

Coming to terms with old age – and death

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Before I begin, I should declare my limitations. As I write this, I am only 48, and therefore I acknowledge that I may, in twenty or thirty years, come to change my mind about what old age is, and about what it means to come to terms with it. Nevertheless, I think Christine Overall (2003 p. 6) is right to say that the middle aged are entitled to speak about the old, first, because death is a possibility at any age; second, because – unlike those who speak about the other gender or other races -- there is a real likelihood that the middle aged writer will become old; and third, because the middle aged, as they age, know more and more old people.

What does it mean to (try to) come to terms with old age? What does it mean to be successful or to fail in coming to terms with old age? These are the questions I will focus on first, and I will come round to death later on. Because of lack of space, I will not have much to say about how women¹ and religious believers come to terms with old age and death, even though women significantly outnumber men above the age of 80, and believers outnumber atheists around the world.

Right away one is torn between two extreme visions. The first, bleak vision comes from Simone de Beauvoir:

A limited future and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to. In many instances it paralyzes them. All their plans have either been carried out or abandoned, and their life has closed about itself; nothing requires their presence; they no longer have anything whatsoever to do. (cited in McKee 1982 p. 271)

The other extreme vision is the relentless chirpy optimism of so much self-help literature, giving advice on coming to terms, some of it very sensible advice, but philosophically it is often at best one-dimensional and at worst conceptually confused. I worry that the whole emphasis on ‘successful’ ageing raises little more than the thought (in me, at least) “what if I don’t measure up?” and “what if I don’t fulfil my plans in time?”,² together with a fear for the consequences on the allocation of

¹ Margaret Urban Walker has edited an entire volume (1999) on the particular problems for women aging. In her Introduction, she writes:

If we are tempted to think that gender matters less as women age, this might well be the dubious product of a cultural prejudice itself rooted in some of our society’s gender norms: that since ‘womanliness’ and ‘femininity’ matter only in relatively young (that is, heterosexually ‘desirable’ and reproductively capable) women, we can stop taking gender seriously as women age. [...] But gender [...] encompasses the whole set of symbolic representations, material conditions, and social practices that define sexual divisions of labor, opportunity, recognition, responsibility and reward. (p. 3)

² The Germans have an evocative word for it that is mentioned by some gerontologists: *Torschlusspanik* – the panic at the thought of the gate closing before one is through it.

scarce social resources. Surely old age is the time when we have earned some time off from all that virtue and achievement, especially given the myriad familiar disadvantages of being old?

By 'one-dimensional', I mean that old age is conceived of as essentially about loss: loss of physical and mental capacities, loss of autonomy and independence, loss of fertility, loss of identity-conferring jobs and other roles and opportunities, loss of parents and siblings and friends, and eventually, the loss of one's home as one moves (is moved) into institutional care. Coming to terms with loss is then seen – one-dimensionally again – as a matter of resisting as much as possible, by remaining active, but cultivating new friendships and new projects, by seizing the day and gathering rosebuds. I've nothing against any of that, but I can't help feeling there's more to say about old age.

The attempt to define old age

Before we can speak of more interesting ways of coming to terms, we have to understand what we mean by old age. Normally we would speak of the 'final' stage in life, a stage bounded by death at one side and by a key threshold at the other, and we could then ask what is essential to that stage. One familiar threshold is the retirement age (call it 65), which would mean that anybody above that age – pensioners – is old. Leaving aside problems of the arbitrariness of the threshold, there is a problem with the sheer diversity of people in this category. There will be huge differences among 66-year-olds in lifestyles, character, political beliefs etc., just as there could be significant differences between the a 66-year-old and the 86-year-old she later becomes. More importantly, there will be huge differences, both laterally and longitudinally, of subjective experience. So if one then wants to speak about coming to terms with old age, one ends up with what I will call the 'sceptical position': that there are so many variations of old age, and of the experience of old age, that it makes little sense to speak of old age as a coherent concept at all: one is simply as old as one feels. By corollary, there are so many ways of coming to terms with old age that it makes little sense to speak about more or less successful ways of doing so. If I accuse you of failing to come to terms with old age, then you can reject my condescending pity by a spirited rendition of Paul Anka's *My Way*.

The sceptical position is reinforced by thoughts of social constructivism, as described by Margaret Gullette (1997): many chronologically old people are *expected* to be old, expected to behave in conformity with widely-shared paradigms that begin with the more or less flattering characters in children's stories. The self-help literature works against these paradigms, but it will only be as successful as the person's underlying character allows. Indeed, one could say that the person's true character is revealed by their response to the sustained indignities and disappointments that most often characterise old age. Neither the sceptical position, nor the social constructivist position deny that it may make sense to gather all pensioners into a single group for other purposes or in other contexts, e.g. for medical doctors, or for financial advisers, or for voting behaviour analysts; but we are more interested in philosophically investigating the meaning and experience of being old.

