costs are considered. The issue is that since neuropreservation cuts the connection between the body and the brain, it makes it more challenging for the future since it now requires the connection to be reconstructed (Minerva, 2018). In *Zero K*, this practice sometimes takes place in The Convergence. Jeffrey states:

The guide told us about brains preserved in insulated vessels. Now she added that heads, entire heads with brains intact, were sometimes removed from the bodies and stored separately. One day in decades to come the head will be grafted to a healthy nanobody (DeLillo, 2016, p. 147).

Jeffrey also “assumed that the brains were in chilled storage and that the headless motif was a reference to preclassical statuary dug up from ruins” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 232).

But if the cost of cryopreserving the body is very high, should the money be allocated towards charity instead? A utilitarian might suggest so especially if there is no moral reason to value one person’s life over that of others. Even if the success of cryonics is guaranteed, there would still be a moral imperative to choose charity over cryonics (Minerva, 2018). Ross spends significant amounts of money on the cryopreservation operation at The Convergence. Jeffrey states, “I was aware that he’d put major sums of money into this entire operation, this endeavor, called The Convergence” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 7). But if the argument is based solely on the cost, it follows that it should also apply to other forms of expensive treatments aimed at prolonging the lives of elderly individuals, who also spend significant amounts of money for only a few additional months or years of life. The argument itself is not a strong one, but it implies that cryonics is not uniquely selfish (Minerva, 2018). In *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (2009), Peter Singer argues that people are not obliged to choose between their quality of life or rigorous charity and that there is a balance. Singer claims that probing people over their life choices regarding charity carries the risk of derailing people from the course of ethics.

Asking people to give more than almost anyone else gives risks turning them off, and at some level might cause them to question the point of striving to live an ethical life at all. Daunted by what it takes to do the right thing, they may ask themselves why they are bothering to try. To avoid that danger, we should advocate a level of giving that will lead to a positive response (Singer, 2010, p. 151).

Singer also asserts that the balanced solution only lies in small amounts of donations to charity that would add up to help save lives. “5 percent of annual income for those who are financially comfortable, and rather more for the very rich” (Singer, 2010, p. 152). Concerning the idea that cryonics comes to benefit only the wealthy, contrary to *The Transhumanist Wager*, in *Zero K*, Ross is a wealthy individual who gains access to the technology of cryonics only by virtue of being wealthy. In describing his father at the beginning of the novel, Jeffrey states, “[h]e was a man shaped by money. He’d made an early reputation by analyzing the profit impact of natural disasters. He liked to talk to me about money” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 13). The novel creates this particular scenario where only the wealthy gain access to the technology of cryopreservation. The Stenmark twins state this while promoting cryonics, “Isn’t this what you’ve been waiting for? A way to claim the myth for yourselves. Life everlasting belongs to those of breathtaking wealth” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 76). The situation is strongly contrasted by the suffering that occurs in the outside world of the novel. There is an edited depiction of human suffering and disasters taking place in the world which are displayed in *The Convergence*. Jeffrey recounts what he sees on the screen, “There were scenes of rain beating on terraced fields, long moments of nothing but rain, then people everywhere running, others helpless in small boats bouncing over rapids” (DeLillo, 2016, 11). The wealthy receive the possibility of immortality while the rest of the world faces death due to wars and disasters (Bender, 2023). The Stenmark twins ask, “What about those who die? The others. There will always be others. Why should some keep living while others die?” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 70).

In this context, life in *Zero K* can be seen as an asset for capitalism. In addition to the image of mannequins as human subjects that was mentioned previously, one of the novel’s main thematic elements is money (Vint, 2018). Even the end of life, i.e., death, is treated as a commodity; a possession. The opening line of the novel is a phrase that Ross says. “Everybody wants to own the end of the world” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 3). Money is an integral part of Ross’ character and since he is “shaped by money” (DeLillo, p. 13), it leads

Jeffrey to ask whether his own life is tainted by that. He asks, “[h]as it been money, my father’s money, that determines the way I think and live? Whether I accept what he offers or turn him down cold, is this what overwhelms everything else?” (DeLillo, p. 224). Jeffrey’s discussions with those working at The Convergence address the topic of money in about the same frequency as other topics related to existence and death (Vint, 2021). Ross then represents a character that is present in a world that values people only to the extent of their monetary production. He is therefore able to go beyond temporal boundaries; to achieve immortality through cryopreservation (Vint, 2021). The mannequins are the subjects of capitalism. They are stripped of their history and identity. Jeffrey imagines them as,

[h]uman bodies, saturated with advanced perspectives, serving as mainstays in the art markets of the future. Stunted monoliths of once-living flesh placed in the showrooms of auction houses or set in the windows of an elite antiquarian shop along the stylish stretch of Madison Avenue (DeLillo, 2016, p. 232).

