

Axiology and Semantics: Expiration Dates

by strannikov

While we yet live and have breath left in our bones and intestinal fortitude in our blood, we can and perhaps should thank God that inert matter will outlast us all.

I am being more serious than a heart attack, an aneurysm, renal failure, peritonitis, and sepsis combined: I am being completely serious.

Our scientists, this reigning class and generation of scientists in laboratory and field and university, experimentalists and theorists alike, at work on whatever investigations occupy their time and attention, are not to be utterly believed.

Our media establishments, with their daily, hourly, and quarter-hourly assurances about what “news” is, what “current events” consist of, are lying through their entertainment and journalistic teeth.

Our politicians are perhaps more honest than most are willing to concede: they, at least, dutifully perform as the circus ringmasters they are.

What I mean is this: though making a substantive bet on the outcome is utterly impossible and while predictions and prophecies are as odious as they can be, still—can anyone alive long enough to read this actually, really, truly believe that any of this will matter in four hundred million years?

Four hundred million years, I admit, is an arbitrary figure, but it is large enough to accommodate my point: none of this will matter in four hundred million years.

Let the quibbling begin: none of this will matter in two hundred million years. None of this will matter in one hundred million years, in fifty million years, in five million years, in a million years, and

quite very likely, none of this will matter in one hundred thousand years, perhaps possibly maybe not even in fifty thousand years.

Inert matter shows every capacity and ability for outlasting us all. I am no scientist, even less of a chemist, nevertheless, apart from hydrogen and oxygen, one of my most favorite elements is thorium. Thorium enchants and intrigues me: it was the first element I found to have (in its isotope 232) a half-life older than the universe itself, a fact which still perplexes me, likely because I am no chemist and even less of a physicist.

Thorium will outlast us all, and though no one credibly imputes intelligence or will, ingenuity or sophistication, glamour or style, wit or charm to thorium, it will outlast us all (at least isotope 232 looks safe).

In my seriousness I am not making the case that none of “this” (our contemporaneity, our historical moment) “matters”. I say only: in four hundred million years none of this will matter. Depositories for nuclear waste have been and continue to be posted with warning signs about the danger of approach: but those signs will be as useless in a hundred thousand years as the cosmic greeting plaques adorning the Pioneer space probes and the cosmic calling cards carried out of our solar system recently by the Voyager space probes. (Is there really any chance that the Pioneer probes or the Voyager probes will ever be seen again by anyone, detected by anyone, intercepted by anyone or anything other than hurtling interstellar debris or, millions of years hence, some hungry stars?)

In four hundred million years none of this will matter. In two hundred million years. In one hundred million years. In fifty million years. In five million years. In a million years. Quite very likely, none of this will matter in one hundred thousand years or even in fifty thousand years.

If in the distant reaches of time and space, where inert thorium (at least isotope 232) will continue to thrive and endure, nothing of what transpires here today will matter: what can we really say, therefore—substantively, credibly, accurately, truthfully, significantly—could possibly matter about today? What can we say?

What—apart from the glaring fact that our species is just as mortal as each and every one of its individual members? Is “carpe diem” relevant in such circumstances? What can “today” mean (today) when it will not enjoy and will not be able to enjoy identical “meaning” four hundred million years (and less) hence?

How happy those anomalocaridids swimming and sleeping soundly in the Burgess Shale! The rest is vanity, the rest of that is silence, and the rest of that is purely absurd, if it can enjoy even that much significance.

Geologists may comfort us about the strict impossibility, but if the Almighty has anything to do with what sediments we wind up frolicking in, if we're at all lucky or the beneficiaries of divine solicitude, we'll settle comfortably into deposits of thorium.

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