It makes a bit more sense, as Dychtwald and Flower argue (1989 p. 33), to take a higher threshold to mark the beginning of old age, such as the statistical life expectancy in the Western world – call it 80. This number is what some gerontologists use to distinguish the 'young old' from the 'old old'. In this latter category there will still be great variation, but there will also be more of the losses to define a common experience, and therefore greater possibility of speaking generally about coming to terms with old age.

Let me return to the question of the losses that many take to be essential to old age. Here the basic problem is that the losses in question can take place *at any age*. While they are more statistically probable in old age, one has to remember the banal truism that one does not get cancer until one gets it. Some people defy the statistics and have to come to terms with Parkinson's at the age of 30 (the actor Michael J. Fox). Others defy the statistics by smoking and drinking and eating heavily until the age of 91 (Winston Churchill). There are philosophically interesting things to say about coming to terms with the loss of physical and mental capacities, but I do not want to duplicate the content of other chapters.³ For the moment, suffice to repeat that different people come to terms with infirmity and disease in different ways: *of course* one should grit one's teeth and stay active through the increasing pain and ugliness; what more can one say than that? Similarly, there is a healthy philosophical and psychological literature about the importance of one's job, profession or calling on one's identity and sense of identity, about the way that a job structures one's week and year and life into a career progression, and about the problem of coming to terms with the profound harm that can arise upon losing one's job (together with losing regular access to the social community at the workplace). Coming to terms with losing one's job – at any age – is difficult, and so I am going to take it as *not* essential to old age. Once again, different people react in different ways to retirement, depending partly on their prior relationship to the job. But in addition, by the time the pensioner reaches the 'old old' stage, 15 years have passed from retirement, and the individual has been forced to come to terms with her retirement in one way or another.

Growing old without reference to age

What if we focus less on chronology? If someone develops a debilitating degenerative disease at 40, then they could be said to become old at 40, partly in virtue of the disease, partly in virtue of the imminence of the death by which it is defined as degenerative. If they lose their job at 50 and cannot get another one because they lack the skills or the strength or the appearance, then they could be said to have become old, even without the likelihood of imminent death: they feel useless, unproductive, ashamed, not to mention poor, and without much to look forward to. Even if such people may not look old, we understand what they mean when they say they feel old.

Even without a reference to disease and loss, old age could be launched by the key experience of the *reveil mortel*.⁴ This is the idea of my waking up with the simple but terrifying *certainty* that I will die – maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day. It is the certainty that there is nothing I or anyone else can do to prevent it, the certainty that the world will blithely allow it, and the certainty that the world's inhabitants will have the temerity to go on living without me. Some people experience the *reveil* earlier, some people later. Sometimes it is associated with a near-death experience, or with a serious illness, or with the loss of a loved one, or with a powerful aesthetic

³ See Christopher Hamilton's chapter on the ageing body, for example.

⁴ According to the novelist Julian Barnes (2008 p. 23) the term was coined by the French critic Charles de Bos. Barnes asks:

How best to translate it? 'The wake-up call to mortality' sounds a bit like a hotel service. [...but] it is like being in an unfamiliar hotel room, where the alarm clock has been left on the previous occupant's setting, and at some ungodly hour you are suddenly pitched from sleep into darkness, panic and a vicious awareness that this is a rented world.

experience, but it need not be. The distinction here is between knowledge and certainty. Tolstoy's Ivan Illyich, before his *reveil*, knew that "all men are mortal" in the merely intellectual sense that we would not deny its converse, but to all intents and purposes we are immortal as we age. The *reveil* launches the beginning of the end, the final phase, although presumably if the *reveil* takes place in a physically healthy person under 50, she will not yet see it as the beginning of old age as such, and so chronology is still relevant.

Let me consider the third loss I mentioned in the opening paragraphs, the loss of parents, sibling and friends. Again we have the obvious point that this can happen at any age, and it will be something that one has to come to terms with, each in her own way, depending on the depth of the relationship. However, in the search for an event that might launch old age (beyond a minimum chronological age), might there be a case for the death of the second parent? The death of the first parent is the death of an individual -- mom or dad; the death of the second is the death of *them*, the end of our family, and of my childhood. Becoming an orphan can be liberating, but it can also be profoundly destabilising, no matter how well supported I am by my current friends and projects. Not only does it bring home that "I am next in line;" rather, there is no person left whose primary role (from my childish perspective) has always been to look after me, to love me unconditionally, to always be there for me, to take me in when I have nowhere left to go. Even if I have very little in common with my parents, even if I judge that they have failed in their role, I don't think I can help seeing them as watching over me, whether or not I want or need or avail of their help. Once they're both gone, there is a special kind of vulnerability, of exposure, of solitude, that, if one has reached a certain chronological age already, *makes* one old.

