



# Is 78.8 Years Long Enough to Live?

Here's what experts just said in a debate about extreme longevity

By Deborah Quilter

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How long should we live? Is the age of death for the average American (78.8) about right or should science continue trying to expand life expectancies? On February 3, that question was debated by four leading experts for [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) moderated by ABC News correspondent John Donvan in front of a packed house at New York's Kaufman Center.

First to argue in favor of the motion that "Lifespans are long enough" was professor of bioethics and director of the Emory Center for Ethics, [Paul Root Wolpe](#). He said: "We all want to live longer. Maybe even forever. But I think the quest for immortality is a narcissistic fantasy. It's about us. It's about me. It's not about what's good for society."

As Wolpe saw it, the question is not about whether it's possible to extend life but whether it's desirable. He viewed making the pursuit of indefinitely long life a goal in and of itself as wrong-headed. "Will life extension make the world a better place, a kinder place? Has extended life expectancy made it better? I don't think so," Wolpe said.

## The Downside of a Longer Life

Wolpe noted that instead of respecting our elders or turning turn to them for wisdom, increased longevity has led to a fetishization of youth in the West. "If we haven't become more attentive to the wisdom of all these old people we have produced, there's no reason to think if they were 200 or 500 that we would be any more attentive to them," Wolpe said.

He also pointed out that as they get older, people get more conservative and that youth brings in new ideas and innovations. "There is a wisdom to the evolutionary process of letting the older generation disappear," he said, adding that if the World War I, World War II, and Civil War generations were still alive, "do you really think that we would have civil rights and gay marriage in this country?"

Wolpe brought up the issues of overpopulation, over-utilization of resources, strain on social services and the prospect of working for 150 years. "We work for 50, 60, 70 years and then we're tired. We're

still going to be tired if we live to be 200. So the idea that if we live to be 200 we'll work for 150 years and then retire just makes no sense to me."

Further, he asked, what sort of retirement would it be? "We already have retired older people who spend their days nonproductively."

Prolonged life also allows older people to accrue greater wealth, contributing to financial inequality.

### **The Argument for "Curing" Aging**

First to debate against the motion that lifespans are long enough was Aubrey de Grey, chief science officer of SENS Research Foundation and a star of the documentary [The Immortalists](#), whose [TED Talk on extending lifespans to 1,000 years](#) has been viewed by millions.

"I believe that the defeat of aging is the most important challenge facing humanity," he declared. "I'm going to start with this question about the alleged conflict between individual desire and societal good." De Grey compared the issue to people not wanting themselves or anyone else to get Alzheimer's disease. "It's a societal good because we don't like each other to get sick any more than we want to get sick," he said.

To the argument about older people being tired of work, he replied, "People forget that we've got artificial intelligence, and the increase of automation, which is going to completely transform what it means to have a career at all. It's extraordinarily seductive for people to look at the question of some big change that might happen as a result of progress and to presume that nothing else changes."

De Grey maintained that change would happen in a gradual way, so society would have the opportunity to adjust its priorities, like offering more education or taxing people differently to avoid problems that might occur as a result of solving age-related ill health. "We have to ask ourselves, why are we scared of this? Even in the worst case scenario, where for some reason we can't figure out how to distribute the access to these therapies equally or how to stop dictators from living forever or whatever it might be," said de Grey.

But suppose bad things happened? De Grey doesn't believe that future problems are anywhere near as horrifying as the problem we have today. He said: "Let me tell you exactly how bad the problem that we have today actually is. Worldwide roughly 150- to 160,000 people die each day. And more than two-thirds of those people die of aging. It's crazy. In the industrialized world, we're talking more like 90 percent of all deaths. Let's actually do something about it."

### **It's About Choices**

Philosopher [Ian Ground](#) of Newcastle University and Secretary of the British Wittgenstein Society supported the motion that lifespans are long enough. Ground questioned the wisdom of having an indefinitely long life that could be led with no thought about its ending or decline.

He urged us to consider a decision like committing to a certain career, person or place. People can't do everything, marry everybody or live everywhere, Ground said. We become particular people by making those choices, and must recognize that with natural capacities come natural limitations, he added.

And what about pragmatic problems such as what society would do about punishing people for crimes. "How many years do you get for a major felony? Do you stay in jail for 300 years?" Ground asked.

### **Boredom at 110?**

The final panelist, who argued against the motion "Lifespans Are Long Enough," was [Brian Kennedy](#), CEO and president of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging. Kennedy addressed speculation from the previous three speakers about what life might be like if we lived to 150, from how society would change to the prospect of boredom.

"Maybe we're going to be bored. Well, you know, if you ask me: 'Do I want to have cancer at 75? Do I want to have Alzheimer's disease at 85? Or do I want to be bored at 110?' I know which one I'm going to take," said Kennedy.

Kennedy held that instead of treating separate diseases such as high cholesterol, diabetes, cancer and others associated with old age that we treat aging itself, which is the biggest risk factor for all of these diseases. He also favored the idea of compressing morbidity — people are sick for a less time before they die, a notion that's already achievable in animals.

### **The Best Intentions**

In his rebuttal, Wolpe stated that he was not against working on ways to extend life by making people healthier. "My argument is against the idea that our goal is to live longer lives, not that our goal is to live as healthily as we can until we happen to die. That was not the proposition of this debate. The proposition of this debate was about lifespan itself," said Wolpe.

"An intention is very, very important morally," he continued. "Is my goal to live as long as possible for the purpose of living as long as possible or is my goal to live a healthy productive life and die whenever I happen to die? I'm not actually sure we're as far apart as we might seem, but the proposition we were supposed to address was the nature of life extension itself and whether that in and of itself is a worthy goal. That's where I draw the line."

He closed by saying, "When life is infinite, what's its value? Do I want to live forever? Sure. I have that survival instinct that all organisms on this planet have. But I think we're greater than that as human beings — greater than pursuing life for its own sake. Life's beauty and preciousness is partly due to its transience and the bittersweet knowledge that we will all die and that through that transition, other lives will live and flourish. And I think the most noble part of who we are as human beings is exactly that — is our willingness to give our lives, our willingness to discount the value of ourselves for the benefit of others."

But in the end, the team arguing against the motion “Lifespans Are Long Enough” won, according to the audience. [The post-debate score results](#) were 40 percent for the proposition, 49 percent against and 11 percent undecided.