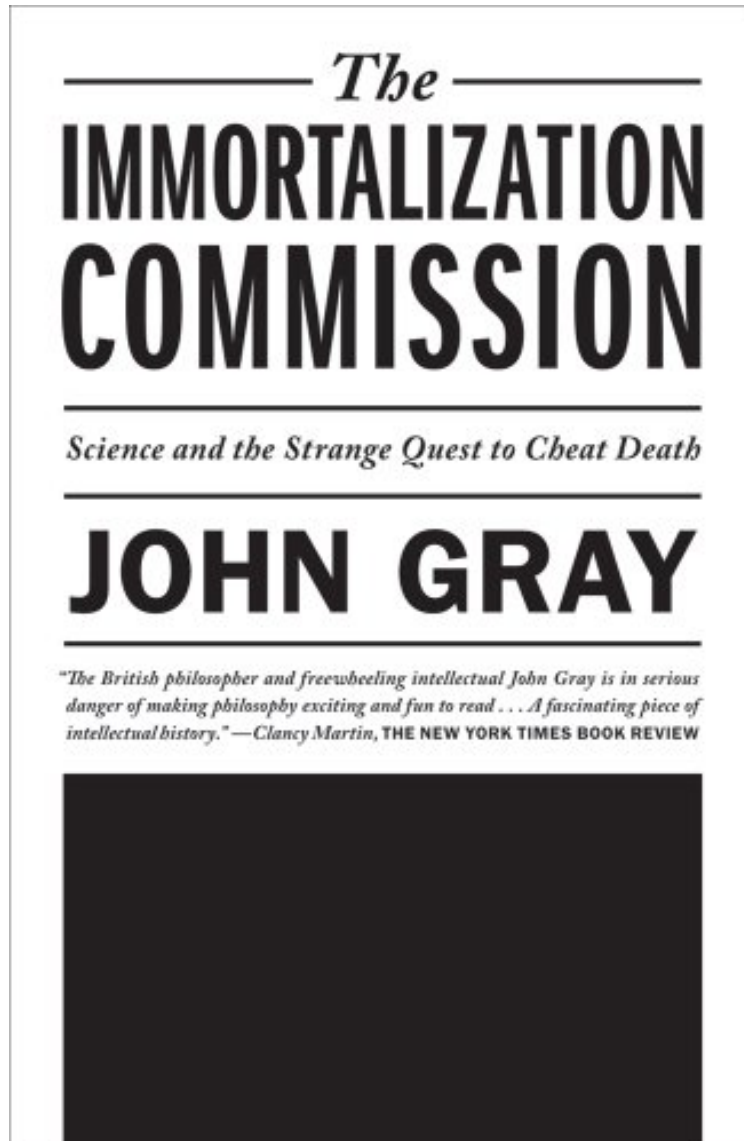


# The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death

John Gray

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#1562123 in Books John Gray 2 2012-04-10 2012-04-10 Original language: English PDF # 1 7.25 x .76 x 4.72l, .52 #File Name: 0374533237288 pages The Immortalization Commission Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death | File size: 76.Mb

**John Gray : The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. another Gray gem

By Eliane Lundberg-Tanaka

Anyone who knows me knows that I have nary a bad word to say about anything Prof. Gray has published from "Straw Dogs" onward: I find his to be an incredibly lucid and relevant voice, which cuts through a suffocating miasma of contemporary cultural studies / philosophy writing. Unlike the majority of philosophical writers entrenched in the publish-or-perish academic environment, Gray's ideas themselves remain challenging and pertinent enough that he doesn't have to do hide them behind impenetrable walls of effusive verbiage and ephemeral jargon. What I especially like about Gray is that he treats all species of interesting thought as having critical value, not limiting himself to readings of the work by fellow researchers in his field: that is to say, J.G. Ballard (a regularly quoted Gray favorite) is treated in his writings as a cultural critic on par with, say, Bruno Latour. By sticking to his guns as such, he has even earned the respect of people much closer to this academic milieu I mention (e.g. Slavoj Zizek) and provides a tremendous inspiration for anyone who wishes to write on human nature without genuflecting before the small handful of "acceptable" Continental thinkers and theorists. So, that said, this current book is no deviation from that standard of excellence. Gray states his case calmly and convincingly, and - as was done in both "Straw Dogs" and "Black Mass" - ends the often pessimistic ride with a surprisingly uplifting realization that mortality is not the curse it appears to be (of course, you'll have to read it in his far more erudite words to appreciate it, and I won't spoil it for you here.) This book reads very much like a volume-length extension of a small episode in "Straw Dogs," wherein Gray cataloged a number of ridiculous beliefs among Soviet leadership dealing with perpetual progress and a fully-automated utopia. His discussion of the so-called "God builders" not only succeeds in showing how secular creeds have attempted to keep alive religious faith's promise of immortality, but shows the full extent to which bona fide religious imagery was rehabilitated in an atheistic culture (check, for example, the esoteric origins of the design of Lenin's tomb, as Gray describes it.) You're unlikely to find trenchant criticism of Marxist policy such as this anywhere else within the academic world- Gray unflinchingly states that "for Marx, the natural world had no intrinsic worth...only by being imprinted with human meaning could the earth have value," and this critique of short-sighted anthropocentrism is long overdue. Some of the books coming out of amusingly named "posthumanities" departments attempt to bring anthropocentrism down a notch while still supporting Marxian modes of thought, and Gray easily points out the hypocrisy inherent in embracing both the "otherness" of the natural world and an ideology that is totally inimical to it. That said, illumination of Marxism's attempts at salvation is not the only thing on tap here, as the book deals a good deal with 19th-century British variants on trying to make consciousness survive physical death (in this case, at a time when the post-Darwin field of scientific naturalism was positing theistic belief as just another evolutionary mechanism, one which had no grounding in objective truth.) In fact, this comprises the first half of the book, building up chronologically to the "God Builders" episode. Gray's tour of "automatic writing" techniques, seances and other means of crossing death's threshold without actually dying, is tragic. Yet it makes us empathize with their practitioners rather than merely laughing at or mocking their folly. He is wise to remind us that these modes of paranormal experimentation are born out of things we all experience - the loss of loved ones - and that people adopting these practices are not a homogeneous mass of crazed individuals wishing to become as gods. A series of respectful period photographs of these individuals are included, seeming to reinforce Gray's empathy for them (this is the first title of his I know of that uses illustrations of any kind.) All told, this book does not break that much new ground for Gray's thought, yet it provides a much more detailed illustration of ideas that he has touched on in the last decade. Readable, at times engrossing, and never inessential.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Profound and fascinating, with occasional digressions