There is another experience I think could be transformative in this way: irremediable regret. Regret is common enough, of course, and is part of all stages of life. But the normal experience of regret is of something that is in principle remediable, since I am more or less conscious of having the time and resources to correct the damage, to compensate the victim, to make up for wasted time, to start again. I stress the 'in principle' -- there may be a host of reasons why I do not or can not seek to remedy the situation, but the possibility remains. The possibility can include *indirect* remedies too. If one of my parents dies and I regret not having spent enough time with her, then I cannot correct that loss directly, but I can still make up for my failure by spending more time with the other parent, say, or with my children. If my marriage or my job has turned sour, then I can still aspire to another marriage or job: such aspirations may be naive in that I may not have as many options as I think I have, but the point is that I can intelligibly aspire.

At some point in life, however, I come to see the regret as no longer remediable, not even indirectly, not even aspirationally. I move from "I could be a contender" to "I could have been a contender," to quote Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. And insofar as the object of the irremediable regret is central to my identity and self-concept, then this evidence of finality will make me old.

Consider the example of Stevens the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro's 1993 novel *The Remains of the Day*. When the novel opens, Stevens is of uncertain age, but probably older than 60. He has always identified himself primarily as a butler, and is proud of having done his job well. He has never been interested in getting married. Nevertheless, he recalls a certain modest near-intimacy -- which he tactfully thwarted -- with his housekeeper, Ms. Kenton, almost twenty years earlier, before she left to become a wife and mother far away. The novel describes his journey down to visit her in Devon.

When they finally meet, Kenton confesses that she had hoped, those twenty years ago, to marry Stevens himself. It is only now that Stevens recognises this is an opportunity irremediably lost, and the effect is devastating. Stevens's regret is interesting because it is not only about what he should have noticed, or should have done, those twenty years ago. He also regrets the loss of the twenty years that he would have spent with Kenton, and the loss of the person he would now have become with those married years behind him.⁵

On the other hand, Sartre provides a refreshing antidote to the all-too-human tendency to blame circumstances for denying one the better life to which one was entitled.

For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, "Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions." But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art. [...] In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait. (Sartre 1946)

In this passage, Sartre was primarily making a point about one's tendency to deceive oneself and avoid responsibility. Certainly, Stevens is not seeking to blame anyone for his failure. But there is a second, important point here as well, I think: as soon as one begins to speculate about how much better things could have been, one is forced to conclude that they could also have been worse in any number of imaginable or unimaginable ways. And then the judgement comparing this life to what might have been is *wide open*, to the point of undermining confident judgement entirely. Instead, Sartre says, one has to take one's past as fixed. I might have written more if circumstances had been better, but I might have written less, or nothing at all, if any number of infinite possible circumstances had transpired. So when considering one counter-factual scenario then in fairness we have to consider them all. Insofar as coming to terms with old age involves coming to terms with the life one has led, with the events that have happened to one, with the choices one has made and the unexpected consequences arising from them, and with the person that one has become, then one can only conclude: this is it.

⁵ There is an interesting contrast with Ivan Illyich. Illyich comes to realise that he has wasted his life on unimportant things such as career progression and social posturing, at the expense of his family. Now diagnosed with a mysterious terminal disease, he descends into irremediable regret and self-pity. However, Illyich derives some solace from the mere fact that what was revealed to him was the truth, and he has time to experience a kind of quasi-religious epiphany before he dies. It is worth remembering the role of *luck* in the story: he might well have died before the epiphany, still racked by regret and self-pity.

The regrets I have considered so far have been discrete components of one's life. Important, identity-conferring components, to be sure, but the regret requires the conceptual space between the assessor and the assessed. The more corrosive kind of regret is one that undermines the meaning of one's entire life – and perhaps regret is not even the correct word for this. With the regret over a discrete failure of the past, it makes sense to try to come to terms with it because there is enough of the individual left "behind the lens", as it were. When regrets build up into a general malaise, and shade into despair, then it is not clear that one can come to terms with this precisely because one just can't find the strength or can't be bothered, and the effect is to alienate one from one's past, to paralyse resolve, and to dilute the remaining time. At this point we have moved beyond the limits of intelligibility of the concept of coming to terms, and beyond the limits of what a concerned friend or therapist can say in an effort to get the subject to come to terms.

