Some Questions from the Edge of Immortality

Nectome, a startup headed by two former artificial intelligence researchers, is serious about immortality. They're touting a process for preserving the human brain at the point of death (by killing the patient with the preservative), with the next (unfortunately still notional) step being to "re-start" that brain as computer software.

The quest for immortality is as old as humankind, and we've publicly agonized over its implications since at least as far back as the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* 200 years ago. As science seemingly moves us closer to the goal, especially if the finish line consists of transplanting brain functions from the body to a computer-generated reality, the questions become more important.

What or who is a "person" — a human being whom we recognize as having rights that ought not to be violated?

Is a physical body a necessary component of "personhood," or would a mind running on a computer likewise enjoy the right to not be robbed or killed, the right to own property, to vote, etc.?

If so, are those rights contingent upon the mind being the transplanted brain schematic of a former physical human, or would artificial intelligences qualify?

Would the transplanted mind of a former physical human be the same person as that human, or a different entity altogether? And what if it becomes possible for a human to "upload" his or her mind to a computer without dying? Is that second mind the first person's property, or a new "person" in its own right?

If the process is cheap, might the state ask — or even require — retirees to "upload" and live forever like kings, at far lower cost to taxpayers than the existing Social Security system? Or might private sector actors offer that option in return for the signing over of government or private retirement benefits? Might life insurance companies offer policies that pay for uploaded immortality instead of paying out death claims to one's survivors?

If the rent isn't paid on server space, electricity and computing power for your brain, can you be evicted — and thereby, in effect, killed? Or will there be the equivalent of "low-income housing" for indigent minds, running on slower servers and without as much resource-hogging cool stuff built into the living environment?

What is this possible future, really? Utopia or dystopia? Freedom or slavery? Reality or self-deception? Whatever it is, it's coming. Time to put on our thinking caps.