Ancients on Old Age

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Greek and Roman literature has bequeathed us a variety of perspectives on old age. Old age, in ancient times before there were palliatives for pain and devices to compensate for failing sense, such as eyeglasses and hearing aids, could be painful and humiliating. At the same time, old age commanded a certain respect, for the wisdom that time and experience brought, and it afforded pleasures of its own, such as memories of former goods. If erotic passion and attractiveness were diminished, this might be considered a benefit rather than a loss. An aged person might still be able to manage personal affairs, and if death was closer, it was not something to be feared, if one had lived a full life. Old age was a stage in life, the final one, but not less valuable for that. | *Keywords: Antiphanes, Cicero, Horace, Lucretius, Mimnermus*

Old age is a problem. If it were not, it would not require a defense, like Cicero's essay *De senectute*. It is a time of waning abilities, physical and mental. Take this passage by the comic poet Antiphanes (fourth century BC), from his play, *The Heiress* (*Epikleros*, fragment 94, quoted by the excerptor John Stobaeus under the title, "Against Old Age" 4.50):

> Old Age—how everyone longs for you
> As a happy thing; then, when you arrive, how grievous,
> How toilsome; no one praises you,
> And everyone who is wise reviles you.

Democritus is said to have starved himself to death when he believed that his intellect was failing (Lucretius *De rerum natura* 3.1050-52). And he was not alone in welcoming death. Plato was not the only disciple of Socrates to compose a version of his defense speech of "Apology" when he was charged with corrupting the youth and importing new gods. Several no longer survive, but that of Xenophon does, written on the basis of testimony by those who were present at the trial. Xenophon was perplexed that Socrates would have chosen to antagonize the jury and so invite condemnation. By way of explanation, he quotes Socrates as saying:

> Do you think it surprising that even God holds it better for me to die now? Do you not know that I would refuse to concede that any man has lived a better life than I have up to now? For I have realized that my whole life has been spent in righteousness toward God and man, — a fact that affords the greatest satisfaction; and so I have felt a deep self-respect and have discovered that my associates hold corresponding sentiments toward me. But now, if my years are prolonged, I know that the frailties of old age will inevitably be realized, — that my vision must be less perfect and my hearing less keen, that I shall be slower to learn and more forgetful of what I have learned. If I perceive my decay and take to complaining, how could I any longer take pleasure in life? (5-6, trans. Todd 1922).

If this depressing picture of old age resonates with us even now, imagine life before the invention of eyeglasses (not to mention contact lenses and cataract operations), hearing aids, and palliatives, if not cures, of many painful and disabling diseases.

Nevertheless, this was by no means the only attitude toward old age. A character in the comedy *Cheiron* by Pherecrates, a contemporary of Aristophanes (quoted in the same context by Stobaeus), affirms:

> It's rash of you to goad me at such an age
> into involving myself in many activities.
> When I was young, gentlemen,
> I thought I had sense, but I didn't;
> rather, all my ideas were whatever popped into my head.
> But recently now, old age has given me sense,
> and I analyze matters strand by strand.

Wisdom, it is claimed, comes with the years, and has a value that compensates for the loss of physical powers (would that this were always the case!). A fragment from Epicurus puts it well (*Vatican Saying* 17):

> We should not regard the young man as happy, but rather the old man whose life has been fortunate. The young man at the height of his power is often baffled by fortune and driven from his course; but the old man has come to anchor in age as in a harbor, and holds in certain and happy memory the goods which he once could only hope for.

> Οὐ νέος μακαριστὸς ἀλλὰ γέρων βεβιωκὼς καλῶς· ὁ γὰρ
> νέος ἀκμῇ πολὺς ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἐτεροφρονῶν πλάζεται· ὁ δὲ
> γέρων καθάπερ ἐν λιμένι τῷ γήρᾳ καθώρμικεν, τὰ πρότερον
> δυσελπιστούμενα τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀσφαλεῖ κατακλείσας χάριτι.

One need only think of the respect accorded to the aged Nestor in the *Iliad*, whose youthful martial prowess had waned, to see that old age had its own esteem (although one wonders at how useful this advice is to those whose accomplishments have been less notable).