Coming to terms with old age

I have said something about old age; it is not time to look closer at what 'coming to terms' might mean. It is a slightly odd expression, because it comes from the context of business negotiations between two agents toward some sort of compromise. Whereas, in coming to terms with old age, there is no negotiating partner, there is simply a new situation which is in some way bad and which I cannot avoid. At the basic level, then, I *have to* come to terms with it, to get used to it, to accept it, and there is nothing more to say. Or rather: I might have the choice of seeking to avoid the bad situation by systematic self-deception, by psychotic fantasy, by suicide, but short of these extreme options there is no choice. In time, one will trim one's preferences and desires to fit the constrained circumstances. It's all very well to rage, rage against the dying of the light, but sooner or later you realise it's not worth the effort.

In order to grasp a more complex notion of coming-to-terms, it would be better to imagine a family member giving advice, trying to persuade, imploring: "you can't live on your own anymore, what if you fall again?" Coming to terms here means accepting new limits; the old person can refuse to come to terms by sending away the concerned family member, and making a new calculation of the risks and benefits, based on how much pain, expense and humiliation she is willing to put up with. In the younger family member's opinion, the old person has not come to terms and is being imprudent and unreasonable, but this opinion need not interest the old person.

This brings us to a third kind of coming-to-terms, where I want to make a distinction between giving up and renouncing. If one is forced to come to terms with old age, with the new limits or with the new risks, there is still a sense in which it is nevertheless up to me what sort of *attitude* I want to take to the business of coming to terms. If old age is a matter of grudging acceptance, of being cowed by a superior foe, of labouring under a yoke, then this may be a recipe not for Dylan Thomas's heroic defiance but rather for bitterness, resentment and ultimately despair. Insofar as I am dwelling on the losses *as losses*, insofar as I continue to see my state as degraded in comparison with my earlier, more authentic self ("I am a shadow of my former self"), then I have *not* come to terms. Coming to terms, on this reading, requires moral renunciation. Let me explain.

Renunciation is a legal term, a formal surrender of some privilege or right. But it is also a moral term, in the sense that I abandon not only an object, but the moral right to that object, even under ideal conditions. When King Lear legally renounces his power at the beginning of Shakespeare's play, he

still expects to be treated like a king, and his tragedy is partly that it took him so long to morally renounce the throne.

If successfully 'coming to terms' with old age is to mean anything, I suggest it means this voluntary act of moral renunciation; at the very least the renunciation of, for example, the expectation of good health. In youth and middle age, there is a default expectation of health, and a corresponding sense of outrage when one's health is undermined. If an old person has come to terms with their old age, they can still enjoy the good health they have, but they accept that they have no right to be outraged when the losses of physical and mental capacities continue. They can still enjoy their participation in any range of projects, but they cannot see themselves as having a right to work. One can also renounce the ideal of autonomy and independence, and come to realise that one has been dependent on different things throughout one's life.⁶ Ultimately, one can renounce one's sense of primordial entitlement to be alive at all – which does not mean that one welcomes death, but one ceases to take it as a personal insult. The acceptance that results from voluntary renunciation will then be a different kind of acceptance to that founded in no more than external coercion. As an act of will, renunciation can provide some small measure of individual expression and assertion as the horizon darkens. Finally, by renunciation I also include letting go, as far as possible, of resentments, feuds, and injured pride; I include forgiveness, if not in person then at least in spirit; I include compassion for others, and for oneself; and I include the simple thought that “there is already too much misery in the world, I don't need to add to it.”

However, renunciation should not go to far. Ruddick (1999 p. 51) is careful to remind us of the importance of a capacity for outrage in response to ageist discrimination and discourtesy. In a similar vein, Harriott (2006 p. 133) describes three 'obstacles' to successful ageing. And although I have expressed my reservations about the notion of 'success' in this context, his examples are useful to illustrate exaggerated renunciation. The first obstacle he calls 'gracelessness'. The extreme case of gracelessness is the “shabby dishevelled old man, who is able to do better, but actually does nothing to add some measure of beauty to the circumstances in which he finds himself.” Not only does this manifest a particular loss of self-respect, it also “adds ammunition to the various negative stereotypes that have historically stuck to the old.” Harriott's third obstacle (p. 135) is the temptation to succumb to grief and despair to the point of a loss of spirit, thereby entering a second childhood and merely existing from day to day. His example is the Countess Rostova from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a once “fresh and vigorous woman” who is thus reduced by news of her son's death on the battlefield. (Harriott's second obstacle I turn to, below.)