By D. D.

This book's theme of science as a means to escape mortality provides a very amenable platform for John Gray's ideas, as anyone familiar with him would guess. It's cut into three distinct but related sections. Of the three, the last section is by far the shortest, but the nearest to my expectations. I'd been interested in the John Gray perspective on Ray Kurzweil, whose ilk and ideology seem to me indicative of the times. There was little explicit examination of that but what there was was articulate and thought provoking, especially in the context of the main portions of the book. The first section is on Victorian period elites seeking knowledge of the afterlife by a bizarre interweaving of occult rituals with scientific posturing and psychology. Having only read Heresies, which compiles articles written for The New Statesman, I found Gray's writing more elegant here than before. His biographical renderings of F.W.H. Myers, Henry Sidgwick and Arthur Balfour were usually quite interesting, if not exactly riveting. They did serve to provide a human dimension to all of the idealizing about life, death and afterlife. That the occult was popular with many Victorians is common knowledge now. Their methods were almost comical, of course, but at times they were heartbreakingly earnest as well. I found myself having more sympathy for them the stranger and more desperate their quest became. Gray examines their ideas and their mission articulately and respectfully, never dismissing them out of hand simply because they were silly or unconventional. What comes clear is that, behind all the seances and automatic writing there is a human longing quite universal and not at all abstruse. The second section explores similar themes of conquering death through technology and science as religion in Communist Russia. I found this section interesting but also rather digressive at times. The soviet mission of progress at all costs certainly had relevant lessons for Gray's topic here, but the biographical bits about H.G. Wells and especially Moura Budberg seemed of dubious relevance despite their being interesting characters. There was a kind of

meander through many of the perils of living in Russia during this period and the crimes of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky and others. I thought this was hardly necessary since it was of only cursory relation to the central focus of the book, and since it's all been explored so much more thoroughly in many, many other books. The kind of ideology that Gray discusses here certainly has its most extreme historical example in this period, but there were many other factors involved in these atrocities that can hardly be explored in this book. I got the feeling he lingered on certain bits here just to give the book a little more meat. The last section was a short but superb conclusion in which Gray expresses his perspective and ideas more eloquently than in anything I'd previously read of his. I have my particular bones of contention with his philosophical arguments, but this is hardly the place to get into that. One never agrees entirely with any writer, and it's usually beneficial to be at odds on at least a few things. The two previous stories present humanity desperately seeking certainty and control, loathe to tolerate long any conditions that undermine the illusion of either. We may feel rather distant from them in the 21st century, but here Gray reminds us that the same messianic view of technology is alive and well today in many new forms. The methods may have changed, but the mission bears a frightening resemblance to the justifications that spawned the horrific nightmares of the past. In the quest for absolute control over nature and fate, the human race has proven itself capable of terrors our ancestors would never have imagined. Gray also makes the excellent point, so often ignored or downplayed by the new atheists, that science and progress have been just as guilty of engendering these terrors as religion ever was. Perhaps more so, when one considers that the greatest calamities of the twentieth century (which also happen to be the greatest in recorded history) happened at the hands of progressive regimes. I've often felt that if our progress in the sciences demonstrates one thing for sure, it's the ultimate ignorance and finitude of human beings. Every new truth discovered undermines a previous one, and yet we remain so sure of ourselves. Contradiction and even ignorance are nothing to be ashamed of, once you recognize how unavoidable they are. In fact, the recognition of it allows for humility, and the retention of a sense of mystery and curiosity. The last portion of this book quotes several beautiful poems, and contains wonderful prose by Gray himself in places. It reminds us that, as much as death may make life appear absurd at times, life without death would be at least as absurd. In a way, it's that very end that imbues our lives with so much of their beauty and their novelty. Here, Gray says it better than I - "Without seasons nothing ripens and drops to the ground, the leaves never change their colors nor the sky its vacant blue. Nothing dies, so nothing is born." 4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Not What I Expected By Book Fanatic This book is broken into two main parts. The first covers a period of Victorian England and the paranormal researchers in that period who were trying to prove that something continues after death by contact with the dead in some spiritual realm. The second was mostly about communism and the scientific state. It was only the last 30 pages titled "Sweet Mortality" where Gray really gets deep into the subject matter and then it is too short. Here's the thing. Gray obviously has a powerful grasp of his subject matter and I found the historical analysis and ideas engaging and interesting. The problem was the vast majority of the text was historical and not the analysis of immortality that I was expecting. So for what it is, it is pretty good. However I would warn prospective buyers to be careful. You don't get really much of a critic of the current scientific search for immortality. It is there a bit, but not much.