The elderly might seem ridiculous, however, or rather, might make a laughable spectacle of themselves, when they sought to compete with the young in their own proper domain, and nowhere more so than in matters of erotic passion. Here, for example, is a poem by the seventh-century BC poet, Mimnermus:

> What life is there, what pleasure without golden Aphrodite? May I die when I no longer care about secret intrigues, persuasive gifts, and the bed, those blossoms of youth that men and women find alluring. But when painful old

> age comes on, which makes even a handsome man ugly, grievous cares wear away his heart and he derives no joy from looking upon the sunlight; he is hateful to boys and women hold him in no honour. So harsh has the god made old age (trans. Campbell)

Three ages are distinguished in the poem: youth (*hêbê*), referring to pre-adolescent or adolescent boys and girls (*paides*); adulthood, that is, the maturity of men and women (*andres* and *gunaikes*); and old age (*gêras*). The first-person perspective of the poem is that of an *anêr*, who delights in amatory pursuits of the sort that make life worthwhile for both adult men and women. Both sexes find the charms of youth alluring; as Kenneth Dover put it in his book on Greek Homosexuality (1989: 172), "The attributes which made a young male attractive to *erastai* were assumed to make him no less attractive to women." Marriage is not in question: these are furtive affairs, beloveds won over by gifts, and the goal is sex, not matrimony. According to the poet's persona, erotic passion is the only thing that makes life enjoyable; once one has lost interest in it, all pleasure is gone. The second half of the epigram shifts the ground. Old age is full of anxieties, which take away the joy in life, not because one does not care about Aphrodite but because one can no longer succeed in the pursuit. With old age, a man (*anêr*) loses, not the "alluring blossoms of youth" that pertain to an *erômenos* (or *erômenê*), which is to say, beauty or *kállos*, but the qualities that render him attractive as an *erastês* – something more like dignity or worth, and so he is no longer "held in honor." This is what renders an old man inimical to the young (*paides*, whether boys or girls) and dishonored in the eyes of women as well.

As is well known, the conversation that is recorded in Plato's *Republic* takes place in the home of Kephalos, the father of Polemarchus, who contributes to the discussion, and the orator Lysias. Socrates observes that he found Kephalos much aged, and that he was sitting on a couch and leaning on a cushion. Kephalos greets Socrates enthusiastically, and affirms that in the measure the pleasures of the body have decreased, his desire for and pleasure in (ἐπιθυμίαι τε καὶ ἡδοναί) conversation have increased (328D). Kephalos explains that many of his contemporaries complain about old age, missing the pleasures they took in sex (τἀφροδίσια) as well as drinking and feasting. He himself, however, feels as Sophocles once replied, when someone asked him his feelings about sex, and whether he could still make love (συγγίγνεσθαι) to a woman. Sophocles affirmed that he rather felt that he had escaped from a rough and violent master, and Kephalos agrees that he now enjoys peace and freedom (εἰρήνη γίγνεται καὶ ἐλευθερία), since his desires no longer torment him and have relaxed (αἱ ἐπιθυμίαι παύσωνται κατατείνουσαι καὶ χαλάσωσιν, 329C). The dialogue now enters upon its primary theme, with Socrates raising the question, as he does also in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (4.2.18), of whether it is always right to give back something one has borrowed. With this, Kephalos withdraws to attend to a sacrifice (an act of repaying the gods, we may note), and leaves it to Polemarchus to proceed with the interrogation. Though he professes a desire for conversation (*logoi*), he is content to leave the serious discussion to younger men, whose yearning is more intense than his. Indeed, I am inclined to think that his name is significant, for it suggests the word

κεφαλή, "head." Kephalos is too mental, and the passion that is necessary for philosophy has dwindled (for further discussion, see Konstan 2022). Be that as it may, Kephalos, unlike many of his aged friends, is happy to be free of sexual desire, and so is not susceptible to being ridiculed like Mimnermus' old men.

Horace offers a nice illustration of the perils of sexual temptation, even in one's declining years. The first poem in the fourth book of his odes, which was published some years after the first three (these appeared together as a set), reads in part:

> Venus now you've returned again
> to battles long neglected. Please, oh please, spare me.
> I'm not prey to the power of kind
> Cinara, as once I was. After fifty years,
> cruel mother of sweet Cupids,
> leave one now who's hardened to your soft commands:
> take yourself there, where seductive
> prayers, from the young men, invite you to return.
> It would be better still for you,
> lifted by wings of gleaming swans, to adventure
> to Paulus Maximus's house,
> if you want a worthy heart to set on fire.
> Since he's noble and he's handsome,
> and he's not un-eloquent, for anxious clients:
> he's a lad of a hundred skills,
> and he'll carry your army's standard far and wide:
> and he'll laugh when he's successful
> despite his rival's expensive gifts, and he'll raise,
> just for you, by the Alban Lake,
> a statue in marble, under a wooden roof.
>
> .....
>
> Women and boys can't please me now,
> nor those innocent hopes of mutual feeling,
> nor wine-drinking competitions,
> nor foreheads circled by freshly-gathered flowers.
> But why, ah Ligurinus, why
> should tears gather here on my cheeks, from time to time?
> Why does my tongue, once eloquent,
> fall indecorously silent while I'm speaking?
> In dreams, at night, hard-hearted one,
> I hold you prisoner, or follow you in flight,
> over the grassy Field of Mars,
> or wing with you above the inconstant waters
> (verses 1-20, 29-40, trans. Kline 2003, slightly modified).