The life review

Coming to terms with old age is often taken to mean no more than coming to terms with new limits and losses in the present. However, insofar as we are conscious of old age not as a new stage but as the *final* stage, insofar as we have passed through the *reveil mortel*, then I have to come to terms with what I am and what I *have been*, what I have amounted to, what my life has been about. This was already suggested above with the discussion of the irremediable regret of Stevens the butler.

⁶ Agich (2003) usefully examines the concept of dependence. He challenges the thought the old age involves increasing dependence. Instead, it should be seen as a *change* in the type of dependence, for we are all dependent on different things throughout our lives.

Harriott's second obstacle to successful ageing (p. 134) is "failing to find some continuity of one's whole life with one's old age." The temptation, in its simplest terms, is to see one's true self as revealed during one's working life, and then buried in retirement.

The recent flurry of interest among philosophers in narrative understandings of oneself and others does not involve much sustained discussion of the understandings of the elderly. While different people will have different quantities of past about which to feel pride or shame, different debts and credits in their present relationships with others, different locations on a more-or-less defined career path, what is distinctive about old age is the constriction of the future, the increase of the relative importance of the past over the future, and the process of 'life review' that is prompted.⁷ The specimens discussed in the normal narrative accounts are all living lives on the way from somewhere to somewhere, where the meaning of the past and present helps one make choices into the future, a future where it is still in principle possible, as I argued, to remedy mistakes. Again, it's hard to link the life review to a specific age: many pensioners might continue their narratively 'balanced' forward momentum well into their 80s, while others might feel the constriction of the future at an earlier age of relative physiological health.

Coming to terms with old age in the narrative sense then means something different from coming to terms with loss and decline. The former means coming to terms with the fact that there is very little future in which to *complete the stories* of the past. I say stories, in the plural, to indicate the interlocking and diverse ways by which the subject organises her past for her own self-understanding and for the benefit of others. A lot of the narrative literature speaks in terms of an ideal *unity* that should come to define each life, perhaps a unity focused around a single, planned 'quest' (Alasdair MacIntyre's word). Such a unity then generates what Hilde Lindemann Nelson calls a presumption in favour of an ideal "career self" that can be planned down to the smallest detail (1999, p. 82). Nelson accepts that some will be driven by a single guiding ideal, and their selves will develop in 'career' terms, but that such a path should not be taken as unambiguously healthy precisely because it tends to construct old age as the decline stage of the narrative, and the life review as excessively judgemental of the present. The thing is, a great many people lead, on the whole, *bad lives*, which they might only come to discover too late: a thorough life review conceived as an effort to discover the overriding significance of the life might merely sink the elderly person into mortal depression or despair, with which they can neither come to terms, nor about which they can be consoled.⁸ Somerset Maugham puts it thus: "What makes old age hard to bear is not a failing of one's faculties, mental and physical, but the burden of one's memories."⁹ The word 'burden' suggests something that cannot be processed into a story.

⁷ As far as I know, the phrase was coined by Robert Butler (1963). A striking dramatic version of the life review process is Beckett's 1958 one-man play *Krapp's Last Tape*.

⁸ Sometimes the present response to a deep life review might be one of guilt – indeed, justified guilt – for serious past wrongdoing. There is then a question of whether a therapist with a knowledge of the past facts, would encourage the feeling of justified guilt, either for psychological cathartic purposes, or simply as the morally appropriate recognition of the wrong and of the victim's suffering.

⁹ From Maugham's last book of essays, *Points of View* (1959), cited in Butler (1963 p. 220).

Instead, as Lindemann Nelson says, for some it may be necessary to lead one's life as an irreducible, diverse, sometimes mutually inconsistent plurality of projects, perhaps resembling a meandering *journey*, or *journeys* -- more than a career -- journeys often without a destination. Nevertheless, reviewing these journeys is an important part of coming to terms with old age, since some of the sundry episodes have to be gathered together into the journeys of *my* life, in order for me to say: this is what I have been. Even if they do not amount to a coherent career or a quest, they still amount to a life, and the past will – even if it is not clear how – be summed up in the present. The novelist Philip Roth gives the following words to the narrator of his 2001 novel *The Dying Animal*:

The only thing you understand about the old when you're not old is that they have been stamped by their time. But understanding only that freezes them in their time, and so amounts to no understanding at all. To those not yet old, being old means *you've been*. But being old also means that despite, in addition to, and in excess of your beenness, you still are. Your beenness is very much alive. You still are, and one is as haunted by the still-being and its fullness as by the having-already-been, by the pastness. Think of old age this way: it's just an everyday fact that one's life is at stake. (p. 36)

Gerontologists seem to be split on this question. On the one hand, they stress the importance of active engagements in projects and relationships, living in the present; on the other, they stress the importance of reflection and contemplation, and living in the past. However, life review is not about living in the past in the sense of re-living pleasurable episodes as a mere distraction to a painful present. Life review is about trying to discover *and* create some meaningful narrative about one's life, in order to achieve, as far as possible, a kind of integrity here in the present.¹⁰