A Globe and Mail Best Books of the Year 2011 Title At the heart of human experience lies an obsession with the nature of death. Religion, for most of history, has provided an explanation for human life and a vision of what comes after it. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such beliefs came under relentless pressure as new ideas from psychiatry to evolution to communism seemed to suggest that our fate was now in our own hands: humans could cease to be animals, defeat death, and become immortal. In *The Immortalization Commission*, the acclaimed political philosopher and critic John Gray takes a brilliant and frightening look at humankind's dangerous striving toward a scientific version of immortality. Probing the parallel faiths of Bolshevik "God-builders," who sought to reshape the planet and psychical researchers, who believed they had evidence of a nonreligious form of life after death, Gray raises fascinating questions about how such beliefs threaten the very nature of what it means to be human. He looks to philosophers, journalists, politicians, charlatans, and mass murderers who all felt driven by a specifically scientific and modern worldview and whose revolt against death resulted in a series of experiments that ravaged whole countries. An urgent examination of Darwin's post-religious legacy, *The Immortalization Commission* is an important work from "one of Britain's leading public intellectuals" (*The Wall Street Journal*).

From *Publishers Weekly* Man's dream of immortality is a foolish, sinister nightmare, argues this gloomy, tendentious meditation on scientific hubris. Gray (*Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*), a professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, examines two oddly paired movements of deluded immortalists: the Victorian Society for Psychical Research sought scientific evidence of an afterlife in the automatic writing of mediums, and the God-builders, an elite circle of Bolsheviks (such as Maxim Gorky) who believed socialism could re-engineer humanity to abolish death. From these studies, Gray distills intriguing insights into Darwinism's impact on philosophy and the similarities between religion and the scientific worldview; he finishes with a nakedly scornful, fatalistic attack on human efforts to avoid extinction, both individual (cryonic preservation) and collective (antiglobal warming).

initiatives). The historical underpinnings of Gray's argument are rickety, especially the confused God-builder section, which swirls pointlessly around the story of H.G. Wells and a beautiful Russian spy. His argument that Soviet atrocities flowed from a mad longing to transcend death is free-associated rather than reasoned, and his implicit yoking of dotty British psychics with Stalin's executioners reveals little. (Apr.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. Beautifully conceived and executed . . . Deftly blending philosophy and history, [The Immortalization Commission] rips along with the narrative drive of the most vivid fiction. Malcolm Jones, *The Daily Beast* A chilling reflection on the post-Darwinian world. Jill Lepore, *The New Yorker* The British philosopher and freewheeling intellectual John Gray is in serious danger of making philosophy exciting and fun to read . . . Gray captures the hilarious audacity and absurdity of the search for immortality, one that could be conceived only by such charmingly quixotic creatures as human beings . . . A fascinating piece of intellectual history. Clancy Martin, *The New York Times* John Gray is a connoisseur of human idiocy. In this brief, modest-seeming yet profound book he makes his most compelling plea yet for man to come to his senses and stop dreaming of immortality, for himself and for the earth. John Banville, *The Guardian* Enthralling. . . John Gray's superb meditation on our desire for immortality makes for an enthralling read. Richard Holloway, *The Observer* An engrossing double-act play about scientific hubris. Thomas Meaney, *The Wall Street Journal* A core strength of this engrossing book lies in his readiness to take absurd endeavours seriously and to consider morally complex individuals sympathetically. Marek Kohn, *The Independent* The author is undoubtedly one of the most important and insightful polemicists currently writing in English. Like most of Gray's work, this book is filled with diverting anecdotes and ironic asides, yet swells to a powerful philosophical conclusion . . . An engaging additional chapter in its author's long-running campaign to expose the quasi-religious and magical thinking that underpins our visions of progress. Stephen Cave, *The Financial Times* About the Author John Gray is the author of many critically acclaimed books, including *Black Mass*, *Straw Dogs*, and *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*. A regular contributor to *The New York Times* of Books, he is Emeritus Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics.