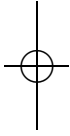




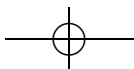



Introduction



The old are expected to be philosophical. This is commonly little more than a wish that a life nearing the end of its possible biological span should be reconciled to the proximity and inevitability of death—a wish that has its famous refuseniks (‘Do not go gentle’, ‘I stood in rage’¹). But having a philosophy of death, or feeling the desirability of such a philosophy in others, is not the same thing as having a philosophy of old age. When Socrates claimed that it was the task of philosophy to teach us how to die, he gave it, one writer has suggested, an ‘easier’ remit than teaching us what it means to be old.² The questions raised by death are familiar, readily framed if not readily answered: is death just the ceasing of biological functions? (if so, what *counts* as the ceasing of biological functions?) what does it mean for our experience of life that we know it to be lived towards death? is there a sphere of transcendence beyond our being in the here and now? Old age offers less well-established terrain: isn’t it just more of the same? ‘what we’ve been doing all along only with more decades added on’.³

There have, of course, been philosophers of old age. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, Bacon, Beauvoir are the names most often thought of. But, in the main, philosophy—leaving aside medical ethics, for the moment—has been far more interested in ‘mortal questions’.⁴ Living to be old has historically been seen as exceptional, the questions it raises supererogatory to the main arguments to be had about lives, and goods, and values. In keeping with that perception, the bibliography of philosophical writing about old age is weighted far more heavily towards essays, letters, paragraphs, aphorisms, than towards books. And yet this literature might still be expected to have had greater influence than it has had on how interested people (we are all, in theory, interested) have thought about age and ageing. Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse* (1970) is the exemplary as well as extreme case.⁵ Its view of old age as a major constraint on the freedom of the subject marked an important redirection of her thinking, in *Le*



Deuxième Sexe (1949), about the extent to which human beings can confer meaning on their own lives. But references to *La Vieillesse* in subsequent writing about old age have been far fewer than one would expect.⁶ When her name does appear, Beauvoir is characteristically treated as a political agitator on behalf of the old (a problematic one, given her emphasis on decline) and as a memoirist and social commentator on old age, but not as a philosopher, with a specific conception of what a life is, of how lives accrue and sustain meaning, and of philosophy's relationship to politics.⁷

This book is an attempt to show what might be required if we are to become more seriously philosophical about old age. My main premise is that, when we think about old age, our thinking rests on larger, but usually tacit, assumptions about what a life is, what a person is, what a *good* life is, what social justice is, and much else besides. Though there have been important philosophies of old age, for the most part philosophy has treated the last phase of life as of minor importance. If we want to think deeply about old age, we therefore, I argue, do better to look to broader claims about lives and persons and values, and even about thinking itself (what it is, what it is for, when in our lives we do it best). In other words, while this is a book about thinking *about* old age, it is as fundamentally a book about thinking *with* old age.

One difficulty in the way of doing this well, at once an obstacle and a potential stimulus, is that what philosophers and non-philosophers have had to say about old age has, in essence, changed very little since classical antiquity. Thinking about old age has always tended towards extremes of optimism and pessimism, often in close conjunction. For every conventional negative association of 'old age' there is an equally recognizable counter-association: rage/serenity; nostalgia/detachment; folly/wisdom; fear/courage; loss of sexual powers and/or opportunities/liberation from sex; loss of the capacity or right to labour/release from a long life of labour. To grow old may be, in Montaigne's phrase, a 'privilege' and 'special favour'; it may also be (Montaigne again), a 'withering' and 'languishing'.⁸ If we are fortunate, personally, socially, culturally, we will have cause to value it for bringing us wider experiences (more rewarding leisure, new friendships and family relationships); we may believe, and others may even confirm, that it has brought us greater wisdom; on the other hand, it may seem to erode much or all that has defined a good life—the 'alacrity', as Flaubert called it,⁹ our health, the social and professional roles that in the past have brought respect

and authority, the friendships and family relationships that are dependent upon the health and longevity of others as well as ourselves.

One of the questions that the philosophy and literature of old age therefore require us to ask is how far conventional attitudes are rooted in reality, how far in prejudice and fear. Their relative weighting has been responsive to historical pressure and to acts of individual will, but the terms themselves, and the structures of expectation they express, can seem exceptionally *un*responsive. They are not definitions of old age, but they are stubborn attendants on it. They have the irritant persistence of banalities, the plausibility as well as the reductiveness of cliché. The negatives have been more often in the ascendancy than the positives, and most difficult to budge when they have involved the perception of bodily and mental decline. They offend most recent writers about ageing, especially when they start to look like biological essentialism,¹⁰ but, given their historical and psychological persistence, and the degree to which many of them are subjects of common observation and experience, they are not dismissible as mere stereotypes.