Right away one has to accept that this is not to be recommended to everyone. Those with traumatic pasts, those who were broken and defeated, those forced into exile, these people might derive present strength from having overcome and rejected the past, from discovering and constructing a narrative that begins only in middle-age. For such people there might be no point in reviewing their lives as part of an effort to come to terms with old age, even though there will be risks familiar to psychotherapists about repressed events festering and distorting the present. Indeed, as Ruddick points out (1999 p. 53), it might not take something so traumatic to undermine the essential curiosity necessary for life review – it would be enough to have a long history of “indifferent schooling, demeaning jobs or none at all, painful illness, and repeated humiliation, just to name a few.”¹¹

¹⁰ 'Integrity' is Erik Eriksson's (1986) term. He saw the drive toward integrity as directed against a pervasive and understandable temptation toward despair. Integrity wins out if the “final strength” of later life – wisdom – is to result. However, this does not mean despair is thereby overcome. Quite the opposite: wisdom *needs* the continuing threat of despair in order to prevent it turning into detached naiveté or worse, presumptuousness. This idea seems akin to the idea that true religious faith is only possible in the lingering presence of doubt, for otherwise it would descend into fanaticism.

¹¹ Ruddick (1999 p. 53) also stresses the importance of relationships within which a healthy curiosity is to be sustained: “an individual is able to enjoy, remain curious, manage pain, or reflect on death only if she can create the occasions, with others, for doing so.”

The life review should not be thought of in purely archeological terms, whereby a story of significance is simply unearthed. For while the facts are fixed, their significance is relatively fluid. Consider the following story: I meet Sophie in Weston-Super-Mare in the year 2005. She was wearing a red dress. I have pictures of her on that date, and her brother was there, and can corroborate. We marry in 2006, and I bless the day I met her a year earlier. The marriage turns sour, and we divorce in 2010 -- and I come to curse the day I met her in 2005. Now, in 2015, I have remained in touch with her, and my attitude is bittersweet: we tried, we failed, it was nobody's fault. Throughout the reminiscing, the facts have remained the same, and my account is answerable to them: we met in Weston-Super-Mare in 2005 and she was wearing a red dress. But the significance of the facts has come to change. As McKee (1982 p. 185) says, it is hard to say that my perspective *improves* with time; on the one hand I might have more objectivity and knowledge of the bigger picture, but on the other hand I am further away and my memories are increasingly unreliable.¹² But during the life review characteristic of someone in old age, there is a finality to the process that gives that discovered significance a certain amount of authority, but of course not infallibility: "the beenness is very much alive," and one is haunted by it. That is not the authority associated with the archeologist's expert access to facts that can fit into a known context, but that associated with the status of those facts in my life, in the life that / have led, and nobody else. The process is not easy. T.S. Eliot describes one aspect of life review in his poem 'Little Gidding':

[...] the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

This understanding of authority does not eliminate two risks (Woodward 1986). The first, as mentioned above, would be the risk of 'living in the past' at the *expense* of the present (and at the expense of all those condemned to listen to the present reminiscences!). The second would be the risk of self-deception. Old age reminiscences would seem to be particularly prone to comforting falsehoods, and these can never be entirely eliminated. An interlocutor could present the old person with a more coherent or otherwise more plausible interpretation of the facts, just as the interlocutor could point out contradictions and inconsistencies between different stages of life review. But once these formal conditions are met, the authority rests with the reviewer.

There is also an interesting role for the concept of 'fate' during the life review. Many philosophers assume that fate means no more than determinism, and would be understandably suspicious insofar as it denies the possibility of free will. But the concept can play a different role during the process of life review. In old age, after a long marriage, it would make sense for me to see the first encounter with my future spouse as fated. And this would not be to deny either that the encounter was almost

¹² The corollary is that the contemporaneous judgement about significance may be more accurate because of emotional proximity, but may also be more vulnerable to emotional distortion. Sometimes it is not clear what a *feeling* is until one can look back on it, as when one says: "I thought I was in love, but now I see it was only infatuation." On the other hand, it might be present bitterness that makes me reinterpret a past love in this way. On the problems of interpreting past emotions, see also Goldie (2003).

entirely a matter of luck,¹³ or that I was free to then refrain from marrying her. Similarly, it might not occur to me to call my medical career a 'calling' when I first stumble into medical school because of extraneous factors (the promise of money and prestige, parental pleasure, following friends); but after a forty-year career, the job has come to occupy a role much greater than a mere source of income, and I cannot imagine my working life in any other form.