Horace had thought that he was free of such passion, like old Kephalos, but it snuck up on him all the same, only now he is no longer able to compete with younger men, and he is aware of the shame and frustration his new infatuation with Ligurinus will cause him.

Aristotle had indeed said that there is a beauty or *kállos* appropriate to every age, but of it is of different kinds:

> Beauty varies with each age. In a young man, it consists in possessing a body

> capable of enduring all efforts, either of the racecourse or of bodily strength, while he himself is pleasant to look upon and a sheer delight.... In a man who has reached his prime, beauty consists in being naturally adapted for the toils of war, in being pleasant to look upon and at the same time awe-inspiring. In an old man, beauty consists in being naturally adapted to contend with unavoidable labors and in not causing annoyance to others, thanks to the absence of the disagreeable accompaniments of old age (*Rhetoric* 1.5, 1361b7–14, trans. Freese 1926).

There is no mention, in this last group, of a pleasant appearance of the kind that might be attractive to women or boys. The best that can be said for old men (apart from doing some inescapable jobs) is that they aren't a nuisance. Not very consoling.

Cicero, in his essay *On Old Age* (*De senectute*), has the elder Cato[1], his mouthpiece in the work, address the negative evaluations of old age under four headings. These are: (1) that it prevents us from managing affairs, whether our own or those of the state; (2) that it renders the body weak (Cicero includes in this section mental decline); (3) that it deprives us of virtually all pleasures; and (4), that it seems to be on the threshold of death. Cato, who is represented as being now aged, cites his own example among many to show that one can still, even in one's dotage, take care of business and perform those physical tasks that are suitable to that time of life (military service is excluded, naturally enough). He also affirms that one need not suffer intellectual deficits (as he did not), and that one can enjoy a wide variety of pleasures far more worthy and dignified than the pursuit of sex. As for the proximity of death, Cato claims that old age, unlike earlier stages of life, has no defined limit (*certus terminus*; Romans thought of childhood lasting till seventeen years of age, and youth at forty-six; after this, one was a *senex*).[2] One can continue enjoying life as long as one is capable of discharging one's duties, and pay no attention to death, for there is no reason to think that it is closer than at any other time. After all, the young too are vulnerable, and death may overtake them at any moment – a notion no doubt more compelling at a time when wars were incessant and losses unimaginably high, and when retirement was not yet regarded as a natural stage in life's course. Thus, old age is a more confident and bolder stage of life than youth.

The problem with Cato's rosy picture is that it comes close to denying old age any quality of its own. A long tradition, for which we have evidence as early as archaic Greek poetry, divided an ideal lifespan into well-defined segments, with old age as the endpoint. Mimnermus, that inveterate pessimist, had set the terminus at sixty:

> Would that my fated death might come at sixty, unattended by sickness and grievous cares (fragment 6 West, transl. Gerber 1999).

[1] Cicero *De senectute* 5.15: Etenim, cum complector animo, quattuor reperio causas, cur senectus misera videatur: unam, quod avocet a rebus gerendis; alteram, quod corpus faciat infirmius; tertiam, quod privet fere omnibus voluptatibus; quartam, quod haud procul absit a morte. Earum, si placet, causarum quanta quamque sit iusta una quaeque, videamus.

[2] Cicero *De senectute* 20.72: Senectutis autem nullus est certus terminus, recteque in ea vivitur quoad munus offici exsequi et tueri possis, et tamen mortem contemnere; ex quo fit ut animosior etiam senectus sit quam adulescentia et fortior; text as in Powell 2006.

Diogenes Laertius, who quotes this line, says that the great statesman Solon responded to this:

> But if even now you will still listen to me, remove this — and do not be offended because my thoughts are better than yours — and changing it, Ligyaistades [Mimnermus' patronymic], sing as follows: "May my fated death come at eighty" (fragment 20 West).

Solon himself imagined ten stages in a life, each of seven years' duration. Of the final two he declared:

> In the ninth he still has ability, but his speech and wisdom give weaker proof of a high level of excellence. If one were to complete stage after stage and reach the tenth, he would not have death's allotment prematurely [ἄωρος] (fr. 27.15-18 West).