‘Old age’ is defined here as the later years of a long life, when there is an inevitable and irreversible deterioration in the organism as a consequence of its age. The traditional and still common locution is ‘past one’s prime’. I assume familiarity with the fact that, in common usage, ‘old’ is a highly flexible term—that it has been applied at various historical periods and in various contexts across the age range from early adulthood to the furthest limit, real and imagined, of the human lifespan. That flexibility is in many respects unhelpful: ‘old’ embraces too large a portion of the human lifespan, and is semantically overweighted towards ‘old old age’. Indeed, ‘age’ is commonly synonymous with ‘old age’.¹¹ Refinements of terminology, such as ‘old old age’, ‘late age’, ‘late life’, and, in earlier periods, ‘green old age’, are sometimes resorted to, but they betray the basic poverty of our vocabulary here, and they are often impediments rather than aids to social and political reform. Our sense of who is old to a degree shifts back as we ourselves age: a 76-year-old may look old to a 56-year-old, but relatively young to a 96-year-old. And our relation to our own age is particularly complex. It is often described as bifurcated: unless life has severely strained a person’s emotional or physical resources, most people report that they feel younger than they ‘actually are’. ‘Multiply split or layered’ would be more accurate than ‘complex’. The age we feel is not necessarily the same as our calendrical age, nor is it the same as how we are perceived, or how we register ourselves being perceived by others.

But to say that our perceptions of age are to a degree age-dependent, to a degree subjective, and to a degree culturally conditioned, is not to say that they are only those things. Much of what makes old age interesting and problematic as a subject for philosophy and literature stems from the fact that it is a necessity, and that—very roughly speaking—we recognize age-related deterioration when we see it, both in others and in ourselves. Unless we die first, it is in the nature of time and our condition as biological creatures that we shall grow old. Something can be done to slow or conceal the signs of ageing, and politically we can, and should, contest the ill effects of being labelled ‘old’ in advance of any serious decline in capacity, but the consequences of ageing chromosomes, and the ‘wear and tear’ of being alive, are ineluctable.¹² This is why, for Aristotle, old age was separately a subject for ethics and for physics: the behaviour and treatment of the old were ethical problems but ageing itself was a non-ethical question of the human mechanism—as he put it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ‘an act neither voluntary nor involuntary’ (*EN* 1135b1). And yet, old age is also not simply a necessity. Not everyone lives to be old, and not everyone who does so experiences the physical or social effects of ageing in the same ways or to the same degree. In that sense, we may view old age as a contingency, though of a rather impure sort. It is not just a matter of circumstances coming to the agent from outside him or herself; nor is it just a matter of subjectivity, psychology, and feelings. It involves both, but is, strictly, neither.

The questions prompted by old age’s oddly indeterminate status in our lives (at once inevitable, and not at all inevitable) and by the intuitive character of many of our responses to it, are fundamental to how we think about the meaning and value of lives generally, but in recent writing about ageing they are often brushed aside in favour of demonstrating the perniciousness of ageism. I take that perniciousness as read, and it is not my subject. The problems I am interested in are more fundamental: they have to do with what we think is the relation between a long life and a good life; with what we think it means to be a person; with whether and for how long identity persists; and with how our sense of all these things inheres in our conceptual structures for defining goods and values and justice and knowledge. The definition of ‘old age’ given above is, it should be clear, non-moral, but it raises a number of questions for moral philosophy: does length of life have implications for the formal or psychological integrity of a life? does it alter the capacity for virtue? does it alter the value of a

life? if so, to and for whom, and under what circumstances? It also raises questions for other kinds of philosophy: does old age have any implications for rational, as opposed to moral, thinking about lives? are thinking about metaphysics and thinking about old age at all connected in the history of philosophy and/or literature, and if so why? And what happens when questions like these run up against scepticism about the prior assumptions they involve: about, for example, the validity of the notion of life stages, about the integrity of personhood, about comparability between or within lives, and about metaphysics itself?

Given the ongoing need to challenge negatively prejudicial perceptions of old age, some may think it an unhelpful, even retrograde move to make philosophy and literature the focus of this book. Neither philosophy nor literature is especially rich in positive responses to age. Even in very recent years, representations of old age in fiction, drama, and poetry have been symptomatic of a culture (in Kathleen Woodward's phrase) 'profoundly ambivalent, and primarily negative, about old age'.¹³ It is noticeable how often black comedy has been the mode of choice, at once mocking and confirming long-standing prejudices. Deborah Moggach's *These Foolish Things* (2004), imagining the outsourcing of care of the British aged to Bangalore, participates in a long tradition of comedy and satire running back from Kingsley Amis's *Ending Up* (1974) with its septuagenarian commune, 'Tupenny Hapenny Cottage', and Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959), in which Death makes a civil phone call to his elderly victims shortly before he strikes ('Remember, you must die'), to the drama and verse satires and epigrams of classical antiquity.¹⁴

