

Al-Biruni, Bartok, Bruch, Glazunov, Laennec, Morgagni, Patanjali, Xunzi, Vieuxtemps.

These are all names of accomplished, in many cases pivotal, figures in the history of their respective fields of music, eastern philosophy, and medicine. I don't want to hold myself out as any type of standard, but I only learned of these important figures in the past year and still could probably do no more than give a sentence summary of their life or beliefs. Even their greatest accomplishments, where they did the best they could at their time, have been surpassed and even contradicted. What type of fame is that? How many others are equally talented and have fallen into the near dustbin of history?

Even worse, when I study someone that everyone's heard of, such as Jesus, I find that people disagree on nearly everything that he said or did. Seriously, the history of Christianity is basically the history of a myriad of interpretations of Jesus, disputes about his life, his message, and whether he was unique or just another of the apocalyptic prophets in Jerusalem. He said or didn't say he was the son of God, he said or didn't say he would inaugurate the kingdom of God, he preached that one should follow the Jewish law or he fulfilled it and started a new one. If you have an idea, you can probably make Jesus have said it. The same is true of other religious figures, both in the east and west.

Try this experiment: give your parent's first and last names. Now, grandparents. Now, great-grandparents. Now great-great-grandparents. Most people find that three-generation reach-back is as far as they can go, and often can only remember nicknames of their grandparents. I am pretty sure me-maw didn't go by me-maw when she was courting her husband. The implications are pretty clear that if I had grandchildren they wouldn't remember me either. At best, they would have a story about what some otherwise unnamed grandfather did. I will most likely be remembered as a biographer once said about Haydn's ancestors: "They were born, they lived, and they died. There is nothing more to say. "

For me, there's a clear lesson in all of this: descendants will forget us and even if they remember us they will most likely reduce us to a single sentence, and still probably get that wrong.

If immortality is out, what does it mean to be a good person in this life for this life?

3 January 2014