Anything over seventy is a gift, and death at that age is not to be lamented.[3]

Funerary inscriptions tell the same story: those who die young are thought to die out of season (ἄωροι), and deserve pity, whereas those who pass away at the end of a full life, in which, among other things, they have produced heirs, are celebrated for their achievements. There is a time to be born and a time to die, as Ecclesiastes puts it. I am reminded of an old sitcom from the early 1950's (the radio version was still earlier), called "My Friend Irma." Irma was a scatterbrained secretary, who worked for the stern and stone-faced lawyer, Mr. Clyde. In one episode, she brings a kitten to the office, which is on a high floor, and the kitten crawls out on a flagpole that extends from the building. Of course, pandemonium ensues, and Irma is distraught. Mr. Clyde suggests that she climb out on the flagpole to rescue the animal. Irma cries out, "But Mr. Clyde, I'm too young to die," to which Mr. Clyde replies: "You're just the right age!"[4] Irma, of course, is much too young, but had she been 70 or 80 years of age, then according to Solon the expression would not have been inapt, even if the kitten was not something to die for. Old age, then, contrary to Cicero's relative optimism (he was around 62 when he wrote *De senectute*, and Horace just 50 when he composed *Odes* 4.1.), is a time to be thinking about death. For if indeed some may live till their nineties (like Democritus and Isocrates), or even beyond, it is not simply a matter of quantity but of quality. Prometheus, in the Aeschylean tragedy, *Prometheus Bound*, declares, "I caused mortals to cease foreseeing their doom," by instilling blind hopes in their breasts, to which the chorus replies: "A great benefit was this you gave to mortals" (250-253). Perhaps; but in old age, one knows, as never before, that one's time is limited. And this lends to this stage of life a special quality of its own.

It is not a matter of being obsessed with death, much less fearing it. It is more a question of acknowledging limits, physical, yes, but above all

[3] Cf. Confucius *Analects* 2:4: "The Master said, at fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ears. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right"; trans. Muller 1990.

[4] I am quoting the lines from memory, having seen this show when I was 14 years old or thereabouts – but I'm pretty sure they're close to what was said.

temporal. There are things one hasn't the time to do: perhaps this is another reason why Kephalos left the lengthy discussion of justice to the younger guests in his home. Tending to the sacrifice was not so much more important as more suited to his time of life. This does not mean that we cannot continue in the pursuits we have cultivated all our lives. Cicero, in his *De senectute* (7.22), recounts how, when Sophocles was working on his tragedy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, his sons brought him to trial for neglecting family affairs, so that the jurors might relieve him of this responsibility, which would then naturally fall to his male offspring. Sophocles, in his defense, recited the tragedy aloud to the jurors, and asked whether this was the work of someone who was failing mentally. With this, he won the case. We may note, however, that the play itself is about a man at the end of his life, who has a sense of imminent death and transcendence. Oedipus is also extremely irate with his son Polynices, who has come to seek his support in his conflict with his brother, Eteocles. Scholars have commented on the unusual severity of Oedipus' response. I wonder whether it might not have reflected, perhaps unconsciously, Sophocles' irritation with his own sons, after their machinations against him (assuming that Cicero's story is not just invention).[5] Yes, Sophocles was concerned to keep control of his family accounts, a mundane concern perhaps in fact better left to his sons. But his primary interest was in poetry, and here he gave evidence of more sublime interests.

Cicero was right, then, that we can continue to take care of business in our later years, and that our capacities, above all intellectual, do not necessarily wane. It is true, too, that the elderly have many pleasures available, even if they withdraw from the competition for the favors of young boys and girls, which is trivial at any age, despite Mimnermus' insistence that this is the only pleasure worth living for. But Cicero's Cato, in emphasizing at the end of his discourse *auctoritas* and *gloria*, prestige and fame, and preferring to believe in an afterlife that might render his renown eternal, overlooked, I think, the way all the occupations of the aged, vigorous as they may be, are tinged by an awareness of mortality. Our thoughts turn to the welfare of those who will very likely outlive us, a concern that even the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus acknowledged as valid, though in all other respects the school maintained that death is nothing to us, since when we are, it is not, and when it is present, we are not.[6] Did I write "our"? Well, I have now passed the eighth decade of life, which Solon, in his response to Mimnermus, regarded as the right moment for death to arrive, and I am conscious of a subtle change in outlook. The old drives are there, pleasures and passions are not diminished or diluted, but my enjoyments are spiced, even enlivened, by the awareness that I have lived, and everything now is both precious and a gift.[7]

5 For a subtle study of this exchange in the context of the play, see Mastrangelo 2000: 35-81.

6 Philodemus *On Death*, column 25, lines 2-9; for text and translation, along with commentary, see Henry 2009.

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