Having the time and space for life review is crucially important for coming to terms with old age. The self-help approach errs in encouraging frenetic activity at the expense of time spent on leisurely, unproductive contemplation.¹⁴

Wisdom

It is ironic that while philosophy is supposed to be about loving wisdom, the concept of wisdom remains of relatively little interest among philosophers, and notoriously hard to define.¹⁵ In this section I want to explore whether coming to terms with old age might have something to do with achieving wisdom, and vice versa. In some cultures, the elderly are taken to have wisdom automatically, and to deserve deference because of it. Not so in ours. There will be certain public figures seen as wise, certain political leaders or writers; perhaps some professions (psychiatrists, novelists, philosophers?) will have a greater share of allegedly wise members; and there will probably be certain elderly individuals in each person's life; but in all cases such reputations have to be earned. And even if one sees oneself as making progress from teenage angst and ignorance through to a more confident and knowledgeable middle age, there is no longer any guarantee of peaking in one's wise later years.

As a rough starting definition (drawn from Baltes et al. 1992), we may take wisdom to be a kind of experienced practical intelligence, knowing what to do in complex or awkward situations, and remaining calm while in such situations, precisely in virtue of one's relevant experience of such situations, and of one's deeper understanding of what drives such situations. It is as much about knowing the world and knowing what makes people 'tick', as it is about knowing oneself and one's place in the world. It is also, as Socrates is only too ready to remind us, about knowing what one does not know. It is about distinguishing the things that can be changed from the things that cannot -- in the world, in other people, and in oneself. It is about the ability to assume a perspective, at the

¹³ I say 'almost' because there are certain properties of my future wife that could not be entirely a matter of chance: the fact that she was female, of a certain age, of a certain attractiveness etc. and I was heterosexual, of a certain age, and sufficiently attractive to her etc.

¹⁴ In Cowley (2010), I introduce the notion of 'retrospective QALYs'. A normal QALY is a quality-adjusted life-year, and is used as a rough tool to justify the allocation of scarce healthcare resources to treating one patient with a particular condition, over treating another with a different condition. One notorious problem with QALYs is that geriatric, palliative and hospice care are hard to justify because the care cannot be expected to generate many more life-years. However, I argued that such care can be justified by providing the patients with more time and comfort for life review, and that this will 'add' many re-examined *past* life-years to their present experience.

¹⁵ For an on-going attempt to define wisdom and give advice on how to achieve it, see the Templeton-funded Wisdom Research Project at the University of Chicago: <http://wisdomresearch.org>

right time, above one's occurrent desires and emotions, and above the immediate causes and consequences of the situation. But ultimately the necessary condition is life experience: while a 12-year-old can have prodigious gifts in music or mathematics, she will not be wise. (And insofar as her gifts interfere with her normal *social* development, she may never be wise.) But mere experience is rarely sufficient: alongside the trope of the wise old person is that of the old fool or the sententious bore who has never learned from -- or came to terms with -- their experience.

There are more dimensions to wisdom, however. In 1951, at the age of 81, the French painter Henri Matisse finished a four-year project to design the interior and the stain-glass windows of the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence (often called the Matisse Chapel). It is widely considered one of his masterpieces. In describing it, he famously said that he could not have executed such a project when he was younger: it was entirely the product of the vision of his advanced years.¹⁶ Admittedly, the Matisse example is of somewhat limited use for the rest of us who are not artistic geniuses, but there will surely be certain things that most of us will claim to be able to understand only in old age.

There is one further element to wisdom, and that is the very Platonic idea of acquaintance with the Good. Both wisdom as practical intelligence, and wisdom as transcendent understanding of one's place, are both essentially prudential or instrumental concepts, and may not get one very far. The next and higher stage of wisdom is to recognise and cherish the good, and to see one's own responsibility for promoting the good. Even the depressing realisation, such as Illyich's, of a life-long failure to seek or promote the good, can itself be good, and can redeem that life at the last moment.

However, it is important to resist the temptation to call wisdom (informed by acquaintance with the good) a kind of moral expertise. There is a real debate about whether there is such a thing as moral expertise (see e.g. Archard 2011). There are certainly philosophers with genuine expertise in moral *philosophy*, which can be corroborated by an institutional certificate and peer-reviewed publications. But it seems perfectly possible to achieve moral wisdom without a philosophical training, just as it seems perfectly possible for the moral philosopher to be morally foolish or insensitive or selfish. In addition, it is perfectly possible to spend a life teaching moral philosophy as an expert in the field, and then to have no clue about how to deal with one's despair upon reaching old age.