In this way, the novel projects life as a subject of capitalism. As if it can be controlled and reshaped. When life and death converge or almost converge, life is seen as a controllable concept through financial means (Vint, 2021). A missionary at ‘The Convergence’ states “[a]re we adjusting the future, moving it into our immediate time frame? At some point in the future, death will become unacceptable even as the life of the planet becomes more fragile” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 66). The title of the novel *Zero K* refers to zero Kelvin which is the lowest temperature; absolute zero. Although absolute zero is not possible and it is not the temperature of the “cryostorage” (DeLillo, p. 143), arguably, the title can come to mean the cessation of the aging process and death or possibly life itself. DeLillo’s message then seems to be that the desire to end mortality strips humans of their humanity and that there is a connection between this desire and the idea that humans are only valuable if they offer economic value (Vint, 2021, pp. 35-37). It is however undeniable that wealth inequalities exist as the world still witnesses conditions of poverty, and the argument is that cryopreservation would further increase this disparity. But in the real world, there is a possibility that new technologies would become cheaper, and with time, more people would have access to it (Minerva, 2018).

3.2 The Argument of Uncertainty

Another objection to new technologies in general is the problem of uncertainty. Uncertainty carries with it fear of negative outcomes. The case of genetically modified tomatoes can be taken as a simple

example. In 1994, after they were introduced, the public was very critical of them, and people were making big claims about the consequences of their consumption on health. All of those claims were proven false more than twenty years later when hundreds of studies were conducted (Minerva, 2018). This is not to say that the argument should be neglected. On the contrary, act utilitarianism would require certainty of positive outcomes or consequences if well-being is at risk. There is only one solution to this problem, and that is experimentation. For cryonics, it is clear that there is no definite proof yet that the technology is safe, especially in the long term. What is the state of the individuals who undergo the process upon waking? The precautionary approach has been applied in the past for what were then new technologies and if cryopreservation is to proceed ethically as a technology, caution should be exercised (Minerva, 2018). In *Zero K*, the idea of cryonics is based on a promise. The character of the monk who speaks to the dying “spoke to men and women who’d been placed in a shelter, a safehold, people in the last days or hours of the only life they’d ever known, and he had no illusions about the sweeping promise of a second life” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 86). In the novel, Ross describes cryonics as a “faith-based technology. That’s what it is” (DeLillo, p. 9). And despite that, Artis is fully committed to the idea of cryonics; she was “completely ready. There’s no trace of hesitation or second thoughts” (DeLillo, p. 8). The reason is that the excitement far outweighs the uncertainty of the technology. Ross states that “[a]nticipation and awe intermingled. Far more palpable than apprehension or uncertainty. There’s a reverence, a state of astonishment” (DeLillo, p. 9). It is worth considering whether the risk for people undergoing cryopreservation is high enough that it does not justify the procedure.

Known as the “father of cryonics,” (Minerva, 2018, p. 12) the academic Robert C. W. Ettinger (1918-2011) argues in support of cryonics against the idea of uncertainty in his book *The Prospect of Immortality* (1962). Ettinger claims that since individuals who undergo the process are practically deemed dead, they would be making a better decision with no compromises since the worst outcome would be failure which still results in death and in that case, it would be the outcome of both choices:

Clearly, the freezer is more attractive than the grave, even if one has doubts about the future capabilities of science. With bad luck, the frozen people will simply remain dead, as they would have in the grave. But with good luck, the manifest destiny of science will be realized, and the resuscitees will drink the wine of centuries unborn.

The likely prize is so enormous that even slender odds would be worth embracing (Ettinger, 2002, p. 16).

While the aforementioned argument applies to Artis who was “suffering from several disabling illnesses” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 8), it does not apply to Ross who chose to be frozen prematurely. At The Convergence, Jeffrey believes that “Artis belonged here. Ross did not” (DeLillo, p. 258). Jeffrey also wonders about the reason behind Ross’ decision to undergo the process, “was it simply love that made him want to join her? Maybe I preferred to think that he was driven by a dark yearning, a need to be deprived of what he is and what he possesses” (DeLillo, p. 145).

