

## Podcast Episode 14: Cryonics part 2

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### Teaser

Hey everyone! Welcome to the new episode of the Life Extension Podcast – technology & magic, society & business. Cryonics is the perfect lens through which to understand current culture. Listen to part 2 to appreciate the role of cryonics from a variety of perspectives: as death ritual in the developing technoscience worldview, as an age-old expression of faith and belief in magic, as speculative investment by capitalist minds, and in pursuing immortality as the ultimate utopian aspiration. Last I will quickly touch on the value of cryonics as a business proposition to consumers.

Cryonics as part of the wider life extension industry has made an offer to us as consumers: deep-freezing and storage of our dead bodies with the hope to be reanimated in the future through scientific methods. This second part looks at cryonics from a cultural perspective, also touching shortly on business and organization.

### Ethics

There are voices claiming that cryonics creates false hopes and exploits vulnerabilities (Hendricks 2015). But maybe there is more to cryonics than just selling snake oil, although most scientists claim that reanimation is impossible. Dying people and their families are paying a fee for the preservation of hope and love, or for coping with death – all very human qualities. Who has the heart to accuse grieving people that they can't let go. It is the compassionate gesture to let them do what they need. Even when this leads to controversy, e.g. in the case of a 14 years old terminally ill girl who won a court battle for the right to be frozen after her death against the will of her parents.

### Cryonics as death ritual shaped by the culture of technoscience

So let's ask ourselves as consumers why we should subscribe to the offer of cryonics, although from the point of view of current science the chance of reanimation is speculative in the extreme. OK, there is Pascal's wager as a philosophical gamble that revival from a cryopreserved state would be more likely than after the crematorium. But what else is there, and how do people tick who actually do it?

It is probably easy to agree that in general dying involves deep anxieties. People do not just become dead and that's it. We as conscious individuals, as well as everyone else who knows us, must inevitably learn to cope with our death – for psychological purposes of all involved, but

also to fix ruptures in the social tissue caused by our disappearance. We usually perform this coping and repairing work through death rituals, a fundamental human practice in all human societies and throughout history, which has been well described by the rich anthropological and historical literature. Any death ritual is performed within the framework of a particular worldview held by current society or social subgroup, and mostly involves the promise of an after-life. It is therefore fair to say that we ourselves or people related to us have explicit psychological and social needs for a death ritual, which will be chosen and purchased like any other service in a consumer society. This strong demand for death rituals makes the questions of scientific validation irrelevant. There has never been scientific proof that Christians go to heaven either, or that Vikings will feast at the table of Odin. Cryonics is a death ritual, shaped by the culture of technoscience. A particular sort of faith in magic is definitely involved as well, expressed through a variety of cultural forms.

E.g. the similarities of cryonics to the Christian resurrection narrative are obvious, which has led to notions of quasi-religion in the light that most subscribers to cryonics call themselves atheists (Swan 2019). Religious aspects consist nevertheless in practitioners' faith, as well as in the way how cryonics is transcending death (Dein 2021). Beliefs and rituals were structured in any society in some institutionalized form, usually by religious organisations. In the modern world Science has taken over the role to provide ultimate explanations. It should not come as a surprise that old beliefs in resurrection are resurfacing, this time shaped by the language of modern science and technology. Existentialism is replaced by techno culture, a "technological fictionalization of death" (Ilnicki 2018).

To the outsider cryonics beliefs sometimes appear merely as science-fiction, e.g. the idea of reviving with a rejuvenated body. Some cryonics subscribers are certainly motivated by the fantasy to become what one imagines. Transhumanists share a belief that humans are able to shape and direct their own evolution, quite differently from traditional notions of divine predestination.

But even if we prefer to call cryonics just an ideology or a culture outside of the domain of religion, faith plays a role in both (Manzocco 2019: 129). As an example for many members Cryonics manifests itself as a speculative investment, an insurance against death in a culture that is based on the values of neo-liberal capitalism (Romain 2010).

There is also the interesting feminist perspective, which regards cryonics and transhumanism as an effort to save the increasingly outdated model of humanism. Humanism was a manifestation of the belief in human exceptionalism, the human as a cultural being separate from nature (Verschuer 2019; see also Haraway, Braidotti). I should mention here that feminist cultural critique often assumes that culture is associated with male and nature with female.

A significant role is also played by the degree of individuation prevalent in any given society. This connects with the imagined importance of personal identities. While a survey of cryonics members in Western societies has allowed the observation of how concerned cryonics members are with their personal identity before and after reanimation (Swan 2019), a Chinese

promotional video for cryonics services is focusing mainly on the grief of family members and their hope to reunite with the deceased as key motivation (Yit 2021).

Immortality is and has always been the ultimate utopia of human imagination. In religious language immortality is associated with eternal bliss or other such desirable states. Russian cosmism and its most famous representative Nikolai Fedorov sees immortality through science as bringing about world peace (Bernstein 2019:3). And Silicon Valley culture hopes for immortal superhumans colonizing space in an extension of the American dream.

### Business

Cryonics may be many things. Among them it is also a business. Its business model is to sell hope in the present without the responsibility to deliver in the future. How good is their proposition to us as potential customers? I would say as a reanimation service the scientific base is too meagre. But as a burial service the proposition is first-class, because it is the only one after all with the option of possible reanimation.

### Organisation, social movement, final take

There are only a few organisations worldwide offering full cryonics services: three in the US, one in Russia, and one in China. Others in Australia and Switzerland are in the planning process. All in all, only a few hundred deceased persons are now in storage, and a few thousands are subscribed members who prepare to undergo cryonics procedures in the future. There are small groups of activists in a number of countries, who are networking through conferences and business cooperation. All this sounds small. But within the larger technoscience framework it carries the seed of a great utopian project with the potential to become part of a major social movement or industry. Until that happens cryonics will remain a temple of worship for the global transhumanist community.

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