Coming to terms with death

In his text 'Cato the Elder on Old Age', Cicero repeats the point that afflictions and disabilities are common to every age of human beings; however, only in the old (and in youthful hypochondriacs!) are they experienced as *portents*, accompanied by the thought "I am soon going to die, this is the beginning of the end" (quoted in Mothersill 1999 p. 20).

¹⁶ The example is discussed by Harriott (2003). Cf. Simone de Beauvoir (in the extract in McKee 1982 p. 274),

The notion of experience is sound when it refers to an active apprenticeship. Some arts and callings are so difficult that a whole lifetime is needed to master them. [...] In many fields, such as philosophy, ideology and politics, the elderly man [*sic*] is capable of a synthetic vision forbidden to the young. [...] One must have lived a long time to have a true idea of the human condition.

However controversial the beginning of old age, the end of it is fairly clear, even if I am making things easy for myself by avoiding any discussion of dementia and disintegration of the self long before the death of the body, just as I am avoiding the possibility of an afterlife.¹⁷ Nor do I want to get stuck in some of the usual philosophical issues surrounding death: e.g. why death is an evil, the status of bequests and organ donation, the implications of immortality for personal identity. Although I would not go so far as Mary Mothersill (1999 p. 9) in describing death as an "unrewarding, virtually sterile concept" for philosophy, I do agree that old age, understood as limited and partly defined by death, is more interesting.

One of my suggested definitions of old age, above, made reference to the *revel mortel*, the sudden certainty that, one day, one will necessarily die. I think Christine Overall (2003 p. 4) is right when she stresses that natural death – when not deliberately or recklessly inflicted by another human being – cannot be thought of as fair or unfair; it “just is”. Even a statistically premature natural death just is. Coming to terms with old age is therefore partly a matter of coming to terms with imminent death, without useless protest against imaginary unfairness, even if I am presently in good health. Although the word 'death' is used in common parlance to mean three things -- the process of dying (with the very real possibility of pain), the moment of death, and the status of being dead -- I will focus on the central idea of all three, and that is annihilation. Old age is not just another stage of life, it is the last stage. It is not just a stage characterised by loss of capacities, loss of parents or loss of employment, but, ultimately, by the loss of the whole world.

The immediate temptation is to see the crushing pointlessness of any activities and projects in old age, of any search for meaning or wisdom through contemplation or life review, indeed, of anything but the most short-term *carpe diem* hedonism. And there's a lot to be said for short-term hedonism, if driven by a sober, non-evasive moral renunciation of the right to life. However, coming to terms with death means breaking through this first temptation in order to ask what my *responsibilities* might be in the shadow of death. At the very least, coming to terms means putting my affairs in order. Here I have in mind the bureaucratic business of life, and the responsibility to minimise the tedious tasks and conflicts after I am gone; but I also have in mind the wider business of reconciliation with family and friends, as far as it is possible.

Once my affairs are in order, then there is room to think about how I might do good, both for the testimonial beneficiaries and projects, but also for the world more generally. It is paradoxical that the shadow of death can bring out the worst in people -- the fear of suffering as if mine were the only suffering in the world, the petty self-absorbed concerns about one's legacy when one will not be around to enjoy it, the increasingly desperate and expensive medical treatments -- but it can also bring out the best in people precisely because of the lack of a future to preoccupy and worry them. Epicurus extolled the virtues of *ataraxia*, a state of tranquillity, free from stress and worry: normally he is taken as referring to an antidote to the visceral fear of death, but I think the term goes much further. Once my affairs are in order, my life review complete, I am ready to be taken hence, be it today, tomorrow, or next week. Note, however, that *ataraxia* does not render one invulnerable to

¹⁷ This is discussed in Chapter X of this *Handbook*.

posthumous harm. My projects may still founder, my enemies may slander me, and my children may disgrace me. It is thus not enough to reach the end of one's life with the words "I did my best."

As a final thought, let me mention one terrible risk with *ataraxia*. And that is that I come to terms with old age, and with death, so much that I am ready to die and... I don't die. Not today, not tomorrow; I just seem to go on and on. I start to get bored and restless, especially with the pain getting worse. My winding down was going so well, and now I am humiliated by the thoughts I know others are having. I start suspecting a sick joke by the Almighty. What I then need is a new way of coming to terms with being *overdue*.¹⁸

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¹⁸ In 1998, Dutch citizen Edward Brongersma successfully requested assistance to end his life on the grounds that he was "tried of life". The vast majority of assisted suicides under the Dutch euthanasia laws concern competent adult patients in the final stages of a terminal disease, and these are not controversial. The Brongersma case, and a small number of similar cases since then, remain controversial. For discussion, see Huxtable and Moller (2007).

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