Ettinger’s argument falls short if there is any possibility of suffering upon reawakening from the frozen state. Experiments regarding the freezing of animals have met with limited success. One such experiment was conducted by the British cryobiologist Audrey Ursula Smith (1915-1981) on golden hamsters, and although the study is limited, it did not result in noticeable side effects:

The brains of the partially frozen animals which subsequently revived must have contained considerable amounts of ice [...]. Nevertheless, no abnormalities in behaviour were noted after these hamsters had recovered from the immediate effects of the experiment. The capacity for revival was, however, limited, so that few hamsters frozen for longer than 60 min recovered fully although natural breathing was temporarily resumed in those previously frozen for 159 min, and heart beats recurred in those frozen for as long as 160 to 170 min (Lovelock & Smith, 1956, p. 425).

In *Zero K*, commenting on how the procedure of cryopreservation for Artis will take place, Jeffrey expresses his resentment.

She would die, chemically prompted, in a subzero vault, in a highly precise medical procedure guided by mass delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception.

I felt a surge of anger. I hadn’t known until now the depth of my objections to what was happening here, a response obscurely coiled within the rhythms of my father’s voice in his desperate reminiscence (DeLillo, 2016, p. 50).

Jeffrey thinks of this technology as a “wishful future.” He feels pity at the state of those undergoing cryopreservation at The Convergence. “Those were humans entrapped, enfeebled, individual lives stranded in some border region of a wishful future” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 256). Jeffrey also questions the motives of employing it and wonders whether The Convergence is a place designed to assert control over the future of its people. He states, “I wonder if I was

looking at the controlled future, men and women being subordinated, willingly or not, to some form of centralized command. Mannequined lives. Was this a facile idea?" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 146).

Ettinger has an optimistic view of technology. He imagines a utopia for ethics and technology and states that "[t]he freezer program represents for us now living a bridge to an anticipated Golden Age, when we shall be reanimated to become supermen with indefinite life spans" (Ettinger, 2002, p. 84). However, since the future is uncertain, it can be argued that Ettinger's optimistic view about cryonics is unjustified and may be misleading (Tandy, 2002). There is no guarantee that the future will be desirable for those who seek cryopreservation.

There is the potential for risks associated with cryopreservation. Recognizing the possibility of those risks and mitigating them is ethically necessary and experimentation is the only means for doing so (Minerva, 2018). Although it is not known whether cryonics will become a reality, it is a concept worthy of consideration (Minerva, 2018). But in the novel, Jeffrey remarks, "[h]ere was science in irrepressible fantasy" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 257). A future fantasy controlled by capital.

4. A Chance for a New Identity

Whether or not people maintain their identity and sense of self upon reawakening is worth considering. The human experience is not a series of unrelated events, but rather connected experiences that make up the self (Minerva, 2018). The view of cryonicists is that the information within the brain is what constitutes the self and by maintaining the brain through cryopreservation, they suggest that restoring a person is possible (Nelson et al., 2014). The question of identity is one about what constitutes the self. This question is fundamental when attempting to answer whether an underlying change causes the person to lose their existence; or what makes a person who they are (Korfmacher n.d.). The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) maintains that the self is based only on consciousness. In his work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke argues that one's identity is defined by their consciousness that the "[s]elf *depends* on consciousness.—Self is that conscious thinking thing [...] which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends" (Locke, 1849, p. 226). By the same notion, Locke asserts that a person would not have the same self if there is an alteration in consciousness. That is if Socrates for example,

waking and sleeping [does] not partake of the same consciousness, Socrates waking and sleeping *is not the same person*. And to punish Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more of right, than to punish one twin for what his brother twin did (Locke, p. 227).

A common interpretation of Locke's theory is related to memory, that the self is defined by the ability to remember the past. Significant objections were raised against this theory, but in recent decades, the theory underwent modifications to address challenges such as the notion that memory should not be the sole psychological link to identity in this case or to deal with the issue of false memory (Schechtman, 2011). Nevertheless, according to the cryonicists' view that the self can be retained after cryopreservation if the information in the brain is intact, it would mean that cryonicists' view of the self is materialistic. However, after laying out several hypothetical considerations in *The Prospect of Immortality*, Ettinger argues that identity is a fictional concept:

In the physical world there is no definite collection of objects which can be called "men," but only shifting assemblages of atoms organized in various ways, some of which we may choose to lump together for convenience. Let us then cut the Gordian knot by recognizing that identity, like morality, is man-made and relative, rather than natural and absolute. Identity, like beauty, is partly in the eye of the beholder. It is only partly existent, and partly invented. Instead of having identity, we have degrees of identity, measured by some criteria suitable to the purpose (Ettinger, 2002, p. 135).

