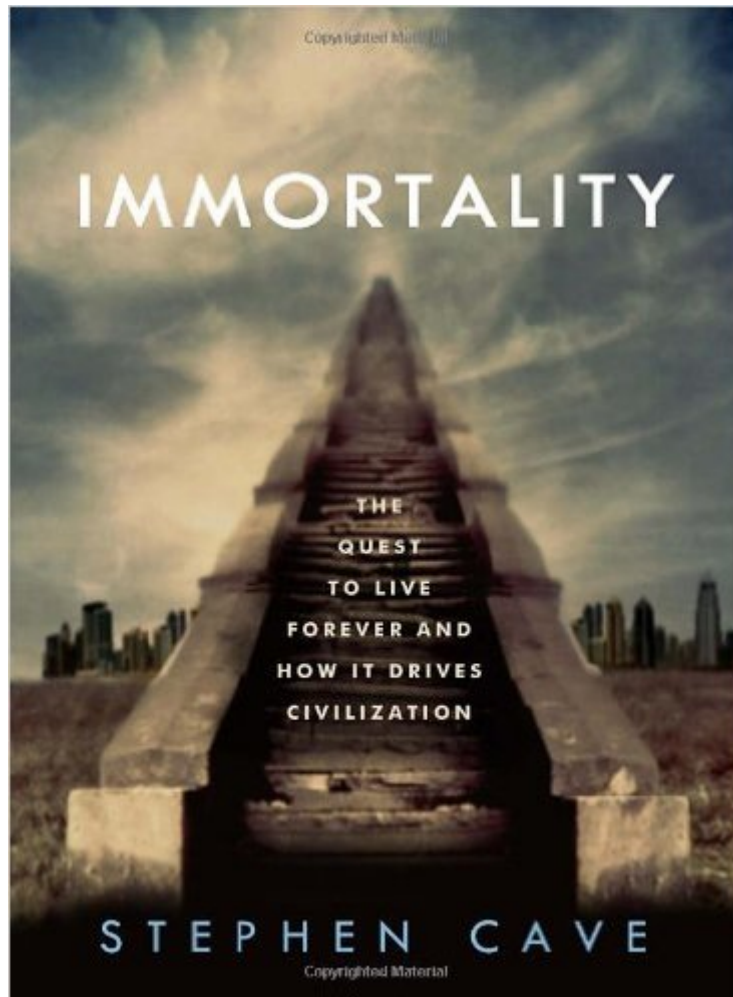


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Immortality: The Quest To Live Forever And How It Drives Civilization



Synopsis

A fascinating work of popular philosophy and history that both enlightens and entertains, Stephen Cave's *Immortality* investigates whether it just might be possible to live forever and whether we should want to. But it also makes a powerful argument, which is that it's our very preoccupation with defying mortality that drives civilization. Central to this book is the metaphor of a mountaintop where one can find the Immortals. Since the dawn of humanity, everyone -- whether they know it or not -- has been trying to climb that mountain. But there are only four paths up its treacherous slope, and there have only ever been four paths. Throughout history, people have wagered everything on their choice of the correct path, and fought wars against those who've chosen differently. While *Immortality* takes the reader on an eye-opening journey from the beginnings of civilization to the present day, the structure is not chronological. Rather it is path driven. As each path is revealed to us, an historical figure serves as our guide. In drawing back the curtain on what compels humans to keep on keeping on, Cave engages the reader in a number of mind-bending thought experiments. He teases out the implications of each immortality gambit, asking, for example, how long a person would live if they did manage to acquire a perfectly disease-free body. Or what would happen if a super-being tried to round up the atomic constituents of all who've died in order to resurrect them. Or what our loved ones would really be doing in heaven if it does exist. Or what part of us actually lives in a work of art, and how long that work of art can survive. Toward the book's end, we're confronted with a series of brain-rattling questions: What would happen if tomorrow humanity discovered that there is no life but this one? Would people continue to care about their favorite sports team, please their boss, vie for the title of Year's Best Salesman? Would three-hundred-year projects still get started? If the four paths up the Mount of the Immortals lead nowhere -- if there is no getting up to the summit -- is there still reason to live? And can civilization survive? *Immortality* is a deeply satisfying book, as optimistic about the human condition as it is insightful about the true arc of history.

