

Book Symposium: The Physics of Immortality by Frank Tipler

SOMETHING TO OFFEND EVERYONE: TIPLER'S VISION OF IMMORTALITY

by Donald G. York

Abstract. Frank Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality* provides abundant cause for intellectual offense—including challenges to physics, to theology, and, seemingly, to common sense. Few philosophical conundrums remain unaddressed. Still, the book is stimulating and well presented.

Keywords: immortality; information; Omega Point; resurrection.

The Physics of Immortality by Frank Tipler (1994) is a wonderful, well-written book with something to offend everyone. Subtitled *Modern Cosmology and the Resurrection of the Dead*, the book has as its goal the derivation of what Tipler calls the Omega Point theory. This theory postulates the likelihood that all (or most) individuals will be resurrected and the necessity that life itself will continue until the end time when the universe collapses.

There is abundant material here for intellectual offense. Many readers will find it hard to accept the thesis that what we mean by *life* includes computer-based copies of ourselves. Some will think it absurd to believe that our biosphere will expand, through information technology, to include the entire universe and that intelligence will be able to continue existence by organizing the gravitational energy freed by the collapse of the universe. Tipler's view that there is no life other than our own in the universe will seem offensively narrow-minded to some. Christians of various persuasions will find the resurrection of which Tipler speaks to have only an incomplete

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relationship to mainstream ideas of Resurrection and will be insulted at what seems like an assault on, not an explanation of, faith. Theologians and physicists alike will ponder deeply the prime conclusion of the book that theology is now a branch of physics. I can only speculate on what my colleagues will think of Tipler's use of the Omega Point theory to derive the mass of the top quark, a value recently confirmed by two independent groups at Fermilab. He has also predicted the mass of the Higgs particle.

In weaving his fascinating and careful story, Tipler addresses a variety of philosophical questions, to which he assigns answers:

- What separates humans from other life?
- What is the meaning of quantum mechanics?
- What are the differences among matter, mind, spirit, and soul?
- In a universe with an omniscient God, how can humans have free will?
- What are the relationships among God, Christ, and Holy Spirit?
- Did Jesus rise from death?
- Has life made progress?
- What does it mean to pray?
- Where does evil come from?
- What are Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven?

Part of the reason that many will be offended rather than convinced is that the book lays its own seeds of doubt. First, the word *proof* is used liberally; yet, in the final chapters Tipler makes clear that the basic theory is yet to be proved. Second, the book purports to apply the integrated wisdom of physics to theology; yet all physicists know that the excitement of physics is in what we do not know and in arguing about the things on which we disagree. Finally, Tipler has selected numerous appropriate quotes from physicists, theologians, and philosophers that seem to serve his purposes too well.

The book ranks number two on my list of stimulating books I have encountered. Much of the philosophy I read and pondered in college came back to me as I read this book, and I found myself excited by the prospect of what waited for me in the next chapter. The material is explained well, is well referenced and documented, and is broad in the sense of relating the theme of resurrection to many religions.

After reading this book, readers who are not in physics or theology will wonder why not.

REFERENCES

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