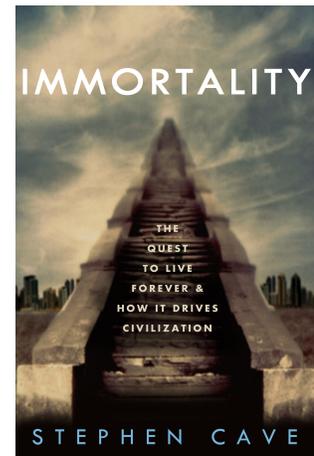
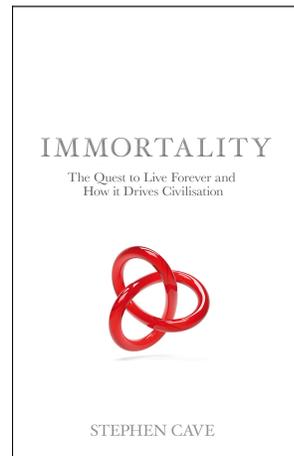


# **IMMORTALITY: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization**

*by Stephen Cave*

(Crown / Biteback) Pages: 336

ISBN: 978-0-307-88491-6



## *About this book*

Who wants to live forever? According to Stephen Cave, we all do—every single one of us. And the evidence is all around. Eluding the Grim Reaper is humanity's oldest and most pervasive wish. It is embedded in our very nature and provides the real driving force behind every aspect of human civilisation: science, agriculture, architecture, religion, the arts, fame and family. From freeing your soul to freezing your brain, all these attempts to defy death fall into four simple categories—the four paths to immortality.

Ranging across continents and cultures, from ancient Egypt to cutting-edge laboratories, Immortality raises the curtain on what compels us humans to keep on going. The four paths are ancient, but science is now showing us—for the first time in human history—whether any of them can really lead to infinity. Cave investigates what it would mean for our lives if they can—but also if they can't. If the paths up the Mount of the Immortals lead nowhere—if there is no getting to the summit—is there still reason to live? And can civilisation survive?

## *Discussion questions*

1. Would you want to live forever? Do you think a never-ending life would lose its meaning? Or be boring?
2. Cave mentions the psychological experiments that show how all worldviews help us to deal with the fear of death ('Terror Management Theory'). Do you think this is true? Does it fit with your experience?
3. Cave argues that there are four paths to immortality. Do you recognise them in our contemporary culture? Are you on any of them?
4. The first 'immortality narrative' that Cave discusses is simply Staying Alive. Do you think science and technology will ever enable us to stay alive forever?
5. If science and technology could allow us to stay alive forever, do you think they should? What ethical considerations do you see on either side of the argument?
6. The second immortality narrative Cave introduces is Resurrection. If God or some omnipotent future scientists could reanimate a corpse—or re-create someone—would it really be the same person as the one who died?
7. Cave's third immortality narrative is the Soul. Do you think we have one? What do you make of the evidence from neuroscience that suggests the human mind and personality are dependent on the brain?

8. The fourth immortality narrative is Legacy. Do you hope to leave one? Would you sacrifice your life for eternal fame as Achilles did? Do you believe you can live on as part of your nation, gene pool, or of Gaia—the sum total of life on Earth?
9. How plausible do you find the ‘Wisdom narrative’ that Cave sketches in chapter ten? Do you think we can accept the fact of mortality?
10. Do you agree with the ‘three virtues’ that Cave argues could help us to cope with mortality? Do you have other suggestions?
11. Are you afraid of death? Why, or why not?
12. In what way has this book changed your beliefs about life and death?

## Reviews

“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*

“An epic inquiry into the human desire to defy death—and how to overcome it...”

Cave traces the histories of each of his four immortality narratives through the world’s great religions, heroes, leaders, thinkers and stories. It’s an epic tale of human folly, featuring a cast of characters including Gilgamesh, Dante, Frankenstein, the King of Qin, Alexander the Great and the Dalai Lama... Cave, a Berlin-based writer and former diplomat, is an admirably clear elucidator, stripping down arguments to their essences and recounting them without any unnecessary jargon... [he] meticulously follows the right path to the right conclusion, rightly stated.”

—Julian Baggini, *Financial Times*

“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*

## About the author

Stephen Cave writes on a wide range of philosophical, ethical and scientific subjects, including for the *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *Wired* and others. He earned a PhD in philosophy from the University of Cambridge, then subsequently spent some years as a British diplomat before taking up writing full time. He now lives with his wife and daughters in Berlin.