In this case, following Ettinger's claim, the relationship that individuals have with themselves; what is referred to as identity, is that they are only related to an identical future version of themselves; mentally or physically. Ettinger argues that cryonics would extend this relationship permanently (Tandy, 2002). By contrast, in *Zero K*, the characters seek a new version of themselves through cryopreservation. They seek to escape their past which implies only physical continuity and not psychological continuity. They will be stripped of their history. The Convergence is a place meant to separate itself from history (Bender, 2023) as it even has its own language which is "[a] language isolate, beyond all affiliation with other languages" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 130). Ben-Ezra also states that "[t]hose who emerge from the capsules will be ahistorical humans. They will be free of the flatlines of the past, the attenuated minute and hour" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 129).

Concerning this new language, it is meant to discard normal symbolism found in normal language allowing for immediate interaction with reality (Bender, 2023). Ben-Ezra states, that it is,

[a] system that will offer new meanings, entire new levels of perception. It will expand our reality, deepen the reach of our intellect. *It will remake us* [...] We will approximate the logic and beauty of pure mathematics in everyday speech.

No similes, metaphors, analogies.

A language that will not shrink from whatever forms of objective truth we have never before experienced (DeLillo, 2016, p. 130).

Ben-Ezra proclaims that those at The Convergence have removed themselves from their history. “Those of us who are here don’t belong anywhere else. We’ve fallen out of history. We’ve abandoned who we were and where we were in order to be here” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 129).

In the same manner, Ross also wants to relieve himself from family connections and his past as he seeks “to abandon his generational history” (DeLillo, p. 82). This is also evident when it is revealed that Ross is not his actual name but a name that he made up. His real name is Nicholas Satterswaite. This is because Ross no longer identifies with himself and “[w]hen he looks in the mirror he sees a simulated man” (DeLillo, p. 82) and not himself. Ross abandoned Jeffrey and his mother when Jeffrey was a child. Although Jeffrey initially accepts this fact and starts to “embrace the idea of being abandoned, or semi-abandoned” (DeLillo, p. 15), he now contemplates that since Ross’ name is not real, he starts to question the implications of the name on his identity. He says, “[t]he name Lockhart was all wrong for me. Too tight, too clenched” (DeLillo, pp. 82-83) and reflects on the consequences of the name, “I wondered what would have happened if I’d learned the truth sooner. Jeffrey Satterswaite” (DeLillo, p. 83). Jeffrey continuously attempts to give names to people at The Convergence. This act of naming people can be seen as a way to add substance to an arguably lifeless place (Glavanakova, 2017). It can also be a way for Jeffrey to deal with the circumstances at The Convergence since the place does not make him feel easy (Bender, 2023).

On the other hand, Artis feels that The Convergence is the place where she is to transform herself. “This place, all of it, seems transitional to me” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 50). She also feels that she does not belong in her current identity and uses the phrase “I’m someone who’s supposed to be me” (p. 52). The novel implies that at The Convergence, those who enter the cryopreservation pods, also enter a state that is neither death nor life. A state between life and death

(Bender, 2023). There is a small ambiguous section in the novel titled “Artis Martineau,” where the reader is allowed a glimpse into what seems to be Artis's consciousness in the cryopreservation pod. The novel does not inform the reader on whether this is her actual mental activity or if it is Jeffery’s speculated imagination. However, the latter seems more likely since Jeffrey states that he likes to imagine her experiencing “minimal consciousness,”

I think of Artis in the capsule and try to imagine, against my firm belief, that she is able to experience a minimal consciousness. I think of her in a state of virgin solitude. No stimulus, no human activity to incite response, barest trace of memory. Then I try to imagine an inner monologue, hers, self-generated, possibly nonstop, the open prose of a third-person voice that is also her voice, a form of chant in a single low tone (DeLillo, 2016, p. 272).

Jeffrey also imagines his father’s mental state in the pod and “his brain (in local lore) geared to function at some damped level of identity” (DeLillo, p. 258). In Artis’s section, she has an internal monologue where she is detached from her sense of self. “She is trying to understand what has happened to her and where she is and what it means to be who she is” (DeLillo, p. 158). And she is described only as a “residue, all that is left of an identity” (DeLillo, p. 160).