Literature at least has a prominent and ongoing tradition of engagement with old age. Unlike much of the writing that has been re-examined, over many decades now, with a focus on the implicit representation of gender or race or class, the literary works on old age discussed in this book are mainly and explicitly about being or growing old. It should not, in theory, be necessary to bring the subject out from the shadows. It is therefore the more surprising that so few critics have read these works *for* what they have to say about old age. Remarkably little of the vast literature on *King Lear*, for example, says much or anything about old age. Critics have tended to think of that play, and most of the works discussed in this book, as being about more general subjects (the human condition, man's relation with nature) or more specific ones (anger, love, kingship, English history). Similarly, they have often, and not without justification, seen literary depictions of old

age as metaphors or symbols for other things: the status of art, the promise or otherwise of immortality (late Yeats, raging against the impermanence of the flesh and seeking the eternity of art; not-quite-so-late T. S. Eliot, rejecting the supposed ‘wisdom of age’ in favour of the mystic involutions of time in Christian theology¹⁵). Old age in literature is rarely if ever only about itself—but as far as criticism has been concerned, it has oddly rarely been much about itself at all.

In philosophy, the case is different. The tradition of writing about old age, though distinguished, is not as rich—in recent centuries nowhere near so. Direct and sustained consideration of old age has been unusual even in those philosophical contexts where one might expect to find it: arguments about lives, persons, morals, reasons, and (less to be expected) metaphysics. It flickers in and out of these debates, occasionally recognized as a significant contingency, but far more often treated as marginal, if treated at all. This apparent dearth of interest in old age is especially striking, once remarked, in texts that are principally about temporality. Take, for example, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Although the subject of *Being and Time* is the relationship between consciousness and temporality, and although it contains extensive discussion of being’s ‘horizon of temporality’, of death as a limit of being, of existential finitude, it makes not a single reference to age or ageing. In one sense, this should not be surprising: the question of ontology is logically prior to that of ageing, and, for Heidegger, one assumes, age could not be introduced without an unwelcome taint of psychology. Even so, the unstated and unexplained exclusion of human temporality is a problem with the Heideggerian philosophical model.¹⁶ We do not simply persist in time: we age, and our perception of being-towards-death is situated and quantified and scrutinized as well as psychologized in the language of ageing (which is not to say that this is *all* the language of ageing does).¹⁷

In saying this, I am not seeking to ‘expose’ philosophy’s ‘neglect’ of old age, or to reprimand philosophers, individually or collectively, for time-of-life bias. There seem to me good reasons why academic philosophy has not been more attentive to old age. Many branches of philosophy have to assume a normative view of persons, and the exceptionalism, until the twentieth century, of living long allows old age, even now, to be treated as non-normative. An additional, more speculative reason has to do with the historically recent emergence of specialist disciplines for the study of old age. Geriatric medicine and gerontology have, since the late nineteenth century and the late 1940s respectively, claimed an expertise in

the subject that has helped to push philosophy away from the forefront of debate. Writing within both these disciplines tends to relegate philosophy to history, its insights assumed to have been incorporated into and superseded by science.¹⁸ That relegation is confirmed by most cultural and social histories of old age, where philosophy typically features only in its classical and early modern guises, with Bacon as a late transitional figure to modern science, and Beauvoir the sole post-Enlightenment representative.¹⁹ It is more surprisingly the case also in the relatively new and self-consciously interdisciplinary fields of ‘age studies’ (the study of ageing across the life course)²⁰ and ‘critical gerontology’ (that strand within gerontology which has especially advocated stronger ties to the humanities).²¹

But if the philosophical tradition of reflection about old age has been less copious than one might have expected, it has, as I have already remarked, been fairly consistent in its presentation of old age. From the very beginnings of philosophy, old age has been seen as cause for special optimism and for particular pessimism (often for both). The most extended exposition of those two extremes of response to late life, and therefore in many ways the best illustration of it, is to be found in the contrast between Cicero’s *De Senectute* and Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse*. As exemplary statements (much quoted by other writers) of why we should, and why we should not, wish to grow old they deserve closer attention here.

De Senectute is the most famous attempt by a philosopher to tell us why we should want to grow old. This short essay on old age, one of several works written in Cicero’s early sixties in his search for consolation after the death of his daughter Tullia, is stoicism in its most invigorating guise. It presents reasons (many have thought them to be the best reasons we have) to reject the view that old age is an evil, and to welcome late life as the zenith of a person’s capacities.

De Senectute takes the form of a conversation between the 84-year-old Cato the Elder and two much younger men, 35-year-old Scipio Aemilianus and his friend Gaius Laelius, whom Cato seeks to persuade of the virtues and pleasures of age. (Like most philosophers of classical antiquity, Cicero addresses himself exclusively to educated free men.) ‘I regard nature as the best guide’, Cato says early on: ‘I follow and obey her as a divine being. Now since she has planned all the earlier divisions of our lives excellently, she is not likely to make a bad playwright’s mistake of skimping the last act. And a last act was inevitable.’²² In the sentence which follows, and which