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Customer Reviews

Stephen Cave's "Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization" is a well-organized, meticulously argued, elegantly written book. Cave's thesis is to describe what he calls the world's four "Immortality Narratives"--"Staying Alive" (prolonging physical life via medical and technological means), "Resurrection" (the traditional Christian teaching that we are reborn in the same body), "Soul" (the idea that our individual consciousness survives bodily death), and "Legacy" (gaining immortality through great deeds or our descendants). Using the stories of Nefertiti, St. Paul, Dante and Beatrice, the Dalai Lama, Alexander the Great and Gilgamesh to organize his book and argue his points, Cave demonstrates in a clear, intelligent style how each of these narratives informed society and led to great advances in art, literature, law and politics. However, Cave--a philosopher, and thus a logician, by training--also uses scientific evidence to assess the chances of any of the Immortality Narratives being true. He concludes that all of them are almost certainly false. He is particularly scathing toward the idea of the soul, the Immortality Narrative most of the world's residents accept: "(E)verything the soul was supposed to explain--thoughts, consciousness, life itself--has been shown to be dependent on the body. We therefore have every reason to believe that all these faculties--from memory to emotion to the most basic form of awareness--cease when the body ceases. There is simply nothing left over for the soul. As a hypothesis, it is redundant." In place of the soul, Cave offers this as consolation: "We do not linger like uninvited guests at our own funeral, nor are we plunged into the lonely void. We stop.

Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization by Stephen Cave" Immortality" is the fascinating and thought-provoking book about life, death and civilization. It's about humankind's quest by one or a combination of four paths that promise immortality and whether any of these paths can deliver on that promise. Finally, with the newfound wisdom it's about following a philosophy of life that provides us with a meaningful existence. Stephen Cave holds a Ph.D. in

philosophy from Cambridge University and a writer who skillfully provides the reader with a gem of a book that is enlightening and a joy to read. This 338-page book is broken out into four parts that correspond to the four narratives of immortality and a conclusion: Part I. Staying Alive, Part II. Resurrection, Part III. Soul, and Part IV. Legacy. Positives: 1. A well written, accessible book for the masses. 2. A mesmerizing topic: immortality. The author treats the topic with utmost care and respect. 3. A fantastic format that follows logically with the author's overall thesis. 4. The four immortality narratives: Staying Alive, Resurrection, Soul, and Legacy. The entire book revolves around these four main paths. 5. The author clearly presents three main goals upfront and thoroughly succeeds in achieving them. 6. Each chapter begins with an interesting historical vignette in which the author highlights the main topic of the chapter. 7. In the first path of immortality the author goes through a number of examples that clearly show how the determination to stay alive and reproduce is one thing that all life forms have in common. 8. The Morality Paradox. The immortality narratives were created to resolve the paradox. 9.

Stephen Cave's book on Immortality deserves to be read and digested by anyone who sincerely wonders about the possibility of a post-death existence. According to Cave, that would be nearly all of us. Those who have already drawn a conclusion based on whatever belief system they have should stay away, given that they want to preserve their belief system. Cave methodically picks apart then discards each of the four major immortality narratives one by one. However, he may be wrong. His scientific biases show up throughout the book and his materialism assumption is ever-present. I would have preferred an upfront admission of his underlying premise that scientific materialism is the only valid source of knowledge. Like any other unprovable assumption, regardless of how rational it may feel, it requires a large measure of faith in it to move forward with whatever argument one is weaving. While Cave does a nice job of presenting each immortality narrative, at the end it seems that he set up four strawmen in order to knock them down and to present his fifth narrative, the Wisdom Narrative, as the champion. He may not be entirely wrong but it's a bit transparent. That said, it is easy to agree with Cave that the Resurrection Narrative has exhausted any currency it may have once had in our collective cultures. Likewise, it is not difficult to accept the Legacy Narrative as a poor proxy for immortality.

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