For Ross, however, this quest for a new identity comes at the cost of cutting his life short. Ross’ decision to choose premature death to undergo cryopreservation calls into question an ethical consideration of assisted death in the context of cryopreservation. The novel implies that Ross is not the only one to engage in premature death to be cryopreserved, as it seems to be an ongoing practice. Jeffrey states, that “[o]thers, far greater in number, have come here in failing health in order to die and be prepared for the chamber. [...] You are the heralds, choosing to enter the portal prematurely” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 238). It is worth noting that an individual has to be declared legally dead before undergoing cryopreservation (Foley, 2011). Therefore, legally, this would mean that Ross is simply committing suicide. Peter Singer argues in his book *Practical Ethics* (1979) that the term “assisted suicide” should not be put out of use regardless of the person’s reason for choosing to end their life.

Although it is certainly true that patients who are terminally ill and choose to end their own life to avoid further suffering are making a very different decision from people who kill themselves because they are emotionally disturbed, that does not change the basic fact that all these people are ending their own lives rather than continuing to live

for as long as they can. Hence, we should not shy away from the term ‘physician-assisted suicide,’ because that offers the most precise description of what happens when a physician, acting on a request from the patient, provides a prescription for a drug which the patient then takes to end her life (Singer, 2011, p. 156).

A close real-life case is that of Thomas K. Donaldson (1944-2006); an advocate of cryopreservation who was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. The symptoms he was experiencing included seizures and issues with speech. He was told by his doctors that he was facing death. His desire was to be cryopreserved before he was considered legally dead in order to maintain the condition of his brain to the extent possible and therefore increase the odds of his revival. Early in the 1990s, he demanded the court to declare his right to die before his legal death to undergo cryopreservation through assisted death (Burden, 2023). The court of appeals states that Donaldson “wishes to die in order to live” (As cited in Foley, 2011, p. 46). The case was unsuccessful and the court decided that there are valid reasons that assisted suicide be outlawed (Foley, 2011).

Peter Singer asserts that since preference utilitarianism favors the desire of a person to keep living, it should also favor the desire of someone to stop living. “Just as preference utilitarianism must count a desire to go on living as a reason against killing, so it must count a desire to die as a reason for killing” (Singer, 2011, p. 170). Singer further argues that the autonomous decisions of rational agents must be respected.

[T]he principle of respect for autonomy tells us to allow rational agents to live their own lives according to their own autonomous decisions, free from coercion or interference; but if rational agents should autonomously choose to die, then respect for autonomy will lead us to assist them to do as they choose (Singer, 2011, p. 170).

5. Conclusion

If people possess some form of existential regrets which are caused by concern about not having enough time for a new beginning to make different choices, then immortality may alleviate some regrets by offering a chance to make more choices. However, although having infinite time entails having more time for more options, it does not mean that individuals will have a clone that would start life from the beginning nor does it mean that immortality will allow individuals to go back in time as some actions that are done cannot be undone (Minerva, 2018). In wishing to transcend their lives, the characters in *Zero K* seek to be reborn, to uncover what they see as their truest self. The unnamed woman states, “[y]ou cast off the person. The person is

the mask, the created character in the medley of dramas that constitute your life. The mask drops away and the person becomes you in its truest meaning, All one, The self” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 67). Cryopreservation is a future promise that carries uncertainties. It introduces new challenges to the traditional understanding of human life and death. Although ethical objections against cryonics such as the improper use of resources are not strong, it is unclear what the future holds for those who choose to undergo the process. *Zero K* showcases a bleak world in which humans are treated as subjects for a future technology that only the wealthy have access to. In a world that is full of suffering and death, they wager on a second chance in life; a rebirth.

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مسائل أخلاقية في رواية "زيرو كي" لدون ديليلو: من منظور النظرية النفعية

أحمد حسين محيسن

مرشح ماجستير - جامعة البيان - كلية التربية - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث أخلاقيات عملية التجميد، وكيف تغير تلك العملية المفهوم التقليدي للحياة والموت، وتأثيره على الهوية البشرية. ويسلط الضوء على عواقب إمكانية تحقيق مستقبل أفضل من خلالها. عملية التجميد هي طريقة افتراضية يمكن من خلالها للبشرية أن تتحدى الموت، وهي تخضع لمخاوف أخلاقية سيتم تقييمها في هذا البحث من منظور النظرية النفعية حيثما يتعلق الأمر بذلك. كلمات مفتاحية: أخلاق، الخلود، الخيال العلمي، النظرية النفعية